

we forget Porfirio Miranda *Marx and the Bible* (Orbis Books, New York 1974; SCM, London 1977 pp. 78–88ff; 'The God of the Exodus'); Elsa Tamez *La Biblia de los oprimidos* (DEI, San Jose 1979); Segundo Galilea 'La liberación como encuentro de la política y la contemplación' *Espiritualidad y Liberación* (DEI, San Jose 1982) pp. 45ff; Ignacio Ellacuría *Freedom Made Flesh* (Orbis Books, New York 1976) p. 16; for the position of Ernesto Cardenal, see Phillip Berryman *The Religious Roots of Rebellion* (Orbis Books, New York 1984) pp. 20, 23, etc.; S. Croato 'Liberación y libertad. Reflexiones hermeneúticas en torno al Antiguo Testamento' *Revista Bíblica* 32 (1971) 3–7; *Liberación y libertad* (Mundo Nuevo, Buenos Aires 1973).

8. In 'Pueblo de Dios y la liberación del hombre' *Fichas ISAL* 3/26 (1979) p. 9.

9. See J. Pixley *Exodo*, p. 19.

10. Gustavo Gutierrez *A Theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, New York 1973 and SCM Press, London 1974) pp. 155–56. See also the texts on pp. 155–60 and 287ff.

11. See Methol Ferre 'La Iglesia latinoamericana de Rio a Puebla (1955–79)' *Historia de la Iglesia* ed. Fliche-Martin (EDICEP, Valencia 1981) suppl. vol. 1 pp. 697–725; Gustavo Gutierrez 'Teología de la Liberación y ciencias sociales', duplicated text. See Paul Gauthier *Les Pauvres, Jésus et l'Eglise* (Ed. Universitaires, Paris 1963) pp. 101ff: 'De Nazaret vers Rome'. I remember the little community of Paul, Andrés and myself—which I left in 1961 to start my theological studies in France. The community's rule of life contains the following statement at the beginning: 'Its aim is to live the Gospel in the light of that text from Luke 4 in which Jesus, quoting Isaiah 61, reveals his messianic anointing and his mission to evangelise the poor' (Gauthier p. 113).

12. This was made possible by the convergence of the Nazareth experience (1959–61) and a reading of E. Levinas (1969): the 'poor' (Isa. 61:1; Luke 4:18), the Latin American poor, the poor as real people and as a theological category (see E. Dussel *Para una ética de la liberación latinoamericana* (1970) (Buenos Aires 1973) I, Chap. 3).

13. See Jon Sobrino *Resurrección de la verdadera Iglesia. Los pobres, lugar teológico de la ecclesiología* (Santander 1981).

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Exodus as a Paradigm for the Black Theology

One of these mornings, five o'clock,
Dis ole world gonna reel and rock,
Pharaoh's army got drowneded,
Oh Mary, don't you weep.

MY PURPOSE in this essay is twofold. First, after noting aspects of the story of the Exodus, I will discuss the specific, historic context that partly explains why Exodus is a paradigm for Black theologians' essential belief that God is liberator and unequivocally on the side of the oppressed. Second, I will propose that the epic theme of the Exodus has certain systematic implications for Black theologians. Throughout, I will focus on aspects of the theologies of James Cone and J. Deotis Roberts.

1. PHARAOH'S ARMY DROWNED IN THE RED SEA

The drowning of Pharaoh's army is part of a biblical witness to God's liberation of Jacob's descendents from Egyptian slavery and is the *central liberating event of Exodus*, of which the dominant character is Moses. God sends Moses to tell Pharaoh to release the enslaved Hebrews. Afflicting the Egyptians with plagues and hardening Pharaoh's heart, God by way of Moses directs a stupendous drama which intensifies with the death of the Egyptians' first born. Mourning the death of his first child, Pharaoh finally sets the Hebrews free. However, Pharaoh's heart is again hardened. Reneging on his

decision, Pharaoh races in his chariots to re-enslave the Hebrews. With the sea in front of them and Pharaoh rapidly gaining on them from behind, the children of Jacob felt trapped. 'Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. ... The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be still"' (Exod. 14:13-14). God directed Moses to lift his staff of liberation over the waters. They parted. The children of Jacob, carrying Joseph's bones, crossed over en route to the Promised Land. Pharaoh's army drowned, and the Hebrew children knew their God was the almighty God of liberation.

