Rediscovering Sabbath: Hebrew Social Thought And Its Contribution To Black Theology's Vision For America

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REDISCOVERING SABBATH: HEBREW SOCIAL THOUGHT AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO BLACK THEOLOGY’S VISION FOR AMERICA

by

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ABSTRACT
REDISCOVERING SABBATH: HEBREW SOCIAL THOUGHT AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO BLACK THEOLOGY’S VISION FOR AMERICA

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Marquette University, 2013

Black Theology has made extensive use of the Exodus narrative for making its theological and ethical claims. It has served to demonstrate God’s concerns for liberation both within history and eschatologically. However, the Sabbath and Jubilee laws of the Hebrew Scriptures have been underutilized as sources of social ethical critique. Sabbath and Jubilee together were a unique way of life and an implicit social ethical system established by Israel in response to their slavery and oppression in Egypt. It is Sabbath and Jubilee that reveal Israel’s response to God’s liberative act, and demonstrates the way in which they understand what a liberated society should look like. Any attempt to utilize the Exodus narrative as a means of doing theology is incomplete without a correlative examination of the Israelite response to that redemptive saga.

The purpose of this dissertation is to determine the ways in which the ethical vision conveyed by the theological and ethical principles that underlie Sabbath and Jubilee can become an interlocutor for Black theology, providing both criticism and support for its ethical vision for America. In order to do so, the dissertation first demonstrates the influence of Exodus within early African American religion and Black Theology. It then examines the hermeneutical framework in which the Exodus is understood. After exploring the theological and ethical principles that underlie the Sabbath and Jubilee, including their canonical connection to the Exodus, the dissertation demonstrates the ways in which a black hermeneutical reading of Sabbath and Jubilee might prove meaningful for Black Theology.
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Christopher T. Spotts

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Introduction

Some Christians may assume that the Sabbath, as revealed in the Bible, is no longer necessary in light of the advent of Christ. The gospels certainly seem to depict a struggle between the legalistic purveyors of the Sabbath laws and the One who scoffed at their rules, and eventually made them irrelevant. Sabbath becomes a part of “the Law,” which they argue has been set aside by the advent of grace made available through the cross of Jesus Christ. For those who find Sabbath to be of any value at all it is primarily a day of rest in which worship and rest supplant the busyness of the rest of the week. For these people, Sabbath has become a means of preparing for more busyness and toil.

However, the ancient Israelites recognized the Sabbath and Jubilee, which is associated with it, as so much more. The Sabbath day was not just a religious practice that kept them from working once a week. It bore more than religious implications, but social, economic and political implications as well. Terms such as “economic” or “political” are anachronistic, as the biblical authors did not understand the world in such categories. They did not understand religion as something unique from politics or economics, because religion suffused every activity in daily life. For those of us in North America for whom religion has become something that is easily separable from politics and economics the use of these terms is instructive, because they demonstrate the extent to which the Sabbath was more than “religious.” It bore implications for how the Israelites made money, worked the land, cared for their neighbor, and lived with those who swore allegiance to gods or kings other than YHWH. As such, the Sabbath conveyed a certain ethic for the ancient Israelites. It was deeply rooted in their
relationship with YHWH, and served to define in many ways the way they were to live with one another.

Perhaps because of this marginalization the Sabbath and Jubilee laws of the Hebrew Scriptures have been underutilized as sources of social ethical critique. However, the Exodus, which serves as one of the narrative backgrounds for the development of Sabbath and Jubilee, has been utilized widely for ethical purposes, in particular by those who wish to argue for the Church’s involvement in liberation for the victimized and oppressed. Many liberation theologies have made use of the Exodus as a paradigmatic narrative for understanding theology and ethics, but they have not fully discovered Sabbath, the unique way of life and implicit social ethical system established by Israel in response to the slavery and oppression of Egypt. It is Sabbath, in part, that reveals Israel’s response to God’s liberative act, and demonstrates the way in which they understand what a liberated society should look like. Any attempt to utilize the exodus narrative as a means of doing theology is incomplete without a correlative examination of the Israelite response to that redemptive saga.

It is evident that the exodus narrative has stirred the theological imaginations of African Americans from their days in slavery through the Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King, Jr. to the present works of James Cone and Black Theology. The consistency of its use demonstrates its significance in African American biblical hermeneutics and social discourse. But the Exodus is not merely a story of liberation from slavery; it is a story about the birth of a people called to live according to the covenant of YHWH; canonically, exodus gives birth to Sabbath. Those who have sought freedom from oppression have been moved by the exodus narrative to call for liberation,
based on God’s concern for the enslaved and oppressed, but to what end? What might the rediscovery of Sabbath and Jubilee look like in American Black Theology?

These are the questions that this dissertation seeks to answer. Because exodus is foundational for a Black liberationist understanding of theology, Sabbath, as the canonical response to Exodus, provides a biblical ethical framework consistent with many of the ethical concerns of Black liberationist thought. It is one thing to argue that God is concerned about liberation. It is another thing to point to the ethical framework established by YHWH as an example of what liberation might result in. As such, the aims of this dissertation are to determine the ways in which the ethical vision conveyed by Sabbath can become an interlocutor for Black theology, providing both criticism and support for its ethical vision for America.

I now provide a brief explanation of “Sabbath” and related concepts which will be more fully developed as the dissertation unfolds. “Sabbath” was more than just a once-a-week practice for the ancient Israelites. It included the Sabbath day, the Sabbath year and the Jubilee year. When I am referring to one of these particular practices I will refer to them specifically as Sabbath day, Sabbath year or Jubilee respectively. However, I will frequently speak of these practices in aggregate. Although the Sabbath day, Sabbath year and Jubilee years probably developed independently from one another, for the sake of ease I will at times refer to the “Sabbath vision” or the “Sabbath tradition.” Even though the different stipulations are historically distinct from one another, I use these terms to address the ethical implication of these laws, not as one specific stipulation (e.g. the Jubilee), but as an entire ethical tradition.
Any attempt to understand Black theology, and thus its purpose in utilizing the Exodus narrative, must begin with its sources. This will be the purpose of the first chapter of the dissertation. Slave religion developed as an attempt to understand the world from the perspective of African enslavement in America. Through the oppression of white racism African slaves faced the total disregard of their human dignity and in many cases their existence qua humans. As such, their religion, demonstrated in the slave spirituals, sermons, and other religious documents and letters reveal a struggle to address enslavement and dehumanization theologically. This context provided a rich tradition of theological meaning for the Exodus. Black slaves in America noticed numerous similarities between themselves and the Israelites enslaved in Egypt. From their perspective, both were slaves in a land not their own. Both were exploited as a people. Neither had any legal or social recourse for justice, and thus both looked to God for deliverance. Similar parallels were drawn between the social and political experiences of subsequent generations of black people in the United States and those of the Israelites in Egypt. As such, the Exodus has provided a theological narrative for the black community for centuries, one that reveals their true dignity, and demonstrated to them a God who would work for their liberation.

Once the significance of the Exodus within the sources of Black Theology is developed, it will become necessary to explore the ways in which it has been used within Black Theology itself. Thus the second chapter will explore the theological works of James Cone, Dwight Hopkins and Deotis Roberts. James Cone uses the Exodus narrative most extensively within his theological development, but each of these theologians acknowledges the importance of Exodus for doing theology within the black community.
To interpret the Sabbath tradition from a black perspective, it will be crucial to understand black hermeneutics and the concerns that drive a black interpretation of the Bible. Chapter 3 will address the hermeneutical concerns of the black community, noting the ways in which Exodus has been interpreted, and the ways in which it has served as a norm for interpreting the rest of the Bible. This chapter will also address some of the criticisms black hermeneutics faces. One such criticism comes from the perspective of biblical criticism in the form of Jon Levenson, and the other comes from a theological perspective in the form of Womanist Theology.

The fourth chapter is concerned primarily with exploring the theological principles that underpin the Sabbath tradition. It will begin by demonstrating the canonical connection between Sabbath and Exodus, and will then examine themes such as covenant, land and rest, which are so crucial for understanding Sabbath’s significance. The purpose of this dissertation is not to make an argument for the reinstitution of the Sabbath and Jubilee stipulations as demonstrated in the Hebrew Scriptures. Within a globalized context, the institution of these stipulations would prove problematic, if not impossible. Instead, I hope to show that the theological and ethical principles that serve to provide Sabbath with its ethical force are still valuable for critiquing contemporary situations. Hence, determining these principles will be the purpose of this chapter.

The final chapter demonstrates how the principles identified in Chapter 4 might serve to further the interest and goals of Black Theology. Some of the principles identified will be completely consistent with the concerns of Black Theology. In such cases, this chapter will demonstrate the similarities, and explore the ways in which an
adoption of the Sabbath tradition by Black Theology might further enrich it. In some ways the principles identified will open new avenues of exploration for Black Theology.

On a personal note, in some ways I am horribly ill-suited to write a dissertation on Black Theology. When I told my father that I would be doing so, he asked whether I could be taken seriously as a white man writing about Black Theology. More than once this question has been asked of me, and it is one that I do not take lightly. However, I have come to realize that the greatest problem I faced in writing this dissertation is not whether or not anybody would listen to a white man talk about Black Theology. The greatest problem before me was that, like many white people, I was completely unaware of the privilege I have been afforded due to the color of my skin. I have assumed for many years that because I harbored no ill will toward any particular black person or to those of African descent as a whole, racism was a problem that had been relegated to the annals of history, having been solved by the Civil Rights Movement. But the intellectual interaction that I have had with the works of James Cone, Dwight Hopkins, Deotis Roberts, Delores Williams, and Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, not to mention the face-to-face conversations I have had with Bryan Massingale while writing this dissertation have revealed to me subtle ways in which I have adopted the normativity of my whiteness.

This awareness has led to some painful revelations, but has also served to make the writing of this dissertation as formative as it has been informative for me. By no means do I think my racist assumptions have been completely resolved, but I have at the very least become aware of them. My hope is that this dissertation might in some way further the causes of Black Theology, such that others may become aware of their own racial assumptions and conditioning in the same way.
Chapter 1: “The Exodus” from Slave Religion to Civil Rights Movement

According to Dwight Hopkins the sources for Black theology are not found in the European thinkers who have so influenced mainstream white theology, but in the songs and religious experiences of enslaved Africans. “The black church begins in slavery; thus slave religion provides the first source for a contemporary statement on black theology.”\(^1\) The religion of enslaved Africans provided a meaningful resistance to the white theology that was used to justify their enslavement. As such, before attempting to write meaningfully about Black Theology it is necessary to examine the ways in which slave theology has influenced it. In this chapter, I will be focusing primarily on the ways in which slave theology made use of the Israelite’s delivery from enslavement and subsequent exodus from Egypt. The purpose is to demonstrate the ways in which the biblical narrative of Exodus has shaped the ethical and theological emphases of Black theology.

**Introduction: The context of slave religion**

Before examining the use of the Exodus in slave religion it is necessary to understand the context in which slave religion developed. The institution of slavery was based on a racist ideology designed to deny the humanity of slaves, and in so doing provide a justification for slavery. Due to the color of their skin, the slaves’ dignity was refused and their cultural, tribal and familial identities were repudiated. They were stripped of the identity they knew, of culture, land, tribe, and family and brought to a

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place where the only identity they were allowed was that of “negro” or “slave.” As Josiah Henson retells the story, “My brothers and sisters were bid off first, and one by one, while my mother, paralyzed by grief, held me by the hand.”

Moses Grandy recalls the story of his wife’s sale, “My heart was so full that I could say very little.” Not even familial ties were recognized; every attempt was made to strip the last vestiges of their African identity.

The racist ideology that served to justify slavery was pervasive. In a public debate between Senator Douglas and Abraham Lincoln, Douglas argued Africans have been a race upon the earth for thousands of years, but they have never, no matter where they were found, been anything but inferior to the white race. “[The African] belongs to an inferior race and must always occupy an inferior position.” The inferior social position held by the black race – that of slavery – was a condition of racial realities that were beyond question. It was widely believed that, because of the comparative degradation of black culture and black personality, whenever black and white races existed together, blacks would find themselves in bondage to whites. Non-white races were inferior to the white race, and as such, were destined to serve them. Slavery was the natural condition of non-whites, and the apparent inferiority of African thinking, culture, and civilization were all the evidence that was needed for many whites to justify the racial abuse of slavery.

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3 ibid., 21.
4 One is reminded of the scene from Alex Haley’s novel, *Roots*, in which the African slave, Kunta Kinte, was given a new name.
The obvious inferiority of the black race meant that any association it had with the white race was inherently beneficial for them. An introduction to white people, and their culture benefited the slaves even if that association was one in which their humanity was denied. “A negro may be said to have fewer cares, and less reason to be anxious about tomorrow, than any other individual of our species.” It was argued that only rarely was it the case when a Negro did not have daily provisions; slaves were completely unfamiliar with the ravages of war; they had someone to take care of them when they were sick; unlike Europeans, the more children a slave had the richer he became. The Africans’ association with the civilized whites provided great benefit because, as the personal property and investment of their owner, they were well taken care of. This argument stemmed from the belief that Africans would be far worse off if left in their savage homeland, to the devices of warring tribes, and uncivil societies.

Christianity in the American colonies was an important component in the broader ideological structure that assumed white superiority. Whites appropriated it to argue for the divine inspiration of hierarchical relationships between races, in which not all human beings were created with inherent dignity, nor with equal value; some races had superior social and personal human qualities than others, and were thus more deserving of respect. “I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of man (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites.” This was not the thought of a slave trader, but of a West Indian Christian pastor.

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8 Richard Nisbet, Slavery Not Forbidden by Scripture, (Ann Arbor: Xerox University Microfilms, 1773), 27.
7 ibid., 28.
9 Nisbet, Slavery Not Forbidden by Scripture, 21.
Slavery allowed the African heathen to be introduced to civilization, by which was meant Christianity. It was argued that those Africans who had been kidnapped and brought to America as slaves were introduced to Christianity and were thus better off than those left behind. When the Portuguese slave ships first returned with their human cargo, historian Gomes Eannes De Azurara noted “And so their lot was now quite the contrary of what it had been; since before they had lived in perdition of soul and body; of the souls, in that they were yet pagans, without the clearness and the light of the holy faith; and of their bodies, in that they lived like beasts, without any custom of reasonable beings – for they had no knowledge of bread or wine, and they were without the covering of clothes, or the lodgement of houses; and worse than all, they had no understanding of good, but only knew how to live in bestial sloth.” De Azurara went on to note “for though their bodies were now brought into some subjection, that was a small matter in comparison of their souls, which would now possess true freedom for evermore.” The Presbyterian Church of the Southern states in their treatise on slavery noted “we cannot but accept it as a gracious Providence that they have been brought in such numbers to our shores, and redeemed from the bondage of barbarism and sin.” The only race capable of developing any form of civilized religion was white in complexion. African society had nothing to offer and so, it was only in America that the Africans could find salvation and hope. To leave them in Africa would have been inconsiderate and lacking compassion. And so, as the argument went, it was by God’s providence that Africans

12 Quoted in ibid., 96.
were brought into slavery. “So it will be found that [God] permitted the introduction of the pagan African into this country, that he might be… redeemed by the genius of the gospel, and returned to bless his kindred and his country. Thus all Africa shall, sooner or later, share the blessings of civilization and religion.” Richard Furman was a Baptist from Charleston, South Carolina, who was asked to write a treatise expressing the Baptist Church of South Carolina’s position on domestic slavery. He said, “Though they are slaves, they are also men; and are with ourselves accountable creatures; having immortal souls, and being destined to future eternal award. Their religious interests claim a regard from their masters of the most serious nature; and it is indispensable. Not only is slavery morally permissible, it is morally necessary for the well-being of the slave and the world at large. If the slaves had been left in Africa, they would never have been introduced to the Christ of the gospels, and because they too are “accountable creatures,” they would still be destined for hell. Furman insists that slavery must be practiced, and excoriates those who think it morally problematic for their lack of concern for the slaves.

Although the salvation of the slaves was apparently of great concern for those wishing to justify the institution, the evangelization of slaves was something about which slave masters were reticent. There was great concern that introducing the slaves to Christianity would result in resistance to slavery. “The danger beneath the arguments for slave conversion which many masters feared was the egalitarianism implicit in Christianity.” Slave owners felt as though introducing slaves to Christianity would

make their slaves aware of their inherent dignity, which would make them proud, demanding the right to freedom, ultimately resulting in rebellious slaves who refused to listen to their masters. This prompted many missionaries and other evangelistically-minded people to offer theological arguments that could address these concerns. These missionaries began to argue that Christianity, rather than making slaves rebellious or insolent, could actually serve to make slaves more compliant and useful. It was argued that Christianity would teach the slaves respect, love and duty, which would only serve to make them better slaves. “And so far is Christianity from discharging Men from the Duties of the Station and Condition in which it found them, that it lays them under stronger Obligations to perform those Duties with the greatest Diligence and Fidelity; not only from the Fear of Men, but from a Sense of Duty to God, and the Belief and Expectation of a future Account.”

In this way missionaries argued that slave owners would benefit from the Christianization of their slaves. Slavery in America forced missionaries and clergy to adapt the gospel into something that would work as a means for slave control rather than slave freedom.

In the Christianity propagated by white theologians and slave owners scripture did not condemn slavery, but condoned and encouraged it. “The Scriptures, instead of forbidding it, declare it lawful.” Biblically, it was argued, slavery was permissible so long as it was not inflicted on one of the same “religious persuasion.” As it was argued, Abraham had slaves, slavery appears in the Decalogue, and Moses considered slavery as

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17 Quoted in ibid., 103.  
18 Nisbet, *Slavery Not Forbidden by Scripture*, 3.  
19 ibid., 4
something “to be regulated, not abolished; legitimated and not condemned.”

The Africans, as heathens, were established by the “Divine government” to serve as slaves in perpetuity. “The Israelites were directed to purchase their bond-men and bond-maids of the Heathen nations…and it is declared, that the persons purchased were to be their ‘bond-men forever;’ and an ‘inheritance for them and their children.’ They were not to go out free in the year of Jubilee, as the Hebrews, who had been purchased were.”

Whites were living within the divine order when they enslaved non-whites, and were under no moral obligation to provide freedom for them because they lacked the one quality that made them deserving of freedom – a similarity with the white master that would require the master to recognize the slave’s humanity. Since the Israelites were not compelled by God to view foreigners as anything but human chattel, “since the slave is his property” it was unnecessary for whites to think of slaves as human.

Another common argument from the Old Testament can be found in the curse of Noah upon his son, Ham. In his book *In His Image, But…: Racism in Southern Religion*, Shelton Smith explains how this passage was employed to support slavery, noting that it was widely believed God himself inspired Noah to curse Ham. Shelton quotes Alexander McCaine, “[Noah] spoke under the impulse and dictation of Heaven. His words were the words of God himself, and by them was slavery ordained.” So the argument went that slavery was not a human institution at all, but instituted by God as a means of cursing an immoral person. Since, as Samuel Dunwoody says, “The Africans or Negroes, are the

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20 Smith, Handy, and Loetscher, eds., “Minutes of the Presbyterian Church”, *American Christianity: Interpretation and Documents*, 207.


descendants of Ham and the judicial curse of Noah upon the posterity of Ham, seems yet to rest upon them,”24 those who argued in defense of slavery claimed the slave was morally inferior and that their bondage was the due course for their immorality. Since Noah’s curse was not simply directed at Ham, but his descendents as well, it became a prophetic indication of the perpetual immorality and inferiority of the African nations. Slavery was the curse they were forced to bear for their inferiority, and the white race was the hand of God for helping to implement that curse.

Christ’s silence on the matter was seen as further evidence of slavery’s legitimacy. It was widely believed that the New Testament, in spite of many opportunities to do so, did not correct the Old Testament’s testimony regarding slavery. “If the custom had been held in abhorrence by Christ and his disciples, they would, no doubt, have preached against it in direct terms.”25 If slavery was indeed objectionable to God, then Christ would have corrected the misunderstanding, as he did with so many of the other Old Testament practices. But not only did Christ fail to speak out against slavery; he frequently used it to illustrate key ideas about the kingdom of God. At such places he would have had ample opportunity to rebuke the practice, had he seen fit. If he could use slavery as a means of illustrating the righteousness of the kingdom of God, then certainly it must be good. Similarly, the Apostles, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, treated slavery in a “general, incidental way, without any clear implication as to its moral character.”26 The practice of slavery, like every other human practice, is regulated by the Bible to ensure just practice, but it is by no means condemned as unjust. The

25 Nisbet, Slavery Not Forbidden by Scripture, 8.
26 Smith, Handy, and Loetscher, eds., “Minutes of the Presbyterian Church”, American Christianity: Interpretation and Documents, 207.
intention of the biblical passages regarding slavery is not to condemn slavery as an inhuman or fundamentally unchristian practice, but to standardize the appropriate duties of each party in the relationship. This allowed people like James Henley Thornwell to claim, on behalf of the Presbyterian Church, that because the Church is a fundamentally non-political institution, unless slavery can be shown to be sinful, it does not fall under the purview of the Church. Thus the Church has no right to enter into the debate on slavery, except for defining appropriate behavior in the relationship between slave and master. In this case the way slave and master approach one another is a part of the Church’s responsibility, but the practice of slavery cannot be either condoned or condemned by the Church unless it can be shown to be an immoral practice. ²⁷

This hermeneutic was presented to the slaves by preachers hired by slave owners for the task of preaching such sermons. The slaves were not told about freedom or human dignity. Instead these preachers focused on biblical passages that reinforced racist ideology and provided support for slavery. In his autobiography, Peter Randolph, an escaped slave, explained how James Goltney, a Baptist preacher, was employed by various slave owners to do just that. “‘It is the devil,’ he would say, ‘who tells you to try and be free.’ And again he bid them be patient at work, warning them that it would be his duty to whip them, if they appeared dissatisfied – all which would be pleasing to God! ‘If you run away, you will be turned out of God’s church, until you repent, return, and ask God and your master’s pardon.’”²⁸ Randolph also recalls how an itinerant preacher, which Randolph referred to as a “Christian preacher,” was run out of the South, fleeing

²⁷ ibid., 205.
for his life for “preaching a true Gospel to colored people,” consisting of a message of freedom for the slaves.  

The Christianity taught to the slaves by their white masters was a vague representation of the Gospel in which sin was defined as the lust and passion for freedom that caused them to resist slavery, and disobey their masters. Through this definition of sin, the slave owner became the only possible means for redemption. According to this white theology, to escape from one’s master was to leave God behind. The white man became the enactor of God’s justice and mediation to the slaves. James Levine recalls the story of a slave who was caught praying by the slave master. When the master asked him to whom he was praying, the slave responded, “Oh Marster, I’se just prayin’ to Jesus ‘cause I wants to go to Heaven when I dies.” The slave master’s response, “You’s my Negro. I get ye to Heaven.” The white man believed himself to be the liberator and mediator for his slaves, because his skin color afforded him that superiority. The slave’s only possibility for dignity was through their obedience to the white master. God had abandoned the slaves to the wretchedness of their lot, and the only means by which the African race could be saved was through its involvement with the white race. According to Dwight Hopkins this assertion by the arrogant slave master “touches the heart of white Christianity and theology.” Not only does it reveal the widely-held belief that white privilege was based on white superiority, it also demonstrates the ways in which whites understood their role in relationship to the blacks, namely as that of divine mediator.

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29 ibid., 66.  
White Christians further bastardized the Gospel by distinguishing between sacred and secular. The sacred was eternal and spiritual, while the secular was temporal and material. Christ died to address eternal spiritual realities, which meant the physical liberation of the slaves was of secondary importance, if it was of any importance at all. Albert Raboteau notes that in many cases, when slaves were baptized, they were required to repeat creedal statements about their faith in which their baptism did not afford them any freedom from their slave responsibilities. They had to reassure their masters that they were not pursuing baptism for the sake of freedom, but “merely for the good of your soul and to partake of the graces and blessings promised to the members of the Church of Jesus Christ.”

According to white masters, the acceptance of Christianity by black slaves carried with it no implications for the present material world, but only an implied freedom upon death. The Catholic bishop John England contended that the freedom God offered to slaves was not physical or political in nature, but spiritual, arguing that all people are called to be servants of God, and should not be distracted from that service for any purpose. One should serve God as a slave if one is a slave; one should serve God as a master if one is a master. And the work of God does not address the position of slave or master, for bodies are not redeemed, but souls. “…their souls, (not their bodies) were redeemed…it was a spiritual redemption.” Hence, the slave should do what God has appointed him or her to do, and not seek for redemption from their physical slavery, for it was not their bodies that were redeemed, but their souls.

In his commentary on Colossians, John Davenport argues, “Our religion knows nothing of the persons and conditions of men, but regards their souls…He who here

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affirms that in the new man there is neither bond nor free...commands servants who are under the yoke, to count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed.34 By separating the spiritual world from the physical world, supporters of slavery were able to contend that any redemption offered by Christ was from spiritual bondage to sin and not physical bondage. The situation of historical political slavery was not addressed by the work of Christ, and because the sacred world in which Christ’s work was efficacious was on a different plane from the secular world, Christ’s death and resurrection had nothing to say to the material slavery in which black slaves found themselves.

And so, the Christianity into which the African slave was proselytized was a bastardized version in which both Scripture and Tradition were argued in defense of slavery. It was a religion in which hatred and dehumanization flourished. “The religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes – a justifier of the most appalling barbarity – a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds – and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection.”35 Christianity provided little if any exhortation for the Christian slave owner to be just or compassionate to his slaves. Christian slaveholders were frequently the cruelest and most hateful of the bunch, which explains Frederick Douglas’ assertion, “Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to the enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the

worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, more cruel and cowardly, of all others.”

It was in this context that the slave’s religion developed. In light of the slave’s introduction to Christianity it is amazing that Christianity was ever entertained as a possibility, much less received by so many slaves as the religion they would choose to follow. What they were shown was a dehumanizing, racist religion that justified the exploitation of anyone who did not have white skin. In spite of the attempts at dehumanization by whites, the slaves “dared to think theologically by testifying to what the God of Moses had done for them.” Many slaves looked to Christianity as a means of understanding and dealing with their situation. However, the Christianity adopted by the slaves was distinctively their own; it wasn’t like the Christianity of their slave masters, but being forged in the crucible of slavery it developed as “a unique version of Christianity.” The slaves did not accept their master’s religion carte blanche; some parts they outright refused, and others they adapted to their own context and their own situation. Rather than accepting white Christianity uncritically or eliminating all connection to it, the slaves “built their own.” Slave religion was not based on a dichotomy of the sacred and the secular. As such, the slaves refused to accept that the biblical stories had nothing to say about their circumstances. The Old Testament heroes so prevalent in the slave spirituals were not merely exemplars of sacred virtue, nor were these heroes merely delivered from spiritual affliction; their virtue was revealed in their

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36 ibid., 101.  
willingness to oppose injustice, and their freedom was realized in this world “in ways which struck the imagination of the slaves.”

The slave songs exemplify how the slaves’ sacred world united the models of the past found in Scripture with their present conditions and the promised future of liberation into one reality. More will be said about an African-American hermeneutic in Chapter 3, but it is important here to note the refusal within slave religion to accept the white distinction between the sacred and the secular. This became a central characteristic of black hermeneutics and heavily influenced the way in which the slave appropriated Scripture.

The African slave came from a culture in which there was no dichotomy between sacred and secular. The holy was experienced in the most mundane of activities. The slaves, in concert with their African tradition, believed that God continually involved Godself in human history and in the lives of human beings, that the supernatural world regularly involved itself in the natural world, not only in the biblical narratives, but in the present world and in the future to come. In this sense the concept of “sacred” versus “secular” is not the separation of the two into autonomous realms, but “the process of incorporating within this world all the elements of the divine.” Levine underscores how this notion of sacredness reveals the true nature of the spirituals and of the slave’s perspective of the world.

“Denied the possibility of achieving an adjustment to the external world of the antebellum South which involved meaningful forms of personal integration, attainment of status, and feelings of individual worth that all human beings crave and need, the slaves created a new world by

40 Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 50.
41 ibid., 51.
transcending the narrow confines of the one in which they were forced to live.”

The slaves transcended this world and all the circumstances in which they lived by embracing the world of Moses, and recognizing within that world a corollary to their own, and a God who willed the freedom of oppressed people.

Beyond that, they also believed that the space between the present world and the next world was permeable, and that not just God but “men were thought to be able to slip across these boundaries with comparative ease.” This intimate connection between eternity and the temporal, between the holy and the mundane, so influenced their religious thought that Thomas Wentworth Higginson, in discussing their music, argued that all their songs had some religious significance, whether intended for rowing, marching, working in the fields or worship. Sometimes the songs are dominated by the difficulties of this life, and sometimes they are dominated by the triumph of the next life, “but the combination is always implied.”

Thus, James Cone can argue that many interpreters of the black spirituals have misunderstood the concept of heaven within them. It is not, as it seems at first glance, that the slaves are merely longing for heaven. Such an interpretation fails to recognize the connection between the eschatological reality of heaven and the possibility of earthly freedom. Canaan and heaven are interchangeable in black religion. The history of the Israelite people is intimately connected to the eschatological reality of freedom, and both have an intimate relationship with the present reality. Liberation from oppression and

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44 ibid., 32-33.
eschatological relief from suffering are not entirely separable. For the African slave, biblical history was not simply a story of a people unconnected to their own plight. Biblical history was being enacted and realized in contemporary history, and they were a part of that history. Hence, the spirituals can refer to the presence of the singer in the biblical stories: “Go tell it on the Mountain that Jesus Christ is born” and “Were you there when they crucified my Lord… sometimes it causes me to tremble…” Daniel, Moses, Joshua, and Jesus are all brought into the present context, and the slave is taken back to be a part of the biblical story, as well. “In the spirituals…a sense of sacred time operated, in which the present was extended backwards so that characters, scenes, and events from the Old and New Testaments became dramatically alive and present. As a result, the slaves’ identification with the children of Israel took on an immediacy and intensity which would be difficult to exaggerate.” This eschatological vision firmly grounded in biblical traditions provided a parallel between the Israelite enslavement in Egypt and their own enslavement in America, which gave them hope that a “similar communal liberation” was forthcoming.

Israel’s exodus from slavery at the hands of Pharaoh provided a narrative for the projection of a radically different future from their own present state of enslavement, a future that found hope enough in the Exodus to endure and resist their present suffering. “Exodus functioned as an archetypal event for the slaves. The sacred history of God’s

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48 For more on this see Lovell, The Forge and the Flame, 210-215.
49 Raboteau, Slave Religion: “Invisible Institution”, 250. See also Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 114-115.
liberation of his people would be or was being repeated in the American South.”51 Their ability to identify with the biblical Hebrews allowed them to believe that the God of the Hebrews, continuing to act in human history, would deliver them as well. The slaves believed that God could and would change their circumstances.

It is because of this that James Cone can argue that “The divine liberation of the oppressed from slavery is the central theological concept in the black spirituals.”52 It could as easily be argued that this story provides the central biblical narrative to all of African American religion and black theology. Allusions to the Exodus from Egypt are ubiquitous in African American religion, providing rich metaphors for understanding and coping with the particular oppression in which they found themselves. Thus, “Egypt” becomes any land or situation from which slaves need to be delivered; “Pharaoh” becomes a symbol of oppression, especially defeated oppression; “Canaan” becomes the land in which the hope for freedom and human dignity are realized; “Jericho” becomes the symbol for good’s ultimate victory over oppression especially if that oppression is based on a long standing tradition; the “Red Sea” becomes the site or the means by which God chooses to destroy those who resist freedom and justice; and “Moses” (and Jesus) become the embodiments of true leadership, freedom, and political resistance.53 These symbols provided significant meaning for the slaves.

In taking a closer look at the Exodus within slave and African American religion I have identified four themes that I would like to emphasize. The first theme is that of suffering, and God’s elective action in light of that suffering. The slaves associated with the Israelites’ bondage in Egypt. The suffering of the Israelite people provided helped to

52 Cone, “Black Spirituals”, African American Religious Thought West and Glaub, Jr., eds., 779.
53 A full list is provided in Lovell, The Forge and the Flame, 258-259.
mark them as a people; it became the defining event in the community ethos. The story of Israel’s enslavement also provided a common history for the African slaves, who were from diverse tribal, cultural and linguistic peoples. The history of the Israelite people with which the African slaves identified, provided an identity for the African slaves marked by unity with each other and with the ancient Israelite. The second theme is found in the metaphors of Pharaoh and Egypt. In Pharaoh the slaves saw injustice defeated. They noticed a God who would stand for justice and defend the weak. This provided a meaningful belief that God would overcome and defeat their oppressors. The third theme is that of liberation of which Moses became the leader par excellence. The association of Moses and Jesus connected the liberating act of God through Moses with the liberating act of God through the person of Jesus. The political act of liberation for Israel was a prefiguring of the completion of liberation at the cross. Finally, the theme of hope is revealed in the metaphor of Canaan. In Canaan, which is closely connected to heaven, the slaves (and later African American thinkers) found hope for a place, time and situation where their human dignity would be fully realized and accepted. The rest of this chapter will be spent examining each of these themes in turn, focusing on the purposes of each of them within the spirituals and slave religion up through their development during the Civil Rights Movement.
EXODUS THEMES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGION

The Enslaved: Suffering Peoples Redeemed by God

The system of slavery was a horrendous attack on the identities of those enslaved. Taken from their land, removed from their people, and stripped of all family connections they were left without political, social or cultural markers by which to identify themselves as a people. The fact that they were refused the opportunity to assimilate into the culture to which they had been brought left them in a sort of cultural limbo, in which they could embrace neither their African-ness nor their American-ness. This provoked the slaves to find ways to form their identity. In part, this identity was shaped by the Israelite exodus from Egypt. Black slaves were able to identify with the history of the Israelites in Egypt and in so doing develop a mythological history in which enslaved Africans were the re-presentation of the enslaved Israelites. The role of suffering (for Israel as well as for those enslaved in America) and its connection to God’s elective choice played an important role in the development of Black identity.

The Exodus event is the defining event in the history of the Israelite people. It was in this event that the Israelites were introduced to Yahweh, and liberated for a unique relationship with Him. The liberating act of God redeemed the Israelites from suffering under sub-human conditions and gave them access to the life-giving possibility of Promised Land. The African slaves recognized this history as their own. The African slave became a part of the Exodus from Egypt, which provided a common history of suffering in which the African slave suffered in a fashion similar, if not identical, to the Israelites in Egypt. Each slave realized the deep connection between the suffering of the
two peoples, which provided a common history with other African slaves and with the ancient Israelites.\footnote{Raboteau, \textit{Slave Religion: \textquotedblleft Invisible Institution\textquotedblright}, 251.}

The similarities between the Israelite condition in Egypt and the experiences of the African slaves as chattel in America provided a ready mythos for the development of a common history – a history marked by suffering. The African slaves were able to locate themselves within the portrayals of Israelite suffering. Although many Christians, especially those in America, found an archetype in the Exodus story, the identity of the African slaves as an enslaved people was peculiar to them, which made their connection to that history all the more relevant and powerful. In the spirituals, as they sang the story of Israel, they sang of their own oppression, their own poor treatment, and their hope for future deliverance:

When Israel was in Egypt’s land, Let my people go!
Oppressed so hard they could not stand, Let my people go!

Go down, Moses, ‘Way down in Egypt’s Land,
Tell ole Pharaoh, let my people go!

Thus saith the Lord, bold Moses said, Let my people go!
If not I’ll smite your first-born dead, Let my people go!

No more in bondage shall they toil, Let my people go!
Let them come out with Egypt’s spoil, Let my people go!\footnote{Lovell, \textit{The Forge and the Flame}, 327.}

This spiritual reveals that the association of the Israelites’ suffering and that of the African slaves also resulted in the hope for a common destiny. This common destiny was possible because of their identity as the chosen people of the God who delivered the Israelites. Those enslaved in America identified themselves as the ones who suffered like Israel and were chosen as God’s people because of that suffering.
Within their worship services the slaves would participate together in a ring dance, which they referred to as the “Shout.” In this act of worship the Exodus was reenacted in dramatic fashion, and the children of Israel were re-presented. The slaves mystically became the children of Israel, toiling under brutal oppression. However, that is not the extent to which the African slaves identified with the Israelite story. In their ring shout, as in the spiritual cited above, the slaves watched as God brought plagues upon Egypt, the oppressor, and traversed on dry land through the Red Sea, where they saw Pharaoh’s army drowned. They experienced the God of liberation, who was concerned about their suffering, and wanted to bring them into a good land. And ultimately they entered that land, standing on the mountain with Moses and gazing across the Promised Land, crossing the Jordan, and marching with Joshua around the city of Jericho. This mystical experience, in which the African slaves became the suffering Israelites, provided a hope for God’s deliverance from the enslavement to whites. They found in the mystical connection between their own suffering and the suffering of the Israelites the hope for a destiny of liberation. One example of this connection is the way in which David Walker appeals to the Exodus in his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, written in 1829,

> “Though our cruel oppressors and murderers, may (if possible) treat us more cruel, as Pharaoh did the Children of Israel, yet the God of the Ethiopians, has been pleased to hear our moans in consequence of oppression, and the day of our redemption from abject wretchedness draweth near, when we shall be enabled, in the most extended sense of the word, to stretch forth our hand to the Lord our God.”

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Walker’s hermeneutic allows him to make use of the Exodus as a typology in which the African slaves are mythically remade into the people of Israel. It is not only the Children of Israel who were treated cruelly by Pharaoh, but it is we, the black slaves, who are treated “more cruel.” Theophas Smith notes the extent to which Walker goes to represent the African slaves as suffering Israelites. This re-presentation allows Walker to claim that redemption from the bitterness of enslavement is near, because we, like the people of Israel, can raise our cries to God. If God delivered the Israelites when they cried out to Yahweh then we shouldn’t have to wait long either. Robert Alexander Young’s *Ethiopian Manifesto* provides another example,

> “We tell you of a surety, the decree hath already passed the judgment seat of an undeviating God, wherein he hath said, ‘surely hath the cries of the black, a most persecuted people, ascended to my throne and craved my mercy; now, behold! I will stretch forth mine hand and gather them to the palm, that they become unto me a people, and I unto them their God.’”

God, in light of the persecution of the black race will stretch out his hand in order that he might adopt those persecuted people as his own, and free them from the oppression of slavery. The suffering of black slaves provided a mythical connection to the people of Israel, one that was reinforced by a typological hermeneutic whereby the African slave experienced slavery in Egypt, and would be delivered by their identification as those who had “become unto me a people, and I unto them their God.” The Exodus is a story of God’s deliverance of a people that God claimed as God’s own. The typological identification of African slave with Israelite slave implied God’s choice of the African slave in a similar fashion.

The God of the Israelites is a liberating God, a God who will ensure that freedom of those who belong to him. Slave theology revealed a God who was present, who chose

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58 ibid., 128.
to dwell with the enslaved in their suffering. 59 If one examines the slave songs it does not take long to discover that the most ubiquitous image is that of chosen people of God. The singers are “the people of God,” “de people of de Lord,” those that are “born of God.” 60 There is great confidence that the slave is a child of God, “I know I am.” While it is true that this image was adopted by the white slave owners and northern evangelical churches, this should not diminish the obvious significance of its adoption by African slaves who were told time and again that they were sub-human, and were treated like cattle. The slaves’ ability to embrace an identity as a chosen people of God reveals the cultural resources they had available to them to resist the onslaught of the images that were both consciously and unconsciously pushed upon them by their white masters.

The belief that God had taken the initiative to choose them provided the slaves with a unique sense of community in which they became the divinely chosen, appointed and privileged people of God. For the slaves, their unique status implied that white slave owners were not chosen or privileged. The significance of God’s action on behalf of suffering slaves excluded from the blessings of God those who perpetrated violence. As Frederick Douglas notes, “Slaves knew enough of the orthodox theology of the time to consign all bad slaveholders to hell.” 61 Blacks slaves were the people of God not by their own merit but because God had expressed his divine initiative, as he had in Egypt, and adopted the oppressed.

Through their suffering the African slaves were also able to associate with the suffering of Jesus, which further implied their special status as the people of God. The blood they spilled and the indignities they suffered allowed them to experience in a mystical manner the death of Jesus and to claim that Jesus was suffering with them.

“Through the blood of slavery, they transcended the limitations of space and time. Jesus’ time became their time, and they encountered a new historical existence. Through the experience of being slaves, they encountered the theological significance of Jesus’ death: through the crucifixion, Jesus makes an unqualified identification with the poor and the helpless and takes their pain upon himself.”

The ability of the slaves to recognize and experience Christ’s suffering is plain within their spiritual songs:

Oh, dey whupped him up de hill, up de hill, up de hill,
Oh, dey whupped him up de hill, an’ he never said a mumbalin word,
He jes’ hung down his head an’ he cried.

Oh, dey crowned him wid a thorny crown…

Well, dey nailed him to de cross, to de cross, to de cross…

When the slaves asked in song, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Sometimes it causes me to tremble,” the implication was that they had been there. They saw and experienced the crucifixion of Christ. Black slaves had experienced their own pain, and their own type of crucifixion.

By taking up the Exodus as their own history, blacks expressed not only their own humanity, revealed in suffering, but also their own destiny, revealed in the God who freed the oppressed from their suffering. This shared existence with the people of the Exodus revealed a destiny that ran contrary to the racist propaganda that told them they

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62 Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 54
64 ibid., 21.
were culturally and intellectually inferior to whites. A freed slave, Charles Davenport, remembers, “All us had was church meetin’s in arbors out in de woods. De preachers would exhort us dat us was de chillen o’ Israel in de wilderness an’ de Lord done sent us to take dis land o’ milk and honey.”\(^{65}\) In the hidden church services\(^{66}\) attended by many slaves the preachers not only asserted the identity of the slaves as a divinely appointed people, but also that they were destined to overcome the oppressive institutions and take the Promised Land and reap its rewards. This narrative played a central role in the development of a culture that helped the slaves to resist white religion. The culture the slaves developed was more than a resistance to the institution of slavery; it was a resistance to the dehumanizing attempts of the racist ideology that attempted to justify it. It helped them to pursue their own form of Christianity. It provided a mythos, by which they could share a common history. It revealed to them and allowed them to adopt the liberating God of the Israelites as their common God. And it revealed to them a common destiny in which they would be free from slavery and free to reap the benefits of their labor.

The significance of the Exodus narrative within the Civil Rights movement is immediately apparent upon reading the works of Martin Luther King. As such, it would make sense that Reverend King would share the slaves’ belief that Black suffering ensured a unique identity as God’s people. However, King seems to be more concerned

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\(^{65}\) Quoted in Hopkins, “Slave Theology”, *Stammering Tongue*, 5.

\(^{66}\) Albert Raboteau in *Slave Religion: “Invisible Institution”* explains that the development of slave culture and slave religion did not take place in a manner that was easily accessible to whites. Although many slaves attended the church services offered to them by white slave owners in which white racism was proclaimed, they also practiced a secret religion in “hush harbors” out in the woods. This religion was not Christian in the same way that whites practiced Christianity, but undercut the racist claims of white Christianity. Because their religion and culture provided the foundation necessary to question the racist claims of the culture to which they had been brought they chose to practice that religion in secret. Because the slaves were forced to practice their religion secretly little is known about the earliest forms of the black Church – the “invisible institution.”
with establishing a world that is not marked by racial divisions than he is with establishing black identity. For King, the significance of human existence is marked by its mutuality. That which is significant about a person is not that which makes her unique, but that which identifies her as a human being – not skin color, or hair color, but the eternal worth of the individual in the sight of God. This emphasis stems primarily from King’s concern for the “Beloved Community” - a community that is not marked by segregation, but by integration, where people of all races can be identified by what they have in common rather than by the different tones of their skin.

