

Dwight N. Hopkins\*

## A Black Theology of Liberation: The Slaves' Self-Creation

The 17th century arrival of Africans to what we now call the United States of America opened up a novel interpretation of Christianity in the "New World." This slave hermeneutic fashioned a theological practice from which the liberation of African Americans would portend freedom for all of the earth's oppressed. By seizing the initiative to appropriate the Bible for themselves, the slaves laid the historical foundation for today's Black theology. Black theology's contemporary religious lessons are grounded in the primordial convictions of ebony chattel.

This essay explores the problematic of enslaved Africans capsized but not drowned in the murky waters of North American bondage. Since Black people originated from a "hyphenated" reality (a synthesis of Africa and America) this essay unwinds the strands of a semiotic of white superiority and an African religious belief system. By unraveling the components of the slaves' religious life we can better appreciate how African Americans reassembled a theology of self-identity and self-determination. Black people anchored their faith in liberation and created *themselves*.

---

\*Dwight N. Hopkins is a leading "second generation" Black theologian and teaches religion and theology at Santa Clara University in California.

### Two Arrivals and Two Creations

White foam rode the black sea waves into the inland waters of the Massachusetts coast. The Pilgrims crowded the decks of their ships and thanked God for the fulfillment of a divine covenantal relationship. They were God's chosen people and this November 1620 arrival would mark the theological and historical folklore upon which every succeeding generation of White Americans would claim mythological allegiance. To be an American would denote being an heir of the old European country, with its culture, language, and Christian religion. Anything else would be a dissimilar Other.

The ships halted at the shore. Pilgrim immigrants waded through black water and claimed ownership of this earth as their Canaan. The ship's captain and the ministers gave praise to God from whom all blessings flow; the ultimate blessing was the bestowal upon God's special people a *New England*—one whose lands were as virgin as the Pilgrim's religion was pure.<sup>1</sup> Indeed this sense of the people, a Puritanism—purity of a superior theology, culture, language, and race—pervaded the self-consciousness of these 1620 arrivals as they proclaimed their ownership of the land and its rich resources. And this self-perceived White superiority primarily derived from a vocational sense of divine mission: a mission to discover, possess, and rule over all lands and peoples that had been created explicitly to be subdued by White images of and emissaries from God.

Thus the Puritans sailed not to break with old Europe so much as to realize the logic and fullest extent of a hegemonic religious and cultural civilization. That is why they named their colonial settlements *New Haven*, *New Canaan*, *New Netherlands*,

---

<sup>1</sup>Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People, Volume I* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, a division of Doubleday & Company, 1975), pp. 183-84; and p. 195.

and Cambridge. From the perspective of the Other, Puritanism signified a squabble within the White theological community, not a revolutionary difference. The 1620 adventurers brought the same view of Blacks (demonic, evil, inferior, and sinful) that their European mother churches had propagated by instinct, language, and symbol. The cries of religious freedom, congregational democracy, and use of the covenantal metaphor meant a justification of white-skinned privileges.<sup>2</sup> Later, an American would be known as a Christian of European tradition, a loyal patriot of the Stars and Stripes, a disciple of capitalist ownership, and fundamentally, of course, a White man. It was, therefore, inevitable that the Pilgrims would set in motion a theology—a conscious religious justification—that was encoded in the signs and symbols of an ordained racial hierarchy. A White American, by definition, enjoyed God's grace. Often whiteness denoted divinity. A Black person, consequently, represented the presence of ultimate darkness and the denial of American privileges; except those accorded to the demonic.

The first Europeans cast their eyes over the vast wooded lands. Some gave a silent prayer for those who had died from diseases en route. Others examined new species of vegetation and plant life. Couples embraced and joined their hearts in plans for raising families. Still others savored the import of this historic moment. All were survivors of a perilous adventure. What unified them now was an arrogant assumption of limitless possibilities. All of human history had served as prologue to and preparation for the birth of this new creation, the phenomenon of being European-Americans.

