

“Born from Coblenz’s own experience, *Dust in the Blood* is a loving theological accompaniment of all who live with chronic depression. As a systematic theologian, she expresses this love by offering new insight into the classic theological discussion of suffering and by arguing that those with depression deserve better than silencing or moralizing. Any Christian theologian reflecting on what it means to be human should read this book, as should anybody who lives with depression or ministers to people with depression.”

—Elizabeth Antus, Assistant Professor of the Practice,
Boston College

“This is the book I have been waiting for. With insight and sensitivity, Jessica Coblenz offers a theological field guide for ministers and communities hoping to faithfully accompany those stumbling through the ‘unhomelike’ landscapes of depression. In *Dust in the Blood*, scripture, systematic theology, and lived experience flow together into a wellspring of resources for those of us with intimate knowledge of the depressive wilderness.”

—Rev. David Finnegan-Hosey, author of *Christ on the Psych Ward*
and *Grace is a Pre-Existing Condition: Faith, Systems, and Mental Healthcare*

“This is a remarkable work that integrates psychology in deliberate theological reflection to disclose and probe some of the wrenching spiritual pain and suffering of depression. Jessica Coblenz is rigorous and poignant, resolute and passionate, uncompromising and gracious. This book makes an important contribution to systematic, practical, pastoral, and foundational theologies.”

—M. Shawn Copeland, Professor Emerita, Boston College

“Honoring first-person experiences of depression—including her own—Jessica Coblenz proposes ways of speaking theologically about depression that make space for the meaninglessness that so many depression sufferers know well. She turns to biblical stories of wilderness and the unsettling story of Hagar to offer a theological account of living with depression that takes dislocation and isolation seriously. Even as most of the wilderness stories lack resolution, Coblenz points to ways in which God shows up in those desolate spaces. She also offers a vision for what it means to accompany those who live with depression, including advocating for more access to psychiatric resources and care. A compelling and powerful addition to theological conversations about those who suffer from depression and all of us who love them.”

—Deanna A. Thompson, St. Olaf College

Dust in the Blood

A Theology of Life with Depression

Jessica Coblentz



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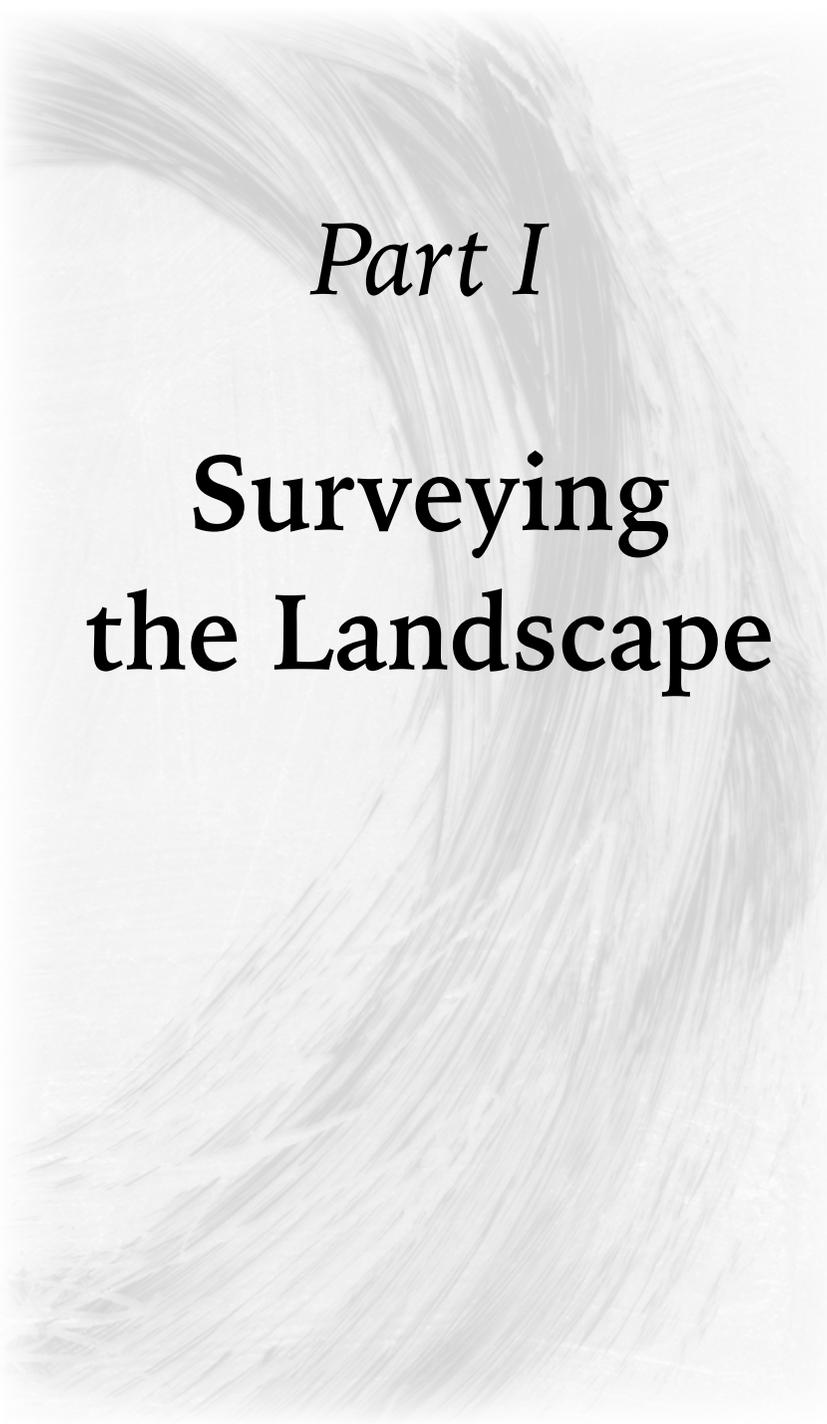
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*To the God Who Sees,
I offer this long-labored prayer.*

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Part I

**Surveying
the Landscape**

Introduction

Dust in the Blood

I was a twenty-six-year-old, fiercely independent young woman when depression took over my life with inestimable force. It was not my first experience with depression, but it had never been quite like this. I was paralyzed by everything. Not by anything in particular, but *everything*: relationships, grad school, part-time employment. Since eighteen, I had lived far from family, won scholarships and juggled multiple jobs to pay for school, maintained friendships and a busy social calendar. I had managed this through a master's degree and the first year of doctoral studies when suddenly the prospect of engaging in any one of these aspects of life seemed impossible.