Because King did not seem as concerned about identifying black community as he was the “Beloved Community” suffering does not play the same role in his thinking as it did in the thinking of early slave religion, but that does not imply that it was unimportant. King believed that one person’s suffering directly effected everybody else. “The agony of the poor impoverishes the rich. We are inevitably our brother’s keeper because we are our brother’s brother. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly” or, in another place, “I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.” Suffering destroys true community. Because God is communitarian in nature, and is concerned with “universal wholeness” for all people, suffering is an evil that God opposes and calls all people to oppose. God always aligns Godself against suffering, because suffering is antithetical to the work of God – community.

68 Martin Luther King, Jr., Where do we go from here? Chaos or Community (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 181.
69 Martin Luther King, Jr., The Measure of a Man, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 48
Even though King does not use suffering as a means of identifying blacks as a unique people of God, he does note that their suffering is something that God can use for the redemption of the entire nation.

“Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.”  

Those who suffer at the hands of the perpetrators of injustice have a unique role in the work of God, because unjust suffering has redemptive power. When someone suffers injustice, particularly violent injustice, and accepts it without a violent response, they have the ability to “win freedom” not only for themselves, but for the one who inflicts the suffering upon them. For King, the injustice of racism could only be overcome through this redemptive suffering, because by it blacks were healed of the sense of inferiority that had been foisted upon them by whites, and whites could be healed of their sense of their own superiority.

The connection between Exodus and a black identity as the suffering people of God is tenuous in the works of King. Although, the narrative of Israel’s exodus from Egypt is not explicitly referenced by King in the same way it is in slave religion, it is evident that those who suffer have a special role to play in God’s work of developing community. Oppressed blacks were the agents by which God would save the nation –

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both white and black – from the evil of racism. In this sense, the oppressed Black community had a significant and unique role within God’s kingdom and God’s plan.

Pharaoh in the Red Sea: A Just God Defeating Injustice

A second theme present in slave religion’s use of Exodus is that of justice, and in particular the God of justice. In the Exodus narrative, the antagonist is Pharaoh. He is arrogant and stubborn, but he is also the greatest power on earth. The Israelite slaves have no means by which to plead their case for freedom. All they can do is cry out and hope someone hears their cry and takes pity. For the black slaves in America, “Pharaoh” typified any earthly power that kept them oppressed. Pharaoh was the highest earthly power, one which could not be overcome by human means. In this regard the slave master was a type of “Pharaoh,” against whom the slaves had no recourse. One important distinction to be made is that the slave master was only as powerful as the institution of slavery that supported him. In this sense, “pharaoh” is more than an individual practitioner of slavery, but is more appropriately designated as the entire system that justified the slave owner’s actions. It was not merely the slave owner who must be resisted, but the system upon which the slave owner made his claims of superiority. But the slaves could not vote, nor could they disagree with the slave masters without being beaten. With no political or economic influence, there was only one possible solution – the existence of a God who worked on behalf of the powerless against those who would do them evil. Pharaoh became the amalgamated power of the slave masters and their political, economic and military influence. Within the slave spirituals one sees the recurring theme of Pharaoh’s demise.

When the Children were in bondage,
They cried unto the Lord,
To turn back Pharaoh’s army,
He turned back Pharaoh’s army.

When Pharaoh crossed the water,
the waters came together,
and drowned ole Pharaoh’s army,
Hallelu!  

Or, in another example:

Didn’t ol’ Pharaoh get lost, get lost, get lost,
Didn’t ol’ Pharaoh get lost, yes, tryin’ to cross the Red Sea.
Creep along Moses, Moses creep along, Creep along Moses,
I thank God.  

Pharaoh was lost in the Red Sea. His army was destroyed as the “waters came together.”

Pharaoh for all his power was destroyed by the God of the Hebrews. But Pharaoh’s army
was not destroyed for the sake of destruction; by this action, God is offering an
unmitigated defense of the Israelite slaves. God is not merely trying to destroy Pharaoh,
but is ultimately doing so to deliver Israel. Hence, as enslaved blacks sang,

My army cross ober,
My army cross ober,
O Pharaoh’s army drown ded
My army cross ober,
My army, my army, my army cross ober.

We’ll cross de riber Jordan…

their claim was two-fold. First, as mentioned above, God will destroy “Pharaoh.” The
institution of slavery cannot survive. Second, “Pharaoh’s” demise is based on God’s
adoption of an oppressed people. Whereas Pharaoh’s army “drown ded, my army cross
over.” God made a choice, a choice in which the slave has been redeemed at the expense
of Pharaoh and his army.

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73 Miles Mark Fischer, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*, 150.
74 ibid., 154.
Pharaoh army got drowned in the sea;
I am so thankful it was not me
Pharaoh army got drowned –
O Mary don’t you weep
O Lord, Pharaoh army got drowned –
O Martha don’t you moan.\textsuperscript{75}

From these slave songs one gets the impression that the slaves had every confidence that the racial power relationships in which they lived could be changed at any time. They believed that when God finally heard their cries, God would become involved in history yet again by destroying the political and social structures that propagated their oppression, just as he had with the Israelites in Egypt. “In this biblical paradigm American slaves discovered the nature of God as the One who sees the afflictions of the oppressed, hears their cries, and delivers them to freedom.”\textsuperscript{76} God was just, and he was on their side; he identified with them, saw their oppression, and would support their cause.

When Moses an’ his soldiers f’om Egypt’s lan’ did flee,
His enemies were in behin’ him, An’ in front of him de sea,
God raised de waters like a wall, an’ opened up de way,

An’ de God dat lived in Moses’ time is jus’ the same today.\textsuperscript{77}

The God of the slaves was not the God of the white oppressors. God did not join with white slave masters in the subjugation of black people, nor could he be used to support the racist ideology that justified slavery. The God of the slaves was the one found within the biblical story of the Exodus who not only delivered the Israelites, but also destroyed Pharaoh. Similarly, the slaves believed that God would oppose, if not outright destroy, white slave masters and the social/political system that propagated

\textsuperscript{75} Newman I. White, \textit{American Negro Folk Songs}, (Hatboro, Penn.: Folklore Associates, Inc., 1965), 58.
\textsuperscript{76} Hopkins, “Slave Theology”, \textit{Stammering Tongue}, 3.
\textsuperscript{77} Lovell, \textit{The Forge and the Flame}, 329.
slavery. “And if de God dat lived in Moses’ time is jus de same today, then that God will vindicate the suffering of the righteous black and punish the unrighteous whites for their wrongdoings.” The slaves refused to accept the white claim that God favored slavery or the slave master. The exodus event provided them with a different understanding of God and of what mattered to God. In 1831 Maria Stewart, in a public address said, “America, America, foul and indelible is thy stain! Dark and dismal is the cloud that hangs over thee, for thy cruel wrongs and injuries to the fallen sons of Africa. The blood of her murdered ones cries to heaven for vengeance against thee…You may kill, tyrannize, and oppress as much as you choose, until our cry shall come up before the throne of God; …in his own time, he is able to plead our cause against you, and to pour upon you the ten plagues of Egypt.” Because slavery was associated with Egypt and Pharaoh, the slave had no problem ascribing God’s vengeance and punishment on those who advocated for it.

In fact, God’s justice and vengeance were inevitable. There was no way in which whites would be able to continue to propagate their oppression of blacks. The essential argument of the slave spirituals and slave religion was that slavery contradicts the purposes of God and the will of God. As such, slavery was doomed to failure, and the exodus narrative played an important role in that faith conviction. When the slaves sang, “Go down, Moses… Tell old Pharaoh, ‘Let my people go!’” they were putting to song their confidence that white Christianity was erroneous in its assertions about black enslavement. The exodus narrative provided the slaves with the assurance that white Christians were mistaken in regards to their claim that God intended blacks to be slaves.

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78 Cone, “Black Spirituals”, *African American Religious Thought* West and Glaub, Jr., eds., 775.
It confirmed for the slaves that slavery was against God’s will, and that God, eventually, would put an end to it, even if that meant ringing plagues on those associated with Egypt. Because the slaves knew how the enslavement of Israel in Egypt ended, when they applied that story to their own context, even though they could see no end in sight, they were encouraged that it was inevitable. “Somehow or yuther us had a instinct dat we was goin’ to be free, and when de day’s wuk was done de slaves would be foun’ … in dere cabins prayin’ for de Lawd to free dem lack he did chillum of Is’ael.”

Thus, when the slaves reflected on the end of the slave trade in Britain (1807), the emancipation of slaves in New York (1827) or the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) they usually described it as a historical event in which the Exodus was occurring within their midst.

The belief in the inevitability of God’s justice continued to be made manifest in the Civil Rights Movement as well, particularly in the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. For King, “Pharaoh” was not institution of slavery, but the Jim Crows laws and Segregation that kept African Americans oppressed. However, even though segregation was still present and being actively practiced in America, King could argue that “Pharaoh” had already been defeated. Even as the bus boycotts were going on in Montgomery, King preached that “The Red Sea has opened for us, we have crossed the banks, we are moving now, and as we look back we see the Egyptian system of segregation drowned upon the seashore.” According to King, segregation had already been destroyed by God, Pharaoh and his armies, “the Egyptian system of segregation” has been crushed by the rushing waters of the Red Sea. During the Montgomery bus

81 Smith, Conjuring Culture, 125 and 133.
boycott King was convicted for violating Alabama’s antiboycott laws. Although some began to see the conviction as an indicator of the ultimate failure of the movement, King in speaking to the Holt Street Baptist Church proclaimed, “this is the year God’s gonna set his people free, and we want no cowards in our crowd.”

King was confident of success, because as he put it, “We have the strange feeling down in Montgomery that in our struggle for justice we have cosmic companionship. And so, we can walk and never get weary, because we believe that there is a great camp meeting in the promised land of freedom and justice.”

Even if King never lived to see the Promised Land, he was confident that it would arrive because “God is for it,” because God was able to raise up Joshuas to come after him, and because the time had come for the idea of integration and racial equality to receive its fulfillment. “We are not about to turn around. We are on the move now. Yes, we are on the move and no wave of racism can stop us. We are on the move now… Like an idea whose time has come, not even the marching of mighty armies can halt us. We are moving to the land of freedom.”

Closely connected to the inevitability of God’s justice was the image of the wilderness. God had promised deliverance. God, by his justice, had delivered on that promise, bringing the people to the other side of the Red Sea, upon the shores of which King could see the “horses of Pharaoh’s army” drowned and crushed. However, they were not yet in “Canaan.” Because Pharaoh had been defeated and yet the promise of

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83 Martin Luther King, Jr., “Address to Mass Meeting following King’s Trial before Judge Eugene Carter,” in ibid., 183.
84 Martin Luther King, Jr., “Non-Aggression Procedures”, in ibid., 327.
85 Martin Luther King, Jr., MIA Mass Meeting, 22 March 1956, in ibid., 200.
realized human dignity still seemed distant, the notion of God’s inevitable justice was qualified by the reality that God’s justice would not be received without a struggle. In the thinking of Martin Luther King, the wilderness became a land of struggle through which one must persist before the Promised Land could be entered. It became the metaphor for encouraging perseverance. Blacks believed that God would aid their cause, and deliver them from injustice, just as he had the Israelite slaves, and as they began to recognize the intransigence of the white infrastructure, they encouraged one another by remembering the wilderness through which the Israelites toiled for forty years before arriving in Canaan. “Stand up for justice. Sometimes it gets hard, but it is always difficult to get out of Egypt, for the Red Sea always stands before you with discouraging dimensions. And even after you’ve crossed the Red Sea, you have to move through a wilderness with prodigious hilltops of evil and gigantic mountains of opposition. But I say to you this afternoon: Keep moving. Let nothing slow you up. Move on with dignity and honor and respectability.”

The justice of God is revealed in African American religious thought through God’s identification with the oppressed African American and through God’s opposition to the arrogance and self-righteousness of the white oppressor. That justice is something in which blacks have taken great confidence for the last three centuries. It gave them the confidence to look beyond their circumstances to what might be, and it gave the perseverance to struggle through opposition in pursuit of God’s aims.

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Moses and Jesus: God’s Liberative Mediators

Within African American religious thought liberation has become a ubiquitous theme. In the development of that theme Moses stands as a central figure, symbolizing God’s liberative purposes. Thus, it is not unusual that allusions are frequently made to Moses when a leader rises up in a movement that seeks to empower and free African Americans. Moses is not just a symbol of God’s liberative purposes; he is the epitome of the leadership necessary to accomplish those purposes. As C.L. Franklin, a prominent black preacher of the 1950’s, noted, “In every crisis God raises up a Moses. His name may not be Moses but the character of the role that he plays is always the same... in every crisis God raises up a Moses, especially where the destiny of his people is concerned.”89 For Franklin that Moses didn’t necessarily have to be black, but could be an “Abraham Lincoln.” What was important was that God would not allow his people to be without a leader when their destiny of freedom was at stake. The surety of God’s justice implied God’s concern for the liberation of his chosen people.

Throughout African American history, the black community has been confident that God would raise up a leader who would work for liberation on their behalf, just as he did for the Israelites. Sojourner Truth, when reflecting on the situation of slavery in the South, demonstrated similar beliefs when she asked the question on every slave’s mind: “Would a Moses appear to remove the bands from wrist and ankle, and with uplifted finger pointing to the pillar of cloud and of promise, lead them forth?”90

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figure was central in the process of liberation. Whether it was antebellum slaves, post-Reconstruction African Nationalists or the blacks of the Civil Rights Era, Moses was a necessary figure for the realization of freedom. Marcus Garvey, although he claims to have never referred to himself as a Moses figure, was labeled such by his supporters – one pastor exhorting his black church “to follow their Moses, Marcus Garvey, [saying] he was an angel sent from God to lead the folks.” Garvey was perceived, by many in the black community, as a leader sent by God who would lead them to victory and freedom. He was afforded prophet-like status as one “sent from God.” He was “appointed by God and recognized and accepted among the leaders of the race and is going to lead us on to victory.”

George Alexander McGuire, Archbishop of the African Orthodox Church noted that his appointment by God provided Garvey a unique status of prophet: “the outstanding prophet as well as the trail-blazer of the universal freedom of a noble race.”

In Garvey’s case allusions to Moses were more infrequent and when they were made they were more implicit. But with Martin Luther King, Jr. the connections to Moses were frequent and explicit. His leadership in the Civil Rights movement was due in part to the powerful oratorical skills he possessed, his status as a highly educated black man in America, and his status as a pastor within the black church, a position that carried with it great respect and prestige. However, the greater influence was probably the way in which each of these attributes contributed to King’s ability to fulfill the expectations of

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92 “A Special Report by Andrew M. Battle, New York City, 1-5 August, 1922”, in *ibid.*, 778.
93 *ibid.*, 802.
Black Americans for a Moses-like leader. King’s obvious skills and talents provided ready examples for the black community of a character like that of the biblical Moses.

In the early period of the Civil Rights Movement, King was hesitant to use the title, choosing instead to identify with those with whom he was working. During this time King chose to speak of “our” difficulties, and the struggles “we” are addressing as “we” seek for civil rights. However, by the end of his life King was using the imagery of his Mosaic leadership explicitly, to the point where in the last speech of his life he could refer to his trip to the “mountaintop” in which he saw the “Promised Land.” “I may not get there with you, but…”

The ubiquity of the Moses figure within African American culture and religion throughout African American history, including the Black Nationalist and Civil Rights movements, demonstrates its significance. But the source for this symbolic figure is found within the black spirituals. Moses is commissioned by God to speak to Pharaoh on his behalf, commanding Pharaoh to let God’s people go free. Moses led the Israelite struggle for freedom, but it was at the request of God that he did so; the work of Moses was destined for success, because the liberation which he sought for the Israelites was not derived from human will, but from the divine will. In the slave spirituals we get the first glimpse of Moses as one called by God to perform God’s liberation, leading a struggle against political oppression.

Canaan land the land for me, Let God’s chillun go
Canaan land the land for me, Let God’s chillun go

There was a wicked man,
He kept them children in Egypt land…

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God did say to Moses one day,
Say Moses go to Egypt land…

And tell him to let my people go
Tell Pharaoh let my people go…

God did go to Moses’ house,
And God did tell him who he was…

God and Moses walked and talked,
And God did show him who he was…

For the slaves, Moses was a divine mediator for human freedom. He performed the work and the will of God in human history. It was God who delivered the people, but Moses worked as the very hand of God in providing that deliverance. The African slaves felt as though their deliverance was dependent on God raising up a Moses within their own historical circumstances. They longed for a leader who had been anointed by God to perform God’s miracles and provide deliverance for them.

This plea for Moses sometimes took the form of faint questioning. The slaves could not determine where to find God’s justice, nor where to find Moses in the midst of the injustice in which they found themselves.

Come along, Moses, don’t get lost,
Come along, Moses, don’t get lost,
Come along Moses don’t get lost,
Us be the people of God.

Stretch out your rod and come across
Stretch out your rod and come across
Stretch out your rod and come across
Us be the people of God.

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97 ibid., 54.
I wonder wheh is Moses he mus’ be dead,
De chillum ob de Israelites cryin’ fo’ bread
I wonder wheh wuz Moses when de Church burn down
… Standin’ obuh yonder wid his head hung down.  

When will Jehovah hear our cries,
When will the sons of freedom rise,
When will for us a Moses stand,
And free us from Pharaoh’s land.  

The figure of Moses within the spirituals and other religious works of the slaves reveals not only that the slaves felt Moses to be necessary for any sort of liberation from the institution of slavery, but also that God could be found in such liberation. Because God was the one who raised up Moses, commissioning him to free the Israelite slaves, the African slaves believed that such physical liberation was indicative of the work of God, including the work of Christ.

De rough, rocky road what Moses done travel,
I’s bound to carry my soul to de Lawd;
It’s a mighty rocky road but I mos’ done travel,
And I’s bound to carry my soul to de Lawd.  

The slaves refused to accept that their physical freedom was distinct from the work of Jesus. The work Moses did freeing the Israelite slaves, the “rough, rocky road” that Moses traversed did more than free a people in physical bondage; it made a way for the slave “to carry my soul to de Lawd.” The work of Moses revealed the work of Jesus, and the work of Jesus completed the work of Moses. As such, the slaves did not distinguish between the work of Jesus and the work of Moses; their works were part of the same activity of God.

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99 Quoted in ibid., 107.
Jesus Christ,
He died for me,
Way down in Egypt land.

Jesus Christ,
He set me free,
Way down in Egypt land.\textsuperscript{101}

In this regard, the work of Moses, in delivering the Israelites from slavery, and the work of Jesus in his death and resurrection are not distinct from one another, but work hand in hand to offer deliverance from evil to all humanity. Moses delivered the Israelites from a kind of evil, and Jesus completed the work destroying evil completely, and thereby delivered all humanity from its influence.

The slaves’ willingness to unify Moses and Jesus was not always well received by whites who were uncomfortable with the notion of Jesus as a liberator from physical bondage. One Army chaplain noted disapprovingly, “There is no part of the bible with which they are so familiar as the story of the deliverance of the children of Israel. Moses is their ideal of all that is high, and noble, and perfect, in man. I think they have been accustomed to regard Christ not so much in the light of a \textit{spiritual} Deliverer, as that of a second Moses who would eventually lead \textit{them} out of their prison-house of bondage.”\textsuperscript{102}

However, the slaves did not regard Christ as a second Moses so much as they regarded the liberation of Christ to be a completion of the liberation begun by Moses. Two different liberation themes are being developed in the conscious interaction between the death of Jesus and the Exodus event. In this interaction the political liberation revealed in the Exodus of Israel from Egypt foreshadows the liberation provided by Jesus’ death and resurrection. The Old Testament stories of God’s liberation of Israel helped provide a

\textsuperscript{101} Quoted in John Lovell, Jr., Lovell, \textit{The Forge and the Flame}, 229.
\textsuperscript{102} Quoted in Raboteau, \textit{Slave Religion: “Invisible Institution”}, 312.
hermeneutic for understanding the freedom offered by Jesus through his death and resurrection. “There is no need to fear the earthly white power structure. Since Jesus, through Moses, led the exploited Israelite people to victory and finished off Satan with the Cross and Resurrection, no human advocates for the Devil could defeat Jesus’ just cause of black people’s struggle for liberation.”\textsuperscript{103}

As such, the slaves had no problem placing Jesus in the time of Moses. According to Dwight Hopkins, this was not a “whimsical interpretation of the bible,” but a faithful and authentic reading of Scripture. The slaves were making the theological assertion that Jesus was not limited by human time or history. More importantly, they were revealing a belief that the liberating work of Christ was related to the kairos of God.

Jesus said He wouldn’t die no mo’, Said He wouldn’t die no mo’,
So my dear chillens don’ yer fear, Said he wouldn’t die no mo.’

De Lord tole Moses what ter do, Said He wouldn’t die no mo’,
Lead de Chillen ob Isr’el froo, Said he wouldn’ die no mo’.\textsuperscript{104}

Jesus won’t “die no mo’.” This refrain is repeated over and over. In his death and resurrection Jesus defeated political oppression and evil powers. He need not die again. His death defeated the powers of Pharaoh and led the “chillen ob Isr’el” froo.” Since the death of Jesus was efficacious for the deliverance of Israel from Pharaoh, it would do the same for them.\textsuperscript{105}

Canaan, Heaven and the North: The Hope of Human dignity

The final theme I would like to address in slave religion is that of hope. In spite of the dehumanizing brutality of the institution of slavery, African slaves were able to

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\textsuperscript{103}Hopkins, “Slave Theology”, \textit{Stammering Tongue}, 15. \\
\textsuperscript{104}ibid., 14. \\
\textsuperscript{105}ibid., 15. 
\end{flushright}
maintain a hope for freedom and human dignity that defies understanding. The exodus narrative provided a meaningful narrative to uphold this hope, because the story of exodus as portrayed in scripture ends in Canaan. The Israelites cross the Jordan River and arrive at the place where they can establish political existence, and experience the dignity of human persons. For the black slave in America, Canaan became a metaphor for that human dignity, and for the hope of an existence not marked by the condition of slavery, but that of freedom.

Within the spirituals there are numerous references to Canaan, and many of those references refer to an eschatological hope in which bondage will be no more.

How happy is the pilgrim’s lot, I am bound for the land of Canaan
How free from ev’ry anxious tho’, I am bound for the land of Canaan

I am bound for the land of Canaan
I am bound for the land of Canaan.
Oh, Canaan, bright Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan
Oh, Canaan is my happy home.

Nothing on earth I call my own, I am bound for the land of Canaan.
A stranger in the world unkown, I am bound for the land of Canaan.

I trample on their whole delight, I am bound for the land of Canaan.
And seek a city out of sight, I am bound for the land of Canaan.

There is my house and portion fair, I am bound for the land of Canaan.
My treasure and my heart are there, I am bound for the land of Canaan.

I have some friends before me gone, I am bound for the land of Canaan.
And I’m resolved to travel on, I am bound for the land of Canaan.

If you get there before I do, I am bound for the land of Canaan.
Look out for me, I’m coming too, I am bound for the land of Canaan.

Many of the material and personal things the slave lacked in this life would be present and available for them in Canaan – freedom from anxiety, a home, treasure. However,

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the song does not refer only to a place where there psychic trouble can cease. Canaan is also a place where the slave’s very presence tramples on “their whole delight.” For the slave, Canaan represented a place where the white slave owner’s privilege and power were broken. The slave owners’ claim of superiority and the racist ideology by which the slaves was forced to identify herself was trampled upon. All the delight and glory the slave masters took in their ability to control slaves would be broken in that place. As such, slaves longed for Canaan:

I want to go to Canaan
I want to go to Canaan
I want to go to Canaan
To meet ‘em at de comin’ day. 107

Don’t you see that ship a sailin’, a sailin’, a sailin’,
Don’t you see that ship a sailin’,
Gwine over to the Promised Land?

I asked my Lord, shall I ever be the one, ever be the one
To go sailin’, sailin’, sailin’,
Gwine o’ver to the Promised Land? 108

Nay, but my soul shall rise and fly,
To that bright world above;
The heav’ny Canaan in the sky,
The city of Thy love. 109

109 This hymn, composed by Bishop Lucius Holsey of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, was probably written first sung by the slaves, but wasn’t published until 1904. This is one example of the significance of Canaan as a continued metaphor for the African American church and for African American religious thought, even after emancipation. Quoted in John Michael Spencer, Black Hymnody: A Hymnological History of the African-American Church, (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 46.
Canaan signified hope. “Across the river Jordan, on Canaan’s bright shore” was salvation, and deliverance from all evil. It was a place where “Satan ain’t got notin’ for do wid me.” Although evil had pursued the slaves their whole lives, “What makes ole Satan for follow me so?” on Canaan’s shore evil could not exist. Satan was turned back to pursue others. Jordan’s bank “is a good old bank,” and slaves are exhorted to “you’re your light on Canaan’s shore,” and to listen for “sweet Jordan rolling.” Across that last river, is “My brudder sittin’ on de tree of life.” The eschatological images are ubiquitous, and it is not surprising that the spirituals would emphasize a life that ends in the Promised Land of freedom.

But the slaves did not reserve the metaphor of Canaan to provide eschatological hope. For as prevalent as the eschatological image of the Promised Land was in slave music, the present hope of Canaan was just as real. Canaan was not only a metaphor for heaven where the slaves could find rest and peace with God, but was used as frequently to refer to a historical situation in which their human dignity would be recognized and their freedom accomplished. Sometimes the Promised Land referred specifically to the North or some other land in which they would not have to live as human chattel. In the following spiritual, the “old Chariot” is referring to Harriet Tubman:

When the old chariot comes,
I’m going to leave you,
I’m bound for the promised land,
I’m going to leave you.\textsuperscript{110}

The slave was “going to leave” and head for the promised land of the North as soon “the old chariot comes.” Frederick Douglas also noted that “a keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of ‘O Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan’

\textsuperscript{110} Quoted in Lovell, \textit{The Forge and the Flame}, 125.
something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the North, and the North was our Canaan.”¹¹¹ It is quite possible that for some of the slaves Canaan may have simply meant a life in heaven, but for Douglas and those “of our company” it meant escape to a free state and the deliverance from the evils and indignities of slavery. The ambiguous nature of Canaan makes the verse mentioned above, “I trample on their whole delight, I am bound for the land of Canaan,” all the more poignant. The ambiguity of Canaan implied that the slaves did not merely hope for a heaven, in which they would be free, but a time and a place where their human dignity would be recognized, where the white superiority was not assumed, and white power was broken, a place where the delight of the slave owner was taken from them.

For Sojourner Truth, this place was in Kansas. Truth lobbied for land in the West, particularly in Kansas, to be allocated to African American slaves, and she had no problem referring to Kansas as a Canaan-like place. “I have prayed so long that my people would go to Kansas, and that God would make straight the way before them. Yes, indeed, I think it is a good move for them. I believe as much in that move as I do in the moving of the children of Israel going out to Canaan.”¹¹² Such examples demonstrate the way in which Canaan carried two meanings: an eschatological reality in which the dignity of the slave would be realized, and a physical place in which the slaves could live as free people, without the worry and danger of slavery.

Other examples do not refer to the Promised Land as a physical place, but nonetheless make use of the metaphor to reveal a hope for a realized human dignity.

¹¹¹ Douglas, Life and Times, 159-160.
Done wid drier’s dribin’
Done wid drier’s dribin’
Done wid drier’s dribin’
Roll, Jordan, roll.

Done wid massa’s hollerin’…
Done wid missus’ scoldin’…

Canaan, the other side of the Jordan River, is the place where the slave will no longer be identified by their slavery, by the slave driver’s whip, the slave master’s yelling or the chastisement of the slave master’s wife. In Canaan the singer can be “done wid” all of it, and be identified instead by their humanity, which will no longer be in question.

The hope present within the African American spirituals remained an important trait in the theological minds of African Americans even after their emancipation. When the freed slaves, in light of continued racism and oppression, began to realize that slavery was only a part of the problem, and that their dignity had not yet been acknowledged by whites, they returned to the exodus and found hope. The Israelites were not able to see the Promised Land immediately upon their emancipation from Pharaoh, but were forced to wander in the desert and wilderness for forty years. “There must be no looking back to Egypt. Israel passed forty years in the wilderness, because of their unbelief. What if we cannot see right off the green fields of Canaan, Moses could not. He could not even see how to cross the Red Sea.”

Although the chains of slavery had been cut off, the shackles of racism, segregation and cultural oppression still existed. Once again African Americans found hope in the metaphor of Promised Land. Even Marcus Garvey, who was decidedly secular in his approach to social problems noted that, in spite of their existence as “children of captivity,” there was hope. This hope was that a new day was

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113 Quoted in Fischer, Negro Slave Songs in the United States, 121.
dawning in which blacks would be able to “as the children of Israel, by the command of God, face the Promised Land.”

W.E.B. DuBois chose to look at race relations from the perspective of the social sciences, but he was also influenced by the Exodus narrative in general and the Promised Land in particular. DuBois refers to existence as a black person in America as living beneath a veil. This veil limits access to economic opportunities, as well as limiting social and political presence. Most notably, the veil hides the full humanity of the black individual from the greater society, and ultimately from the black individual him or herself. This veil refuses to allow any true self-consciousness, but forces blacks to perceive themselves only through the eyes of white society. “The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood (sic).” The black consciousness has struggled for identity for centuries. Often pulled between two identities – American and African – it has sought to reconcile the two. The slaves believed that with emancipation their identities would be reconciled, that freedom would present the opportunity for the full realization of their American-ness, and full acceptance of their African-ness. In this context, the slaves believed their bondage to be the source of all evils, and “Emancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites.” But Emancipation did not live up to its claims. The nation continued to suffer under racial strife, and freed slaves did not find “in freedom his promised land.”

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117 ibid., 9.
118 ibid., 10.
119 ibid., 10.
slavery held the promise of a dignity that had as of yet been unrealized. However, upon being freed, it became clear that the Promised Land of black dignity was still on the horizon. When the newly freed slaves began to realize that suffrage and political power were to be denied them, “the rise of another ideal to guide the unguided, another pillar of fire by night,” 120 arose by which the African-American could make known his/her identity – education. This pillar, like the one that led the Israelites in the desert would ultimately lead them to Canaan, the land in which their humanity would finally be accepted. However, in spite of all the difficult work these students put in they received no credit from society, no recognition for their intelligence and perspicuity was forthcoming. The references of DuBois to the metaphor of exodus are almost all made to elucidate the fact that the Promised Land is always over the horizon, just beyond sight. Interestingly, in spite of the distance of the Promised Land, it is always a metaphor of hope. In Canaan the full dignity of the African American is realized.

During the Civil Rights Movement, at least in the thought of Martin Luther King, Jr., the metaphor of Canaan took on a slightly different historical meaning – integration. For King, the Promised Land was “the promised land of cultural integration.” 121 King believed that God wished to achieve a world in which all people could live together as a family – the Beloved Community. Canaan was the place where the Beloved Community would not be hindered or impinged upon by the social evils of racism and segregation; it was a place in which black dignity could be realized. When the walls of bondage and exploitation were torn down, King believed that all people would be able to respect the dignity of human personality, in whatever color skin that personality presented itself,

120 ibid., 12.
121 Martin Luther King, Jr., “Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” in Papers, Vol. 3, 454.
“and then we will be in Canaan’s freedom land.” In spite of the differences between King’s vision of the Promised Land and those of the spirituals, there is one constant, a hope for human dignity.

It is this hope, along with the other themes of liberation, suffering and justice that black theology takes as its source, a source founded and symbolized by the Exodus of Israel from slavery.

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Chapter 2: Exodus in Black Theology

In the previous chapter the role of the Exodus within Slave and early African American religion was demonstrated, and four themes identified. The theme of suffering and God’s compassion for those who suffer helped to shape the Israelites as a people, and in a similar manner, early African Americans found a sense of identity in the God who chooses those who suffer. African slaves, who were from diverse tribal, cultural and linguistic peoples, found a common history and a common identity in the suffering Israelites. African Americans emphasized a God of justice and liberation by identifying God’s ability and will to destroy Pharaoh and defend the suffering Israelites. This highlighted their belief that God would overcome and defeat white racists and the institutions that kept black people enslaved. Within the slave tradition liberation was always brought about by a mediator raised up by God. Within the Exodus that leader was Moses, and numerous leaders were granted that title. However, little distinction was made between the liberating leadership and activity of Moses, and that of Jesus in his death. Israel’s liberation from Pharaoh was a foreshadowing of the completion of liberation at the cross. The final theme, hope, was identified more with the arrival in the Promised Land than in the actual Exodus itself. Hope, although it became closely connected with heaven, was not relegated to the next life, as though hope within history were impossible. The hope of Canaan was for a place, time and situation where the human dignity of black people would be fully realized and accepted.

1 Some of those leaders were enslaved or formerly enslaved, for example Harriet Tubman. However, the title was not discontinued when slavery was legally abolished. As noted in the previous chapter, Marcus Garvey and Martin Luther King, Jr. were both referred to as Moses at different times.
Black Theology was developed in response to the plight of African Americans, who although no longer legally enslaved, were still forced to deal with racist ideologies that claimed their inferiority. It was also developed in light of the continuing resistance of white Americans to give up their privilege and accept the full humanity of African Americans. The American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s provides the context for its seminal works. As such, one must ask to what extent the Exodus has influenced the works of Black Theology. How have Black Theologians made use of the Exodus in their own theological formulations?

In this chapter I will seek to identify the use of Exodus in the works of James Cone, Deotis Roberts, and Dwight Hopkins. Of the three of them, it is Cone who uses the Exodus motif most frequently, and because Black theology finds its genesis in the early work of James Cone, it is necessary to start there. Cone’s theology is shaped by his struggle with the contrasting messages of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. On the one hand, the call for reconciliation and community was being made by Dr. King and the Black Church. However, in spite of apparent Civil Rights victories, it soon became evident to King and other black leaders that the government would not address the greater problems of American society – institutional racism and economic injustice.² King continued to argue for a “Beloved Community”³ that he believed could only be achieved through non-violent resistance. However, Malcolm X was less optimistic about the possibilities of a community in which blacks and whites lived as equals. Malcolm argued that reconciliation was impossible as long as it required blacks to live with white claims

² For more on King’s developing perspective see Kenneth L. Smith, “The Radicalization of Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Last Three Years,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26:2 (Spring 1989), 270-288.
³ For more on the Beloved Community, see King, Jr. *Strength to Love*; or King, Jr. *Where Do We Go from Here?*
of superiority and corresponding definitions of blackness. And so, he argued for a more proactive pursuit of black dignity, one in which black people should be allowed to use whatever means necessary to achieve their goals.\textsuperscript{4} Cone sought to develop a Christian theology consistent with the ideals of Malcolm X. He believed that anything less would mean Christ and Christianity no longer have anything to offer black people.\textsuperscript{5}

Deotis Roberts does not make use of the Exodus narrative nearly as often as James Cone does; however, Roberts is an important interlocutor for Cone. Where Cone seeks to develop a theology that makes room for the criticisms of Malcolm X, Roberts adopts Martin Luther King’s call for reconciliation. For Roberts, the particularity of Cone’s theology does not recognize the need for, nor leave open the possibility of reconciliation, which is the ultimate goal of liberation. Because Roberts seeks to address some of the ways in which Cone makes use of the Exodus narrative, it is important to note the ways in which he seeks to correct what he sees as lacunae in Cone’s theology.

Dwight Hopkins was a student of James Cone. Hopkins also makes extensive use of the Exodus narrative, but he also seeks to identify other possible sources for Black Theology. He does not forsake the Christian scriptures; he believes that the promise of justice and liberation found within them is the primary source of hope found in African Americans for a new just human community. However, Hopkins also seeks to identify other black sources, such as African American folk tales, that can help to develop Black

Theology. Within these folk tales are themes that reinforce the themes of Exodus, and as such this chapter will also seek to address the work of Dwight Hopkins.

**JAMES CONE**

James Cone is perhaps the most important and influential of the black theologians, because it is Cone who initiated Black Theology as a systemic and academic endeavor. Cone is the first theologian that attempted to present a systematic theology from the perspective of the black community in a white racist America. Of the three theologians this chapter will address, it is James Cone who makes use of the Exodus most extensively. In spite of the many nuances of Exodus in Cone’s thought, most can be summed up in one of two ways: as a means of identifying the character of God, and as a means of identifying the work of God. It should not be assumed that these two things are mutually exclusive, however, for Cone argues that God’s character is only revealed through God’s work within history. The European philosophical approaches to God’s attribution are of little value to Cone who argues that God’s revelation cannot be understood outside God’s activity on behalf of the oppressed, for God is not going to work in opposition to God’s character. Exodus is the first revelation of this activity, and as such, provides an important avenue for understanding the nature and character of God. Exodus serves another purpose within Cone’s work as well. It demonstrates the connection between ethics and eschatology. God sought to liberate those enslaved in Egypt, because God’s work is always one of liberation, both historically and eschatologically.
The Exodus as Revelation of God’s Character

The central argument for Cone is that God can only be known to us by God’s acts within history. There is no way to come to any conclusion about God’s character or God’s nature that is not revealed to humanity by God’s historical actions. Any attempt to arrive at conclusions about God in any other fashion will ultimately reveal more about the context of the theologian than about the nature of God. This is because, for Cone, all theology is conditioned by social contexts, so that there is no such thing as a theology that is in some way uninfluenced by human culture and experiences. Because theology will always be influenced by human culture, Cone believes that the ability to identify God through God’s acts within history frees theology to speak about God in a manner that “is not simply about ourselves.” Scripture reveals God by sharing the story of God’s historical actions. This provides a norm by which we can discuss God in a manner that is not influenced merely by our own cultural whims. When theology focuses on Scripture it “is granted the freedom to take seriously its social and political situation without being determined by it.” And God chooses to reveal God’s self through historical, social contexts, rather than through some eternal idea of the divine. This is why Cone takes pains to separate God’s righteousness from the abstract philosophical notions of Greek philosophy, and emphasizes the ability to know God only through God’s concrete historical actions. It is also why Cone argues that any appropriate understanding of God arises from the historical revelation of God in two primary sources:

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7 ibid., 7.
as expressed in the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt, and as expressed in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{8}

Cone upholds the Exodus as the decisive starting point for understanding God and God’s action in the world, because through this liberative act YHWH is revealed. As the God of human history, God revealed God’s self as the Redeemer of an oppressed people. “In the Exodus-event, God is revealed by means of his acts on behalf of a weak and defenseless people. He is the God of power and of strength, able to destroy the enslaving power of the mighty Pharaoh.”\textsuperscript{9} Cone goes on to note that the Exodus was directly connected to the covenant that established Israel as the people of God. Exodus became the source for Israel’s understanding of the covenant relationship with YHWH. As such, they were called to become the “embodiment of freedom” that had been revealed to them through the acts of freedom experienced in Egypt. This embodiment of freedom is the source of the apodictic laws of Israel. God cannot be known outside of these events. For Israel, there is no knowledge of YHWH except as the one who frees from oppression. Cone goes on to argue that theology must be done in light of the fact that God chose the Israelites as God’s people, and not their Egyptian oppressors. Theology must be done in light of the fact that God chose the poor against the rich. Whatever else is said about God must be consistent with God’s revelatory activity in history. “The God in Black Theology is the God of and for the oppressed of the land who makes himself known through their liberation. Any other view is a denial of the biblical revelation.”\textsuperscript{10} Any doctrine of God must express, and be consistent with, the God who participates in the liberation of oppressed people. God’s activity in human history is the way in which God

\textsuperscript{8} We will address the connection between these two sources below.
\textsuperscript{10} Cone, \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}, 116.
makes God’s self known, and as such, it is impossible to say anything about God without acknowledging God’s involvement in human liberation.

This is why the central theological assertion made by James Cone is that liberation is the *sine qua non* of God, God’s work, and God’s revelation. God is both the source and fulfillment of justice. There is no other means by which justice can be realized than by the involvement of the God of justice within history. “God chose to make himself known to an oppressed people, and the nature of his revelatory activity was synonymous with their emancipation.”

11 God’s revelation to the Israelites was an act of liberation on their behalf. Through it Israel came to know and worship YHWH, and their very existence was “inseparable from divine activity.” The Exodus event in the Hebrew Scriptures reveals that God’s salvation becomes apparent to the Israelites only through their freedom from socio-political bondage. This is the primary means by which God reveals God’s self to Israel. Cone argues further that the Hebrew prophets and the social laws of Israel are all based upon the historical activity of YHWH in Egypt. 12 In fact, when the Israelites forget their identity as the people liberated by God, and choose to inflict injustice on the weak and the poor of their own people, God brings judgment against them. 13 This oppression of the weak is inconsistent with the character of the God revealed to them in the Exodus, and thus the same God promises justice. God’s justice is “the divine decision to vindicate the poor, the needy, and the helpless in society.” 14 God is the author of justice, and justice’s basis in the very nature of God means that God must act justly. God’s justice is not a conception of God’s divine attribution (as in Greek

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11 *ibid.*, 94.
12 *ibid.*, 19.
13 Cone, *Speaking the Truth*, 5.
14 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 43.
thought); God’s character (nature of justice) is not revealed by human philosophical endeavors. God’s justice is bound up in God’s activity within human history. Exodus reveals God’s justice so that it can be defined as it is.

This leads Cone to the argument that God will always choose the poor and oppressed over the rich oppressors.

It is significant to note the condition of the people to whom God chose to reveal his righteousness. God elected to be the Helper and Saviour to people oppressed and powerless in contrast to the proud and mighty nations.¹⁵ If God is going to be consistent and true to God’s nature as a God of justice, then God must stand on the side of those who suffer injustice, and against those who commit it. Cone argues that nowhere in Scripture is God’s grace bestowed upon the powerful at the expense of the weak, but that God always resists the oppressors and exalts those who suffer.¹⁶ “Should God’s work in the world be identified with the oppressors or the oppressed? There can be no neutrality on this issue; neutrality is nothing but an identification of God’s work with the oppressors.”¹⁷ God is not on the side of the poor because they are better than the rich, but because God is always on the side of justice, and always on the side of the weak against the strong. Because the weak are unable to defend themselves against the aggression of the strong, God sides with the weak against the strong.

Salvation in History

For Cone, it is this involvement with the weak that typifies salvation. Salvation is not limited to a symbolic spiritual freedom from sin. God’s salvation for the poor is

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¹⁵ ibid., 44.
¹⁷ Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 65.
God's participation with the weak against the strong. God’s salvation for the Israelites is their deliverance from enslavement to Pharaoh. Salvation only becomes apparent to the Israelites through their freedom from socio-political bondage. This is the primary means by which God reveals God’s self to Israel. In fact, when the Israelites forget their identity as the people liberated by God, and choose to inflict injustice on the weak and the poor of their own people God brings judgment.