Granting the grace of manifest destiny, God worked in history to plough the ground for God's chosen White people. No

---

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 82.

other Americans would image their phenotype as normative. No other race would (or could) act with such impunity while monopolizing extant resources. No other group could openly name something and then claim it as universal reality. The Pilgrims knew that God had given them an invincibility to walk the earth without repercussions resulting from treading on the backs of the Other. And they passed on a tradition of being oblivious to Black humanity—a heritage of inherent superiority and assumed correctness. They raised their Christian children in this manner. In spite of notable exceptions who, like John Brown, betrayed their race, a theological glue served to hold a substantive materiality intact and thus an intransigent system was born.<sup>3</sup>

Unknown to those who landed at Plymouth Rock, the violent white waters off the Virginia coast had delivered twenty imprisoned Africans into Jamestown in August 1619. These seventeen men and three women were unwilling objects of force. A Dutch man-of-war had brought them to Jamestown. They were denied use of their own languages. The ship's captain traded them for food and supplies.<sup>4</sup> Thus a foundational representation of black bodies as commodities for White use and exchange became reality in the "New World." But we must remember that these were not White atheists conducting business transactions. On the contrary, this first domination of Blacks by Whites on North American soil would epitomize an ensuing white Christian theology: that is, the image of God would reside in the corporate White privilege to expect and demand Black compliance and silence. As one former

---

<sup>3</sup>Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), pp. 191-200; and David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. 165-210.

<sup>4</sup>Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America, 1619-1964* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1964), pp. 29-30; and Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America* (London: Collier Books, 1969), pp. 33 and 36-38.

slave remembered:

[Slaves] didn't go to the church building; the [white] preacher came and preached to them in their quarters. He'd just say, "Serve your masters. Don't steal your master's turkey. Don't steal your master's chickens. Don't steal your master's hogs. Don't steal your master's meat. Do whatsoever your master tells you to do." Same old thing all the time.<sup>5</sup>

This initial group of Africans suffered an amorphous status. They were not quite officially slaves, nor were they exactly like the White indentured servants (that is, the latter did not have to endure lifelong bondage or suffer the stigma of black skin). But the fact that the first twenty Blacks came to Jamestown by force and at the whim of European Christians indicated not voluntary immigration, but a violent separation from their African homeland.<sup>6</sup> And ever present were the language and symbols of White religion—a theological phenomenon that had been hatched in Europe. In this faith paradigm, Europeans (of the old world) and their descendants (of the new) deployed a ritualistic, divinely ordained hierarchy of racial polarity reigned over by a White Jesus (actually a portrait of an Italian model commissioned by a former pope) who had subsumed a Black Satan beneath his feet.<sup>7</sup> And as the first captured Africans trod Virginia's lethal waters and onto Jamestown's dark banks, they soon enough discovered their role in this pantheon of a pale Christ and an ebony evil.

---

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in B.A. Botkin, ed. *Lay My Burden Down* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), p. 25.

<sup>6</sup>Vincent Harding, *There Is A River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p. 27.

<sup>7</sup>See Joseph R. Washington, *Anti-blackness in English Religion* (AUTOPress, 1984).

Laws speedily appeared that made an African woman's offspring a slave. This subhuman inscription on the female body freed Christian White men to impregnate Black women without having to fulfill a religio-moral obligation to one's biological children. Moreover, and as a result of training male slaves as studs,<sup>8</sup> Black women began to produce a profitable labor force. The first twenty rapidly grew into hundreds and the hundreds into thousands. By 1865, the thousands had yielded four million people.

From 1619 to 1865 Black servitude resulted from one of the greatest experiments in human history: the creation of an African American people. Slavery laid the basis for the founding of Christian America. Twelve of the first fifteen presidents of the United States were slavemasters. It is an ironic fact, therefore, that religious and patriotic America would not exist without the invention of the Blacks. In a sense, God's chosen people from Europe (the theological language of Puritanism would continue to echo down the corridors of American history) birthed both a New World and a new racial caste system. They actualized their divine creative powers from sunup to sundown—a theological metaphor for their God-ordained White supremacy over Black inferiority. In this time and space, European Americans carved out a Christian nation grounded in chattel slavery.

