

NEIGHBORING THE INVISIBLE: LIBERATION THEOLOGIES, THE EXODUS NARRATIVE, AND THE SPECTER OF CANAAN

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Classical formulations of liberation theology appropriated the biblical narrative of the exodus as a paradigmatic image of a God who sides with the oppressed and acts in history to transform situations of injustice. Recognition of this foundational narrative as a preeminent expression of God's partial love for the victims of history prompted liberation theologians to begin analyzing the contemporary significance of the exodus theme in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The paradigmatic reception of the exodus in black and Latin American liberation theologies exhibits the pivotal role of the narrative in the emergence of theological reflection guided by the preferential option for the poor. In the late 1980s, however, theologians who were revisiting the exodus narrative in light of the complex realities of settler-colonial power, the mechanics of erasure, and experiences of social invisibilization began to reevaluate the meaning of the exodus in connection with its troubling underside—namely, the envisioned invasion, dispossession, and destruction of the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan. Consequently, the paradigmatic conception of the exodus was critiqued and the enduring value of the exodus as a liberative resource was called into question, especially in relation to contexts and histories of suffering which can be identified in certain ways with biblical representations of the Canaanites. Catalyzed by Osage, Palestinian, and womanist theologians, this important shift in the conversation on the relationship between the exodus tradition and God's relation to the oppressed brought

into sharp focus the harmful dimensions of a biblical narrative which had come to signify the effective justice of God amid dehumanizing conditions. In addition, this renewed attention to the exodus demonstrated how its entanglement with the theme of conquest intersects with challenges of complicity in structural violence and exclusionary legacies in the United States as well as in the larger context of global geopolitics. This dissertation advances the conversation on the theological appropriation of the exodus in several ways. The project first examines the liberation theologies of Gustavo Gutiérrez and James Cone as exemplary of the paradigmatic model. The discussion of critical departures from the exodus paradigm addresses the contributions of Naim Stifan Ateek, Delores S. Williams, and Robert Allen Warrior. Finally, a constructive response to the question of the role of the exodus in theological reflection grounded in the option for the poor is put forth. This response first introduces key insights from scholars in the field of settler colonial studies as a framework for placing Ateek and Warrior in dialogue with each other as indigenous interpreters of the biblical narrative. The results of this dialogue are then developed in relation to important theological perspectives discussed earlier in the project in order to reimagine the contemporary significance of the exodus in a manner that renders audible the cries of the Canaanites. To neighbor what has been relegated to absence, to disrupt the forgetfulness of what lies buried in both text and world, to sit with broken narratives and encounter God in their disregarded victims—this is central to the challenges facing readers who turn to the exodus in the spirit of liberation today.

For my parents,

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and

in loving memory of

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INTRODUCTION

The writing of this dissertation grew out of a commitment which began to take root during my first theology courses as a master's student at Boston College—namely, the option to think theologically, consistently and uncompromisingly, in light of God's loving partiality toward the victims of history. In those formative courses, at a time when my primary interests were directed toward examining possibilities of creative interaction between theological reflection and developments in the phenomenological tradition, the contributions of liberation theologians began to challenge my thinking and expose me to new ways of exercising the theological imagination. These initial encounters with the writings of liberation theologians mainly revolved around Gustavo Gutiérrez, Ignacio Ellacuría, Jon Sobrino, and Juan Luis Segundo. As my studies continued, the horizon of engagement increasingly broadened to include not only liberation theologies from other geopolitical contexts but also critical interlocutors of such discourses, bringing about an ongoing attempt to carry out theological analysis in a manner that is also informed by the insights of James Cone, Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux), Elsa Támez, Marc H. Ellis, Delores S. Williams, Michael Prior, Naim Stifan Ateek, Musa W. Dube, Robert Allen Warrior (Osage), Andrea Smith, and others. This constellation of voices gradually brought to my attention the theological problem that lies at the center of my dissertation project.

In its classical formulations, liberation theology illustrates an orientation toward the biblical sources grounded in a praxis of solidarity with the afflicted and guided by an

imperative to cultivate the liberative significance of the narratives.¹ This approach to the hermeneutical task involves a fundamental recognition of transformative justice and love of the oppressed as constitutive features of the biblical image of God. Among the various examples of this understanding of God in scripture, a preeminent witness is found in the exodus account. A narrative recounting God's self-revelation as liberator of the enslaved Israelites in Egypt and promised presence among the transforming community insofar as it embodies the values made palpable through God's activity, the exodus affords a key resource for theological reflection on God's preferential love in situations of inflicted suffering.

The deep resonances of this image of God find expression in the distinct reception of the exodus story as a paradigm which began to take place during the formative years of liberation theology. Both Cone and Gutiérrez, for example, articulate the centrality of the narrative in their respective reflections on what contemporary struggles for justice signify in light of faith.² The divine disruption of systemic sin and the gift of new communal life that appear in the exodus are developed in ways that furnish critical perspectives for the work of contesting forms of social domination in the present. While specific readings of the exodus in the writings of different liberation theologians certainly vary according to

¹ For instance, see James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 50th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1969] 2018); James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1970] 2018); James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1975] 1997); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed., trans. and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1971] 1988); Gustavo Gutiérrez, "God's Revelation and Proclamation in History," in *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [essay orig. publ. 1976] 1983), 3-22; Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology*, trans. John Drury (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, [1975] 2002).

² See Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 50-51, 72-73, 133; Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 2-3, 6, 12, 47, 29, 46-48; Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 57-66, 84-85; Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 86-91; Gutiérrez, "God's Revelation and Proclamation," 3-22.

context, theological considerations, and analytical resources, the core insights regarding the enduring pertinence of its portrayal of a God who responds to oppressed peoples in a concretely liberative manner and the corresponding praxis through which God continues to act today remain vital to the paradigmatic status of the narrative.

My early encounters with such approaches to the exodus—approaches which, as shown in the first part of this dissertation, encompass much more than what is indicated by the brief remarks in the preceding paragraphs—were theologically stimulating and spiritually enriching. The hermeneutical opportunities unlocked by different aspects of the paradigmatic model were wide-ranging and the implications for Christian identity amid entrenched violations of human dignity struck me as profound. With the steady expansion of my readings on liberation theologies, however, another dimension of the exodus began to emerge. Beginning in the late 1980s, several interpreters had started to part ways with the paradigmatic reception of the exodus, calling attention to a side of the narrative which offered a message devoid of liberation: the conquest of Canaan.³ This important recognition, put forth by readers assessing the biblical account both in critical dialogue with liberation theology as well as from within liberation theology, generated reflections on the exodus that remained sensitive to the problems of a paradigm in which the dispossession and collective erasure of indigenous communities is entangled with a vision of justice. Moreover, the difficulties intensify in connection with readers such as

³ Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989); Robert Allen Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today,” *Christianity and Crisis* 49, no. 12 (September 1989): 261-265. See also Edward W. Said, “Michael Walzer’s ‘Exodus and Revolution’: A Canaanite Reading,” *Grand Street* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1986): 86-106.

Warrior and Ateek who consider the process of liberation recounted in the exodus from the standpoint of communal experiences and histories which intersect in different ways with representations of the Canaanites in the scriptural narrative.

This critical reassessment of the paradigmatic model in view of the underside of the exodus prompted me to examine these diverging approaches more carefully with the aim of clarifying what is stake and thereby identifying how this conversation might be able to offer new opportunities for theology. The results of that work, which became an attempt to integrate the insights guiding these different interpretations of the exodus in order to reimagine its significance today, make up the present dissertation.

The project is divided into three parts. In the first part, the paradigmatic reception of the exodus in classical formulations of liberation theology is examined. The second part attends to critical reassessments of the paradigmatic reception and the accompanying shift in the theological conversation on the relationship between the exodus narrative and God's activity among victims of oppression. The third and final part of the dissertation continues the discussion of the shifting reception of the exodus tradition and expands it in a constructive manner.

The first part of the project consists of two chapters, each focusing on the work of a foundational liberation theologian as exemplary of the paradigmatic conception of the exodus. In chapter 1, the reception of the exodus in the theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez is presented. This chapter introduces Gutiérrez's appropriation of the exodus in the context of the soteriological-historical framework that is central to the Latin American theology of liberation which he began crafting in the late 1960s. To that end, the exposition in this chapter first addresses Gutiérrez's analysis of the nature of the liberative process and its

relationship to salvation as a necessary point of departure for engaging his understanding of the exodus narrative. The discussion then concentrates on how Gutiérrez deepens his reflections on the multidimensional significance of historical liberation by expounding the paradigmatic status of the exodus in Christian life. Among the issues that feature prominently in this reading of the exodus are the relationship between creation and salvation, the meaning of social praxis in light of that relationship, the all-embracing character of God's liberative activity in history, and the Egypt-to-Canaan trajectory that structures the exodus as a process. In addition, the treatment of Gutiérrez's contribution in this chapter foregrounds how his interpretation of the exodus integrates themes relating to the ongoing task of biblical appropriation, the disruptive possibilities of historical undersides, spirituality and the search for God, and the life-embracing reality of divine transcendence.

Chapter 2 turns to the reception of the exodus in the theology of James Cone. Like the chapter on Gutiérrez, the discussion here centers on a biblical-hermeneutical model in which the exodus carries paradigmatic value as an expression of God's effective partiality toward the oppressed. A preliminary overview of key elements of the US context which impelled Cone to develop a black theology of liberation, all of which concern the legacy of white supremacy and the responsive self-affirmation of black humanity, sets the stage for analyzing his appropriation of the exodus narrative. Thus the chapter underscores the critical connections between Cone's diagnosis of the realities of ongoing domination and resistance in North America and the message of the exodus. Such continuities—structural negations of human dignity, collective experiences of enslavement, warped relationalities that warrant a transformative change in which God is encountered, and so forth—emerge

in his writings as fundamental to the task of identifying the contemporary pertinence of the exodus. It is through a sustained consideration of these intersections that this chapter elaborates Cone's exodus-based approach to God's self-revelation in the United States as the continuing work of the Spirit of Christ in the process of black liberation. The status of the exodus in black liberation theology is presented in a manner that also accounts for the various ways it remains linked with the significance of creation, the problem of sin, the nature and orientation of theological reflection, the dimensions of divine love at work in struggles against inflicted suffering, and the blackness of God in a situation marked by pervasive anti-blackness.

The second part of the dissertation comprises the next four chapters, in which the discussion concerns the contributions of two formative theologians who call into question the enduring value of the exodus narrative as an unproblematically liberative resource for theological reflection and Christian life amid the complexities of violence in the present. In particular, the Palestinian liberation theology of Naim Stifan Ateek (chapters 3 through 5) and the womanist theology of Delores S. Williams (chapter 6) afford approaches to the biblical sources that part ways with the paradigmatic model examined in the first part of the dissertation. Both Williams and Ateek engage the exodus account in ways that evince a critical sensitivity to an unsettling biblical theme that belongs to the narrative sequence beginning with God's liberation of the Israelite slaves in Egypt—namely, the envisioned invasion and destruction of the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan. This shared attunement to the deeply troubling trajectory of the exodus process and its relevance to the different histories of communal invisibilization out of which emerged the theologies of Ateek and

Williams are pivotal to the hermeneutical reorientations introduced in this second part of the project.

Since Palestinian liberation theology is less familiar in the United States than any of the other discourses presented in the dissertation, a greater amount of space is given to the treatment of Ateek's work, as indicated in the preceding paragraph. Such an extensive discussion serves the purpose not only of providing an overview of various historical and geopolitical forces which led to the formulation of a Palestinian theology of liberation, as well as an analysis of the theological and hermeneutical principles informing how Ateek probes biblical texts in general, but also of illustrating numerous resonances between the major issues addressed throughout his writings and what is most at stake in his reading of the exodus narrative. In addition to furnishing a lens that facilitates the main objective of explicating the status of the exodus in Palestinian liberation theology, this broader study of its context, genesis, conceptual framework, method, and praxis also aids in the task of identifying some of the important differences between Ateek's theological model and the more familiar expressions of liberation theology covered in chapters 1 and 2. Besides this comparative perspective on certain aspects of global liberation theologies, the substantial portion of the dissertation focusing on Ateek allows for a deeper appreciation of how the reception of the exodus story in his theology relates to the better known critiques of the paradigmatic model described in chapters 6 and, as will be discussed below, 7. For these reasons, Palestinian liberation theology receives a more detailed account than the other interlocutors in the critical conversation which animates this project.

Beginning the second part of the dissertation, chapter 3 attends to the conditions and experiences that ultimately gave rise to a Palestinian theology of liberation. In these

pages, a wide-ranging introduction navigates the connections between facets of Ateek's context that are vital to an adequate understanding of his contribution. Highlighted in the chapter are the following: Ateek's own memory of dispossession as an eleven-year-old in 1948, when his family (along with all other Palestinian residents) was expelled from their hometown of Beisan (renamed Beit She'an); the complex reality of the Nakba (Arabic for "catastrophe"), encompassing life-altering dislocations not only in relation to place but also of communal identity and Christian faith; the horror of the Shoah and the long, sinful history of European anti-Judaism; the responsive emergence of modern political Zionism at the end of the nineteenth century; Ateek's second experience of occupation following the 1967 War; the first stirrings of Palestinian liberation theology in the wake of the first intifada, which began in 1987 while Ateek served as canon of St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem; and the problem of Christian Zionism. These interlocking elements of Ateek's situation are considered in view of their ongoing treatment in his own writings, thereby also providing a preliminary contact with the self-understanding of Palestinian liberation theology.

Continuing the discussion on Ateek, chapter 4 takes a closer look at the spiritual, ecclesial, and theological dimensions of issues introduced in the previous chapter. With the birth of Palestinian liberation theology amid popular resistance and awakening, the challenge of working out an understanding of faith that engages the particularities of his community acquired a special urgency for Ateek. Two prime examples of his response to this challenge are the main focus of this chapter: the founding of Sabeel, an ecumenical liberation theology center based in Jerusalem, and the development of a hermeneutical model that fosters healthy interaction with the biblical sources. As regards the first of

these focal points, the origins and role of Sabeel are presented in a manner that remains attentive to its guiding values and vision of transformative praxis, features which surface in crucial ways in the sections of the chapter that address Ateek's approach to the process of biblical appropriation. Central to this overview of Sabeel is the meaning of its basic orientation toward justice and commitment to peace as a unified ministerial imperative that finds its source in Christ. The emphasis on embodying a prophetic presence through which anti-exclusionary forms of relationality can be cultivated involves an unqualified repudiation of violence that likewise informs Ateek's proposed framework for scriptural reading.

Illustrating the continuity between the two examples covered in this chapter, the transition to questions pertaining to the biblical heritage and its interpretation from the standpoint of Christian faith takes place by means of a prolonged reflection on the unity of justice, peacemaking, and love in Ateek's work. In connection with the difficulties of inquiring into biblical texts in a contextually responsible way, a significant matter which first appears in chapter 3—namely, the changes in the relationship between the Bible and Palestinian Christians after 1948 and 1967, increasingly uneasy and destabilized—is here revisited as a principal concern in Ateek's attempt to put forth a viable hermeneutic. This task is thus carried out in his writings with a heightened awareness of the profound harm that has been and continues to be unleashed due to uncritical receptions of some biblical traditions. It is not only the role of the reader, however, with which Ateek contends, but also the biblical sources themselves when their contents endorse exclusionary values. In respect to the latter, he identifies two divergent and incongruous theological trajectories in the Bible—one inclusive and universally loving, the other exclusionary and prone to

terror—that correspond to conflicting portrayals of God. An emphatically nonsynthetic understanding of the biblical corpus as an intrinsically frictional inheritance shapes the hermeneutical problem in Palestinian liberation theology. The final sections in chapter 4 analyze the nature of this tension and its implications for contemporary readers, both of which are indispensable for interpreting Ateek's departure from the paradigmatic status of the exodus in classical liberation theologies.

Ateek's hermeneutical model is further examined in chapter 5, which provides a lengthier treatment of his approach to specific instances of theological tendencies in the Bible acknowledged to be at variance with one another. This continued discussion of the challenges involved in the appropriation of biblical sources as articulated in Palestinian liberation theology gives more direct attention to issues and themes that are salient in Ateek's evaluation of particular texts. Incompatible conceptions of God, neighbor, land, alterity, relationality, indigeneity, and habitation come to the fore in concrete ways, both in regard to various biblical narratives and perspectives as well as in view of what those sources may signify for the Israel-Palestine context. Thus the chapter oscillates between the contents of biblical traditions in tension with each other and the implications of that theological incongruity for the situation in which Ateek works for justice. The ongoing interplay between text and reception throughout this chapter begins to engage the status of the exodus/conquest narrative in Ateek's theology by means of a problem that appears frequently in his reflections on the hermeneutical imagination: indigeneity as a key nexus between the biblical Canaanites and contemporary Palestinians. This problem concerns a disquieting proximity to the negations and ideals of dispossession presented in scriptural references to the Canaanites, an inflicted correspondence which serves as a critical locus

of interrogation from which Ateek derives a distinct mode of reading the Bible. Through the implementation of what this chapter designates a Canaanite analytic, he interprets the biblical sources in a way that elucidates different representations of the land and its native communities while simultaneously decentering those accounts which prove pernicious to indigenous life. This study of Ateek's hermeneutic, with special consideration of how the lived proximity of Canaan relates to his reading of biblical texts, lays the groundwork for the more direct treatment of his approach to the exodus in chapter 7.

Chapter 6, as mentioned above, analyzes the reevaluation of the exodus paradigm in the theology of Delores Williams. In this chapter, the discussion of Williams's work is mainly, though not entirely, focused on certain aspects of her critical dialogue with black liberation theology. By way of introducing some of the primary concerns and issues that inform her contribution to womanist theology, the presentation of Williams first attends to her analysis of the relationship between white feminist discourse and black women's experience. This preliminary exposition begins to bring into view an understanding of the task of womanist theology and key areas of inquiry that pertain directly to her assessment of the reception of the exodus in black liberation theology. The remainder of the chapter addresses Williams's critical engagement with the paradigmatic model and is organized in accordance with two distinct components of her critique: (1) the rereading of the story of Hagar (Gen 16:1-16; 21:9-21) that she develops in light of a corresponding tradition of biblical appropriation in the black community; and (2) a corrective to interpretations of the exodus that effectively render inaudible the cries of its victims when the emphasis on liberation evidences a forgetting of the conquest of Canaan. Both of these features of Williams's theology entail a rethinking of the paradigmatic value of the exodus, albeit in

different ways. The former proceeds in relation to the insight that God's response to the oppressed is not always depicted in the Bible in liberative terms, whereas the latter finds within the exodus process itself an image of divine liberation of the oppressed that bears a catastrophic message for the native residents of Canaan. At the center of this twofold critique of the exodus paradigm is a womanist attunement to what has been relegated to invisibility, in both the text and the world, and thus requires a recognition that subverts the mechanics of concealment. This crucial orientation appears throughout the chapter, offering a point of intersection in Williams's work that links (without conflating) her distinct reflections on the neglect of black women's experiences in the writings of white feminists, the biblical figure of Hagar, the androcentric proclivities of black liberation theology, and the exodus both as a biblical narrative and as a theological paradigm.

The third part of the dissertation consists of chapter 7, a constructive response to the shifting conversation on the theological reception of the exodus covered in chapters 1 through 6. This part of the project aims to contribute to that conversation in a manner that advances the discussion about the role of the exodus in theological reflection grounded in the option for the poor. First, the chapter introduces conceptual resources from the field of settler colonial studies as a theoretical framework for placing Ateek in dialogue with Osage scholar Robert Allen Warrior. This dialogue revolves around their respective ways of engaging the exodus as indigenous interpreters in settler-colonial contexts. Readings of Ateek's direct responses to the question of the exodus as a liberative resource in Israel-Palestine and Warrior's assessment of the meaning of the exodus paradigm for Native North America are developed in the chapter and then allowed to interact with each other. By placing Warrior and Ateek in dialogue across contextually different yet analytically

intersecting communal experiences, particularly as brought into focus by insights from scholars in the field of settler colonial studies, it becomes possible to derive a challenging yet instructive message for the task of engaging the exodus today. The perspectives that arise throughout this reflection on the relationship between their respective interpretations of the exodus as well as their larger projects are then reframed in connection with the theological conversation presented in the earlier parts of the dissertation. In this context, the chapter proposes an integrative notion of rereading in which the praxis of solidarity with oppressed peoples in the world today, especially amid settler-colonial processes, is inseparable from a decentered exodus. That is, the contemporary challenge of the story is reimagined in a manner that involves rendering audible the cries of the Canaanites, in text and world, and thereby neighboring what has been relegated to invisibility. In this way, the concluding part of the dissertation invites readers who turn to the exodus in the spirit of liberation not to abandon the narrative or to replace it with a more palatable resource, but rather to sit with its brokenness and encounter God in its underside.

