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Biblical Theology and Black Theology

I. INTRODUCTION

It is to the credit of black theologians such as James Cone and J. Deotis Roberts that the black religious experience is beginning to receive a serious hearing within the theological curriculum. In some sense it is incorrect to equate black studies in seminaries with black studies programs in the university, for this investigation has a more pervasive role within the theological curriculum than in the university. A college black studies program can be contained within a given department, no matter how diverse the offerings within that department, but black studies within theological education cannot be so contained. Rightly understood as being revelatory the black religious experience must pervade Bible and church history no less than ethics, theology, and practical theology.¹ Therefore, this paper has as its special concern the place of black theology within the area of scripture and vice-versa. Furthermore, of the two major exponents of this emerging discipline a profitable dialogue can take place with James Cone, who has more explicitly tackled the matter of Bible content and interpretation for his theological position than has J. Deotis Roberts.

No doubt because of criticism of aspects of *Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), Cone has made a fuller statement of his approach to scripture in "Biblical Revelation and Social Existence," Chapter 4 of his *God of the Oppressed* (1975). Here he states his position with regard to an interpretative principle for the Bible:

"The hermeneutical principle for an exegesis of the scriptures is the revelation of God in Christ as the liberator of the oppressed from social oppression and to political struggle. . . ."²

It is clear in this chapter that Cone is laying out his case for a *Heilsgeschichte* pointing toward liberation of the oppressed, while at the same time broadening his biblical base to include other elements such as those found in wisdom and messianic texts that also support this hermeneutic of liberation. Thus, not only the parade examples of Moses-Exodus and prophetic texts speaking of God's will toward justice but also David-Zion and Psalter hymnic and even wisdom sayings on demands for societal justice are marshaled (Ps. 72:12-14, Isa. 33:22, Prov. 14:13 and 23:10-11). Great emphasis is placed on "The Social Context of Divine Revelation in the New Testament," in which section the case is made for Jesus' plan for the Kingdom as including liberation of the poor and afflicted. A very long footnote (page 258) restates

¹Warner Traynham, "Black Studies in Theological Education," *Harvard Theological Review* 66/2 (April, 1973): 257-271.

²Cone, *op. cit.*, p. 81; also in *Interpretation* 28/4 (Oct., 1974): 439.

Cone's refusal to separate the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith, no doubt in rebuttal of the charge of being overly Barthian and indifferent to history.³ In any event, Cone's is the fullest explication of an identifiable biblical stance of the black theologians.

William Jones, *Is God a White Racist?* (1973), in what he calls a "Preamble to Black Theology," takes the problem of theodicy, namely the why of black suffering, as a controlling category for any black theology. His use of scripture is limited to the issue of apparently unmerited suffering and clearly shows his own humanistic bent or bias. Albert Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (1969), handles numerous passages but with the aim of establishing that the Hebrews were black. Major Jones, *Black Awareness* (1971), emphasizing the relevance of the theology of hope for a discouraged black community, and J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation* (1971) and *A Black Political Theology* (1974), emphasizing black personhood and reconciliation, both focus on New Testament calls to love and to be reconciled. In none of these leading representatives of black theology is there as conscious a dealing with principles of scripture and its interpretation. The Bible is used, is indeed vital to the presentation of argument, but no real effort is given to stating a stance for interpretation as Cone has done in his writings, particularly now in *God of the Oppressed*. For this reason Cone will loom larger in this effort to establish a more incisive dialogue between biblical theology and black theology.

The disciplines of biblical theology and black theology are both at critical positions in their development. Black theology has emerged to the point where it can truly be in dialogue with itself and with other kindred efforts, as in South American liberation theology, African theology (both in the name of indigenization and liberation), and feminist perspectives in theology.⁴ As for within black theology, there is internal debate on questions such as the place of scripture, the politically aggressive versus the more theologically reflective emphasis, or the place of blackness as a racial or theological symbol, the narrower definition or the more universally applicable one. Biblical theology itself has passed from a stage of confidence, as reflected in Krister Stendahl's classic statement in behalf of the descriptive approach (*IDB*, 1962), to one of reappraisal after the trenchant criticism of James Barr, from *Old and New in Interpretation* (1966) to *The Bible in the Modern World* (1973), and Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (1970). The major thrust of the critique concerns hermeneutics and the forging

³ See J. Deotis Roberts, *A Black Political Theology*, p. 123.

⁴ Some representative works are: (African Theology) Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth, eds., *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1971; Mark Glasswell and Edward Fashole-Luke, eds., *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World*, London: SPCK, 1974; Basil Moore, ed., *The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa*, Atlanta: John Knox, 1974; (Liberation Theology) Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1973; Frederick Herzog, *Liberation Theology*, New York: Seabury, 1972; (Women's Perspective) Rosemary Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism*, New York: Simon and Shuster, 1974; Phyllis Trible "Biblical Theology as Women's Work," *Religion in Life* 44/1 (Spring, 1975): 7-13.

of links between what the Bible meant then (descriptive approach) and what it means today (contemporary proclamation), the latter of which is too often ignored or given too little attention. It is at this point, where biblical theology seeks to be able to deal with biblical interpretation and even proclamation, that it must engage and be engaged by black theology whose avowed purpose is to do "God talk" from a contemporary (black) perspective. It is overly simplistic to say that biblical theology needs issues and that black theology needs biblical sophistication, but it is not too far from the mark to suggest that each can learn from the other at this critical juncture of their careers.