If God is known by God’s acts in history, what, then, is God doing in and through historical events? What is the meaning of salvation as an act of God?... God is known by God’s acts in history and these acts are identical with the liberation of the weak and the poor.18

Salvation is not reserved for some future heavenly experience, but is experienced historically by those who are freed from oppressive situations by the mighty hand of God. Salvation is not experienced unless one first is associated with God in God’s liberative work on behalf of the weak. “Knowing God means being on the side of the oppressed, becoming one with them and participating in the goal of liberation. We must become black with God!”19

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18 James H. Cone, *For my People: Black Theology and the Black Church: Where have we been and where are we Going?*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 65.
19 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 124, italics in original. Cone uses the term “black” both as an indicator of skin color and as an ontological category for those who are oppressed. As such, there are some people with dark skin who would not be considered “black.” God’s blackness, for Cone, is both metaphorical and historical. God’s historical blackness is demonstrated in the non-European lineage of Jesus; God’s ontological blackness is revealed in Jesus’ existence as “the Oppressed One.” God chose to become incarnate in the person of Jesus, born in a sheep’s trough to a poor family. This blackness is “the one symbol that cannot be overlooked if we are going to take seriously the Christological significance of Jesus Christ.” ibid., 218. Cone notes that in the Hebrew Scriptures God’s actions within history are not on behalf of an individual but on behalf of a particular community. God’s actions can only be for the individual insofar as that individual is a part of the community chosen by God. “A man’s selfhood is bound up with the community to which he belongs.” ibid., 243. In the Hebrew Scriptures that community was the enslaved Israelites; in contemporary America that community consists of the black poor. Cone argues that the promise of the kingdom does not include those who are rich, but belongs to the poor alone. “Here the gospel, by the very definition of its liberating character, excludes those who stand outside the social existence of the poor.” Cone, “Biblical Revelation and Social Existence,” 437. The chosen people are not necessarily those whose skin is black, but those who are a part of the “oppressed” community.
If this is salvation, then sin is defined as “refusing to recognize God’s activity as defined by the community of Israel.” Sin is the condition in which humanity lives when they refuse to acknowledge the liberating activity of God in the world. The historical activity of God that leads to freedom is denied whenever humanity chooses to live according to its own greed or selfish interests. Sin alienates humankind from God, the source of humanity, causing it to cease to be human. This condition is marked by human oppression. Cone points to Israel’s failure to protect the poor within their own community. “Sin is the failure of Israel to recognize the liberating work of God. It is believing that liberation is not the definition of man’s being in the world.” The idolatry and injustice which ultimately resulted in Israel’s demise were due to Israel’s refusal to live according to the stipulations of God’s liberation. Instead they sought to live in the manner of the oppressive regimes around them.

All this leads Cone to argue that salvation in an American context must be analogous. The freedom of black people in America is God’s salvation in a contemporary context.

If God sided with the poor and the weak in biblical times, then why not today? If salvation is a historical event of rescue, a deliverance of slaves from Egypt, why not a black power event today and a deliverance of blacks from white American racial oppression?

The God of the oppressed is the God who opposes slavery in all its forms, the one who leads the revolution against all forms of enslavement, which is why Cone argues that revolution is not only a necessary tool of black people for overcoming and destroying white racism, but is also completely consistent with Christian theology, because it claims

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21 ibid., 190.
22 ibid., 188.
23 Cone, *For my People*, 65.
that allegiance to any system that does not recognize the dignity of every human person is sinful. Salvation requires “an act of defiance against what is conceived to be an established evil.” Because salvation means participating with God in God’s historical actions on behalf of the poor, salvation requires that the principles upon which the established evil of racism is founded must be challenged. Anything less is not salvation, for the evil cannot be redeemed or rectified; it must be destroyed and replaced. A new just system must take the place of that which is being resisted. God’s salvation cannot be revealed as a metaphysical reality that has no grounding in historical activity. Thus, it is the God of Moses who empowers the poor to fight against injustice, for their fight against injustice is waged with God, and is their salvation.

Within white theology one cannot talk about salvation without talking about Jesus. It is the suffering and death of Jesus that brings salvation within white theology. Cone would not disagree with the centrality of Jesus within white theology. For Cone, the point of departure for all Christian theology must be Jesus. However, he argues that the work of Jesus is primarily one of liberation in which Jesus becomes a servant himself, opening “realities of human existence formerly closed to man.” For Cone, an appropriate understanding of the work of Jesus must not be abstracted from what has already been revealed as the work and nature of God – liberation.

What God did in the Hebrew Scriptures,destroying the power of Egypt and delivering Israel from its oppression, by establishing it as a nation, God did in the New

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24 Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 136.
25 ibid., 35. By this cone means that Jesus reveals the way in which God chooses to act within history and how humanity fits into that action. The Kingdom of God, defines the nature of Jesus’ ministry. Cone understands the Kingdom of God to be a revolutionary claim that refuses to allow humanity to define its own existence at the expense of others. The Kingdom of God is a revolutionary new age in which those who live in the ghetto will be given new life, because God enters into human history and takes sides with the oppressed against the oppressor. This Kingdom gives the oppressed individual the right (maybe even the responsibility) to rebel against any condition that limits or offends her humanity. ibid., 31-61, 136-152.
Testament through the person of Jesus Christ. Again, it is through an act of historical liberation, a historical event in which God makes God’s self known. In the same way that YHWH became involved in human history to free the Israelites from their captivity, God again became involved through the Incarnation. However, God did something unique in the Incarnation. Whereas God’s involvement in the plight of the Israelites demonstrated God’s justice for the oppressed, in the person of Jesus we see God’s solidarity with the oppressed. “What else can the crucifixion mean except that God, the Holy One of Israel, became identified with the victims of oppression?” Cone rejects the metaphysical speculations about the cross of Christ that define European theology, and instead chooses to embrace what at first glance appears to be a “crude anthropomorphic way of speaking of God.” Such a theological approach makes the cross of Christ more than a metaphysical wonder in which the soul is saved from sin. In this affirmation, God suffers the experiences of those oppressed by racism and cruelty. Jesus’ cross becomes the manner by which God becomes one with the suffering. Cone claims that the poor and oppressed of the world do not understand the suffering of Jesus as a theological idea or attempt to unpack the mystical ways in which it saves humanity from sin. Jesus’ suffering is God’s solidarity with them, because in it God experienced pain and suffering. “With the Old Testament sharply in view, the New Testament Jesus was

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28 However, it should not be assumed that Jesus’ work is purely political. The freedom provided by Jesus in the cross and resurrection is more than just historical freedom. Historical freedom is included, but the cross and resurrection transcend history and provide a freedom that is not dependent on socio-political circumstances. See for example, Cone, “Biblical Revelation and Social Existence,” 438.
29 Cone, “An African American Perspective on the Cross and Suffering”, 58.
defined as the liberator whose ministry was in solidarity with, and whose death was on behalf of, the poor.”

The incarnation, death and resurrection are all then a part of the liberative work of God as expressed in the Exodus. Christ’s death and resurrection play a central role in the thought of James Cone. “His death is the revelation of the freedom of God, taking upon himself the totality of human oppression; his resurrection is the disclosure that God is not defeated by oppression but transforms it into the possibility of freedom.”

Death, the ultimate sign and source of oppression, has been defeated, and those who live oppressed within society no longer have to live as though it has ultimate power. Living as though death is the ultimate reality is to be enslaved by it. Blacks who recognize the freedom available in the death and resurrection of Christ no longer have to live as though they have no being. The threat of death no longer binds them, but they have been freed to claim their dignity and their identity.

A fuller understanding of the significance of Jesus’ liberative work is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important to note that the liberative work of God in the Exodus is not unique from the liberative work of Christ in the Crucifixion and Resurrection. “To speak of [Christ] is to speak of the liberation of the oppressed.”

For Cone, the life and death of Jesus is another historical revelation of a God who refuses to allow the poor to languish in their poverty. The God of the Exodus sought to save those who were weak through the proclamation of the kingdom of God (Jesus’ ministry),

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30 Cone, *For my People*, 64.
31 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 210-211.
through solidarity with the victims (Jesus’ Crucifixion) and through the ultimate defeat of evil (Jesus’ Resurrection.)

Cone argues forcefully that the figure of Jesus is central within his theology, but it is evident that Cone’s understanding of Jesus is on some level influenced by Cone’s understanding of Exodus. From the above it can be clearly seen that the Exodus plays a significant role in shaping Cone’s understanding of God. God as liberator, God as just, Jesus as the continuation of the work begun in Israel by YHWH, each of these themes is influenced by the historical salvation of Israel in Exodus.

But the Exodus narrative does not only influence the way Cone understands who God is. It also plays an important role for defining theology as a discipline that seeks to analyze Christian faith from the concrete historical experience of oppression. As Cone notes, the election of Israel “is inseparable from the event of the Exodus.” God’s call of the Israelites is related to their status as slaves, as those oppressed at the hands of a brutal socio-economic regime. Through this call the Israelites came to know and worship YHWH; they became God’s chosen people. By choosing the Israelite slaves rather than the Egyptian slavedrivers, and by becoming “the Oppressed One” in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God reveals that God will make God’s self known in the midst of dehumanization, humiliation and suffering. “His election of Israel and incarnation in Christ reveal that liberation of the oppressed is a part of the innermost nature of God himself. This means that liberation is not an afterthought, but the essence of divine activity.”

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35 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 18.
36 ibid., 121.
Because God has identified with the enslaved and lived as “the Oppressed One” Cone argues that, in an American context, God must be black.  

God always chooses to embrace the oppressed condition, rather than choosing to be aligned with the oppressors, therefore, God cannot be white.  

God did not choose the Egyptians, but the Israelites. Consequently, God chooses black people. “Since the black community is an oppressed community because, and only because, of its blackness, the Christological importance of Jesus Christ must be found in his blackness.”  

Blackness is the only means by which one can describe Jesus as the “Oppressed One” in an American context. No other group is as consistently oppressed. To assume God can be known outside of God’s blackness is to assume God is an oppressor. Cone can only accept God if God is one with the black community in their oppression, and reveals to them the means by which they may experience liberation. Anything less would not be the God of Israel who delivered them from Egypt. The affirmation of blacks by God is revealed through “his election of oppressed Israel, but more especially in his coming to blacks and being rejected in Christ for blacks.”  

The experience of Christ – his suffering, oppression and death at the hands of the Roman authorities – implies that the oppressed of the world in general, and black people in particular, are the people of God, because it is these people who re-present Christ and Christ’s experiences.

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37 For more on Cone’s use of the term “black,” see footnote 19 of this chapter.  
38 In the same way that Cone uses the term “black” to refer to both historical and ontological categories, he uses the term “white” to refer both to those with white skin, and to a group of people who pursue power and privilege through the use of exploitative power. When Cone says that God cannot be white, he means that God cannot be a part of the oppressive forces which Cone associates with whiteness.  
39 ibid., 213.  
40 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 118.
Exodus and Eschatology

One final way in which Cone makes use of the Exodus within his theology is to provide a framework for his eschatology. Cone argues that within white theology, eschatological hope is a means of placating the revolutionary dreams of enslaved blacks. The enslaved were promised their freedom in the next life, “after we die…in some dreamy heaven-in-the-hereafter.” All the while the systems of slavery that prop up white privilege are functioning to ensure that white people have “milk and honey in the streets paved with golden dollars here on this earth.” For Cone, even though the ultimate Kingdom of God lies in the future, it “breaks through like a ray of light upon the darkness of the oppressed.” Hope is not hope if it is merely based in eternity with no possibility of present realization. Yet, as Cone argues, this is the eschatological perspective taken by most white people, and the one offered by white people to those enslaved by racism. In a society that claims the equality of all people, but forces black people to behave as inferior creatures, black people have been trained to accept their status as “second-class citizens,” to accept their presumed inferiority and endure it for the sake of a heavenly reward. Cone argues that, within white theology, heaven has become a means by which the oppressed can endure their present suffering by hoping for a future filled with heavenly joy.

But Cone refused to accept this eschatological perspective. God’s involvement in human history upholds a different possibility. Eschatology cannot remove humanity from history in such a way that history no longer matters. History does matter; God is

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41 Malcolm X, quoted in ibid., viii.
42 Malcolm X, quoted in ibid., viii.
43 ibid., 37.
revealed within it, by God’s liberative activity. Cone notes that Israel’s failure to live according to the requirements of Exodus, their failure to live with the poor in the way YHWH intended, caused Israel to misunderstand “the significance of Yahweh’s imminent eschatological judgment.” 44 Eschatology must provide a humanizing force for change. “When the gospel is spiritualized so as to render invisible the important economic distinctions between the haves and the have-nots, the dialectical relation between faith and the practice of political justice is also obscured.” 45 Cone argues that sanctification, which is the concept within white theology that leads to over-spiritualization of the gospel, cannot be appropriately understood without connecting it to the struggle for liberation. 46 The two are not mutually exclusive from one another in such a way that liberation results from sanctification. Sanctification and liberation are equivalent; to be sanctified means to be involved in the struggle for historical liberation, the struggle against the injustices (or sin) that dehumanize the oppressed. Sanctification, like salvation, must find its ground in history; any understanding of sanctification that focuses purely on the eschatological and substitutes “inward piety for social justice” is heretical. And so, Cone upholds an eschatological vision that connects eschatology to history, in which the future can only be discussed meaningfully in light of what God has already done, and in light of what God is presently doing. If heaven reveals God’s intention for humanity – freedom, dignity and self-affirmation – then history must live up to that revelation. “There can be no comprehension of the gospel apart from God’s

45 Cone, Speaking the Truth, 36.
46 Ibid., 33.
solidarity with the liberation struggles of the poor, because the freedom of the victims on earth is the eschatological sign of God’s intention to redeem the whole creation.\textsuperscript{47}

A meaningful understanding of the future is also necessary in order to be able to resist the powers that seek to oppress the weak. Because the powerful have the guns and the bombs, an eschatological perspective is necessary in order to provide a hope that allows for a different evaluation of history. Without a hope provided by a meaningful eschatology resisting the racist power of whites and asserting one’s own dignity would be impossible. “If we really believe that death is not the last word, then we can fight, risking death for the freedom of man, knowing that man’s ultimate destiny is in the hands of him who has called us into being.”\textsuperscript{48} But without an eschatological component to salvation, the oppressed would grow weary of the struggle against injustice. They would grow tired and afraid of the risks associated with the struggle. Without the vision of what is possible, without the hope provided by the eschatological dimension of salvation, the poor become like the Israelites in the desert who complained, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, in bringing us out of Egypt?”

The fears and risks associated with the struggle for freedom will always stifle freedom unless “the ‘otherness’ of salvation, its transcendence beyond history, introduces a factor that makes a difference.”\textsuperscript{49} The transcendent component of salvation is what gives the oppressed the resolve to resist at any cost the powers and structures that perpetuate their oppression. In America this means that blacks should affirm their blackness regardless if such an assertion will mean their death. It is better to choose

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., vii.
\textsuperscript{48} Cone, \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}, 248.
\textsuperscript{49} Cone, \textit{Speaking the Truth}, 34.
death with dignity than life with humiliation. Cone recognizes that such a revolution has some potential of “failing,” but then calls the notions of winning and failing into question. Black people “win” when they revolt, because in the revolt, even if it leads to death, there is affirmation of blackness. Cone believes that martyrdom clearly identifies what it means to be Christian. The willingness to die for the sake of the eschatological vision is not new, but stands at the core of Christian confession. The difference here is that Cone’s understanding of martyrdom is not based on an eschatology that removes the martyr from her historical context in such a way that history no longer matters, but on an eschatology that realigns the martyr so that she realizes death is not the “goal of history.”

The role of Exodus within the theology of James Cone is nuanced to say the least. However, there is a common thread. Whether it is used to reveal God’s compassion for the victimized, God’s solidarity with the victim, God’s justice, God’s salvation, or God’s eschatological vision, it seems as though Exodus is the means by which Cone grounds theology in history. In so doing, Cone uses Exodus to ensure three things. First, theology must not become imprisoned by the whims of cultural context. Grounding theology in Exodus ensures that the theologian is able to speak about more than just herself and her context. Second, theology must not become a purely conceptual practice. Without grounding theology in God’s liberative activity, theology becomes, at best, a philosophical endeavor lacking any contact with the God revealed by divine activity. Finally, theology must address more than the metaphysical. Exodus ensures that the theologian does not lose sight of God’s concern for socio-political realities.

Deotis Roberts is a contemporary of James Cone. Each represents one of the two main black theological traditions that came out of the Civil Rights Movement. Whereas Cone felt that Christianity must find a way to embrace Black Power and the criticisms of Malcolm X or risk losing young black people altogether, Roberts seems to be more in line with the tradition of reconciliation associated with Martin Luther King. That is not to say that either Cone or Roberts should be painted as exclusively indebted to Malcolm X or Dr. King, respectively, but their theological emphases do tend in those directions.

Roberts had three main criticisms of Cone: 1) He believed Cone’s theology was too particular, and did not present a gospel that was accessible for all people. God’s blackness, for Roberts, should not preclude God’s universality. 2) Roberts felt as though Cone’s emphasis on liberation as the ultimate work of God weakened the possibility of reconciliation, which Roberts felt was actually the ultimate work of God. Liberation’s importance was in some ways nuanced by its role as a means for reconciliation. 3) Roberts argued that Cone’s eschatology emphasized martyrdom, which did not provide a meaningful way forward for young black people. He believed that the goal of reconciliation meant working towards practical solutions within history, rather than upholding martyrdom as a solution. Because of these different theological concerns Deotis Roberts is an important interlocutor for James Cone. As such, we will now turn to his theological appropriation of the Exodus.

The Exodus as Revelation of God’s Character

Roberts does not make use of the Exodus as extensively as Cone does, perhaps because of the emphasis within his theology on reconciliation. However, like Cone, Roberts upholds God’s historical activity among the people of Israel as God’s revelation of God’s concern for the liberation of those who are oppressed.

The God of Moses, the God of the exodus, has been revealed to black people. This God is one of deliverance from bondage, who…has comforted, strengthened, and brought great assurance to black Christians throughout all their years of oppression in this country. Thus the God of the exodus is the black Christian’s God. 52

God’s concern for the Israelites, and their deliverance from bondage reveals to the black community that their suffering has not gone unnoticed. It seems as though, for Roberts, the Exodus is the reason black people are still Christians. It is the Exodus that has given those who have suffered under the enslavement of racism and poverty the assurance that God will deliver them.

However, Roberts does not focus exclusively on God’s liberation, but tends to emphasize God’s power, justice and love as revealed in the Exodus. Unlike Cone, Roberts tends to emphasize the interconnectedness of God’s love and God’s justice. One is not possible without the other. “In the Christian understanding of God, love is not antithetical to justice. In the very nature of God, love is strengthened by righteousness and justice is tempered by mercy. God is lovingly just.” 53 God’s justice is revealed in God’s love of the oppressed – God chose Israel, and delivered them from their suffering; and God’s love is revealed in God’s justice against those who oppress – God defeated

53 ibid., 46.
Pharaoh. Both love and justice have been perverted within Christian social ethical thought because justice, having been removed from the love of God lacks reconciliatory power, and love having been cut off from the justice of God has become purely emotional without any ontological or ethical power.  

God’s love must have as a correlative God’s justice. The black poor have not been given their due, because justice has been separated from the command to love. Instead, the patronizing welfare system has stripped the poor of their dignity and insulted their pride, while simultaneously creating a social arrogance in those who substitute welfare “for the empowerment of the black poor.” Exodus is important because it upholds God’s justice as a correlative of God’s love, which is absolutely necessary if one is going to address the problems facing the black community in a white racist America.

Roberts argues that although many people have given up on the biblical God, who is simultaneously transcendent and immanent, black people have not. The political situation in which black people live in America has caused them to adopt a God who is present in the midst of their suffering, and yet powerful enough for justice to be realized. For those with privilege and power, God’s presence and power may not be a priority, for they can revel in their own power and their own agency apart from the activity of God. However, for those who daily live with white racism, suffering has caused them to turn to a God who is both benevolent and provident, both present and powerful, and this God is revealed in the Exodus. “The God of the Bible, who by a mighty hand delivered the enslaved Israelites from Egyptian bondage, illustrates the attribute of power in God…It is the divine power which has sustained black life and

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54 Roberts, A Black Political Theology, 65.
55 ibid., 65.
56 Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation, 42.
nourished black hope through the long night of suffering.”

Roberts refuses to accept any theology that is willing to sacrifice God’s omnipotence for the sake of God’s goodness. “God is not merely present, but is present in power.”

The powerlessness of black people in America has meant that nobody listened when they sought human status. The oppression of racism ensured that their voices would never be heard. Power is not evil, but rather morally neutral and takes on the character of the one wielding it. When it is used by certain white people to maintain their privilege it is used to oppress and dehumanize. But God uses it to liberate. Black people, who use all the power at their behest to liberate themselves, are using power in accord with the purposes of God, and as such are not using it for evil. Racism is an injustice opposed to the purposes and love of God. Without the absolute power of God there can be no assurance that the white claim of black inferiority will be defeated. However, because injustice and inhumanity are in direct opposition to both God’s love and power, there is assurance that racism is a defeated enemy. This is why Roberts argues that God’s power is of as much importance to suffering people as God’s love and desire to liberate. “A powerless people, being crushed by the ruthless abuse of power in a racist society, needs a Christian understanding of God as power.” The assertion that God is the lone

57 Roberts, A Black Political Theology, 69.
58 Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation, 43.
59 Roberts, A Black Political Theology, 65.
60 ibid., 69. Power has been marginalized within white theology as though pursuit of it is evil. Roberts asserts that such understandings of power cannot adequately deal with race relations in America. When power is not shared with minorities, and minorities cannot ask for such power without apparent appeals to evil, the power inequities within society cannot be addressed.
61 ibid., 110.
unconditional source of power provides hope to powerless people.\(^{62}\) On the one hand, it emphasizes the ability of God to bring strength out of weakness; on the other hand, it reveals the weaknesses of social power structures based on race. “All-power is a precious attribute of God for black people; for them impotent goodness has little appeal.”\(^{63}\) God’s demonstration of power in the Exodus is meaningful both because God is able to overcome Egypt, and because God is good enough to do so. Both absolute power and absolute goodness are necessary in the character of God. Absolute power ensures the ultimate triumph of good, but absolute good ensures that absolute power won’t be put to immoral use.

Exodus also reveals that all other powers, whether they be religious or secular, national or personal, militaristic or political, are subject to the power of God, who is the ultimate source of all power. This does not imply that the absolute power of the state must be obeyed as a prelate of divine ordination. In reality, God’s sovereignty precludes the absolute sovereignty of any other entity. In the same way that God challenged the oppressive power of Pharaoh, God must challenge all forms of oppressive earthly power:

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Listen! – Listen!
All you sons of Pharaoh.
Who do you think can hold God’s people
When the Lord God himself has said,
Let my people Go?\(^{64}\)
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Both the state and the individual are subject to the authority of God. Because Pharaoh, at the height of his power, is forced to bow to the will of YHWH, all earthly powers must ultimately submit. This means that a Christian understanding of power subordinates all

\(^{62}\) ibid., 112.
\(^{63}\) Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 44.
\(^{64}\) Quoted in Roberts, *A Black Political Theology*, 111. Italics inserted for emphasis.
human powers to the sovereignty of God. Any absolutization of human power or superiority is idolatrous, because the Christian owes ultimate allegiance to God alone.

Roberts also makes use of the Exodus, albeit obliquely, to emphasize one further attribute of God as a correlative to God’s justice – God as creator. In the Exodus, God serves as creator, provider, and redeemer of Israel. The God who creates is also the God who judges that creation. These roles serve as the basis of the black individual’s claim of human dignity and, hence, liberation.  The God who creates is also the God who judges that creation. These roles serve as the basis of the black individual’s claim of human dignity and, hence, liberation. 65 Understanding God as the giver and redeemer of life implies that the dignity of black people is not based upon the definitions and claims of those who would oppress them, but upon their creation as “beings of supreme value.” 66 God’s work on behalf of the oppressed in the Exodus provides the means by which oppressed blacks in America can lay claim to their own dignity.

Exodus and Christ

Roberts does not only use the Exodus to uphold a God of love, justice, power and creation. Like Cone, he emphasizes the importance of Exodus for understanding the significance of the work of Christ. Roberts upholds the Exodus as a paradigmatic narrative for understanding and interpreting the work and ministry of Jesus and the Church. In the Exodus, an oppressed people experienced unexpected deliverance through divine intervention and the destruction of the might of the powerful oppressor. The future of the oppressed was given new possibility. The new order was won through the invalidation of the old order. Roberts argues that this paradigm – the establishment of the new through the invalidation of the old – is consistent throughout Scripture. 67

65 ibid., 88.
66 ibid., 87.
67 Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation, 10.
However, there is also a sense in which the arrival of a new order is not marked by a destruction of the old, but by a “fulfillment” of the old. Biblical faith is a movement from the promise of God to the fulfillment of that promise. The Exodus and Incarnation are revelatory events, because the Exodus provides the promise of liberation, and Christ the fulfillment. In the Exodus, liberation was won for a particular people at a particular time. At the cross, the evil of empire and corruption was confronted by holiness and defeated universally. The promise of liberation from evil, evident in Exodus, was fulfilled when “love won the victory over hate.” 68 This metanarrative of promise and fulfillment provides the context for Roberts’ understanding of the relationship between revolution and reconciliation. Roberts asserts that there must be a discontinuity between the old order in race relations and the new order, but he notes that “the best of the past may be the matrix for launching the future.” 69 Racism is sin. It is the direct result of human perversity. As such it must be resisted. The promise of liberation requires it. But, revolution can never completely fulfill the promise of liberation. The fulfillment of liberation is only made available in reconciliation. 70

A further connection is made between the Incarnation and Exodus, by noting that God’s choice of the victims of slavery in Egypt is fulfilled in God’s solidarity with all victims through the Incarnation. If God’s choice of the oppressed Israelites reveals God’s justice for particular victims, then in the Incarnation, God reveals God’s willingness to share universally in the sufferings of those who are oppressed and marginalized. The Incarnation of Christ reveals a God who intentionally identifies with the victims in order

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68 ibid., 77.
69 ibid., 10.
70 ibid., 11.
that God might “transform their status to one of freedom.”\textsuperscript{71} God is revealed within the Bible as the God of a people who have lived a colonized existence. The God of the Exodus is the one who provides both eschatological hope and “biblical tranquility” in the face of human history. “The God who was a benevolent and provident God for Israel comes to us as the Liberator where he reveals himself as the Lord.”\textsuperscript{72} Roberts connects the cry of Jesus upon the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” with the infinite compassion of the suffering God. In this cry, the ability of God to identify with the suffering masses becomes clear. Jesus, who suffered unjustly upon a cross, sought the Father, and failed to find him. God’s suffering love as revealed upon the cross provides both comfort and strength for those who are oppressed. Roberts accuses white theologians of ignoring the way in which Christ came into the world, or the way in which he lived, or the people with whom he chose to work. For Roberts, Jesus’ birth in a pile of hay, his rejection by the political, social and religious elite, his friendship with prostitutes and other marginalized people, and his shameful death on a cross are of critical importance, because it is this person who was raised from the dead. It is this person who was God Incarnate. The Word became flesh, but the Word did not take on a privileged, noble, superior, or elite existence. “The baby Jesus needed tenderness and care, and his incarnation in the humiliation and weakness of human flesh joined him with the meek who would inherit the earth.”\textsuperscript{73}

Roberts upholds the Jesus of history as a central figure for understanding liberation in the black struggle. A Christ who is only interested in personal salvation and life after death is of little value or concern to blacks. Instead, Black Theology must look

\textsuperscript{71} Roberts, \textit{A Black Political Theology}, 105.
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{ibid.}, 105.
\textsuperscript{73} \textit{ibid.}, 88.
to uphold the “political Jesus” – the work of whom is intimately connected with the political deliverance of the Israelite people. Who Jesus was, and what Jesus did, are of central importance for Roberts, in particular the political nature of what Jesus did. In this way, the connection of Jesus with the Exodus is even more central for Roberts than it is for Cone. Roberts acknowledges that many are willing to make the theological assertion that Jesus’ death had theological import, that the spiritual lives of individuals were changed by the event. However, he also argues that it must not be overlooked that Jesus was put to death on a Roman cross for sedition against the Roman government. It must not be overlooked that Jesus was crucified for resisting the colonizing power of Empire. According to Roberts, “the oppressed will accept Jesus as a political messiah.”

The resurrection has personal, saving meaning; but, because it is the fulfillment of Exodus, it also has a collective meaning, a political meaning, for those who are crucified and prematurely put to death.

The Church and the Chosen People of God.

Roberts also makes use of the Exodus themes when he discusses possible images of the Black Church. Whether speaking of the “reconstituted people of God,” the New Testament ecclesia, or the people of Israel as “the bearers of the divine covenant of

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74 ibid., 133.
75 This is why Roberts is unwilling to assert the need for a historically Black Christ. He acknowledges that the Jesus accepted by most white people is not suitable for black people in America, because he only addresses personal problems, whereas black people face social and psychological issues that require a different Messiah. ibid., 135. However, Roberts is concerned that the attempt by Cone and others to uphold a literal, historical, Black Christ holds Christ culturally captive. J. Deotis Roberts, Black Religion, Black Theology: The Collected Essays of J. Deotis Roberts, edited by David Emmanuel Goatley, (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2003), 164. Such attempts, according to Roberts, are based in vengeful attempts to punish whites, which he deems as an inappropriate motive for establishing a Christological statement. He is more concerned with developing a Christology that can be of universal value to all oppressed people. “The black Messiah liberates the black person. The universal Christ reconciles the black person with the rest of humankind.” Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation, 73.
promise,” the “people of God” is the overriding image present in Scripture, but Roberts expresses concern about the Black Church adopting the identity of God’s “chosen people.” Such an identity, when based upon experienced suffering, has the potential to lead to the glorification of suffering, rather than its demise. Roberts recognizes that the claim by many oppressed peoples to be “chosen” grows out of a need to find some meaning in their suffering. If their suffering somehow prepares them for a greater mission, then it becomes more bearable. But such an understanding must not result in the identification of those who suffer as a privileged people. If suffering becomes something that leads to privilege, then the meaning of Exodus and Crucifixion are lost. The Israelites were chosen as God’s people in order that God might make of them an instrument for extending God’s salvation to all. “Only in this way may black people overcome the danger of assuming the posture of a chosen people and at the same time fulfill the promise and purpose of a ‘suffering servant of God.’”

The purpose of the Church is to become an “incendiary fellowship,” a body in which the work of Christ is extended. In this way the identity of “chosen people of God” helps to provide meaning for the misery that has been suffered. “A people chosen of God are a people who have entered into a new understanding of their mission in the world. Instead of being victims of suffering, they transmute suffering itself into a victory.”

76 ibid., 27. This does not mean that suffering should be embraced. Not all suffering is from God, and not all suffering is redemptive. Only by the power of the liberating God can suffering be “transmuted” into victory. Black people must not see this as an excuse to wallow in suffering, but must seek to transcend it and “render it unnecessary as a way of life.” In this way, those who suffer seek both reconciliation and liberation.

77 Roberts, Black Religion, Black Theology, 77. Roberts identifies a danger inherent in Cone’s theology: He argues that those who suffer, and see themselves as chosen, should never assume their own superiority before God. Suffering does not make one more holy or more deserving of God’s favor, but those who suffer must learn to understand a “stewardship of suffering,” in which those who suffer become “a saving minority.” ibid., 77. Roberts is willing to accept the notion of chosenness only if it assumes black people have been chosen not in order that they might be favored before God, but in order that they might be a part
It should be noted that in spite of the theological differences between James Cone and Deotis Roberts, each of them makes extensive use of the Exodus. Even though Roberts is concerned with addressing what he sees as shortcomings within Cone’s theology, he is not willing to forsake the narrative upon which Cone bases much of his theological development. Instead, Roberts uses the Exodus to emphasize his concern for an understanding of the attribution of God that addresses God as power, love and justice. He also makes use of the connection between the Exodus and the work of Christ to identify the importance of a political understanding of Jesus and illustrate the metanarrative of fulfillment and promise within scripture. Finally, even though Roberts is concerned with the black community accepting a status as the “people of God” that is based upon its suffering, he acknowledges that the benefits to such an identity far outweigh the potential setbacks. Roberts’ theology is almost as influenced by Exodus as Cone’s.

Dwight Hopkins

The work of Dwight Hopkins is not as systematic as that of Cone and Roberts. As such, the Exodus is not as centrally located within Hopkins theological enterprise. However, this is not to say that Hopkins disregards the significance or importance of Exodus. He notes that in any African American theological formulation, Exodus must be addressed, because it is something that dominates the black religious mind. As he notes in his introduction to Black Theology, “Specifically for African Americans, to be Christian is to identify with the freedom stories of the Hebrew slaves fleeing from
Egyptian bondage.”

One’s identity as an African American Christian implies that one’s history and being are intimately connected to the story of Exodus. Hopkins argues that when black people in America read of the deliverance of the Hebrew slaves they identify with a people who suffered physical torment at the hands of brutal taskmasters. But beyond that he also notes that contemporary black people also identify with the spiritual and emotional torment of anxiety, doubt, fear, anger and pain due to humiliation and systemic exclusion. African Americans recognize within their own story a similar past and a similar passion for freedom. The Exodus provides a different narrative to the one presented by the “dominating Christianity and theology of mainstream American believers.”

This is notably so, for Hopkins, because Exodus does not end in continued slavery, but in deliverance, which provides hope for a similar deliverance among contemporary African Americans. This hope helps to overcome the psychological pain of racism and provides the hope to continue the struggle against racism. “The certainty of victory, witnessed in the Hebrew Scriptures, empowers the poor in the midst of their deepest self-doubt.”

The Exodus as Revelation of God’s Character.

For Hopkins, like Cone and Roberts, the story of Israel’s redemption from Egypt provides the lens through which both the work and character of God are revealed. It provides the prevailing concept of God’s compassion and presence with those who suffer. The Hebrew Scriptures reveal Yahweh compassionately hearing and seeing the dire difficulties faced and experienced by the bottom of society,

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80 ibid., 34.
in this case, the Hebrew slaves. When people living in a system of poverty today read the story of enslaved Hebrew workers and their relationship to a liberator God, they can see that they are not alone in their cruel predicament in contemporary America.\footnote{ibid., 33.}

In the Exodus, African Americans have discovered the nature of God as the one who notices the cries and afflictions of the oppressed and saves them from their oppression. As such, the Exodus reveals God as the “Spirit of total liberation for us.”\footnote{Dwight N. Hopkins, \textit{Down, Up and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology}, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 158 – 164.} God’s involvement on behalf of the Israelite slaves implies that God involves God’s self in the activity of the liberation of the oppressed. The Spirit of liberation for us works with marginalized and exploited humanity to liberate them from Egyptian bondage (in whatever manifestation that may exist), and bring them into a “material free space undergirded by a spiritual belief in the power of Yahweh and the human community.”\footnote{ibid., 158.}

Because this spirit is the one that exists for us, it is not confined to the pages of scripture or to the Israelite deliverance from Egypt. In any activity that seeks to bring liberation, the same God who sought to deliver Israel seeks to provide that same deliverance. The Spirit of liberation’s activity is not invisible – it does not work on a plane or in a space that is not knowable to us – but is present both when the poor work to fulfill their human existence, and when they seek to resist those within society who use “otherness” to justify their privilege and power. When the power brokers use “otherness” to stigmatize the weak and justify the destruction of those not like them in defense of their own power, the Spirit of total liberation for us is involved in any form or resistance.

However, unlike Cone, for Hopkins the Exodus does not merely reveal God through the divine activity within human history. The Spirit of total liberation for us is
also revealed in the giving of the divine name to Moses – it is revealed within the divine being. In the Exodus narrative God reveals God’s ontological existence as the “spirit of liberation for us.” According to Hopkins, YHWH chooses to reveal God’s self to Moses as the “I Am” God, the one who sends Moses to liberate the Israelites. Hopkins identifies YHWH with the present liberation, revealed to Israel in the Exodus and expressed in ‘I Am,’ and in the eternal concern for liberation, revealed in the ongoing resistance of injustice and expressed in ‘I will be.’ “The I am and the I will be signify a oneness and eternity in the Spirit of liberation for us.”

God’s concern for liberation is not merely revealed in God’s activity within history, but within God’s existence as ‘I am.” This provides the one suffering with the ability to defy present circumstance, because God is opposed to their suffering, and because a connection is made between present concerns for liberation and the eternal holistic freedom of God – “I am” is also “I will be.” The divine concern for justice and liberation revealed in ‘I am’ implies that God will address injustice and suffering experienced by any people at any time, whether that injustice is based on race, class, gender or sexual orientation. God’s liberation of the oppressed is not unique to black people, nor to the Israelite people, but is located in the eternal nature of God.

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84 ibid., 163.
85 For Hopkins, one cannot talk about the liberation of black people without specifically including black women, a lacuna in the early works of James Cone and Deotis Roberts. Womanist Theology, the theology of black women, becomes another important source for doing Black Theology. Hopkins argues that, in order for Black theology to be consistent in claiming liberation for all people, it must also take into account the issues of African American women within the community and the church. “Black theology cannot claim to be for justice and simultaneously treat black women as second-class citizens.” Hopkins, Heart and Head, 41. Hopkins makes the argument when discussing the ontology of “I Am” that “I Am” encompasses both genders, and cannot be exploited for patriarchal purposes. The very nature of God, the sacred ontology, is gender equality. “The Great I Am’s being is gender inclusive and holistic, not privileging either gender, while ensuring the full liberation of all regardless of gender or skin color… Any being masquerading as God but suffering from a designation as only male is a demonic personality whose intent, consciously or unconsciously, is not to bring freeing comfort to the oppressed. Hopkins, Down, Up and Over, 164. God is the one who created human beings, and because God created both males and females, God is the source of justice within gender relationships.
of God. Wherever people suffer, God chooses to collaborate with the sufferers on behalf of justice.\textsuperscript{86}

The Exodus and Jesus

In Hopkins’ work, one cannot talk about God as the Spirit of liberation for us without simultaneously talking about God as the “Spirit of liberation with us.” God is present as this Spirit in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. As with Cone and Roberts, the influence of Exodus on an appropriate understanding of God leads to its influence on an appropriate understanding of Christ. If God is the “Spirit of liberation for us” then Jesus, who was God in human flesh, is the fulfillment of that Spirit.

If Jesus’ entire existence and the complete purpose of the resurrected Christ is to work with the oppressed in society, and if the entire Hebrew scriptures tells us about Yahweh co-laboring with slaves to move them out of oppressive structures in space and time and into a new location of freedom, then surely our divine calling begins first with the poor.\textsuperscript{87}

For Hopkins, the entire work of Jesus is to complete what YHWH began in the Exodus. Jesus is the decisive revelation of God in the midst of the suffering of the oppressed. Jesus’ residence with the weak resists the claims of the powerful to sole right to the revelation of God. Jesus, as the Spirit of liberation with us, offers a freedom that refuses to accept the supremacy of any people, place or thing over those who suffer. Those who suffer, who have been liberated by the presence of Jesus, seek allegiance with the one who has liberated them rather than with those principalities and power that claim sovereign authority to exploit and manipulate them. The Spirit of liberation with us has laid claim to the oppressed, so that that the oppressors no longer have that claim. “If the

\textsuperscript{86} Hopkins, \textit{Heart and Head}, 29.
\textsuperscript{87} ibid., 64.
Spirit of God’s freedom with us has created all, then all on earth belong to Jesus and not to the narrow claims of any one class, race, gender, or sexual orientation.”

In the same way that YHWH “co-labored” with the Israelites in order to deliver them from Egypt, Jesus labors not only on behalf of the oppressed but with them. Jesus as the Spirit of liberation with us does not simply become a part of creation in order to be with the weak, but in order to bring them out of this world so that they might work with him. Those who choose to work with Jesus accept a call to servanthood to the least in society. They are given power to this end, power to proclaim the good news of liberation, power to be co-creators of the “new human being.” The Incarnation of Christ, the work of Christ, and the Passion of Christ all reveal a profound ethic of servanthood, especially to the weak.

The crucifixion symbolizes God in Jesus working the very blood from the divine body so that oppressed people may have life abundantly and have it now. The crucifixion blood gives us hope that today those who have life resources will sacrifice themselves to empower those who, in many instances, are literally losing blood every day.

Because Jesus offered his own blood in service to the oppressed, those with the resources for survival are challenged to sacrifice those resources for the survival of the weak. Hopkins argues that this servanthood, as revealed by the presence of the Incarnate and Crucified One among the poor, reveals humanity’s true purpose to be the awakening of the Spirit of liberation within the oppressed.

By working with Jesus – the Spirit of liberation with us – the victims of society pursue the role of servanthood for salvation; they administer the

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88 Hopkins, *Down, Up and Over*, 224.
89 ibid., 196.
power to the powerless, proclaim a freedom word, heal the sick, cast out demons, and pray over the ill ones.\textsuperscript{91}

Jesus’ own human purpose was to do this very thing.

From the Christian perspective, Jesus announces his sole purpose on earth to privilege the poor – the homeless, the hungry, the thirsty, the prisoner, people enslaved by labor, the abused women, humans lorded over by the powerful, the brokenhearted, the oppressed, the stranger, those without clothing and the lonely.\textsuperscript{92}

Jesus is the decisive revelation of God in the midst of the suffering of the oppressed.

Jesus labors not only on behalf of the oppressed but with them.

Hopkins offers the inaugural sermon of Jesus in Luke 4:18-19 as a recapitulation of the entire purpose of Jesus. Any understanding of Jesus, he argues, that does not coincide with this foundational message fails to speak appropriately about him or his ministry. “Jesus anchors his intent to be “with us” within a definitive social location.”\textsuperscript{93} Namely, the earth’s poor and weak. Jesus preaches good news to those who need to hear good news. The proclamation of liberty to the captives, to those who have been maligned and had their hearts broken by evil powers (both spiritual and physical) signifies a holistic salvation that includes the liberation from physical poverty and oppression.

Jesus’ fulfillment of this passage suggests how “Jesus acts today to remove the poor from all manner of prisons and from any obstacles preventing them from struggling for liberation and practicing freedom.”\textsuperscript{94} Jesus’ annunciation of the day of the Lord’s favor also proclaims that the poor no longer need to wait for a time when it is suitable. \textit{Today} is the day of the Lord’s favor. They can begin to conduct themselves as though God’s reign has begun. Because Jesus emphasized a new human community in which the least

\textsuperscript{91} Hopkins, \textit{Down, Up and Over}, 197
\textsuperscript{92} Dwight N. Hopkins, \textit{Being Human: Race, Culture and Religion}, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 80. Italics mine.
\textsuperscript{93} Hopkins, \textit{Down, Up and Over}, 194
\textsuperscript{94} ibid., 195.
would play a defining role, the sole purpose of all humanity is to work on behalf of the least.⁹⁵

Exodus and Other Black Sources

It is evident that Exodus has had an influence upon the work of Dwight Hopkins; however, the greater portion of Hopkins’ career has been spent identifying different resources for Black theology. These resources may seem, at first glance, to be more specifically black than they are specifically Christian. In particular, the African American folk tales that Hopkins uses are not readily identifiable as Christian sources, and they are certainly not explicitly connected to the Exodus. However, this may be part of Hopkins’ point. There are specifically black sources for doing Christian theology, and one need not resort to using only European theological figures when doing Christian theology.

There are three themes that Hopkins identifies as possible sources for Black Theology within African American folk literature: The Way Maker, the Way Made, and the Trickster. Hopkins connects God with the Way Maker, the Trickster is loosely connected with Christ, and the Way Made with the goals of liberation. These concepts provide the “foundational beings or places to which black people dedicate their lives in African American folk culture.”⁹⁶ As such, Hopkins acquaints them with the ultimate pursuit of faith, and seeks to explain how they are understood within folk culture in order to recognize the possibilities for sources within Black Theology.

Hopkins identifies two main characteristics of God as the Way Maker: creator and deliverer. The Way Maker is first of all the creator, and one of the Way Maker’s primary

⁹⁵ Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 23.
⁹⁶ Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit our Feet*, 85.
roles is to create, *ex nihilo*, new life and new existence. The role of creator, therefore, does not merely consist of bringing into existence the universe, but also includes reordering the world in a manner consistent with the aims of God. The Way Maker creates things in a manner that implies logic and perfection, which means that God always provides a means by which humanity can thrive.\(^{97}\) That God creates the world with logic and perfection does not mean that God is no longer involved; God is not a deistic entity that is no longer concerned with creation. The Way Maker’s job as creator is to maintain and re-order the world in such a way that its existence is consistent with divine intent.