Concerned by this shift, I sought the aid of a counselor, and at first our weekly appointments helped. There, I attended to my feelings as I had not in a long time, if ever, and I learned to extend this awareness to my everyday life. But as time went on, the self-examination only fueled my despair. I ruminated about my increasing inability to keep up with my coursework, not to mention the peer-reviewed publications, conference presentations, and other professional pursuits of my academic peers. So overwhelming was my fear of failure that I could barely write a single sentence. And the more I struggled, the more I hated myself. Guilt filled every cavity of my body, weighing me down to the point where even simple tasks were extraordinarily difficult. I could hardly get myself to complete an assignment or wash the dishes or show up to a social gathering.

Within a few months, my counseling regimen increased to multiple appointments a week: two, then three, sometimes five. Sometimes a day's work could only consist of going to my counseling appointment before retreating to the isolation of my apartment. I could do that, and I could cry. I cried every morning in therapy. I cried again every night for hours as I tried to sleep. Thoughts of all the ways I had failed everyone around me that day kept me awake despite my exhaustion. I cried at school. I cried in the parking lot, in empty classrooms, and sometimes quietly at my cubicle desk in the middle of the office when I could not conjure the energy for discretion.

Despite loyal friends and a family on the other side of the country that strained to be present, I experienced myself as utterly alone. I could not find the words to convey the depths of my depression. Communication is predicated on connection—on something shared, a common referent—and I could not relate to anyone. The words we shared could not capture what I felt. What “sadness” denotes did not apply. “Despair” and “guilt” were likewise unsuitable. Detached from the world and the people beyond me, I could not conjure an alternative tongue. Meanwhile, I was unable to hear a word of comfort. For some time, I could not read. My eyes jumped between words on the page and nothing of substance emerged, robbing me of the books that had been both my solace and my livelihood. I was trapped inside myself.

After more than a year and a half of therapy and struggle, I began to experience a recurring dream. Night after night, I dreamed I was in the backseat of a parked car that had made its way into the middle of a forest. Surrounding me were the woodlands of the Pacific Northwest where I had often wandered growing up. No one else was there, and not knowing how or why I was, I reclined on the cool leather of the backseat, letting my eyelids droop as I stared out the window at the tree canopy above. “It is only a matter of time,” I thought to myself each night in this dream. I knew I would die there.

I started to wonder why this dream had come. I wondered if it remained in my memory each morning because it was something special, like dreams in the biblical tales that I delighted in when I began reading the Bible as a teenager. Those ancient dreams were

nocturnal messages from God, divine warnings or commissions to the dreamer. Perhaps I, too, remembered my dreams because God insisted. But what was God telling me?

The dream reoccurred over the course of weeks before one day I remembered another similar scene: the girl from high school who had propelled her car from a winding road down hundreds of feet into a densely wooded ravine. At first, no one knew where she went. Eight days passed before a local woman received a vision right in the middle of her suburban living room: She saw the car and its young driver alive in the forest. She thought she recognized the place, so she got into her minivan and went looking. When the woman found the wrecked car and its driver still alive, the people around me called it a miracle: the vision, the discovery, the fact that this girl survived the car's descent and remained alive so many days later. Some also began to whisper that the wreck was not an accident. This beloved teenager—beautiful, popular, athletic—had been trying to kill herself. But God had saved her, they said.

Remembering the girl, I wondered if my dreams were sleeping prayers for divine rescue—for a miraculous intervention like the one she had received. Maybe God would send someone another vision and she would come looking for me.

I also wondered if the woods that filled my sleeping hours were an ethereal version of my therapist's office, where I spent so many waking hours. After all, it had green walls and a stillness similar to the forest. It was dark there, too, when I arrived nearly every morning for her first appointment of the day. Lying atop the carpeted green chaise, I stared out the window past the curtains embroidered with leaves. Perhaps the dream was a divine foreshadowing of the fate to which I might have to resign myself: Would I be a perpetual patient, stuck in depression and helpless to move forward for the rest of my life? Would I live forever lost in this depression?

I wondered, too, if the dream was a sacred commissioning to another place I knew. My apartment was a few miles from Harvard's McLean Psychiatric Hospital, and when the depression continued to worsen, I found myself driving by, looking through the wall of trees along its perimeter. I wondered if I would be better off on the other

side of the hospital's verdant boundary. Maybe these were the woods that surrounded me in my dreams. Was it on the stiff bench of the hospital where I would finally lie down and find rest?

This book would not exist had my life with depression not improved in the months and years following that severe episode in my twenties. But it would also not exist had the depression and those dreams never come. When I resumed my graduate studies, passing my comprehensive exams and deliberating prospective dissertation topics again, my condition and those dreams had become part of me, like "dust in the blood," a descriptor the poet Robert Lowell once used to characterize his own depressive states.¹ I had planned to pursue a research project in feminist theology or one of the other political or liberation theologies that had long grounded my studies. But as I waded through all that literature's compelling insights about suffering and God's responses to it, I found myself always ultimately wondering where depression fit in. What was this suffering I lived with, I pondered, and how was God working in its midst? How should I have related to it as a Christian, and how should I relate to it if it ever consumes me again?

Were depression *my* suffering alone, it would not have warranted the dissertation I would go on to write, nor the book before you now. But in fact depression is a relatively common condition in the United States, my native country, with one measure estimating that 17.3 million Americans experienced a major depressive episode in 2017 alone.² Other studies suggest that rates of depression are increasing globally as well,³ with one study estimating that 264 million people across the world suffered depression in 2017.⁴

1. Jeffrey Meyers, ed., *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1988), 169.

2. Jonaki Bose et al., "Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health," *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration*, September 2018, <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHF2017/NSDUHF2017.pdf>.

3. Ethan Watters offers a critical account of this phenomenon in *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche* (New York: Free Press, 2011).

4. Global Burden of Disease Collaborative Network, "Global Burden of Disease Study 2017," *Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation*, 2018, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/number-of-people-with-depression>.