II. ISSUES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY TODAY

It is possible for a particularly fruitful and mutually beneficial dialogue to take place. In biblical theology the search seems to be shifting from efforts to find the "center of biblical theology" to that of bridging the gap between what the text "meant" then and what it "means" today. At the same time black theology is beginning to examine more closely the relevance of the scripture for its agenda of interpreting the reality of God for black Americans today. What is particularly interesting is the quest within both disciplines to recognize the dialectical relationship between the contemporary community of faith and the text, that is, an increasing recognition of the validity of later generations' appropriation and interpretation of scripture with regard to their own needs and understanding of God's will in their time. In biblical theology this is apparently the thrust of scholars such as James Sanders in a call for canonical criticism or even midrash criticism and the provocative exegesis and comment of Brevard Childs, which give new import to the subsequent interpretations of the text up to the present hearers of the word.⁵ Similarly, the debate between Cone and Roberts over the value of christological proclamation for the contemporary black struggle focuses on how the word is most potently communicated to that community of faith called the black church. An attendant discussion, closely related to that over canon, is also being carried out as to whether the biblical text is the sole vehicle for discerning the divine will for black folk today. Here J. Deotis Roberts is joined by those with a more historical and sociological interest such as Charles Long, Gayraud Wilmore, and Vincent Harding, who argue for a broader theological agenda than James Cone is ready to allow.⁶ Within both disciplines the discussion centers on the text or the texts and the validity of later interpretations given them by the faithful.

⁵ Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary* (Old Testament Library), Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974. James Sanders, *Torah and Canon*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972, and "The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Quarter Century of Study," *Biblical Archaeologist* 36/4 (December, 1973).

⁶ Vincent Harding, "Reflections and Meditations on the Training of Religious Leaders for the New Black Generation," *Theological Education* 4/3 (Spring, 1970): 189-201; Charles Long, "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States," *History of Religion* 2/1 (August, 1971): 54-66; Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, New York, Doubleday, 1972.

Surveys of the history and recent developments within biblical theology are readily available, such as those given by Robert Dentan, *Preface to Old Testament Theology* (Rev. Ed., 1961), Norman Porteous, "Old Testament Theology," in H. H. Rowley, ed., *The Old Testament and Modern Study* (1951), and both Otto Betz and Krister Stendahl articles on "Biblical Theology" in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1962). What emerges from these studies is the fact of the uneasy merging of biblical study and theological discourse into a discipline committed to exposition of scripture in theological categories. The marriage is between content of the Bible and the fitting of the same into the structures of dogmatic theology — which includes philosophical and cultural matter — aimed at the church's contemporary needs. It was the late eighteenth century theologian, Johann Philipp Gabler, who called for the clear distinction between biblical theology which was historical in character, setting forth what the biblical writers said about God, and dogmatic theology which was more didactic and concerned with what the contemporary age thought about God. Yet even in this distinction, which holds sway to the present, it is clear that a dialectic relationship exists between the two. Each is in dialogue with and exerting some influence upon the other. We are only lately aware of the reciprocal nature of the dialogue, namely, how our thought is shaped by scripture and how our perceptions of what the sacred writers thought reflect so much more of our own perspective than we had acknowledged. It is this new awareness of an inability to fully disrobe when, in the historical-critical process, we would rethink the thought of the ancient writer that has undermined some of the earlier confidence in the objectivity of the descriptive approach in biblical analysis. In a sense Stendahl's statement of a descriptive biblical theology repeats that of Gabler nearly two centuries earlier, for Gabler spoke of three steps which both separate and link the historical-critical task and the interpretative one: first, individual passages of scripture are examined using grammatical-historical principles; second, these texts are to be compared and contrasted with one another; third, certain general principles are formulated on the basis of this analysis. Only then, after the work of the biblical theologian is done, can the systematic theologian begin to erect his system to meet the needs of his contemporary situation. Stendahl would have the exegete (1) describe, (2) interpret, and then (3) relate the results of his historical-critical analysis of the text to his own time.⁷

How then shall biblical theology be defined once its descriptive character has been set and placed in contra-distinction to the contemporary cultural demands of dogmatic theology? While it is clear that the

⁷Robert Dentan, *Preface to Old Testament Theology*, rev. ed., New York: Seabury, 1963, pp. 22-23. Cf. Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1962), pp. 422, 425. History and methodology are examined in Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, pp. 11-47.