With a view to moving beyond the choice between a paradigmatic reception that circumvents what is catastrophic in the exodus story and a sensitivity to that troublesome dimension that remains at the level of critique, the dissertation draws on both sides of the hermeneutical divide in a way that wrests a new theological dynamic from the text. At the heart of this position is the proposal that there are humanizing ways of reading a narrative that harbors dehumanizing elements. Such ways of reading, insofar as they participate in the larger process of liberating readers from all that obstructs love, can foster communion with God. And inasmuch as they foster communion with God, such ways of reading bear upon the salvific.

CHAPTER 1

THE GOD OF LIFE AND SALVATION IN HISTORY: THE EXODUS PARADIGM IN THE LATIN AMERICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY OF GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The first part of this dissertation consists of two chapters examining paradigmatic conceptions of the biblical theme of the exodus as developed in classical formulations of liberation theology. In particular, this part of the project concentrates on the contributions of two foundational theologians—Gustavo Gutiérrez and James Cone—whose writings on the exodus will be treated in chapters 1 and 2, respectively. Presenting the constructive reorientations to the exodus narrative marking prominent expressions of Latin American and black theologies of liberation will provide an expository point of departure for the discussion of the critical reception of the exodus paradigm in the second part of the dissertation.

Chapter 1 addresses the significance of the exodus in the Latin American theology of liberation of Gustavo Gutiérrez (b. 1928). This chapter will first establish the meaning and basic elements of the soteriological-historical framework that informs Gutiérrez's approach to the exodus in *A Theology of Liberation*.¹ On the basis of this initial treatment, the chapter will offer an analysis of the interpretation of the exodus that emerges in light of Gutiérrez's general theological optic. In addition to the reception of

¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed., trans. and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1971] 1988).

the exodus in *A Theology of Liberation*, the remaining sections will engage his reflections on the exodus narrative in subsequent writings and highlight the distinct characteristics of those interpretations. The following texts will be considered as important examples of the paradigmatic understanding of the exodus in Gutiérrez's theological development: the essay "God's Revelation and Proclamation in History," and the analyses of the exodus in *We Drink from Our Own Wells* and *The God of Life*.² In presenting this range of attempts to probe and cultivate the liberative dimensions of the biblical account of the exodus, this chapter will identify features of Gutiérrez's theology of liberation that signal key aspects of the larger critical-dialogical trajectory of this dissertation.

1.2 LIBERATION AND SALVATION: THE HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE EXODUS PARADIGM

Among the foremost challenges which Gutiérrez aims to address in his *Theology of Liberation* is the task of examining the relation between the process of liberation as a social praxis and the theme of salvation that remains at the center of Christian faith and its reflective attempts at self-understanding. Indeed, the importance of engaging this task is formulated as endemic to the articulation of a theology of liberation: "To speak about a theology of liberation is to seek an answer to the following question: what relation is there between salvation and the historical process of human liberation?"³ Confronting the

² Gustavo Gutiérrez, "God's Revelation and Proclamation in History," in *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [essay orig. publ. 1976] 1983), 3-22; Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, 20th anniversary ed., trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1983] 2003); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1989] 1991).

³ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 29. While the term "salvation" does not appear in the Spanish subtitle of the book (the subtitle in Spanish is *Perspectivas*), its inclusion in the English subtitle fittingly reflects the

question of soteriology is neither secondary nor optional for liberation theology as developed by Gutiérrez but rather a constitutive feature of its discursive production.⁴ This pivotal question, however, is raised in an explicit manner only after providing a preliminary clarification of the meaning of liberation in the first part of the book.⁵

Establishing an analytical component that will be vital to his reflections on the significance of the exodus, Gutiérrez frames the process of liberation in contradistinction to developmentalist approaches to “contemporary aspirations for more human living

centrality of this theme in the book. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación: Perspectivas*, 18th ed. (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, [1971] 2009).

⁴ This point is succinctly expressed by Gutiérrez in his introduction to the revised edition of the book marking the fifteenth anniversary of its English translation: “Liberation theology is...intended as a theology of salvation.” Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Introduction to the Revised Edition: Expanding the View,” trans. Matthew J. O’Connell, in *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed., trans. and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1971] 1988), xxxix.

⁵ The fundamental connection between liberation and salvation is adumbrated early on in the book when Gutiérrez mentions the role of love as the basis of “the *praxis* of Christians, of their active presence in history,” which expresses a responsive commitment to the God “who saves through love.” Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 6 (emphasis in original).

It should also be noted that the importance of this question in Gutiérrez’s theology predates his *Theology of Liberation*. For instance, in his 1968 work titled *Líneas pastorales de la Iglesia en América Latina*, Gutiérrez begins his analysis of different pastoral models of the church in Latin America by posing the basic question: “How is the salvific dialogue of the church to be established with the men and women of Latin America?” Observing that salvation constitutes “a key notion” from which “all theological production starts,” Gutiérrez proceeds to explicate the operative soteriologies in four distinct pastoral approaches in Latin America, among which the “prophetic” model is described as reconceptualizing salvation in a “revolutionary” manner that affirms concrete love—universally oriented and self-giving—as its “condition” (rather than explicit faith). Similarly, in an essay commonly recognized as his earliest attempt to formulate the basic challenges requiring the development of liberation theology—originally presented in Chimbote, Peru, in 1968 under the title “Toward a Theology of Liberation”—Gutiérrez asserts that since “the gospel is primarily a message of salvation,” the task of reflecting on “human emancipation” in light of faith “will have to reply first of all to this question: Is there any connection between constructing the world and saving it?” This essential question is reiterated in Gutiérrez’s “Notes for a Theology of Liberation,” first presented at a conference in Switzerland in 1969: “What is the connection between salvation and the process of [human] emancipation in the course of history?” Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Líneas pastorales de la Iglesia en América Latina: Análisis teológico* (Lima: CEP, [1968] 1970), 13, 34, 63-69, 81-83 (my translation); Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Toward a Theology of Liberation,” trans. Alfred T. Hennelly, in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 62, 65, 69-73; Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Notes for a Theology of Liberation,” *Theological Studies* 31, no. 2 (June 1970): 255. For further discussion of the context of these early writings, see Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez: An Introduction to Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 34-35; James B. Nickoloff, introduction to *Essential Writings*, by Gustavo Gutiérrez, ed. James B. Nickoloff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 4-5.

conditions.”⁶ While the concept of development entails multiple models and thereby defies “clear definition,” its results in Latin America during the decades prior to the publication of *A Theology of Liberation* led to what Gutiérrez describes as an ongoing shift from supportive hope to “confusion and frustration.”⁷ He identifies the main reason for this growing disenchantment as a failure on the part of developmentalist approaches to “attack the roots of the evil.”⁸ Exhibiting an essentially reformist orientation to the reality of dehumanization, the vision of change guiding development remained “within the formal structure of the existing institutions without challenging them,” which ensures that the causes of injustice remain intact and operative.⁹

Whereas the palliative projects of development ultimately preserve arrangements of power and basic conditions that continue to produce various forms of suffering, the process of liberation signifies a fundamentally different approach to the problem of injustice. In contrast to the prevailing mode of understanding development, the forms of social praxis that inhere in the process of liberation—a process in which the active participation of the poor remains paramount—are characterized by a commitment to the transformation of unjust situations by eradicating their structural causes.¹⁰ It is in

⁶ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 14; cf. 16, 24. See also Gutiérrez, “Notes for a Theology,” 245-248.

⁷ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 16-17; cf. 49-51. The three general approaches to the concept of development which Gutiérrez discusses are (1) the “purely economic” view of development, (2) the notion of development as a “total social process” (i.e., not only economic but also social, political, and cultural), and (3) the “humanistic perspective” of development as a more integral process of human becoming (15-16).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17; cf. 50-51.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17; cf. 50.

¹⁰ This mode of presenting the process of liberation in contradistinction to the concept of development does not yet appear in Gutiérrez’s earliest articulation of liberation theology, where—drawing on Pope Paul VI’s *Populorum progressio* (1967)—he discusses integral development (without addressing the different models of development) as a salvific process of human emancipation. In *A Theology of Liberation*, on the other hand, Gutiérrez expresses a more nuanced position on the encyclical, underscoring the distinctive character of integral development as envisioned by Paul VI (including its important denunciations of injustice and

reference to this basic feature of liberation (i.e., its structural orientation) that Gutiérrez mentions its deepening “radicality” as a “social revolution” in which it is considered indispensable “to attack these deep causes” of oppression and “abolish the present status quo.”¹¹ Rather than seeking simply to alleviate the symptoms of such causal mechanisms, the social praxis of liberation attempts to uproot their dehumanizing foundations in order to effect systemic change in the direction of justice.

The radicality of liberation—one of several expressions of the “adult character” which social praxis has been steadily acquiring—reflects an “increasingly clear consciousness” among the most vulnerable with regard to the concrete conditions that undergird and enable the perpetuation of their inflicted vulnerability in the first place.¹² Critical attention to the structural depth of social reality, Gutiérrez observes, resulted in an awareness of its “necessarily conflictual” dynamics.¹³ Obscured by developmentalist approaches to the problem of poverty, this recognition of prevalent forms of social domination further clarifies that the historical trajectory of liberation begins in a setting

avarice on an international level) yet also identifying the centers of power (rather than the oppressed) as the main addressees of *Populorum progressio*. In light of this orientation of the encyclical, Gutiérrez describes it as a “transitional document” in the magisterial trajectory toward a mode of engaging social reality marked by the oppression-centered and agency-fostering method of liberation (e.g., as reflected in the Medellín documents). Gutiérrez, “Toward a Theology of Liberation,” 68-74; Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 22-23; cf. 45, 63-65, 67-69, 73, 82, 100, 162, 174, 187n50, 226n102.

In this regard, it should also be noted that while Gutiérrez views the term *liberation* as lending “greater depth and dynamism to the process in which the poor countries are involved,” he does not preclude the possibility of reframing development (as distinct from developmentalism) in light of transformative praxis. “Only in the context of such a [liberative] process,” he writes, “can a policy of development be effectively implemented, have any real meaning, and avoid misleading formulations.” Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 17, 183-184n18; cf. 24, 25.

¹¹ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 17, 21, 30-31; cf. 100-102.

¹² Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 79, 97 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 17, 30. Instances in Gutiérrez’s text where a more precise English rendition seems preferable to the translation provided by Caridad Inda and John Eagleson will include a citation of the Spanish text accompanied by a cross-reference to the corresponding passage in the English translation.

¹³ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 31; cf. 13-14, 17, 23, 24, 32, 51, 100-102.

shaken with tension. Such conflict means that “the building of a just society passes through the confrontation—in which violence is present in different modes—between groups of people with diverse interests and opinions, [and also] passes through a process of overcoming everything that is opposed to the creation of an authentic peace between human beings.”¹⁴ The path toward justice traverses its conflictual negation in search of a social life that becomes attainable not by pursuing “improvements within the present order” but rather through a transformation of that order—an exigency which Gutiérrez describes as an “inevitable moment of rupture.”¹⁵

While expressing a crucial element of Gutiérrez’s conception of liberation, this social and political rupture does not exhaust his understanding of the liberative process. In light of a multidimensional theological anthropology and a unified historical-soteriological framework, Gutiérrez articulates a correspondingly multidimensional vision of liberation as a single process consisting of three distinct yet interrelated “levels of meaning.”¹⁶ He mentions that liberation on the level of systemic forms of economic,

¹⁴ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 99 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 31. In this instance, the translation by Inda and Eagleson can lend itself to an interpretation of liberation by means of violence. It should be noted that Gutiérrez eventually deemed it necessary to clarify his position on social conflict in response to various misinterpretations of his work, including the idea that the social praxis of Christians should endorse conflict. In Gutiérrez’s writings, the problem of social conflict concerns the *diagnosis* of a reality which—as unwanted, unacceptable, and undeniable from the standpoint of lucid Christian faith—requires a loving engagement that seeks to transform its structural basis. See Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Theology and the Social Sciences,” in *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [essay orig. publ. 1984] 1990), 67-80; Gustavo Gutiérrez, “The Truth Shall Make You Free,” in *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [essay orig. publ. 1986] 1990), 130-131; Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 156-161.

¹⁵ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 79 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 17.

¹⁶ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 24-25, 103-105; cf. Gutiérrez, “Truth Shall Make You Free,” 116-141. In his essay “The Truth Shall Make You Free,” Gutiérrez—reflecting on the major theological insights developed fifteen years earlier in *A Theology of Liberation*—makes the following observation on the value of the term *dimension* with regard to both the integral understanding of the human person and the threefold significance of liberation: “‘Dimension’...is a term from spatial geometry; a body has three dimensions but

social, and political dehumanization remains situated in the context of “a deeper level” of liberation—namely, the larger historical process of humanity in which an emerging and creative self-awareness gradually yields “a new way to be human.”¹⁷ The profoundly ontological and axiological resonances of this dimension of liberation bespeak the insufficiency of transforming economic and political structures. In this regard, Gutiérrez notes that the liberation to which contemporary humanity aspires is not simply from “that which, coming from the *exterior*, impedes [one’s] fulfillment as a member of a social class, a country, or a particular society,” but also “an *interior* liberation in an individual and inner dimension.”¹⁸ Addressing this second level of liberation several years later, he writes: “A change of social structures can help to bring about this personal change but does not automatically bring it about. On the other hand, there are also alleged transformations of persons that have no consequences in the social sphere...Structural change is necessary, but it is not everything.”¹⁹

Intricately linked with the social level of liberation, the individual or personal character of the second level does not amount to a descent into individualism. Rather, the acquisition of personal freedom on this level of liberation remains fundamentally relational and expressive of solidarity with all persons. Reflecting “a dynamic and historical conception of the human person” that defies all “essentialist and static

is not reducible to one of them. The term is applied to human existence in order to bring out its complexity and richness; so too it is applied to the process of liberation” (130).

¹⁷ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 21, 24-25; cf. Gutiérrez, “Truth Shall Make You Free,” 131-135. See also the genealogical survey of this historical process from the early modern period to the twentieth century in Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 18-21; cf. 42.

¹⁸ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 84 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 20.

¹⁹ Gutiérrez, “Truth Shall Make You Free,” 133.

thinking,” the freedom at the center of this dimension of the liberative process entails an increasingly deepening reorientation toward others that transpires as the ongoing “creation of a new humanity” by means of “a *permanent cultural revolution*.”²⁰ Such a revolution—which, to be sure, remains distinct yet inseparable from the social revolution defining the first level of liberation—signals the nature of history as “the conquest of new and qualitatively distinct forms of being human in view of an increasingly complete and total self-fulfillment in solidarity with the entire human community.”²¹ Critical freedom as a process of active humanization expands and enriches the horizon within which the liberative rupture of structural transformation takes place, enabling the cultivation of “a qualitatively different society” that serves as an alternative to unjust social mechanisms *and* the underlying set of pernicious human values.²² “It will be qualitatively different,” Gutiérrez writes, “because other persons will be normative in a society in which the needs of the poor are more important than the power of the privileged—qualitatively different, too, because the goal will no longer be to incorporate more individuals into a consumer society but to change the way in which human beings are viewed.”²³

The emergent relational-anthropological significance of the second level of

²⁰ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 21-22, 139 (emphasis in original); cf. 137. In the English translation, the second reference to a “permanent cultural revolution” is omitted from the summary of the second level of liberation on pp. 24-25; see Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 91.

²¹ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 87 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 22. The theme of conquest plays an important role in Gutiérrez’s discussion of freedom in light of this emergent-historical anthropological model. He refers, for instance, to “a freedom which is a historical process and conquest,” to “freedom as a historical conquest,” to the “gradual conquest of a real and creative freedom,” to “a critical freedom which is conquered over the course of history,” and so forth. These passages are rendered with varying degrees of accuracy by Inda and Eagleson. The theme of conquest is altogether absent from their translation of the final quotation, which renders the verb *conquista* as “won.” Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 14, 81, 87, 91, 98 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, xiv, 18, 21, 22, 24, 30.

²² Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 24-25.

²³ Gutiérrez, “Truth Shall Make You Free,” 131.

liberation ultimately refers to the third and most profound level of the unified process: the gift of liberation from sin that is given by God through Christ.²⁴ Gutiérrez describes this third level of meaning as follows: “In the Bible, Christ is presented as bringing us liberation. Christ the Savior liberates the human person from sin, the ultimate root of every rupture of friendship, of all injustice and oppression, and makes the human person authentically free, that is, to live in communion with him, the foundation of all human fellowship.”²⁵ Structural injustice and damaging ways of being human—the conditions at stake in the first and second levels of liberation, respectively—both derive from sinful origins. An “intrahistorical reality” with both “personal and social” dimensions, sin “represents an egoistic withdrawal into oneself” which finds concrete expression in the “refusal to love others,” thereby enacting the “rupture of friendship with God and with others” that constitutes “the ultimate cause of the misery, injustice, and oppression in which people live.”²⁶ Without seeking to deny or undermine the indispensable role of structural analysis and examination of the systemic causes of social suffering, Gutiérrez attends to the generative reality of sin in order to “highlight that things do not come about by chance, that behind an unjust structure there is a personal or collective will that is responsible, a will to refuse God and others.”²⁷

An awareness of the sinful foundations of inhuman economic and political arrangements means that the necessary condition for attaining and maintaining the

²⁴ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 23-24, 25; cf. Gutiérrez, “Truth Shall Make You Free,” 122, 134-141.

²⁵ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 92 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 25.

²⁶ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 90, 193 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 24, 85.

²⁷ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 90 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 24.

“moment of rupture” that characterizes the transformative vision of the first level of liberation lies in accepting the gift of liberation from sin. Accordingly, Gutiérrez notes that “a social transformation, no matter how radical it may be, does not automatically achieve the suppression of all evils.”²⁸ In this sense, the multidimensional process of liberation requires a choice between two different ruptures: the *liberative rupture* with social oppression (ultimately grounded in loving communion with God and all persons) and the *sinful rupture* of communion with God (which involves egoistic retraction and thereby preserves the fundamental wound that produces the various forms of social domination). It is in light of this understanding of sin that Gutiérrez considers the three levels of liberation as forming a unified process which, without separating or fusing the distinguishable levels, “finds its deepest sense and its full realization in the saving work of Christ.”²⁹

Liberation from sin as “the fundamental alienation” of the human person offers the freedom to love others.³⁰ Undoing the rudimentary relational rupture that breeds realities of oppression (i.e., the “particular alienations” in which the primordial alienation is concretely encountered), this third level of meaning in the liberative process signifies “the collapse of our egoism and of every structure that maintains us in it.”³¹ In the final

²⁸ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 24.

²⁹ Ibid., 25; cf. Gutiérrez, “Truth Shall Make You Free,” 122, 135, 138-140.

³⁰ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 24, 103; cf. 85-86, 96-97.