Research consistently shows that a number of socially marginalized groups experience depression at higher rates. Women suffer depression at higher rates than men.⁵ Transgender youth are nearly four times more likely to experience depression than their non-transgender peers.⁶ Meanwhile, cis lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer teens experience significantly more depressive symptoms and higher rates of suicidality than their heterosexual peers.⁷ The disproportionate rates of depression in the LGBTQ community evince the importance of investigations into the effects of oppression on mental health, which is a concern depression researchers also bring to their studies of race and class. Studies of racial and ethnic differences among depression sufferers find that while racial minorities are less likely to be diagnosed with acute episodes of major depression than white Americans, these minoritized populations are more likely to experience extended and severely debilitating symptoms when they do suffer depression.⁸

Upon learning of depression's prevalence and its disproportionate effects on marginalized groups, the scarcity of theological resources that address this condition alarmed and perplexed me. Theology ought to consider the implications of this widespread suffering for Christianity's teachings and practices. At the very least, theological reflection on depression could enrich Christian understandings of the human condition. What's more, if God resides in a special way among the poor and vulnerable, as Christianity's "option for the

5. For statistics on this gender disparity in the U.S., see Bose et al., "Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators"; for statistics on this gender disparity across the globe, see Global Burden of Disease Collaborative Network, "Global Burden of Disease Study 2017." For an overview on this topic, see Lori M. Hilt and Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, "Gender Differences in Depression," in *Handbook of Depression*, 3rd ed., ed. Ian H. Gotlib and Constance L. Hammen (New York: Guilford, 2014), 355–373.

6. Sari L. Reisner et al., "Mental Health of Transgender Youth in Care at an Adolescent Urban Community Health Center: A Matched Retrospective Cohort Study," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 56, no. 3 (2015): 274–279.

7. Michael P. Marshal et al., "Suicidality and Depression Disparities Between Sexual Minority and Heterosexual Youth: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 49, no. 2 (2011): 115–123.

8. Rahn Kennedy Bailey, Josephine Mokonogho, and Alok Kumar, "Racial and Ethnic Differences in Depression: Current Perspectives," *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment* 15 (February 2019): 603–609.

poor” affirms, then studies of depressive suffering could also reveal important insights about who God is.

Faced with this lacuna, I was mindful that academic theologians like me must approach this topic with great care. Theologians during the last half century have learned that studying suffering is a delicate task because the discipline, both in its silence and in its speech, has often failed when confronted with the struggles of our world. On one hand, the silence of theologians concerning suffering has at times called into question the integrity and sheer relevance of the Christian tradition. This was the case during and after the Shoah, when too many Christian theologians said nothing to decry Nazi violence. This problem endures in the relative silence of my own community of Catholic theologians, who—overwhelmingly white—too rarely speak of the suffering engendered by anti-Black racism in the United States. On the other hand, the Shoah and other atrocities across the globe—from the brutality of nuclear warfare to the everyday, dehumanizing exploitation of factory workers—have also exposed inadequacies in how many theologians treat suffering when they *do* venture to speak of it. Utilizing rational proofs, theodical explanations, and intellectual apologies, many theologians speak of suffering only to justify its existence before God and, in doing so, explain away the grave horrors of history.

In the wake of these theological failures, theologians such as Johann Baptist Metz, Dorothee Sölle, and Edward Schillebeeckx have insisted that theologians *must* address suffering. Yet when they do, theologians must utilize specific modes of reflection in order to do so humanely.⁹ These theologians argue for narrative theological approaches to suffering that uphold the particularities of suffering, including its contradictions and fragmentations, and, as Metz puts it, its “non-identity” with Christianity’s tidy theories of God. Only by humbly bringing together complex and concrete narratives of suf-

9. See Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroads, 2007); Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx*, vol. VI, trans. Hubert Hoskins and Marcelle Manley (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

fering and the revealing memories of the Jewish and Christian God will theology be possible in a world of such pain, he insists.

It is in view of Christian theology's failings and the subsequent turn of many theologians to concrete narratives of suffering that I have come to see my own experience as a potential asset in my development of a theology of life with depression. I know—again from decades of insights from liberation and political theologies—that there are epistemological gains born of experience. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, the late founder of *mujerista* theology, names the affordances of first-person experience for theology in her reflections on *lo cotidiano*, the everyday experience of Latina women. *Lo cotidiano*, she argues, is both a source of knowledge and a hermeneutic through which *mujerista* theologians see God and the world.¹⁰ This insight from Isasi-Díaz, along with other analogous theological affirmations of the knowledge born of experience, has led me to attend to how my firsthand experiences of depression direct me to dimensions of this elusive experience that outsiders might not be so inclined to apprehend. There are some things one knows from living them, even suffering them, and the story of depression that I explore in this book is one that circulates in my veins. I know it by heart.

At the same time, I am well aware of the hazards that accompany my relationship to depression. My experience of depression might leave this research vulnerable to charges of “navel gazing” or of “bias.” In response, I concede that my personal story of depression informs the representations of the condition and the theological claims I develop in this book. I, like all theologians, cannot wholly suspend these biases. Many inductive theologies emphasize the contextual reality of the theological enterprise to argue that all theologies arise from and reflect a particular historical location and its people, whether or not an author acknowledges this situatedness. That the concrete reality of my depression informs my views of God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the human person, and the church is undeniable and unavoidable to some extent, and this would be the case even if I gave myself to a research topic seemingly disconnected

10. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 66–73.

from depression. Taking on depression as the *locus theologicus* of my work simply makes explicit that which will inevitably shape any topic I take on. A body that has known depression is the only body from which I can theologize.¹¹

Still, it is not my own story that I forefront as the sole or even primary account of depression that grounds this project. Chapter 1 draws on many published, first-person narratives of English-speaking sufferers to offer a portrait of life with depression, particularly in its chronic and recurring forms. While each account of depression has unique features, just like every life story, I focus on patterns that emerge across these stories to convey what this depression is like for many sufferers. I then utilize the insights of phenomenologists of depression to sharpen and interpret the narrative contours of depressive experience, arguing ultimately that depression can be thought of as a particular experience of “unhomelikeness” (*Unheimlichkeit*). What results is a narrative-phenomenological account of depression that differs significantly from the condition’s prevailing emotional profile. Over the course of the first chapter, I demonstrate why this far-less-common description of depression is preferable to others. Thus, and henceforth, my own story of depression is but one among many others that belong to a cloud of witnesses. And while I am predisposed to narratives that are in accord with my own, I have tried to relativize my experience and offer a richer presentation of depression through engagement with these other narratives and expert interpreters.