term does not refer to the use of scripture within theology, it continues to be debated how it refers to the theological part of biblical study. At a very minimum this discipline can be said to be "the study of the religious ideas of the Bible in their historical context."⁸

Yet even this basic definition points to a continuing discussion of the distinctiveness of biblical theology, as against a history of religion's or comparative religion's approach. Is biblical theology simply a survey of religious concepts and institutions of Israel old and new, judged vis-à-vis the ancient Near Eastern setting? Or is it something else, say, the isolation of key elements in the classic period of religious development? Dentan refers to Eichrodt's expression for this further distinction, namely, that biblical theology is concerned not with "length-wise section" of history of religion's interest in the grasp of generic elements in the growth of a religious system but with the "cross section" in the more systematic task of describing the key, central, or most persistent elements within the religion.⁹ In a sense this distinction marks the difference between the two major Old Testament theologies of this era, Eichrodt's concern for the covenant idea as central (the cross cut) and von Rad's more lengthwise history of traditions survey. This holds for von Rad's Volume 2 analysis of the prophetic tradition as a trenchant critique of previous tradition, making that movement normative for Old Testament interpretation. Note the titles of von Rad's volumes, *The Theology of the Historical Traditions of Israel* and *The Theology of the Prophetic Traditions of Israel*.¹⁰ In a sense we live with a dual definition of biblical theology. One definition is more concerned with a systematic treatment of key religious ideas of the scripture, often borrowing the God-Man-Sin-Redemption schema of dogmatics. Ludwig Kohler, *Old Testament Theology* (1957), is typical of this point of view. The other definition, represented by von Rad and in G. E. Wright, *The God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (1952), interprets biblical theology more out of the matrix of Israel's historical development, tracing and highlighting the vital traditions of the people. Both views are wedded to the descriptive historical approach, but one sets forth its results in logical categories, while the other is more reportorial.¹¹

The crisis in biblical theology of which Brevard Childs speaks comes not at the point of the descriptive, historical-critical approach to scripture but at the point of bridging the gap between what the text meant then and what it means for us today. The crisis is not at the point of

⁸Dentan, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 64, 92.

¹⁰Eichrodt and von Rad debate the relative merits of their positions: Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* Vol. 1, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961, pp. 512-520; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, New York: Harper & Row, 1962, pp. 105-128.

¹¹G. E. Wright, *Old Testament and Theology*, New York: Harper & Row, 1969, p. 62, shifts to a position more supportive of Eichrodt's covenant emphasis, and states in "The Theological Study of the Bible," *Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (1971), p. 986, that the Mosaic covenant is the "primary structuring concept in the OT."

exposition, whether one takes the cross-out of biblical ideas using the terminology of systematics or the long-cut, being wedded to the *Heilsgeschichte* and retelling the story of God's mighty acts, but at the point of proclamation — of interpreting the text as divine command for today. The crisis comes at the point of treating the biblical passage as kerygma. The problem is hermeneutical. By what mode or what interpretative principle can the word be effectively preached? The gap between the seminary classroom and the pulpit is not readily closed by exhortation to think things through with the mind of Christ or contemplate what Jesus would do. The focusing of the biblical word on contemporary issues is not achieved by asserting that the God of scripture is active today in the church, that the salvation events are still working themselves out within the community of faith.¹² The linguistic efforts of the New Hermeneutic movement would use the historical-critical approach to free the ancient word so it could audibly be proclaimed, so that with Ebeling, "proclamation that has taken place is to become proclamation that takes place."¹³

Yet in each of these approaches to bridging the gap, there is a forced quality of exhortation without real conviction. This refers of course to mainline "liberal" as against more narrowly conservative stances with regard to biblical interpretation. Nor is there agreement as to the essential validity of either the typological or christological mode of interpreting the word, let alone that of the much maligned allegorical method. These of course primarily refer to efforts to relate the testaments — the quest for the unity of scripture — and only to a lesser degree apply to linking the divine word to contemporary concerns. Yet in the end, if the three-fold definition and role of hermeneutics as mode of translation, interpretation, and transmission is to be met, then effective use of typological or christological — and why not even allegorical? — interpretation must be used. To say God and man are the same within the Old and New Testaments and that their histories are the same means that what holds there can be applied as a span over the chasm separating this witnessing community from the biblical one. The biblical witness to God's commitment to his people, often expressed in the promise/fulfillment or way of promise schema, provides a useful key to the continuity between the then and the now of proclamation.¹⁴

Closely related to the hermeneutical problem is that of identifying the central or unifying theme found in the Bible, especially within the realm of Old Testament theology, that is, the key to the message of proclamation which spans the there/then and here/now communication gap. The

¹² Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, pp. 51-60.

¹³ Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963, p. 329.