However, Hopkins also points out that the Way Maker does not wish to work alone, but seeks to be a co-creator, and a co-laborer. “The fundamental act of God…*operates in a co-constitutive fashion.*”\(^{98}\) God does not wish to work alone, but involves the rest of creation in divine creativity and liberation. “God’s fundamental plan calls on the Creator and creation to live together and co-labor in the ongoing process of unfolding new realities and novel possibilities.”\(^{99}\) In the African American folk culture the Way Maker creates out of a sense of loneliness. Only in the creation of humanity is that loneliness overcome, because only in humanity is the divine self-image embedded. The Way Maker was able to recognize the divine likeness and creativity within humanity, and “enjoyed the existence of [a] co-creator.”\(^{100}\) Part of the co-creative role of humanity is to be the instruments of God’s will. The Way Maker is a relational power, and does

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\(^{97}\) ibid., 85-88.
\(^{98}\) Hopkins, *Down, Up and Over*, 160. Italics mine.
\(^{99}\) Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit our Feet*, 88.
\(^{100}\) ibid., 89.
not do anything without making use of human agency. “God works directly in a physical effort and digs in the black dirt of life with toiling humanity.”

Another characteristic of the Way Maker is that of deliverer, although there is a lot of overlap between this characteristic and the understanding of the Way Maker as creator, because deliverance is re-creative. The Way Maker’s deliverance is found first in a co-laboring with the poor to accomplish the divine re-creative purposes. God is the one who makes a way for those who have been victimized. The Way Maker is the one who “grants food to the poor from the storehouse of the rich.” The Way Maker will set right the imbalances that arise from the self-sufficiency of certain individuals. When that self-sufficiency threatens the survival of the rest of the members of the community, God intervenes to set things right. “Because the Way Maker is a God of voiceless humanity, those violently and institutionally forced to the margins of the dominant mainstream society will never lack the accompanying presence of God.” The Way Maker’s deliverance is realized, in part, by the re-establishment of the created order through human agency in such a way that the victims are no longer victimized.

God’s involvement with and love for humanity leads God to resist anything that would harm or damage it. “The fundamental act of God (that is, the doing and ethics of the divinity of liberation for us) is earthly emancipation for those in bondage, both spiritual and material...” In other words, the Way Maker is the emancipating power for the poor. God prefers the poor in an effort to oppose the injustice that blocks the realization of their full humanity. And, as with the divine role as creator, the Way Maker...
as liberator wishes to work with those being liberated. God’s ethics works to co-
constitute (constitute with the input and involvement of the oppressed community) a
humanity that is liberated. On the one hand, “there is nothing that the poor can do on
their own to bring about their own release from pain.”105 The only recourse is to have
faith in a God of liberation whose deliverance is a gift. Human action alone, whether
political or economic, cannot provide freedom. Only when the oppressed turn to the God
of liberation in faith does God make the choice to deliver them. On the other hand,
“Divine justice…requires us in the present moment to fulfill the mandates of struggling
for liberation and practicing freedom.”106 The Way Maker’s deliverance is not
experienced by divine fiat. It is a gift for which humanity must strive. The divine gift of
God is two-fold. First, it is the promise of the presence of God within the midst of the
suffering, and second, it is the empowerment of those who suffer to defy, by their own
free agency, those who oppress them. “The poor and marginalized should see themselves
and act out in the now as free persons. The divine judgment bar employs a norm of
freedom.”107

One can, without too much difficulty make obvious connections between the
African American folk understanding of the Way Maker and God’s involvement in the
Exodus. First, in the Exodus God creates a new existence and a new life for the
Israelites, and by God’s continued involvement with Israel, creates a new community that
is consistent with the creative aims of God. Second, God’s deliverance is a co-creative
process, and a re-creative process. God’s deliverance is a new reality in which
imbalances of power are reordered. God resists those who harm humanity, and upholds

105 ibid., 181-182.
106 ibid., 177.
107 ibid., 177.
those being victimized in order that creation might be re-established. Perhaps the only
way in which the Exodus narrative does not parallel the narrative of the Way Maker is in
the co-creative aspect. In the Exodus, Israel’s only involvement was to cry out. They did
not struggle against Egypt. They did not fight or resist. Israel was delivered solely by
the power of YHWH, not because of Israel’s ability to resist Egypt, but because of
YHWH proved to be more powerful than Pharaoh.

The Trickster Intermediary is another figure from African American folk lore that
Hopkins identifies as a possible source for Black Theology. Within African American
folk culture the Trickster is a liaison between the Way Maker and humanity. The
Trickster is the emissary of the divine will. Brer Rabbit is a good example when he notes
“It’s not right for one animal to have it all and the rest to have nothing.” Brer Rabbit
proceeds to organize the forest animals in an attempt to put an end to the monopolization
of resources by Brer Tiger. By reinforcing the communality of the forest animals and
showing them the power they have together, Brer Rabbit becomes God’s prophet. He
proclaims the divine intent for the resources of the earth and destroys Tiger’s monopoly
of those resources. In this way the Trickster becomes a kind of Moses figure, in which
God’s intent for a marginalized people is made clear. Hopkins himself notes that the
forest animals thank God for Brer Rabbit, “for putting forth a shrewd and powerful
intermediary, who leads them on a grand exodus out of fear into a place of ‘milk and
honey.’” The Trickster leads the people on an exodus out of enslavement to
exploitative power and into a promised land. Intermediaries like Brer Rabbit do
everything from destroying exploitative power to revealing the dignity of the oppressed
and empowering them to overcome.

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108 Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit our Feet*, 102.
Sometimes the intermediary refuses to accept the definitions provided by the powers that be, renaming and redefining reality, and in so doing reshaping how things can and ought to be. But the Trickster’s most important role is to serve as intermediary between the Way Maker and the poor, in order that the poor might arrive at the Way Made. The Trickster connects the power of the Way Maker to the suffering and hopes of the poor. “To move through the Trickster to the Way Made is the theological effort of the poor to ‘get over,’”\(^\text{109}\) which is the theological struggle of the oppressed toward liberation. The Way Made is the means by which the poor cope with the external and internal forces that threaten to destroy them. It implies the transformation of self-identity and systemic evil.

According to Hopkins, within the African American folk narrative, all other desires are subject to the longing for the ideal space of the Way Made. Only in its discovery is the true identity of the searcher realized, because this world belongs to somebody else, and the sojourner is merely a suffering temporary resident. The Way Made will not be marked by suffering and insufficiency, but by the availability of those things which are necessary for physical health and existence. However, it will also be marked by healthy emotional and social relations. It is a place in which there is harmony between humanity, the Way Maker and nature. “Here then the folk will no longer endure poverty and the forced conditions of perpetual reacting to outside domination.”\(^\text{110}\)

Both the Trickster and the Way Made are alluded to using terms from the Exodus narrative. The Trickster, as noted above, is a type of Moses figure, who will both reveal and help bring about the promised reality of the Way Maker. The Way Made is referred

\(^{109}\) ibid., 114.
\(^{110}\) ibid., 97.
to as the Promised Land, or “land of milk and honey.” God’s deliverance is never simply for the sake of deliverance, but in order that the victimized might be brought into a new existence in which their dignity is realized and a “New Common Wealth” is established.  

CONCLUSIONS

In the last chapter the ubiquity of Exodus within slave theology and the early African American theology was revealed. However, it was also necessary to reveal the extent to which Black Theology has made use of the Exodus. Within the three representatives of Black Theology studied here the Exodus provides a foundational narrative. Within the more systematic theological projects of James Cone and Deotis Roberts, Exodus influences the understanding of God’s attribution, Christology and eschatology. Exodus reveals a God who is concerned about liberation in James Cone, and a God who is present in power, love and justice in Roberts. It also provides the means by which one can appropriately understand the work and presence of Christ, as God incarnate. Finally, it ensures that eschatology not become so metaphysical that it loses its connection to history and ethics.

Within the work of Dwight Hopkins, who is much more concerned with identifying uniquely black sources for Black Theology, the Exodus still plays an important role. Even though Hopkins could disregard Exodus as an inconsequential to his theological project, he determines that it is such a part of the black consciousness that to do so would prove problematic. The themes he identifies within the African American folk lore are all consistent with and build upon the Exodus narrative.

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111 There will be more on this “New Common Wealth” in chapter 5.
The importance of this narrative in the development of Black Theology, both through an influence upon its sources, and upon its seminal thinkers, is evident.
Chapter 3: Black Hermeneutics

To this point we have sought to make clear the importance of Exodus within both early African American theology (Chapter 1) and Black Theology (Chapter 2), each of which makes use of Exodus as the operative narrative in explaining the nature and purposes of God. Within each of these theological interpretations of Exodus, as with any theological interpretation of scripture, there are accepted presumptions about the appropriate way in which the Bible should be interpreted.

The purpose of this brief excursus is to unearth the operative assumptions made within African American religion and Black Theology in regards to the authority and interpretation of scripture. These operative assumptions provide the hermeneutical criteria that explain how and why Exodus is so important, and therefore must be understood in order to justly address the possibility of appropriating the Sabbath tradition for ethical reflection within Black Theology.

The first section of this chapter will identify the significance of contextualization within black hermeneutics. Within black hermeneutics, the normativity of white interpretations of the Bible is challenged, and an interpretation of the Bible from the perspective of black history and experience is pursued. Thus, it is important to be able to understand what role contextualization plays in black interpretations of scripture.

The second section will identify two operative assumptions about the nature of the “Word of God.” These two assumptions redefine the “Word of God” within black hermeneutics such that it is no longer equivalent with the Bible.

The third part of this chapter will examine two hermeneutical challenges posed to black interpretations of the Bible. The first such challenge has been posed by the Jewish
scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures Jon Levenson, who takes issue with liberationist interpretations of Exodus. The second challenge is one posed from within the black community, namely Womanist Theology. The work of Cheryl Kirk-Duggan argues that the Exodus may not be as liberative a text as many black theologians claim, and challenges black hermeneutics from an ethical perspective. Each of these criticisms has important contributions to make to the hermeneutical dialogue with Black Theology.

**CONTEXT IN BLACK HERMENEUTICS**

In some regards black hermeneutics is a response to white hermeneutics. In the eyes of many black biblical scholars, white religion and white interpretations of the Bible have been used for centuries to propagate an ideology of white superiority, and consequently violence against black people. “It seems to be the hallmark of Western (Eurocentric) biblical scholars to seize upon every opportunity to read their racial biases into the interpretation and translations of the ancient biblical text.”

African American biblical hermeneutics began as a response to this tradition of racist interpretation. Black interpreters of the Bible, like Waters, believe that the differences between the hermeneutical concerns of black and white interpreters of the Bible stem primarily from the differences in social status and cultural perspective. White people have come from a cultural perspective that upholds their social status, claiming it is due to their superiority as white people. Thus, their interpretation of scripture underscores the racist ideology that provides the foundation for their right to dominate those without white skin. Black people, on the other hand, have a cultural perspective that seeks “to affirm their dignity

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and to empower [them] to struggle for justice."² This leads Black Theology to a specific hermeneutical perspective that grows from the historical situation of bondage and the attempt of the African slaves to address the contradiction of slavery and Christianity, a contradiction largely ignored by white theologians.

The issue of contextualization really centers on the question of how black Americans will read the Bible in light of their existence as black Americans. There is a clear awareness within black hermeneutics of the significance that context plays in the reading and interpreting of scripture. The experiences of slavery, racism, and economic exploitation demonstrate the fundamental reality of this context. For black scholars of the bible, the experience of oppression has shaped the way in which the biblical story is retold, and how it is understood.

The most important factor in any community’s theological perspective is that community’s history. What a community is, what it looks like and what it deems important are shaped by the shared experiences of those within the community – its history. This history provides the framework through which the believing community reads scripture, and no community can escape this contextualization. “Every reading is contextual. It can make no legitimate claim to universal truth because it is rooted by necessity in a conceptual frame of reference, which is always historically, socially, and culturally conditioned.”³ In this way, the history and experiences of the black community shapes the ways in which Black Theology interprets scripture.

Hence, much of biblical scholarship within Black Theology has been done with the intent to disabuse the biblical reader of any Eurocentric historiography of the Bible.

² Cone, “An African American Perspective on the Cross and Suffering,”, 49.
Many black biblical scholars point out the subtle racism of white biblical scholarship. For example, Cain Hope Felder points out that there has been an attempt to remove Africa from the Bible, and place Europe as the locus of the biblical story. Egypt was removed from Africa and included in maps of the Middle East or even associated with Europe. Felder points out how this academic racism “thoroughly sought to de-Africanize the sacred story of the Bible along with the whole sweep of Western civilization.” In response, Felder seeks to place Africa in the center of the history of scripture. Hence he points out that most of the characters of scripture, whether Abraham, the other patriarchs, Moses, those liberated from Egypt, David or any of the other ancient Israelites should not be considered European, but “Afro-Asiatic.” Even Jesus, or maybe especially Jesus, should be characterized in this way, as well. This attempt to recapture the role of Africa within the scriptures is indicative of much of black hermeneutics.

If all readings of scripture are contextualized, and are thus conditioned by social and historical experiences, then what permits the black interpreter of the bible to make claims about the text, over against a white racist interpretation? The answer, interestingly, is context. The privileged interpretation is the one that grows from the community that most clearly reflects the community that wrote the biblical texts. “What is to be hoped is that the community’s concern is consistent with the concern of the community that gave us the Scriptures.” The community that can most faithfully interpret the meaning and purpose of the “Word of God,” is the community that most

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5 See for example, ibid.
7 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 76.
looks like the one that was enslaved in Egypt and delivered by YHWH. This is why Cone can argue that the experiences of racism, enslavement and oppression suffered by black people should be “the most important source we use to interpret the meaning of the gospel.”\(^8\) Black interpretations of scripture are among those best equipped to be faithful interpretations of scripture.

**The Operative Assumptions in Determining the “Word of God”**

What must now be addressed are the operative assumptions made within black interpretations of the Bible that allow Black Theology to make claims about what is the “Word of God.” There are two hermeneutical lenses within black hermeneutics that determine the bounds for what is consistent with the “Word of God” and what is not. These two lenses are an emphasis upon God’s concern for history and God’s concern for liberation. Each of these two lenses have been explored at length in the previous chapters, and so a brief introduction to each of them will suffice.

**God’s Concern for History**

There is an emphasis within black hermeneutics upon political and social realities. According to James Cone, God’s concern for history demands that the Church cannot do theology as though the poor and their condition are not of theological concern.

Because most biblical scholars are the descendants of the advantaged class, it is to be expected that they would minimize Jesus’ gospel of liberation for the poor by interpreting poverty as a spiritual condition unrelated to social and political phenomena.\(^9\) Black hermeneutics refuses to accept any interpretation of scripture that focuses on the spiritual at the expense of the political and social. Robert Bennett begins his hermeneutic

\(^8\) Cone, “Black Liberation Theology and Black Catholics,” 745.

with an assessment of the Israelites as an oppressed people without identity, who are
liberated and given an identity as a nation. Israel, as a people, was formed by its
covenantal relationship with YHWH. “This relationship was dependent more upon
working out the divine intentions for the community than upon ritual worship of the
deity.”\textsuperscript{10} The Old and New Testaments are commentaries on what that responsibility
means, and what the community which has been formed by God’s activity within human
history would look like, a community “where human relationships can serve as the
paradigm for the God-to-man relationship.”\textsuperscript{11} The implication is that the Bible
communicates more than an individualistic piety defined by one’s relationship to God; it
also communicates God’s intention for an ordered society and the intentions of God’s
creation.

Within African American religion, scripture has been interpreted by the
correlation of the biblical stories to the present historical experience. As Vincent
Wimbush notes, the development of the historical-critical method within America came
at a time when African Americans were “otherwise disposed” with the struggle for basic
human and civil rights. As such, they had little concern in engaging with these methods
in order to discover the historical context of the texts. However, this does not mean that
African Americans failed to develop their own methods of interpretation, “appropriating
Christian symbols, concepts, and language in their own way.”\textsuperscript{12} The difference between
the developing African American hermeneutic and that of the historical-critical method is

\textsuperscript{10} Robert A. Bennett, “Black Experience and the Bible,” \textit{African American Religious Studies: An
\textsuperscript{11} ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{12} Vincent L. Wimbush, “Biblical Historical Study as Liberation: Toward and Afro-Christian
Hermeneutic,” \textit{African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology}, Gayraud Wilmore,
that whereas the latter was concerned with the historical context which spawned the
documents of scripture, the former emphasized the telling and retelling of the story in
such a way that the experiences of the biblical characters became analogous to the
experiences of the black community. The ability to correlate the biblical stories with
present events made the Bible an important instrument of comfort, prophetic criticism,
and liberation. Identification with the characters of the narrative, and in so doing finding
strength and hope, were the priorities that shaped the ways in which the African
American church interpreted scripture.

Demetrius Williams notes the ways in which the biblical stories served as
analogies for providing hope within given specific historical contexts. Biblical models
such as Exodus, Wilderness, Promised Land, and Exile were all analogous to specific
historical situations of oppression in which they lived. The context of slavery was
analogous to the biblical model of Exodus. An analogical connection between the
history of the ancient Hebrews and the African American community was established.
The suffering of the ancients was brought to end by the deliverance of YHWH and the
establishment of those enslaved in Egypt as a nation. In the same way, the slaves
believed that God would deliver them from their slavery and provide them with a status
that allowed them to maintain their freedom. With the end of slavery, and the rise of Jim
Crow legislation, the black community adopted a different biblical experience that it saw
as analogous to its own – “wilderness wandering.” Again, in the 1950s when the Civil
Rights Movement began, the analogy of “possessing the promised land” was adopted. In
each of these cases, African Americans looked to the biblical stories to provide an

13 ibid., 141.
analogous connection to their own experience. Analogy served to connect the Bible with specific political and social realities.

The African American belief in God’s concern for political and social realities has led black interpreters of the Bible to uphold readings of scripture that emphasize this concern. Any reading of scripture that attempts to spiritualize these concrete political and social concerns is deemed inconsistent with the Word of God.

God’s Concern for Liberation

The emphasis upon concrete historical realities has led black interpreters of the bible to emphasize the role of God in the Exodus. The Exodus is operative because it reveals God’s concerns for political and social realities. The most significant operative assumption within black interpretations of the Bible is that God’s political activity within human history is always on behalf of the poor. At the heart of African American hermeneutics is “a sense of black values and protest against oppression.”

Scripture reveals to African Americans that the battle is not between white and black, or between slave and slave owner, but between God and evil – and in the end God will win. As such, liberation becomes the focus of black hermeneutics. It is through the lens of liberation that all hermeneutical and theological assertions are assessed. Liberation is the principal theme of Black Theology, and this theme is expressed and understood primarily through hermeneutical involvement with the scriptures.


15 Some theologians have asserted that the theme of liberation must be understood in relation to other themes. For example, Deotis Roberts argues that liberation must result in reconciliation if it is to be consistent with the work of God. See for example, Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation, 8-20, 44-45, 55-67. Others, such as Olin Moyd, would like to offer redemption as a more fully developed theme than liberation. For Moyd, redemption includes economic, social, and political deliverance, but also includes
The centrality of liberation within black hermeneutics makes liberation the norm by which proper interpretation of scripture is evaluated. Black hermeneutics is much less concerned with “exegesis” than it is with the methods that ensure interpretations consistent with the theme of liberation.\textsuperscript{16} The liberative activity of God is revealed in the witness that scripture provides to the nature of God, and so any interpretation of the scriptures that is either indifferent to the plight of the oppressed or contrary to their liberation is not considered to be Christian theology.\textsuperscript{17} “It is indeed the \textit{biblical} witness that says that God is a God of liberation, who calls to himself the oppressed and abused in the nation and assures them that his righteousness will vindicate their suffering.”\textsuperscript{18} The biblical witness provides a plumb line – the God of liberation – by which the theologian can judge interpretation. Contemporary interpretations of God’s revelation must be consistent with this witness, and thus must be “guided by the theological norm of liberation.”\textsuperscript{19} Any hermeneutic that justifies injustice or oppression is inconsistent with the revelation of God, and must be rejected.

For Dwight Hopkins, theology must take seriously the parallels between the work of God in freeing the African American community and the liberating work of God in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Attempts made by dominant strains of theology to develop a theology that is impartial (attempts that Hopkins believes have

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\textsuperscript{16} Frederick L. Ware, \textit{Methodologies of Black Theology}, (Cleveland: Pilgrims Press, 2002), 28.
\textsuperscript{17} Cone, \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}, 11.
\textsuperscript{18} ibid., 66. Italics in original.
\textsuperscript{19} Brown, \textit{Blackening of the Bible}, 14.
\end{flushleft}
failed) are contrasted with the theological developments of Black Theology which deliberately take the side of the poor.

Of all the classes, sectors, and strata in biblical times, Yahweh opted for the poor and decided consciously to listen to, to see, and to change the course of human history by cementing forever the holy will to a single purpose... the freeing of broken humanity from sin by working with the poor on earth.\(^\text{20}\)

God’s choice of the poor and the oppressed as God’s vehicle for revealing the divine nature means that the perspective of the poor and the oppressed is crucial to an appropriate understanding of God. Whatever is said about the Christian Scriptures, the Christian God or Christian theology must be said in light of the experience of suffering within oppressed communities, and any theology that arises out of a context other than that of an oppressed community must be called into question.\(^\text{21}\) Because God has revealed God’s self to be a God who historically demonstrates righteousness to the weak and oppressed, theology must take seriously the condition of the marginalized.

Bible as the “Word of God”

The two hermeneutical lenses mentioned above have led to a number of claims about the Bible that continue to challenge the hermeneutical assumptions of white Euro-American theology. The first of these is a redefinition of “biblical authority.” Although many African Americans accept the authority of the Bible, they do not accept that all of scripture is normative.

Seeing the Bible as authoritative, African Americans traditionally have bypassed the related issues of its normativity. Acceptance of the canon as such as normative by African Americans would only validate a certain


\(^{21}\) Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 77.
‘triumphalism’ that promotes a self-serving and predominantly European understanding of the tradition.\(^\text{22}\)

Scripture’s authority is dependent upon its ability to respond to the norm that defines the Word of God – liberation. Many black scholars of the Bible have evaluated its authority based upon the ways in which the texts have justified or resisted dehumanization. The hermeneutical lens of liberation allows the African American community to differentiate between those texts that are authoritative and those that are not.\(^\text{23}\)

When questioned by his critics about how Black Theology can choose some biblical strands and avoid others, Cone asserts that there is one thing that validates hermeneutics: liberation in Christ.

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.\(^\text{24}\)

Cone goes on to assert that the only source for the validity of this hermeneutical starting point is God’s historical activity of liberation. If it is shown that the liberating God is not the God Cone identifies with the Bible, then Black Theology will either have to forgo the name Christian or start over, because the hermeneutical framework of Black Theology is God’s revelation of God’s self through acts of liberation within history.

This is why the greater concern for black hermeneutics is the “produced” meaning of scripture within social contexts. Only the oppressed group can determine which texts provide for liberation and which texts do not.\(^\text{25}\) The meaning of scripture is determined not by the historical critical tools of white hermeneutics, but by the black community’s

\(^\text{22}\) Brown, *Blackening of the Bible*, 37.
\(^\text{23}\) Ibid., 64.
appropriation of scripture. Hence, Gerald West argues that historical critical tools can only be of so much value. They cannot help one to “find” some true, perfect meaning of scripture; instead, meaning is “produced” by the reader who engages with the Bible from within their specific context. This raises concerns about critical readings of scripture. West argues that interpretation must be done in community, in a dialogue between biblical scholars and everyday interpreters of scripture. Only through the influence upon each party within a dialogical relationship can the presence of God within scripture be revealed for certain contexts.\(^\text{26}\)

Vincent Wimbush argues that the *Sitz im Leben* of the biblical texts must limit the possible applications and interpretations of each of the texts. However, such an approach to scripture does not convey eternal ethical principles, but the struggles of the biblical authors and their communities to become human. These struggles are not autonomously spiritual, but take place within the framework of social, political and economic contexts. “Ethical and moral prescriptions are always localized and always serve only to help fill out the picture of the struggles inherent in the faith-journey, namely in the effort to understand and realize true existence.”\(^\text{27}\) The solution to biblical interpretation, then, is not to attempt to recreate the “world” (specific contextual reality) in which a particular scriptural passage was developed, but to recognize that scripture provides numerous pictures of the ways in which different worlds have shaped faith. These different worlds within scripture allow the freedom “to experiment with the testimonies of other communities of faith about what faith might mean in different situations in life.”\(^\text{28}\) The worlds of the Bible are not to be ignored, but provide a sort of “historical tie that binds all

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\(^{26}\) ibid., 21.


\(^{28}\) ibid., 151.
post-biblical communities together.” Scripture has meaning, but that meaning is not revealed from within scripture. Scripture’s meaning is only found as it leads the reading community to the reality of God’s revelation. “Black Theology considers the Bible revelatory only insofar as it functions as a witness to God’s ultimate liberatory self-disclosure in Jesus Christ.”

The central concern within black hermeneutics is not what the text means to the author or to the intended audience, but what it means to those who struggle to survive on a daily basis. The Bible plays a secondary role, although a still crucial role, in the development of Black Theology’s understanding of existence in America. Scripture is not the primary or absolute norm of theology. Although any theology of the Christian gospel must take into account the biblical witness, the Bible is not the revelation of God – only Christ is. Scripture’s value is found in its ability to witness to God’s revelation. This witness makes scripture a primary source for understanding God and God’s work, but not an exclusive one. Cain Hope Felder points out the danger associated with the propensity to accept the Bible as the ultimate and exclusive Word of God. The biblical text cannot contain the entirety of God’s revelation. The Bible does provide, in some sense a foundation for the Word of God, and does “constitute the most important ancient locus for the Word of God.” Yet, the significance of scripture does not make the Bible identical to the Word of God.

The Word of God is the person of Christ, and is revealed in the liberative acts of God performed by Christ. Hence, for Black Theology revelation is a continuing

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29 ibid., 151.
30 Brown, Blackening of the Bible, 18.
31 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 66.
phenomenon. God is continuing to reveal God’s self in liberating activity of the oppressed. One can find God when one discovers where God is at work freeing the slaves. The hermeneutical task within Black Theology is to shape and communicate the ways in which the black experience can be a Word of God to contemporary America. Scripture is an important source of Black Theology; it is the model by which the Word of God is known; however, this does not mean that it is the only source, or that it is an infallible source. Scripture serves as a model by which we see and understand God’s activity in the world, but scripture is only a brief history of God’s involvement in the world. God is still involved, and still revealing God’s self through that involvement. As such, participating in God’s liberating activity in the present is to experience God’s revelation. “God’s word is always found on the cross.” However, there are those who are still dying on crosses today. This means that God’s word is found in the mud huts of the two-thirds world and in the ghettos of America. It is always found in solidarity with those who suffer and are incapable of defending and upholding their own humanity.

HERMENEUTICAL CHALLENGES TO BLACK HERMENEUTICS

There have been certain hermeneutical challenges to black interpretations of scripture, in particular the focus on liberation as the hermeneutical lens through which Black Theology reads the Bible. The criticism of this focus comes from two different concerns. The first is that a focus on liberation within the Exodus is not faithful to the story as told from a Hebrew perspective. This argument is most clearly revealed in the work of Jon Levenson, who is chosen not because he is unique, but because he is

33 Bennett, “Black Experience and the Bible,” 135-6.
34 Cone, For my People, 34.
35 ibid., 35.
representative of those who are concerned with the manner in which scripture is interpreted.\textsuperscript{36}

The second criticism focuses more on the usefulness of liberation within ethical thought. Womanist Theology has sought to argue that liberation is an incomplete perspective on the work of God on behalf of the oppressed. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on the thought of Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, and Delores Williams to the extent that Kirk-Duggan makes use of her critique.

The challenges are important because they offer criticisms that can help develop new avenues for conversation within Black Theology. They are also important because, as will be shown later, the adoption of the Sabbath and Jubilee narratives can help to address some of the concerns raised from these sources.

Jon Levenson

Jon Levenson is one of only a few Jewish scholars who seek to address the Hebrew Bible in a systematically theological way.\textsuperscript{37} Levenson’s work has sought to protect the Hebrew Scriptures from Christian supersessionist interpretations by interpreting them through a decisively Jewish lens. The importance of his work is that it enhances the understanding of Hebrew Scripture as a theological and ethical text within itself. Those who understand the Hebrew Scriptures as a foreshadowing of their fulfillment by the Christian Scriptures are left with inherent lacunae in their approach to


\textsuperscript{37} For more on the reasons behind this dearth of Jewish systematic theological work see Walter Brueggemann, \textit{Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy}, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 61-95, especially pages 93-95.
the Hebrew canon, and Levenson’s insightful work reveals an understanding of Exodus that poses some challenges for liberationsist interpretations.

In the last chapter of his book, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament and Historical Criticism*, Levenson poses the question about what type of liberation is typified by the Exodus as it is told in the Hebrew Canon, and how that differs from the manner in which many liberation theologies make use of it today. Of great concern for Levenson is the tendency to try to make the story of the Hebrew liberation from Egypt into a narrative about class struggle and social revolution in the vein of Marxist ideology. He argues forcefully that the attempt to associate the preferential option for the poor, a “central element of the Hebraic social ethic,” with a classless society or some primitive form of communism is irresponsible exegesis. When the prophets condemn the oppressive activities of the rich, they are not condemning the existence of the categories of rich and poor. Levenson points out that poverty is only sometimes a symptom of injustice within the Hebrew canon; at other times it is the result of laziness, bad luck, or even divine decree. And wealth, conversely, is not always due to exploitative economic practices; God at times blesses people with wealth, and it can also be won through diligence and hard work. Furthermore, the Hebrew Scriptures uphold an eschatological vision that includes a restored royal and priestly lineage, which indicates an endorsement of “class.” Levenson admits that justice is a significant part of the Hebrew Bible, “but the identification of justice with equality is essentially a modern phenomenon and, in the hands of many modern exegetes, an impetus for gross anachronism.”

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Levenson goes on to point out that the society of Israel allowed slavery as a part of their social fabric (Exodus 21:2-6); slavery was not deemed inherently exploitative or oppressive, nor is it treated within the Hebrew Bible as something that is terribly offensive to God (1 Chr 22:2; 2 Chr 2:17), and most references to Exodus within the Hebrew canon don’t even address it.39 There is, however, one form of slavery that is always condemned within the Hebrew Bible: state slavery or debt slavery. Any slavery of an Israelite by a fellow Israelite, either for the sake of the king or due to incurred debt, is prohibited and will ultimately bring condemnation. It was the infliction of forced labor on the Israelite people by Solomon that ultimately led to the splitting of the kingdom (1 Kings 12:6-20).40

Levenson argues for a different set of categories as a hermeneutical reference for understanding Exodus: kingship. The Exodus is ultimately not a story of the liberation of the poor from the oppression of the powerful, but the story of the kingship of God, and the acceptance of that kingship by the Israelite people. He argues for three messages of the Exodus: first, the enthronement of God as the king of Israel by God’s incomparable power, which God revealed through the utter annihilation of the most powerful empire in the ancient world. The second message of the Exodus, according to Levenson, is the basis of a covenant. The Exodus provides the ground by which God lays claim to Israel. Israel is to obey YHWH. The final message is that Israel has been consecrated to their new king. When Leviticus 25 forbids one Israelite to enslave another Israelite in the manner in which Pharaoh enslaved them it is not because Israel is to remain free. In fact,

39 ibid., 138. According to Levenson “the memory of Exodus is more often invoked on behalf of the aliens than on behalf of slaves.” Noting this, Levenson points out that it seems the biblical authors were more concerned about the acceptance of strangers than they were about the emancipation of slaves.

40 ibid., 137. Levenson also points out that this passage has “significant point of contact with Exodus 1.
Israel has been freed in order that they may be “slaves” to God. Only God is allowed to be their master. Thus, according to Levenson, it is not possible to dichotomize liberation and subjugation, because “in important ways, the relationship of God to Israel in the Hebrew Bible is patterned upon the very institution whose existence surprises… most sensitive readers in our time,” namely slavery. This indicates that the Israelites were not freed from Egypt in order to receive freedom qua freedom. They were freed in order to live in the obedience of a master/slave relationship with the God enthroned as their king. “In their various ways, enthronement, covenant, and dedication all signify God’s proprietorship of Israel and Israel’s inescapable subjugation to its God.” Levenson argues that liberation, at least the liberation afforded to the Israelites from Egypt, means something very different than the self-determination it is often taken to mean in the circles of liberation theology. Biblical liberation is not a liberation for self-determination, but a liberation for obedience to God.

The term ‘liberty’ therefore, can indeed describe the result of redemption of the sort typified by the Exodus, but only if some crucial semantic distinctions are maintained. One of the several meanings of ‘liberty’ in Western thought is government by law rather than by a tyrant. If this is what we identify as the result of the Exodus for Israel, then ‘liberty’ and the process that produces it, ‘liberation,’ are appropriate terms for the biblical process. We must, of course, recognize that the sole source of law in the Pentateuch is God, so that the ultimate allegiance of the populace is to him as their lord and redeemer rather than to the legal order as an autonomous entity. If, however, ‘liberty’ be taken to mean the self-government of the populace, as has also often been the case in Western thought, then the Exodus must be seen as profoundly opposed to liberty and liberation. For liberty so conceived cannot allow for the collective act of subjugation upon which the relationship of YHWH and Israel is founded and which is variously thematized as enthronement, covenant, and dedication/consecration.

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41 ibid., 140.  
42 ibid., 144.  
43 ibid., 146.
The Exodus, therefore, cannot be interpreted in such a manner that it authorizes self-determination or a freedom from all limitations.

In some ways, Black Theology would concur with Levenson’s assumptions. Cone and others argue that freedom is “freedom for” and not only “freedom from.” Liberation implies a freedom for obedience to God, and not just a freedom for self-determination. In this regard, there is correspondence between Levenson and Black Theology. However, the theme of God’s kingship, in which the Israelites are called into a slave/master relationship to God is one that Black Theology would find problematic. Such language is a part of the problem, because in it slavery is sanctified.

One last comment must be made in regards to Levenson’s criticisms. Levenson’s concern centers primarily on being faithful to the text. His criticism is levied primarily against those who attempt to project their own political and social agendas into the story (as, for example, those who try to make the story about a Marxist revolution). He does not, however, seem to have the same problem with those who attempt to bring the Exodus narrative into the present to inform their own thinking and their own self-understanding, because this appropriation of Exodus does not seek to rewrite the biblical story, but to “bring the story of Israel to bear upon the present.”

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44 In Cone, the goal of Black Theology is freedom for oppressed people. He defines freedom not as something that allows the liberated to act as they see fit, but allows them instead to become what they were intended to be. “A man is free when he sees clearly the fulfillment of his being and is thus capable of making the envisioned self a reality.” (Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 39). This, Cone argues, is the purpose for the advent of Christ – that people might become what they were intended to be. “As long as man is a slave to another power, he is not free to serve God with mature responsibility.” (ibid., 39). Cone argues that Black Theology is thus Christian theology because it is working to bring to oppressed peoples the freedom necessary to become what they are – human.

45 For example, Dwight Hopkins resists the use of the term “kingdom of God” preferring instead to use the term New Common Wealth, because he feels terms like “reign” and “king” are patriarchal and unjust. Hopkins does not wish to uphold a dominant male patriarch who rules humanity like peasants. Instead, Hopkins prefers the term “New Common Wealth,” which he believes implies that God has created the world for the enjoyment and equal use of all earth’s inhabitants. Hopkins, Heart and Head, 177.

specifically the Civil Rights Movement as an appropriate use of Exodus, because the Civil Rights Movement did not attempt to impose its own norms on Exodus, but sought to use the Exodus to inform the contemporary situation.

But even here Levenson warns against two oppositional extremes. The first is the tendency to ignore the particularity of Israel. This universalizes the story and implies that all the world's slaves are made free. This is the extreme he identifies with the liberation theologians, in particular those who wish to make the story about class warfare. The opposite extreme is to ignore the universalistic dimension of the story, which subtly implies that YHWH was only concerned about Israel because of the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as though God is somehow unmoved by the plight of those who suffer. Instead, Levenson argues for a theology in which the particular and universal aspects of the story are held in tension with one another. God delivered Israel because of the covenant he had made with the Patriarchs and because they were suffering, and any appropriate interpretation of the biblical story must take both of these aspects into account.

Womanist Theology

The primary role of the Exodus in African American religion has been as an invocation challenging slavery and racial injustice. In spite of the ability of the biblical stories of Exodus and Resurrection to provide hope through their liberative paradigms, there are problems being raised by contemporary scholars who argue that the stories are

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47 Womanist Theology is a theology done by black women who claim that neither Feminist Theology, which focuses primarily on the concerns of women, nor Black Theology, which focuses primarily on the concerns of men with black skin, fully address the concerns of Black Women who are oppressed because of their dark skin and their gender. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan is a major representative of this theological perspective, and will be the primary interlocutor.
not as fully liberative as originally thought. Many are beginning to ask whether or not the biblical paradigm of Exodus has run its course within African American religious thought. In the last several decades, Womanist scholars in particular have begun to question the use of the Exodus motif within Black Theology. The concern is that an uncritical acceptance of Exodus leads to a theology that fails to be liberating for all people. After all, the Egyptians suffered violence on behalf of Israelite freedom, and the Canaanites were victimized by the Israelites when Israel conquered the “promised land.”

Cheryl Kirk-Duggan argues that there is a tendency within liberationist thought to read the Exodus narrative without considering the cost experienced by innocent Egyptians, including the first born child of each Egyptian home. These people are also created in the image of God, and are all objects of God’s affection. She contends that not enough black theologians are willing to critique a narrative that upholds the “divine ego,” in its hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in order to make sure that the whole world knows of the former’s glory. She, however, is willing to call into question the role of God in the Exodus story. From her perspective, God plays the role of the “divine-puppeteer,” hardening Pharaoh’s heart even after Pharaoh agrees to let the people of Israel go. It is almost as though God wants to kill the first-born child of each Egyptian family, and almost as though God wants to destroy Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea. For Kirk-Duggan

48 See for example, Demetrius K. Williams, “The Bible and Models of Liberation in the African American Experience,” Yet with a Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation, Randall C. Bailey, editor, (Brill, Nevada: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), in which Williams claims that Galatians 3:28 serves as a better model for liberation than does exodus. He offers the verse as a means of overcoming race, class, and gender distinctions within the body of Christ.  
50 ibid., 276.
this begs the question, “Is the God who created the Israelites not the same God who
created the Egyptians?”⁵¹ There is inconsistency between the God who is love, who
created humanity for wholeness and relationship, and the God who would destroy entire
peoples for the sake of the Israelites. Violence is a “nihilistic energy that defames God,
humanity and creation,”⁵² and as such is something completely outside the character of
God. Even though the warrior-God and Exodus traditions have encouraged social
transformation both within the biblical corpus and in contemporary society, the violence
they presuppose “seems antithetical to social justice.”⁵³

Such an acceptance of God’s violence enacted on the Egyptians and Canaanites
on behalf of the Israelites reveals deeper theological problems for Kirk-Duggan. Using
the critique of Delores Williams, she points out the problem of surrogacy, the belief that
the suffering of one can redeem the other, within Christian theology, especially within a
theology of the redemption. The problem with the traditional view of redemption is that
someone must suffer, and/or experience persecution in order for redemption to take place.
Freedom and liberation are only available for some at the expense of others. Kirk-
Duggan upholds Williams’ vision of ministerial redemption. In this metaphor,
redemption is a process of working with men and women, of healing, of feeding the
hungry, and freeing the captives, but the emphasis is on abundant life. “The victory of
the atonement is about right relationships, not about a bloody cross.”⁵⁴ The cross is not a
sign of victory, but of depravity and evil, a symbol of everything Jesus was working

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⁵² Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, *Misbegotten Anguish: A Theology and Ethics of Violence*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 65
against in his ministry. The use of the Exodus within liberative thinking implies that liberation can only be won at the expense of the other and, as we will see, Kirk-Duggan wants to find a narrative for redemption and freedom that is both wholistic and inclusive, and not won at the cost of another’s dignity.

It is the willingness of the text to accept sexual, class, and ethnic biases that Kirk-Duggan resists. Within the Exodus there is generally posited a difference between the “us” of the Israelites and the “them” of all other peoples. “Because many of the biblical texts assume differences between categories of women and men, slave and free, these texts, cited by contemporary liberation movements, are contradictory and problematic. The Exodus story does not challenge or question these differences but merely relates this ideology based upon difference.”

55 The liberation narrative is a two-edged sword, which many fail to consider. Many interpreters who wish to use the Exodus narrative as a means of emphasizing liberation “remain selective in their use of biblical texts and do not deal with the two-edged nature of the texts.”

56 She argues that Pharaoh is merely a puppet within the P source, not the real problem. The real problem is the lack of faith of the Israelite people. The focus is not on liberation for the sake of liberation, but on “recognizing and honoring YHWH’s preeminence, with liberation a modest secondary matter.”

57 God’s acts of violence against the Egyptians, the genocidal destruction of the Canaanites and the theft of the Canaanite land indicate a xenophobia that poses real theological problems. Furthermore, the nature of slavery within the biblical canon and

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56 Ibid., 262.
57 Ibid., 263.
the different rights of male and female slaves indicates that the Israelite community also had difficulty living with their fellow Israelites (in particular females) justly.\textsuperscript{58}

To identify with the Hebrew slaves in the manner in which Black Theology has done overlooks their violence and injustice, and perpetuates the subjugation of the “other.” By privileging the children of Israel, Black Theology is offering a tacit validation of not only the injustice of the Hebrews, but of all those who identify themselves with the Hebrews. The concern is that if God sanctioned the destruction and servitude of the Canaanites by the Hebrews, then “the God of the Bible is ‘partial and discriminatory.’” If this obtains, then God is not against all oppression for all people: Israel alone is favored.”\textsuperscript{59} The willingness of the Israelites to overlook their own injustice in conquering the Promised Land has provided justification for black men to overlook black women within Black Theology.\textsuperscript{60} “The point is that when non-Jewish people (like many African-American women who now claim themselves to be economically enslaved) read the entire Hebrew testament from the point of view of the non-Hebrew slave, there is no clear indication that God is against their perpetual enslavement.”\textsuperscript{61} The narrow focus of black preachers and some black theologians upon racial injustice has the tendency to blind them to other sources of oppression, including gender and sexual orientation. As Ronald Niburd put it, the hermeneutics of black liberationists has

created a paradox, in that, despite its hermeneutics of liberation, it runs the risk of being left far behind as the last bastion of oppression, judged by its appeal to biblical authority in its systematic marginalization of people on

\textsuperscript{58} ibid., 263.
\textsuperscript{59} Demetrius K. Williams, “The Bible and Models of Liberation in the African American Experience,” 37.
\textsuperscript{60} ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{61} Delores Williams, \textit{Sisters in the Wilderness}, 146.
such contemporary social issues as the role of women in church (and society) and sexual orientation.  

Because Exodus and liberation fail alone to provide an adequate hermeneutical lens for interpreting Scripture, Kirk-Duggan and Womanist Theology offer a different hermeneutical perspective. Kirk-Duggan recognizes the paradigmatic nature of the Exodus narrative, noting that it reveals the “divine preference for the persecuted, the disempowered as a mode to expose, dialogue about, and then eliminate classism, sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and other experiences of oppression.” Liberation is still important. However, it cannot stand alone. Liberation qua liberation is an inadequate hermeneutical perspective, because it does not address God’s concern for wholeness and inclusivity, available through the healing power of God’s presence.