³¹ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 91, 223 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 24, 103. It is important to note here that while Gutiérrez, in light of the threefold liberative process, describes “every struggle against exploitation and alienation” as “an attempt to drive back egoism, the negation of love,” and thus as ultimately affecting “the fundamental alienation” (i.e., sin), he also mentions that “the process of liberation will not have vanquished the very roots of oppression, of the exploitation of the human person by the human person, without the arrival of the reign, which is above all a gift.” A key distinction which preserves the anticipatory significance of an unforeseeable eschatological finality “beyond history,” the “growth” [*crecimiento*] of the reign of God that transpires in historical liberation and the arrival [*advenimiento* or *llegada*] of the reign that “will put an end to history” signify the ambiguous

analysis, the possibility of the transformative social reordering and the humanizing transvaluation that correspond to the first two levels of liberation remains an expression of the “relationship between grace and sin [which] is played out in the inmost depths of the human person.”³² Acceptance or rejection of the gift of liberation from sin envelops and qualifies the nature of one’s orientation to the first and second levels of liberation. As such, the “three levels of meaning which reciprocally interpenetrate one another” while remaining distinct dimensions of a “single and complex process” of liberation are “situated at different depths.”³³ Comprising the most expansive and profound dimension of the threefold process, the third level communicates that “nothing is outside the pale of the action of Christ and the gift of the Spirit.”³⁴ “In Christ and through the Spirit,” Gutiérrez writes, “the comprehensiveness of the liberative process acquires its full sense. His work embraces the three levels of meaning which we have distinguished in that process.”³⁵

This treatment of the unity of the multidimensional process of liberation—a unity which Gutiérrez would later articulate in terms of the “Chalcedonian principle” (i.e., as exemplified in the conciliar distinction between the two natures of Christ that intends neither to confuse nor to separate them)³⁶—provides the analytical framework for the task of engaging the aforementioned question regarding the relationship between liberation

attenuation of sin and its unqualified eradication, respectively. This distinction forms an essential feature of Gutiérrez’s integrated understanding of history discussed below. Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 214, 224-225, 225nb (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 97, 103-104, 227n103.

³² Gutiérrez, “Truth Shall Make You Free,” 138.

³³ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 91, 92, 224 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 24, 25, 103.

³⁴ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 104; cf. 102-103, 226n101.

³⁵ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 226 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 104.

³⁶ Gutiérrez, “Truth Shall Make You Free,” 121-124.

and salvation. Indeed, such a task is carried out precisely by probing how the three levels of liberation are related to each other.³⁷

In attending to the soteriological significance of the threefold liberative process, Gutiérrez foregrounds the need for a theological approach that remains sensitive to the inadequacies of dualist models. Avoiding a truncated or deficient understanding of the interaction between the three dimensions of liberation requires an ongoing effort to formulate a theology of grace that overcomes ahistorical conceptions of a separate order or plane which is “superimposed” on humanity.³⁸ Contrary to the abstractions of dualist theologies wherein the reality of grace is reimagined in a manner that relegates salvation to “the world beyond,” the unified process of liberation renders untenable the severance of lived experience and the salvific.³⁹ Whereas evasive and spiritualizing tendencies in certain theological traditions resulted in “otherworldly” visions of salvation, Gutiérrez asserts the “unified and all-embracing character” of grace as pervading human existence with the sonority of an enduring invitation to salvific communion in the present life.⁴⁰ Salvation, he observes, does not signify a reality categorically in deferment from the standpoint of human history, a “transcendent end” toward which one can be oriented in

³⁷ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 29. This point receives slightly clearer expression in the Spanish text, which restates the salvation-liberation question as the challenge of examining “how the different levels of meaning of the term *liberation* are related to each other.” Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 95 (my translation).

³⁸ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 43; cf. 44-46.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 43-46, 83-86.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 45, 85. The universal-communal dimension of the “single call [*vocación*] to salvation” constitutes a key feature of Gutiérrez’s soteriology. He mentions that “the historical point of view allows us to overcome a narrow individual optic in order to see, with more biblical eyes, that human beings are called to the encounter with the Lord insofar as they constitute a community, a people. Hence it is less a matter of a vocation [*vocación*] than of a convocation [*convocación*] to salvation...All human beings are, in Christ, efficaciously called-with-others [*convocados*] to communion with God.” The unified call to salvation, then, abides in the human subject as a call-to-salvation-with-all-others. Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 118, 120-121 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 43, 45.

an exclusively anticipatory fashion yet which ultimately remains inaccessible to the worldly mode of existence; rather, “salvation—communion of human beings with God and communion of human beings among each other—is something which is also given, truly and concretely, right now, which embraces all of human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its plenitude in Christ.”⁴¹

Irreducible to the afterworld, salvation “is also an intrahistorical reality.”⁴² In light of this vital historical-soteriological insight, Gutiérrez—objecting to the separation of human history and salvation history into two separate histories which correspond to worldly and otherworldly possibilities of life, respectively—insists that “there is only one history.”⁴³ Retrieving the concretely accessible status of the *already* while maintaining a hopeful attunement to the *not yet* safeguards against the understanding of human history as a prequel to the salvific. Precluding the disjunctive ethereality of such approaches, Gutiérrez writes: “The historical path of humanity must be definitively situated in the salvific horizon.”⁴⁴ The initial yet real givenness of salvation in the present life grounds the unified, theologically enlivened historical framework that lies at the center of Gutiérrez’s work.⁴⁵ It is in expounding this concept of history in terms of biblical themes that the exodus narrative emerges as paradigmatic.

⁴¹ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 191, 192 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 84, 85. An important portion of this passage is omitted in the translation by Inda and Eagleson.

⁴² Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 194 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 86.

⁴³ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 86.

⁴⁴ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 194 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 86.

⁴⁵ An early formulation of this historical framework appears in *Líneas pastorales de la Iglesia en América Latina*, where Gutiérrez discusses “a historico-existential perspective” which characterizes the prophetic pastoral model of the Latin American church and entails a distinctive recognition of the human inability to “know the boundary between grace and nature.” Central to this historical perspective is the awareness of the “already operative presence of salvation among humanity—the communion with God.” Gutiérrez, *Líneas pastorales*, 69, 71 (my translation); cf. 64-76.

1.3 EXODUS, (SELF-)CREATION, AND SOCIAL PRAXIS: THE MANIFOLD PROCESS FROM CHAOS TO CANAAN

In particular, Gutiérrez proceeds to examine the soteriological integrity of human history from the standpoint of two major biblical themes: “the relationship between creation and salvation, and the eschatological promises.”⁴⁶ The main treatment of the exodus appears in the context of addressing the first of these two themes.⁴⁷

In his discussion of the theology of creation, Gutiérrez simultaneously deepens and concretizes the notion of the salvific matrix of history in several ways. The point of departure for his constructive engagement with the theme of creation lies in establishing its significance as “the first salvific act.”⁴⁸ Creation, he mentions, appears in the biblical sources “not as a stage prior to salvation but rather as inserted in the salvific process.”⁴⁹ As the very opening of the dimension of history by “a God who saves and acts in history,” creation does not amount to an order or domain into which salvation enters and unfolds through historical occurrences; seeking to overcome tendencies to understand the creation-salvation relationship in terms of convergence, Gutiérrez offers a “synthetic”

To be sure, Gutiérrez does not present the unified understanding of history as an original contribution of liberation theology. Rather, he explicates the core insight of this approach as an indispensable corrective which liberation theology inherits from contemporary theology and advances in light of historical praxis. For example, see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 43-46, 83-86, 219n14; Gutiérrez, “Truth Shall Make You Free,” 124-127.

⁴⁶ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 195 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 86.

⁴⁷ This pair of biblical themes already receives special attention in the earlier essays “Toward a Theology of Liberation” and “Notes for a Theology of Liberation.” Notably absent from Gutiérrez’s reflections in those essays, however, is the appropriation of the exodus account in any form. With the exception of a passing reference to the exodus narrative in the latter essay, there are no direct indications of its potential value for the task of developing a theology of liberation. Gutiérrez, “Toward a Theology of Liberation,” 71-73; Gutiérrez, “Notes for a Theology,” 255-257, 258.

⁴⁸ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 86-87.

⁴⁹ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 196 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 87.

vision which recognizes that “creation itself is a salvific act.”⁵⁰ That is, the creative work does not provide the arena for a subsequent salvation history but transpires as the inception of that history. God is not depicted as first creating and then saving but “simultaneously as Creator and Savior.”⁵¹ Ultimately, then, the unified historical framework does more than simply call into question the deferment of salvation as an otherworldly reality; in so doing, it follows the pulsating thread of the salvific in the direction of concrete history, traversing the fabric of embodied experience in the present life, until it arrives at its entanglement with the very foundations of this world.

An important element of the theology of creation presented by Gutiérrez is the continuation of the creative process by humanity. He introduces this key concept of continuity as evincing a self-demythologizing mechanism in the biblical theme of creation insofar as the originating act of salvation involves a transition from a cosmologically enframed human person to an anthropogenically transformable world: “The creation of the world begins history, human undertaking, and the salvific exploit of Yahweh. Faith in creation removes its mythical and numinous character. It is the work of a God who saves and acts in history, and since humanity is the center of creation, the latter remains integrated in the history that is built by human effort.”⁵² The work of

⁵⁰ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 196-197, 202 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 87, 90.

⁵¹ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 87. Alongside biblical scholarship, Gutiérrez cites a variety of biblical sources in articulating this view (e.g., Isa 43:1; 44:24; 54:5; Pss 74; 89; 93; 95; 135; 136).

⁵² Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 196 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 87. In an earlier section of the book, Gutiérrez discusses secularization as an orientation toward the “worldliness” of the world which results from “a transformation in the self-understanding of humanity”—a shift “from a cosmological vision...to an anthropological vision” whereby humanity “perceives itself as a creative subjectivity.” While this change begins in the early modern period, Gutiérrez’s remarks attest to the link between this process and his theology of creation. Reflecting on attempts to discover the “biblical roots” of this understanding of secularization, he writes: “Indeed, biblical faith affirms the existence of the created as something different from the Creator, as humanity’s own space, having been proclaimed by God as lord of

creation persists in the ongoing construction of history through human labor—that is, in a project of self-fulfillment whereby humanity proceeds “to dominate the earth as Genesis prescribed.”⁵³ Moreover, the soteriological status of the creative process qualifies its continuation by human work as essentially salvific.⁵⁴ “To work,” Gutiérrez writes, “to transform this world, is to become human and to forge the human community; it is also already to save.”⁵⁵ The full meaning of this dynamic of demythologization by means of the human prolongation of creation comes into view only through the mediation of the exodus paradigm.

Expanding his synthetic analysis of creation and salvation, Gutiérrez first turns to how the exodus activates a distinct liberative valence in the relationship between the two biblical themes. He observes that “the creative act is linked, almost identified, with the act which liberated Israel from slavery in Egypt.”⁵⁶ Drawing on passages in Second Isaiah—whom Gutiérrez presents as “the best witness to this idea”—and Psalms, he calls attention to the coalescence of creation and the exodus experience of liberation.⁵⁷ For

that creation. In this way, *worldliness* appears as an exigency and condition for an authentic relationship between humanity and nature, among human beings, and finally of human beings with God.” Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 114-116 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 41-42.

⁵³ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 90; cf. 91, 100-101, 168.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 91; cf. Gutiérrez, “Toward a Theology of Liberation,” 70-72; Gutiérrez, “Notes for a Theology,” 256.

⁵⁵ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 203 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 91.

⁵⁶ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 197 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 87. While Gutiérrez first addresses the theme of creation and then proceeds to discuss its relationship with the exodus, it should be noted that this discursive sequence inverts the theological order he discerns in the biblical sources. That is, he describes the exodus as the “true source” of the creation-salvation relationship; it provided the “historical-salvific” experience in light of which the biblical authors reflected on creation, leading them to produce creation narratives that are “strongly marked” by that experience. Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 87, 89, 220n21.

⁵⁷ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 87-88. As shown throughout this chapter, Gutiérrez's writings on the exodus consistently appear to be premised on an acceptance of its basic historicity. The lexicon he deploys in his reflections on the departure from Egypt—*event, act, experience, occurrence, process, life-experience, historical event*, and so forth—communicates an approach to the exodus that recognizes its legitimacy as an

instance, in reference to Isa 51:9-10, he remarks: “The terms and images allude, at the same time, to the two events: creation and liberation from Egypt. Rahab, which is Egypt for Isaiah (cf. 30:7; Ps 87:4), likewise symbolizes the chaos that Yahweh had to defeat in order to create the world (cf. Pss 74:14; 89:11). The ‘waters of the great deep’ are those which enveloped the world and out of which creation emerged, but they are also the Red Sea which was crossed by the Jews at the beginning of the exodus. Creation and liberation from Egypt are one single salvific act.”⁵⁸ The approach to creation as initiating the process of salvation, then, discerns in that relationship the inextricable moment of historical liberation expressed by the exodus. “The God who liberates Israel,” Gutiérrez writes, “is the creator of the world.”⁵⁹

This liberative dimension of the theology of creation signals a necessary political level of lived salvation in a world marked by oppression. Highlighting that “the liberation from Egypt is a political act,” Gutiérrez asserts that the exodus “is the rupture with a situation of dispossession and misery, and the beginning of the construction of a just and relational society. It is the suppression of disorder and the creation of a new order.”⁶⁰ In this regard (i.e., in terms of its political status), the liberation of the ancient Israelites from the suffering of social oppression corresponds to the first distinguishable level of the threefold process of liberation discussed above. The exodus transpires as a disruption

event that took place in the past. As such, the presentation of Gutierrez's understanding of the exodus in this chapter will mirror his terminology in order to provide an accurate exposition of his paradigmatic model.

⁵⁸ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 197-198 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 88. The text of Isa 51:9-10 reads as follows: “Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD! Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago! Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over?”

⁵⁹ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 198 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 88.

⁶⁰ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 198 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 88.

of systemic injustice and violence. In particular, the loving “initiative” of God catalyzes a restorative experience of departure from dehumanizing conditions of enslavement which afflicted the Israelites with collective “repression,” “alienated work,” “humiliations,” and coercive antinatalism.⁶¹ Contrary to the pivotal role assigned to human labor in the continuing process of creation, the cruelty of slavery imposes a negation of human dignity that inherently disfigures the meaning of work and violates the transformative project of human self-fulfillment.⁶² The abjection of exploitation and alienation warps the salvific dynamic of world construction by the human person in communion with others and thereby betrays an imperative for radical intervention.

In response to such a debasement of the creative act, God “stirs the vocation of a liberator: Moses.”⁶³ The task confronting Moses, however, is not confined to the external reality of structural oppression. Underscoring the multidimensional complexity of the liberative process, Gutiérrez notes the injured interiority of the Israelites as depicted in the exodus narrative and thus identifies an indispensable personal level of the liberation which God calls Moses to lead. Among the enslaved Israelite population, Moses encounters a situation of “alienation” which initially prevents them from receiving his message of liberation and continues to impede their relationship with a nascent and

⁶¹ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 88-90. While Inda and Eagleson’s rendering of “política antinatalista forzada” as “enforced birth control policy” arguably captures the general sense of Exod 1:15-22, the primarily contraceptive reference of the concept of birth control in the contemporary world and the postnatal violence described in this Exodus passage seem to favor a closer adherence to Gutiérrez’s terminology. In addition to Exod 1:15-22, Gutiérrez cites the following passages as depicting the other elements of oppression to which the Israelites were subjected: Exod 1:10-11 (repression); 1:13-14 (humiliations); 5:6-14 (alienated work); 13:3 and 20:2 (slavery).

⁶² Ibid., 90, 168.

⁶³ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 198 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 88.

precarious freedom after the departure from Egypt.⁶⁴ As such, the process of liberation to which Moses is called requires him to embark on “a long and hard struggle” in which “a slow-moving pedagogy, involving euphorias and regressions, will be necessary for the Jewish people to become conscious of the roots of their oppression, struggle against it, and perceive the profound meaning of the liberation to which they are called.”⁶⁵ The exodus, then, unfolds as an extended process that remains irreducible to the crucial moment of liberation from a prevailing system of political violence. As an experienced “historical-salvific event,” however, it irrupts in the concrete form of “a political liberation in which the love of Yahweh for the people is expressed and the gift of total liberation is received.”⁶⁶

Total liberation begins in the departure from Egypt, proceeds amid the context of ongoing internal liberation and the covenant, and leads to the entrance into Canaan. Developing this view of the exodus as a fundamentally graced and comprehensive movement rooted in divine love, Gutiérrez mentions that “Yahweh liberates the Jewish people politically in order to make them a holy nation.”⁶⁷ The emancipatory moment of

⁶⁴ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 88. As instances of this alienation, Gutiérrez cites the following passages: Exod 6:9; 14:11-12; 16:3. It is important to note that the discussion of alienation in this context corresponds with Gutiérrez’s earlier treatment of the human desire for an “interior freedom” which does not amount to “the internalization of a situation of servitude” but instead reflects a “psychological liberation” that “adds dimensions which do not exist or are not sufficiently integrated” in the liberation from unjust political structures. Indeed, his remarks on Moses’s difficulties in relation to the effects of alienation among the Israelite population can be viewed as exemplifying the notion that “alienation and dispossession, as well as the very struggle for liberation from such a situation, have effects on the personal and psychological plane which would be dangerous to neglect in the process of constructing a new society and humanity.”

⁶⁵ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 84-85 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 20.

⁶⁶ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 198-199 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 88.

⁶⁷ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 199 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 89.

⁶⁷ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 89. In relation to this point, Gutiérrez quotes Exod 19:4-6: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians...Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”

rupture with a dehumanizing social reality does not exhaust the desired outcome of liberation but rather sets in motion an increasingly deepening process of transformative encounter with God. To this end, Gutiérrez presents his unified approach to the liberative significance of the exodus in a manner that identifies the primacy of the religious dimension:

Indeed, Yahweh calls the people not only to leave Egypt but also, and above all, “to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exod 3:8). The exodus will be the long march toward the promised land, in which a society free from misery and alienation could be established. Throughout the whole process the religious event does not appear as something separate. It is situated in the context—or more precisely, it is the profound meaning—of the entire narrative. It is the root of the situation, where the dislocation introduced by sin, injustice, and oppression is ultimately determined.⁶⁸

It is the entrance into Canaan, envisioned in terms of the salvific experience of living in communion with God and with others, which fully concretizes the liberative dynamism into which the Israelites were propelled by freedom from slavery: “The worship of Yahweh and the possession of the land are united in the same promise.”⁶⁹ The activation of a specific directionality or geo-referential structure in the encounter with God as liberator forms a key component of Gutiérrez’s analysis of the exodus: the *departure from* is principally and definitively a *departure for*.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 199 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 89. The link between vocation and convocation seems to be operative in these pages (see note 40 above). Having described Moses’s vocation [*vocación*] several paragraphs earlier, Gutiérrez proceeds to discuss the end to which God calls [*convoca*] the Israelites out of Egypt. In light of his previous remarks on the meaning of convocation, the use of the term in this context captures the inseparable salvific and communal features of the exodus process.

⁶⁹ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 329 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 168.

⁷⁰ This basic dynamic of liberation reappears in Gutiérrez’s discussion of a “spirituality of liberation” as a “comprehensive and synthetic [attitude] that informs the totality and the details of our lives,” grounding the concrete commitment to others, especially the oppressed, in an ongoing process of conversion. Reflecting on spirituality as “the domain of the Spirit,” he describes the “complete freedom” into which the Spirit leads the human person as “*freedom from* everything which impedes our fulfillment as human beings and

As an Egypt-to-Canaan trajectory, then, the transitional character of the exodus revolves around its religious core. Indeed, the liberative nature of the entire process, Gutiérrez suggests, cannot be adequately considered without attending to its religious depths.⁷¹ “The covenant,” he observes, “will give full meaning to the liberation from Egypt—one is not understood without the other.”⁷² Insufficient on its own, political liberation requires both the qualitative-cultural revolution through which new modes of interhuman relationality can emerge as well as the communion with God and with others from which it receives its most comprehensive horizon of transformative love. On the other hand, the new society and communal reality to be forged in Canaan in accordance with the covenant remain inextricably linked with God’s gift of emancipation from structural oppression. Accordingly, Gutiérrez insists that “the covenant and the liberation from Egypt are only aspects of a single movement—a movement that leads to the encounter with God.”⁷³ Remarketing on God’s self-revelation to Moses in Exod 3:14, he identifies the covenantal context of this landmark moment in the exodus narrative and

children of God, and *freedom to love and enter into communion with God and with others.*” Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 244-246 (my translation; emphasis mine); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 116-118. See also the pertinent reference to this passage in a later discussion of the third level of liberation in Gutiérrez, “Truth Shall Make You Free,” 138-141, 195n124.

⁷¹ Commenting several years later on his treatment of the exodus paradigm in *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez addresses the significance of the political and the religious levels of the exodus in his earlier work: “The one aspect does not negate the other; rather they are at different levels of depth. This is the important point to be kept in mind, for otherwise the message is mutilated. The ultimate meaning of the event is to be found in God’s call to the people, inviting all of them to enter into full communion with God.” Alongside the emphasis on the indispensable political level of liberation, Gutiérrez’s position on the preeminence of the religious dimension of the exodus process is unmistakable: “This is a point about which we must remain clear: priority belongs to the religious element, to the covenant with Yahweh, because it is this that gives the entire movement its deeper meaning.” Gutiérrez, “Truth Shall Make You Free,” 118; cf. 187-188n78.