### Sundown to Sunup: the Invisible Institution

The initial twenty and their descendants had to be victims of White religion. Otherwise, America would not be as we know it today. Without free (slave) labor, there would never have arisen

---

<sup>8</sup>Former slave William Ward is quoted to this effect in George P. Rawick, ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Georgia Narratives* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1977), volume 13, part 4, p. 133.

the accumulation of capital and subsequent global superiority of the United States of America. Black bodies labored for two and one-half centuries, rendering uncompensated work and wealth to a nation legally owned by propertied White male citizens as inscribed in the Constitution.<sup>9</sup> Without African American chattel, White churches could not have acquired a monopoly on resources. European American ecclesial institutions (as corporate entities) engaged in and both actively and passively supported "the peculiar institution".<sup>10</sup> And White theology—the reflection on and practice of faith in this Europeanized Christ—could not have survived and developed without the creation of African Americans. White theology nurtured a religious worldview that enhanced and refined itself through the subordination of Black people. White plantation missionaries and preachers used sermons, catechisms, biblical exegeses, and religious epistles to claim their privileges.<sup>11</sup> In the 1839 words of Calvin Colton (later a New England Episcopal clergyman), "there was no such thing as equality between men, nor can there be," and slaves were not injured—

but benefitted, by the position which they now occupy; not only in comparison with the history of the race to which they belong, but also in comparison with the common history of other tribes and nations.<sup>12</sup>

In a word, the creative core of White theology was the practical subordination and marginalization of a Black Other.

White theology, in slavery, institutionalized itself within

<sup>9</sup>*Before the Mayflower*, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup>James Gillespie Birney, *The American Churches: The Bulwarks of American Slavery* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup>See Thomas V. Peterson, *Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World*. (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1978) and Richard Nisbet, *The Capacity of Negroes* (Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1970).

<sup>12</sup>Quoted in Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America* (Athens, Ga.: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), p. 188.

the plantation system. It began slowly during the hours between sunup and sundown. In the North, the heirs of the 1620 Pilgrims eventually legalized Black subordination. Here African American slavery took the form of holding in perpetual bondage house servants, farm hands, and semi-skilled laborers.<sup>13</sup> In the South, the offspring of the 1607 British immigrants to Jamestown (the first Whites to establish a permanent colony in the "New World") sculpted and cultivated one of the most precise Christian relationships between free White men and racial chattel. There, due to peculiarity of soil, climate, and cash crops, the plantation system enjoyed longevity and complexity.

White Christian citizens and their churches, North and South, signified their divine racial hierarchy through a theologically justified terror: sometimes threatened, sometimes actualized, but always an understood possibility. Ex-slave Frederick Douglass underscores this reality:

For of all the slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others.<sup>14</sup>

This was the sunup to sundown period when daylight enabled a White Jesus Christ to rule over Black slaves like a wolf over a sheep fold. Encoding this religious superiority, the Anglican Church's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) standardized the following text for slaves preparing for baptism in the thirteen colonies:

---

<sup>13</sup>William Z. Foster, *The Negro People in American History* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), p. 36; and Quarles, p. 40.

<sup>14</sup>"Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave," in *Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: The New American Library, 1968), p. 256).

You declare in the presence of God and before this congregation that you do not ask for the Holy Baptism out of any desire to free yourself from the duty and obedience you owe to your master while you live; but merely for the good of your soul and to partake of the grace and blessings promised to the members of the Church of Christ.<sup>15</sup>

Christianity, reflecting this earthly racial stratification, ordained the White race's lordship over Black bodies just as Christ's lordship was ordained over all creation.

The slaves, however, deployed their own survival and liberation strategies, most notably in the time and space between sundown and sunup. Under the grace of darkness, African Americans sneaked off to some pre-arranged place deep in the woods, swamps, ravines, or in slave cabins.<sup>16</sup> There they began literally to re-create themselves in what is known as the Invisible Institution — a sacred space and relationship where the loosely organized and surreptitious religious gatherings of the slave community could take place. There the Black chattel re-named themselves as liberated children of God. Before they began their religious rituals, they called one another "Sister" and "Brother". They were siblings of a heavenly "Father" whose spirit would soon descend upon their gathering like a mighty rushing wind. These familial titles also subversively contradicted the designations they received from slavery during the sunup to sundown periods. No longer were they

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Forrest G. Wood, *The Arrogance of Faith: Christianity and Race in America from the Colonial Era to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p. 118.