Whereas chapter 1 explores what depression is through the stories of numerous depression sufferers and the perspectives of various secular scholars of depression, chapter 2 examines how Christians in the contemporary United States tend to understand this condition. There, I present two popular theologies of depression that circulate

11. Dorothee Sölle offers another response to concerns about personal bias: “I consider the separation of the personal from the professional, of one’s own experience from reflections that then vault themselves as ‘scientific’ philosophical-theological thought, to be a fatal male invention, the overcoming of which is a task for any serious theology that intends to be a theology of both men and women.” See Dorothee Sölle, *The Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 35.

among U.S. Christians today. Gathered from Christian self-help books, pastoral writings, websites, and social-scientific research, these theologies represent the attempts of pastors and other Christians to bring their religion to bear on this harrowing condition. In addition to outlining these theologies with illustrative examples, I connect their underlying logic to the Enlightenment worldview that underpins some of the secular approaches to depression featured in chapter 1, as well as well-known theodical theories of God and suffering that are emblematic of the modern Western mindset. I suggest that the modern logic underlying these popular theologies of depression may contribute to their widespread appeal among Christians. However, this modern logic also limits them theologically. These popular theologies of depression reinforce a presumption that faithful Christian interpretations of suffering necessarily entail a coherent, logical justification of suffering before God, no matter how extraordinary the suffering in question may be.

Chapters 3 and 4 grapple with what to make of these prevailing popular theologies of depression. Do they offer a suitable Christian understanding of depression? And if so, how does one determine this? Other scholars of Christianity and mental illness cast doubt on the validity of these popular theologies, and their critiques could provide grounds to reject these theologies in favor of other prescriptions for how Christians ought to make sense of this condition. Wholly rejecting these popular theologies raises other problems, however. Drawing on the incisive work of theologian Karen Kilby, I argue that the tendency of scholars to dismiss these popular attempts at Christian meaning making transgresses theology's ethical boundaries. These rejections overdetermine how others make meaning of the mystery of suffering in relation to the Mystery of God. I then consider what it might look like for theologians and other Christians to contribute to theological reflection about depression without violating the boundaries of theological "restraint" that Kilby exhorts. These chapters thus amount to an extended methodological reflection that informs the chapters to come, where I propose additional resources for Christians trying to theologize depression.

When I set out on this research, I did not anticipate that my intellectual investigation would lead me back to the wilderness of

my dreams. That lonely, recurring dream of the forest ceased as the severity of my depression lessened, and once it dissipated from my sleep, I thought of the dream only occasionally in the months and years that followed. When it did cross my mind, however, the dream captivated me, like a vivid flashback. No matter the time that had passed since the depressive episode that overtook my life, that dream of the wilderness endured as an arresting representation of what I had lived.

It was not until I revisited Delores Williams's classic, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, that I began to consider the dream as not only a memory of my depression but also a lens through which I might explore the theological questions that my struggle engendered.¹² As I explore at greater length later in this book, Williams identifies the suffering of African American women with the wilderness experience of Hagar, the woman of the Hebrew Scriptures who was enslaved by Sarah and her husband, the patriarch Abraham (Gen 16, 21). The similarities between the suffering of Hagar and of African American women lead Williams into the wilderness traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and the African American community. From the convergences of these traditions, all of which assign theological significance to desolate landscapes, Williams develops a groundbreaking account of suffering and salvation in the lives of African American women.

The theological truths born of the suffering of the African American women with and for whom Williams theologizes resonated profoundly with some of the reflections that arose from my early thinking about God and depression. They did so despite the fact that I—a white woman of European descent—encounter God and suffering from a decidedly different social location. Yet these resonances are not entirely surprising. Williams, like many of her Black and womanist contemporaries, was attuned to psychological suffering within the Black community. Consequently, her project presents important truths that pertain to many forms of psychological distress, including the experiences of depression that I share (at least to some degree)

12. Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

with many women in the Black community. Williams's work also reveals truths about God, the human person, and the Christian community that are relevant to Christians of all races and psychological conditions.¹³

The influence of Williams's text is apparent in chapter 5, which marks a constructive pivot in *Dust in the Blood*. In search of theological resources for ongoing Christian reflection on depression, I explore biblical images of the wilderness. Throughout Christian history, theologians have brought together the Scriptures' tales of harsh landscapes and applied them analogously to contemporary experiences, including instances of psychological and spiritual distress. I invite depression sufferers to continue this theological tradition by bringing the wilderness worlds of the biblical text to bear on contemporary depression, and I use the work of biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann to elucidate the possible theological affordances of doing so.

It is in chapter 6 where I demonstrate in greater depth how biblical wilderness narratives can afford theological alternatives to popular theologies of depression in particular. I do so by reading the Hagar story from the book of Genesis as a tragedy in the classical sense, a tale where suffering is undeserved, inexplicable, and serves no apparent purpose from the perspective of the audience or the sufferer herself. This reading shows Hagar's wilderness experience to be one that not only resonates experientially with what many depression sufferers describe but also one that affirms the possibilities of meaninglessness that many sufferers experience. At the same time, this interpretation of the biblical tale upholds that senseless suffering is not necessarily antithetical to an affirmation of divine presence. Hagar's story shows that some wilderness experiences are tremendously difficult, utterly baffling, and still coexist—inexplicably, even incoherently—with an affirmation of a personal and benevolent God.

13. On this point, I have in mind M. Shawn Copeland's charge that, against a history in which the white, male, bourgeois subject was taken for granted as the universal subject for all Christian theology, all Christians must consider the theological truths revealed by a "new anthropological subject," namely, the "poor, despised woman of color" who is also centered in Williams's project. See M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

This, too, can be a Christian theological interpretation of depression. This proposal notably differs from existing popular theologies of depression and their resonant theodical counterparts in that it offers a Christian interpretation of depressive suffering without the rational justifications and requisite meaning making that accompany these and so many Christian views of suffering.

Chapters 7 and 8 draw out some of the implications of theologizing depression with this tragic interpretation of Hagar's wilderness experience. In chapter 7, I reflect on how it might inform claims about the doctrine of God and how God relates to depressive suffering. Next, and with the aid of Delores Williams, I consider how the story of Hagar can inform Christian notions of salvation amid the wilderness of depression, especially in its chronic and recurring forms. In chapter 8, I reflect on the implications of the Hagar story for Christian discipleship. In particular, I focus on how a recognition of depressive suffering as tragic suffering invites Christian disciples to adopt particular ethical and spiritual dispositions in relation to the suffering of others. Here, Rowan Williams's work on the tragic imagination affords a helpful framework for Christians who accompany depression sufferers as friends, family, ministers, and people of faith.