Exodus is more than a call to personal freedom, more than a simple freedom from bondage. It is a “freedom to” – a freedom to appreciate beauty, a freedom to claim the dignity of all human life, a freedom to offer comfort, a freedom to develop and appreciate community and communal memories, and a freedom to engage in celebration. However, a simple acknowledgement of freedom as “freedom from bondage” leaves room for the spreading of domination and further oppression.

For Kirk-Duggan the greater paradigm than liberation within the Exodus story is wilderness. It is within the wilderness wandering that she sees a clearer picture of God’s nature, especially God’s concern for issues of survival. It is in the wilderness that God provides manna, water and quail for hungry and thirsty people. It is in the wilderness that

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64 ibid., 273.
God leads the Israelites by day with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire. Kirk-Duggan identifies the wilderness with survival, reproduction and ministry. Of greater theological value than liberation is God’s concern for the survival and quality of life of the oppressed. It is the wilderness experience that “teaches the sacred, spiritual, and secular moments of black women’s everyday lives.”

In the quality-of-life tradition typified by Womanist Theology, the biblical motif of liberation becomes secondary to various biblical stories of provision within the wilderness. God’s provision for the Israelites in the desert isn’t as important as the experience of Hagar, where God speaks directly to Hagar after she has been sent out to die by her husband and his preferred wife. There are two stories told about Hagar’s dismissal by Abraham, each of which reinforce the superiority granted to Israel over all their neighbors that is associated with the Exodus and the taking of the Promised Land. Within the Yahwist source, Sarah is the favorite wife, even though she is barren. However, Hagar’s pregnancy threatens Sarah’s position, and so she seeks to humiliate Hagar in order to regain her superior status. Hagar flees rather than be reduced to the status of a slave. Within the Elohist source, Sarah’s action against Hagar has more to do with her economic self-interest (whether Isaac or Ishmael will be the preferred heir.) Ishmael has legal claim to the inheritance as a legal first-born child. Sarah, under the guise of the superiority of her own son over against the son of a slave woman, chases Hagar and Ishmael away. In each case, Sarah attempts to protect her privilege by marginalizing Hagar and Ishmael. However, and this is the important message for Womanist Theology, in both stories, it is not Sarah to whom God reveals God’s self, but

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Hagar. Hagar receives the promise from God, not Sarah. Kirk-Duggan identifies the Exodus narrative with concerns of men’s relationship to God in liberation battles. The Hagar narrative, however, she identifies with the importance of survival and quality-of-life, which provides a female-centered interpretation and de-emphasizes male authority.

Because God did not liberate Hagar, but instead makes her survival possible, and builds a nation (community) from the very son who has been sent away, many Womanist theologians would argue that it is not enough to assume that God is concerned first and foremost with liberation. God first addressed Hagar’s need, the survival and human dignity of both her and her son. God’s provision for Hagar is revealed within the wilderness. “The ‘wilderness experience’ symbolizes the place where Hagar and black women and their children encounter and are cared for by God.” As such, the concern is first and foremost in God’s care for those who are without hope. The experience of Hagar in the wilderness becomes symbolic of meeting God in the midst of struggle, of “pioneering” in a situation where others seek to keep black women from economic, political and social progress. This is not the wilderness of the Israelites post-Exodus, which was after God’s liberating activity. This wilderness is the place where God meets the oppressed in their need and sustains them. Hagar’s wilderness experience is not due to her salvation from injustice, but is the experience of injustice from which she must be delivered. Kirk-Duggan is noting that God does not deliver her from her wilderness experience, but meets her within it, and in so doing sustains her and Ishmael.

This alternative hermeneutic offers slightly different conceptions of God and justice. God is still powerful and personal, but there is a much greater emphasis on God’s

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66 Kirk-Duggan, *Refiner’s Fire*, 11ff. For more on this see Waters, “Who was Hagar?,” 195-199.
compassion and concern for all human life. God is still the God who makes a way out of no way, but there is equal emphasis on God’s presence in the midst of suffering. Even when circumstances seem hopeless God is able to bring life. The emphasis is not on the changing of circumstances, even though that is important. The emphasis is on God’s presence within hopeless situations. The Womanist view of God is one of relationality before liberation. “Relationship with this God allows one to survive and transcend and to accept and celebrate the gifts of creation.”\(^6^9\) The emphasis is upon a God who creates humanity \textit{Imago Dei}, creates humanity for intimacy, compassion, solidarity and love. “Such a theology provides identity and respect for all life.”\(^7^0\)

In her exegesis of the Slave spirituals, Kirk-Duggan takes a different message than her male counterparts. “Our ancestors remembered, retold, and rehearsed that God cares, God helps, God rescues, God empowers; God is slow to anger, is just, is merciful.”\(^7^1\) Although God’s justice and deliverance are both present, the greater concern is God’s presence in the midst – that God cares and works toward wholeness. God’s presence removes the sense of isolation that stigmatizes, and in so doing, this presence gives hope.

Within the spirituals there is not only an identification with the Israelite slaves, and not only a realization of the need for liberation; there is a concern for survival. The hope for freedom is enhanced by the possibilities of life-giving vitality.\(^7^2\) In fact, the telling and re-telling of the biblical stories, and the singing of the spirituals were a means of help in themselves. They provided the singers with an opportunity to complain to God

\(^{6^9}\) Kirk-Duggan, \textit{Refiner’s Fire}, 7.  
\(^{7^0}\) ibid., 7.  
\(^{7^1}\) Kirk-Duggan, \textit{Exorcizing Evil}, 154.  
\(^{7^2}\) ibid., 63.
about their situations, and to find hope that God would someday bring an end to their condition. Unlike Cone, Kirk-Duggan argues that the purpose was not only resistance. The spirituals were not sung exclusively to call for uprising. The spirituals were a form of survival, a means of providing community, hope, petition, and praise; they transmitted meaning to the community that sang them together. They also helped to confront the pain and suffering that was experienced. The spirituals provided a means by which slaves could deal with the hatred and contempt of white people and survive in a white society.\textsuperscript{73}

Liberation and resistance of oppression are present and important, but Kirk-Duggan argues that the relational component, relationship both with God and with each other, is present in a way that is missing from most male Black Theology. God is personal, compassionate and powerful. God cares about the liberation of all people and all communities. “The Womanist view of God celebrates a relationship with persons that produces intimacy, mercy, love, compassion and solidarity.”\textsuperscript{74} In this way, the pursuit of liberation for one group is not accomplished at the expense of another’s freedom or dignity. God’s concerns for humanity, while including liberation, also include creativity, survival, abundance and transcendence. The concern for Kirk-Duggan is less about the political liberation of black people than it is about embracing a message of hope and transformation that will bring about empathy, mutuality and community. Embracing this message and engendering community “honors the imago dei in all persons.”\textsuperscript{75}

This leads to an emphasis on relationship within the imago Dei. As with Black Theology, Womanist Theology emphasizes the importance of imago Dei, but tends to

\textsuperscript{73} ibid., 70-71.
\textsuperscript{74} ibid., 140.
\textsuperscript{75} ibid., 8.
emphasize wholeness, mutuality and diversity rather than simply dignity. Although dignity and respect are still important components of the Womanist theological anthropology, the image of God becomes the source of the concern for wholeness and inclusivity. In this manner, Kirk-Duggan claims that the *imago Dei* is more than a call for the dignity of the human person, but is an inclusive call to love the other and care for those who get pushed aside for the “greater good.” The *imago Dei* is by nature relational. The God of this hermeneutic is one who becomes angry when a person made in the divine image is dismissed as insignificant. All people are significant, and all people are created to live in relationship to one another. The divine image leads to relationship. “To be created *imago Dei* means all God’s creations stand equal before God and have the possibility of being in active, loving relationships with God and with other human beings.”

One’s status as created in the image of God implies that one has the potential to be in relationship with God and in loving relationships with other human beings. This sense of community implies a belonging to each other that engenders concern for a neighbor’s suffering. The *imago Dei* promotes diversity, mutuality, and wholeness, and seeks to develop an inclusive community that embraces the weakest members of society, granting them life and dignity.

The inclusivity within Womanist Theology that results from a theological affirmation of the *imago dei*, stands in direct contrast to the particularity of the Exodus story and God’s election of the Israelites. Kirk-Duggan’s criticism is that Black Theology, at times, emphasizes liberation to the point that those who are oppressed become the particular people of God; at the expense of the “other.” The oppressors become associated with Pharaoh, and are thus doomed to destruction, and those who are

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76 ibid., 4.
not directly related to the specific oppression of black men are also relegated to second-class status. Womanist Theology embraces a love for all people that creates community and communion. “The survival of all people depends largely on seeing all of humanity as human beings, not as ‘others’ to be denied.”\textsuperscript{77} The \textit{imago Dei} exists in all people, not merely black males. Kirk-Duggan’s whole ethic of non-violence, which is the subject of the vast majority of her work, is based upon the existence of the image of God in all people. Violence damages both the perpetrator and the sufferer, thwarting the wholeness of the individuals and the communities involved. “We have skillfully convinced ourselves, in ingenious ways, of objectifying those deemed other, so that genocide legitimated by war holds no shame, remorse, or guilt.”\textsuperscript{78} The particularity of the Exodus story lends itself to the objectification of the “other,” which is why Womanist Theology offers its alternative hermeneutic.

\textbf{An Excursus on the Partiality of God in Conquering Canaan}

A plain reading of the Israelite’s deliverance from Egypt does reveal a God that condemns both innocent Egyptians and Canaanites in order to demonstrate Israel’s chosen status. As such, the criticisms of Kirk-Duggan and Womanist Theology are relevant to the extent that they call into question an uncritical acceptance of this narrative as one that is universally liberating. However, there are interpretations of the Exodus narrative that provide an alternative view of the nature of the God who delivers Israel. One such perspective is provided by James Walsh, in his book, \textit{The Mighty from their Thrones}.\textsuperscript{79} In this text, Walsh explores the role of power and powerlessness in the Biblical tradition.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{77} \textit{ibid.}, 164.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Kirk-Duggan, \textit{Misbegotten Anguish}, 65.
\end{itemize}
Walsh begins by defining three important terms: mishpat, tzedakah, and naqam. Mishpat, although often translated “judgment” or “justice” refers to “having the say” about who should be in power and how they should maintain that power. Mishpat refers to the “various ways in which we make determinations and take action.”

Societal consensus about what is right is how Walsh translates “tzedeq,” a word usually translated in English as “righteousness.” Communities judge whether the exercise of “having the say,” mishpat, is right only if the displays of authority are consistent with the community’s sense of “rightness” or tzedeq.

When the exercise of mishpat is inconsistent with tzedeq, people cry out for naqam—vindication or vengeance. When someone claims the right to determine what is just, the community evaluates those claims according to tzedeq. If the claims of those in authority are inconsistent with tzedeq, the people instinctively seek naqam. Biblical vengeance, or vindication comes from the community’s sense of what is right. Naqam seeks to rectify any violation of tzedeq. “Standing up both for what is right and for those who are in the right is naqam in its positive aspect: that is, vindication. Showing that those who are in the wrong are indeed in the wrong (most often by making them ‘get what’s coming to them’) is the negative side of naqam. It is vengeance.”

This is important because Walsh argues that the origins of Israel come from two sources. Israel does not merely develop from a group of slaves liberated from Egypt, but from an indigenous group of Canaanites who sought to rebel against local rulers. The first group, which Walsh labels the “Moses Group” knew YHWH as the liberating God of the oppressed. The second group (the Canaanite group) had “withdrawn” (the

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80 ibid., 3.
81 ibid., 7.
apiru, from which the term Hebrew is derived) from local city-states and were looking for a deliverer. Because the local Canaanite God, Baal, was insufficient to meet the needs of liberation of the Canaanite group, they adopted YHWH as their God and joined forces with the Moses group in resisting the city-states in Canaan. To be a member of Israel one had to accept the mishpat of YHWH, following the laws and the covenant code. This meant caring for the weak, in particular the widow, orphan and foreigner. YHWH’s mishpat was such that it was valid for all people. This vision of the YHWH groups was distinctly different from the vision based upon the mishpat of Baal. Because Baal was the god of fertility, for the believers of Baal, tzedeq meant fertility and abundance, even if that fertility was won at the expense of the oppressed. But YHWH was the God who heard the cry of the oppressed. For those who worshipped YHWH, tzedeq meant “compassion for the powerless.”

As the Moses group entered Canaan, the indigenous Canaanites recognize the similarities between these two groups. They see the Moses group as apiru, too, for they have also withdrawn due to their powerlessness and marginalized. These two groups together sought to unseat the local kings. Walsh offers as an indication of his historical reconstruction the story of Rahab told in the second chapter of Joshua. In spite of the fact that Rahab is not from the Moses group she notes,

“‘I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. As soon as we heard it, our hearts failed, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below.’” (Joshua 2:9-11)

In light of her acceptance of YHWH’s mishpat, Rahab and her family become a part of Israel. This is the true meaning of the “conquest” of Canaan. In modern language it may be referred to as a revolution (political, economic or social) more than a “conquest.”
Hence, the conquest of Canaan is not a war in which all the people of Canaan are slaughtered, but is \textit{naqam} against the Canaanite kings for their failure to practice \textit{tzedeq} according to the \textit{mishpat} of YHWH. The conquest is YHWH’s judgment against the Canaanite kings. This is why we find the language of holy war in the books of Joshua and Judges. Because of YHWH’s \textit{mishpat}, the Canaanite kings are thrown into a panic and are defeated.

However, there is still problematic language within the books of Joshua and Judges, namely the \textit{herem}, which referred to the total destruction of not only the enemies of Israel, but their goods as well. At times within the conquest narratives Israel practiced \textit{herem} with the spoils of war, including goods, animals, soldiers, and even women or children. This language proves extremely problematic for Kirk-Duggan and other Womanist theologians. However, Walsh points out that \textit{herem} is symbolic language that should not be taken literally. The term was intended to reinforce that the conquest of Canaan (and perhaps war in general) was not a means to economic advancement. Israel was not to profit from the spoils of war. Ultimately, the fight that Israel had against the Canaanite kings, and Israel’s refusal to profit from this fight, reveals that Israel is to take nothing from these kings. Their ways are to be completely avoided. Walsh’s emphasis is that the impedimenta of “the royal establishment, the metals and material resources on which oppressive rule was based, are to be done away with. The destruction of the existing order was to be total.”

Thus, the kings of Israel were always to be reflective of the divine king, YHWH, and not look like the kings of Canaan or Egypt. The Davidic king, as the ideal king of Israel, was to practice \textit{mishpat} on behalf of the poor.

According to Walsh, in the book of Joshua, “the conquest” is a metaphor. The metaphor challenges the people of Israel to not be like the nations. Israel is to separate herself completely from the ways of the

\footnote{Walsh, \textit{Mighty from their Thrones}, 76.}
nations, by (metaphorically speaking), place the herem on them. The point is not a literal herem. The point is to “eradicate from Israelite life the values and ways of doing things of the Canaanite kingdoms.”

**CONCLUSION**

James Cone argues that an appropriate hermeneutic that focuses on both the Bible and God’s liberative activity will influence theology in four important ways: 1) It will emphasize the political and social nature of theology, refusing to accept the understanding of poverty or oppression as principally spiritual conditions. 2) It will provide theology with a prophetic component, bringing hope to the oppressed and shame to the oppressors. 3) It will help to correlate the biblical stories to the present conditions in which the poor live. And 4) it will speak a word of judgment on the powerful who seek to protect their power through injustice.

To this end, black hermeneutics has sought to highlight the importance of the black context in its interpretation of the Bible, accentuating the political and social nature of God’s salvation and the role of liberation in revelation. These hermeneutical lenses have helped to define the biblical texts that are consistent with the Word of God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, and thus how scripture is authoritative. This hermeneutical perspective identifies the means by which Exodus is understood; and why it is important, and thus shapes the ways in which Sabbath and Jubilee, as the continuation of the Exodus narrative, must also be understood.

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84 ibid., 128-129.
Both Jon Levenson and Cheryl Kirk-Duggan have brought another set of questions to the discussion, asking whether Exodus is even an appropriate narrative for use in these ethical and hermeneutical frameworks. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan points out, almost as an aside, that the Ten Commandments and the Hebrew societal laws have not been sufficiently addressed as possible sources for liberation theologies, noting “The Torah teaches those formerly enslaved not to re-create the bondage they just experienced.”86 If liberation from bondage still presents problems as a paradigm for doing theology, and if the Womanist critique of Black Theology’s utilization of the Exodus narrative is valid, then further theological work is necessary. Bondage is but one affront to the imago Dei. Poverty, sexism and heterosexism must also be addressed. What might a study of the Hebrew social laws associated with Sabbath add to the conversation? How might these laws address the concerns of Womanist theologians? It is to these questions that the next chapter will turn.

Chapter 4: Sabbath and Jubilee

To this point, we have identified the ways in which Exodus has been used within slave religion, the Civil Rights Movement, and within Black Theology as a biblical narrative that emphasizes the theological concerns of those who must deal with white racism on a daily basis. This includes the ways in which God’s nature and work are understood, as well as the ways in which scripture can most faithfully be interpreted. The significance of the Exodus within black theological development is unparalleled in U.S. Christian theology.

However, the purpose of this dissertation is to make an argument for the use of the ancient Hebrew socio-cultic laws of Sabbath and Jubilee\(^1\) within Black Theology. The emphasis thus far has been on the Exodus, because the Exodus plays such an important role within Black Theology. What this chapter will first demonstrate is the ways in which Sabbath developed within Hebrew thought as a response to Exodus.

Because Sabbath is Israel’s response to the liberative work of YHWH in the Exodus it

\(^1\) It is necessary, at this point, to make a couple of points about “Sabbath.” 1) Much modern usage, primarily within Christian churches, sees Sabbath as a day set aside for worship. Sabbath is this, but I intend to demonstrate the ways in which Sabbath was also a social and economic (and to some extent political) system within ancient Israel. As such, when I use the term Sabbath, I am using the term to refer to more than a day of worship. 2) I will frequently use the term “Sabbath” in a generic fashion to refer to the entire Sabbath tradition, which included the Sabbath day, Sabbath year, and Jubilee year (the differences of these will be discussed below.) As such, Sabbath and Jubilee will at times be used interchangeably to refer not only to weekly rest, but debt-forgiveness, slave-emancipation, land-fallow, and the return of tribal lands to the paterfamilias. These laws are not merely religious/cultic, but are also social and economic. 3) There are three primary law codes in which the Sabbath/Jubilee stipulations are located: the Covenant Code (Ex 20-23), the Deuteronomic Code (Dt. 1-15), and the Holiness Code within the Priestly source (Lv. 17-26.) For a detailed outline of these specific codes and their emphases see Niels-Erik A. Andreasen, *The Old Testament Sabbath: A Tradition-Historical Investigation*, (Missoula, Montana: Society of Biblical Literature, 1972), or John Sietze Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation*, (Leiden: Brill, 2007). The similarities and differences between these codes are beyond the scope of this paper, and will only be addressed as such distinctions provide necessary insight to the concerns being addressed.
can serve as a valuable narrative within the theological development of those who use the Exodus as a normative text.

Upon demonstrating the significance of Sabbath as a response to slavery in Egypt there are four other theological themes that are foundational for understanding the significance of Sabbath. Each of these theological foundations will, in the next chapter, be utilized as a possible source of further development within Black Theology. The first theme is covenant, which is a term that serves to define the relationships operative within the new society. The second theme is the emphasis upon the land within Sabbath thought. The Promised Land is more than simply a space for existence in Israelite thought, but serves as a partner with YHWH in the establishment of a new society. The third foundational theme is the eschatological reign of God. This is demonstrated both in Sabbath’s connection to the creation of the world, and Isaiah’s eschatological vision of the world. Sabbath plays a role both in the beginning and the end. The final theological theme is in some ways the most important – rest. However this theme’s importance is implied by its ubiquity; rest is operative in each of the other themes being addressed, and is in some ways ties them all together.

The chapter will conclude with an examination of the manner in which Sabbath and Jubilee become operative in the teaching and ministry of Jesus. This is of particular interest to Black Theology, because of its concern that the real meaning of Jesus has been lost in the white theological assertions that the death and resurrection of Jesus is purely for the sake of spiritual forgiveness. This perspective of Jesus forsakes his message and ministry to the poor and oppressed. If it can be demonstrated that Sabbath plays a role in
the theology of Jesus, the connection between the work of God on the cross and the work of God in the Exodus becomes more pronounced.

The intent of this chapter is to unpack the themes that are germane to the development of the Sabbath laws, in order that these laws might, in the next chapter, be interpreted through the liberative hermeneutics of Black Theology. As such, this chapter is not attempting to make an argument for any one theological approach to the Sabbath tradition, but to demonstrate the significance of the Exodus, covenant, land, rest and the eschatological reign of God in its theological development.

**THE SABBATH PRESCRIPTIONS**

In order to fully understand the significance of Sabbath and Jubilee it is critically important to realize the connection between them, for it is not obvious to many modern readers of the Bible. At first glance there does not seem to be much connection between the weekly practice of Sabbath and the economic stipulations that typify Jubilee. But the remission of debts, leaving the land to lie fallow, freedom from economic and physical slavery, and the returning of all land to the original family of ownership, were all a part of the socio-religious structures of Sabbath. The purpose of these practices was to ensure that “there shall be no poor among you” (Deut. 15:4).

*Seven Days.* The Sabbath day was celebrated every seven days (Exod. 16:23ff; 20:10-11; 31:14-16; Lev. 23:3; Deut. 5:12-15). It harkens back to the creation story, where even God observed it, after six days of creation (Gen. 2:2). On this day, every one in Israel was to rest, not only Israelites, but also foreigners and slaves; even the draft animals were required to rest (Exod. 10:10; Deut. 5:14).
Seven Years. The Sabbath year was celebrated every seven years (Exod. 23:11; Lev. 25:4ff; Deut. 15:9-12), and bears the same name as the weekly practice, connecting the two beyond argument. The Sabbath year was celebrated in two specific ways. First, in this year all debt accrued was forgiven, and all those who had been forced into slavery as a result of debt were set free. Because Israel lived in an agrarian society, they were intimately tied to the land they owned. If, for some reason, that land failed to produce a crop the only recourse available for survival would be to borrow from their neighbors. If one could not repay their debt they would be forced to offer their labor in payment. Ultimately, a kind of labor developed, in which individuals and families were required to work for the one to whom they owed their debt. The Sabbath year was a means of protecting those who had suffered such problems from perpetual wage slavery, by ensuring that all debts, and the slavery associated with those debts, would be forgiven.

Second, the Sabbath year included the requirement to let the land lie fallow (Lev. 25:4, 20). There is some disagreement about what the actual practice looked like. The significance of the stipulation, whether or not it was practiced, is that the land had as much right to Sabbath rest as the Israelites who lived on and worked it.

Fifty Years. The Jubilee year was practiced at a “Sabbath’s Sabbath” interval - every seven Sabbath years. Because the Jubilee was a Sabbath year it included all the stipulations of the regular Sabbath year. The Jubilee was special because it included the

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2 Alberto Soggin, *Israel in the Biblical Period: Institutions, Festivals, Ceremonies, Rituals*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2001), 149-150. It is doubtful that the entire nation allowed their land to lie fallow at the same time. It is even doubtful that an entire family’s land would lie fallow for a year. Quite possibly, there were plots of land, which were rotated. For more on this see Robert North, S.J., *The Biblical Jubilee... After Fifty Years*, (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2000), 35.

3 There is some debate about whether the Jubilee was practiced every 49th or 50th year. If it was practiced every 50th year then there would be two consecutive years in which the land would lie fallow. It is unlikely that an agrarian society would be able to allow the land to lie fallow for two consecutive years, as it would mean that the 48th year would have to provide for three years until the date of the next harvest. North, *The Biblical Jubilee... After Fifty Years*, 26.
requirement that all land which had been sold from one family to another be returned to the original family. In Israel, as in any agrarian society, the cycle of poverty began when a family was unable to raise enough crops to feed themselves. If a family was forced to sell its land, it was selling the only means by which it would ever be able to provide for itself. Because the family’s only means of long-term survival had just been sold for its immediate needs, the family had just ensured itself a future of perpetual debt-slavery.

Whether the failure to raise adequate crops was due to natural causes, incompetence, or laziness, the selling of the land ensured not only the poverty of an individual generation, but every subsequent generation as well. The Jubilee vision refused to accept this as a continuing economic system. Instead, Jubilee ensured that exploitation, poverty and marginalization were addressed every 50 years through the redistribution of land, the means for wealth creation.

These three ritual practices of Sabbath bore not only cultic connotations, but social and economic connotations, as well. The attempt to separate cultic practice from social justice in ancient Israel, and the ANE in general, is a false dichotomy that does not do justice to either. In order to capture the Hebrew Sabbath vision it is necessary to understand not only the religious components of these laws, but also their social, political and economic components.

**SABBATH AND EXODUS**

In order to make an argument for the usefulness of Sabbath and Jubilee within contemporary Black Theology it is first of all necessary to demonstrate the theological
connection between Sabbath and Exodus. This theological connection is crucial if we are to make an argument for Sabbath’s validity within Black Theology.

Walter Brueggemann argues that the experience of the Exodus from Egypt was the defining event in Israelite history. He argues that the Exodus is the “foundational paradigm” for understanding salvation in the Hebrew canon. It is in the Exodus that the Hebrews were first introduced to YHWH, the God of liberation for the poor and oppressed. Thus he argues that the Exodus provides the primary narrative for the Hebrew practice of Sabbath. In the Deuteronomic rendering of the Decalogue (Deut. 5:12-15), the motivation behind the Sabbath commandment is the Exodus from Egypt. The Israelites are to practice Sabbath because they remember that they were once slaves in the land of Egypt. YHWH delivered them from Egypt and thus commands that they observe Sabbath (Deut. 5:15). The call upon the Israelites to uphold the concerns of the poor was based upon their own history as an enslaved people in need of God’s intervention. If a member of one of these marginalized groups cries out, their cry would be heard in the same way that YHWH heard the cries of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt. This concern

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4 There is little possibility of connecting the Sabbath and Exodus on a historical basis. This is in part due to the uncertainty amongst historians of the historical occurrence of the Exodus itself. Such a historical connection is further complicated by the uncertainty surrounding the timing of the advent of the Sabbath traditions. While these academic pursuits are important, they lie beyond the scope of this dissertation. Of greater concern here is the canonical relationship between Sabbath and Exodus. As such, the focus of this chapter will be upon the canon, as it currently exists, and leave unaddressed the broader concern about historicity.


6 It should be noted that Brueggemann assumes God’s revelation is presented through historical experiences. Thus, the Exodus becomes the source of the Israelite experience of God. The liturgical, ritual and social practices of Torah become the response to the historical event of Exodus. For some interpreters of the Hebrew Scripture, it is not the historical event of Exodus in which the revelation of YHWH becomes most evident, but in the Torah. For example, Jon Levenson is concerned that too frequently historical-critical study of the Hebrew Scripture replaces the normativity of Torah with the historical process that produced it. According to Levenson, this shift assigns revelation to history rather than to Torah. Levenson, The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament and Historical Criticism, 10-15. See also, Jon D. Levenson, Sinai & Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible, (San Francisco: Harper Books, 1985), 15-53.
for the weak and marginalized was institutionalized in the Sabbath and Jubilee laws found within all three major law codes within the Hebrew Scriptures.⁷

In his explanation of the covenant at Sinai, David Pleins argues that the biblical authors deliberately intertwined the Exodus with the covenantal laws in order to ensure that the social practices of the Israelites were firmly grounded in the collective memory and history of Israel.⁸ “With the Exodus event as motivation, the tradition will ever after link Exodus and justice, even if different streams of the tradition will debate the nature and scope of that justice in daily practice.”⁹ Thomas Hanks argues similarly when he says that the Sabbath day was “to be a miniature, weekly, Exodus-type liberation, especially for the working class.”¹⁰ These authors contend that the Exodus served as the foundational narrative for the establishment of the Hebrew practice of Sabbath. As Walter Brueggemann notes,

Sabbath is rooted in the history of Exodus, which led to the land of fulfillment. And keeping Sabbath is a way of affirming the power and authority of the history that brought Israel to the land. Sabbath is a way of remembering to which history Israel belongs and the way in which it is related both to Yahweh and to land.¹¹

However, the Exodus is not merely a historical narrative that serves to ground Sabbath. In the Exodus, the Israelites sought to re-establish themselves as a society that no longer belonged to Pharaoh. This is why Brueggemann argues that the Exodus provides Israel with an understanding of faith that shapes its social structure. Brueggemann points out three ways in which the collective experience of the Exodus

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⁷ See footnote 1 from this chapter.
⁹ ibid., 54.
shaped Israelite faith.\textsuperscript{12} The first two have to do with resistance to the socio-politico-economic systems of Pharaoh. He labels them, “critique of ideology” and “public processing of pain,” respectively. These two phases of faith development are dialectical and result in the third element of faith development, “the release of new social imagination.” It is in this phase of faith development that the social laws of Sabbath and Jubilee are revealed. According to Brueggemann the development of a new social imagination involves three acts, one liturgical, one political and the third legislative. As such, Brueggemann argues that the Sabbath and Jubilee traditions have a liturgical, political and legislative nature.

The liturgical component is revealed in the Song of the Sea (Exod. 15:1-18),\textsuperscript{13} in which the demise of Pharaoh at the hands of YHWH is celebrated. The political component of Sinai is that the Israelites rejected the kingship of Pharaoh and affirmed YHWH’s kingship. At Sinai, Israel is formed as a new political entity, one based not upon its relationship to Pharaoh, but upon its relationship to YHWH. The third component is legislative. The liturgical worship of, and political realignment with, YHWH must be reflected in concrete economic, political and social terms. This is the role of Torah. Torah is not merely legislative, for it grows out of the liturgical and political responses to Exodus, but it is in the Torah that the social imagination of God’s kingdom is made concrete. Thus, Brueggemann argues that it is here that the Israelites seek to demonstrate the difference between themselves as members of the covenant and the exploitative and oppressive religions and politics of Egypt and Canaan. And so,

\textsuperscript{12} Brueggemann, \textit{Hope within History}, 7-26. Brueggemann takes pains to demonstrate the collective nature of faith. Unlike in Western conceptions, faith is not merely psychological, but is sociological in nature. Faith must be practiced as one belongs to the community that seeks to relate to God. This will be addressed more fully in the next section.

\textsuperscript{13} This song may at times be referred to as the Song of Moses or the Song of Miriam.
Torah proposes an alternative legislative venture. This legislative venture includes Sabbath, which is a part of the community response to Egypt, a part of the social imagination of an alternative existence. Brueggemann argues that Sabbath is the means by which the Israelites sought to resist an economy of debt and slavery, as typified by the land of Egypt. Sabbath is the requirement of their new king, YHWH, and it is through an egalitarian, de-centralized tribal mode of life, based on the worship of YHWH, that the Israelites seek to live up to these requirements.

One of the earliest stories told in the Hebrew Bible about the Sabbath stipulations, one that precedes (at least canonically) the giving of the law at Sinai is the story of the manna in the wilderness. Some commentators use this story to demonstrate Israel’s alternative socio-economic vision. According to these commentators, almost as soon as the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea they began to wonder whether or not YHWH, who delivered them, would also be able to provide for them in the desert. They had experienced the socioeconomic systems of Egypt for 400 years; they had lost the ability to imagine an economic reality outside of those economic systems. The Israelites were uncertain about how they would provide for themselves, and so longed to return to the “fleshpots of Egypt” (Exodus 16:3).

The former Hebrew slaves found it difficult to accept their freedom and wanted to return to Egypt and to slavery. This is a dramatic demonstration of the system’s power. Not only was Pharaoh unable to imagine Egypt without the Hebrew slaves, the Hebrew slaves were unable to imagine life outside of Egypt in spite of the misery that life there brought them.

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The fleshpots provided a sure means of sustenance; the desert provided only uncertainty. Their failure of imagination and their fear led them to ignore their oppression and slavery. They cried out against Moses, complaining that he had brought them into the desert to die. As a result of their complaints, YHWH introduced them to a new economic system, based not upon exploitation and slavery, but upon Sabbath. God provided manna from heaven, bread they had never seen before. Brueggemann draws parallels between the creation story of Genesis 1 and this story, noting that each is a creation story that moves from chaos to Sabbath. God brings the disordered world into rest, and the frantic worry of Israel into that same Sabbath experience, whereby they no longer have to toil or worry about how they will survive.  

According to Ched Myers, the manna became a means of sustenance for the newly freed Israelites in the wilderness. This means of sustenance - this economy - based on YHWH’s provision for the Israelites, is a stark contrast with Egypt’s economy in three ways. First, God’s provision is abundant, and for everybody: “Gather of it every man as much as you should eat” (Exod. 16:16). Whereas in Egypt, the plenty of those in power was won at the expense of the weak so that the powerful had “too much” and the weak had “not enough,” with the manna in the desert everyone has enough. “In God’s economy there is such a thing as ‘too much’ and ‘too little.’” All the Israelites have to do is gather it. The provision is not based on the individual’s ability to create wealth or to be of service to the master. The socio-economic system in Egypt, and the predominant system in the Ancient Near East, consisted of urban elites or nobility monopolizing the land, extracting from it as much as possible using the labor of the poor and weak, leaving

17 Brueggemann, The Land, 32.
those same laborers only enough to subsist. The egalitarianism of manna is radically
different than the exploitive economic means of Egypt.

Myers points to a second manner in which the manna story demonstrates a
difference between God’s economy and Egypt’s. In the desert the Israelites are only to
collect what they need (Exod. 16:18), but in Egypt, Pharaoh ruled with impunity. Myers
argues that Pharaoh’s massive building projects were exercises in hubris, exercises in
which the Hebrews were forced to contribute bricks for bread. Pharaoh had no
limitations to his greed. Furthermore, Pharaoh expressed his power by his ability to
accumulate. Myers points out that in the manna story accumulation is not intended to be
a part of the economic model. The Israelites were not to store the bread. Anything stored
from one day to the next would rot. Accumulation was not a part of God’s economic
model, because accumulation ultimately leads to idolatry.

God’s economy challenged the economy of Egypt in a third manner, for Myers –
it required Sabbath discipline. Every seventh day, the Israelites were to cease from
collecting manna. On the 6th day, the Israelites were to gather twice their daily
allotment, prepare it and save it for the Sabbath (Exod. 16:20-27). The Israelites were not
to continue with the productive work of gathering sustenance. Manna was a gift from
YHWH, sent in abundance, one which they were to trust YHWH to continue to provide.
Myers, insists that the Sabbath requirements regarding manna implied the necessity of the
Israelites to trust that the one who had graciously provided for them Sunday through
Friday would do the same on Saturday. Manna did not belong to the Israelites, and they
were not to accumulate it as though it did. In comparison, Egypt sought productivity; the

19 For more on this see Anthony R. Ceresko, O.S.F.S., Introduction to the Old Testament: A Liberation
Perspective, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992), and Walter Brueggemann, The Covenanted Self: Explorations
goal was the creation of wealth, at whatever cost. According to Myers, in God’s economy any attempt to control resources and maximize production is met with failure. “It came about on the seventh day that some of the people went out to gather, but they found none” (Exod. 16:27). Similarly, Richard Lowery upon whom Myers relies heavily, notes “Sabbath promises seven days of prosperity for six days of work. It operates on the assumption that human life and prosperity exceed human productivity.”20 This Sabbath provision is commanded later on in regards to the Sabbath year: “You shall let the land lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat” (Exod. 23.10-11). Lowery argues that the Sabbath laws curtailed the activity of the productive members of society, in order that the poor and marginalized may benefit. Consumption, the creation of wealth, and the command of resources are not the goal of God’s economy. Sabbath becomes a weekly reminder of the contingency of human existence upon the provision of God.

Myers’ assessment of the manna story in Exodus should not be accepted uncritically. He reads the story somewhat anachronistically, assuming that “economy,” as it is understood in modern conception, is a category that is applicable to ancient Israel, which it obviously is not. The manna in the wilderness is not the establishment of an economic system, even if it does have implications for the Sabbath tradition.21 Furthermore, Myers emphasizes a concern for redistribution and wealth concentration, which have a Marxist undertone that is in danger of the very things Levenson has

21 Myers also fails to consider the plundering of Egypt by Israel, when Israel was released by Pharaoh (Exod. 13:36). If the manna story is indicative of YHWH’s economic concerns, then the plundering of Egypt by Israel is problematic.
critiqued in regards to Liberation Theology. Although the Sabbath and Jubilee stipulations were not in any way similar to western capitalism, they were not Marxist or Socialist either. If anything the Sabbath and Jubilee laws seem to be concerned with the right of all Israelites to the produce of their land, which is inconsistent with Marxist ideology. Finally, Myers fails to take into consideration the possibility presented by numerous scholars that the Sabbath stipulations were intended as a utopian ideal, and never intended to be practiced by Israel. Myers’ assessment of the Sabbath tradition is based heavily upon its practice within Israel. However, there is no indication that the sabbatical and Jubilee years were ever practiced within Israel.

In spite of these difficulties, Myers makes a case that the manna story demonstrates the ways in which the Sabbath day was more than a commandment merely for the sake of religious observance. It was not simply a means to provide time for regular worship, as it has become for many contemporary Christians, but was also an important economic and social principle. Not only were the Israelites to refrain from work, but their slaves and all their domestic animals, as well. They were not allowed to perform any sort of productive labor. Those who rested still had to be fed, so in essence, the Sabbath meant a net loss economically for Israel. There is a compelling case to be made that rest was not simply for worship’s sake, but was a means of breaking the cycle of work on a regular basis. It may be too strong a statement to say that the Sabbath

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22 See pages 108-112 of the present work. For example, Myers argues that “Israel is enjoined to keep wealth circulating through strategies of redistribution, not concentrating through strategies of accumulation.” Myers, The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics, 12.
23 See for example, Pleins, The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible, 66; North, Sociology of the Biblical Jubilee, (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1954), 153-154, 204; Bergsma, The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran, 298-302. I tend to disagree with this assertion. However, ultimately whether or not these laws were intended as an ethical ideal or intended to be practiced on a regular basis is of little concern for the goals of this dissertation.
24 See also, Soggin, Israel in the Biblical Period, 140-143.
tradition was intended for the “deabsolutization of work,” but one could safely say that it included this deabsolutization. Without the Sabbath, labor and land could too easily be exploited and the Israelites would find themselves back in the same exploitative situation from which YHWH had delivered them. The Sabbath vision provided an alternative standard to Egypt, a method of defying the predominant socioeconomic systems around them. It was more than a religious precept; it had tremendous economic and social implications.

SABBATH AND COVENANT

Covenant is a complex theological theme within the Hebrew Bible, and unpacking all that it entails is well beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, one cannot understand the significance of Sabbath without some attention to it, because the responsibilities of the Sabbath tradition are a part of the covenantal relationship.

According to Jon Levenson, within the rabbinic tradition the commandments associated with the covenant are differentiated by ethics and ritual. There are two relationships that are definitive of the covenant: the relationship of Israel to YHWH (the ritual part of the covenant), and the relationship of the members of Israel to one another (the ethical part of the covenant).

In some ways, separating ritual and ethical commandments of the covenant from one another is a false dichotomy. The rabbis did not consider one as autonomous from the other. The ethical commandments were not independent from worship of YHWH, and true worship of YHWH requires that one obey the requirement to love one’s

26 Levenson, Sinai and Zion, 50.
27 ibid., 51.
neighbor (Lev. 19:18). Neither the ethical nor the ritual commandments exist independently of one another. As Sharon Ringe notes,

The Jubilee laws are significant in that, in the very midst of the Holiness Code with its emphasis on cultic matters, these laws bear witness to the continuing power of the image of God as sovereign over Israel, and to the fact that such an image of God has ethical consequences. To confess God as sovereign includes caring for the poor and granting freedom to those trapped in a continuing cycle of indebtedness. God’s sovereignty is presented as a fact bearing on people’s daily life and structuring their relationship with one another and with the rest of the created order.\(^\text{28}\)

Sharon Ringe argues that the different strands of law that contain the Sabbath and Jubilee tradition each carries its own particular implications. There is not merely one message given, and there is not a means by which we can discover a linear development from one to the next. However, the Jubilee traditions do share one thing in common – a foundational belief in the sovereignty of God and the mandate for social justice and liberation in light of that sovereignty.\(^\text{29}\)

In spite of the interconnectedness of these two axes it will be necessary to examine each of them as independently as possible in order to demonstrate the significance of covenant within the Sabbath tradition.

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\(^\text{29}\) ibid., 17. This sovereignty finds its roots in the Exodus event, and God’s redeeming activity within it. The underlying principle for the laws in Exodus 20-23 is found in 23:9, “You shall not oppress a stranger; you know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” This principle grounds the social ethic of Israel in its religious history, and the actions toward the oppressed are an expression of obedience to YHWH. However, this foundation is not unique to Exodus 20-23. In Deuteronomy 15, the requirements of Sabbath are also modeled on Israel’s redemption from Egypt (vs. 15). Similarly, in Leviticus 25, which addresses the Jubilee, God’s liberative actions serve as the foundation for the stipulations surrounding debts, slavery and land management (vs. 23, 42-55). God’s sovereignty, expressed in Exodus, makes God the convener of the covenant, and the ultimate owner of the land, who is responsible for the requirements upon the people, and the distribution of the land.
Ritual Commandments

Any discussion of covenant must begin with the Decalogue. At Mt. Sinai, YHWH codified what the covenant should look like, and the first responsibility was to God. “I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:2, 3). It is this “word” that serves as the basis for each of the other nine. The covenant begins with the establishment of YHWH’s sovereignty over Israel.

When YHWH delivered the Hebrews from Egypt, YHWH delivered them from service to a harsh master, namely Pharaoh. At Sinai, the Israelites traded their allegiance to Pharaoh for an allegiance to YHWH, who became the new King of Israel. YHWH promised to be their provider and protector, so long as Israel agreed to live according to the relationship with YHWH, as the one who freed them. This transfer of allegiances becomes especially evident in the work of George Mendenhall, who compared the Israelite covenantal formulas to the suzerainty treaties of the Ancient Near East. In his comparisons Mendenhall noted a formulaic similarity connecting Israel’s covenant with YHWH and these suzerainty treaties, which were treaties established between a more powerful king (the suzerain) and a less powerful vassal king. It is most important to note is that the covenantal formulas of the Israelite Scriptures correspond directly to the

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30 The conceptual basis of the original Sabbath and Jubilee laws may be based upon the belief that Israel was some kind of temple estate, belonging to YHWH, having been taken by YHWH in the Exodus. Because the Israelites were citizens of this temple estate they were afforded certain rights and protections in deference to the deity. In connecting the Jubilee with the ancient Near Eastern practice of dedicating a city and its inhabitants to the service of a God, Bergsma notes that if any form of violence or injustice was inflicted upon a citizen of one of these temple cities it was taken as an affront to the god whose worship was practiced there, and could result in the vengeance of that particular god. Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 29.

suzerainty formulas in which a vassal king would declare fealty to the suzerain. Frequently these treaties are established because the suzerain king has delivered the vassal king from a power that was beyond the vassal king’s ability to overcome. This led to a sense of obligation and responsibility to the suzerain.

Mendenhall identified six components of these treaties, each of which has a corresponding piece within the Israelite covenant. For the purposes of this paper it will be sufficient to draw attention to four of them, and demonstrate their connection to the Decalogue. The treaties began with a *preamble* that identified who the suzerain was. “I am YHWH your God” (Exod. 20:2a). YHWH is the suzerain king, and Israel has transferred her allegiance from Pharaoh to YHWH. The second component is referred to as a *historical prologue*, in which the suzerain’s support and deliverance of the vassal king is identified. This served to demonstrate both the worthiness of the suzerain to receive the vassal’s loyalty and the debt of the vassal to the suzerain. “Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exod. 20:2b). YHWH has delivered Israel from their bondage, from the house of Pharaoh, and is thus due the loyalty YHWH requires.