The story of the God of Moses has been embraced by Blacks of the United States. The biblical account of God's mighty acts on behalf of the Hebrew children has captured their imagination. Afro-Americans' historic experience of gross exploitation within the Americas has resulted in their faithful focus on the Exodus; they have felt justified in their identification with the people of Moses. If, they have reasoned, God destroyed Pharaoh, will not our oppressor also be destroyed? Indeed, Exodus is the clearest Old Testament example of both God's sensitivity to the oppressed and destruction of the oppressor. Thus, Exodus has over the centuries been in Afro-America the *critical text revelatory of God's action in history on behalf of the oppressed*.

Black theologians have inherited the historic Black faith that God is a God of liberation. Faced with the question, 'How could a just God allow such heinous oppression of Black people?', Black theologians appeal to the Exodus, which vividly depicts God's destruction of the oppressor. Indeed, J. Deotis Roberts asserts:

The God of Moses, the God of the Exodus, has been real to Black people. This God is one of deliverance from bondage. The God who assures the Israelites constantly, 'As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee' has comforted, strengthened, and brought great assurance to Black Christians throughout all their years of oppression in [the United States].

Thus the God of the Exodus is [the God of Black people]. (Roberts *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* p. 99).

Black theology emerged formally at the end of the 1960s when impacts of the dissimilar legacies of Malcolm X and Martin King radically sharpened theological endorsement of Black power by Black clergy. Radical Black clergy found the Christianity of the racist White church oppressive. They found intolerable contradictions between White supremacy and Christianity and concluded that Black power was justified in the providence of a God of liberation. In order to support a theology of Black power, radical Black clergy studied the history of the Black church, invisible and visible. Immediately

evident from their studies was the *essential paradigmatic significance of Exodus for their theological views*. Slave spirituals, testimonies and sermons and political manifestoes of educated clergy and laity like Henry H. Garnet and David Walker were established as essential sources for Black theology. Indeed, Walker wrote in his classic *Appeal* that God '... being a just and holy being will one day appear fully in behalf of the oppressed, and arrest the progress of the avaricious oppressors ...' (Walker *Appeal* p. 3). Walker's understanding of God's partiality to the oppressed is a product of his understanding of Exodus. Walker, moreover, agitated for the violent overthrow of slavery. Reading Walker, then, Black theologians discovered that the historical character of Exodus led many of their ancestors to fight to the death for liberation. Henry Highland Garnet's interpretation of the Exodus is especially intriguing:

If you must bleed, let it all come at once—rather *die freeman, than live to be the slaves*. It is impossible like the children of Israel, to make a grand Exodus from the land of bondage. The Pharaohs are on both sides of the blood red waters! (John H. Bracey Jr., *et al. Black Nationalism in America* p. 73).

Garnet here is not rejecting the Exodus as an archetype of God's sensitivity to the oppressed. Rather he wishes to make it clear that God, as a God of liberation, has sanctified insurrection. He writes to the slaves: 'It is in your power so to torment the God-cursed slaveholders, that they will be glad to let you go free. ... Yes the tyrants would meet with plagues more terrible than those of Pharaoh' (*ibid.* p. 75). His theodicy, then, was elucidated in resistance to slavery's advocates.

In sum, faith in a personal God of liberation has not only assured Blacks of inheritance of heaven, but also fuelled their fires of revolt. Insurrections, running away, emigration and support of the Union all suggest that slaves' interpretation of Exodus inspired resistance. Denmark Vesey's revolt bore intriguing relation to his understanding of post-Exodus events (Gayraud Wilmore *Black Religion And Black Radicalism* p. 58). Harriet Tubman's recurrent sojourns 'way down into slavery land' earned her the title of Moses among the slaves. Lincoln's army progression into the south was heralded in the slaves quarters with song: 'I am bound for the promised land ...' (Miles M. Fisher *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* p. 156). Henry McNeal Turner's call to return to 'Guinea' pulled in its train the Black slave belief that Canaan, the promised land, was Africa (*ibid.* p. 45). That Exodus today, then, is an essential archetype for Black theologians' focus on liberation marks the extension of a radical Black Christian tradition into the late twentieth century.