Across these chapters, I do not wade into Christian debates about the morality of suicide, a topic many might expect from a project on depression. They might expect this because, though most depression does not end in suicide, most people who die by suicide experience a mood disorder such as depression.¹⁴ Suicidologists who study the factors that lead to suicide attempts and completion help us understand why this is the case: The forms of psychological pain that most often contribute to an individual's desire for death have much in common with features of depressive suffering, including perceived disconnection, ineffectiveness, and hopelessness.¹⁵ Greater attention to these dimensions of depressive suffering, which are commonly downplayed and misunderstood in and beyond the Christian com-

14. Thomas Joiner, *Why People Die by Suicide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2005), 152–153, 164, 191, 199, and 201; Kay Redfield Jamison, *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 100–105.

15. See Joiner, *Why People Die by Suicide*, 36–42, 164; Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind* (New York: Oxford University, 1996).

munity, can thus contribute to a better understanding of some of the circumstances that lead to suicidality. Any debate about the morality of suicide must take into account these circumstances, as my own Catholic tradition's teachings on suicide increasingly acknowledge (despite the suicide stigma that still endures within this denominational community, to be sure).¹⁶ So while this book does not engage in debates about the morality of suicide, it can contribute to the necessary groundwork for these discussions by replacing some operative misunderstandings about depression with a more accurate account of the circumstances that often occasion suicide.

Dust in the Blood is unequivocally a product of who I am. I am an academic theologian, and this is a work of academic theology, as is evident in my citational practices and my engagement with interlocutors from the theological academy. I am also someone who has suffered with depression, and this, too, is a book from and for depression sufferers—many of whom are in the academy, certainly, but also beyond it, of course. Additionally, I hope and anticipate that this book will serve those who accompany depression sufferers, which statistically speaking, includes every one of us. Ultimately, my great hope is that engagement with this book, whether critical or sympathetic, will spur more dialogue about depression in any number of Christian settings and mediums, from the theological classroom and our Sunday liturgies to religion news media and official church teachings. In defiance of the stigma that has long hidden this suffering—confining it to the privacy of counseling offices, confessionals, and sometimes only the silent prayers of our hearts—I hope for more discussion of what depression is, who we are, what we ought to be for one another, and who God is in the midst of this difficult condition.

16. For the history of Catholic perspectives on suicide, see Ranana Leigh Dine, "You Shall Bury Him: Burial, Suicide, and the Development of Catholic Law and Theology," *Medical Humanities* (July 2019): 1–12, esp. 6–7. Elizabeth Antus explains that greater theological attention to the mental suffering that usually occasions suicide would reflect a paradigm shift that has already taken place in suicidology more broadly. See Elizabeth L. Antus, "Covid-19 and Religious Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 48, no. 3 (September 2020): 380.

Chapter 5

Depression as a Wilderness Experience: Theological Foundations

“Where are you, God?” queries Monica Coleman. “Why me?” asks Martha Manning. The methodological reflection of the last chapter leaves onlookers with only one assured response to the theological questions that emerge from depression memoirs. That is, “I don’t know.”

Still, I have argued that, while upholding what we cannot know about God and depression, we can—and should—wonder about these questions with depression sufferers. We should wonder because, when our response to these questions is merely silent resignation, we leave sufferers to grapple with only the prevailing Christian theories of God and suffering—theories that, due in no small part to generations of theologians like me, are limited, imposing, and fairly homogenous. Nourishing as these available theories may be for some sufferers, there are others who remain mystified and doubly displaced, still plagued by their questions, “Where are you, God?” and “Why me?”

In this chapter, I begin the work of offering theological resources to depression sufferers who are still trying to navigate the difficult and desolate world of depression from within the Christian faith. Guiding my efforts are the parameters for theological reflection on depression

that I advanced in the previous chapter. I heed Kilby's charge that only sufferers themselves are rightly positioned to interpret their suffering: what it is, theologically speaking; how Christians should relate to it; how God relates to it; and what God will make of it now and eschatologically. Christians like me must exercise restraint so as to not impose meaning onto them and elide the incoherence of Christian claims about God's goodness and the real mystery of suffering in our world. At the same time, my task as a theologian and fellow sufferer is to expand the available theological resources for potential engagement among those navigating their own depression. It is for sufferers to engage, reject, or embrace the proposed theological resources on their own terms.

In view of the fact that the popular theological resources in the U.S. context mirror well-established, Christian patterns of meaning making about suffering, I focus my efforts on identifying alternative resources for interpreting depression in a Christian frame. I seek resources that affirm divine goodness and the innocence of depressive suffering while also refusing attempts to justify why one suffers from depression and claims about its inevitable resolution. I seek means for theologizing meaningless suffering and for theologizing meaningful suffering without presuming that its meaning is necessary and inherent. I start developing these resources in this chapter, where I explore biblical tales of barren and unfamiliar landscapes as potentially fecund Christian analogues for theologizing the unhomelikeness of depressive experience. Harkening back to the imagery of depression narratives and the dreams of my own depression, I argue that, perhaps for some of us, depression is a wilderness experience.

In what follows, I first introduce a brief account of the meanings and uses of this landscape imagery across the Christian tradition, beginning with the Bible itself. Second, I elaborate on how this biblical imagery can provide correlates for depression, an argument that returns us to the narrative-phenomenological description of depression that I proposed in chapter 1. Third, using the work of biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann, I tease out the variant theological implications of reading depression as a wilderness experience. I suggest that the theological plurality and ambiguity of Christianity's wilderness imagery makes it an especially fecund resource for sufferers striving to interpret their condition from a Christian perspective.

To clarify my proposals and highlight their possible theological implications, I at times emphasize points of similarity and difference between them and the theological principles that shape existing popular theologies of depression. Highlighting points of contrast is not intended to dismiss or downplay the potential validity of these popular theologies when they are appropriated in the first person; that would constitute the kind of overreach I have discounted in the previous chapter by way of Kilby's work. Rather, identifying differences across potential theologies of depression could serve the interests of depression sufferers as they discern how best to interpret their own conditions before God. Motivating my proposals is a desire to expand, not constrain, possibilities for Christians who seek to interpret their depression.

Wilderness in the Sacred Scriptures and Christian Theology

Like depression narratives, the Christian Scriptures abound with stories of dislocation into “unhomelike” places. Indeed, so plentiful is this imagery in the scriptural canon that Walter Brueggemann characterizes the Bible as “primarily concerned with the issue of being displaced and yearning for a place.”¹ He labels the Israelites a “landless folk” and “God's homeless people” because of the frequency with which they are unmoored from home and immersed in a harsh and unfamiliar place.²

Readers witness this from the very start of the canon, which begins with Adam and Eve's forced migration from paradise into an unruly

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 2.