Because the suzerain king has established this historical relationship the third component, the *stipulations* of the treaty, is a natural transition. The suzerain places certain requirements on the vassal king and his people, which consisted primarily of loyalty in foreign policy. As Levenson notes, “The ancient Near Eastern covenant was not an impersonal code, but an instrument of diplomacy founded upon personal

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32 Jon Levenson demonstrates how the “Treaty Between Mursilis and Duppi-Tessub of Amurru” ensures Duppi-Tessub’s royal status. The suzerain, Mursilis, placed Duppi-Tessub upon the throne in spite of Duppi-Tessub’s illness. Mursilis delivered his vassal from the possibility of being overthrown by his brothers by reinforcing his royal status. *Sinai and Zion*, 27.
relationships of the heads of state.” The stipulations typically included an exclusive relationship between the suzerain and his vassal, for the relationship specified by these treaties precluded the vassal entering into this type of relationship with another king.

“You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3). Depending on the tradition in which the Decalogue is being explicated this is either the first or the second commandment. And the commandments that follow further reveal the expectations of YHWH upon the vassal people of Israel.

The last element of these treaties that I would like to address is the *curses and blessings*. To betray the suzerain by failing to live up to the conditions listed will result in a life of hardship, but appropriate loyalty will result in blessing. As Levenson explains these suzerainty treaties, “It is clear that the [suzerainty] covenant contains within it a moral mechanism based on the principle of retribution, reward for the faithful, punishment for the faithless.” Within the suzerainty treaties these moral mechanisms were often believed to be enforced by the gods in whose names these oaths were sworn. Interestingly, within the Decalogue, there are no specific curses for failure to live according to the Decalogue, although these threats are located elsewhere within the Torah (Lev. 26:14-18; Deut. 28:15-28). However, the same cannot be said for blessings within the Decalogue. For example, the fifth commandment promises a long blessed life if it is obeyed, and in Exodus 19, just prior to the reception of the Decalogue, YHWH tells Moses to explain to the Israelites what he expects of them, and in this monologue says, “Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples…you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy

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33 ibid., 28.
34 ibid., 30.
nation” (Exod. 19:5). The people of Israel are promised that they will become a treasured possession of YHWH, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation if they will simply hear and obey God’s commands.

The similarities between Ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties and the Israelite covenant are striking. And they demonstrate the significance of the ritual relationship between YHWH and Israel. Israel is YHWH’s vassal. YHWH will protect them, provide for them, and make of them a holy nation, if they will submit to the stipulations set forth in this treaty. Thus, the ultimate purpose of the freedom which the Israelites received was not freedom for the sake of freedom itself, but freedom in order that the Israelites might declare their allegiance to YHWH. “YHWH owns Israel because he is their redeemer. Freedom means simply a transfer of masters; henceforth the Israelites are servants of YHWH, and of no one else.” The covenant is indicative of this transfer of allegiance. It reveals the concerns and character of YHWH, because it is the “full realization of Israel’s release from Egyptian service. The Israelites themselves are to be put to the service of God’s community as shaped by God’s laws.” Their land, their produce, their livestock, their children, and even their very selves were to be put to the service of God, as defined by God’s commands. This service was constitutive of the covenantal relationship between YHWH and the Israelites; the Israelites were not freed in

35 Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 302. Such language of “ownership” is problematic within Black Theology (see the previous chapter on black hermeneutics). Although, the language is problematic, and as such I choose to avoid it if at all possible, it does speak on some level both to the transfer of allegiance from Pharaoh to YHWH, and the contingency of Israel’s freedom upon its willingness to worship YHWH.

order that they might live however they please, but that they might enter into a special relationship with YHWH, defined by service to YHWH.\textsuperscript{37}

The primacy of the first (or second) commandment seems evident. The exclusivity of YHWH’s sovereignty over Israel is the source for the rest of the Decalogue. However, for Abraham Heschel, it is not the first commandment that serves as a foundation for the others, but the fourth. Sabbath is the epitome of the entire Torah. Every other commandment, for Heschel, finds its power in Sabbath.

We know that passion cannot be vanquished by decree. The tenth injunction would, therefore, be practically futile, were it not for the ‘commandment’ regarding the Sabbath day to which about a third of the text of the Decalogue is devoted, and which is an epitome of all other commandments. We must seek to find a relation between the two ‘commandments.’ Do not covet anything belonging to thy neighbor; I have given thee something that belongs to Me. What is that something? A day.\textsuperscript{38}

It is in Sabbath that Heschel identifies the full meaning of the remaining commandments within the Decalogue.

Heschel’s argument is highly mystical, and he may be overstating his case, but for Heschel Sabbath is the practice by which Israel’s responsibilities to God are delineated.

Israel demonstrates her allegiance to YHWH primarily through the practice of Sabbath.

\textsuperscript{37} Some have identified misarum, “debt release” in Mesopotamia, and anduraru(m), establishment of freedom in Akkadian, as ancient antecedents to Sabbath and Jubilee. These terms refer to the social reforms of the Ancient Near East intended to establish justice. They were typically enacted through edicts from kings in which debts were forgiven and slaves were set free. For more on these and other influences on the biblical development of Sabbath and Jubilee see Moshe Weinfeld, Social Justice in Ancient Israel, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1995), 25-44, 152-178. Weinfeld essentially argues that the Jubilee of ancient Israel is identical in nature to the laws of ancient Babylon and Assyria. I think he overstates his case, as he fails to take into consideration the sacred and cyclical nature of Jubilee in Israel. The ancient antecedents to the Jubilee were enacted at the caprice of the king. The Hebrew Scriptures free Jubilee from the social interests of the king, and connect the source to the will of God. “The Divine regime embodied in the Tora entails spreading social power among the members of society and preventing the accumulation of power in human foci.” Quoted in Yairah Amit, “The Jubilee Law – An Attempt at Instituting Social Justice,” in Justice and Righteousness: Biblical Themes and their Influence, edited by Henning Graf Reventlow and Yair Hoffman, (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1992), 52.

Similarly, Alberto Soggin argues that the Sabbath day is the signifier of YHWH’s election of Israel, for “only Israel in fact was elected to observe it.”

The sign of Sabbath is always something between YHWH and Israel. It serves as an indicator of YHWH’s lordship over Israel and YHWH’s sanctification of Israel. Through Sabbath YHWH “restores [Israel] as a holy people.” YHWH gives Sabbath to Israel as a means of recognizing the covenant, and as a means of ensuring that Israel is a holy people.

Further connection between the Sabbath stipulations and Israel’s holiness is demonstrated by the fact that the Jubilee, the special Sabbath celebration, was announced on Yom Kippur, at the cleansing of the Temple. “There is nothing arbitrary about the proclamation of the jubilee on yom kippur; on the contrary, there may be the most intimate conceptual relationship between the purgation of the temple and the restoration of social justice in Israel.” If the temple was unclean this would preclude YHWH’s presence within it. Yom Kippur served to cleanse the temple in such a way that YHWH’s presence was once again possible. Bergsma argues that, because the establishment of a king’s rule was typically associated with freedom and social justice in the ANE, it is not unusual that the Day of Atonement served as such a useful day in the proclamation of the Jubilee. Richard Lowery argues that the announcement of Jubilee with the blowing of the shofar on Yom Kippur demonstrates the coronation of YHWH as the king of Israel. “Jubilee prepares Israel to meet God.” It serves as the royal enthronement of YHWH.

The ritual component of the covenant, which is indicative of the relationship between YHWH and the people of Israel, was typified by the establishment of YHWH as

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41 Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 31.
Israel’s king. This relationship served to identify the responsibilities of both YHWH and Israel, and Sabbath was an important means of expressing this relationship.

Ethical Commandments

YHWH’s lordship over Israel served as the foundation for the ways in which the Israelites were to live with one another. The covenant does not merely serve to establish YHWH’s kingship over Israel, but announces that YHWH’s role and activity within Israelite religion and history implies a certain manner of life amongst those who are YHWH’s subjects. This serves to connect the cultic and the social in a meaningful way in Israel. Because the Israelites’ freedom and existence are the result of YHWH’s deliverance, they must live according to the mandates of YHWH that uphold YHWH’s concern for deliverance. No person, freed by God from slavery and oppression, is to be forced into such an exploited existence again.

In Isaiah 58 the biblical author rebukes the people for divorcing their cultic observation on *Yom Kippur* from the social obligation of the Jubilee, which was pronounced simultaneously with it. The author of Third Isaiah recognizes that the Jubilee is the social manifestation of the ritual purification of the sanctuary. Thus, the author challenges the people to do what is necessary to address the problems of poverty and injustice. In some senses, the purification of Israel, associated with *Yom Kippur*, is incomplete without Jubilee. Hence, the Israelites are barred from exploiting or even neglecting their neighbor. Sabbath rejects the human tendency to separate the sacred from the profane in such a way that the profane is outside the purview of God’s sovereignty. As Jeffrey Fager notes,
The Jubilee declares that what some consider ‘private’ transactions do fall under the rule of God…the maintenance of proper access for everyone is a religious obligation, not a matter of social choice or even economic expediency.”

Fager contends that the liturgical responsibilities of the covenant could not be separated from the ethical responsibilities of the covenant. The Israelite had no right to disconnect him/herself from their covenantal relationship with their neighbor. One’s covenantal connection to YHWH resulted in one’s covenantal connection to one’s neighbor. Gnana Robinson argues similarly when he notes, “So the condition required for man to live in harmony and peace with his neighbor is his acknowledgement of God as the only Creator and Sustainer of the whole universe.”

The connection of Sabbath with both the history (the Exodus) and religion (cult) of Israel emphasized the constitutive nature of Sabbath. One could not be a member of YHWH’s covenant community unless one practiced the Sabbath in all its various forms. The connection of social justice to religious matters persuaded the Israelites to fulfill their covenantal responsibilities. These covenantal responsibilities are underpinned by two important themes: 1) the primacy of the community, and 2) the familial tie of all Israelites.

Walter Brueggemann argues that Sabbath is a part of the social imagination of Israel that developed in response to the experience in Egypt. Israel calls for an alternative existence to Egypt. What must not be lost in this is the role of the community in the development of that imagination. “The Israelite’s sense of the primacy of the community can scarcely be doubted. It is indeed the community which evokes, permits and

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legitimizes persons of faith.” Brueggemann argues that the salvation of God and the practice of faith in the Hebrew Bible is not individualistic, but is only accomplished through participation in the faith community. The covenant “suggests that the real transformation of faith is to participate in the new community which overcomes the old unjust order of exclusiveness.” The covenant between Israel and YHWH implies that faith is developed most clearly in relationship to other members of the covenant.

Thus, the care for the poor and weak in Israel was not left up to individual acts of charity, but was a requirement of justice placed upon the whole community. The poor had a right to be cared for, and those with the means to do so had a responsibility to provide for those in need. However, it must also be noted that the Sabbath laws (at least insofar as they are represented by Jubilee) did not address the needs of the individual poor person. Jubilee seems to address the problem of perpetual poverty not from an individualistic perspective, but from a tribal or communal one. For the Jubilee only returned the land to the original family after fifty years. As such, the chances are that the individual who originally was forced to sell the land would only have it returned to him in his old age, if he had it returned to him at all. What Jubilee ensured was that no family or clan would be forced into poverty through the circumstances of one of its ancestors. It addressed the perpetual poverty of the family or clan, but not of the individual.

The primacy of the community led to an emphasis on the interconnectedness and familial obligations to the other members of the covenant. The wealthy and the poor belonged to the same family; hence the debtor in Deuteronomy is referred to as a brother.

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45 Brueggemann, *Hope within History*, 25.
46 ibid., 45.
47 For more on this see Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 64.
and one who is not to be exploited.\textsuperscript{48} No one should take advantage of the weakness of their brother as a means of economic gain. All relationships amongst members of the covenant were sacred. The nation of Israel was to be a “commonwealth of brothers whose life together was constituted by friendship and integrity,”\textsuperscript{49} and every member of the covenant was judged by their willingness to live up to these familial obligations.

Brueggemann argues that Sabbath becomes the defining characteristic for how the Israelite is to live with the other members of the covenant.

Sabbath in Israel is the affirmation that people, like land, cannot be finally owned or managed. They are in covenant with us, and therefore lines of dignity and respect and freedom are drawn around them that must be honored by people who will have the land as a covenanted place.\textsuperscript{50}

Hence, Deuteronomy sought not only to free the debt slave, but to ensure the means by which independence could be achieved. The one whom the debt slave had served was to make a generous provision for them as they left (Deut. 15:13-14). The slide into poverty by a member of the covenant was never to result in slavery or any other perpetuation of that poverty. And even those who do work as slaves, even at their poorest, are wage-earners, working to pay off their debt.\textsuperscript{51} The prophets decry a community where people of power and influence use their positions to enrich themselves at the expense of those without power. As such, one finds throughout the prophetic corpus denunciations of all manner of oppression: fraudulent economic transactions (Hos. 12:7-8; Amos 8:5), the greediness of the rich and powerful that left others homeless (Mic. 2:1; Ezr. 22:29), corruptible judges and officials (Amos 5:7), and the violence of those with property

\textsuperscript{48} Hopee, \textit{There Shall be no Poor among You}, 31.
\textsuperscript{50} Brueggemann, \textit{The Land}, 60.
\textsuperscript{51} Milgrom, \textit{Leviticus}, 302.
toward a lower class that was living in poverty due to that violence.\textsuperscript{52} The prophets were calling for the rich and powerful, those with property and position, to hold up the cause of the weak, to live up to their Sabbath responsibilities. Wealth won at the expense of another was iniquitous. If it caused the economic slavery of another member of the community, another member of the covenant, it was incompatible with that covenant.

“This is the essential message which God proclaims to man through his Sabbath. In the Sabbath all are brought to the creation context, the context of unity and equality.”\textsuperscript{53}

In order to understand Sabbath, one must understand its connection to the relationships that defined the covenant. Sabbath served to reveal the sovereignty of God as the King of Israel. The Israelites, to whom Sabbath was given, lived under the reign of YHWH. But the Sabbath regulations were more than a liturgical responsibility; they also bore an ethical component in which the Israelites were required to live with one another as a family, each member of the covenant was an heir of YHWH. No citizen of YHWH’s kingdom had the right to objectify or exploit another citizen, because all were participants in the covenant relationship with YHWH.

\textbf{SABBATH AND LAND}

The land of Canaan looms large in the Hebrew Scriptures.\textsuperscript{54} In fact, Walter Brueggemann argues that “land is a central, if not the central theme of biblical faith.”\textsuperscript{55}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Robinson, \textit{The Origin and Development of the Old Testament Sabbath}, 345.
\item Brueggemann, \textit{The Land}, 3. italics in original
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Moshe Weinfeld also points to the significance of the land in the Hebrew Bible, noting that the entire historiography of the bible is conditioned by it. The patriarchs live in expectation of it, the Exodus is a preparation for it, the conquest of Canaan is a struggle to enter and acquire it, and the judges and kings struggle to keep it. Weinfeld believes that the writing of the former prophets, Judges through Second Kings, was done in order to explain how and why Israel, both north and south, ended up exiled (2 Kings 17:1-23; 21:11-16). The centrality of land in biblical theology, and the centrality of land within the Sabbath vision, makes it a crucial theme to address.

This section will explore three interconnected theological emphases in regards to the land. The first is that the land of Canaan is owned by YHWH. Israel does not own the land in which it lives, but is a steward and tenant of that land. The land, therefore, is a gracious gift from YHWH to the nation of Israel, received due to the promise of YHWH to Abraham. The second emphasis is that the land imposes a certain responsibility upon the Israelite people. Because YHWH owns the land, the Israelites are not free to treat it as they wish. The land has a right to Sabbath rest. Finally, the third emphasis is that the Israelite’s existence within the land is a sign of God’s presence with them. So long as they live in God’s promised land, they can be assured that they are in God’s good favor. But, the land is God’s partner. It will participate in chastising Israel when Israel fails to live up to the covenant, and it will participate with YHWH in blessing Israel when she lives appropriately.

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Within the Hebrew Bible, YHWH makes ultimate claim on the land of Israel. The Israelites are not the lords of the land of Canaan; they are merely tenants. The earth does not belong to those who purchase it or conquer it. It belongs to the One who was there before they were and who is ultimately responsible for its future. “The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land belongs to me; for you are ‘guests’ and ‘residents’ with me” (Lev. 25:23).

As the owner of the Promised Land, YHWH had certain requirements for those who resided upon this land. First, the land was to be distributed to the entirety of the people. Land was allotted to tribes, “according to their clan,” and each family had its own “heritage” or portion (Judges 21:24). Each tribe and clan was graciously given land upon which they would live and raise their families. Second, family land was inalienable. Because the land was a gift from YHWH, it could not be bought or sold in perpetuity. The Sabbath laws prevented perpetual landlessness, and perpetual poverty.

Walter Brueggemann devotes an entire book, aptly entitled The Land, to an exploration of the biblical theology of the land. In this book, Brueggemann argues that the land to which YHWH would take Israel was altogether different than the land of Egypt. The land of Egypt is the land of planning, control and manipulation. Survival and security are achieved there through Pharaoh’s ability to control the land, and make it produce. The significance of the manna story and its connection to Sabbath, for Brueggemann, is that fullness and security in the wilderness are not the result of the land,

57 The only exception is the tribe of Levi who were to serve as priests to YHWH.
but the result of YHWH’s gracious provision. Manna and Sabbath reveal that it is God who provides.

The land promised by YHWH provides a radical break from the socioeconomic system in Egypt. There are just and unjust ways of living in YHWH’s land. Because the land of Israel belonged to YHWH, it could never be used to enslave a fellow member of the covenant. The kings and priests did not have the right to appropriate the land (1 Kings 21:1-19). Neither natural nor human-made disasters were to be used as an opportunity to take advantage of the weak. In contrast, the Hebrew Scriptures provide an explanation of Pharaoh’s ownership of the land of Egypt, which he acquired it in the midst of a terrible natural disaster. Pharaoh preyed upon the weak, and took advantage of an enormous natural disaster in order to advance his wealth. YHWH forbade the same behavior from the Israelites. This ensured that they would never again be enslaved to anyone, especially each other.

According to Moshe Weinfeld, the significance of YHWH’s ownership of the land is not in the ethical requirements such an affirmation makes upon the Israelites. Instead Weifeld argues that YHWH’s ownership of the land makes the land holy. The land is an ideal land specifically because YHWH owns it. Exile is problematic because it is an existence in an unclean place, where holy living is near impossible. YHWH’s presence within the land implied the land’s holiness and that holiness implied the ethical requirements of its inhabitants. Anyone who lived outside the borders of God’s promised

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58 Genesis 47 tells the story of how Pharaoh came to possess the land of Egypt by his ability to prepare for a famine through Joseph’s interpretation of his dreams. Because Pharaoh was able to prepare for the seven years of famine by managing the crops through seven years of prosperity Pharaoh was able to exploit those who did not have this ability. It is important to note that this is the Israelite rendering of this story. There is no historical evidence that such an event ever took place. As such, it may be polemical, but canonically it does demonstrate the differences between the way in which YHWH wants Israel to live in the Promised Land and the way in which Pharaoh lived in the land of Egypt.

land lived in an “unclean” place (Amos 7:17). And the practice of holiness in any other land seemed impossible (Hos. 9:3-5). Hence it became difficult for the people of Israel to imagine a pure life being lived outside the borders of Israel. The same idea of the holiness of the land of Israel is presented by Bergsma when he argues that within Israel, land is sacred, and only God can truly own it. For Bergsma, these two realities are dialogical. The land is sacred because God owns it, and God owns it because it is sacred.61

Both Weinfeld and Brueggemann emphasize God’s ownership of the land. It is a gift from YHWH to YHWH’s covenant people. God granted Israel the ideal land that God alone controlled. According to Brueggemann, that land provided a radical break from Egypt such that the Israelites could not exploit it for their own ends. Weinfeld argues that God’s ownership of Canaan implied a certain holiness for the land that made the holiness of God’s people possible. In spite of these differences, the significance of YHWH’s ownership of the land is central to each. God gave Israel the land in order that they might live within it as a holy people, a people of the covenant.

The Land’s Right to Rest

Within the Hebrew Scriptures, the Sabbath tradition commands that the Israelites allow the land to lie fallow every seven years (Lev 25:4-5). Because YHWH owns the land, YHWH has the right to make such stipulations in regard to its usage. The gift of land given by God bears a certain responsibility for those who would live as God’s tenants. These responsibilities imply that the Israelites were not free to do with the land

60 ibid., 219.
61 Bergsma, The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran, 63.
as they saw fit. There were requirements to treat the land with respect and to use it wisely.

On the occasion of the sabbatical year, ancient man recognizes that he does not have unlimited right to the land, that he cannot exploit it at will, that he can only use his agricultural skills to force productivity of the land for a time, and that after this he must let it return to its rest, that is, its natural state.62

The land had a right to Sabbath rest. The right of the land to rest was in order that the land might regenerate itself. Niels-Erik Andreasen argues that this regeneration is more than a natural process, but is accomplished through the “liberation of the productive powers of the earth from the hand of man.”63 The land has the same right to liberation from the coercive powers of productivity that Israel does.64

Within the Hebrew Scriptures, the Israelite failure to provide the land its Sabbath rest is one of the factors that leads to the Babylonian Exile. There is a direct connection between the failure to observe the land’s right to rest and the subsequent eviction from the land. The land, which has not been granted its rightful rest, will lay claim to the time it is due, by removing the people from her presence. (Lev. 26:34-35) Weinfeld identifies five sins for which Israel might forfeit their right to the Promised Land, two of which deal directly with the keeping of Sabbath laws.65 Failing to keep the Sabbath and Jubilee years, and failing to keep the Sabbath day holy would result in Israel’s expulsion from the land promised to them by YHWH. However, it is not merely a forfeiture of the land that was at risk. Israel’s sin may also pollute the land, such that the land that flowed with milk and honey, the perfect land of God, might become barren. The land may be cursed,

63 ibid., 214.
64 One might even argue that for Israel the coercive powers of productivity are represented by Egypt, while, for the land the coercive powers are represented by the unchecked manipulation of the land by Israel.
65 The others are idolatry, intermarriage and a failure to live according to justice and righteousness. Weinfeld, *The Promise of the Land*, 193-201.
and become a wasteland because of the sinfulfulness of its inhabitants (Lev. 26:20-22; Isa.24:3-13). The land will not bear the breaking of the covenant; it will not respond to those who disobey YHWH’s commandments.

The idea that exile and desolation are the punishment for failing to observe God’s commandments is based, therefore, in the typology of violating a covenant. One who violates a covenant with his sovereign can anticipate exile and the desolation of his land. This is the case for Israel, the vassal, who breaks the covenant with its sovereign, the God of Israel.66

However, for Weinfeld the conditionality of the promise of the land is not as ancient as the unconditional promise given to Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 13:14-15; 17:7-8).67 Abraham was promised the land for all eternity based upon the favor he had won by his obedience to God. There was no future condition upon it. Weinfeld believes that this unconditional understanding of Israel’s possession of the land was the operative understanding within Israel until the destruction of the northern tribes by Assyria. Only then did those remaining in Israel begin to believe that the promise of the land may have been in some way conditional.68 So, for Weinfeld, unlike Brueggemann, the conditionality of Israel’s possession of the land is not based on its ethical connection to Exodus, but develops within Israel as exile becomes more and more of a possibility.

At whatever point the conditionality of Israel’s existence in the land developed, there is within the canon a conviction that YHWH’s ownership of the land implies that it has a right to Sabbath rest. And any failure to recognize that right will result in expulsion from the land.

66 ibid., 192.
67 ibid., 185.
68 ibid., 185-188.
Land as God’s Partner

Because the land belongs to YHWH, YHWH alone has the right to it, but YHWH is gracious and gives this land to Israel as a gift, one that “binds Israel in new ways to the giver.”69 The land was an “inheritance” of all the people of Israel, a term that locates Israel as the heir of YHWH. As such, the land was proof of one’s status as a member of God’s family. This status also placed a responsibility upon him/her to live accordingly. “God expects those who have freely received the land from God to freely give of its fruits to those in need.”70 The Promised Land was more than just a place to live. The promise was that the land would always provide for them, so long as they lived according to the Sabbath stipulations that YHWH had given. The land is evidence of Israel’s special relationship to YHWH, for the land is, first, a gift of YHWH. It is a gracious gift from the one who delivered them from Egypt. Israel could be assured of its identity and its future so long as they trusted in YHWH as the giver of land. If they did so, the land would always provide for them.

Weinfeld points out that Israel’s understanding of its relationship to the land is not unique. The promise of God to give the land in perpetuity to Israel has echoes even in later Greek formulations.71 What makes the Israelite story different is the moral and religious implications of the promise made by God. Only in living faithfully with the God who had promised the land could the land be attained or maintained. “The land was thus transformed into a kind of a mirror, reflecting the religious and ethical behavior of

69 Brueggemann, The Land, 45.
70 Hoppe, There Shall be no Poor among You, 27.
the people."\textsuperscript{72} This is true not only of Israel, but also of those who lived within the land prior to Israel’s possession of it. In the same way that the “sins of the Amorites” led to their expulsion from the land (Gen. 15:16), Israel’s own sin led to her exile to Babylon.

In light of all this, Israel understood the land as “party to a relation.”\textsuperscript{73} On the one hand, their existence in the land was evidence of God’s fulfilled promise, but on the other hand, if they failed to live up to their Sabbath responsibilities, the land would evict the Israelites from it and be evidence of God’s promise to remove them from it. Thus, the land becomes the actualization of the divine word.

Brueggemann argues that the land, as it is discussed in the book of Deuteronomy, is upheld as something different from the land of Egypt, from where the Israelites came. The land of Egypt was a land of effort. It demanded toil in order to provide. One thinks of the Nile and the endless irrigation systems required maintaining the productivity of that land, but the Promised Land is different.

For the land which you are entering to take possession of it is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and watered it with your feet, like a garden of vegetables; but the land which you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land which Yahweh your God cares for; the eyes of YHWH your God are always upon it from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. (Deut 11:10-12). The Promised Land is not to be manipulated in order to ensure Israel’s continued existence, but is a land in which the Israelites must yet trust that YHWH will provide.

Brueggemann argues that the above passage demonstrates a partnership between the land and YHWH’s. The land participates with YHWH in Israel’s security and provision. It participates with YHWH in Israel’s blessing, but will also participate in Israel’s demise if and when the time comes. Hence, according to Brueggemann, Deuteronomy also

\textsuperscript{72} ibid., 184.
\textsuperscript{73} Brueggemann, \textit{The Land}, 45
institutes laws that serve as guidelines for land management. Brueggemann believes that “Torah exists so that Israel will not forget whose land it is and how it was given to us.”

Brueggeman is terribly concerned about what he sees as the exploitative nature of kingship. The Torah exists as a means of protecting the Israelite people from the avarice of their kings. The stipulations regarding the freeing of slaves and the forgiveness of debts as well as the institutional reminder to cease from work on a regular basis all provide the means by which the kings of Israel and Judah can remember the responsibility to justice. Sabbath reminds the kings that the land is YHWH’s partner, and thus requires justice.

Jon Levenson disagrees with Brueggemann’s dichotomy between the kings and the Torah. In his book, *Sinai and Zion*, Levenson argues that that these two great mountains of Israel’s history are theologically connected to one another. Levenson notes that Judaism’s development includes an overshadowing of Sinai by Zion. God moves from the wilderness, which has a political affiliation with neither Egypt nor Israel, to the center of Israel’s land. However, Levenson is careful to point out that the transition from Sinai to Zion is not simply about replacing one mountain or one understanding of God with another. "Sinai was the mountain of Israel’s infancy;”

It was the place of only one of Israel’s great revelatory events, the giving of Torah. But it could have no ongoing significance for Israel; it was not a repeatable event. The mountain upon which the Torah was given, was slowly replaced by Zion, which became the symbol of YHWH’s continued presence with Israel. The Davidic covenant slowly overshadows the covenant

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74 ibid., 57-58.
75 Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 89.
at Sinai, not in a way that makes Sinai insignificant, but in a way that makes Sinai available.

The Mosaic covenant was grounded at Sinai, and in the suzerainty treaties of the Ancient Near East. But, according to Levenson, the Davidic covenant, which is vital to the significance of Zion is based upon grant type covenants, which bear royal implications. Levenson argues that the differences between these covenants shape the relationship between YHWH and Israel; YHWH is bound to Israel, which receives YHWH’s gracious gift.

The importance of this work is that it refuses to assume that the Mosaic covenant was somehow usurped in Jerusalem by the Davidic covenant. Brueggemann argues that the Sinaitic covenant was set aside by the kings of Judah in an attempt to solidify their sovereignty. But, Levenson argues that Zion did not replace Sinai in importance, nor is there a geographical separation, in which the northern tribes affirmed Sinai while the southern tribes affirmed Zion. The theological significance of each tradition serves to complement the other, accentuating different aspect of Israel’s relationship with YHWH. Zion "inherited the legacy of Sinai."76 It did not abandon or usurp the Mosaic covenant in favor of a covenant that was more permissive toward the kings, but sought to reestablish the Sinai experience on a regular basis in the Temple on a new mountain. For Levenson, Sinai inaugurates Israel’s relationship with YHWH; Zion becomes the “cosmic mountain” that serves to keep Israel connected with God.

Because the land is YHWH’s partner, the land cannot become adequate in itself; the land is never enough to provide for Israel on its own. And those who “possess” the land cannot forget the requirements placed upon them in regards to the land. Sabbath

76 ibid., 206.
reminds Israel that her existence is ultimately contingent upon YHWH, that the land is partner with YHWH, and that Israel can lose the Promised Land.

**THE ESCHATOLOGICAL JUBILEE**

An examination of the Sabbath vision would not be complete without addressing creation, and its role in Sabbath’s theological development. This is especially pertinent because the theological connection between creation and Sabbath provides a theological connection to eschatology, as well. Within the creation story, Sabbath is the crown of creation. This becomes evident in the work of David Cotter, who demonstrates a pattern in the creation story. On the first day, light is created, and on the fourth day the great lights of the day and the night are created. The sun and the moon become the source of light. On the second day, the seas and the sky are created, and on the fifth day the seas and the sky are filled with the birds of the air and the fish of the sea respectively. On the third day, the land is brought forth, and on the sixth day it is filled with the beasts of the field and with humankind. But there is not corresponding day for day seven. It stands apart as a unique day, one that God does not complete later (at least not within the creation story.)

According to Richard Lowery, the Sabbath day within the creation story is crucial for the establishment of order and the foundation for life. Time becomes an instrument of God’s bringing order out of chaos. “In the narrative logic of the story, time is the fundamental instrument of the cosmic order.” Lowery asserts that God chooses to begin the ordering of chaos by the creation of time, day and night. He argues that the

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78 Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 89.
created order is bracketed by time, for on the first day, God created universal time, but on the seventh day God created sacred time. It is with the creation of Sabbath that chaos is finally brought under control. “Sabbath is the final piece of the creative process by which the world comes into being. It is the crowning touch, the cosmic sign that God’s universal and benevolent dominion is fully extended and secure.”  

Lowery’s exegesis is a little suspect, because God did not create time on the first day. God created light. Time, whether universal or otherwise, is not created until God distinguishes day from night, with the creation of the sun and moon on day four (Gen. 1:14-18). In spite of Lowery’s suspect exegesis, his emphasis upon the Sabbath within creation is correct. Sabbath is the pinnacle of creation. It is a unique day, the one declared “holy,” set apart for divine purposes.

However, Jon Levenson would disagree with Lowery’s assessment of creation on different grounds. For Levenson, Sabbath’s role in overcoming chaos once and for all is not demonstrated within the creation story. In his book, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, Levenson argues that within the Hebrew Bible chaos is not completely overcome at creation. He points, in particular, to Psalm 74:12-14, Psalm 89:9-10 and Isaiah 27:1 as evidence of the continued presence of chaos through the form of mythological beasts of destruction such as Leviathan, Rahab, various dragons, and even the sea becomes a metaphor for chaos upon which God sets boundaries. It is YHWH’s continued presence and involvement in history that prevents these mythological beasts of chaos from rising up and overwhelming the world. Levenson concludes the first section of his book with

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79 ibid., 89.
the argument that evil and chaos have a certain vitality, and that creation, as portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures, is fragile.\textsuperscript{80}

In spite of this difference, Levenson and Lowery agree that Sabbath has eschatological significance in light of the creation story. Levenson notes the ways in which the cult can serve as a means of neutralizing chaos. Darkness, which is a primordial power that is frequently associated with evil by the Israelites,\textsuperscript{81} is not destroyed by God at creation, but alternates with light, as evidenced by the repetition of day and night. Darkness has been confined to its place by the creation of light, but is not destroyed. The retelling of the story of creation closes each day with the reminder that there was evening and there was morning, there was darkness and there was light. The cult serves to keep these primordial powers at bay. This is evidenced within the creation account by the fact that there is one day upon which the formula consistent with each of the first six days is broken. “And there was evening and there was morning…” is not said of the seventh day. According to Levenson, this may be intended to declare that the sanctity of the Sabbath excludes the malign powers that Israelite tradition very often associated with darkness: on only one day out of every seven is that horrific primordial chaos banished rather than neutralized by confinement.\textsuperscript{82}

This, Levenson believes, is why the Mishnah can associate the eschatological future with Sabbath rest. The seventh day is unique, and this uniqueness opens the possibility for an eschatological interpretation. The creation account provides eschatological significance to Sabbath, for it is the only day for which the pattern of “and there was evening and there was morning…” is broken. The seventh day does not contain the formulaic pattern


\textsuperscript{81} ibid., 123.

\textsuperscript{82} ibid., 123.
that concludes each of the other days. As Abraham Heschel notes, “Literally, the sun has not yet set on God’s Sabbath.”

It is evident that Sabbath’s connection to creation also provides an eschatological vision. However, the eschatological vision is not merely to be found within the creation account of the Hebrew Scriptures. Abraham Heschel notes that Sabbath and eternity are “one.” According to Heschel this concept is not new or unique, but has been influential for generations in Jewish theology. He points out that within the Talmud, the Sabbath is “somewhat like” eternity – that the world to come at God’s eschatological reign is a Sabbath world. He even argues that Sabbath is more than a pale reflection of eternity, but is its ultimate source.

Heschel’s mystical interpretation of Sabbath resonates with the Latter Prophets. For example, Bergsma identifies the eschatological significance of Jubilee within Ezekiel 40, in which “Ezekiel sees a vision of the restored temple and Israelite nation on the Day of Atonement at the mid-way point of the Jubilee cycle.” This vision is recounted in the first verse of chapter 40, which begins a section of Ezekiel (chs 40-48) that upholds the Jubilee as an eschatological hope of redemption, cleansing, and the restoration of both the cult and social justice. Several scholars have also identified the dimensions of the rebuilt temple from Ezekiel 40 has Jubilee dimensions (all the dimensions are multiples of 25 and 50.)

In fact, the entire vision of Israel restored in chs. 40-48 can be described as Israel finally appropriating the wholeness that should have been actualized

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83 Lowery, Sabbath and Jubilee, 90.
84 Heschel, The Sabbath, 67, 68.
85 Bergsma, The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran, 189.
86 Ibid., 190.
on every Day of Atonement of a Jubilee year: cultic purity (e.g. 44:1-31), renewed presence of God (43:1-9), restoration to ancestral land (47:13-48:35), and social equity (45:9-12; 46:18; 47:21-23). Thus we see a strong symbolic association here between the exile as a jubilee period and the restoration as a jubilee.\textsuperscript{88}

Similarly, Bergsma notes the ways in which Isaiah 40-66 identifies the return from exile as an act of redemption from debt-servitude, connecting Jubilee imagery to the eschatological redemption and glorification of Israel. He notes that in this passage of Isaiah the term go’el (redeemer) is used for God almost twice as frequently as it is in the entirety of the rest of the Hebrew Bible.\textsuperscript{89} Within this passage, as well, the redemption to which the biblical author refers is the redemption from Egyptian bondage, so that the implication is that the return from exile becomes a second Exodus.\textsuperscript{90}

Isaiah 61:1-2 is probably the most widely recognized Jubilee reference outside of the Torah.\textsuperscript{91} Within this passage there is not a call for enacting the provisions of the Jubilee; instead the author foresees the imminent coming of one anointed by God who will inaugurate a new age that is characterized by the vision of the Jubilee.\textsuperscript{92} Ringe argues that the oracles in Third Isaiah are more concerned with the eschatological completion of God’s glorification of Zion than with the mundane rebuilding of the walls or city of Jerusalem. Thus, the Jubilee imagery found in Isaiah 61:1-2 reveals that it was as much an eschatological vision of God’s ultimate restoration of the world (based in Zion), as it was a legislative concern of the contemporary priests who composed the priestly source in which the legal stipulations are given.\textsuperscript{93} “The oracle represents a

\textsuperscript{88} Bergsma, \textit{The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran}, 190.
\textsuperscript{89} ibid., 192.
\textsuperscript{90} ibid., 193.
\textsuperscript{91} It is this passage from which Jesus reads in Luke 4 of the Christian New Testament, and is frequently studied as his understanding of the purpose of his ministry. This will be addressed at length below.
\textsuperscript{92} ibid., 202-203.
\textsuperscript{93} Ringe, \textit{Jesus, Liberation and the Biblical Jubilee}, 29.
message to be delivered to the people concerning the establishment of God’s
eschatological reign.” The year of the Lord’s favor is proclaimed in connection with
good news to the poor, liberty for those in debt, and freedom for those who are enslaved.
God’s eschatological reign is begun by the release of the weak from situations of
enslavement and imprisonment.

The eschatological nature of Jubilee is revealed primarily within the post-exilic
prophetic corpus. However, there are a number of ways in which its eschatological
possibilities are revealed within the socio-economic requirements of the Torah, as well.
As Bergsma notes, “There is something inherently ‘eschatological’ about the jubilee,
long before it was seen as a symbol of the eschaton by later writers.” Because the
Israelites based the imperative for Jubilee on the shared remembrance of slavery in
Egypt, the Promised Land became a kind of ideal eschatological place, which promised a
radically different existence than Egypt. The purpose of the Jubilee was to protect that
eschatological existence.

Leviticus 25 – in its present position in the Pentateuch – looks forward to
the time when the ‘eschatological’ condition of Israel dwelling within her
own land will be realized, and enacts measures to ensure that periodically
this utopian, ‘eschatological’ state of Israel will be renewed and restored.

A second way in which the eschatological nature of Jubilee is revealed within the Torah
prescriptions is in the long intervals between Jubilees. The impoverished Israelite who
was forced to sell his land would live in expectation of the Jubilee for most of his life
which would make it, at least for that individual, a type of eschatological occurrence.
Furthermore, the conquest of Canaan and the settlement of Israel within it, at least from

94 ibid., 29.
95 Bergsma, The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran, 81.
96 ibid., 81.
the perspective of the Torah is a fulfillment of the promise originally made to Abraham and so becomes a kind of “realized eschatology.”97

Both within the prophetic corpus and the priestly source, particularly the creation story of Genesis 1:1-2:3, the Sabbath and Jubilee are not merely historical and ethical. These sources seem to identify a time when God’s eschatological reign will be realized through the establishment of a fulfilled Sabbath, or a fulfilled Jubilee. The eternal reign of God is foreshadowed by the ethical and liturgical practices of the Sabbath vision.

**SABBATH REST**

In the creation account of Genesis 1:1 – 2:3, God concludes the creative work with a final day of rest. This passage does not actually use the word “Sabbath,” but it does use the word “rest” (a cognate of Sabbath) to refer to God’s activity on that day. Rest is intimately connected with Sabbath, such that one cannot understand any of the Sabbath stipulations – Sabbath day, sabbatical year, or Jubilee – without understanding the significance of rest.

According to Heschel, rest is a created entity, necessary because upon the completion of the sixth day, the universe still lacked something. He refers to that something as menuha – rest. Rest is not a negative quality such that it implies a withdrawal from work or the freedom from certain requirements, but is a positive quality, something that has existence.98 This precludes us from assuming that rest is merely something intended to regenerate the laborer for further toil. Rest is an end in itself.

97 ibid., 81.
98 Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 13. According to Heschel, the term menuha is the term that eventually became synonymous with eternal life, which connects rest with eschatology.
The idea of rest is not unique to the Israelite creation story within the Ancient Near East. Niels-Erik Andreasen demonstrates the ways in which divine rest is a ubiquitous theme present in numerous ANE mythologies. Each of these mythologies explains human purpose as intended to carry the yoke of the lesser gods. Within this mythological narrative, it is the creation of humanity that is intended to give rest to the lesser gods (who were required to serve the higher gods). Prior to humanity’s creation, the toil of the lower gods was necessary to ensure the continuation of the created order. Humanity is created to remove this responsibility from the lesser gods.99

Within the Hebrew creation story, just as with other mythological narratives, God rests upon completion of the creative work. Andreasen argues that there is a connection to be drawn between the gods’ ability to rest in these different narratives. The creation of humanity, which is intended to fill and subdue the earth, allows for the biblical God’s rest, just as it did for the gods of other ANE creation myths.100

What Andreasen’s assessment fails to recognize is that within the Hebrew story God invites humanity into God’s Sabbath rest. Through the Sabbath stipulations God develops a society that is to participate on a cyclical, liturgical basis in the divine rest, and is to allow the land to do the same. Although this invitation does not occur within the creation account, it is still a part of the theological development of Sabbath within the Hebrew canon. As Jon Levenson notes,

It would be convenient at this point to conclude that the Hebrew bible reflects two broad interpretations of the Sabbath. The first…sees the Sabbath as an implication of Israel’s distinctive experience of liberation from slavery. The second…sees in the seventh day a mimetic reenactment of the primordial divine repose. In short, the first interpretation speaks of rest, the second of re-creation. The principal deficiency of this dichotomy

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99 See for example, the Mesopotamian creation epic, the Enuma Elish.
is that in driving a wedge between the two themes, it fails to reckon with the prominence of rest in ancient Near Eastern creation stories. It is the attainment of rest which marks the completion of the act of creation in many of these stories; in others, it is the gods’ need for rest which initiates the creative process.  

This is important because the humanitarian institutions mandated by the first interpretation provide the rest for Israel that the gods sought for themselves by their own acts of creation. In the Israelite understanding of creation, then, humanity is not a part of the creation that must serve the gods, but becomes the ones for whom creation exists. “By reinterpreting the divine otiosity as sabbatical in nature, the Priestly account of creation accentuates the possibility of human access to the inner rhythm of creation itself. Israel can rest the rest of God.” If rest is a part of the created order, then rest is not created for God’s sake, but for humanity’s sake. The Sabbath day, Sabbath year and Jubilee re-present the mythological rest revealed by Andreasen in a manner that humanity does not fear, but into which humanity is invited to participate.

The rest in which humanity is invited to share is, on some level, provided for by God in the Promised Land (Dt 3:20; 12:9-10). Rest was lost in Eden, but the land is the means by which Israel can reenter the rest in which God intended humanity to live from creation, because the land provides the resources to do just that. In this way possession of the land becomes a symbol for the re-acquirement of the eternal rest of God. The toil associated with the departure from Eden is reversed in the Promised Land, because in it the Israelites find rest from their enemies, from their wandering and from their toil. This provides further theological emphasis for the significance of Sabbath, because Sabbath

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102 ibid., 111.
103 ibid., 103.
“betokens the peace agreement ending the primordial war between ourselves and earth, which began as we left Eden.”\textsuperscript{105} The toil associated with the departure from Eden is lifted one day a week. A failure to practice Sabbath, then, becomes a failure to live into the divine intent for humanity.