⁷² Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 200 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 89.

⁷³ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 200 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 89. Cf. Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 246n25.

thematizes that context in terms of an intrahistorical divine accompaniment which actively unifies Egypt and Canaan, departure and entrance, *liberation from* and *liberation for*.⁷⁴ The salvific ultimacy of the multidimensional exodus process animates the journey to a promised land in which the dynamic of creation from chaos is reinscribed in a manner that further elucidates its significance.⁷⁵

In Gutiérrez's soteriological analysis of liberative praxis, the aforementioned interplay between the creative act and the exodus extends beyond the biblical expressions connecting the cosmological theme of God vanquishing the chaotic primordial waters to establish the order of creation and the historical disruption of political disorder in emancipating the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Likewise, the intimate relationship between creation and exodus provides Gutiérrez with a perspective which recognizes more than the distortion of the protological integrity of human labor under the inhuman conditions of bondage. A third aspect of this thematic interplay concerns the continuation of creation in relation to the all-encompassing process of liberation that is conceptualized as exodus-to-the-promised-land. Gutiérrez articulates this third point as follows:

Humanity is the summit and center of the creative work and is called to prolong it by means of labor (cf. Gen 1:28)—and not only through labor. The liberation from Egypt in its link to creation, even to the point of concurrence, adds an element of paramount importance: the necessity and the place for the active participation of humanity in the construction of society. If faith in creation “desacralizes” it, making it the human person's own field of labor, the departure

⁷⁴ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 95. In addition to Gutiérrez's quotation of Exod 6:6-9, this thematic interlocking appears in the account of God's self-revelation to Moses under discussion: “Then the LORD said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt’” (Exod 3:7-10).

⁷⁵ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 89; cf. 87-88.

from Egypt, the country of the sacred monarchy, reinforces this idea: it is the “desacralization” of social praxis. Henceforth, it will be the work of humanity.⁷⁶

The demythologization of creation effected by its continuation through human work as a world-transformative task of self-fulfillment receives a liberative inflection from the exodus paradigm. Creative activity is prolonged by the human person only when the struggle for social justice and communal flourishing is incorporated in the process of transforming the world—that is, when social praxis is also demythologized.⁷⁷

In light of the mediation of the exodus, the continuing work of creation renders its constitutive praxis of liberation an essential mode of human self-fulfillment. Elaborating this insight in contradistinction to the Israelite experience of oppression and alienation in Egypt, Gutiérrez writes that “by working, transforming the world, breaking with a situation of servitude, constructing a just society, and assuming its destiny in history, humanity forges itself.”⁷⁸ As transposed dynamisms of historical salvation to be carried out in the sphere of human exertion, the liberative process and the creative process become conjoined in Gutiérrez’s understanding of the exodus as “a re-creation.”⁷⁹ Since “the God who makes [*hace*] the cosmos from chaos is the same God who leads [*hace pasar*] Israel from alienation to liberation,” the persisting creative role which humanity receives from the Creator resounds with a political imperative.⁸⁰ It is in regard to this feature of the theology of creation that Gutiérrez asserts: “To dominate the earth as

⁷⁶ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 202 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 90.

⁷⁷ The illustrative passage which Gutiérrez quotes from Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) frames “political education” in terms of communicating the idea that “the demiurge is the people and the magic lies in their hands and their hands alone.” Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, [1961] 2004), 138; cf. Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 221n34.

⁷⁸ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 202 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 90.

⁷⁹ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 89.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 89-91.

Genesis prescribes, to prolong creation, does not have value if it is not done in favor of humanity—if it is not in the service of its liberation, in solidarity with all persons, in history. It is in response to this [necessary condition] that the liberative initiative of Yahweh stirs the vocation of Moses.”⁸¹

At once creator and liberator, the divine presence lovingly and gratuitously nurtures a history of salvation in which the exigency of shaping forms of social life that redress oppression reflects the ineluctable reflexivity engraved in the generative responsibility of humanity in a transformable world. In short, Gutiérrez’s anthropocentric approach to creation ultimately discerns in the protracted creative act a graced impetus toward human “self-creation” (or “self-generation”) that is intrinsically political in orientation as a result of the exodus prism and entirely salvific without ever exhausting the entirety of salvation.⁸² Indeed, “the lesson of the exodus” is concisely recapitulated a few pages later as “the significance of the self-generation of humanity in the historical political struggle.”⁸³ In the final analysis, Gutiérrez proposes, the relationship between

⁸¹ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 202 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 90.

⁸² Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 90, 91, 101, 221n41; cf. 17-22, 24-25, 30, 42-43, 81-82, 168. While not explicitly developed by Gutiérrez, it seems difficult not to perceive an operative thematic interaction between the free society to be established in Canaan, the liberative self-creation of humanity, the aforementioned “historical conquest” of “creative freedom” through the ongoing creation of a new humanity (see note 21), and the biblical narrative of the conquest of Canaan. The entrance into Canaan, albeit of primary importance in Gutiérrez’s understanding of the exodus paradigm, is not discussed in light of its biblical context of conquest; rather, it is appropriated in terms of the religious dimension and aim of the process beginning in the departure from Egypt as an act of (re)creation. On the other hand, the theme of conquest does feature in Gutiérrez’s treatment of humanity’s self-creative orientation toward a socially and qualitatively different embodiment of freedom—a trajectory represented by the entrance into Canaan. In effect, this discursive strategy brings the themes of conquest and Canaan into proximity without directly naming the conquest of Canaan (with the exception of a quotation from Hebrew Bible scholar Gerhard von Rad on p. 94). It is perhaps best to resist the temptation to amplify the significance of this conceptual nexus; nonetheless, its evocative pertinence should at minimum be identified.

⁸³ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 205n41 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 221n41.

creation and salvation can be “profoundly and synthetically” apprehended only on the basis of “the *mediation of this self-creation*—initially revealed by the liberation from Egypt.”⁸⁴ Central to the paradigmatic framework formulated by Gutiérrez, the exodus-centered vision of humanity creating itself through social praxis safeguards against dualizing and depoliticizing models of the creation-salvation relationship.⁸⁵

This concrete dynamic of self-creation through participation in the struggle to establish a new social reality marked by justice and communion inhabits the heart of Christian faith. Salvation as a process of re-creation—that is, as “a new creation”—comes to “complete fulfillment” in the gift of liberation offered in Christ.⁸⁶ “In this sense,”

⁸⁴ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 202 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 90.

⁸⁵ In a later section titled “The Horizon of Political Liberation,” Gutiérrez returns to the theme of self-creation in offering several critiques of contemporary theological approaches to the relationship between liberation and salvation. Characterizing such approaches as obstructing fruitful reflection on “the question concerning the ultimate meaning of human action in history,” he discusses certain consequential shortcomings associated with theologians who consider “temporal progress” in terms of “the domination of nature by science and technology, and some of its repercussions for the development of human society.” In particular, he addresses the problems of the creation-redemption dualism, of disregarding the challenge of structural transformation, and of evading the conflictual setting of historical praxis. With regard to the first of these issues, Gutiérrez notes that “temporal progress is viewed as a prolongation of the creative work” yet results in a theological framework wherein the order of creation remains in juxtaposition with that of redemption. The discursive separation of creation and redemption into two orders, he suggests, involves an understanding of the concept of creation as nature (the cosmos) requiring redemption; specifically, the ongoing scientific and technological transformation of nature by humanity—whose “socially and historically situated freedom” gives rise to sin—means that “‘creation,’ the cosmos, only suffers the consequences of sin.” Whereas this approach requires an “immediate relationship between creation and redemption” and thus yields “a curious forgetfulness of the liberative and protagonistic role of humanity, lord of creation and collaborator [*coparticipe*] in its own salvation,” Gutiérrez contends that “only the mediation of the self-creation of humanity in history can lead us to establish, correctly and fruitfully, the relations between creation and redemption.” That is, redemption does not enter into creation as an extrinsic order but rather always already suffuses it and finds concrete expression through it, especially in the liberative process of humanity creating itself. Grounding his critique of the dualist approach in “the major event of the exodus,” Gutiérrez asserts the necessity of the political horizon of liberation in order “to encompass in a single gaze, or to establish on a single principle, the creation-redemption relationship.” In these paragraphs, the translation by Inda and Eagleson does not communicate with sufficient clarity the distinction between the theological perspective Gutiérrez is critically engaging and his proposed corrective. Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 219-222 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 100-102.

⁸⁶ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 90, 101.

Gutiérrez writes, “Paul speaks of a ‘new creation’ in Christ (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17). Moreover, it is through this ‘new creation,’ that is to say, through the salvation which Christ affords, that creation acquires its full meaning (cf. Rom 8).”⁸⁷ The synthetic understanding of the creation-salvation relationship finds its richest expression in Jesus of Nazareth. In discussing the fulfilling work of Christ as a re-creation, however, Gutiérrez maintains its profound continuity with the multidimensional experience of liberation depicted in the exodus narrative. The new creation offered by Christ, then, is “presented simultaneously as a liberation from sin and from all of its consequences: dispossession, injustice, and hatred.”⁸⁸ That is, it is the comprehensive salvific invitation to communal love in history, socially effective and thus eminently tangible, calling into question every spiritualistic and individualistic ideal of disconnecting from the world.⁸⁹

It is in light of this vital christological perspective that Gutiérrez considers “the paradigmatic experience of the exodus” as an event that “structures our faith in the gift of the Father’s love.”⁹⁰ Observing that this fundamental revelatory experience “maintains its validity and relevance due to similar historical experiences which the people of God go through,” he recognizes the persisting liberative orientation of the exodus process in the lived faith of contemporary Christians: “In Christ and through the Spirit, human beings—overcoming through struggle and confrontation everything that divides them and opposes

⁸⁷ Ibid., 90.

⁸⁸ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 201 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 90.

⁸⁹ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 86, 90-91, 95-97, 102-105.

⁹⁰ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 202 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 90-91.

them to each other—are becoming [*se van haciendo*] one in the very heart of history.”⁹¹

Christian life, in its commitment to contesting dehumanizing structures and transforming the conditions that perpetuate oppression, participates in the “movement of human self-generation initially launched by the creative work.”⁹² Exhibiting the complex restoration of human dignity that characterizes the Egypt-to-Canaan trajectory, Christian praxis in a world of preventable suffering seeks to concretize the “radical liberation” of Christ while embracing an anticipatory and celebratory posture.⁹³ The enduring imprint of the exodus on Christian faith is aptly communicated in Gutiérrez’s integrative image of “the Christian life [as] a passover, a transition from sin to grace, from death to life,

⁹¹ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 202 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 90-91. In his later remarks on the understanding of the exodus articulated in *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez notes: “It is because of [its] comprehensiveness that the event of the exodus can be called paradigmatic for biblical faith... The sense is not that the event must be repeated as such in the history of the Christian community but rather that the deeper meaning of the event—the liberating intervention of God—is permanently valid.” Gutiérrez, “Truth Shall Make You Free,” 119.

⁹² Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 203 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 91.

⁹³ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 103; cf. 116-120. This anticipatory dimension of Christian faith, in which a historically effective orientation toward the definitive arrival of the reign of God (see note 31) animates and contextualizes all liberative activity, intersects with Gutiérrez’s suggestion that “the eschatological horizon is present in the heart of the exodus.” Initially obscure, the meaning of this remark becomes clearer throughout the section in which Gutiérrez discusses the unified concept of history in relation to the biblical theme of the eschatological promises. In this section, history is framed as structured by promise, which is understood as “the effective revelation of God’s love, of God’s self-communication,” and therefore as fundamentally oriented “toward the future.” Ultimately “fulfilled in Christ,” the promise is described as “developing its potentialities... in the *promises* made by God throughout history.” As such, history is presented as unfolding by means of an ongoing “dialectical relationship” between the promise and the promises, excess and “concretion,” the “inexhaustible” and its “partial fulfillments.” In the context of this “permanent historical mobility” fostered by the promise, Gutiérrez (quoting biblical scholar Albert Gelin) recognizes the covenant as the first concretion of the promise. The exodus process, then, is situated in an expansive salvation history which remains eschatologically directed toward “what will come”—that is, a history marked by futurity, involving “rupture with the past,” new interventions by God, and a constant propulsion beyond the present in the direction of the “end of history.” Simultaneously concretizing and announcing the promise, the complex liberation of the exodus paradigm expresses the forward momentum of history. Hence the basic perspective which the prophets appropriate from the exodus, Gutiérrez notes, reflects the eschatological impetus of history: “the break with the past and the projection toward the future.” Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 200, 203-205, 207-210 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 89, 91-95.

from injustice to justice, from the subhuman to the human.”⁹⁴

1.4 REREADING AND SUB-VERSION: THE EXODUS IN LIGHT OF THE MEMORY-FREEDOM DIALECTIC

In addition to the reflections offered in *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez’s understanding of the paradigmatic significance of the exodus narrative is encapsulated in his essay “God’s Revelation and Proclamation in History.” Based on a presentation first given at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru in 1975, this essay continues the analysis of the exodus in light of the theologically saturated historical framework established several years earlier in Gutiérrez’s foundational text while focusing on issues pertaining to the nature of the biblical text and its ongoing reception.⁹⁵

In his opening remarks, Gutiérrez proposes a methodological distinction between an approach to the Bible that aims “to adapt its message and its language to the human

⁹⁴ Ibid., 103.

⁹⁵ The essay was first published in 1976 and appears as the first chapter among the essays collected in *The Power of the Poor in History*. In this collection, the essay stands alone in comprising the first part of the volume, titled “biblical overview of the sources of liberation theology.” Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 3.

The original presentation from which this essay derives was given as part of the “summer course” in theological reflection founded by Gutiérrez in 1971. This annual course—the Jornadas de Reflexión Teológica—emerged as a theological-pedagogical response to the vision of Vatican II (1962-1965) and the Latin American bishops’ conference held at Medellín in 1968. Actively cultivating the participation of the laity and the poor in the life of the church and in the process of challenging conditions of oppression, the “summer course” was not primarily designed for academically trained theologians but rather for the larger Christian community (thereby exemplifying the popular conception of theological reflection asserted at the beginning of his *Theology of Liberation*). Attention to the biblical sources of Christian faith characterized the course from the outset. See Nickoloff, introduction to *Essential Writings*, 6, 330n11, 332n59; Robert McAfee Brown, preface to *The Power of the Poor in History*, by Gustavo Gutiérrez, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1979] 1983), vii, xi; Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 3, 177-178n1. For further discussion of the historical context, institutional setting, and ecclesial vision of this theology course, see Juan Miguel Espinoza Portocarrero, “Las ‘Jornadas de Reflexión Teológica’ y el desarrollo de un proyecto eclesial posconciliar asociado a la teología de la liberación en el Perú: Discurso teológico, redes sociales y cultura eclesial (1969-2000)” (master’s thesis, Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, 2015), <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12404/6705>.

person today” and one that seeks “a reinterpretation from our own world,” that is, in light of “our human and faithful experience.”⁹⁶ Establishing the latter method as the “more radical” way to engage the biblical sources insofar as “it goes more to the root of what the Bible is, of what the revelation of God in history is,” he embraces a hermeneutic that itself adumbrates the conception of the exodus to be presented in the essay.⁹⁷ Latent in the adaptation-reinterpretation distinction is a notion that informs the biblical framework developed in these pages—namely, the continuing historical experiences of God’s self-revelation. Since the Bible “narrates a history” in which God acts in an effective and liberative manner, Gutiérrez identifies the “historical event” as “the crux of the faith of Israel.”⁹⁸ The biblical texts are primarily concerned not with “theoretical considerations regarding a supreme being who created the world and maintains its order,” or with “a prehistorical—or more precisely, ahistorical—mythical event,” but rather with a shared experience of revelation within history.⁹⁹

Receiving expression in Israel’s creedal formulations, the experience of God’s activity in history produces “a profession of faith” that appears in multiple biblical sources yet always “centers on liberation from the oppression that had been suffered in

⁹⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio de Dios en la historia,” in *La fuerza histórica de los pobres* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, [essay orig. publ. 1976] 1982), 14 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 4.

⁹⁷ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 14 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 4.

⁹⁸ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 15-16 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 5-6. The English translation by Robert R. Barr omits the following sentence, which should appear on p. 5, concerning the biblical texts: “Reflections that are more or less philosophical and mythical accounts should be read in light of what constitutes the crux of the faith of Israel: the historical event.”

⁹⁹ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 15 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 5.

Egypt.”¹⁰⁰ The exodus experience constitutes the concrete point of departure for a faith embedded in historical reality: “It is in that liberation that the God of biblical faith is revealed.”¹⁰¹ In reference to the various versions of biblical creeds, Gutiérrez writes that “all of them are summarized as ‘Yahweh brought us out of Egypt.’ This is the God of Israel: the God who liberates.”¹⁰² Biblical faith celebrates “the break with that situation of exploitation” in Egypt as the “foundational historical event” which, as an imitable act of transformative justice, also forms the “basis” for enacting justice in society.¹⁰³

This feature of the exodus as a praxis-orienting paradigm is developed throughout the essay but it is perhaps most succinctly stated in Gutiérrez’s observation that “to know God as liberator *is* to liberate and to do justice. For the Bible, the root of behavior that can be called just is in the historical event which summarizes its faith: God brought us out of Egypt.”¹⁰⁴ The nature of the historical experience of emancipation from oppression provides a model for social relations, especially with regard to the most vulnerable. “To be just,” Gutiérrez writes, “is to behave toward the poor as Yahweh did toward the people of God.”¹⁰⁵ In the exodus, the encounter with God as liberator offers an exemplary way of responding to dehumanizing conditions and an enduring standard for evaluating one’s knowledge of God. Consequently, to live in a manner that inflicts suffering upon others

¹⁰⁰ Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 5-6. The following creedal examples are cited by Gutiérrez: Deut 6:20-25; 26:5-9; Amos 2:10; 3:2.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰² Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 16 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 6.

¹⁰³ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 16 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 6.

¹⁰⁴ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 17-18 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 8.

¹⁰⁵ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 18 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 8.

or neglects the exigency of solidarity with victims of injustice amounts to a rejection of the God revealed in the exodus. This exodus-based metric, then, remains inseparable from the epistemological significance of social praxis: “To fail to know God is to make an option contrary to the God who liberated Israel from Egypt to establish justice and right—and this is measured on the terrain of practice.”¹⁰⁶

It is for this reason that Gutiérrez mentions the insufficiency of recognizing historical revelation as structuring biblical faith and insists on the importance of naming the effective and liberative partiality toward the oppressed that characterizes God’s self-revelation in history.¹⁰⁷ Simply to assert the historical setting of revelation curtails the necessary theological amplitude that surpasses indeterminacy in order to specify God’s justice in solidarity with the poor. In attending to the primacy of this particularity of God’s activity, Gutiérrez observes that “the true ‘theophany,’ the revelation of God, is given in the liberation of the poor.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the preeminence of the concrete specificity of divine revelation finds clear expression in his position that “the God-poor relationship is the heart of biblical faith.”¹⁰⁹ Grounded in the exodus experience, this dimension of biblical faith revolves around “Yahweh’s love” as “a God who takes sides with the poor and liberates them from slavery and oppression.”¹¹⁰ As such, the God-poor relationship

¹⁰⁶ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 19 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 9. With regard to the knowledge of God in the context of behavior informed by the exodus revelation, Gutiérrez develops themes expressed in numerous biblical texts, including Exod 22:20-23; Deut 24:17-18; Pss 68:5-6; 146:7-9; Prov 14:21; 17:5; Jer 7:1-7; 22:13-16; Amos 4:1-3; and Mic 3:9-12.

¹⁰⁷ Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 7.

¹⁰⁸ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 17 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 7.

¹⁰⁹ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 18 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 8.

¹¹⁰ Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 7, 9.

invests biblical faith with an essentially practical impulse. This behavioral value of the exodus paradigm is addressed by Gutiérrez in terms of the covenant.