2. Brueggemann, *Land*, 5. In the preface to the second edition of *The Land*, Brueggemann admits that in the book's original edition, he was not sufficiently attentive to the ideological violence that has resulted from Israel's identification with land in the ancient world and on through today. Our needful attention to the imperial violence imbued in Israel's identity with land does not nullify Brueggemann's point about its centrality in the ancient Israelites' identity, however. On the contrary, it evinces the fact of Israel's attachment to the land, regardless of whether one judges that right or wrong. The ideological inflections of the Israelites' relationship to land require that we consider what right relation to space—literal and symbolic—might be.

land (Gen 3). Then when Cain, the son of the mythical first humans, murders his brother, God condemns him to a life of itinerancy away from the safety and comforts of his family and their homeland (Gen 4). Later in the Genesis narrative, God commissions Abram (later Abraham) from his familiar terrain into foreign land: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1). Harsh landscapes permeate the famous story of Moses too. Upon the liberation of the Israelites, Moses leads them into the desert where they wander for forty years (Exod 13–40). Through perseverance and conquest, the Israelites eventually reach and establish a new home in the land of Canaan (Josh). Yet, the powerful kingdoms they construct there are in time overtaken by the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires (2 Kgs, 1–2 Chr, Ezra). Reflecting on the period of exile that follows, the writings of many of the prophets convey the severity of their displacement.

Important themes of place and the predominance of movement between homelike and inhospitable landscapes persist throughout the gospels and other New Testament writings, too, where authors, drawing on the sacred stories of Judaism, reflect their practiced attention to place. For example, early in all three Synoptic Gospels, John the Baptist emerges from the wilderness to begin his ministry (Matt 3:1; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:2). Soon after, Jesus is led to the wilderness where he is tempted by “Satan” (Mark 1:12-13) or “the devil” (Matt 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13). The gospels report that while Jesus traverses the lands of first-century Palestine during his ministry, he regularly retreats to isolated places to pray (e.g., Mark 6:46, Luke 6:12).

Contemporary Bible scholars emphasize the geographical and cultural differences among the Bible’s literal landscapes as well as the linguistic distinctions that surface in ancient authors’ descriptions of them. However, Christian thinkers throughout history have not always been attentive to the same ancient details that concern today’s Bible scholars. Reflecting on interpretations of the Hebrew Bible’s terms *midbar*, *arabah*, *tsiyyah*, *tohu*, *chorbah*, *yeshimon*, theologian George Williams observes, “Although in their literal sense they designated different kinds of terrain—sandy and rocky desert, steppe, and forest—there appears to have been no significant difference among them in their successive non-literal or theological

applications.”³ Theologians have often grouped stories featuring these diverse landscapes and referred to them more generally as tales of the “wilderness”—a label Bible scholars more strictly associate with the terms *midbar* in the Hebrew Bible and *eremia* in the New Testament.

This practice of grouping variant biblical landscapes together as “wildernesses” is not entirely disconnected from understandings of wilderness in the ancient world, however. According to Robert Barry Leal, what ultimately distinguished the wilderness from other places in the ancient world was its relationship to humankind: A wilderness was a place that was difficult to domesticate in service of human nourishment and flourishing.⁴ Accordingly, Leal argues that the Bible’s ancient authors present a portrait of the wilderness as a landscape of precarity, unfamiliarity, isolation, and danger to human flourishing—even danger to human life itself.⁵ A wilderness is not only a difficult place, as we will see, but it is always at least this. It is precisely the human struggle engendered by this place that makes it a wilderness. Employing a more capacious understanding of wilderness than what is referred to as *midbar* and *eremia* in the biblical text, subsequent Christian interpreters usually retain the basic understanding of wilderness as a landscape that persistently threatens human flourishing, be it a barren desert or a violent sea. Thus, whether narrowly or more broadly construed, wildernesses have been seen as difficult landscapes for human living. It is in this broad sense that I reflect on wilderness in this chapter.

The fact that ancient landscapes were defined relative to human experience positioned them as useful vehicles for symbolic expression. Commenting on this point, Brueggemann says of biblical geographies, “Land is never simply physical dirt but is always physical dirt freighted

3. George Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought: The Biblical Experience of the Desert in the History of Christianity & Paradise Theme in the Theological Idea of the University* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1962), 12 and 12n4.

4. Robert Barry Leal, *Wilderness in the Bible: Toward a Theology of Wilderness* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 36–39.

5. See Leal, *Wilderness in the Bible*, 65–95.

with social meanings derived from historical experience.”⁶ For instance, the so-called “promised land” is not merely the literal place of Canaan. It also functions in the text as a symbol of God’s covenant and blessing. In this example and elsewhere in the Scriptures, the dual meanings of land—literal and symbolic—are interrelated.⁷

Because the literal wilderness was demarcated for its inhospitality to human life, biblical authors employed the wilderness as a symbolic image for conditions of precarity, struggle, and even fatality (Isa 51:3; Jer 4:26; Ps 107:33-35). In the New Testament, Ulrich Mauser observes, “In the majority of cases, whenever the wilderness is mentioned, the thought of the New Testament writers is not directed to the geographical disposition of the country, but to the memory of the basic action of God which took place in the wilderness in the course of Israel’s history.”⁸ Thus, while the Bible depicts “actual earthly turf,” or what Brueggemann sometimes calls “literal land,” the coexistence of symbolic representations of land in the text enriches its interpretative potential. As Alec Gilmore puts it, “the geographical wilderness underlies and brings out the emotional wilderness.”⁹

It is no surprise, then, that over the course of Christian history, religious teachers and writers have read biblical stories of “literal” untamed lands as meaningful analogues for the struggles of the present day, including those with little to nothing to do with literal land. Susan Bratton observes the influence of such biblical stories in the colorful hagiographies of the early Christian desert monastics. For example, “The story of the crows feeding Paul the hermit is similar to the account of Elijah at wadi Kerith, where ravens brought him bread and meat (1 Kgs 17:1-6).”¹⁰ In the referenced passage from 1 Kings, the land is experiencing severe drought, and Elijah’s survival hinges on his exile to an isolated ravine and the miraculous provision

6. Brueggemann, *Land*, 2.

7. Brueggemann, *Land*, 2.

8. Ulrich W. Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness: The Wilderness Theme in the Second Gospel and its Basis in the Biblical Tradition* (London: SCM, 1963), 14.