¹⁴ So we may surmise from the arguments of Zimmerli, Westermann, von Rad, and Eichrodt in Claus Westermann, ed., *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964, and especially in B. W. Anderson, "The New Covenant and the Old," in Bernhard W. Anderson, ed., *The Old Testament and Christian Faith*, New York: Harper & Row, 1963, pp. 225-242.

methodological approach to doing Old Testament theology can be said to consist of two basic types. The cross section or central biblical theme type, which is often expressed in the God-Man-Salvation categories of systematic theology, is represented in Eichrodt's focusing on covenant and the God-People, God-World, and God-Man schema. The long cut or salvation history (acts of God) type, which shuns external logical categories for a simple recital of events, is championed by von Rad, who can be said to be writing on the "theologies" of the Old Testament in his dependence on the tradition-history approach. These representative modes of approaching the text can also be characterized as defining the internal unity of scripture as either "word" (idea or concept of covenant) or as "event" (process of salvation history).

Gerhard Hasel, "The Problem of the Center in the OT Theology Debate," *ZAW* 86/1 (1974), calls attention to the fact that neither focus alone can encompass the breadth of the biblical witness, for as covenant or election ideology cannot adequately handle the testimony to God's universal lordship, neither can any event-centered schema permit the non-*Heilsgeschichte* (as Psalms, Wisdom) portion of scripture to speak. Hasel questions whether the manifold nature of the Old Testament testimony can be systematized, even in a dual use of word and event "center", for both modes of approach represent what he calls an "unconscious philosophical-speculative premise."¹⁵

He argues against seeking any center superimposed on the dynamic of growth, as represented in the biblical witness to "diverse and manifold encounters between God and man" over such a long period. Hasel would break the impasse in the search for a single unifying "center" in Old Testament theology by focusing on the dynamic encounter between God and man, where God becomes the center of both word and event. The emphasis is on God as a dynamic, unifying core rather than on any form of static organizing principle. The critique of both Barr and Childs against OT theology as it is pursued today points to the lack of any agreed upon unity, and those which are proffered fail most noticeably to deal adequately with the wisdom tradition.¹⁶ We shall return to this question as it affects black theology's use of the Old Testament, especially in the area of the scope of the divine-human encounter.

Particularly intriguing are recent suggestions by Childs and Sanders that more attention be given the process of redaction and selection of the biblical material by the initial communities of faith.¹⁷ Tradition criticism, which traces the process of selecting and linking traditions, and canonical criticism — if such can be looked upon as a distinct discipline, which focuses on the final selection process giving us our scripture, both

¹⁵ Gerhard Hasel, "The Problem of the Center in the OT Theology Debate," *ZAW* 86/1 (1974) p. 79. Cf. his *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, pp. 49-63.

¹⁶ Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, pp. 66-70; James Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation*, London: SCM, 1966, pp. 72-76.

¹⁷ See note 5 above.

acknowledge a dialectic process at work between inspired word and community of faith. Could not the reciprocal relationship apparently at work in the midrashic and canonical process give some hint of a vital relationship which continues to be at work between church and scripture? Instead of looking for an elusive central unifying message in scripture and then in dismay being brought to a concept such as that of a canon within a canon in order to separate wheat from chaff, cannot the dynamic process of scripture's growth itself be instructive of the biblical message? As in earlier debates over the nature of revelation as to whether it concerned propositional truth about God or was a process of divine self-revelation, so in this area of discussion it would be useful to shift emphasis away from unifying principle(s) toward the dynamic of the divine-human encounter itself. The focus then would be on the formation of scripture and the community's relationship to it throughout the total process. This is also to say that despite the passage of time, later generations such as ours would continue to stand in a dynamic relationship with the sacred text. Tradition-history points up the very long process by which the received text emerged, the palimpsest idea of subsequent generations rearranging and adding to received traditions. A look at the evolution of canon reveals the criteria and motives for the final fixing of the sacred story. What emerges is a mixture of theological-political-existential motives and criteria for such significant shifts of emphasis as in the movement from

(a) Hexateuch (Exodus-Sinai-Conquest plus Promise to Fathers) to (b) Tetrateuch and Deuteronomic History (Promise-Exodus-Sinai plus Creation) now with Conquest-Kingdom(s) to (c) Pentateuch (Creation-Promise-Exodus-Sinai-Wilderness) and Prophets (Conquest-Kingdoms plus Prophets).

James Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (1972), addresses this issue, treating as well the Writings, that often neglected final portion of the tripartite canon of the Hebrew Bible. Crisis situations — all involving oppression from without — forced upon the community a new relationship vis-à-vis the traditions, a new reading and a new ordering of the story of God's dealing with his people.