The covenant, Gutiérrez writes, concerns “a *twofold belonging* that binds God with the Jewish people.”¹¹¹ He describes this relationship as an “exchange” between the God who “liberated the people from servitude in Egypt” and the emancipated Israelites who will be expected to “bear witness” to God insofar as they “practice the justice implied in God’s liberating activity on behalf of the oppressed.”¹¹² Justice, in its liberative and transformative vitality as reflected in the exodus, serves to contextualize and qualify the character of the covenant. This exodus-inflected understanding of the covenant provides the framework for Gutiérrez’s observation that “to be just is to be faithful to the covenant. *Fidelity is justice and it is holiness*. In the Bible, justice is a notion that unites the relationship with God. Only in this way is it synonymous with holiness.”¹¹³ The justice of God as liberator and the justice embodied by witnessing to God in society undergird the mutuality of the covenant relationship. This analysis of fidelity to the covenant reinforces the foundational status of the exodus experience as Gutiérrez discusses it; as he notes with reference to the liberation from bondage: “The covenant is deeply rooted in it; the faith of Israel rests on both events [i.e., on the exodus from Egypt and the covenant].”¹¹⁴

The resulting model of holiness that inheres in biblical faith stems from the image

¹¹¹ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 19 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 9.

¹¹² Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 9-10.

¹¹³ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 19 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 10.

¹¹⁴ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 16 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 6.

of God initially revealed in the exodus. Consistent with the explication of the exodus in *A Theology of Liberation*, then, the liberative event is irreducible to the removal of the Israelites from systemic oppression; rather, as indicated in the treatment of the covenant, it is a process with direction and purpose. The encounter with the God of justice that begins amid slavery in Egypt comes to fruition and attains its deeper significance in the covenant and the entrance into Canaan. Bringing this aspect of the exodus to the fore, Gutiérrez writes: “The exodus affords a grasp of the perspective in which the covenant is situated, and the covenant in turn gives full meaning to the liberation from Egypt.”¹¹⁵ The biblical narrative of the freedom from slavery enacted by God cannot be adequately understood independently of its trajectory toward the ratification of the covenant and the attendant vision of social life. The exodus experience of “liberation leads to communion” and thus belongs, as a generative moment with its own liberative integrity, to a larger “process by which the ‘people of God’ is built.”¹¹⁶

Intertwined with the communal witness to God to be lived out in accordance with the covenant, the biblical theme of the possession of Canaan is likewise crucial to the exodus process. Commenting on Deut 6:20-25, Gutiérrez asserts that the departure from Egypt “will be real only due to the fulfillment of the promise: the people will settle in a land ‘flowing with milk and honey’—the promised land.”¹¹⁷ It is the aim of God’s

¹¹⁵ Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 9-10.

¹¹⁶ Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 10.

¹¹⁷ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 16 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 6. The cited passage in Deuteronomy, which Gutiérrez quotes as an example of the “historical creeds” of biblical faith, reads as follows: “When your children ask you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the LORD our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your children, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The LORD displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to

liberating act—that is, the *liberation for*—that crystallizes the transformative significance of the foundational revelatory event.

In this essay, the Egypt-to-Canaan structure of the exodus paradigm is more explicitly appropriated in connection to the horizon of futurity developed in *A Theology of Liberation*.¹¹⁸ That is, the entrance into Canaan as the fulfillment of a promise itself becomes “a promise of other fulfillments.”¹¹⁹ Describing this historical dynamic of biblical faith as an “*openness to the future*” in which memory and “creative freedom” form an ongoing “dialectic,” Gutiérrez examines the exodus process as itself situated in a more expansive process of reconceptualization amid recontextualization.¹²⁰ He notes that “the liberation from Egypt is an event that will constantly be reread, illuminating other historical interventions of Yahweh (cf. Pss 105; 106). The land to which the people are led fulfills a promise made to their ancestors, but at the same time the possession of that land is a promise which opens history to other fulfillments.”¹²¹ In its historical openness to subsequent experiences of God’s self-revelation, the exodus offers living resources that will continue to speak anew when probed in light of changing situations. Interacting with

bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.”

¹¹⁸ While this connection is not entirely absent from *A Theology of Liberation* and can easily be deduced from the more general discussion of the promise-promises dialectic (see note 93), it appears in an explicit manner mainly in quotations from biblical scholars and theologians. See Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 89, 94, 221n38.

¹¹⁹ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 16 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 6.

¹²⁰ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 16-17, 21-22, 26, 31-32 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 6-7, 12, 16, 20-21. Unlike the perspective formulated in *A Theology of Liberation*, the themes of creative freedom and the exodus are not presented in this essay in relation to the theology of creation as a process continued by humanity.

¹²¹ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 16-17 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 6.

lived faith in all its vicissitudes across shifting social contexts and irrupting challenges, the foundational encounter with God as liberator exceeds the parameters of a past event in its relation to the evocative force of a contemporizing and forward-looking memory of the divine presence in history.¹²²

Simultaneously promise fulfilled and promise anticipated, the exodus process signifies not simply in a retrospective key but through a continuing reappropriation that seeks to discern God's liberative activity in new settings. Emphasizing this feature of biblical faith, Gutiérrez writes: "The evocation of the liberative act of Yahweh is not nostalgia for times past. Every great love remembers its initial moment—in strong moments, as a source of joy; in difficult moments, as a reaffirmation of hope. In both cases, the gaze looks forward, and the future is a task. In this way, memory appears as a condition for creative freedom."¹²³ The exodus, then, is not transmitted by biblical faith as a settled memory, a memory at rest in the closure of removed recollection, but rather as the diachronic encounter with the liberative exertion of God's love in response to realities of injustice. As an expression of the memory-freedom dialectic, the "evocation [effected by biblical faith] makes the past present in function of the future" and thereby fosters a participatory remembrance of the exodus marked by the act of "rereading it" from a standpoint of hope.¹²⁴

An example of this practice of rereading, the tragic experience of the Babylonian

¹²² Gutiérrez, "God's Revelation and Proclamation," 6-7, 12.

¹²³ Gutiérrez, "Revelación y anuncio," 21-22 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, "God's Revelation and Proclamation," 12.

¹²⁴ Gutiérrez, "Revelación y anuncio," 17, 22 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, "God's Revelation and Proclamation," 6, 12.

exile (586-ca. 538 BCE) is discussed by Gutiérrez as attesting to a mode of questioning and rethinking faith on the basis of “the memory of the departure from Egypt and the openness to new paths of liberation.”¹²⁵ Producing a “profound *crisis of faith* in the Jewish people,” the exile gave rise to “the lacerating question” concerning the liberative activity of God in light of calamity: “Is God a liberating God or not? Why does God permit this reversion to slavery?”¹²⁶ This painful situation of suffering and uncertainty—an exodus process in reverse, as it were—nonetheless occasioned “a qualitative leap” through which God became more clearly understood as “the liberator of all peoples” and the incipient expectation of a new covenant served to reassure “the permanent fidelity of Yahweh.”¹²⁷ Recognizing an expansion in the notion of God reflected in the liberation from slavery and entrance into Canaan, Gutiérrez’s treatment of biblical faith indicates a shift from the “mutual possession” [*posesión mutua*] characterizing the covenant relationship to “a kind of dispossession” [*una especie de desposesión*] that accompanies the theological changes prompted by the exile.¹²⁸ Evoking the exodus memory, God remains liberator and covenantal in calling humanity to a witness of holiness and justice, but the rereading of that remembrance which takes place from the context of exile discloses new ways of experiencing its basic message in the midst of crisis.

The vision of God’s universal love and continuing fidelity in the form of a new

¹²⁵ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 22 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 12.

¹²⁶ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 20 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 10.

¹²⁷ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 20-21 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 10-12. With regard to the “universality of God,” Gutiérrez cites Isa 41:1-7; 43:10; 44:8; in discussing the new covenant, he quotes the “fundamental texts” of Jer 31:31-34 and Ezek 36:23-28.

¹²⁸ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 19-20 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 9-11.

covenant finds fulfillment in the mission, execution, and resurrection of Jesus. In its most radical orientation, the memory-freedom dialectic of biblical faith perceives in the work of Christ “the fulfillment and the relaunching of the promise of love.”¹²⁹ The revelatory activity of God in history as formulated in the creedal celebrations of the exodus event acquires a new manifestation: “In Jesus, God not only reveals Godself in history but also becomes history.”¹³⁰ Consequently, as the specificity of historical revelation and “the nucleus of the biblical message,” the God-poor relationship deepens to a level of loving identification: “Jesus Christ is precisely *God become poor*.”¹³¹ Proclaiming the reign of God with its preferential focus on the oppressed and embodying a solidarity that contests every violation of human dignity, Jesus “was killed as a subversive” and rose again, thereby sealing “the *universality of the new covenant*” and enabling a fuller apprehension of its communal significance.¹³²

Like the experience of the exiles in Babylon, the death of Jesus produced “a crisis of faith” among the disciples which became “the occasion of a great discovery” insofar as it allowed them to transcend “the limits within which they understood the person and mission of Jesus.”¹³³ In the “paschal light,” they came to a new understanding of Jesus’s activity and the universal breadth of his message—an understanding, Gutiérrez mentions,

¹²⁹ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 23 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 13.

¹³⁰ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 23 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 13.

¹³¹ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 24 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 13.

¹³² Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 23-26 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 13-16.

¹³³ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 26 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 15.

which is “not possible” in the absence of concrete solidarity with the most vulnerable.¹³⁴

It is for this reason that the Eucharist, which derives from a celebration of “the liberating act of Yahweh in bringing the Jewish people out of Egypt,” is situated in the memory-freedom dialectic: it involves gratitude for the “historical events in which the love of God is revealed” as well as the commitment to enfleshing, “in a creative and free manner, the meaning which Jesus wanted to give to his life.”¹³⁵ That is, the commemoration of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth “is not a fixation on the past, a sad and nostalgic remembrance,” but rather a joyous and Spirit-guided “openness...toward the future.”¹³⁶ Rereading the liberative, covenantal, and communal dimensions of the exodus process in light of their contemporaneous vigor and forward momentum, the revelation of God in Christ evokes the past as a vibrant love that continues to open “unforeseen paths” in human history.¹³⁷

This paradigmatic conception of the exodus affords an appreciation for how the dialectic of memory and creative freedom informs the distinction between adaptation and reinterpretation which Gutiérrez establishes at the beginning of the essay. Whereas the approach to the biblical texts in terms of adaptation implies a certain distance from the historical reality of revelation and thus seeks to connect the meaning of that reality with the world of the contemporary reader, the method of reinterpretation perceives a shared

¹³⁴ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 26 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 15-16.

¹³⁵ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 26 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 16.

¹³⁶ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 26 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 16.

¹³⁷ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 26 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 16.

reality of revelation and thus engages the biblical testimony as stemming from an experience of God's liberative presence which persists today. Hence the description of the latter approach as "more radical," that is, as closer to the foundational encounter with God's self-revelation in history.¹³⁸ Simply to adapt the biblical message of God's loving act of liberation effectively confines the exodus process to the status of a past occurrence that can only speak *to* the present instead of creatively effervescing *from within* it. In Gutiérrez's analysis, the exodus emerges as a *living exodus*.

In the contemporary world, to reread the exodus process from the standpoint of Christian faith entails what Gutiérrez refers to as the "verification" of that faith precisely through a praxis that instantiates justice in a conflictual history.¹³⁹ Only in this way, he insists, can God as liberator and the "poor Christ" be adequately proclaimed: "That was

¹³⁸ Gutiérrez, "God's Revelation and Proclamation," 4. In this essay, Gutiérrez outlines four characteristics of the biblical hermeneutic of reinterpretation that, as a whole, pertain to the radicality which distinguishes it from the model of application: it is (1) *christological* in its point of departure, which allows for an understanding of "the profound unity of the Old and New Testaments"; (2) a *faithful* reading carried out by "a community that knows itself to be addressed by the word," which distinguishes it from the methods of "cold specialists"; (3) a *historical* reading that recognizes God's self-revelation "in the history of the people that believed and hoped" in God and thus, Gutiérrez observes, "leads us to rethink the word from our own history"; and (4) a *militant* reading, lucidly situated in a conflictual world and aware of the inevitability of "insertion" into that reality in order to transform it. While the adaptive approach may share the first two characteristics, the historical perspective—rethinking the biblical texts as a community in light of God's continuing self-revelation—contextualizes the christological and faithful traits in a manner that warrants attending to their dissimilar meanings with regard to reinterpretation and adaptation. Similarly, the feature of militancy (not to be confused with a call to violence) acquires, in light of its historical qualification, a dimension of continuity with prior revelations of God's liberating love in situations of inhumanity. Gutiérrez, "Revelación y anuncio," 14 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, "God's Revelation and Proclamation," 4.

¹³⁹ Gutiérrez, "God's Revelation and Proclamation," 16-18; cf. 4. In his frequent reflections on the practical verification of faith in terms of doing the truth, Gutiérrez alludes—and at times directly appeals—to the etymological signification of the term *verify*. In *A Theology of Liberation*, for instance, he writes in reference to the task of transforming the world that "only by doing this truth will our faith be *veri-fied*, literally speaking." While this etymological meaning is not explicitly identified in the essay under discussion, it is implied by Gutiérrez's citation of John 3:21 ("those who do what is true") and his observation that "our faith becomes truth in the act." Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 66 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 8; Gutiérrez, "Revelación y anuncio," 27-28 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, "God's Revelation and Proclamation," 16-17.

the fundamental exigency of the covenant. The event of Jesus Christ makes the demand even more urgent.”¹⁴⁰ The behavioral orientation preserved in the memory of God emancipating the Israelite slaves in order to establish a society marked by the witness of holiness intensifies in the context of the new covenant. Reinterpreting the liberative activity of God today, however, leads to an encounter with conflict not only in the concrete structures that perpetuate realities of suffering but also in relation to the ideological obfuscation of biblical faith. The reception of the Bible by readers who occupy positions of social and economic power, Gutiérrez notes, produces interpretations that reflect the “prevailing ideology” and seek to “justify a situation contrary to ‘justice and right,’ as the Bible states.”¹⁴¹ As a result, the act of rereading God’s historical partiality toward the oppressed already engages a certain level of conflict inasmuch as it exhibits a “function of unmasking” when carried out by the oppressed themselves and from a commitment of solidarity with them.¹⁴²

The unmasking enacted by the theological optic of the poor concerns more than a misunderstanding of God due to the distorting effects of an ideological filter—ultimately, it exposes the lived embrace of another god.¹⁴³ To proclaim the God of the victims as revealed in Christ is to participate in a “liberating evangelization” that recognizes faith as situated before the absolute mystery of a God who is “wholly Other, the Holy,” that is, a

¹⁴⁰ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 27 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 16.

¹⁴¹ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 29 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 18. The expression “justice and right” alludes to Gen 18:19, which Gutiérrez quotes earlier in the essay (see p. 10).

¹⁴² Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 18.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 19. Illustrating this insight, Gutiérrez here quotes Peruvian novelist and poet José María Arguedas (1911-1969): “The God of the masters is not the same” (19).

faith enveloped and sustained by “an alterity” whose transcendence and gratuitous love break through in the form of “establishing justice.”¹⁴⁴ On the other hand, to countenance pervasive misery on the level of practice and thereby elevate the sinful antithesis to the reign of God is to negate the paradigmatic value of the exodus as fulfilled in Christ. The trajectories are fundamentally incompatible and correspond to different gods, thereby requiring a church of the poor that “tears away the gospel from the hands of the dominators” in order to reclaim its liberative message.¹⁴⁵

In its constitutive attunement to history as the setting for God’s self-revelation, this imperative of rereading confronts ideological appropriation not only of Christian faith but also of historiography as a medium of misrepresentation and erasure. “It is necessary to insist,” Gutiérrez writes, “that history (where God is revealed as well as proclaimed by us) must be *reread from the poor*, from ‘the wretched of the earth.’ The history of humanity has been written, as someone has said, ‘with a white hand,’ from the dominant sectors.”¹⁴⁶ Just as the ideological dissimulation of biblical faith warrants a process of recovery from below, so too does historiography when it reinforces the violent legacy of white supremacy. Calling attention to the history of the Americas and that of Peru in particular as exemplifying the gaze of white domination, he notes that “another perspective is that of the ‘vanquished’ of history—the erasure of their very memory, the memory of their struggles, has been desired, and this is to snatch away from them a

¹⁴⁴ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 29-31 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 19-20.

¹⁴⁵ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 32 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 21.

¹⁴⁶ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 31 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 20.

source of energy, historical will, and rebellion.”¹⁴⁷ In addition to its norming and silencing impact on historiography and the remembrance of suffering, the centralization of whiteness has exerted a wide-ranging effect on the representation and understanding of Christian history. Crafted by “a white, Western, and bourgeois hand,” the discursive record surrounding the Christian tradition serves to highlight the need to “recuperate the memory of the *lashed Christs of America*, as Bartolomé de Las Casas would call the Indians of the American continent.”¹⁴⁸ Retrieval of repressed indigenous memories and exposure of the historical invisibility inculcated by prevailing modes of social power evince a critical reproduction of God’s partiality toward the most vulnerable.

Central to Gutiérrez’s exodus-based notion of reinterpretation in light of Christian faith in the world today, then, is a racial critique of historiographic production as deeply shaped by the exclusionary character of white normativity. In its diachronic openness, the memory of God overturning an institutionalized form of social domination in removing the Israelites from a situation of slavery is incarnated in the contemporary praxis of subverting imposed absence. To unsettle the unjust consolidation of power in history from its subjugated underside is to witness to the God who transforms that history in favor of the afflicted. As Gutiérrez observes, “To reread history means *to remake history*, to make it from below. It will, for this reason, be a sub-verse history. It is necessary to ‘vert’ [*vertir*] history not from above but rather from below. What is alarming is not being a ‘sub-verse,’ struggling against the capitalist system, but thus far to be a ‘super-

¹⁴⁷ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 31 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 20.

¹⁴⁸ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 31 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 21.

versive,’ providing support for the prevailing domination. This subversive history is the site for a new experience of faith, a new spirituality, as well as for a new proclamation of the gospel.”¹⁴⁹ The encounter with God as liberator today coheres the living memory of the exodus with the task of unearthing memories buried by the colonial wreckage—an activity of rereading as resistance and reconstruction through which faith in Christ is verified.

The memory-freedom dialectic yields a contemporary rethinking of the exodus process from the prism of suppressed communal presences and historical negations. Like the exilic community in Babylon and the paschal experience of Jesus’s disciples, the painful reality that incites a remaking of history challenges Christian faith in a manner that occasions a new reading of God’s justice and covenantal fidelity. It leads, on the one hand, to discerning the liberative voice of God in the proclamation of the good news that is made possible through the recovery of the gospel by the church of the poor. This reclaimed gospel, Gutiérrez mentions, “will be a gospel that is not ‘presentable in society,’ it will be expressed in a hardly refined manner, it will smell bad...The Lord who scarcely has the figure of a human being (cf. the songs of the servant of Yahweh in Isaiah), will speak to us from there. Only by listening to that voice will we recognize our

¹⁴⁹ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 32 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 21. While not explicitly developed here, Gutiérrez’s remarks on (re)making history connote the theological framework of creation as liberative self-creation presented in his *Theology of Liberation*. In this regard, the following passage from Peruvian social philosopher and journalist José Carlos Mariátegui (1894-1930), quoted in *A Theology of Liberation* as “valid for theology” in light of its function as a critical reflection on historical praxis, is pertinent: “The faculty for thinking history and the faculty for making it or creating it become identical.” Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 67n36 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 181n37.

liberator.”¹⁵⁰ The divine presence remains liberative, and its historical self-revelation can be experienced in the disruptive evangelization that stems precisely from the location least expected by the entrenched constellations of occidental narcissism, economic ascendancy, and normative whiteness.

The universal love of God, on the other hand, stimulates a rethinking of the covenant that embraces both oppressor and oppressed while disturbing the mechanisms of oppression and seeking their eradication. Returning to the exilic crisis of faith in relation to the Latin American context, Gutiérrez asks: “How can we sing to God in a continent, in a country, of oppression and repression?”¹⁵¹ The response he offers to this difficult question reflects the dialectic of memory and creative freedom that marks the paradigmatic conception of the exodus developed in this essay: “A serious challenge for faith, it leads us to something like a new historical covenant made with the culture, the race, and the classes which have been dominant until now. It leads us to a covenant with the poor of this world, toward another kind of universality; this creates true dread in some and disquiet, the loss of old securities, in everyone.”¹⁵² Universality and a new covenant,

¹⁵⁰ Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 32 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 22.