**SABBATH AND JUBILEE AND JESUS**

There is one final question that must be addressed about the Sabbath and Jubilee: to what extent did they play a role in the teaching and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth? That Jesus was Jewish is common knowledge. As such, his awareness of these laws should be obvious. Certainly there is ample evidence within the gospel literature that Jesus had disagreement with the religious leaders of Israel, at least insofar as those leaders are depicted within the gospels. However, it is not immediately evident to what extent Jesus made use of the Sabbath and/or Jubilee in his ministry or teaching. The remainder of this chapter will briefly outline Jesus’ interactions surrounding both the Sabbath day and the Jubilee, and any possible implications that can be drawn about the connection between the intent of Jesus in regards to his own life and teaching and the Sabbath vision.

**Sabbath Day**

Within the New Testament, the Sabbath day seems to focus primarily on sacrificial worship in the Temple and the study of the scriptures in local synagogues. The latter of these two practices Jesus participated in (Mark1:21-29, 6:2; Luke 4:16-28; John 6:59) on a somewhat regular basis. But, one of the most prominent characteristics of the Sabbath day within the gospels is the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees.

\textsuperscript{105} Quoted in Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*, 17.
surrounding it.106 A casual reading of the gospels may result in the assumption that Jesus forsook the Sabbath traditions, or that his ministry in some way abrogated them. After all, in his confrontations with the Pharisees, which consisted frequently in disagreements about Sabbath practice, it is not Jesus who seems to be the more concerned of the two parties with appropriate Sabbath behavior. The Pharisees appear to be far more zealous about observing the requirements of Sabbath (Matt. 12:1-8; 12: 9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 4:31-41; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; John 5:1-18; 9:1-34).

However, it can be argued that Jesus is not abolishing the Sabbath day when he chooses to heal on that day, but challenging overly legalistic conceptions of it. For example, in Mark 2:23-28 the Pharisees condemn Jesus because his disciples pick grain on the Sabbath. In response to the criticism of the Pharisees, Jesus argues that there are times when even the laws of Torah must be disregarded for the sake of human well-being (2:25-26). Hence, Jesus says, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.” Commentators agree that Jesus is not attempting to deregulate or abrogate the Sabbath, but is emphasizing its humanitarian concern. When Jesus argues that he is “Lord of the Sabbath” (2:28), his claim is not that Sabbath is insignificant, but that it is so significant that God alone, and not legalistic legislation, should define it.107

106 There is some debate about whether or not the Pharisees within the New Testament gospels represent actual practices surrounding the Sabbath day. One commentary argues that “There is no evidence to support the assumption that Jews of Jesus’ day were such rigid legalists that they had forgotten [that doing good and saving life always take precedence over Sabbath obligations].” Pheme Perkins, “Mark” in The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes vol. viii, Leander E. Keck, gen. ed., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 558. But within the Anchor Bible Dictionary it is argued that the rabbinic halakhah consisted of “minute casuistry” that sought to unflinchingly restrict human affairs on that day. Gerhard F. Hasel, “Sabbath” Anchor Bible Dictionary vol. 5, David Noel Freedman, editor-in-chief, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 855. Such debates are beyond the scope of the current work.

107 See for example Perkins, “Mark” in TNIP viii, 557.
In the following passage (3:1-5), Jesus is again confronted by the religious leaders for his Sabbath practices. In this passage the intent of Jesus to do good on the Sabbath is placed in contrast with those (presumably the Pharisees, although there is no antecedent within the present pericope for “they”) who are trying to trap him. The man with the withered hand becomes a Sabbath lesson. For those trying to trap Jesus the man becomes a means of repudiating Jesus. But Jesus asks the question, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” (3:4). According to Perkins, Mark is openly accusing the Pharisees of practicing evil on the Sabbath rather than good.108 They plot to harm and kill, and require that a man continue to suffer, whereas Jesus upholds the greater rabbinic tradition that saving a life on the Sabbath is not breaking it.

One final example of Jesus and the Sabbath that I would like to address is found in Luke 13:10-17, in which Jesus heals a woman on the Sabbath who has been crippled. When the synagogue ruler condemns Jesus’ action, Jesus responds by claiming that the woman who had been bound by Satan had every bit as much right to be “untied” and set free from her bondage as an ox would if it was tied up in such a way that it could not reach water. The act of untying may be considered an act of labor, and would thus be forbidden on the Sabbath day, but for the sake of an animal that is thirsty, such an act was permissible on the Sabbath.109 Luke interprets Jesus’ act as “untying” this woman from her bondage and leading her to water. The synagogue ruler sought to make the work of Jesus the issue, but Jesus refused to accept that his willingness to heal on the Sabbath was the issue at all. Jesus focuses on the right of the woman to be healed. The synagogue

108 ibid., 557. No rabbi would have questioned whether or not healing the man on the Sabbath was lawful. In such situations, the need of the man for healing outweighed the Sabbath stipulations regarding rest.
ruler is more concerned about the observation of Sabbath law than he is about the dignity and health of the woman who was suffering.

In each of these passages, Jesus confronts a concept of Sabbath that seeks to legislate rest. The Pharisees within Mark’s gospel want to define rest by their rules about what is permissible and what is not permissible upon the Sabbath day. But Jesus upholds a vision that affords people the opportunity to experience rest. Rest, for Jesus, is defined by the ability of those who suffer, whether it be hunger (his disciples) or physical pain (the man with the withered hand or the crippled woman), to experience rest. Rest is not defined by what one does or doesn’t do, but by one’s freedom to participate in it. Jesus is attempting to provide rest for those who would not otherwise be able to experience it.

Whether or not these healings on the Sabbath have anything to do with Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God is unclear. For some scholars, such as Gerhard Hasel, the struggle that Jesus has with the religious leaders of Israel helps to explain Jesus’ understanding of the kingdom of God. The proclamation by Jesus that the Sabbath was created for humanity and not humanity for the Sabbath is an attempt by Jesus to restore the Sabbath to its original intent within the creation, a day in which “God manifests his healing and saving rulership over man.”\(^{110}\) Hence for Hasel, Sabbath was a part of Jesus’ announcement of the inbreaking kingdom. And Andreas Schuele believed that the Sabbath healings, especially in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, were “linked to the impending nearness of the kingdom of God that was also foreshadowed in the holiness of the Sabbath.”\(^{111}\) Schuele notes the connection between the eschatological

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\(^{110}\) Hasel, “Sabbath” *ABD* vol. 5, 855.

\(^{111}\) Schuele, “Sabbath” *NIDB* vol. 5, 9.
reign of God and the unique day of Sabbath that was discussed earlier, and argues that this same connection is evident in Jesus’ willingness to heal on the Sabbath.

However, such arguments are too sweeping. There is no canonical connection between Jesus’ disagreements with the religious leaders regarding the Sabbath and his teaching on the kingdom of God. His parables regarding the kingdom are all devoid of any reference to the Sabbath or its significance. Hence, claiming that Jesus’ struggle with the Jewish leaders within the gospels is in some way indicative of Jesus’ attempt to initiate the kingdom of God seems exaggerative. Certainly Sabbath was important to Jesus, and important in a way that was different that it was for the Jewish leaders. However, we get no indication from the gospels that Jesus understood these differences of opinion regarding Sabbath as anything more than varying interpretations of the importance of Sabbath.

What we can draw from the gospels is that Jesus sought to reveal what he thought to be a proper understanding of Sabbath, one that seemed to be in danger of being lost. Jesus did not seek to abolish the Sabbath day, as though it were no longer valid, but was concerned that the moral and ethical force of the Sabbath tradition not get lost in what some might call civil legislation.¹¹²

¹¹² Yoder argues that Jesus’ behavior on the Sabbath was not a repudiation of the Sabbath itself, but a repudiation of the prospul, the civil legislation that was a Pharisac attempt to circumvent the Sabbath laws, thus allowing the powerful to forsake their Sabbath duties. Yoder believed that when the issue at hand was the practice of humanitarian concerns as expressed in the Sabbath laws, Jesus was much more radical than the Pharisees. The Pharisees worried about the Sabbath laws for the sake of obedience to the law; Jesus was far more concerned with the humanitarian results of the practice of the law.¹¹² John Howard Yoder, Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster, second ed., (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 65.
Jubilee

The term “Jubilee” is nowhere used in the New Testament.113 The passage from which the historical stipulations of Jubilee come is nowhere referenced there either. The only specific reference to Jubilee in the New Testament is found in Luke 4:16-19, where Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah (61:1-2 and 58:6) in the synagogue in Galilee.

Some scholars wish to argue that Jesus’ reading from the scroll in Isaiah indicates that Jesus sought to reestablish the historical Jubilee.114 Thus, Ched Myers can argue “Jubilee ideology is the only plausible background to the practice of Jesus.”115 For many of these scholars the ethical vision of the Jubilee is writ large in Jesus’ concern for the poor, healing of the sick and confrontation with the Jewish leaders. For example, when Jesus heals a paralytic man in Mark 2:1-12, in spite of the fact that there is no reference to the Jubilee, Ched Myers argues that Jesus is doing more than healing his paralysis; Jesus is freeing the paralytic from all his debts.116 The man’s restoration to physical wholeness, and thus full inclusion into society, is akin to the “release” from debts that enslave the poor in ancient Israel. Jesus’ healing becomes a Jubilee release for the paralytic. However, such arguments fail to recognize that Jesus makes no specific reference to the Jubilee, nor does he call for debt forgiveness, freedom for debt slaves, or

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113 Because there is no unique word within the Greek to translate the Hebrew words, deror (release) or yobel (jubilee), only the very common Greek words aphiemi or aphesis are used to characterize it. Because of this “it is necessary to base claims to find the Jubilee in the NT on the presence of actual Jubilee texts from the OT, rather than on motifs more loosely defined.” Sharon H. Ringe, “Jubilee” in New Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible Vol. 3, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, gen ed., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 419.
115 Myers, The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics, 35. See also, and Yoder, The Politics of Jesus, 60-75
the return of tribal land to its original owners, each of which would have been necessary if a historical Jubilee was instituted.

One should not assume, however, that Luke had no purpose for Jesus’ Galilean manifesto. But Luke’s purpose has more to do with Jesus’ anointing by God than it does specifically with the historical Jubilee. Jesus has been anointed to announce the eschatological reign of God. For John Nolland the question becomes whether the anointing of Jesus by the Spirit of God, which he ties back to Jesus’ baptism (Luke 3:21, 22), is to be understood in a prophetic or messianic manner. On the one hand, the context of Isaiah would naturally imply a prophetic sense. However, the term Messiah means “anointed one.” Nolland finally arrives at the conclusion that Luke thinks of Jesus in both prophetic and messianic terms, noting that the figure in Isaiah 61 “brings and does not merely herald salvation.”

The implication is that the ministry of Jesus to the poor, the captives and the oppressed is not merely a herald of the coming of the kingdom of God, but serves to initiate it. The message of Luke is that this prophetic message has found its fulfillment in Jesus (4:21).

Luke shapes the prophetic quotations in such a way that Jesus’ anointing is demonstrated through four infinitives: to bring good news, to proclaim release and recovery, to let go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. The fulfillment

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118 ibid., 202.
119 Luke actually draws from two different passages in Isaiah. It appears as though Luke has very carefully constructed the elements of the story in order to make a theological assertion about Jesus. Luke omits certain parts of Isaiah 61:1 (for example, “to bind up the brokenhearted”), and inserts “to let the oppressed go free” from Isaiah 58:6. He also excludes “and the day of vengeance of our God” from the end of Isaiah 61:2.
of these activities validates Jesus and his ministry (Matt. 11:5; Luke 7:22). Although Luke’s gospel seems to place emphasis upon good news to the poor, most scholars hesitate to assume that the historical Jubilee plays any significant role in Jesus’ understanding of the kingdom of God. According to N.T. Wright, that Jesus quoted from Isaiah and not Leviticus implies that if Jesus is making allusion to the Jubilee he is far more interested in the eschatological implications of Jubilee than he is with the actual legislation. Wright argues that a merely historical Jubilee seems to be a far less grand vision than Jesus had in the rest of his ministry. Jesus is concerned with the kingdom of God, and not with the establishment of a historical Jubilee.

However, one must qualify Wright’s assessment as well. Jesus’ vision of the kingdom of God is much grander than a historical Jubilee, but the eschatological Jubilee does seem to have some resonance with Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom. Ringe identifies three proclamations that characterize the Jubilee. Even a cursory examination of these three proclamations demonstrates some connection between Jesus and Jubilee. The first proclamation identified by Ringe is the announcement of a kingdom ruled by God. This proclamation is made by one anointed to do so. The centrality of the kingdom of God within the teaching of Jesus is unquestioned. Thus, the proclamation of God’s eschatological reign that characterizes Jubilee is evidenced by Jesus’ own proclamation of God’s kingdom.

The second proclamation that characterizes the Jubilee is the proclamation of good news to the poor, which is especially evidenced in Luke’s gospel. Mary’s Magnificat glorifies God for raising up the lowly and bringing down the powerful (1:52).

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and for filling the hungry while sending the rich away empty (1:53). Luke’s beatitudes proclaim that the poor will be blessed (6:20), and the rich will receive woe (6:24). The poor are a more important part of Jesus ministry in Luke than in any other gospel (7:22; 12:32-34; 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 21:1-4; 18:22; 21:3). However, this concern is not unique to Luke. In Mark, the wealthy, contrary to popular belief, are not more inclined to enter God’s kingdom, but less (Mk 10:23-25). And in Matthew, the kingdom will be inherited by those who give of their wealth to feed the hungry, and clothe the naked (Mt 25:40). These are the true members of God’s kingdom.

The final proclamation that Ringe associates with the Jubilee is a proclamation of “release” to those who are enslaved for various reasons. As discussed above, this is especially true of those who are enslaved due to debt. Although Jesus doesn’t specifically call for freedom for debt slaves he does connect forgiveness from God with one’s willingness to forgive others (Matt. 18:21-35; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:37). In the pater noster this forgiveness is specifically the forgiveness of debts.

What conclusions can be drawn about the use of Sabbath and Jubilee within the ministry of Jesus? Jesus’ awareness of both the Sabbath and Jubilee requirements are obvious. In regards to the Sabbath Jesus seems to identify with the ancient tradition of rest. However, unlike the Pharisees as depicted in the gospels, Jesus is less concerned with the legalistic definition of what rest entails than he is with providing the dignity and wholeness (for example, through physical healing) that make it possible. One might argue, on the one hand, that Jesus’ healings on the Sabbath provide the means necessary for Sabbath rest, but one may also argue that it is rest that makes dignity and wholeness possible.
In regards to the Jubilee, the emphasis within the teaching of Jesus is not upon the reinstitution of a historical Jubilee. The Galilean Manifesto connects Jesus’ understanding of the kingdom of God to the eschatological jubilary reign of God depicted in Isaiah 61:1-2. “Jubilee release is not spiritualized into forgiveness of sins, but neither can it be resolved into a program of social reform.”122 It incorporates both of these. Spiritual renewal, deliverance from demonic power, and healing from socially stigmatizing illnesses and disabilities are all a part of Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God.

CONCLUSION

The Sabbath has many layers in the Hebrew Bible. It is a complex and rich practice that has numerous theological principles behind it. Although some contemporary Christians may wish to see it as an outdated ancient religious practice that was abrogated by the advent of Jesus, it is evident from this chapter that the Sabbath was far more than a day set aside for simple religious observance and prayer. The Sabbath did serve as a day of rest, and that rest was a part of the Hebrew religious practice. But one cannot separate this liturgical religious practice of Israel from the ethical requirements for living righteously with one’s neighbor and the land. The Sabbath helped provide a vision for Israel’s alternative society, which challenged the normativity of Egypt’s exploitative society. It helped identify the Israelites as the covenant people, who traded their bondage to Pharaoh for a new allegiance to a just and righteous king, YHWH. It served to establish rest as the purpose for human existence. And it served to connect all these things to the eschatological reign of God, which would ultimately reflect

the utopian ideal of the Jubilee. The Hebrew theology of Sabbath and Jubilee carried both historical ethical importance, and an eschatological hope for God’s eternal reign, and this same theology informed Jesus’ understanding of the kingdom of God.

Within Black Theology the norm for appropriately doing theology is liberation. Hence, Exodus has served to provide an important narrative for how Black Theology understands God and God’s purposes. However, this chapter has revealed that Exodus and the Sabbath and Jubilee traditions have consequential connections. These connections make the adoption of Sabbath and Jubilee within Black Theology a meaningful possibility. The purpose of this dissertation is to demonstrate the ways in which such an adoption can serve to provide theological principles that inform Black Theology. As such, the themes developed in this chapter – land, covenant, eschatology and rest – because they provide the theological underpinnings for Sabbath and Jubilee, may also have meaningful insight for Black Theology.
Chapter 5: The Sabbath Vision and Black Theology

To this point the influence and importance of the Israelite Exodus from Egypt within the black theological tradition has been demonstrated. This narrative is important within Black Theology because it not only provides a norm for understanding the character and work of God, but also because the black community has found a typological connection between the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt and their own experiences of enslavement and injustice. The deliverance of the Israelite people by the biblical God has served to encourage the black community in its suffering, and provide an ethic of resistance to continued racial injustices. However, neither slave religion nor contemporary Black Theology has addressed the complete story of the Exodus. The previous chapter demonstrated how the Sabbath tradition, as revealed within the social and cultic laws of Torah, is canonically connected to the Exodus. Although different scholars disagree over whether these laws serve to reveal Israel’s response to God’s liberative work in Exodus or God’s requirements for a liberated people, it is plain that the Sabbath practices of the Hebrew Scriptures are not only cultic, but also carry fundamental social, political and economic implications.

This final chapter seeks to address the ways in which a black hermeneutical reading of the Sabbath tradition might be meaningful for Black Theology. Such a reading will reveal that the deliverance from Egypt and the wilderness wanderings are not the culmination of Exodus. There is more to this story than deliverance from Pharaoh. A black hermeneutical reading of the Sabbath tradition provides a fuller account of God’s intent for the people of Israel upon their deliverance from Pharaoh, and as such serves as a meaningful resource for continued conversations in Black Theology.
If one wonders why such an endeavor is important, perhaps the words of Cain Hope Felder can provide a poignant warning:

Despite their deliverance, a revealed Law, Promised Land, nationhood, and periods of glorious prosperity, the children of God enslaved one another, forgot and neglected the substantive moral dictates of Law, experienced slavery again, were delivered, developed a Temple fixation, fenced in the compassion inherent in the Torah, and separated themselves — either in ascetic withdrawal (Qumran), militant nationalist death squads (Sicarrii and Zealots), or in the pietism of peaceful coexistence (post A.D. 70 Rabbinic Judaism). Here we have portraits of what can happen to the oppressed once they are liberated. Forgetting their roots, they become condemned to repeat socioeconomically and spiritually their past.¹

Felder makes clear that a hermeneutic of liberation revealed in Exodus may not be sufficient on its own. As he argues, even with the theological principles that undergirded the Sabbath as a ready resource, the Israelites forgot their history, and the Bible relates the tragic consequences. How much more important is it for Black Theology, grounded in the narrative of Exodus, to remember the principles of the Sabbath tradition in the continued struggle against oppression? This warning reveals the extent to which the attempt to understand the ways the Sabbath vision might be relevant within the contemporary context, particularly the contemporary context of a theology that has sought to make normative the liberation of the Exodus.

If the Sabbath tradition is going to serve as a meaningful narrative within the black theological tradition, then two things must be demonstrated. The first is a consistency between Black Theology and the Sabbath tradition. It must be shown in what ways the theological foundations for Sabbath, as read from the perspective of a black hermeneutic, help to support the concerns already being addressed by Black

¹ Felder, Troubling Biblical Waters, 20.
theology. If the adoption of Sabbath cannot demonstrate consistency with the concerns of Black Theology, it is of little use. This will shape the first section of this chapter.

To this end, I will demonstrate first the consistency between the Sabbath vision’s alternative society and the call of Black Theology for structural changes that can address poverty and racism. In particular, I will address how a black hermeneutical reading of Sabbath might be meaningful within the thought of Dwight Hopkins in regards to the New Common Wealth. Second, I will demonstrate the ways in which the Sabbath tradition’s foundation in the covenantal understandings of Israel confronts an individualistic view of society, which theologians, such as Dwight Hopkins and Deotis Roberts, see as one of the primary sources of social injustice. A third way in which the Sabbath tradition can address extant concerns within Black Theology is by the connection of the eschatological reign of God to present social ethical concerns. I will focus, in particular, upon the ways in which a black hermeneutical reading of Sabbath might influence the concerns of James Cone surrounding the white emphasis on eternity at the expense of temporal historical concerns.

In each of these cases, Black Theology’s use of the Exodus narrative without the association of the Sabbath vision to make its argument can be more meaningfully addressed by the adoption of the Sabbath alongside the Exodus. For example, the concern within Black Theology for critiquing social structures that perpetuate poverty and racism can more adequately be addressed by the inclusion of a narrative that specifically addresses what a society might look like upon experiencing Exodus.

The second section of this chapter will be shaped by the need to demonstrate the ways in which a black hermeneutical reading of the Sabbath vision can provide new
avenues of exploration within Black Theology. If the Sabbath vision is to become a worthwhile narrative within Black Theology, it must be able to provide these new theological insights, or risk becoming an unnecessary tautology.

To this end, two possibilities for further exploration within Black Theology will be presented. First, the emphasis within the Sabbath vision upon YHWH’s ownership of the land reveals a theology that might provide opportunities for the underdeveloped concern for environmental ethics within Black Theology. And the second possibility for a meaningful appropriation of the Sabbath vision within Black Theology is the means by which it can help to address the pertinent issues raised by Womanist Theology in regards to the concerns of black women.

It is important to note that a historical-critical interpretation of Sabbath will prove difficult to use for addressing the ethical concerns of Black Theology. In order for the Hebrew Sabbath to provide a meaningful narrative for Black Theology’s vision of a new society it must be interpreted from a black hermeneutical perspective. This is true for a number of reasons. First, the Sabbath tradition does not prevent poverty specifically, but resists perpetual poverty. The ethical concerns of the Sabbath tradition do not preclude the possibility of an individual or family becoming poor, but instead attempt to ensure that this family’s economic weakness does not get exploited in such a way that their poverty becomes perpetual. Second, the Sabbath tradition (and really, the Bible at large) does not address the question of race in general, nor does it address a poverty that is due to racism. Race is not even a category that is present within scripture. Third, the covenant, of which Sabbath is a part, is addressed to a specific people in a specific place.

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It is intended to provide the people of Israel alone with the requirements for relationship to God. It helps to establish a unique people who have been liberated and expatriated to a new land. As such, a historical-critical interpretation of Sabbath cannot address the unique context of contemporary black society which bears little resemblance to the liberated ancient Israelite community. Hence it is important that the Sabbath tradition be interpreted in light of the black hermeneutic of liberation in order to demonstrate the ways in which the alternative society of Israel might be meaningful in a modern black context.

Such a hermeneutical perspective recognizes that the context of the black community provides the most important framework for the ways in which that community will understand scripture. The Sabbath narrative must be interpreted for use within the black community in much the way that Exodus has been interpreted. There are two operative assumptions within this hermeneutic. The first is that God acts within history working within it to bring about God’s ends. The second assumption emphasizes that God’s ends are consistent with liberation. These two assumptions determine whether or not biblical passages can actually be considered “Word of God.” In light of the hermeneutical problems associated with interpreting the Sabbath tradition from a historical-critical perspective, these interpretive concerns will be operative in the remainder of this chapter.³

³ See Chapter 3 for a fuller discussion of black hermeneutics.
SABBATH’S CONTRIBUTION TO EXTANT BLACK THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

Structural Injustice

If there is one issue within Black Theology that is most important, it is arguably the injustice due to racism suffered by non-white peoples. Any theology that does not address the systems and structures that cause race-based poverty and oppression cannot be considered Christian. As such, one of the ethical purposes of Black Theology is to call into question the normative assumptions of a society based on white racist ideology. A second purpose serves as a correlative to the first: to offer alternative visions for what society should look like. This section of the dissertation will demonstrate the ways in which a black hermeneutical reading of Sabbath might correspond to these concerns within Black Theology.

In regards to the first of these two purposes, there are three realities within white American society that have been accepted uncritically by many white people: 1) the normativity of whiteness, 2) the institutionalization of racism, and 3) consumerism and

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4 For more on the connection between race and poverty in the U.S. see Bryan Massingale, Poverty and Racism: Overlapping Threats to the Common Good, (Alexandria, Virginia: Catholic Charities USA).

5 By white normativity I mean the assumptions made by and within a “white” society about what is considered or deemed normal, standard, or acceptable. Such normative assumptions provide the at times unspoken foundations for a social and cultural system of white supremacy. Black Theologians have identified many ways in which white assumptions define society. For example, Dwight Hopkins identifies three white assumptions that ensure that white supremacy goes unquestioned. The first is racial identity, which affects the individual and collective understanding of the self, both consciously and unconsciously. Hopkins argues that white normativity is accepted by both black and white people when they assume that white skin is more reflective of full humanity than black skin is. The second area is aesthetics, which shapes concepts of beauty and value. These judgments in turn define what is “good” and what is “bad.” In a white society, “darkness” is somehow associated with evil, and “light” with good. “White” is pure, and “dark” is defiled. Such associations propagate the belief that white skin is superior to dark skin. The final area Hopkins identifies is power, which highlights the ability to monopolize wealth, violence and the media. The one prerequisite for success, wealth and power in “white” society is whiteness. Hopkins argues that the assumptions made in these three areas not only serve to perpetuate white supremacy, but also make it the most influential imperial force on earth. Dwight N. Hopkins, Being Human: Race, Culture and Religion, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 130. Similarly, James Cone notes “The white denial of the theological value of black history and culture in the doing of theology meant a denial of black humanity
monopolization. Different proponents of Black Theology have criticized each of these in turn, attempting to call into question their uncritical acceptance within American society.

Critiquing White Normativity. There are numerous assumptions within white American culture with which the proponents of Black Theology take issue. What each of these assumptions boils down to is a normativity of whiteness. In America, according to Black Theology, whiteness has historically defined what is beautiful, what is right, what is normal and what is influential. “In the American civic fabric, there inheres an unspoken prerequisite for success: the requirement of whiteness.” Whether one is talking about who has a right to power, or the right to wealth ownership, or the right to claim what is moral, or the right to claim what is the work of God, it is white ideas and norms that make the determination. Hopkins goes on to note that the requirements of white normativity deny the image of God in those who are not white. He argues that God’s purposes for creation have been hampered by the arrogance of white normativity.

This normativity is akin to a kind of idolatry of white skin. And any attempt by whites to uphold what they see as their own superiority is an attempt to usurp the role and

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7 For example, Dwight Hopkins identifies three such assumptions: 1) Racial identity, which effects the individual and collective understanding of the self, both consciously and unconsciously. 2) Aesthetics, which shapes values and judgments, thereby defining what is “good” and what is “bad.” 3) Power, which highlights the ability to monopolize wealth, violence and the media. Hopkins argues that these assumptions serve to ensure that white supremacy is the most influential imperial force on earth. ibid., 130.
8 ibid., 167.
9 ibid., 167.
power of Jesus,\textsuperscript{11} which would alienate white Christians from Jesus. Any compelled normativity of whiteness within society makes an idol of whiteness, which subsequently leads to the destruction of black identity and black value.

As such, Black Theology has sought to resist the normativity of whiteness, claiming that blackness, too, can be beautiful. James Cone has sought to demonstrate the importance of black people reclaiming their identity by embracing the characteristic that they have been forced to ignore if they wanted to become a part of white society – their blackness. For Cone the entirety of American history reveals the American attempt to destroy black identity, whether through slavery or integration. The destruction of black identity ensures that whiteness is the only normative reality present in America. And so Cone argues that the black community must resist white definitions of blackness and uphold the dignity of being black. They must refuse to be assimilated into white community, if that assimilation means they are to become white.\textsuperscript{12} He argues that until America can admit that there is value and dignity in blackness, and in this way forsaking the normativity of whiteness, any attempted integration between white and black peoples will prove either futile or destructive.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Critiquing Institutional Racism}. Black Theology as a whole recognizes that the issues of racism are only minimally due to the prejudices of individual racists. Ultimately, the real problem stems from racism’s institutionalization. Many white people are not prejudiced or racist on an individual level, or in their individual dealings with non-white people. However, due to the institutional nature of racism, whites have benefited from the oppression of black people regardless of their personal interaction

\textsuperscript{11} Hopkins, \textit{Down, Up and Over}, 204.
\textsuperscript{12} Cone, \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}, 39.
\textsuperscript{13} Cone, \textit{Black Theology and Black Power}, 17.
with racism. The institutions that propagate the superiority of whiteness include economic, political, and religious entities. Deotis Roberts argues that a belief in the racial inferiority of black people, and a corresponding superiority of white people, is a part of the accepted social norms of white people, even white church-goers. In the same way, James Cone argues that contemporary theology is blind to the problem of the enslaved condition of black people. White theologians tend to define the theological questions philosophically and metaphysically rather than deal with the physical reality of the ghettos. This has helped to ensure the continuation of the status quo, which enslaves blacks. Racism goes beyond the obvious hatred of a few, beyond the attempts of those same people to seek harm for people with dark skin. For Roberts and Cone both, racism is a sinister hidden problem that is both unconscious as well as conscious, both institutional and individual. White theology has ultimately failed to relate to oppressed peoples because it has refused to confront the evils of racism present deep within the structures of American society.

Critiquing Monopolization and Consumerism. A third concern within Black Theology regarding American society is located primarily in the work of Dwight Hopkins, who criticizes the monopolistic and consumeristic tendencies of Western economies. Although some might consider consumerism to be a purely economic reality, Hopkins argues that it has become a religious phenomenon in Western culture. This religion is based upon the right and ability of powerful white people to monopolize

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14 For more on the privilege of white people in America and the need for theology to address the problem see Laurie M. Cassiday and Alex Mikulich, editors, *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007.)


16 For Cone, The institutionalization of racism within America serves to enslave contemporary black people in a similar fashion to antebellum slavery. Hence he can argue, “To preach the gospel today means confronting the world with the reality of Christian freedom. It means telling black people that their slavery has come to an end, and telling whites to let go of the chains.” *Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation*, 231.
creation and sacrifice the vulnerable\textsuperscript{17} on the altar of consumption.\textsuperscript{18} The god of consumerism is “monopoly wealth,” and is most concerned with providing the conditions whereby the greatest concentration of wealth can be achieved. In this way, the powerful can monopolize their control of the resources of the earth. Those who worship this god pursue it by any means necessary. “It is the final goal above all else.”\textsuperscript{19} Monopoly wealth is “transcendent” in that it owes no allegiance to any nation, person or institution. Wealth circles the globe and is used to manipulate circumstances for the profit of its owner and at the expense of the weak. The goal to which all who worship this god are aligned is the subordination of all humanity and all creation to consumption. “Instead of characterizing itself as love, liberation, justice or reconciliation, this god is mammon.”\textsuperscript{20} The theological anthropology of consumerism is such that the individual’s humanity is based upon the ability to consolidate and consume. The adherents of this religion are “rebaptized,” and “the measure of worth becomes what one consumes.”\textsuperscript{21} Because those with dark skin disproportionately lack the ability to consolidate wealth or consume goods, consumerism relegates them to less than full humanity. Hopkins argues, “A correct social analysis must perceive the interlocking nature of white supremacy and capitalist class exploitation domestically with the inherently violent nature of United States monopoly capitalism on a global scale.”\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{17} Unlike Cone, who identifies blackness as an ontological category that includes all those who are weak, Hopkins tends to identify Black Theology as a theology of those who are weak. Hence, he does not typically refer to blackness as the marker of one who is exploited and enslaved, but weakness.

\textsuperscript{18} Hopkins, Heart and Head, 129.

\textsuperscript{19} ibid., 130.

\textsuperscript{20} ibid., 131.

\textsuperscript{21} ibid., 134.

\textsuperscript{22} Hopkins, Shoes that Fit our Feet, 206.
In a critique consistent with Hopkins’ own critique, James Cone notes how often white people associate their privilege and their success with God’s blessing.\textsuperscript{23} Cone’s frustration is obvious, when he claims that such an understanding divorces God’s love from God’s righteousness. According to Cone, white people assume that their ability to monopolize resources and be successful is due to God’s blessing of their economic endeavors. The implication is that white oppression has led to God’s blessing. But the wealth and privilege of white people in a racist white society is not due to God’s divine favor or blessing, but to the oppression of those with dark skin.

The proponents of Black Theology argue that the normativity of whiteness, the institutionalization of racism, and the problem of consumerism and monopolization must be challenged. It is here that Exodus has played such an important role in Black theological thought. The call to challenge these systems and assumptions within Black Theology is based in the activity of God on behalf of those who are oppressed. God always sides with the poor against those who would oppress them and make them that way. God is the one who challenges the systemic and structural injustices that perpetuate the poverty of the weak. Racism and poverty are not only personal sins, and thus cannot be solved by personal transformation alone; structural change is also necessary. And because God has demonstrated that God resists injustice, God’s people are called to participate in that change. “In a word, the vertical fellowship with God results in political commitments to change the human world.”\textsuperscript{24}

The refusal of Black Theology to accept white definitions of normativity is a means of participating in the liberating work of God in resisting the status quo. White

\textsuperscript{23} Cone, \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}, 132.
\textsuperscript{24} Hopkins, \textit{Being Human}, 37.
society wants to make black expressions of morality, worth and dignity unsuitable in an attempt to make whiteness the norm, but

When we permit ourselves to experience the root meaning of the biblical message and to hear the claims that it lays upon all who would dare be Christian in this world, then we will see the radical difference between the established churches and the truth of the gospel. For inherent in the Christian gospel is the refusal to accept the things that are as the things that ought to be. This “great refusal” is what makes Christianity what it is and thus infuses in its very nature a radicality that can never accept the world as it is.\(^{25}\)

The Exodus leads the followers of God to refuse “to accept the things that are as the things that ought to be.” In order to be consistent with God’s liberative work one must fight the assumptions and systems of white supremacy.

There is a second purpose within the ethical concerns of Black Theology, one that goes beyond the criticism of structural injustices. Black Theology also seeks to provide a vision for what the world might look like if it represented the concerns of the liberating God of Exodus. Exodus has served to shape the black challenge of anything that restricts human freedom or dignity. It calls for a new existence, one that is not defined by exploitation and slavery. But it does not provide an alternative vision for what that society might look like, which is of equal concern within Black Theology.

To this end, Dwight Hopkins has presented a vision for a new human community, which he refers to as the “New Common Wealth.” Hopkins’ New Common Wealth is marked by three things, the first two of which will be addressed here.\(^{26}\) First, it is a society in which no one family can own the property or labor of another. The monopolization of the resources of God is inconsistent with Hopkins’ explanation of the

\(^{25}\) Cone, *Speaking the Truth*, 36.

\(^{26}\) The third component of the New Common Wealth is a communal lifestyle that resists the individualism of American culture and will be addressed in a later section of this chapter.
New Common Wealth. One cannot exist as a member of this society if one does not live justly with the poor and weak. To be human is to work with the Spirit within us to put an end to structures favoring the rich and powerful. This means that it is necessary to redistribute the resources of God’s creation in such a manner that wealth disparity no longer exists. It is also necessary to resist the exploitative labor practices that enrich the poor at the expense of the weak and impoverished.

Second, it is a society in which barriers to full humanity no longer exist. These barriers Hopkins associates with ideologies that justify exploitation based on class, gender, race, or sexual orientation. In the New Common Wealth there is no marginalization that forces black people to accept the normativity of whiteness, females to accept the normativity of maleness, or gay people to live with the normativity of heterosexuality.

The Exodus narrative within Black Theology has been used to argue forcefully that the injustices of racism, consumerism, individualism and monopolization are inconsistent with the work of God and Christ. But the question that has not been answered is, “What’s next?” The Exodus is a norming narrative within Black Theology, but without the inclusion of Sabbath it does not provide a vision for a new society. However, a black reading of the Sabbath tradition reveals the ways in which it demonstrates Israel’s vision for an alternative society to the social, economic and political systems of the pharaonic world that Exodus overcomes. Exodus revealed something about YHWH to the Israelites. The God who saved them from slavery demanded that they live in a way consistent with their liberation. And so, the Sabbath

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27 Hopkins, *Down, Up and Over*, 197.
28 ibid., 253.
29 See for example, Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 53-74
vision as both a cultic and social institution provides laws of economic behavior based upon their historical and religious experience. The practices of Sabbath were not mere legal stipulations, but were grounded in the collective history and faith of Israel. Their society was to reflect their liberation.

A black hermeneutical reading of Sabbath can contribute to the ethical concerns of Black Theology by demonstrating the possibility of an economic model that is based upon one’s relationship with one’s neighbor rather than one’s ability to consume and/or monopolize resources. Within such a reading the Sabbath provides four tenets for what this new society might look like. The first is that the resources of the world belong to God, and are graciously given by God for all people. God’s provision is both an abundant and inscrutable gift. There is no need for anyone to go hungry. Within the Sabbath tradition, God’s provision is never intended to be monopolized by a few. There is enough for every person’s need. No segment of Israelite society is precluded from participating in this abundant provision. The Israelites were compelled to accept what they needed as a gift from God, but to resist the temptation to take more than they needed. The attempt to store manna was met with failure by the miraculous work of God, and the attempt to accumulate land was also resisted by the God who gave it to all the people.

In the same way, no segment of the global community should be forced to suffer poverty while a few rich people hoard God’s resources. The dominant schools of economics in contemporary America tell us that material scarcity is inevitable due to the

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30 This is one area in which a Black hermeneutic is crucial, as opposed to a historical-critical hermeneutic. Although no individual was precluded from the abundance of manna, the same cannot be said of the land, which was allotted to males and passed from generation to generation patrilineally. A black hermeneutic of liberation must take into consideration the rights and roles of women in order to ensure that this alternative society does not preclude them.
boundless wants of an ever increasing human population for limited resources. Scarcity is a condition from which humanity cannot be delivered. However, the Sabbath tradition refuses to accept that God’s provision is inadequate. God has delivered in abundance what is needed for every person’s need, although not perhaps for every person’s greed. While advertisers seek to condition us to accept no differentiation between our needs and our wants, the Sabbath tradition upholds a very real distinction between them.

This leads to the second perspective the Sabbath tradition provides for a new society, namely a refusal to allow monopolization. A black hermeneutical reading of the Hebrew Bible must recognize a distinction between the socio-economic system in Egypt and that established by the Sabbath tradition. Egypt represents a land in which the powerful make use of their ability to enslave the poor and weak, in order to monopolize the resources of the land. Israel’s Sabbath vision reveals a different possibility in which God’s resources cannot be hoarded by a select few at the expense of the weak. God forbade the use of God’s provision in any way that ensured the poverty of another member of the covenant.

It should be noted that the Sabbath tradition does not resist ownership per se. The Israelites are permitted to use their land to produce crops for themselves and their families. They are permitted to own the resources necessary to provide for their needs (e.g. livestock). However, within the Sabbath tradition, YHWH’s ownership of the land precludes the claim of any other person or level of society. The land is not theirs to do

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with as they see fit. God has given the land as a gift, and if the Israelites do not live up to the expectations that God has placed upon the land, then God will remove it from them.\footnote{Regina Schwartz notes the connection of humanity to land, and the strange idea that humanity can parcel out land, and claim a part of the earth as their own. She notes the role this way of thinking has played in countless acts of violence, including the biblical conquest story. However, she also notes that there is within scripture an alternative view to the land. Jubilee, because it does not view the Israelites as the owners of the land, but as tenents upon the land of God, refuses to allow them to enact violence in its protection. The Israelites are not the ones who own the land, but are ultimately sojourners even within Israel. “In theory, the theology of the land as ‘inherited’ protects its heirs against those who would seize it by force.” Regina M. Schwartz, \textit{The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism}, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 53}

A black hermeneutical reading of the Sabbath and Jubilee years emphasizes the importance to live with God’s provision in such a way that one does not give primacy to those resources. Instead, it recognizes that those who have been created in the divine image have a claim to the resources of God. Monopolization disorders God’s creative purposes, but Sabbath provides a means by which the needs of the poor take priority over the rights of the wealthy to hoard the abundant provision of God.

A third perspective that the Sabbath tradition offers for a new society in contemporary America is the refusal to accept consumeristic idolatry. If consumerism is a religion, as Hopkins argues, and the god of this religion is mammon, then what is necessary to free God’s people from slavery to the false god of mammon? The declaration of a new allegiance, one to the God of liberation will include a new way of living that does not reflect the socio-economic standards of consumerism.

The Sabbath tradition is a part of the covenant that was intended to reveal and constitute the relationship between Israel and her sovereign, YHWH. The failure to live up to the covenant constituted a breach of this relationship. As such, the requirement to live up to the Sabbath stipulations was constitutive of one’s existence as a person of God.
There could be no other sovereign. As such there is no room within the Torah or the prophets for the worship of the idol of mammon.

The concerns of Cone, mentioned above, in regards to white claims of divine blessing are therefore confronted with a different theological perspective. White success is not an indication of God’s favor. Rather, because it has been won through the iniquitous use of resources and the dehumanization of God’s children, the white ability to possess the land is an indication of their idolatry. No person or group of people can simultaneously control the resources of the Creator and still claim that Creator as their God. The manipulation of the world’s resources in such a way that some have plenty and others suffer is not an indication of relationship with YHWH, but a forecast of YHWH’s condemnation.

The experience of the Exodus provided Israel with a spirituality of liberation. But that spirituality is not revealed primarily in their experience of Exodus, but in the command of YHWH to obey the covenant, including Sabbath. It is in Sabbath that the Israelites were called to both remember their liberation, and to live it, practice it, and find new ways to establish it. It is the Sabbath narrative in which their commitment to an alternative society, based in solidarity and community rather than exploitation and individualism, is revealed. In the same way that Hopkins demonstrates a concern for a new society that refuses to accept the status quo of monopolization and marginalization, the Sabbath laws emphasize a society based in relationship rather than in productivity and wealth maximization and in need rather than want or consumption. As such, a black hermeneutical reading of Sabbath can help provide a theological foundation for the alternative society envisioned by Black Theology.
The importance of community within Black Theology cannot be overstated. It is a theme that is emphasized by most black theologians. Although they often highlight different concerns in regards to community, there is a common concern that the emphasis upon the individual within Western philosophy and ethics is insufficient for understanding the human person.\textsuperscript{34} To this end, many black theologians argue that the social nature of the human being is a crucial component of theological anthropology.

Within Black Theology, individualism leads to an isolation of human persons that becomes detrimental to both the individual and the community. Hence, Hopkins insists that the New Common Wealth must forsake individualism.\textsuperscript{35} He argues that individualism forces the individual to live as though the concerns of the community are unimportant, which enervates the community and harms the individual, whose humanity is dependent upon social relationships. The emphasis upon the individual results in “me-first” societies in which people become “enamored by distracting entertainments, satisfied with what they consider reasonable disposable income, or aggressive in their pursuit of wealth.”\textsuperscript{36} These self-centered pursuits isolate us from one another and ultimately result in the destruction of the social connections that make us human. For this reason, Hopkins insists that it is necessary to not only transform the systemic structures

\textsuperscript{34} See for example, Roberts, \textit{Black Religion, Black Theology}, 53; Hopkins, \textit{Heart and Head}, 65; and Cone, \textit{Black Theology and Black Power}, 103.

\textsuperscript{35} Hopkins, \textit{Down, Up and Over}, 197.

\textsuperscript{36} Hopkins, \textit{Being Human}, 95.
of evil (e.g. racism) in society, but to “transform the internal demon of individualism.” Only then will the New Common Wealth become a possibility.