E. A. Speiser has written cogently of Israel's election to be both "nation" (*goy/ethnos*) and "people" (*'am/laos*).¹⁸ Thus, it is the threat to the socio-political configuration that poses the trauma of lost identity in the fall of the northern kingdom (impetus for Deuteronomic effort), the fall of Jerusalem and Exile (impetus for Priestly and Prophetic work), and the Restoration adjustment within the Persian empire (formation of incipient Law-Prophets-Writings canon). This is to say that canonical process reflected both political and spiritual realities of the day and, further, that this ought not to be viewed as mere historical accident or contingency but rather as itself part and parcel of the divine-human encounter that makes up the scripture. Saving word and saving

¹⁸E. A. Speiser, "'People' and 'Nation' in Israel," *JBL* 79/2 (1960): 157-163. Cf. Robert Bennett, "Black Experience and the Bible," *New Theology* No. 9 (1972), pp. 176-189.

event that emerge from Sinai covenant and exodus liberation (also prophetic word and Zion — “Day of Yahweh” event) must also be expanded to include these moments of trauma when a still newer and deeper awareness of God’s self-revelation led to re-readings and adjustments of the sacred traditions, to say nothing of several additions to the text from Restoration literature. The discovery and interpretation of the literature at Qumran points not only to the fluid nature of canon near the turn of the millennium but also to the role of questions of identity during oppression in determining what is held to be “sacred,” whether ancient or newly created.¹⁹ Though the person of Jesus is central to the New Testament canonical process, similar factors seem to have given impetus to gathering the Epistles and the creation of the Apocalypse of John, the latter of which parallels Daniel as a punctuation mark for the canon. Though the question of adding to or subtracting from the received canon has not been argued with success, it is clear that subsequent generations of the church (and synagogue) have approached the scripture with different questions from age to age; and they have been rewarded with direction and power appropriate to that age or situation. The Patristic era was shaped by its reading of the text but also brought new ideas to it in its use of philosophical concepts. Protestant Reformation and Bible are yoked together, with subsequent interpretation being marked by questions put to the text by Calvin and Luther. Today two groups profoundly shaped by a new encounter with the Bible are the Catholic Church and the black church, the one more recently after the freeing encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), the other in its reception of the word in bondage.²⁰

III. THE BIBLE IN BLACK THEOLOGY TODAY

It is at this point where Bible and people encounter one another, the hermeneutical nexus, that biblical theology and black theology must begin their dialogue. Begin is the word because the ensuing interchange will pass beyond hermeneutics to touch the manner in which the exegete performs his descriptive task and the theologian forms his statement on the reality of God in life today. As stated at the beginning, this paper more directly concerns the black theologian, particularly as he engages the theological community. This is because the black religious experience seen as revelatory has a pervasive role within the theological curriculum and hence cannot be relegated to a few electives in church history and perhaps homiletics or pastoral theology. The subject matter of black theology rightfully touches on the entire curriculum — Bible, history, theology, ethics, pastoral theology — and is of consequence for black and white alike. The black theologian will also be touched by

¹⁹ James Sanders, “The Dead Sea Scrolls . . .,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 36/4 (December, 1973).

²⁰ Robert Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, New York: Macmillan 1963; and Robert Bennett, “Biblical Hermeneutics and the Black Preacher,” *Journal of the ITC* 1/2 (1974): 38-53.

biblical theology because his special constituency, the black church, has a unique relationship with holy scripture. Like the biblical community, this community of faith met its lord in a very long moment of crisis. A very special link was forged during bondage between the God of scripture and the African slave bereft of every other form of identity — homeland, language, religion, kinship. His new life became marked by hope and a profound trust that the God of his enslaver would bring deliverance. The Bible for the slave ancestors was both holy book and primer; and like the African who received the Gospel from missionaries during colonialism, the new religion was a way both to salvation and to a new socio-political existence. Thus biblical and black theologians have parallel tasks, with one moving from the past to the present meaning of scripture and the other moving between that word and the realities of the modern situation. The point is that the cultural awareness and perceptions of the black religious community, as in the Tillichian method of correlation, pose vital questions to scripture and also bring with the question some new insights (revelations) in the encounter.

Since this effort is directed more toward the black theologian than the biblical theologian, it gives more attention to what is happening in biblical theology than in black theology. Since of the theologians, James Cone is more dependent upon and more articulate about his use of scripture, most of the comment about the discourse between the disciplines will focus on his presentation. In that important chapter, "Biblical Revelation and Social Existence," in his latest work, *God of the Oppressed*, (1975) Cone asserts that liberation is the Key to biblical interpretation and is the (sole?) hermeneutical principle. While he has not committed himself as clearly as Cone has to a hermeneutical position, J. Deotis Roberts attacks Cone for his Barthian christological stance, which doubtlessly refers to (a) disparagement of history in the great stress on transcendence and (b) firm denial of any form of natural revelation.²¹ The former puts total emphasis on kerygmatic proclamation and the crucial encounter with God's word where personal decision is required, and the latter rejects any source for revelation save that in the risen Lord. Roberts acknowledges Cone's concern for history and recognition of other forms of revelation but rejects the exclusivity of Cone's stance on blackness and salvation-liberation as limited to the oppressed. Roberts opts for a more universalistic approach and owns up to the influence of his teachers in the British neo-liberal school, John Baille and Herbert Farmer, plus his own black experience in shaping his christological statement.²² His *A Black Political Theology* (1974)

²¹ James Cone speaks of the Bible in black theology in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, New York: Lippincott, 1970, pp. 66-69, passim, as well as in *God of the Oppressed*, New York: Seabury, 1975, pp. 62-83, on the hermeneutical question. In the latter work he also speaks of: biblical revelation, pp. 91-101; Bible and black suffering, pp. 163-183; and of Jesus, pp. 108-137. J. Deotis Roberts offers critique of Cone's biblical stance in *Black Political Theology*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974, pp. 123, 181-182, and in "Theology of Religions . . .," *Journal of ITC* 1/2 (1974): 54-68, esp. 65-66.