<sup>16</sup>See the autobiography of ex-slave James L. Smith in *Five Black Lives*, Introduction by Arna Bontemps (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), pp. 163-67; the narrative of ex-slave Moses Grandy in *Five Slave Narratives*, ed. William Loren Katz (New York: Arno Press, 1968), pp. 35-36; ex-slave Charlotte Brooks in Octavia V. Rogers Albert, *The House of Bondage or Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 12; and William Ward's narrative, p. 189.

"nigger", "nigra", or "black sons of bitches". Now they were people with their own names; they identified themselves as divinely created human beings and this self-definition confirmed their new cultural initiative.

At the same time, slaves asserted their political privileges. They claimed holy space as their earth and resources in the wilderness and thereby established their control of time and territory. Politics is the right to determine one's self and those things around one. Only in the Invisible Institution could these people hold the reins of political power. Slaves were extremely self-conscious about their free areas. Like guerrillas defending liberated zones, they dispatched lookouts to encircle their religious gatherings to detect any white patrollers who combed the highways at night in search of illegal slave gatherings. Furthermore, a semi-governmental structure developed in that situation where preachers and laypersons acquired oratorical and leadership skills, essential tools for any successful community building. Systems of communication were set up that carried the latest news about fellow slaves and the plans of the masters. In certain instances, resistance or armed rebellions were contemplated and, at times, executed. Slaves took seriously their new names as denoting equality as children of God who were created to live in freedom, even if that meant waging self-defensive resistance against a demonic slave society.<sup>17</sup>

Linguistically, slaves conjured up a bilingual capability to endure the potentially death-dealing obstacles of slavery. As the spirit descended on them they fashioned spirituals (the unique religious songs of slavery) with double meanings. In the Invisible Institution, songs to the Almighty were encoded with both heavenly and earthly substance. There existed a surface meaning and a

---

<sup>17</sup>See Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), chapter one; Eric Foner, ed., *Nat Turner* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971); and Sara Bradford, *Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People* (Secaucus, N.J.: The Citadel Press, 1961).

sub-textual intent in their sorrowful and Jubilee lyrics. "Going to cross Jordan's waters," connoted both the longed for ultimate freedom that death would bring, and the Ohio River to the north, and subsequently the escape to Canada. Religious songs sustained both a penultimate and eschatological liberation. The surface hope-substance (i.e., the longing for life after death) played on the stereotyped images held by slavemasters—images of "darkies" cheerfully passing time by singing about a remote and heavenly end. Simultaneously, the masters misunderstood the earthly "Jordan", the immediate object of runaways on the Underground Railroad that was conducted by "Moses" (the biblical name given to Harriet Tubman, a leader of the secret passage out of slavery).<sup>18</sup>

In a situation like this religious language becomes a physical force. By creating duplicitous spirituals and deploying them in ways to support organized escape, a superstructure of biblical characters (e.g., the River Jordan, Daniel in the lion's den, the three little Hebrew boys) facilitated the breaking asunder of the chains that bound these people in the material social relations. Thus language, through the metaphorical and practical immediacy of religious song, enabled African Americans to re-create themselves, their visions, and the space-time in which they existed.

### A Black Theology of Liberation

The Invisible Institution, the sundown to sunup period, offered an opportunity for slaves to devise an entirely new interpretation of Christianity: a Black theology of liberation. They merged the remains of their African Traditional Religions, their reinterpreted Christianity, and their common sense daily experiences under slavery.

---

<sup>18</sup>Sarah Bradford, *Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People* (Secaucus, New Jersey: The Citadel Press, 1961), p. 28.

Though wrenched from the systematic divine pantheon and religious worldview of the African continent, as a consequence of the mixture of different language groups and the inevitable disruption of African memory as succeeding generations distanced themselves from their ancestral homeland, enslaved African Americans adhered to fragments of African Traditional Religions. In this sacred social relationship, the High God continued to rule all creation with justice and compassion for the weak.<sup>19</sup> Deriving power from the Supreme Being, strata of intermediary gods implemented specific duties in behalf of the High God.<sup>20</sup> The ancestors, the living dead, were the most recent members of the spiritual world, they required, therefore, sacred acknowledgement and veneration. They too served an intermediary role, linking the plight and fortunes of the living with the supernatural realm.<sup>21</sup> Religious leaders and elders within the land of the living guided the community with sacred wisdom based on traditional authority. Finally, the unborn prepared to depart from the spiritual to the material world.