9. Alec Gilmore, “Wilderness in the Bible and the Wild Places of Earth,” *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 7, no. 1 (2006): 45.

10. Susan Bratton, *Christianity, Wilderness, and Wildlife: The Original Desert Solitaire* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton, 2009), 163.

of these birds. Hearers of the hagiography would have understood Paul the hermit's biblical allusion as a likening of the hermit's ascetic existence to Elijah's precarious but blessed experience in the literal desert of the biblical narrative.

In George Williams's study of mystical theology in the late Middle Ages, he identifies yet another correlation between the deserts of the Scriptures and the figurative wilderness experienced by Christians during the Middle Ages. The mystical sense of wilderness during this era "made it possible for [Meister] Eckhart boldly to extend the meaning of *Wüste* [wilderness] as a technical term of apophatic theology."¹¹ Namely, Eckhart describes the human mystical experience of God as "desert," writing:

In this barren Godhead, activity has ceased and therefore the soul will be most perfect when it is thrown into the Desert of the Godhead where both activity and forms are no more, so that it is stuck and lost in this Desert where its identity is destroyed and it has no more to do with things than it had before it existed. Then it is dead to self and alive to God. What is dead in this sense has ceased to be so that that soul will be dead to self which is buried in the Godhead-desert.¹²

Other mystical theologians similarly engaged the wilderness during the medieval and early modern era, including Richard of St. Victor, Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and John of the Cross.¹³

Symbolic interpretations of geographical displacement continued throughout the Protestant Reformation and the rest of the modern era. In 1520, Martin Luther penned *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, a diatribe against the Catholic Church and its sacramental practices and theologies.¹⁴ Luther utilizes the story of the Israelites'

11. Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise*, 53.

12. Cited in Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise*, 53. See Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, ed. Raymond B. Blackney (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941), 200.

13. Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise*, 51–57. For additional examples, see also Andrew Louth, *The Wilderness of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 71–130.

14. Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520*, Annotated Luther Study ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

experience of occupation and exile under the Babylonian Empire as an extended metaphor for the captivity of the contemporary laity under the cruel authority of the church's hierarchy. In the seventeenth century, Baptist author John Bunyan drew on the Bible's symbolic imagery of harsh landscape in a number of writings. His 1687 classic, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, combines scriptural allusions to the Books of Job, Jeremiah, and Revelation to present a journey through what George Williams summarizes as the "wilderness of the religious and political turmoil of the English seventeenth century."¹⁵

These historical examples show how people of faith have read sacred stories of the wilderness not merely as tales of a past, literal geographical reality but also as figurative stories that speak to the experiences of a present, very different historical moment. They have drawn on the tradition's wilderness imagery as a correlate for the disorientation, spiritual and existential precarity, isolation, entrapment, struggle, aimlessness, and death that marred their contemporary lives. And in the process, they made new meaning of the trying realities of their lives, often emphasizing not only the difficulty of the wilderness but also the good work of God that unfolds in otherwise desolate circumstances. This process of bringing these ancient texts to bear on contemporary experience in service of drawing out new interpretations and implications is grounded in the Christian belief that biblical memories of the land are never mere retellings of a historical place and time. These inspired stories also always have the potential to reveal something timeless about the nature of God's creation, including human beings, as well as valuable truths about how the God of All relates to them, past and present. The question of what the Bible's ancient tales could reveal for those enduring depression is therefore but a new and particular version of a long-standing question of Christian faith.

Indeed, already some contemporary Christians have associated wilderness with experiences of psychological distress. We find one

15. Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise*, 85. Williams offers a concise overview of the wilderness motif in Bunyan's writings in *Wilderness and Paradise*, 84–86. See also John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 11th ed., ed. Roger Pooley (New York: Penguin Classic, 2009).

example in Andrew Louth's study of two nineteenth-century spiritual companions, Saint Charles de Foucauld and his longtime spiritual director, Abbé Huvelin. Louth argues that both of their lives were shaped by deserts, albeit deserts of differing kind. Foucauld, the "desert saint," was drawn willingly into the literal desert as a young man and regularly returned throughout his vocational journey through religious life and the priesthood. For him, the desert wilderness was "a place of solitude, of hiddenness, a place of being alone with God in prayer. It is a place of presence: the purifying presence to oneself of solitude, and the still more purifying presence of God."¹⁶

The lesser-known Abbé Huvelin played a central role in Foucauld's conversion to Christianity as a young man, and Huvelin continued to serve as his confessor and spiritual director in the years that followed, even across the saint's lengthy stays in the desert. Louth argues that for Huvelin, "his desert was no literal desert of sand—he lived all his life in Paris—but an inner desert of mental anguish."¹⁷ Because of this, Louth suggests, "he too can be considered a desert saint, one who dwelt in the desert, only for him it was not a literal desert but the inward wilderness of desolation of his own mind."¹⁸ Louth elaborates further on Huvelin's wilderness condition:

His letters and diary reveal one who knew endless misery, and often found his thoughts turning toward death—as release, and suicide as the means. The enormous demands of preaching, teaching, caring for the sick and dying, hour after hour in the confessional, added to the continual burden of suffering, physical and mental, the encroachment of despair and depression: all this produced an intense weariness. Weariness, nothing more, he said to himself, not the suffering of reparation, of sharing Christ's suffering: a weariness that seemed to undermine his reason and threaten to topple him over into madness.¹⁹

Huvelin's public writings affirm the potential spiritual gains of suffering, but according to Louth, "his own suffering seemed rather to

16. Louth, *Wilderness of God*, 21.

17. Louth, *Wilderness of God*, 14.

18. Louth, *Wilderness of God*, 26.

19. Louth, *Wilderness of God*, 28.

drive him to the brink of madness and despair.”²⁰ Huvelin’s personal writings include intriguing doodles, which inform Louth’s observation. “The obsessive, anguished character of these doodles seems to point to the genuine sense of inner desolation, verging on madness and a depressive longing for annihilation. It seems to suggest that Huvelin lived in an inner wilderness, a desert within, that—like the literal desert—afforded him no sense of security, no place of comfort. It suggests we should see Huvelin as a desert saint struggling in a barren place, inhabited by demons quite as terrifying as any St. Anthony faced.”²¹

This is just one example of how contemporary Christians have interpreted psychological distress in light of the wilderness imagery that finds its roots in the Scriptures.²² The work of Louth and others invites depression sufferers to participate in the theological tradition of exploring what Christian wilderness tales might reveal about this contemporary condition.