²² J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971, pp. 142 ff., and in *Black Political Theology*, p. 127.

speaks of the special place of scripture in black theology but seems to take an "anthropological" approach in emphasizing the significant concepts for black selfhood, e.g., "The Bible speaks existentially to the individual black man, but it also addresses black people."²³

There is a more than subtle shift in emphasis when Cone speaks of the Bible among the sources of black theology in *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970): "The Bible is inspired because through reading it, a community can encounter the resurrected Christ and thus be placed in a state of freedom whereby it will be willing to risk all for earthly freedom."

In the same section of that volume, Cone argues that the link between then and now of proclamation is God as revealed in Jesus and that by reading of God's activity in the biblical era, the black faithful can "experience" his work in the contemporary world. The meaning of scripture is not found in its words but "in its power to point beyond itself to the reality of God's revelation; and in America, that means black liberation."²⁴

There is a hint of typology in this use of scripture to find patterns for God's behavior in present existence, but overriding this is Cone's emphasis on Jesus as the true revelation of God.

Using Cone as representative of black theology — not because he is typical but because he has given the clearest statement of his use of scripture — let us now have biblical and black theology converse one with the other. Some major issues within biblical theology have been exposed, so what now can be said about black theology à la James Cone? Cone takes the lengthwise view of scripture, reciting the saving acts of God for the elect community, emphasizing throughout the social context of God's decisions and activity. God chooses to free Hebrew slaves, not their oppressors; he punishes disobedient Israel for its divine and societal covenant infractions but again shows mercy toward the oppressed in the prophetic call for justice. Justice is for the poor and for the disobedient, each receiving his due. "There is no divine grace in the Old Testament (or in the New Testament) that is bestowed on oppressors at the expense of the suffering poor."²⁵

Cone sees this theme as present in the royal theology and in wisdom tradition, namely, special concern and responsibility for the poor and helpless. Exile and return are seen as setting the stage for future events in Jesus Christ. Indeed the New Testament (Matthew 5:17) speaks of itself as the fulfillment of God's "drama of salvation." Cone spends some time on the Gospel accounts of Jesus and the question of history being especially careful to emphasize the historicity of Jesus and its

²³ *Black Political Theology*, p. 38. Roberts states his view on scripture in pp. 36-42.

²⁴ *Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 69.

²⁵ *God of the Oppressed*, p. 68.

importance in relation to the Christ of faith and the Lord's identification with the poor in his ministry.²⁶ The messianic role of Jesus, seen as a linking of royal and (suffering) servant themes, focuses on "the establishment of justice through suffering." It is upon this key affirmation that Cone interprets the divine mission as one of liberation for the poor and outcast. Furthermore, in this day and time the *scandal* of the Gospel is seen as just such a call for a radical transformation of our social and political existence. Cone places this at the heart of the Gospel and rejects Bultmann's emphasis on human self understanding as emerging from the divine-human encounter. The Gospel is bad news for the privileged and good news for the oppressed. Jesus is contiguous with the Old Testament in that his life is the "historical demonstration that the God of Israel wills salvation for the weak and helpless;" he is discontiguous in that his saving grace is more than "historical freedom," that is, the incarnation goes beyond the exodus as a liberation event. The Christ event "transcends history and affirms a freedom not dependent on socio-political limitations."²⁷

The essence of the New Testament story is that in the crucified-resurrected Lord the promised freedom is "now fully available."

Cone concludes this statement on scripture with an examination of the relationship between theology and the Bible in black theology. His statement of a hermeneutical position is made in face of a charge that black theology is too selective, ignoring vital traditions such as David-Zion and wisdom and placing one-sided emphasis on Moses and the prophets. Referring to black theology's use of scripture, he says,

"The hermeneutical principle for an exegesis of the scriptures is the revelation of God in Christ as the liberator of the oppressed from social oppression and to political struggle, wherein the poor recognize that their fight against poverty and injustice is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ."²⁸

Cone argues that the test of the validity of such a hermeneutic can only come from God; that is, it is to be found in revelation alone. This is to say that the principle of interpretation is given in scripture and is grasped by those for whom the liberation is intended. From this lengthwise survey of God's self-disclosure in event, Cone concludes that the Bible has a message for all of theology. Given the nature of God's self-revelation within history, theology must therefore (a) be itself social and political; (b) be prophetic, daring to speak up in behalf of the helpless; (c) be aware of and itself become a bearer of the tradition of interpretation; and (d) address a word of liberation directly to the oppressed and one of judgment to the oppressor. The encounter with scripture lays a heavy responsibility upon theology — one of reflecting the divine word in both its method and its message.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 258-249, note 4; and pp. 78-80.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82. Cf. *Black Theology of Liberation*, pp. 114-116.