Like their forebears, radical Black theologians state unambiguously, Exodus reveals that *liberation is this-worldly*. Thus James Cone, who has the distinction of textually bringing this radical Black Christian tradition of liberation and protest to fruition as *Black theology*, writes:

It is important to note the history in which God chose to grant a self-disclosure. It was granted to an oppressed people, and the nature of the revelatory deed was synonymous with the emancipation of that people. The Exodus of Israel from Egypt was a revelation-liberation event. In this revelatory event, Israel came to know God as the liberator of the oppressed, and also realised that its being as a people was inseparable from divine concomitance. Thus Yahweh was known primarily for deeds done for Israel when other political powers threatened its existence as a community (Cone *A Black Theology Of Liberation* 2nd. ed. p. 47).

Thus for Cone, as for Walker and Garnet, '... God's revelation means political emancipation' (*ibid.*). God is a God of *liberation on earth as well as a God of redemption in heaven*. Indeed, the Exodus has been for Black Christians a most familiar theopolitical idiom. Analogically, Black Christian freedom fighters have been understood as Moses; White oppressors, as Pharaoh. Dr King in his mountaintop speech obviously likened himself to Moses (*Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Documentary ... Montgomery To Memphis* ed. Flip Schulke p. 224). King, moreover, in relating his faith that 'interposition and nullification' is penultimately defeated in God's providence, alludes to the drowning of Pharaoh's army. 'The meaning of this story', King writes, 'is not found in the drowning of the Egyptian soldiers, for no one should rejoice at the death or defeat of a human being. Rather, this story symbolises the death of evil and of inhuman oppression and unjust exploitation' (King *Strength to Love* p. 78). For King and Black theologians, the drowning of Pharaoh symbolises the justice of God. Drawing on the history of radical Black Christianity, then, Black theologians' usage of the Exodus is intrinsic to their doctrine of God. Roberts implies as much as he writes:

The exodus is ... paradigmatic of God's manner of acting in history and throughout creation. In the light of this event, the creator and liberator of Israel is affirmed as the creator of the world and Lord of history (Roberts *A Black Political Theology* p. 28).

For Black theologians, a doctrine which ignores that God is not only creator, but also liberator, is moribund.

2. WEEP NO MORE MARY: CANAAN IS THE LAND FOR ME

I would like now further to explore doctrinal implications of the Exodus as a theological paradigm with unique significance to Black theologians. Discussion of the Exodus as a paradigm of Black theology necessitates *discussion of Jesus*. As Professor Cone explains: '... the God of Israelite history ... is the God revealed in Jesus Christ ...' (Cone *Liberation* p. 1). If the Exodus has been the paradigm for Black theologians' belief in the liberating God of Moses, then Jesus has given that belief increased existential power. It should be clear by now that Black theologians partly trace that historic sensibility to slave religion, which is quite appropriate. What better way to understand the Exodus as a paradigm for Black theology than as an expression of the religion of former slaves? Black theologians' interpretation of Jesus' passion has led to their conviction that their slave ancestors, more than Whites who proselytised the slaves, were justified in Christ, sanctified, and thus elected to ultimate salvation and penultimate liberation. Thus Black theologians claim to have the most authentically Christian theology. 'There can be no Christian theology', writes Cone, 'that is not identified unreservedly with those who are humiliated and abused' (*ibid.*). Theology, for Black theologians like Cone, is most Christian when it emerges from the context of the oppressed. Thus in making Exodus paradigmatic, the faith of the slaves, more than the writings of the Church fathers of the patristic period, is tradition for Black theologians.

Part of that tradition is the *spirituals of the slaves*. In certain spirituals, slaves reveal their perception of the proximity of their suffering to Jesus'. Professor Cone explains: '... slaves knew the significance of the pain and shame of Jesus' death on the cross [and] they found themselves by his side' (Cone *The Spirituals and the Blues* p. 53). In their eschatological imagination, the reciprocity between the salvific past and the redemptive present allowed them to transcend spatio-temporal limitations, placing them at the foot of the cross. There, they told Jesus' mother:

Oh Mary, don't you weep, don't you moan,
Oh Mary, don't you weep, don't you moan,
Pharaoh's army got drowned,
Oh, Mary don't you weep.