¹⁵¹ Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 22. This question is a contemporary restatement of the question posed by the psalmist (Ps 137:4), which is quoted by Gutiérrez in his discussion of the exile (see p. 10): “How could we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?”

¹⁵² Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 33 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 22. The English translation of these lines by Barr seems to take highly inaccurate liberties with Gutiérrez’s text. Rather than communicate the universal scope of the new covenant which Gutiérrez describes (i.e., as pertaining to both the powerful and the poor), Barr’s rendering presents a truncated covenant only with the poor after “we rip up the treaty struck by history with the culture and classes that have dominated us” (22). Aside from the issue of translational accuracy (and the curious omission of the racial dimension of domination, a tendency which recurs on different levels throughout *The Power of the Poor in History*), the English translation presents a conceptually incoherent vision insofar as the proposed covenant conflicts with the notion of universality. The main point of Gutiérrez’s response to the recontextualized exilic question is that singing to God is possible as a way of expressing hope in a transformation that encompasses all peoples and forges communion among them.

the themes identified by Gutiérrez as emerging with increasing lucidity during the Babylonian exile, are invested with a meaning impelled by the subversive rereading of history from its underside. As a call to the witness of justice in society, this covenant at once traverses the manifold power difference and exposes its inhumanity. Directed toward communal holiness, God's liberation as revealed in the foundational event of the exodus is experienced today as a universal love which solicits a remaking of history that prioritizes those who have been rendered its outcasts.

1.5 SPIRITUALITY AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF FREEDOM: THE EXODUS AS A PROCESS OF SEARCHING FOR GOD

The prominence of the exodus as a paradigmatic experience of God's liberating love continues to appear in Gutiérrez's writings from the 1980s. In particular, his books *We Drink from Our Own Wells* and *The God of Life* offer important reflections on the exodus in their respective thematic contexts of spirituality and the theology of God.¹⁵³ The first of these two books considers the significance of the exodus as a biblical model of spirituality. Framed as a comprehensive communal "journey" toward freedom that always originates in a prelusive encounter with God, spirituality provides Gutiérrez with an analytical perspective that allows him to develop certain features of the processive conception of the exodus formulated in his earlier writings.¹⁵⁴ Attending to the Egypt-to-Canaan trajectory as a deepening spiritual path, he elaborates the exodus process as a

¹⁵³ Like the essay "God's Revelation and Proclamation in History," these two books derive from presentations given at the Jornadas de Reflexión Teológica, the "summer course" held at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru (see note 95).

¹⁵⁴ Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 1-5, 72, 88-89.

shared experience of searching for God that arises from the initial encounter with God as liberator in the emancipation from slavery and culminates in communion in the promised land.¹⁵⁵ Divine self-revelation in solidarity with the victims stirs the desire for God.

“Every spirituality,” Gutiérrez writes, “receives its initial impulse from an encounter with the Lord. That experience determines the path to be followed; it bears permanently the mark of the divine initiative and of the historical context in which it occurred.”¹⁵⁶ In the exodus, this defining catalyst is the experience of “breaking away from death,” that is, from the oppression and injustice characterizing the situation of the Israelites in Egypt.¹⁵⁷ Initiating a “multifaceted process of liberation,” the departure from Egypt leads to “a search for God” that constitutes “the ultimate meaning of the entire process” and brings into view the all-encompassing transformation into which God guides the people.¹⁵⁸

While remaining grounded in the liberative experience of God’s love, the ensuing Israelite journey toward “freedom, justice, and the possession of a land of their own, the promised land,” entails a key pedagogical dimension of internalizing the new life of freedom and receiving a more profound understanding of the divine love that set the process in motion.¹⁵⁹ The exodus transpires as a justice-based quest that gradually nurtures integral spiritual growth among a community undergoing external and internal changes on its way to Canaan.

In Egypt, Gutiérrez observes, God’s message of liberation posed a challenge

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 72-79.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 3.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 73.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 73-74 (translation lightly modified); see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo: En el itinerario espiritual de un pueblo*, 4th ed. (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, [1983] 1986), 98-99.

¹⁵⁹ Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 73-77.

that surpassed the structural problem insofar as it was premised on the need to “break with an existing situation to which—in spite of the difficulties it presented—the people were linked by means of subtle and cowardly complicities.”¹⁶⁰ The necessary liberation, then, is not only from a concrete setting of violence but also from the damaging personal acquisition of its inhuman message and underlying values. Developing ideas introduced in *A Theology of Liberation*, he notes that the departure from oppression in Egypt “does not concern a rupture that was actualized once and for all. It is a permanent process that implies a struggle against all the forces inviting a return to the old state of affairs (this is the attraction of ‘the fleshpots of Egypt’).”¹⁶¹ A continuing rupture with a situation of inflicted death and its lasting impact on human interiority, the exodus process involves a communal experience of “learning freedom during the crossing of the wilderness and its solitude.”¹⁶² It is in the Sinai desert, amid an enriching apprehension of freedom during a forty-year period, that the spiritual path of the emancipated Israelites unfolds as a “search for union with the Lord.”¹⁶³

The lengthy duration of the wilderness experience is interpreted by Gutiérrez (in light of Deut 8:2-8) as “a time of trial and of a deepening of the knowledge of Yahweh” that simultaneously exposed the human heart before God.¹⁶⁴ Describing this period as a

¹⁶⁰ Gutiérrez, *Beber*, 99 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 74.

¹⁶¹ Gutiérrez, *Beber*, 100 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 74. The parenthetical reference to Egyptian “fleshpots” alludes to Exod 16:3: “The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’” Gutiérrez quotes this passage in his discussion of alienation among the Israelite slaves in *A Theology of Liberation* (see note 64 above).

¹⁶² Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 74.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 74-75. The quoted passage from Deuteronomy (including verses 7-8, presumably omitted in O’Connell’s translation due to a typographic error in Gutiérrez’s citation) reads as follows: “Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He

“twofold learning” between God and the Israelites, he frames the years in the desert in terms of a formative reciprocity that fostered love and thereby served to orient the people in preparation for the entrance into Canaan.¹⁶⁵ The originating revelation of divine love in the act of liberating the Israelites from slavery leads to fuller self-communications in the forbidding Sinai wilderness, where an increasingly intimate understanding of God’s will to life and justice is cultivated.¹⁶⁶ At the same time, the motivations and behavior of the Israelites are steadily probed by God throughout the wilderness years, a process which foregrounds the multidimensional nature of liberation and the exacting pedagogy of renewal required by “a difficult and demanding freedom.”¹⁶⁷ This twofold learning, an intensifying proximity that further propels the search for God, becomes the “twofold belonging” of the covenant relationship.¹⁶⁸ Instruction in integral freedom and encounter with God’s parental care, the arduous journey between Egypt and Canaan yields a model for the “radically different situation” of communal life to be established in the promised land.¹⁶⁹

humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the LORD your God disciplines you. Therefore keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey.” See Gutiérrez, *Beber*, 101.

¹⁶⁵ Gutiérrez, *Beber*, 101-102 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 75.

¹⁶⁶ Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 75-79.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 75-77.

¹⁶⁸ Gutiérrez, *Beber*, 104 (my translation). Omitted in O’Connell’s translation, the lines containing this expression—which, as noted above, also appears in the essay “God’s Revelation and Proclamation in History”—should follow the quotation of Exod 3:18 on p. 77: “The initial encounter calls for plenitude, an expression of which is the Sinai covenant. This is why the twofold belonging between God and the people is the profound meaning of the whole journey toward freedom: rupture with oppression and crossing of the desert.”

¹⁶⁹ Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 75, 77.

In Gutiérrez's discussion of the period of mutual learning in the wilderness, the topography of the Sinai emerges as an important contextual element of the spiritual experience of the Israelites. Concretely shaping as well as emblemizing aspects of the path toward freedom, the desert landscape offers a valuable resource in his reflections on the exodus process in this book. On the one hand, the "terrible solitude of the wilderness" required the Israelites to "exercise their creativity in opening up new ways" in the midst of a menacing uncertainty and searing vulnerability.¹⁷⁰ In light of the severe "poverty and scarcity imposed by the inhospitable land they were traversing," the Israelites struggled with frequent temptations to return to the perceived security of slavery in Egypt.¹⁷¹ These bleak conditions in the Sinai desert proved troubling for the relationship between human desire and a reality of oppression. Elemental danger and grim desolation gave rise to a certain tension in the learning of freedom—a tension between the absence of freedom suffered by the Israelites in Egypt, exhibiting a new lure from the destitution of the desert environment, and the anticipated freedom in Canaan, a vision rendered fragile by trepidation before the prospect of imminent death.¹⁷² This recurring Egypt-Canaan tension does not compromise or impede the pedagogy of the wilderness but rather belongs to the very process through which the gift of freedom is received. Freedom is learned not simply as a concept or a content of reflection but as a dynamic, shared experience that is inseparable from the complexion of the terrain upon which it transpires. In the Sinai wilderness, the Israelites were challenged to search for the God who liberated

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 76.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

them through unfamiliar paths, and “thus it was amid advances and regressions that the journey to the promised land was accomplished.”¹⁷³

On the other hand, the topography of the desert bespeaks basic features of the spiritual experience of the Israelites. Observing that the mutual learning between God and the Israelites “must take permanently new routes,” Gutiérrez articulates the reason for this aspect of the reciprocal process in a topographic language: “Because the journey is through the desert, where no path is charted in advance. The track made by someone walking is immediately erased by the wind and sand. This is why we neither find a trail nor leave one behind when moving forward in the desert.”¹⁷⁴ Beyond well-trodden or even little-known paths, the trajectories to be taken by the Israelites seeking God in the wilderness are to be created in the very search itself. The encounter with the God who is absolute mystery does not proceed along a predetermined course that is readily captured by a cartographic gaze and which should be replicated in the spiritual experience of the Israelites longing for union with their liberator. Rather than follow a recognizable path, the growing love between God and the people in the Sinai desert must freely fashion its own way.¹⁷⁵ In essence, the journey toward freedom prefiguratively—albeit with varying degrees of clarity and cognitive adequacy—participates in its end point.¹⁷⁶ The nature of the learning experience that takes place in the desert is imaged in its geography.

While the wilderness period already required exercising freedom as a mode of continuing the rupture with bondage and encountering God, the Sinai experience is not

¹⁷³ Ibid., 76-77.

¹⁷⁴ Gutiérrez, *Beber*, 102 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 75-76.

¹⁷⁵ Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 76.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

the destination of the liberative journey but rather functions as a vehicle for spiritual growth directed toward inhabiting Canaan. The purpose of the departure from Egypt defines the processive status of the exodus: “The Jewish people leave Egypt (‘house of slavery’; Deut 8:14) to enter into the promised land, not to go around in circles in the desert.”¹⁷⁷ Canaan does not feature in the exodus process as a fortuitous outcome or as the result of a communal attempt to surmount the life-threatening difficulties experienced in the wilderness. In contrast to the situation of oppression disrupted by God at the inception of the exodus, the occupation of Canaan signifies the intended transition to communal flourishing and justice in the presence of divine love.¹⁷⁸ Alluding to God’s self-revelation to Moses prior to bringing the Israelites out of Egypt, Gutiérrez writes, “This land in which there will be no exploitation and no need is, in the final analysis, an unmerited gift of the Lord and the pledge of commitment to the people with whom the Lord is establishing a covenant: ‘You shall be my people, and I will be your God.’ This gift sets everything in motion and leaves its imprint on the process from the beginning.”¹⁷⁹ Chronologically, the entrance into the promised land follows the liminal period in the Sinai desert; in terms of the theological significance of the exodus process of liberation, however, it precedes the departure from Egypt, structuring its multidimensionality and saturating the dynamics of the search born out of that galvanizing encounter.

It is in Canaan that the spiritual experience of the exodus can be implemented and

¹⁷⁷ Gutiérrez, *Beber*, 103 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 77.

¹⁷⁸ Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 77-79.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 78-79. Throughout his discussion of the exodus, Gutiérrez quotes Exod 3:7-8 and 6:2-8, passages which depict God’s self-revelation to Moses at the beginning of the process as explicitly communicating the orientation toward Canaan (see pp. 73, 77).

cultivated in the establishment of concrete forms of social life before the God of justice. “Life in the promised land,” Gutiérrez mentions, “should be a life lived in the presence of God and marked by fulfillment of the requirements of justice toward others. The land is the place and occasion for communion with God and communion among human beings.”¹⁸⁰ Possession of the land constitutes an indispensable step in culminating the learning of freedom in the wilderness. Beginning with the emancipation from slavery in Egypt and deepening throughout the forty years of creating new paths in the desert, “the full experience of that freedom was to come in the communion of the promised land.”¹⁸¹ The liberative process of the exodus is fulfilled not in the initial rupture with unfreedom but in the gift of a site in which to actualize its promised antithesis.¹⁸²

On the basis of this notion of the exodus as a comprehensive spiritual process of searching for God and learning freedom, Gutiérrez illustrates its paradigmatic value by considering two examples of its enduring impact on the Christian tradition—namely, the way of life of the first Christian communities as described in the New Testament and the mystical theology of John of the Cross.

With regard to the nascent church, he mentions that the following of Jesus is “characterized by a certain behavior, a manner of life,” and thus entails a fundamentally “ethical” orientation.¹⁸³ This mode of living, which revolves around the ongoing attempt to embody love in concrete acts as “the supreme fruit of the Spirit,” is designated “the Way” in the book of Acts, thereby indicating the element of journeying that is central to

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 79.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 74.

¹⁸² Ibid., 77-78.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 81.

the spiritual experience of the exodus.¹⁸⁴ Highlighting the need for a “comprehensive and synthetic” understanding of the Way, Gutiérrez describes this shared “behavior in the service of God” as a salvific path of learning agapic freedom.¹⁸⁵ This freedom, he notes in reference to Gal 5:13, is freedom-to-be-for-others, a freedom to love and serve; indeed, the practical intensity of the relationality that qualifies this love-based freedom is such that it finds expression in the “paradoxical” Pauline directive for Christians to “become slaves to one another.”¹⁸⁶ In contradistinction to the dehumanizing conditions from which God liberated the Israelites, the agapic vision of enslavement-to-others that appears in Paul’s letter seeks to communicate the ethical radicality and meaning of the freedom from sin that frames Christian spirituality.¹⁸⁷ The spiritual path of the first Christian communities encompassed a deepening process of living with and for others, and thus represented, “as in the case of the Jewish people [discussed in relation to the exodus], a collective adventure moved by the Spirit of God—an adventure in which a people learn to live a freedom in the service of love.”¹⁸⁸

In relation to the second example, the theology of John of the Cross, Gutiérrez calls attention to a basic correspondence between the three nights through which the soul passes (i.e., the departure, the path, and the arrival) and the threefold structure of the

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 72, 79-80, 81-82. Although the linguistic connection between the exodus (from the Greek terms *ex* and *hodos*) and the Way (which translates the Greek term *hodos*) does not receive direct attention in his discussion, Gutiérrez does make separate references to the Greek basis for both terms, making the link readily identifiable and inviting appreciation on this level in light of the spiritual connection developed in these pages (see pp. 74, 80, 81).

¹⁸⁵ Gutiérrez, *Beber*, 107-109, 111 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 81-83.

¹⁸⁶ Gutiérrez, *Beber*, 110 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 82-83. The passage from Galatians cited by Gutiérrez reads as follows: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.”

¹⁸⁷ Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 81-83.

¹⁸⁸ Gutiérrez, *Beber*, 111 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 83.

exodus process (i.e., the departure from Egypt, the desert experience, and the entrance into Canaan).¹⁸⁹ Addressing John of the Cross's first night, he writes that "the starting point for the spiritual path is a rupture, a departure," and specifies that what the soul leaves behind is "what in Pauline language is called flesh, whose fate, as we know, is death."¹⁹⁰ Consisting of a graced negation of inadequate desires and attachments that impede the freedom of the spirit, the rupture characterizing this night—which, it should be noted, implies a conflictual moment—is, "as in the case of the Jewish people, the expression of the liberative act of God ('the LORD *brought us out*...with a mighty hand'; Deut 6:21), and the ultimate motive for the process is likewise the love of God."¹⁹¹ Both departures—the soul from worldly distortions and the Israelites from oppression—mark the beginning of a transition from death to freedom that stems from God's love while also effectuating a search for union with God.¹⁹²

The second night signals the pathway which the soul traverses in seeking union with God—namely, faith.¹⁹³ An "obscurity" that nonetheless offers security, faith is a "darker" night than that of departure according to John of the Cross, who analogizes it to midnight and describes its capacity to guide the soul beyond the limitations of human understanding.¹⁹⁴ As a journey toward God, the second night is "a continuous and exigent process" which must be experienced, Gutiérrez mentions, "like the Jewish people in the

¹⁸⁹ Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 83-88.

¹⁹⁰ Gutiérrez, *Beber*, 112 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 84.

¹⁹¹ Gutiérrez, *Beber*, 113 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 84-85. The reference to Deut 6:22 in Gutiérrez's text has been modified to 6:21, which is where the quoted material appears.

¹⁹² Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 84-85.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

desert, in the greatest solitude.”¹⁹⁵ Such solitude, “central in every experience of God,” amounts to a precondition for communion with God and with others, inciting the soul to proceed in its search across the wilderness of faith by means of a “permanent creative freedom” and carve out a way where “there is no previously charted route.”¹⁹⁶ Faith as the second of the three nights, Gutiérrez suggests, intersects with the period of learning freedom in the Sinai desert that follows the emancipation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

The pathway freely created in the dark night of faith begins to culminate in its arrival at the third night: God.¹⁹⁷ Designated “the antelucan” by John of Cross, the last of the three nights—which, due to its proximity to the morning light, is less dark than the second night—commences the finality of union with God for which the soul originally set out on its search.¹⁹⁸ Immediately preceding dawn, the third night signifies the “initial state of union with God” that is possible in the present life and simultaneously points to “the perfect union which follows after the third night.”¹⁹⁹ A night in which fulfillment abounds with anticipation, the destination of the soul “is equivalent to the arrival in the ‘land flowing with milk and honey,’ insofar as that entry was a definitive one.”²⁰⁰ That is, the Israelite possession of Canaan as the purpose of the exodus process corresponds to the soul’s entrance into union with God. As a whole, this tripartite correlation exhibits both unity and interacting particularities that enable aspects of the distinct spiritual paths to

¹⁹⁵ Gutiérrez, *Beber*, 114 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 85.

¹⁹⁶ Gutiérrez, *Beber*, 114-115 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 85-87.

¹⁹⁷ Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 87.

¹⁹⁸ Gutiérrez, *Beber*, 116 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 87.

¹⁹⁹ Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 87.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, (translation lightly modified).

surface anew: “The paradigm of the exodus and the nights of John of the Cross are mutually illuminating. The difference in tone should not deceive us. The historical and personal dimensions interweave and enrich one another within a process that has the same fundamental pattern.”²⁰¹

1.6 LIBERATION AND LIFE: THE EXODUS AS HISTORICAL WITNESS TO DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE

The significance of the exodus as a death-to-life transition receives further analysis in *The God of Life*. In this book, Gutiérrez elaborates a theology of God from the standpoint of biblical revelation in light of Christian faith while attending to “the way in which the poor *perceive* God.”²⁰² Developing an understanding of God as life and as the living source of all life, he pursues a meditation on the “being of God” as the most fundamental reality that establishes the meaning of God’s active presence in history as well as the nature of belief in God.²⁰³ What God *does*, he observes, stems from and reveals who God *is*: “God is not a liberator because God liberates; rather God liberates because God is a liberator. God is not just because God establishes justice, or faithful because God enters into a covenant, but the other way around.”²⁰⁴ It is through the liberative activity of God that the ultimate roots of liberation in the reality of the divine mystery itself are made known in human experience. This focus on the divine wellspring

²⁰¹ Gutiérrez, *Beber*, 116-117 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *We Drink*, 87-88.

²⁰² Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, xiii-xviii (emphasis in original).

²⁰³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *El Dios de la vida* (Lima: CEP, 1989), 29-32, 33, 37-39, 42, 45, 50-51, 54, 56-62 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 1-2, 3, 5-6, 8, 9, 12-13, 14-15, 16-19.