Is Cone right — some may even ask if he is serious — in such an appraisal of the theological task? Cone is here speaking about all Christian theology, not simply black theology. We will not presume to address the matter of his words to the theologian, except to wonder if his recital approach in biblical analysis can or even should be carried over into theology. Cone begins this concluding section of his paper with the statement, “. . . Christian theology exists only as its language arises out of an encounter with the biblical story. . . .”²⁹

While he is aware that theology is more than simply repeating the Bible story, Cone seems to lay too heavy a weight here, to the exclusion of the task of communicating the story to the contemporary culture in the logical categories and schema through which it might fully grasp the message and begin to work out its directives.

What of the author's mode of biblical analysis and his hermeneutical principle? Here, let us venture comment and begin by saying the obvious. Cone stands squarely within the salvation-history, biblical-theology-as-recital school. But as noted above, some biblical critics are less confident today in the adequacy of such an approach for dealing with the breadth of the Bible witness. Yet it seems that Cone is sensitive to such an observation in that he has moved to include some royal and wisdom motifs in his presentation. These, however, cannot simply be added by title as it were, but must be worked into his system through an expansion of his view of the divine self-disclosure and the varied nature of the divine-human encounter. Yet just as Cone seems to be “event” oriented in his Old Testament analysis, so his New Testament survey shows more concern for a “word” orientation. Can there be such a shift from God-event in the Old to what might be called Jesus-word in the New Testament? Would not the consistent use of both word and event concepts for both testaments better describe the God-man encounter in both and provide a greater breadth of approach for the black theologian? Wisdom no less than royal-messianic themes augment the God-in-history emphasis in the whole of scripture. In any event, whether one continues the search for a “center” in biblical theology such as Cone's stance reflects or replaces this approach with one allowing for a greater diversity of the biblical encounter with God as Hasel suggests, the liberation note would continue to be essential in any resulting biblical theology. It would seem to me that the impact of black theology should be such as to prevent the liberation element being left out of any subsequent program.

The black theology of James Cone is a contemporary witness to the encounter which can take place between Bible and theology, between the then and the now of biblical meaning. Cone himself, avowedly addressing a black audience, has moved to a position calling for all of Christian theology to become so engaged. The implication is that in using the hermeneutic of liberation others will hear the same contemporary word of God now unfolding in black theology. This is an aspect of the revela-

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

tory nature of the black religious experience. The general context is that of faith addressing faith, of witness in dialogue with witness. The weakness of Cone's engagement with scripture is not so much a matter of substance as one of method. It does not follow that the "language" of theology must be that of the Bible, even if Cone agrees with von Rad's view that biblical theology is fundamentally "telling the story." The New Testament parables indicate that there are numerous ways of telling the story, the language need not in a narrow sense be the very words of the *Heilsgeschichte* or of the prophets or of the psalmist and sages. If we learn anything from Bultmann, it is that there must be a transposing of language for real communication to take place across the ages. Even for a biblically shaped and oriented community like the black community there must be a translation of the message into modern cultural and philosophical categories. One of the messages of biblical wisdom is that Israelites could communicate in what was the lingua franca of pervasive non-Yahwistic cultural forms. This is also testimony of the numerous borrowed forms within Israel's cultic corpus.

Another methodological weakness consists of the use of an assumed "center" within biblical meaning and its use as the basis of a hermeneutic approach to the whole of scripture. The question of whether there is or is not a single central concept or meaning adequate for the construction of a biblical theology is one of methodological approach. It does not affect the truth of the liberation motif and its centrality within the scriptural witness. But being conscious of methodology, of opting for a broader rather than a narrower principle for ordering the material does open up even more avenues for viewing the operation of the liberation theme within the Bible. By focusing on the variety of God's relationship with his creation, that is, with the broad scope of the divine-human encounter, the liberation concept is broadened and deepened and not limited to the *Heilsgeschichte*. Thus viewed it cannot be diluted or pushed aside for some other conceptual word or event. The cultic hymn and lament, the wisdom prudential counsel or critique of orthodoxy, are now opened to be interpreted vis-à-vis God's will to save, and not merely as an appendage to his action in history or dim mirror image of the divine activity. Far from diverting attention from the salvation history, these otherwise non-event elements contribute both a humanizing and a mystical note to the divine-human encounter. The contribution of black theology toward a new sense of God's reality today will be enhanced by taking a broader view with regard to the core of biblical thought. In seeking a "center," such as the idea of covenant, Eichrodt's biblical theology has difficulty in speaking meaningfully about God and his world and that which falls outside the election tradition. Von Rad's theology is also marred by such an exclusive concern for credal affirmation of Yahweh-event and prophetic comment thereon that he must relegate the Writings of the Hebrew canon to a second-class status ("Israel's Response") of something less than revelation. These too nar-

rowly drawn circles present pitfalls which black theology might well avoid, because so many elements testifying to God's liberating grace and to the mystery of that activity are lost in the quest for a central meaning-idea-concept in the Bible.