The slaves in that spiritual relate: the awesome events of the Exodus and the resurrection; the archetype of liberation and the prototype of the ultimate liberated person; the God of liberation and the Son of that God who was their brother in suffering. The Exodus, for many slaves, was but the sign of the

inevitability of the resurrection. Developing this insight, Black theologians claim that the resurrection has brought to eschatological fruition the promise enshrined in the covenant of Sinai. Roberts puts it this way:

The exodus provides a central category for interpreting not only the Old Testament but the work of Jesus. ... The exodus was an event in which people experienced unexpected deliverance from bondage ... and meant the opening up of an until-then impossible future for those who had been oppressed. (*Reconciliation* p. 29).

In short, the impact of the faith of the slaves has led Black theologians to intrinsically relate *Jesus to the Yahweh of the Exodus*. Both Persons reveal the judgment of God on chattelisation and victimisation. Thus whereas most Christians, in order to unify the Old and New Testaments, have tended to claim that Abraham foreshadows justification, the faith of Black theologians has essentially related the Exodus and the resurrection. The Exodus is the paradigm of God as a God of liberation and foreshadows God's incarnation of the *definitive* revelation of the election of the oppressed—Jesus the fellow sufferer, the Word of liberation made flesh.

It is problematic to say, slaves bequeathed to contemporary Black theologians a Christology, a doctrine of God, a soteriology and an eschatology. Nonetheless, ideas and records of the piety of slaves indicate that the Exodus and the resurrection are biblical supports from which Black theologians have uniquely constructed a doctrine of God and a Christology, both of which have eschatological significance in terms of a praxis of liberation.

Black theologians have learned from their ancestors that liberation is divinely initiated action against the oppressor. It is not that Black theologians have believed they were sinless in comparison to the Whites who have abused and exploited their people. They have simply asserted that their oppressors have in God's providence been destined to play the role requisite for victory of the truth: God is no respecter of persons. Implicitly, their doctrine of God is of Persons providentially dispensed to penultimately and ultimately institute political justice. Initial revelation of that justice occurred in events of the Exodus.

Among Black theologians, Exodus has confirmed that God has chosen blackness over whiteness in the same way that God elected the enslaved progeny of Jacob over imperial Egypt. Black theologians, then, know that their ancestors who survived the middle passage, who were unpacked and unloaded in the new world emaciated, diseased and bewildered, were persons of value. Resiliency of vestiges of their ancestral ways in their ringshouts and

spirituals confirms for Black theologians that the God of Exodus was the God who pressed on their forebears a distinctive image. Although early missionaries thought it their burden to christianise Africans they believed barely evolved from lower primates, Black theologians know their ancestors have been God's chosen people. For Black theologians, God has made those who appeared to be heathen—Blacks—more holy than those who appeared to be divinely elected—Whites. That is today a seminal teaching of God in Black theology.

Professor Cone asserts insightfully that God is Black in identification with the Black oppressed. That God is Black is the Word which has become flesh in Black theology. Black christology implies the Exodus as part of a doctrine of God who both sinks Pharaoh's army and becomes one of the descendants of the slaves who crossed over into Canaan. The eschatological insight of Black slaves bears repeating: 'Don't cry Mary, Pharaoh's army drowned.' The *God* who swallowed them is identical with Jesus Christ. Pressed further, that *trinitarian insight* yields this one. The Spirit reveals blackness as a sign of the humanity of God. Blackness has been made spiritually fit to absorb the way, the truth and the light. God not only liberates the oppressed and afflicts the oppressor in the Exodus, God historically is 'The Oppressed One' who through the Spirit moves in history among the oppressed ones. This is the good news! Judgment is daily passed on the oppressors. To be in Christ, then, is to be in political solidarity with the oppressed. In God's grace, faith in Christ makes the theopolitical struggle for liberation from White supremacy, capitalist exploitation, imperialism and misogyny the work of the Spirit. Penultimately in God's providence, faith without works is dead. Ultimately, Pharaoh, because he is not one of the elect, drowns again. Exodus, as a paradigm for Black theology, works every time.

Oh Canaan, sweet Canaan,
I am bound for the land of Canaan.