²⁰⁴ Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 2.

of life and love that reveals itself in a conflictual history attests to Gutiérrez's aim "to bring out the primacy and transcendence of God and to remind ourselves that God's being gives meaning to God's action."²⁰⁵

In light of this framework, the exodus emerges not *as* the basis of God's identity as liberator, but *on* it. As the "foundational event for Israel's faith," the exodus reveals the divine reality as a vivifying love that intervenes in history and effects a shift from a situation of death to a communal experience of life.²⁰⁶ Establishing an inseparable link between worship and liberation, "the deliverance from Egyptian slavery and the journey toward the collective takeover of the promised land" comprise a "historical experience" whose generative axis is a "will to life" that exceeds history.²⁰⁷ The God of life affects history in a manner that is entirely consonant with that identifying vitality—namely, in defense of life, especially that of the most vulnerable, whose inalienable right to life is denied by death-imposing conditions of injustice.²⁰⁸

In articulating the paradigmatic status of the exodus in relation to the theology of God, Gutiérrez revisits the pivotal moment of God's self-revelation to Moses before the departure from Egypt and offers a reflection on the tetragrammaton that moves on two interrelated levels: the context in which the name is communicated and the meaning of the divine name.²⁰⁹ In terms of the first level, he observes the importance of attending to

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 33-34, 47 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 3-4, 11.

²⁰⁷ Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 3-4, 11.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 10-11.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 11-13. An earlier, albeit brief, treatment of the divine name appears in *A Theology of Liberation*, where Gutiérrez considers its meaning in terms of the eschatological promises. In this prior discussion, he proposes that the name signifies a divine presence that accompanies and acts in historically salvific ways, as exemplified in the departure from Egypt, the covenant, and the possession of Canaan. See Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 95.

the setting in which God's name is revealed, noting that this key disclosure "is situated in the moment in which Moses receives and assumes the task of liberating the Jewish people from Egyptian oppression."²¹⁰ The call to emancipate the Israelites from the death of slavery does not provide an incidental backdrop for the divine name to be transmitted but rather manifests an orientation toward life which is intrinsic to the same reality to which the name refers. This responsive act of love is essential to Gutiérrez's understanding of the tetragrammaton: "The immediate context for the revelation of God in the book of Exodus is thus the commission of a historical mission of liberation...On the basis of the mission, it is possible to understand who God is."²¹¹

In the biblical sources, Gutiérrez remarks, to know a name means to know more than a mere word. The name functions as something which "not only designates but also signifies the very person," belonging to—instead of simply denoting—the identity of its referent.²¹² Accordingly, the account of Moses asking for God's name (Exod 3:13-15) concerns a question about God's very self.²¹³ This perspective brings into view the second level on which Gutiérrez examines the divine name. He approaches the meaning of the tetragrammaton by first asserting that "life, in a biblical key, always means 'to live with,' 'to live for,' 'to be present before others'—that is, it implies communion."²¹⁴ The concept of life, as formulated by Gutiérrez, is a deeply theological category, ineluctably other-oriented and exhibiting a relational structure of service. It follows, then, that "death

²¹⁰ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 47-48 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 11.

²¹¹ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 48, 51 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 11, 13.

²¹² Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 48-49 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 11-12.

²¹³ Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 11-12.

²¹⁴ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 49 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 12.

is absolute solitude,” a denial of participation in the “social body.”²¹⁵ Citing the work of several biblical scholars in corroboration of his position, Gutiérrez links this notion of life to the divine name, writing: “It is highly likely that the disputed term Yahweh follows along those lines and means ‘I am the one who is with you [pl.], I am life.’ It concerns a presence that is at once creative and liberative.”²¹⁶

The living divinity that Moses encounters and the message of liberation which he is called to bring to the enslaved Israelites cohere in a single vision of communal love. In the same revelatory moment, Moses stands before “the idea of origin and of the initiative of life” expressed in the tetragrammaton and receives assurance that “the being of God is linked to the historical trajectory.”²¹⁷ Addressing this interplay between who God is and what God does, Gutiérrez mentions that “to be the absolute principle does not signify a disinterest in history” but rather pertains to a love that gratuitously communicates itself in the world of human experience.²¹⁸ This dynamic and effective self-communication, in which the being of God and the activity of God are shown to be inseparable, is at the core of the revelation of the divine name:

By revealing the name—not a concept—Yahweh expresses the decision to intervene in [history]...The eternal becomes present in the temporal, the absolute in history...The two texts that relate the manifestation of the name speak about God’s liberative will and will to life: “I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt, to...a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exod 3:17). “I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment” (Exod 6:6).²¹⁹

²¹⁵ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 49 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 12.

²¹⁶ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 50 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 12. The biblical scholars cited in support of this understanding of the tetragrammaton are John Linskins, Gerhard von Rad, David Noel Freedman, Frank Moore Cross, Roland de Vaux, and Jorge Pixley. See Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 193n19.

²¹⁷ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 50 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 12.

²¹⁸ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 50-51 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 12.

²¹⁹ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 50 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 12.

In this way, faith in “the God who transcends” history and therefore “lacks a past” is nonetheless inherently historical insofar as “it is received and professed by persons who live in time, wherein God becomes present.”²²⁰ From the self-revelation of God as life that breeds life—that is, as the “absolute and active principle, beginning of everything,” commissioning Moses to lead the Israelites out of a situation of oppression—stems a faith that preserves the memory of that liberative intervention.²²¹

Faith in the God of life, Gutiérrez remarks, calls for a befriending of life. As in his earlier reflections on the exodus, the behavioral ramifications of God’s act of liberation are discussed in terms of the covenant; in this book, however, this practical dimension of the exodus is thematically reframed in light of the life-death binary confronting every believer.²²² Observing the persisting directive value of the exodus in the form of the “exigency of actualizing the covenant,” Gutiérrez emphasizes that the task of living out the commandments of God does not imply a life of faith marked by coercion but rather an exercise of human freedom: “God does not impose the covenant; it is a gift, which is why it requires an option—an option for life.”²²³ Remembrance of the life-oriented departure from Egypt entails an inevitable choice “before the *life or death* disjuncture,” placing faith before “two paths” that lead toward the fundamentally different historical realities of communal love or its sinful negation.²²⁴ “To opt for life,” he writes, “is to choose God,”

²²⁰ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 51 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 13.

²²¹ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 34-37, 51 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 3-5, 13.

²²² Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 3, 5-6, 8, 9, 14-15, 16-19.

²²³ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 37-38 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 5.

²²⁴ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 38-39 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 6.

who *is* life, engenders life, and thus incessantly emanates the need for the faithful to be “friends of life.”²²⁵

By way of further explicating the theocentric praxis of befriending life in connection with the exodus, Gutiérrez turns to the deuterocanonical book of Wisdom, from which he derives the description of God as a “friend of life.”²²⁶ In a manner that recalls the earlier treatment of the exodus in light of the memory-freedom dialectic, he recognizes in this biblical text a context-sensitive “rereading” of major scriptural themes through which the author presents “a strong connection between *God* and *life*” and thereby exhorts believers to embody justice.²²⁷ Commenting on the opening line of Wisdom, Gutiérrez mentions that the biblical author—whom he situates “in the most genuine prophetic tradition”—integrates the call to “think correctly about God” and the need “to desire justice.”²²⁸ To consider a God who is just and who therefore acts justly

²²⁵ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 39, 45 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 6, 9.

²²⁶ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 61 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 18. As indicated by O’Connell’s bracketed interpolation in Gutiérrez’s quotation of Wis 11:26, the New American Bible (the version used in this book to render quoted biblical texts) does not communicate the same terminological resources that Gutiérrez finds helpful in the Spanish translation of the Bible which he uses here (the Nueva Biblia Española, Edición Latinoamericana). Nor does the NRSV, which reads: “You spare all things, for they are yours, O Lord, you who love the living” (Wis 11:26). The Spanish translation of this passage that is quoted by Gutiérrez can be more precisely translated into English as follows: “You forgive everyone, because they are yours, Lord, friend of life” (A todos perdonas, porque son tuyos, Señor, amigo de la vida). The biblical basis of this language (which also appears as a section title on p. 9) as appropriated by Gutiérrez becomes less readily recognizable to the anglophone readership due to the difference between English translations of the Bible and the Spanish version informing his constructive reflections.

²²⁷ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 56-57, 58-59, 61-62 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 16, 17, 18-19.

²²⁸ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 56-57 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 16. As with the example of Wis 11:26 (see note 226), the difference between the translation of the Bible used by Gutiérrez and the New American Bible presents difficulties in identifying the precise relationship between Gutiérrez’s remarks and Wis 1:1. This passage is rendered in the NAB as follows: “Love justice, you who judge the earth; think of the LORD in goodness, and seek him in integrity of heart.” While it is possible to derive the notion of thinking correctly about God from the call to “think of the LORD in goodness,” the former expression is adopted by Gutiérrez from the Spanish translation, “piensen correctamente del Señor” (think correctly of the Lord), and its clear correlation with justice in this passage has implications for the theology of God he develops in this book as well as for theological method in general.

means to understand justice as a defining feature in the relationship with God. In the absence of justice, the alternative of death distorts all thinking about God: “No one can love God and practice injustice, because the exploitation and despoilment of the poor, like the resultant rejection of God, is a choice of death...Only by practicing [justice] can one think correctly of God.”²²⁹ Justice is neither an ornamental addition nor a derivative moment in the life of faith but rather a constitutive element in what Gutiérrez terms “our friendship with God.”²³⁰

This friendship, then, consists in a concrete option for life and against death. Illustrating the insightful radicality gained by contemplating divine activity in view of the transcendent depths of absolute life from which it arises, Gutiérrez (citing Wis 1:12-13) underscores the idea that “God is not the author of death.”²³¹ That is, death does not have the Creator as its source and it is not willed by the God who, as life, “wills life” among all creation.²³² He suggests that the biblical author envisions creation as incompatible with death since “creatures have been made to live in health; the earth exists to nurture and shelter the living.”²³³ Death amounts to an unqualified negation of the basic purpose of creation. It is for this reason, Gutiérrez notes, that “the Bible rejects the shedding of blood, and not only of innocent blood,” observing that this “rejection extends to every attack on human life.”²³⁴ The God whose creative work does not include the fashioning

²²⁹ Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 16, 17.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

²³¹ *Ibid.* The biblical passage cited by Gutiérrez reads: “Do not invite death by the error of your life, or bring on destruction by the works of your hands; because God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living” (Wis 1:12-13).

²³² *Ibid.*, 16-17.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 16 (translation lightly modified).

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

of death and remains incongruous with its destructive character requires a way of life in accordance with the vivifying will to which creation testifies.

In Gutiérrez's discussion of the book of Wisdom, this notion of the theological primordially of life and its implications for justice are connected in an important way to the communal experience made possible by the possession of Canaan. Consistent with his previous treatments of the entrance into the promised land as the covenant-based moment in which the comprehensive exodus process can be most fully concretized, the vision of inhabiting the land appears in *The God of Life* in a contrastive key, marking the culmination of a liberating transition from the God-denying death of oppression to "the life that has God for its author."²³⁵ Indeed, Gutiérrez proposes that the "importance of life acquires its true dimension in the theme of the promised land," emphasizing that Canaan "is not only the place where human beings find daily nourishment but also the space for their personal freedom and dignity."²³⁶ The reality of life that originates with the living God encompasses multiple planes of human existence, the active cultivation of which bespeaks a commitment to the significance of creation. Such a commitment, encapsulated in the image of the arrival in the promised land, expresses the nature of the friendship with the loving source of creation: "In a land in which men and women cease to be aliens and wanderers and instead become owners who are able fully to exercise their rights, they will be able to offer God a worship 'in spirit and in truth.'"²³⁷

The contrast between life and death that lies at the center of Gutiérrez's theology

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 58 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 17.

²³⁷ Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 17.

of God comes to signify the discontinuity between covenant and “countercovenant” in his reading of Wisdom.²³⁸ Identifying the tension in Wis 1:15-16 between the immortality of justice and those who consider death to be their friend, he proceeds to highlight the injustice that characterizes the latter as depicted by the author of Wisdom: “The wicked...are friends of death...They sow it everywhere by violating the rights of others...The author is referring to those who exploit and mistreat the poor and do not love justice.”²³⁹ Contrary to the option for life that defines the covenant relationship with God, the “pact with death” eclipses the dignity of the human person and effectively disavows the axiological metric associated with God’s self-revelation as liberator of the Israelite slaves.²⁴⁰ Hence Gutiérrez’s description of befriending death as “a kind of countercovenant,” an option that seeks “to give death the last word in human history.”²⁴¹ Defending life, the oppositional stance to be freely chosen in conformity with the covenant with God, finds its antithesis in a trajectory that moves inversely to that of the exodus process and essentially interlocks with the setting of death from which the

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid. The text of Wis 1:15-16 reads: “For justice is undying. It was the wicked who with hands and words invited death, considered it a friend, and pined for it, and made a covenant with it, because they deserve to be in its possession” (NAB). With regard to the injustice practiced by those who befriend death, Gutiérrez quotes the words which the biblical author attributes to them in Wis 2:10-11: “Let us oppress the needy just man; let us neither spare the widow nor revere the old man for his hair grown white with time. But let our strength be our norm of justice; for weakness proves itself useless” (NAB). The quotation of this passage that appears in O’Connell’s translation (see p. 17) incorrectly cites Wis 2:11-12 (the text is correctly cited by Gutiérrez on p. 59 of *El Dios de la vida*).

²⁴⁰ Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 17. The expression “pact with death” provides another instance in which the scriptural basis of the language which Gutiérrez employs does not communicate properly in translation due to differences between the Nueva Biblia Española, Edición Latinoamericana (NBEL), and the NAB. While the NAB (in agreement with the NRSV) refers to a “covenant” with death in Wis 1:16 (see note 239), the NBEL presents the wicked as those who “make a pact” [*hacen pacto*] with death. As such, when Gutiérrez speaks of those who “establish a pact with death” [*establecen un pacto con la muerte*], he is reproducing the terminology of the NBEL and then thematizing it as a “countercovenant” [*contra-Alianza*], not the other way around. Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 58-59 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 17.

²⁴¹ Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 17.

Israelites were brought out.²⁴²

It is this transformative experience of divine revelation—namely, “the liberating action of Yahweh who rescues the people from the situation of oppression and death that was theirs in Egypt”—that provides the context for the material in Wis 11, on which Gutiérrez focuses his final comments on the book of Wisdom.²⁴³ In the perspective of the biblical author articulated in this chapter of Wisdom, Gutiérrez discerns a profound understanding of the relationship between the loving source of every existent and the act of emancipating the Israelites from an unconscionable reality of suffering—that is, the relationship between who God is and what God does. Wisdom 11, he writes, “concerns a meditation on the liberative will and force of Yahweh, who brought the people out from slavery in order to lead them to freedom and to the land ‘flowing with milk and honey.’”²⁴⁴ The biblical text is presented as integrating the inexhaustible love underlying all creation and the vivifying transition that structures the exodus process.

Working his way toward the idea of divine love as a creative presence in this scriptural context, Gutiérrez states in reference to Wis 11:23 that “the omnipotence of God is not a reason for terror or insecurity on the part of the believer; on the contrary, it is the cause of divine compassion—the closeness of God to God’s creatures allows for a better understanding of the meaning of God’s power.”²⁴⁵ The compassion of God

²⁴² Ibid., 5, 17-18.

²⁴³ Ibid., 18. With regard to Wis 11, Gutiérrez mentions that the “immediate context is a reflection on Exodus 7:25-8:11” (18). As indicated by the cross-references in the NBEL, Wis 11:15-26 (which is the material that Gutiérrez addresses) relates to Exod 7:25-8:11 (i.e., the second plague in Egypt: frogs), while Wis 11:1-14 relates to Exod 7:14-24; 17; Num 20:1-11 (i.e., the first plague, by which the waters of Egypt are turned to blood, and the accounts of Moses drawing water from the rock for the Israelites to drink).

²⁴⁴ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 60 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 18.

²⁴⁵ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 60 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 18. The cited biblical passage appears in the context of a reflection on why God “sent...a multitude of irrational creatures to punish” the

expresses the desire for “all human beings to be converted” and thus “to set out on the way of life, even the wicked, the friends of death,” whose countercovenant ultimately serves to derail creation.²⁴⁶ In the intertextual context of Wis 11, those whose friendship with death is called into question before God’s invitation to conversion are the Egyptians. “God’s plan of love,” Gutiérrez remarks, “knows no limits,” extending to persons who facilitate and participate in systemic forms of collective dehumanization.²⁴⁷

Further examining the theme of God’s generative love, Gutiérrez recognizes in Wis 11:24-25 a concise statement of creation as a persisting witness to the enduring divine embrace from which it receives its ultimate meaning.²⁴⁸ In view of the biblical author’s assertion that to exist inherently precludes being hated by the Creator, he observes: “Everything begins with God’s love...Creation itself is an expression—the first expression—of God’s love, a free and gratuitous love which the Lord situates at the root of all existence.”²⁴⁹ The fundamental existentiality without which particular existents would simply no longer be at all is irrevocably inscribed with the gift of love. This perspective, Gutiérrez suggests, differs from certain philosophical approaches to creation as “an act done once and for all” (e.g., the notion of the “prime mover”) insofar as in the biblical texts “the creative action of God is presented as something permanent.”²⁵⁰ The

Egyptians rather than fierce, raging animals or instant destruction (Wis 11:15-20). The passage reads: “But you are merciful to all, for you can do all things, and you overlook people’s sins, so that they may repent” (Wis 11:23).

²⁴⁶ Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 18.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid. The text of Wis 11:24-25 reads as follows: “For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made, for you would not have made anything if you had hated it. How would anything have endured if you had not willed it? Or how would anything not called forth by you have been preserved?”

²⁴⁹ Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 18 (translation modified).

²⁵⁰ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 61 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 18.

God who lovingly creates and “sustains creation in existence” is a God who continues to create in light of the perpetual potency of that love.²⁵¹ An ongoing task, God’s creative work transpires as a diurnal testimony to the accompanying presence of God among all creatures precisely on account of their status as creatures: “The Lord creates every day, so to speak, because the Lord loves every day and rejects nothing that has been made...God’s love envelops everything.”²⁵²

The departure from Egypt, then, simultaneously reveals God as liberator and as absolute love assuring the entirety of creation that it is loved. It is from this transcendent source of divine affection for what exists that the universal call to conversion through an option for life emerges—a call which, as the author of Wisdom attests, does not exclude those from whom the Israelite slaves are liberated. This invitation to forgiveness pertains to every “partisan of death” and tends toward the vivification that reveals God as life, “for to forgive is to give life.”²⁵³ In the exodus, God not only liberates from death with the intention for life to be actualized in Canaan but also seeks to transform that death itself into life, compassionately displaying the continuing love for every creature in the offer to forgive the friends of death. Such a link between forgiveness and life is identified

²⁵¹ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 61 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 18.

²⁵² Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 61 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 18. In the context of a meditation on the exodus in relation to the life-death contrast, Gutierrez here revisits the theme of creation as an ongoing activity without reproducing or alluding to the theology of creation as an exodus-mediated process of self-liberation continued by humanity which he formulated in *A Theology of Liberation*. The absence of this early perspective in his reflections on the exodus in *The God of Life* is especially noticeable in light of the focus on the subsequent practical impact of God’s liberative activity in the exodus, the link between creation and justice as a mode of fostering life, and the reference several pages earlier to God granting Adam “lordship over all creation”—all of which appear as essential elements in the view developed in *A Theology of Liberation*. For the androcentric reference to Adam as lord of creation (an expression which, in *A Theology of Liberation*, is closely connected with the demythologization of creation through its human continuation), see Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 48-49 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 11.

²⁵³ Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 18-19.

by Gutiérrez in the designation for God that appears in Wis 11:26 and “summarizes the message” of the entire book—namely, God as “friend of life.”²⁵⁴ As the creator of all human beings, God’s forgiveness extends to everyone while soliciting a change in the direction of befriending life: “To believe in God is to be, like God, a friend of life, in contrast to the companions on the way of death.”²⁵⁵

Friendship with life before a God of justice means to live for others, especially those whose humanity is under assault by macabre formations of power which betray both the most rudimentary dimensions of creation as well as the undergirding principle that invests those dimensions with their ineradicable eminence. It means to side with life in a conflictual history and thereby to act in harmony with the love that God is and which is revealed in God’s liberating intervention preserved in the exodus memory. The shift from death to life that structures that memory reflects the divine will and thus warrants prophetic replication as an indispensable feature of every relationship with the God of life.