Within this divine cosmology, African Traditional Religions embraced a sacred worldview that demarcated how Africans saw the cosmos and acted in it. First, the sacred and secular were one. Africans could not conceive of any space as non-religious.<sup>22</sup> From the unborn state, to the event of birth, to the eventual return to the supernatural, all life was holy. This belief comforted and encouraged them. It comforted them because it suggested that God

---

<sup>19</sup>John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1970), p. 37.

<sup>20</sup>See Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra, Ghana: FEP International Private Limited, 1978), pp. 9-10; and Philip D. Curtin, ed. *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), p. 274.

<sup>21</sup>*Africa Remembered*, p. 78.

<sup>22</sup>See John Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, 1991), p. 29; and John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1979), p. 44.

ruled over all creation and no individual or race could claim hegemony in any sphere of reality. It encouraged them because whenever any person or group sought to challenge God's harmony by hoarding resources and lording privileges over another, duty mandated protracted resistance in the name of the Supreme Being.

Furthermore, a dynamic interaction determined the individual's connection to his or her community. Individualism proved to be anathema, but individuality became a cherished goal. In other words, in the African worldview, one left the human level and sank to a lower form whenever one acted on her or his own to benefit primarily oneself. A human being could pursue her or his strengths and visions as long as they served the communal wellbeing. In radical distinction from the European notion, "Cogito ergo sum" (a focus on the self that pointed toward a cutthroat competition for individual gain), Africans embraced "I am, because we are" (a basis for a healthy collectivity that encompassed the interests and needs of society's most marginalized).<sup>23</sup> Consequently, Africans accented the extended family which accepted not only biological kin, but also the beggar, the broken, and the bereaved.

Finally, Africans brought with them to the New World a perspective on life that, instead of "either-or", cherished "both-and." The High God ordained harmonious interaction within humanity, and between humanity and the natural and spiritual worlds. All of life's dimensions involved a complementary and non-antagonistic association with that which was outside of oneself; thus the notion of the naturally belligerent Other escaped the African worldview. Only when evil spirits or wicked people disrupted the created balance of community did antagonism and hierarchical stratification enter the picture.

Sequestered in the swamps and woods, with snakes and wild animals as nature's witnesses, the Invisible Institution enabled

---

<sup>23</sup>John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1979), pp. 120-21.

African American slaves to keep alive the memory of African Traditional Religions in the form of attenuated survivals. To these, they added their own common sense experience consisting of aphorisms pregnant with folk theological wisdom. Every slave knew what "God may not come when you call him, but he's right on time" meant. For them, the divinity was a time-God, who operated on God's own time. From the anthropological perspective, one could not instruct nor always understand the ways of the All Powerful. But somehow and some way, God appeared "on time" to ease your troubled mind, lift your burdens, prop you up on every leaning side, and help you climb the rough side of the mountain. It was this time-God, who "made a way out of no way."

Similarly, the aphorism that "God sits high but looks low" imaged a majestic Being whose providence encompassed all of reality. Though this all-powerful One held the whole world in divine hands, still God knew the individual hairs on each of the heads of society's weak and downtrodden. Our arms might be too short to box with God (paraphrasing a slave saying), but this God was never positioned too high to empty the divine spirit into the human predicament. Indeed, the appearance of God's Word in the form of the human Jesus symbolized precisely the divine Being becoming poor in order to ensure suffering humanity's liberation. Referencing the metaphor of dead to sin/slavery and resurrection to life/liberation, one former slave witnesses to his new Christian freedom brought to earth by the Spirit:

Whenever a man has been killed dead and made alive in Christ Jesus he no longer feels like he did when he was a servant of the devil. Sin kills dead but the spirit of God makes alive.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>Quoted in George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, God Struck Me Dead*, volume 19 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1977), pp. 124-25.