Hopkins instead argues for an individuality that opposes individualism. This individuality provides a freedom that individualism could not, because it liberates the human person to recognize and serve the common good in such a way that the interests of the Common Wealth and not the interests of the individual become the ultimate goal of humanity. Individuality redefines humanness, so that the religion of consumerism can no longer define the human being by its ability to consume. By drawing on West African philosophy, Hopkins points out that only through the freedom to serve the collective interests is one’s true humanity realized, for without community, one is “less than an animal.” Hopkins argues for a humanity that functions differently by living a communal lifestyle in which all members of society are equal. The humanity of the individual is dependent upon the full humanity of each member of the community, such that no member of the community can be fully human if another’s dignity is denied.

In this way, Hopkins insists that God’s intent for humanity is not individualism, but community and communal interactions. Solidarity and the common good are the focus of this communalism, because the collective selves take priority over individual self-interest. “Perception of the holistic selves in community hinges on perceiving collective humanity incarnated in the humanity of others. All humanities thrive when all see their own humanities embodied in others.” The image of ourselves in the community and in the existence of others leads to a realization of the humanity of the

37 ibid., 80.
38 Hopkins, Heart and Head, 72.
39 ibid., 72.
40 ibid., 50.
41 Hopkins, Being Human, 88.
other, and can lead to humanizing relationships. A healthy humanity recognizes God’s intent for a society defined by political, economic and social balance and harmony.

Deotis Roberts also argues that the emphasis upon the individual within Western thought has failed to recognize that true human fulfillment is necessarily dependent upon healthy social relationships. However, Roberts provides an important new perspective. He contends that the *imago Dei* has been defined as something possessed by the individual in much of white Christian theology. Roberts, drawing from African religion, emphasizes that the *imago Dei* is not located purely within the individual, but is also a function of the community. God did not create humanity to live as isolated individuals, but created it for fellowship both with the divine and with fellow human beings. The *imago Dei* cannot be fully revealed on an individual basis without also recognizing the interconnection of all life.

To this end, salvation becomes more than an individual experience. In the same way that the image of God is a function of both the individual and the communal, God’s salvation is not merely revealed on an individual basis. Roberts argues that the individual salvation of white theology is insufficient, because it fails to consider the community’s need for salvation. Society must be saved from the evils that persist within it, and “No Jesusology based upon salvation one-on-one will put an end to this social evil. Jesus comes to the black man as Lord of all life, confronting systems of evil that dehumanize the oppressed.” Because racism is institutionalized, Christ must not only save the individual from sin, but must also redeem society from the demonic systemic problems of racism and poverty. God’s intent is for human unity, but both individuals and society

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43 *ibid.*, 136.
have been responsible for thwarting this work of God.\textsuperscript{44} As such, a salvation that is purely individualistic is inadequate to address the problems at hand.

The Sabbath tradition, and its foundation in the covenantal relationships of Israel, reveals a theological anthropology that when understood from a black hermeneutical perspective supports the concerns of Black theology regarding the human person. I would like to examine three ways in which this is the case.

The first, and perhaps most important, is a redefinition of human value. Within the Sabbath tradition profit does not take precedence over people. The ability to maximize wealth through the acquisition of the resources for wealth creation (i.e., the land) has limits placed upon it. The Israelite who has benefited from the productivity of his land must not see that productivity as a means to further wealth if in so doing he would subject another to inhuman conditions. Although the productivity of one person may provide that person with ample opportunity to subject another to the indignities of poverty or exploitation, such behavior is forbidden. The creation of wealth is not inconsistent with the Sabbath tradition, but it is not the goal either, and when it impinges upon the humanity of another it becomes iniquitous.

In this way, the Sabbath tradition offers a prophetic critique to the North American option to focus on national wealth rather than human dignity. Within a consumeristic culture people are a means to the end of consumption. Wealth and pleasure drive choices in such a way that the weak are exploited in the pursuit of more and more consumer goods. However, the Sabbath tradition demands that the powerful remember the poor and prefer them to the pursuit of their own wealth. It calls for a redefinition of humanity such that the human person has primacy over the goods it can

\textsuperscript{44} Roberts, \textit{Liberation and Reconciliation}, 61.
produce or consume. Within the Sabbath tradition, one’s humanity is not determined by what one produces, but by one’s willingness to serve those who do not possess the means to survive. The humanity of the privileged elite is less than human if they fail to recognize the humanity of the impoverished.

A second way in which the Sabbath tradition can support the concerns of Black Theology regarding community is in the connection between the ritual and ethical commands of the covenant. There is no dichotomy within the Israelite mind between one’s religious obligation to YHWH and one’s obligation to one’s covenant neighbor. Within Israel, identity as God’s people was dependent upon two equally important factors: Israel’s willingness to live righteously with YHWH, and the Israelite’s willingness to live righteously with one another. There was no means by which a person could faithfully practice one set of obligations without also observing the other. As such, there was no way in which one clan could exploit a weaker clan and still be considered faithful inheritors of God’s promise. One could not simultaneously claim membership in YHWH’s covenant community and work to oppress other members of that covenant community.

Within a black hermeneutical framework, the connection between the ritual and ethical commandments of the covenant reveals the extent to which the community’s relationship to God is directly related to its willingness to care for the poor. Care for the poor and weak must not be left up to individual acts of charity, but is a requirement placed upon the entire community. Within black theological thought any community that claims to represent God’s purpose on earth must demonstrate concern for the things that concern God. In other words, they must participate in the liberative work of God. Only
those communities that participate in God’s liberative action for those who suffer poverty and disenfranchisement due to the color of their skin can be considered heirs of the kingdom of God.45 Sabbath provides a theological foundation for the claim, placed upon all Christians, that how they treat the weak, poor, and disenfranchised is determinative of their citizenship in God’s kingdom.

The third manner in which the concerns of Black Theology can be further developed by the inclusion of the Sabbath discourse is by the insistence upon salvation as a collective experience. The Israelites believed that the individual’s faith was a function of the community.46 Faith and salvation were only accomplished through participation in the faith community, and in relationship to its members. As such, the salvation that God provided for Israel was not won for the sake of individual autonomy or in order that they might live however they pleased, but in order that they might exist as a unique community. The individual’s salvation was dependent upon his/her participation within the collective covenantal relationships of Torah, which included both Sabbath and Jubilee.

A hermeneutical reading of Sabbath done from the context of the black community emphasizes the communal and political nature of salvation. The salvation of the individual is possible only insofar as the community in which that individual practices his/her faith represents the liberative aims of God. The Israelite community represented something that looked entirely unlike the nations around it, because it refused to accept that some had to be enslaved in order for the community to function properly. The impoverishment of one segment of the community was a failure of covenant in such a

45 See footnote 17 in Chapter 2 of the current dissertation.
way that the salvation of the entire community was called into question. If it is necessary for some to be impoverished in order for society to work then society is flawed, and in need of redemption. This is why the Church must provide an alternative to the cultural norms of American society. Because the white church has been so influential in establishing the racist ideology that promotes injustice in American society, the Black Church becomes a crucially necessary factor in demonstrating what a saved community might look like. One is saved as one participates with the Black Church in God’s liberative work in America.\footnote{It should be noted that Black Theology, and James Cone in particular, criticize the Black Church for its failures to live up to the liberative purposes of God. The Black Church is only able to demonstrate what a saved community looks like insofar as it resists the racist assumptions of white theology and works toward the liberation of oppressed black people. James H. Cone, \textit{Black Theology and Black Power}, 20\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary Edition, (San Francisco: Harper, 1969, 1989), 105-107.}

According to Black Theology, the theology of many white Americans strips black people of their identity and their human dignity. This theology presents a salvation that Black Theology has claimed is overspiritualized. The Sabbath narrative and its connection to covenant demonstrate that this overspiritualized salvation cannot be true salvation because it stems from a community that does not reflect the liberative aims of God. As such, only the salvation that comes from one’s involvement with a faith community such as the Black Church can be a truly efficacious salvation, because only a faith community like that reflects the salvation of God.

A historical-critical interpretation of these laws runs into certain limitations, in particular the exclusivity of the Israelite covenant. The Sabbath tradition was one that was primarily addressed only to Israel. Sabbath was given to Israel as a sign of her relationship to YHWH. The Israelite was only required to free Israelite slaves, and only required to return Israelite land that had been sold to them to pay off a debt. With the rise
of the global community, especially in the shadow of colonialism, the apparent freedom of Israel to ignore the Sabbath stipulations in regards to those who are not Hebrew may prove problematic.

However, the insistence within Black Theology that the ministry and work of Christ is a fulfillment of the work begun in the Exodus opens the possibility for a more inclusive perspective. By this I mean that the possible connections between the Jubilee and Jesus’ understanding of the kingdom of God provide a more universalized vision for the community. The community of God, according to Jesus, is not confined to the boundaries of Israel, or to those who bear the marks of the Israelite covenant (Matt. 8:5-13; 15:21-28; John 10:16). The kingdom of God is made up of those who obey the commandments of God (Matt. 25:31-46; John 14:23-24). In light of Jesus’ redefinition of the kingdom of God, a black hermeneutical reading of the Sabbath tradition can argue for the necessity to treat the world’s poor, those who have suffered, and continue to suffer at the hands of colonialism, globalism and consumerism, with justice. The adoption of this Sabbath tradition by Black Theology provides the theological insistence that care for the world’s poor is a crucially necessary component of one’s existence as a member of the community of God.

The connection of the Sabbath traditions to the covenantal responsibilities of the Israelite peoples demonstrates the significance of community in Sabbath that is not necessarily present within Exodus. The Sabbath requirements were constitutive of belonging to the community of God. One could not disregard those requirements and still be considered a part of that community. Thus, Sabbath can help provide a deeper
foundation for Black Theology’s emphasis on the community in a way that Exodus cannot on its own.

Eschatology and Ethics

Within Black Theology there is an insistence that the eschatological hope associated with salvation must be seen in light of present ethical concerns. Although Deotis Roberts and Dwight Hopkins recognize the need for an eschatology that has ethical meaning, it is James Cone that most fully develops the idea.\(^{48}\) It may be necessary to briefly explain what is meant within this section by the terms “eschatology” and “ethics.” The term “eschatology” used here refers primarily to the presence of an eternal ideal, what some may call “heaven.”\(^{49}\) For Cone, heaven’s existence is assumed. The concern for Cone is not whether heaven exists, but whether it serves to dull the revolutionary ethics of black people. He insists it does if it is separated from historical ethical concerns, or “ethics.” The term “ethics” is used here to mean a concern for social, political and economic realities within history, especially contemporary history.\(^{50}\)

Cone’s concern is that, at least from a mainstream white theological perspective, ethics and eschatology have been divorced from one another. Cone argues that such a separation fails to recognize the influence that ethics and eschatology must have on one another, such that emphasizing one to the exclusion of the other enervates both. Cone upholds a vision that connects eschatology to ethical historical concerns, a vision that

\(^{48}\) For more on this see pages 64-68 of the current work.

\(^{49}\) I choose to use the term eschatology because, within the Hebrew Scriptures, the concept of “heaven” as a place of eternal rest is undeveloped. However, the Hebrew Scriptures do uphold a vision of God’s eschatological reign. (See for example, pages 164-171 of the current work.)

\(^{50}\) Terms like politics and economics are anachronistic in regards to the Hebrew Scriptures, in part because they do not develop conceptually until the enlightenment. They are equally anachronistic because the Hebrew Scriptures do not recognize the existence of autonomous historical realities; requirements upon the kings (politics) and the rich (economics) are not separable from the covenantal responsibilities of each person to YHWH.
also connects salvation to liberation. Whereas white theology may deem salvation to be an eschatological reality, and liberation to be a historical or ethical reality, Cone argues that one necessitates the other. In his vision, eschatology can only be discussed meaningfully in light of what God has already done, and the present can only be discussed meaningfully in light of the possibilities of the future. In other words, God’s purposes for eternity must be understood as being in some way consistent with God’s ethical designs for humanity within history, and present political, economic and social circumstances must all be evaluated by their ability to live up to the eschatological ideal. The influence that ethics and eschatology have upon one another in Cone’s theology is crucial for understanding his criticism of white theology, especially white concepts of salvation and the saving work of Christ.

Because Cone sees the Exodus as the norm for understanding God’s work within history, he argues that the interpenetration of eschatology and ethics is most clearly demonstrated by it. The Exodus reveals God’s concern for historical liberation (what I have termed “ethics”). Israel’s failure to live according to God’s ethical concerns, which God revealed within the Exodus, led to God’s judgment. This judgment Cone identifies as the Exile. He contends that the Exile is the result of Israel’s inability to recognize the connection between their historical salvation in Egypt and God’s eschatological purposes. The problem is that the Hebrew Scriptures do not explain the Exile in terms of eschatology, or as a failure to connect the Exodus with God’s eschatological judgment. The Exile may be interpreted as the result of Israel’s failures to live according to the

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51 Cone, “Biblical Revelation and Social Existence,” 426. Cone does not explain what he understands those eschatological purposes to be.
covenant, but the ensuing judgment of the Exile is not an eschatological one.\textsuperscript{52} The Exodus is depicted as an act of salvation, and Egypt becomes the foil of both Israel and YHWH within the Hebrew Scriptures, but the Exodus is the initiating act of a suzerain king in relationship to his vassals. Although the Exodus had tremendous theological significance for Israel, it does not bear eschatological implications within Hebrew thought.\textsuperscript{53}

This poses a problem for Cone’s emphasis upon ethics and eschatology. However, the criticism that he levies against white theology in this regard should not be disregarded, for the problems can be addressed by an adoption of the Sabbath narrative within Black Theology. Although Exodus doesn’t demonstrate it clearly, the Hebrew Scriptures do recognize a connection between the ethical practices of the covenant and God’s eschatological reign. The Sabbath and Jubilee prescriptions, which it has been demonstrated have social and economic implications, are also a foreshadowing of God’s eschatological reign. The Sabbath day is a practice wherein the Israelites participated in God’s intent for humanity and all of the created order. And the Jubilee year served to demonstrate an ideal that was in some way consistent with the concerns of the

\textsuperscript{52} For more on the relationship between Israel’s disobedience to YHWH and their subsequent exile from the Promised Land see Weinfeld, \textit{Social Justice in Ancient Israel}, 231-247.

\textsuperscript{53} Unlike the Christian New Testament, within the Hebrew Scriptures eschatology is never explicit. There is very little sustained discussion of heaven, hell, or life after death. As such, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what Israel’s eschatology looks like. However, it can be argued that the book of Exodus does contain some eschatological importance, in particular within the final 15 chapters. Some scholars, such as Nahum Sarna, note that the establishment of the tabernacle allows the experience of the Divine presence at Sinai to continue in perpetuity. Nahum Sarna, \textit{Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel}, (New York: Schocken Books, 1986, 1996), 190-191. Two other ways in which the Tabernacle might have eschatological significance are 1) that the Tabernacle is a “terrestrial objectification of a celestial image.” ibid., 200. As such, in its physical dimensions and “sacred furnishings” it represents the heavenly ideal. 2) The Ark of the Covenant was understood to be the footstool of the throne of God in heaven. God’s eternal sovereignty as the king of Israel is symbolized by the Ark that is God’s footstool. ibid., 210-212. The second half of the book of Exodus consists of YHWH’s commandments regarding the building of the tabernacle, the altar, and the ark of the covenant, and the book concludes with YHWH’s entering the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34-38). YHWH’s eternal divine presence goes forward with the Israelites from Sinai.
eschatological reign of God. If the Hebrew Sabbath and Jubilee laws bear social and
economic concerns, then there is an intimate connection within the Hebrew Scriptures
between eschatology and ethics. That connection is just not present within the Exodus on
its own.

As such, a black hermeneutical reading of the Sabbath tradition will reveal a hope
for God’s eschatological reign that is not present within the theological developments of
Exodus. The practices of the Sabbath day, sabbatical year and Jubilee years are reflective
of the ideal eschatological reign of God. The “new heaven” and “new earth” of Trito-
Isaiah (65:17, 66:22) are reflected in the “year of the Lord’s favor” from the jubilary
vision of God’s eschatological reign in Isaiah 61:2. The eschatological reign of God is
reflected in the practice of Sabbath (including the sabbatical and Jubilee years). This is
why the year of the Lord’s favor – the establishment of God’s eschatological reign – is
presented in connection with good news to the poor, liberty for those in debt, and
freedom for those enslaved. If the Sabbath vision is a vision for a new community that
radically countermands the imperialism of Pharaoh, then a society that takes seriously the
concerns of the weak and marginalized in some way reflects the eschatological reign of
God. A society that seeks to challenge systems of perpetuated poverty and enslavement
reveals God’s intent for creation, even if what it reveals is only a shadow of the
eschatological ideal. The new earth established by those who claim allegiance to the God
of the bible is identified with acts of freedom and protection for the weak. This new earth
serves as the fountainhead for the new heaven of God’s eschatological reign.

In this way, the Sabbath tradition is consistent with and can help support the
emphasis within Black Theology that eschatology and ethics are intertwined. If the
Exodus reveals a God who is concerned about the historical actions of humanity by actively opposing systems of oppression and exploitation, then it is the Sabbath that reveals the eschatological ideal that is the alternative to those systems. Black theologians like Cone have successfully used the Exodus as a narrative that points out the ways in which God’s concern for those who are marginalized or oppressed is revealed. However, if as Cone argues, eschatology provides the hope necessary to make an ethical world possible, the Sabbath tradition is crucially necessary. For, Sabbath and Jubilee provide the eschatological vision of a world ruled by God.

NEW AVENUES OPENED BY THE SABBATH TRADITION

At this point the chapter will turn to the possibilities for new areas of exploration within Black Theology. I will focus primarily on two possibilities. The first is to open avenues of discussion toward an environmental ethic within Black Theology. To this point, Black Theology has addressed environmental ethics primarily from the perspective of environmental racism, which does not consider the needs of creation so much as it does the ways in which people of color are disproportionately forced to deal with potentially harmful environmental factors. However, the Sabbath tradition, due especially to its emphasis upon the rights of the land to rest, provides a narrative that places great emphasis upon the needs of creation.

The second area of exploration is in the dialogue with Womanist Theology. The criticisms of Black Theology made by Womanist Theology were addressed in Chapter 3, and as such will not be repeated at length again here. Instead the remainder of the chapter will demonstrate the ways in which the Sabbath narrative provides a more nuanced perspective of liberation that is more suitable for Womanist concerns. To this
end, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan has suggested one area of possible exploration that might be helpful within this dialogue is the social laws of Israel that were intended to ensure the well-being of all Israel’s people.  

Land as Partner

One of the glaring lacunae within Black Theology is environmental ethics. That is not to say that black people have not sought to address environmental issues. However, their emphasis has not been on environmentalism or environmental ethics, but upon “environmental justice” or “environmental racism.” This emphasis draws attention to the disproportionate extent to which people of color and the poor are forced to deal with radioactive and hazardous waste disposal sites, and other potentially life-threatening environmental hazards, but not upon care for the earth, per se. While this is no doubt a real and growing problem, it does not address the more and more urgent problem of how and why we must take care of creation. As such, the Sabbath tradition from a black hermeneutical perspective must speak to both concerns – the conservation and care for nature and natural resources and the needs and rights of those who suffer “environmental racism.” It must provide a theology of creation that focuses both upon the rights of the

55 For example, Cone has only very recently begun to consider the need to address environmentalism as an ethical issues. See James Cone, “Whose Earth is it Anyway,” Sojourners 36:7 (July 2007), 15.
56 The question has been raised as early as the early 90’s. See for example Robert D. Bullard, Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quality, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990); See also Richard Hofrichter, Toxic Struggles: The Theory and Practice of Environmental Justice, (Salt Lake City: University Press, 2002), 25-35.
58 Massingale does argue that, at least according to the Catholic social tradition, a respect for creation must entail both a concern about the use of natural resources and about social justice.
poor to a healthy environment and the need to ensure that creation be preserved and protected.

Within Black Theology the focus in regards to environmentalism has been primarily to address the environment from the perspective of racism.

The logic that led to slavery and segregation in the Americas, colonization and apartheid in Africa, and the rule of white supremacy throughout the world is the same one that leads to the exploitation of animals and the ravaging of nature. It is a mechanistic and instrumental logic that defines everything and everybody in terms of their contribution to the development and defense of white world supremacy.  

Although Cone does go on to note that the best way forward for both the black freedom movement and the environmental movement is to develop a solidarity between them that will enhance the earth for all its inhabitants, he also acknowledges that there hasn’t been much theological development within his own thought in regards to the environment.

Cone does not explain why this lacuna exists within his work. However, I would argue that the hermeneutical norm of the Exodus within his theology has not provided a suitable narrative for addressing them. The land in which the Israelites lived while enslaved in Egypt was not one for which they were predisposed to care all that much. They had no stake in it, nor did they have the right to its produce. Egypt is not Promised Land; there is no command to let the land rest in Egypt. Nor do the Israelites have the right to rest from working the land. Ultimately, the land is a part of their slavery. As such there is little concern for the well-being of the land of Egypt by the Israeliite people.

Another way in which the Exodus narrative’s normativity might result in a blindness to the concerns of environmentalism is that it depicts a God who is more concerned with liberation than with caring for creation. The story reveals God’s

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59 Cone, “Whose Earth is it Anyway,” 15.
systematic destruction of the land and resources of Egypt in pursuit of Israel’s freedom from slavery. God turns the Nile River into blood, destroys the crops and livestock of Egypt and otherwise treats the land as something that obviates liberation. In the Exodus narrative not even God cares about the land of Egypt.

In light of these two narrative problems, it can be concluded that the Exodus narrative does not adequately demonstrate God’s concern for God’s creation. In contrast, the Sabbath narrative reveals a God who has great concern and respect for the land. The Promised Land of Canaan was much more than a space in which Israel would live. It was a land that flowed with milk and honey, and provided the opportunity for rest. The Promised Land of Canaan participated as a partner with YHWH in the establishment of a society that would resemble the principles of YHWH revealed in the Exodus. Canaan was categorically different than the land of Egypt, out of which the Israelites were brought, and the Israelites were to live with it accordingly. (Deut. 11:10-12)

The Israelite theology of land, upon which Sabbath and Jubilee are based, provides a meaningful critique of contemporary uses of the environment, because the land is not a commodity in Israel; it is a partner to the work of God. When Israel is faithful, God will bless Israel through the productivity of the land. And when Israel is not faithful, the land will become barren and ultimately evict them. The Promised Land participates with God in completing God’s work. As such, it has right to rest and respect. It is also a partner to the poor. The land is not to be taken in perpetuity from the poor. The land is the means by which the people of Israel will be able to ensure their continued existence. Removing the poor from the land, from the means of survival, is an unsuitable use of land, because the land must participate in the freedom of all the people of Israel.
Because the land is a partner to YHWH and the poor it has a right to rest. This is not simply a command to allow the land to lie fallow in order that it can be more productive. The Sabbath and Jubilee laws ensured that the land’s right to rest from the exploitative machinations of productivity was observed. The demand for rest, based upon YHWH’s ownership of the land, implied that the people did not have the right to do with the land as they saw fit. The rich were not to monopolize the land for their own benefit, nor were they permitted to use it in a utilitarian fashion that did not honor it as YHWH’s partner.

The Sabbath tradition can provide a meaningful narrative for constructing a black environmental theology. Although the Sabbath tradition deals specifically with YHWH’s ownership of the land of Canaan, a black hermeneutical perspective can interpret the implications for the ways in which the wealthy live with creation in the contemporary world. Sabbath provides a narrative by which Black Theology can insist that creation be recognized as a partner and not merely a commodity. There is a rising awareness that all humanity lives in solidarity regarding environmental care, whether we want to or not. The demand for resources and energy, as well as the demand for places in which to store waste (each of which is driven by the needs of wealthier industrialized nations) are causing irreparable damage to the atmosphere as well as our lakes and oceans. These demands put the earth, and everyone on it, in grave peril, because the damage affects us all. The Sabbath tradition upholds a different vision for the care of the earth, due to its emphasis upon Yahweh’s ownership of the land, which calls into sharp relief the claim

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the wealthy make upon it. The land belongs to God. Those of us who make use of it are merely stewards, and as such have a responsibility to be careful with it. In this sense, there isn’t merely a social mortgage on property, but a spiritual and covenental one. According to the Sabbath vision, the earth is already a fitting home. It is God’s land, and God has seen fit to bless humanity with it, but God requires that those who live upon it do so appropriately. The land is more than a commodity. It is a partner with God and with humanity in our blessing and survival. The Sabbath vision’s emphasis upon the land as partner demonstrates the extent to which all of humanity must treat the land with respect or risk the threat of no longer being able to live upon it.

The Sabbath tradition demonstrates that a failure to recognize the Promised Land’s right to rest will result in the barrenness and desolation of that land, ultimately leading to an exile from it (Lev. 26:20-22; Isa.24:3-13). Black Theology must ask the prophetic question, “If creation becomes barren, to where can we be exiled in order that the land might receive its rest?” There is no place else to call home. If humanity continues to see no limit to the ways in which creation may be used, to make use of the resources of the earth without restriction, and to pollute the earth without regard for the land’s well-being, the consequences will be grave.

Unfortunately, the consequences are already grave for those with dark skin. Non-white people share a disproportionate amount of the environmental consequences of consumerism. It is not a question of the damage that might someday be done; black and brown people already live with that damage, and it is costing them their lives. This is the criticism that black scholars are currently levying, which has been termed “environmental

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62 Such a perspective has been demonstrated also within Catholic Social Teaching. See for example, John XIII, Mater et Magistra, 1961; John XIII, Pacem in Terris, 1963; Paul VI, Gaudium et Spes, 1965.
racism.” The Sabbath tradition can also help provide a prophetic critique for this concern. The emphasis within the sabbatical and Jubilee requirements seems to be upon ensuring the poor’s access to the land and its usufruct. The land was a partner with YHWH for the blessing and survival of God’s people, but the poor seem to have a special privilege. The command for Sabbath observance is in some way intended to ensure that no Israelite ever again find himself in a condition similar to Egypt (Deut. 5:15).

Within a contemporary context, land, as a theological construct, bears little resemblance to the Israelite understanding. As such, the right of each family to their own land as a means of survival may not be germane. However, in regards to environmental racism, it might be argued that poor and non-white communities currently have to bear a disproportionate amount of the weight of certain environmental hazards. In our contemporary setting the land is increasingly becoming a source of death and dehabilitation for the poor. Because poor communities, and communities consisting primarily of people of color have fewer resources and fewer political contacts they frequently find themselves faced with waste sites and other environmental health hazards. In these situations, the land fails to ensure the possibility of survival for the poor, but becomes a source of death. When the land does not serve as a resource of life but becomes a cause for premature death, it does not resemble Promised Land, but Egypt. Such a condition is untenable, because it is inconsistent with the ethical imperative of the Sabbath and Jubilee laws. The poor have the right to share in the produce of God’s creation. They also have the right to exist with that creation in a life-giving way. When God’s creation resembles Egypt more than it does Promised Land the institutions that have perpetuated this resemblance are inconsistent with God’s Sabbath concerns. The
poor and those with dark skin must not bear a disproportionate amount of the environmental hazards that have resulted from unchecked consumption.

In light of Black Theology’s relative silence regarding environmentalism the Sabbath tradition becomes an even more important possibility for further development of the theological norm of Exodus. Not only does it open new avenues of exploration for a pursuit of environmental ethics, it also provides a rich new narrative for the extant concerns of Black Theology regarding environmental racism. The commoditization of the land within the contemporary world, and the unequal bearing by the poor of the consequences of that commoditization make the adoption of the Sabbath narrative a crucially relevant and necessary endeavor.

Addressing the Womanist Critique

Womanist Theology has taken issue with an uncritical acceptance of Exodus within Black Theology. The argument is that such an uncritical acceptance can lead to a theology that fails to be liberating for all people. The Exodus, although liberating for those who claimed to be the people of YHWH, proved to be disastrous for who stood to prevent their liberation. Both the Egyptians, who experienced the death of the first-born son of every household, and the Canaanites, who were forcibly evicted from the Promised Land by the Israelites, bear a certain suffering on behalf of Israelite freedom.64 Womanist Theology argues that the oppression of some people in pursuit of the liberation of others is inconsistent with the God of the Bible. An uncritical reading of Exodus, one that does not recognize the cost paid by the weak and innocent in pursuit of Israelite liberation, can result in a failure to recognize the ways in which some are forced to suffer

64 Kirk-Duggan, “Let My People Go!,” 262.
in pursuit of black liberation. The concern levied by Womanist Theology is that the God who justifies such behavior in pursuit of freedom is not consistent with the God who created all humanity in the divine image.

Thus, even though the warrior-God and Exodus traditions have encouraged social transformation both within the biblical corpus and in contemporary society, the violence they presuppose is not consistent with the concerns of the God of social justice. The use of the Exodus within liberative thinking implies that liberation can only be won at the expense of the other. Womanist Theology believes it is necessary to find a narrative for redemption and freedom that is both wholistic and inclusive, and not won at the cost of another’s dignity. This narrative must also reveal God’s presence with and provision for those who are suffering, even while they suffer.⁶⁵

The patriarchal nature of scripture makes it difficult to address the contemporary problem of sexism. Although, the Sabbath tradition upholds a vision of life that maintains the dignity and personhood of all those who are impoverished and weak, it seems to accept as normative the notion that wives are the property of their husbands and daughters the property of their fathers. Although it insists that no one should be exploited because of their weakness, it remains silent about the social and legal vulnerability of women in ancient Israel. As E.W. Davies notes, “The unenviable position of the widow in Israel was primarily due to the fact that no provisions were made to enable her to

⁶⁵ For more on the Womanist critique of Black Theology see Chapter 3, pages 114-125.
inherit the property of her deceased husband.” As such, in some senses the problem of sexism is not alleviated by scripture, but exacerbated by it.

However, there are some ways in which the Sabbath tradition can help provide a narrative that addresses the concerns of Womanist Theology. First, the Sabbath and Jubilee laws provide a means whereby Israel might never resemble the nations around them. The Sabbath tradition is a part of the covenantal requirements placed upon those who have forsaken allegiance to Pharaoh for allegiance to a new suzerain, YHWH. And the social nature of these laws ensures that no member of the Israelite community, not even the king, can ever wield Pharaonic power. A society that enslaves the weak for the sake of the strong is inconsistent with the liberative spirituality that YHWH calls the Israelites to live. One of the critiques of Black Theology provided by black women is that black men have neglected the concerns for liberation of black women in pursuit of their own freedom. From a Womanist perspective, black men resemble the oppressors from which they are trying to free themselves. The Sabbath tradition provides a narrative that resonates with such concerns, because it underscores the social responsibilities of the liberated. Whereas an uncritical reading of the Exodus might not address these concerns, the Sabbath tradition most certainly does.

Another way in which the Sabbath tradition can address the concerns of Womanist Theology is found in Sabbath’s emphasis upon rest. Womanist theologians such as Cheryl Kirk-Duggan have argued that the normativity of Exodus leads to an

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incomplete understanding of the purposes of God, because it focuses exclusively on liberation. It fails to consider the ways in which God seeks to provide life and meaning even when liberation is far off. Kirk-Duggan argues instead for the story of Hagar’s wilderness experiences (Gen. 16:7-16; 21:9-19) as a norm for understanding God’s purposes. In both accounts Hagar is in the wilderness due to the injustices of her mistress (Sarah). In the wilderness she is met by YHWH. However, in neither case does God seek to right the injustices Hagar has experienced or liberate Hagar from her situation. In the first, God tells her to return to the camp of Abram and continue to serve Sarai (Gen. 16:9), and in the second God meets her needs and provides her with life-giving water so that she can survive (Gen. 21:19). Rather than providing liberation God offers the divine presence to minister to Hagar in her times of suffering. For Kirk-Duggan this is a more appropriate metaphor for understanding the work of God in history. Liberation, although important, is not God’s only concern for humanity; God is equally concerned with ministering to those in need and providing life and meaning even in situations in which liberation seems impossible.

The Sabbath tradition demonstrates a similar concern for God’s life-giving purposes, which it refers to as rest. The Sabbath day is referred to as qadosh, which is the Hebrew word for holiness. That which is holy is set apart for divine purposes, as opposed to that which would be referred to as common or profane. If God declares something qadosh, it has been set aside by God for God’s purposes. The first time the

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68 In the second story YHWH finds Hagar because he hears her son Ishmael crying in the wilderness. The comparisons to YHWH’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt, when “their cry for help went up to God” (Exod. 2:24) is compelling, and bears further examination, although it is beyond the scope of the current project.
word *qadosh* is used in the Hebrew Bible is in regards to the Sabbath day. “And God blessed the seventh day and made it *holy*” (Gen. 2:3). The Sabbath day has been set apart by God for the divine purpose of rest, and humanity is invited to participate in that rest with God. However, one might argue that the Israelites would not have been able to participate in the divine rest without liberation. Sabbath rest included freedom from the toil of Egypt. “He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil.”

Whether that toil is due to enslavement in Egypt or to racist ideologies that perpetuate dehumanizing situations in America, a lack of freedom implies a lack of rest.

From this perspective liberation is necessary insofar as it makes rest possible. As such, liberation is not an invalid perspective on God’s purposes for humanity, but an incomplete one. This is consistent with a Womanist theological anthropology, which would argue that God’s justice and deliverance while important, are of lesser concern than God’s life-giving presence in the midst of suffering. God’s presence and care for those in oppressive situations is the reason God chooses to liberate. As such, liberation becomes a means to an end. God’s presence removes the sense of isolation that stigmatizes, and in so doing, this presence gives hope. This hermeneutical perspective is far more consistent with the theological emphases of the Sabbath tradition than it is with the theological norm of Exodus as used within Black Theology. As such, the Sabbath vision could provide a valuable resource for bridging the gap with Womanist Theology.

A third and final way in which the Sabbath tradition may be useful for Womanist Theology is by providing a narrative in which the Hebrew Bible seeks to address the possible shortcomings of Jubilee. This occurs within the context of a legal discussion.

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concerning the unique circumstances of Zelophehad’s daughters (Num. 27:1-12; 36:1-12). Although this story is not present within the legal stipulations regarding Sabbath and Jubilee, it is a part of the Torah’s case law surrounding them. Within this case law, Zelophehad died without a male heir, and his five daughters approach Moses to state their case (27:1-2). Their father’s death without a son to inherit his tribal allotment will mean they have no means of survival. They have no way of providing for themselves, and they have no means of providing a dowry in order to be married. The provision of their tribal land would provide an inheritance and the possibility for survival.

Moses, does not immediately know how to respond (27:6), presumably because the request of these five women is not consistent with the accepted patrilineal social mores about land inheritance. Do Zelophehad’s daughters have the rights of inheritance since there is no male heir? The Sabbath and Jubilee vision fails to address such a circumstance. These five sisters are not protected by a straightforward rendering of Jubilee, which would, if they were male, ensure that their father’s land was not lost. The Sabbath and Jubilee vision is incomplete, because it has never considered the possibilities that a woman might need to inherit her father’s or her husband’s land.

Cheryl-Kirk Duggan pays careful attention to this story. However, she seems less concerned with the ruling of Moses than she does with the ethical stand made by the daughters of Zelophehad. These daughters become a “provocative metaphor for grounding [her] Womanist analysis,”71 in part because they claim a God-given authority as those created in the divine image. For Kirk-Duggan the daughters of Zelophehad use their authority as bearers of the image of God to challenge the lacunae of Jubilee.

At first glance it may seem as though this story merely demonstrates the weaknesses of Jubilee. However, upon closer examination the inclusion of this story within the biblical canon demonstrates the need to constantly reevaluate the liberative attempts of any theology, in particular from the perspective of those for whom these attempts may not prove liberative. As such, the inclusion of this story within the Sabbath and Jubilee narrative provides a meaningful critique of Black Theology that is consistent with Womanist Theology’s own critiques. This story demonstrates two ways that the adoption of the Sabbath within the sources of Black Theology can provide new ways forward. First, it allows for the admission that every attempt to address injustice is going to be flawed. The daughters of Zelophehad, through their insightful critique of the Jubilee legislation, revealed its underlying flaws. Moses, who facilitated Israel’s deliverance by YHWH, received the commandments from God upon the mountain, and served as the mouthpiece of God’s judgment within Israel could not see the shortcomings of Jubilee until five sisters revealed them. The implication wasn’t that Sabbath and Jubilee were inappropriate, merely that they were not yet complete. In the same way, every attempt to address oppression is going to be imperfect. Even Black Theology, which from the outset, has attempted to argue for the dignity of black peoples, has been shown that its attempts at liberation have been incomplete. The story of Zelophehad’s daughters challenges the proponents of Black Theology to hear the voices of those for whom the black theological enterprise might still be incomplete. Such a willingness to listen humbly to the concerns of black women will continue to bridge the gap between Black and Womanist Theology.
A second manner in which the story of Zelophehad’s daughters might be meaningful within this dialogue between the theologies of black men and black women is that it provides an encouragement for continued conversation. Black Theology has argued for a new theological norm. It has recognized the destructive normativity of whiteness and challenged that normativity with a theological hermeneutic that upholds liberation. However, Womanist theology is demonstrating the ways in which the hermeneutical emphases of Black Theology may result in similar forms of exclusion as have the hermeneutics of white theology. The story of Zelophehad’s daughters demonstrates the necessity for dialogue between those who are pointing out the destructive nature of specific theological perspectives, and those who hold those theological perspectives. The Jubilee was the ideal by which no Israelite would end up enslaved due to landlessness, but it was incomplete. The five women in this story reveal the ethical power of the marginalized perspective. Although they had no legal standing before Moses, they alone had the insight necessary to point out the shortcomings of the Jubilee legislation. If the marginalized are to have the privileged voice because of their context, then both they and those whose theology marginalizes them must recognize that privileged perspective. The story of Zelophehad’s daughters summons black women to challenge even those systems that might seem good if those systems perpetuate their marginalization, and it encourages black men to hear the voices of black women and recognize the privileged perspective they bring.

If Black Theology is going to continue to be a theology for the oppressed it is going to have to address the concerns being levied by Womanist Theology. It cannot continue to uphold an uncritical reading of Exodus, or an uncritical hermeneutic of
liberation. If liberation is important then it must be important for all people, and the oppression of some in the pursuit of the liberation of others cannot be acceptable.

This section has demonstrated three ways in which the Sabbath tradition can help Black Theology address these concerns: first, by upholding the command for a society that refuses to enslave the weak for the benefit of those who are stronger than them; second, by demonstrating God’s concern for sustaining life and providing healing in addition to liberation; and finally, by providing a narrative that opens avenues for accepting the criticisms of those who may be marginalized even by something that is intended for good. Black Theology need not abandon the Exodus as its hermeneutical norm, but it may be necessary to include in that hermeneutical norm the Israelite response to God’s liberative activity.

CONCLUSION

The Exodus has been a meaningful and useful narrative within black liberationist thought. From the slave spirituals in the antebellum south to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, the Exodus played an important role in shaping a theological narrative that sought to resist a white racist ideology, which attempted to relegate black people to sub-human status. For the African slaves, it helped provide hope that the God who freed the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt would do the same for them. For those marching the streets of Montgomery and Selma, it served to demonstrate God’s concern for the end of segregation. With the development of Black Theology, Exodus has continued to be an important narrative, one that provides the norm for understanding what the Word of God is, and what is consistent with it.
The intent of this project has been to demonstrate that such an emphasis upon Exodus, however meaningful and useful, could be more so if the Sabbath tradition was also included as a part of the hermeneutical vision of Black Theology. To this end, I have briefly attempted to demonstrate the ways in which the Sabbath tradition was theologically connected to the liberative aims of the Exodus. The Sabbath and Jubilee laws were instituted in light of the fact that “you too were once slaves in the land of Egypt, and YHWH, your God brought you out from there” (Deut. 5:15). The social and ritual legislation surrounding Sabbath and Jubilee is consistent with the liberative aims of Exodus, and thus the liberative aims of Black Theology. As such, the adoption of the Sabbath tradition into the theological concerns of Black Theology is a natural one.

The intent of this dissertation has not been to argue for an abrogation of the Exodus within Black Theology. Exodus has provided a meaningful narrative within African American religion, and I certainly am not arguing that it is no longer useful. The Exodus narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures provides a meaningful critique of a society that has sought to uphold the privilege of one group at the expense of another. Black Theology has made use of this narrative to criticize the racism of white America, and to encourage those who suffer because of that racism. The Exodus narrative has served to reinforce God’s justice, God’s liberative work, and the promise of a world in which the human dignity of black people can be recognized. Thus the purpose of this dissertation has been to mark the ways in which the Sabbath vision might strengthen Black Theology. In many ways the theological principles that underlie Sabbath and Jubilee are completely consistent with the concerns of black theologians, and in some ways these theological
principles open new avenues for exploration that Black Theology could greatly benefit from pursuing.

These theological principles are not relegated to usefulness only within Black Theology. They are relevant for contemporary society as a whole. One such way in which Sabbath provides a meaningful perspective to contemporary society is simply by its connection to Exodus. There are structures in contemporary society that exploit the weak and privilege the powerful. The Sabbath tradition emphasizes the need for institutional changes that protect the weak and reveals some theological principles that might help define what a liberated society should look like.

Another manner in which Sabbath is relevant in contemporary society is to witness to the common good. Within a society that sees the rights of the individual as sacred, the rights of the community, the call for solidarity and the concerns of the common good provide an important balance. And in a church that is more segregated by class and race than almost any other institution in America, the constitutive nature of covenant can provide a prophetic voice to those who allow skin pigmentation and socio-economic status to be a more defining characteristic than one’s identity as Christian.

A third way in which Sabbath might be relevant has already been addressed at length in this chapter, but with a widening gap between the rich and the poor in America a condemnation of monopolization has more than passing relevance.\footnote{For more on the widening gap between the rich and poor in the world see Isabel Ortiz and Matthew Cummins, \textit{Global Inequality: Beyond the Bottom Billion: A Rapid Review of Income Distribution in 141 Countries}, (New York: UNICEF, 2011), found online at \url{http://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/files/Global_Inequality.pdf} (April 1, 2013); Lisa A Keister, \textit{Wealth in America: Trends in Wealth Inequality}, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Tami Luhby, “The Wealthy are 288 times Richer than You, CNN\textit{Money}, found online at \url{http://money.cnn.com/2012/09/11/news/economy/wealth-net-worth/index.html} (March 31, 2013).} This gap is marked by the accumulation of the resources for wealth creation in the hands of the few, which
ensures that the wealthy always have the means to create more wealth and the poor lack the means to get out of their poverty. Sabbath calls into question this reality by claiming that the resources of survival belong to God, and thus are the right of all people. This theology of the land also calls into question those who take a utilitarian approach to creation. In a world in which creation has been exploited for the sake of productivity, a constructive theology of the land can be meaningful. God’s ownership of the land in the Sabbath tradition refuses to accept that those who possess the land have the right to do with it as they see fit. The land is humanity’s partner, and deserves to be treated with the honor accorded a partner.

Finally, the notion of Sabbath rest provides new theological language for discussing the divine intent for human existence. In a world where the poor must work two and three jobs to survive, and in which people die prematurely simply because of their gender, sexuality, race or socio-economic status, the language of rest is meaningful. The invitation of God to participate in the divine rest as a means of human fulfillment has economic, social, political and spiritual consequences that merit further exploration.

In a modern globalized context the specific stipulations of the Hebrew Sabbath and Jubilee are unworkable. However, the operative theological and ethical principles that underlie Sabbath and Jubilee have far-reaching potential not only for Black Theology, but also may serve to inspire the religious and ethical imagination of those seeking to describe a better world. In this way they offer a meaningful critique of the political economic and social structures that continue to marginalize the weak and exploit the vulnerable.
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