Depression as a Wilderness Experience

Informing explorations of how the Bible’s wilderness imagery might serve sufferers striving to theologize their depression is the observation from chapter 1 that many depression sufferers already draw on similar imagery to represent their suffering. I recognize this organic intuition as a worthy starting point for theological reflection, and what I aim to demonstrate in this chapter is that this recurring imagery across depression narratives is indeed ripe with theological possibility.

20. Louth, *Wilderness of God*, 29.

21. Louth, *Wilderness of God*, 30.

22. For another contemporary example of Christians connecting wilderness imagery and psychological distress in a theological key, see Jean Vanier, “From Wilderness towards Home,” in *Wilderness: Essays in Honor of Frances Young*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 167–174. On February 22, 2020, L’Arche International, an organization founded by Vanier, reported that he engaged in coercive sexual relationships with multiple adult women under his spiritual guidance. I decry this abuse and join others in wrestling with its implications for Vanier’s legacy, particularly because such abuse can contribute to the very mental-health challenges to which he speaks in the writings cited here. For the report, see <https://www.larche.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=139bf786-3bbc-45f5-882a-9f78bfbc99e9>.

Recall from chapter 1 how, amid the struggle to capture and convey this elusive condition, sufferers frequently turn to the spatial imagery of harsh landscapes to represent their dislocation into the encompassing, isolating, and often meaningless state of unhomelikeness: Depression is a dark wood, an alien place. It is unfamiliar, unhomelike terrain. Sufferers' use of this figurative imagery invites a consideration of biblical landscapes as lifeworlds: Just as depression sufferers—and all people—always occupy some world (*Umwelt*) that is constituted by one mood or another (*Stimmung*), the people of the Bible always occupy some landscape that conditions their experiences.

Like phenomenological lifeworlds, conditioning each biblical landscape are the possibilities it affords or lacks. Whether a place abounds with the resources for human flourishing—water, bountiful soil, edible plant and animal life—or it shrivels in drought and decay affects the possibilities of human experience there. As in depression narratives, we see in the stories of the people of Israel that some places are homelike not only because they are physically comfortable but also because of the experiences that the Israelites have there. These are places where the Israelites feel “landed,” as Walter Brueggemann puts it, because these landscapes are familiar or laden with meaning, affording inhabitants a sense of belonging. Such lands facilitate relative safety and stability. Phenomenologically, these places correlate to the at-home-ness or everydayness of most people's ordinary experience.

Yet we know, too, that the Israelites are often far from the familiar landscapes of home, dwelling in places that leave them feeling “landless,” as Brueggemann puts it; that is, they are unknown and uncomfortable places. Frequently, the people of Israel are isolated in foreign lands, arid places, and life-threatening landscapes. Being that the wilderness is a difficult setting for human life—a place defined by the possibilities for human life that they lack—the possibilities it affords are unfamiliar and less than ideal, and it lacks other possibilities to which the ancient community would have been accustomed. The wilderness is an engrossing world of discomfort and isolation, precarity, and struggle. Experientially, the untamed and difficult landscapes of the Scriptures share characteristics with the unhomelikeness of depression.

Correlating the imagery of depression narratives to those of the Sacred Scriptures invites what Sandra Schneiders, drawing on philosophical

hermeneutics, calls a “fusion of horizons,” where the unhomelike world of the depression sufferer “fuses with the horizon of the world projected by the text.”²³ Like the world of the sufferer, the wildernesses of the Scriptures are difficult and inhospitable to human life. Yet, in contrast to many experiences of depression, the Bible’s tales of desolate places often project a world abundant with theological meaning. How the people of Israel find themselves in and out of these places, how they experience them, and how God, in turn, interacts with sufferers there can afford contemporary depression sufferers an array of possibilities for interpreting their own conditions.

That said, not all efforts to bring together the world of the sufferer and the world of the biblical text will result in a “fusion of horizons” or what Schneiders terms an “appropriation” of the text. Building on the argument of chapter 4, this is but another reason why imposing meaning onto the suffering of others is a misguided pursuit. One simply cannot force a sufferer to see her depression through one or another wilderness tale from the Scriptures. A transformative encounter with the biblical text, one “by which we appropriate the meaning of the text by a fusion of horizons with the world the text projects,”²⁴ ultimately hinges on a sufferer’s “genuine dialogue” with the Scriptures.²⁵ “For the believer . . . this dialogue is rooted in the faith that this text is a mediation of transformative divine revelation.”²⁶ It follows that what may result from such a dialogue is a sufferer’s conclusion that the wilderness depicted in a particular biblical scene is *not*, in fact, a story that helps her interpret her condition before God. This dissonance, too, can be revealing. What can also result, however, is a transformative encounter with the text that affords the sufferer ways of interpreting her condition in relation to God and the truths of the Christian faith. This may address that second, religious displacement that often accompanies the phenomenological dislocation of depression.

23. Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 172.

24. Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 174.

25. Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 177.

26. Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 177.

Before looking more closely at the biblical narrative to consider the worlds of meaning it offers depression sufferers for their consideration, I note that the prospect of correlating the harsh landscapes of Scripture to depression, though not unprecedented in the Christian tradition, is distinct from how many contemporaries engage Scripture in their interpretations of depression. When adherents to popular theologies of depression draw from Scripture to support their interpretations, they frequently read depression into the Scriptures in a literal fashion. They identify the lamentations of Jeremiah as “depression,” for example, suggesting that the prophet experienced the same condition that many people do today.²⁷

In addition to presenting some historiographical problems, these literal engagements with biblical narratives have other limitations.²⁸ First, this approach narrows the relevance of biblical texts to only scenes of sadness and misery. While such scenes are not uncommon throughout the canon, they constitute but one rather limited possibility for bringing depression into correlation with the Scriptures. Second, this approach reinscribes the common reduction of depression to sadness, which many depression sufferers have identified as discordant with the fundamental features of their experience. For sufferers who resist the identification of their depression with sadness, this approach to Scripture may not suffice. Thus, correlating depression to wilderness imagery has the potential, first, to expand possibilities for interpreting depression with the biblical narrative and, second, to extend more resources to sufferers who resist or find themselves unsatisfied by the identification of depression with sadness alone.

The Theological Plurality of the Bible’s Treacherous Landscapes

In addition to offering representations of suffering that might resonate with experiences of depression, biblical wilderness narratives

27. David Murray, *Christians Get Depressed Too: Hope and Help for Depressed People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2010), 2–3.

28. See chapter 1 for more on the risks of anachronism when identifying past instantiations of psychological distress with contemporary depression.

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