"God don't like ugly" implied the eschatological certainty that trouble did not last forever for the voiceless of society. Commenting on God's ultimacy in defeating slavery by bringing on the Civil War, ex-slave J.W. Lindsay proclaimed: "No res' fer niggers 'till God he step in an' put a stop to de white folks meanness."<sup>25</sup>

Though evil might reign in the immediate realm (that is, the penultimate reality), in the end God's will would prevail on earth for the sufferers of pain and abuse. Such an expectation of the finality of justice gave the slaves hope in a future that would be theirs. Hope engendered the power to keep on struggling because their divinity would take care of them through trials and tribulations. The ugliness of life had no dominion and would be defeated because the desire of the oppressed for full humanity coincided with the divinity's disdain of evil.

The everyday life experiences of the slaves taught them that though God was on time, looked low, and detested ugliness, oppressed humanity was, nevertheless, a co-laborer with God. We find this belief in another aphorism: "God helps those who help themselves". As divine creations, the nature of human beings compelled them to defend themselves and struggle for full humanity in the course of achieving their fullest creative possibilities. This indicated for Black chattel a fight against the slave system in order to establish their humanity. To wait idly on God while evil forces crushed down one's spirit, body, and mind exemplified a slow suicide. To the contrary, God summoned society's victims to co-labor with God and each other in life's dangerous vineyards in order to produce life's fullest fruit. This vision articulated for the slaves the goal of ultimate freedom.

---

<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Charles L. Perdue, Jr., ed. *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 126.

Enslaved African Americans created a Black theology of liberation by intertwining African Traditional Religions and daily life experiences with a radical reinterpretation of slavemaster Christianity. They took the normative white theology (e.g., "slaves obey your masters") and crafted a firm plumb line which guided their understanding of the Bible and its implications for their unique situation. Whatever biblical substance spoke to the question of liberation and whatever events in their lives opened the door to freedom guided their creative re-evaluation of Christian discourse. The intellectual acumen of oppressed African Americans and the material weight of their status as private property demanded a critical appropriation of the Bible. Liberation biblical stories were eagerly garnered and cherished as the criteria of Christian witness; likewise, liberation actions were lifted up as criteria for sensible biblical interpretation. The norm of justice for the poor navigated both Scriptural importance and daily practice.

From their perspective of freedom in the survivals of the religions of their ancestors, the drive toward proactive justice in everyday life encounters, and the liberation motif at the heart of a reinterpreted Christianity, Black chattel projected themselves into an entirely new community made up of God, Jesus, and themselves.

God became the personification of justice. The European Christians and their descendants in the New World had defined justice as saving the African "heathen" from the barbarism of her or his own native environment. But when enslaved Africans embraced the Good News of the Bible, they sifted out the essence of true liberation. As one former slave wrote:

Indeed I, with others, was often told by the minister how good God was in bringing us over to this country from dark and benighted Africa, and permitting us to listen to the sound of the gospel. To me, God also

granted temporal freedom, which man without God's consent, had stolen away.<sup>26</sup>

This sense of freedom flowed directly from a slave exegesis of the Old Testament. Here, in the narratives of the Hebrew people, Blacks in chains saw themselves in a similar predicament. Pharaoh literally signified the White slavemasters. The story of the oppression of the Israelites, under the Black experience of forced labor and a subordinate social status, resonated verbatim with southern and northern slavery in colonial America. Consequently, if Yahweh could free those biblical people, then surely the same God—the I Am Who I Am God—could and would liberate four million African Americans. In original creation, Yahweh had granted equal freedom to all humanity. But “man,” slavetraders and profiteers in Black flesh, had stolen them from Africa and thereby had transgressed God's sacred primordial intent. Just as the Old Testament divinity brought new reality to oppressed Hebrews, so would the same God fulfill the promise of liberation for North American slaves.

Moreover, the slaves developed a ritualistic affirmation about God's consistency. For them, God inevitably felt a special love for the oppressed, heard their groans, and brought them out of the house of bondage. A former slave writes about the ordeal of North American slavery and the eventual decision of God to break the chains of captivity:

The Lord, in His love for us and to us as a race, has ever found favor in His sight, for when we were in the land of bondage He heard the prayers of the faithful ones, and came to deliver them out of the Land of Egypt.

---

<sup>26</sup>“The Narrative of Lunsford Lane,” in *Five Slave Narratives*, William Loren Katz, ed., (New York: Arno Press, 1968), p. 20.