IV. BLACK THEOLOGY IN THE THEOLOGICAL CURRICULUM

A very brief statement reiterating the broad significance of black theology for theological education is necessary. The word of Childs and Sanders is that we have drawn our circles too closely with regard to the descriptive approach in biblical theology, that exegesis must move to contemporary meaning via the path of the history of meanings given to the text. Our canon is the result of the ongoing process of extended meaning of the text and tradition, and from this we should learn that the process of revelation does not end with the close of canon. Biblical theology, therefore, must not only give statement to that ever-widening circle of encounter with God within the textual tradition but also point to the ongoingness of the process. Black theology, like the great theologies of the past, gives testimony to the ongoing process of the human family's encounter with God within life. As such, biblical theologians as well as systematic theologians and church historians and ethicists should take up the challenge of black theology to examine and act upon its liberation theme. Rather than being seen as a low priority elective for black and some white students, black theology ought to have a regular place within the theological curriculum, and some of its concerns as regular elements within other course offerings.

If we rightly hear what black theology is trying to say, it is that its word is a word for all who would hear the gospel today. Though he does not mention black theology or the American urban unrest, I am sure that Brevard Childs' perceptive commentary of Exodus 2:11-25, Moses' slaying of an Egyptian, represents a digging into the text on the basis of new questions being put to the scripture as a result of pressing social issues.³⁰ From a very different corner of the intellectual sphere, we might do well to look at C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (1961), especially the chapter on the imprecatory psalms, "The Cursings," for sensitive and fresh treatment of anger and its place in the divine scheme. In addition to putting questions to scripture out of contemporary concerns, black theology also points to the hymns and sermons of the black religious heritage as texts giving classic statement to black perceptions of God's saving activity in life. These affirmations are stamped out of the biblical mold, but bring such new perceptions with them as to be compared with that biblical palimpsest process of the new being inscribed upon the old. The black sermon, "Behold the rib," is more than comment on Genesis 2:21-25, for out of the black experience which forged a new relationship between black male and female, there is a profound

³⁰ Childs, *Book of Exodus* (1974), pp. 27-46; *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, pp. 164-183.

new word on the man and woman belonging side by side in everything.³¹ Many a black preacher was able to grasp the deepest meaning of Esther 4:14 despite its apparent silence (non-reference) regarding the source of deliverance.³² Particularly valuable source material and interpretation is found in Howard Thurman, *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Ingersoll Lecture) (1947), and *Deep River* (1955), and also James Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues* (1972). These are simply hints of what has been done, recently and not so recently, relating interpretation of scripture to the existential situation of the contemporary culture.³³

Perhaps the greatest challenge of black theology to the theological curriculum is in the biblical discipline, the one committed to searching for meaning and the means to the same for today. Thus, even as this study has been directed primarily to the black theologian, it is also a word to the biblical theologian. That word is that black theology is the most serious effort within the theological community today attempting to grapple with biblical meaning for today. Inasmuch as it is bridging that gap between what it meant then and what it means now, biblical theology can find no more worthy or profitable enterprise than to be in dialogue with black theology.

³¹ Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, eds., *Book of Negro Folklore*, New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1958, pp. 233-235. Cf. James Weldon Johnson's, *God's Trombones*, New York: Viking 1955. Also, James Cone, "The Content and Method of Black Theology Consultation, Accra, Ghana, December 1974.

"Behold de rib!
 Brothers, if God
 Had taken dat bone out of man's head
 He would have meant for woman to rule, hah
 If he has taken a bone out of his foot,
 He would have meant for us to dominize and rule.
 He could have made her out of back-bone
 And then she would have been behind us.
 But, no, God Almighty, he took de bone out of his side.
 So dat places the woman beside us.
 Hah! God knowed his own mind.
 Behold de rib!"

³² "And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Esther 4:14b (RSV). While the black preacher uses this text to inspire the favored of the community to aid the distressed, others such as Frederick Douglass speak of the broader black-white situation in America. In his journal, *North Star* (1849), Douglass interprets the black presence in America thus,

"We shall never die out nor be driven out; but shall go with this people, either as testimony against them, or as evidence in their favor throughout their generations."

³³ Julius Lester's review of C. Eric Lincoln, ed., *The Black Experience in Religion in Christianity and Crisis* 35/5 (March 31, 1975): pp. 73-75, criticizes much of black theology for not making more of the "experience of faith" which he finds at the core of black religion. While this is not the last word on the subject, it is significant that one outside of the theological discipline should make such a comment on essays devoted to the black religious experience.