For God loves those that are oppressed, and will save them when they cry unto him, and when they put their trust in Him.<sup>27</sup>

The ritual chant of sacred love-hearing-deliverance expressed the heart of the new liberation theology that slaves bequeathed to Christianity in North America. Neither the Massachusetts Pilgrims of 1620 nor the colonists who settled Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, experienced so definitively a God who allowed the poor to "ever find favor in His sight". Now love entailed a divine partiality to the poor; hearing became Yahweh's ears opening to the moans of the voiceless of the earth; and deliverance construed as divinity with outstretched arms fending off slavery and hoisting the victims onto eagle's wings into a land rich with milk and honey. The essence of *kairos* (the fortunate offering of God's grace in human time and history) was revealed in the poor's response to the possibility and inevitability of ultimate justice from on high, in full knowledge that the cries of those who are abused make a difference in the cosmos and their summons to be collaborators with God ensures an earthly as well as a heavenly deliverance.

But the love-hear-deliver dynamic of the slaves' liberation theology also brought condemnation from the oppressor. The evil of slavery was designated as Satan's realm, an affront to the original divine intent. Anything or anyone arrogant enough to counteract Yahweh's providence risked bringing down the wrath of the God of the Old Testament. Slavery evinced the *hubris*, the arrogant self-centeredness of White North Americans who believed that it was their Christian responsibility to exercise dominion and control over African Americans. The slaves thought otherwise. Only God pos-

---

<sup>27</sup>"A Slave Girl's Story, Being an Autobiography of Kate Drumgoold," in *Six Women's Slave Narratives*, William L. Andrews, ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 3.

sessed that providential right and capability. Those who played with divine fire would suffer severe burns. An ex-slave speaks of the nature of the justice God metes out when he writes in his autobiography:

There is, however, great consolation in knowing that God is just, and will not let the oppressor of the weak, and the spoiler of the virtuous, escape unpunished here and hereafter.<sup>28</sup>

God may not come when you call, but is always right on time! In the discourse of African American chattel, time included both earthly and heavenly time. In other words, the adversary of Black liberation was bound to suffer in the present world as well as in the world beyond. Slaves perceived all things, including space and time, as full of religious meaning and an intermixture of the natural and the supernatural. Accordingly, punishment of evil doers was not delayed until after death. God's time comprised the here and the hereafter. The "oppressors of the weak" and the "spoilers of the virtuous" would receive no reprieve in the chronology of the divine narrative.

Africans, who in their enslavement eventually became self-creators of an African American identity, marked a new beginning, not only for themselves, but for the whole society. They introduced an entirely new way of doing theology. They forged in North America a faith that became a freedom way paved by the practice of justice for the least of Christ's brothers and sisters. Such an original liberation theology became and remains the ultimate stumbling block for those who claim allegiance to Christ, but who continue to practice injustice. In the religious language and legacy

---

<sup>28</sup>William Craft, *Running A Thousand Miles For Freedom* (Salem, New Hampshire: Ayer Company, 1991 reprint edition), pp. 8-9.

of the Black slaves, we, therefore, discern signs of our own times as well as theirs.

In other words, no longer can Christianity be conceived of simply as the affirmation of correct doctrine. Now the perspective from below, the vantage point of the Black Other, makes it obligatory that Christians define themselves first by bearing a practical witness in behalf of the liberation of the poor and the oppressed. In slave discourse, "everybody talking about heaven, ain't going there," because the slaves reconfigured talk about the divine out of the context of struggle and survival in the midst of suffering. In doing so, they challenged all Christian tradition since the Emperor Constantine snatched the message of Jesus from the mouths of voiceless and the persecuted, and transformed the faith of the primitive Church into an ideological justification for the whimsy and posturings of a dominating religio-political order. The Black chattel of North America re-translated that dogma of oppression into the justice praxis of the earthly Jesus. Paraphrasing slave theology, "it's not how you talk that talk, but how you walk that walk."

Indeed, in the particularity of the slave's self-creation, a Black theology of liberation was born. And in forging their new selves, those amazing new communities of faith, those gathering witnesses of a new humanity, taught succeeding generations of Christians—most of whom turned a deaf ear to them—how to strive in hope as co-laborers for "thy kingdom come on earth."