1.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided an exposition of the paradigmatic approach to the exodus in Gutiérrez’s theology of liberation. In presenting his theological appropriation of this biblical theme, a variety of distinct engagements, each with its own particular set of guiding concerns and analytical foci, were incorporated into the discussion and

²⁵⁴ Gutiérrez, *Dios de la vida*, 61 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 18-19. For the translational issues concerning the NBEL and NAB versions of this passage in Wisdom, see note 226 above.

²⁵⁵ Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 19 (translation lightly modified).

considered in view of Gutiérrez's constructive reception of the exodus narrative. Among the several distinguishing specificities of the texts treated in this chapter, a unifying aspect in his conception of the exodus was identified—namely, that of its liberative significance as a multidimensional process exhibiting an Egypt-to-Canaan structure. Furthermore, the ascending nature of this transitional structure in Gutiérrez's processive model of the exodus was underscored in the foregoing discussion. Without undermining the indispensable moment of emancipatory departure from structural oppression (the *liberation from*), the theological primacy of the entrance into the promised land that receives emphasis in Gutiérrez's writings signifies an asymmetrical trajectory toward Canaan (the *liberation for*). The paradigmatic status of the exodus in Gutiérrez's theology expresses a dynamic and unified vision of liberation with others in the company of a God who identifies with the afflicted. Continuing the treatment of the exodus narrative in classical formulations of liberation theology, the following chapter will turn to the work of James Cone.

CHAPTER 2

THE CREATIVE REVOLUTION OF GOD IN EGYPT AND THE UNITED STATES: THE EXODUS PARADIGM IN THE BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY OF JAMES CONE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter continues the first part of the dissertation in examining paradigmatic conceptions of the biblical theme of the exodus as developed in classical formulations of liberation theology. Focusing on the contribution of James Cone (1938-2018), chapter 2 addresses the significance of the exodus in black liberation theology. The discussion in this chapter will first highlight important features of the US context which gave rise to Cone's theology of liberation. These preliminary contextual remarks will introduce the critical diagnosis of white supremacy in the United States—including its general impact on the church and theology—and the analysis of the responsive process of black self-determination which appear in Cone's writings. In presenting these key elements of the social situation in which black liberation theology was born, the chapter provides a necessary framework for engaging Cone's theological vision of liberation and its basic relationship to his appropriation of the exodus. Accordingly, the manifold reality of black suffering and communal resistance to racial violence will occupy a central role in the following sections. As will be seen below, this approach to the reception of the exodus in Cone's theology aids the task of explicating its meaning as a contemporary challenge for the life of Christian faith and theological reflection in the United States. In addition to the methodological emphasis on the concrete setting for Cone's interpretation of the exodus,

this chapter will attend to its interconnectedness with other theological areas, including the theology of creation, the theology of God, revelation, theological anthropology, sin, christology, pneumatology, and eschatology.

2.2 VOICING BLACK FIRE: THE EMERGENCE OF CONE'S BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

James Cone first began formulating his theological understanding of liberation in the late 1960s in the midst of renewed black resistance to the persisting legacy of white supremacy in the United States. Responding to centuries of anti-black violence and the resounding failure of white America to confront in an effective manner the dehumanizing ordering of US society according to whiteness, the self-affirmation of black humanity and communal dignity variously expressed in the civil rights and Black Power movements provided key elements of the context in which Cone began to forge a new way of doing theology in view of the centrality of blackness.¹ The urgency of naming and contesting the pervasive forms of racial oppression in the United States while developing a theological analysis of the concrete processes seeking to transform that reality imbues

¹ See James H. Cone, "Christianity and Black Power," in *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Boston: Beacon, [essay orig. publ. 1968] 1999), 3-12; James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 50th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1969] 2018); James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1970] 2018); James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1982] 1986), 25-32, 36-39, 41-57; James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 1-59; James H. Cone, "Introduction: Looking Back, Going Forward," in *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Boston: Beacon, 1999), xiv-xxiv; James H. Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 1-84.

Cone's vision of liberation from the outset and thus serves as a vital point of departure for the task of explicating his conception of the exodus account.

The theme of liberation appears in Cone's earliest writings as the primary mode of expressing the theological dimension of the black revolution and the struggle for communal emancipation—encompassing both oppressed and oppressor—from every structure that perpetuates the denial of black dignity in any way.² In attending to the concrete conditions that gave rise to black liberation theology, it is helpful to consider three interrelated contextual aspects that feature in Cone's analysis of the situation in the United States: (1) a structural-ideological dynamic of ongoing white supremacy and its production of black suffering, (2) the resulting black experience of existential absurdity, and (3) an emancipatory-humanizing process which refuses to accept that the first two aspects reflect the way the world should be. This section will discuss the emergence of Cone's work in light of these three tensional characteristics of his social setting.

In his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone describes the first of the aforementioned three aspects of the US context as follows: "For over three hundred years black people have been enslaved by the tentacles of American white power, tentacles that

² This basic understanding of liberation is already recognizable in Cone's first essay, "Christianity and Black Power." Published in 1968, this short essay introduced fundamental insights that would be more deeply examined in *Black Theology and Black Power* and systematically expounded in the process of developing a black theology of liberation. In the essay, Cone not only insists that "nothing less than *immediate* and *total* emancipation of all people is consistent with the message and style of Jesus Christ" but also—and precisely on the basis of that theological claim—proposes that "Christianity...is not alien to Black Power; it *is* Black Power!" Describing the New Testament image of "the work [of Jesus as] essentially one of liberation" and thus as relaying the vital message that "God enters human affairs and takes sides with the oppressed," Cone identifies the contemporary liberative activity of Christ in the "black rebellion" against the structural inhumanity and unfreedom of white supremacy. The theme of liberation, then, occupies a central role—albeit in an incipient and compact form—in Cone's work from the outset insofar as it already serves to express the heart of the gospel and provides the key to identifying God's activity in the present. Cone, "Christianity and Black Power," 4, 8-12 (emphasis in original); cf. Cone, *Said I Wasn't*, 9-18.

worm their way into the guts of their being and ‘invade the gray cells of their cortex.’ For three hundred years they have cried, waited, voted, marched, picketed, and boycotted, but whites still refuse to recognize their humanity.”³ Pointing to the depth, range, and nature of anti-black oppression in the United States, Cone offers a diagnosis of historical whiteness in North America that brings into view the fundamental negation of human identity which underlies and orients such forms of social domination. This destructive force of dehumanization is not confined to certain domains or institutions of US society but rather can be identified as a pervasive problem affecting national life at large. “All aspects of this society,” he writes, “have participated in the act of enslaving blacks, extinguishing Indians, and annihilating all who question white society’s right to decide who is human.”⁴ It is important to note that while Cone’s analysis of the US context certainly entails the tragic history of chattel slavery, the critical concept of enslavement which he deploys in assessing the damaging effects of white supremacy designates a more expansive and persisting reality of inflicted suffering. Indeed, the diagnostic amplitude of this concept can be recognized in the directness with which it serves to characterize the unjust conditions under which black liberation theology was born: “On the American scene today, as yesterday, one problem stands out: the enslavement of black Americans.”⁵

Discerning a widespread practice of enslavement that outlived the Civil War and remained structurally and ideologically active in the late 1960s, Cone challenges white

³ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

America to confront interlocking forms of racialized unfreedom, reification, and distorted values that are deeply embedded in US society. In regard to the multiple levels of misrecognition operative in this situation of enslavement as maintained by white racism, Cone observes:

Being accustomed to defining human relationships between themselves and the slaves on “I-It” terms, they [i.e., the oppressors] naturally think that they have a monopoly on truth and right behavior. But when the slaves begin to say No to the God-behavior of the masters, the masters are surprised. They are surprised because they thought the slaves were happy. They cannot believe that the hostilities of the slaves stem from anything that the masters themselves have done. But neither can they believe that the unrest in the slave camps is motivated from within the slave community. Therefore, in an attempt to explain the phenomenon of slave hostility, the masters devise tests that will show that most, if not all, people in the society are happy, and the disorders are created by outside agitators who can easily be lumped into one category—Communists. All unhappiness is a lie created and perpetuated by the ungodly Communists who want to destroy the “free” American society.⁶

Originating in the period of chattel slavery, the reifying orientation toward black bodies that is endemic to white supremacy in the United States continues to mark the perduring denial of black freedom in a manner that norms the corresponding arrangements of power and warped relationality. The shifting mechanics of enslavement throughout the Jim Crow era and at the time of Cone’s early writings extends a pernicious historical process of disinheritance and othering centered on an increasingly dissimulated anti-black racism. It is in calling into question this disavowal of inhumanity as an ideological maneuver that Cone further probes the enslaving apparatus of society as defined by whiteness in his second book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*: “Masters always pretend that they are not masters, insisting that they are only doing what is best for society as a whole, including

⁶ Ibid., 164-165.

the slaves. This is, of course, the standard rhetoric of an oppressive society. Blacks know better...They know that whites will kill them rather than permit the beauty and the glory of black humanity to be manifested in its fullness. Over three hundred and fifty years of black slavery is evidence of that fact, and blacks must carve out a free existence in this situation.”⁷

In its earliest expression, anti-black oppression in North America transpired in relation to the condition of coercive labor and the involuntary status of property imposed on African slaves by white slaveholders. Describing the context in which the black church emerged, Cone points to the wide-ranging injury effected by this form of institutionalized horror: “The white master forbade the slave from any remembrance of [her or] his homeland. The mobility created by the slave trade, the destruction of the family, and the prohibition of African languages served to destroy the social cohesion of the African slaves. The slave was a *no-thing* in the eyes of the master, who did everything possible to instill this sense of nothingness in the mentality of the slave. The [slaves were] rewarded and punished according to [their] adherence to the view of [themselves] defined exclusively by the master.”⁸ Alongside the indispensable confrontation with the

⁷ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 11.

⁸ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 102-103 (emphasis in original). While Cone eventually became self-critical regarding the androcentric language that appears throughout his early writings and took steps in the direction of remedying those tendencies (e.g., the 1986 revision of *A Black Theology of Liberation*), the exclusionary language originally used in *Black Theology and Black Power* intentionally appears unedited in subsequent editions. Identifying this “weakness” of the 1969 text in his preface to the 1989 edition, Cone writes: “I decided to let the language remain unchanged as a reminder of how sexist I once was and also that I might be encouraged never to forget it...Amnesia is an enemy of justice. We must never forget what we once were lest we repeat our evil deeds in new forms. I do not want to forget that I was once silent about the oppression of women in the church and the society.” Without seeking to undermine Cone’s reasons for retaining his earlier language, quotations of passages containing androcentric terminology will be amended in this dissertation. See James H. Cone, preface to the 1989 edition to *Black Theology and Black Power*, 50th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1969] 2018), xxviii-xxix; James H.

death, brutality, abuse, and sociocultural devastation that characterized the institution of slavery, the slave's forced internalization of the slaveholder's debasing gaze appears in Cone's writings as a problem that warrants special attention from the standpoint of black liberation. The enduring impact of the ideological conflation of blackness and inferiority attests to the need for a transformative response to this fundamental dimension of white supremacy: "Any careful assessment of the place of the black [person] in America must conclude that black self-hatred is the worst aspect of the legacy of slavery...Black consciousness is the key to the black [person's] emancipation from his [or her] distorted self-image."⁹

It is important to highlight Cone's analysis of the role of the white church and theologians during this period of North American history. In his discussion of the relationship between the church and slavery, Cone identifies a pervasive embrace of violence that renders untenable any claim to Christian identity.¹⁰ "It is a sad fact," he writes, "that the white church's involvement in slavery and racism in America simply cannot be overstated. It not only failed to preach the kerygmatic word but maliciously contributed to the doctrine of white supremacy."¹¹ Indeed, the white church played a

Cone, preface to the 1986 edition to *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1970] 2018), xv-xvi.

⁹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 21-22; cf. 45-47, 59-63, 69, 70, 168-169; James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury, 1972), 22-23; Cone, "Looking Back, Going Forward," xx. The centrality of this problem in Cone's work—which, it should be noted, reflects the lasting influence of Malcolm X, "the great master of suspicion in the area of race," concerning the significance of blackness in black liberation theology—is also indicated in his recent memoir, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*. In recounting various critical engagements with his early writings by other scholars and theologians, Cone remarks: "Any critique that did not address black self-hate was beside the point...I felt that any criticisms directed at me were inconsequential as long as they did not address the most vexing problem in the black community—self-hate." Cone, *Said I Wasn't*, 92.

¹⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 80-88; cf. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 6, 9, 32, 127.

¹¹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 81.

formative role in this regard: “It was the white ‘Christian’ church that took the lead in establishing slavery as an institution and segregation as a pattern in society by sanctioning all-white congregations.”¹² Slaveholding was often considered not only to be divinely sanctioned and biblically grounded but also to be significantly improved when practiced in accordance with ostensibly Christian principles.¹³ Despite some exceptions, the theological defense of slavery as an institution legitimated by God and the church’s active participation in that system lead Cone to conclude that the “very coming to be [of white Christianity in America] was an attempt to reconcile the impossible—slavery and Christianity.”¹⁴

With the end of slavery as an institution in the United States, the dehumanizing workings of racial oppression transitioned into a setting which bore a semblance of freedom while preserving cultural and structural expressions of anti-blackness. In his treatment of the new challenges facing the black church in the post-Reconstruction context, Cone describes the shifting reality of racism as follows: “The new Jim Crow structure had devastating effects comparable to slavery. In slavery one knows what the odds are and what is needed to destroy the power of the enemy. But in a society that pronounces a [person] free but makes [them] behave as a slave, all of the strength and

¹² Ibid., 83.

¹³ Ibid., 83-88, 104, 113-116. As examples of attempts to justify slavery on theological grounds, Cone cites the contemporaneous writings of two Presbyterian ministers—namely, George Dod Armstrong’s *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery* and Frederick Augustus Ross’s *Slavery Ordained of God*, both of which were published in 1857 (84). In addition, he provides an excerpt from a 1727 pastoral letter by Anglican Edmund Gibson, bishop of London, who exhorts slave owners in the colonies to offer Christian instruction to their slaves and assures them that baptism does not change their status as property but rather reinforces it and enhances their obedience (85). This understanding of Christian instruction as promoting conformity among slaves is further illustrated in a quoted passage from nineteenth-century Methodist missionary William J. Shrewsbury, whom Cone cites in discussing the view that “Christianity made blacks better slaves” (85-86). See also Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 23-24.

¹⁴ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 116.

will power is sapped from the would-be rebel. The structures of evil are camouflaged, the enemy is elusive, and the victim is trained to accept the values of the oppressor.”¹⁵ The mendacity of the situation emerging after the Civil War, he suggests, can be readily observed in the historical trajectory that followed, which “unmistakably shows that as a people, America has never intended for blacks to be free.”¹⁶ Prolonged unfreedom and the concrete negation of the fullness of black humanity took the form of daily Jim Crow terror. A hierarchical world marked by constant humiliation and volatile networks of white power, the systemic subjugation that replaced chattel slavery amounted to a “social ethos...that was inherently dehumanizing for black people.”¹⁷

Recounting his experience growing up in this racial caste system, Cone recalls that “the meaning of black was defined primarily by the menacing presence of whites, which no African-American could escape...I attended segregated schools, drank water from ‘colored’ fountains, saw movies from balconies, and when absolutely necessary greeted white adults at the back doors of their homes. I also observed the contempt and brutality that white law meted out to the blacks who transgressed their racial mores or who dared to question their authority.”¹⁸ Born and raised in Jim Crow Arkansas, Cone’s familiarity with the culture of coercion and violence as well as the strategies of survival pertaining to everyday life under segregation comprised an important aspect of the lived experience that would eventually inform his theological reflections on liberation. It was

¹⁵ Ibid., 118; cf. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 13; James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 4-12.

¹⁶ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 12.

¹⁷ Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 19.

¹⁸ Cone, “Looking Back, Going Forward,” ix; cf. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1975] 1997), 2-3; Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 18-40; Cone, *Said I Wasn’t*, 3-6.

in response to the challenges of navigating this threatening setting of injustice, he notes, that he “learned...to wear a mask” when interacting with whites.¹⁹ He describes this strategic practice as follows: “When a Negro expressed an opinion that differed from a white person, the typical response was, ‘Are you calling me a liar, boy?’ No black person would dare contradict a white man or woman, or even a child; in their world, white was always right. Knowing that, we had to disguise our true selves in order to keep a job, stay out of jail, or even stay alive.”²⁰ Reflective of the underlying social contradictions that defined the world of Jim Crow, the mask afforded a provisional yet vital resource for surviving within a deeply broken system.

Survival in the Jim Crow era, however, was haunted by the atrocious reality of lynching. As a form of anti-black terror, lynching increased in the post-Civil War period as a lurid attempt to reassert white domination over the black population.²¹ The end of chattel slavery and the emerging possibility of extending rights and opportunities beyond an exclusively white sphere in view of a truly shared society troubled the established power relations. Attachment to an American dream rooted in whiteness yielded the historical nightmare of the lynching tree: “White supremacists felt insulted by the suggestion that whites and blacks might work together as equals. Whether in the churches, colleges, and universities, or in the political and social life of the nation, southern whites, who were not going to allow their ex-slaves to associate with them as equals, felt that if lynching were the only way to keep ex-slaves subservient, then it was

¹⁹ Cone, *Said I Wasn't*, 3-6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3-4; cf. Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 27-29, 43-44.

²¹ Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, xv, xviii-xix, 3-23.

necessary.”²² Not confined to the South, the “public spectacle” of lynching produced an atmosphere of racial intimidation across the United States and served as “the white community’s way of forcibly reminding blacks of their inferiority and powerlessness.”²³ Indeed, it was precisely for refusing to accept such exclusionary conditions that Cone’s father, Charlie Cone, was personally threatened with lynching.²⁴ Oftentimes generating a carnivalesque spirit among the white audience, this hateful assault on black humanity further illustrates the strategic value of the performative mask, for “nothing was more terrifying than the lynching tree.”²⁵

In the face of the structural violence of Jim Crow and the terror of lynching, the pronounced absence of a prophetic response by the church and theologians in the United States is considered by Cone to be expressive of a failure to embody essential features of Christian identity.²⁶ As he observes, “During the most fervent period of lynching, the Church scarcely said a word against it.”²⁷ Prefiguring the larger social manifestation of segregation in its racial divisions of worship during the antebellum period, the church continued to countenance the perduring legacy of white supremacy after the end of chattel slavery through either silent complicity or explicit embrace.²⁸ With reference to

²² Ibid., 4-5.

²³ Ibid., xiv, 7-9, 15.

²⁴ Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 21-22, 49. Cone writes that the threat came in response to his father’s lawsuit against the Bearden School Board “on the grounds that the white and black schools were not equal.” While no attempt was made on his father’s life, the episode exemplifies the function of lynching as a form of racial terror that seeks to maintain an oppressive social order: “Absolute madness seemed to enter the minds and hearts of the white folks in Bearden at the very idea of blacks and whites going to the same schools. For the first time, to my knowledge, Bearden whites began to talk about lynching Charlie Cone because he refused to take his name off of the lawsuit” (21).

²⁵ Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, xix.

²⁶ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 80-101; Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 1-10, 18, 43-45, 55-57; Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 25-27, 30, 36-37, 43-45, 48-50.

²⁷ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 88-89.

²⁸ Ibid., 83; Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 2-3, 19.

his childhood years in Bearden, Arkansas, Cone laments the troubling conflation of the Christian tradition and the various forms of anti-blackness that characterized the Jim Crow era: “White people were virtually free to do anything to blacks with impunity. The violent crosses of the Ku Klux Klan were a familiar reality, and white racists preached a dehumanizing segregated gospel in the name of Jesus’ cross every Sunday.”²⁹ In light of the widespread disjuncture between white theology and the victims of racial oppression, his evaluation of theological production highlights its ideological link with the national milieu in which it arises: “American theology is racist.”³⁰

This crucial deficiency of US theology, which Cone describes as its “great sin,” betrays social preconditions of white domination that require the critical attention of the theological community if it aspires to examine the relationship between the gospel and the contemporary world in a responsible manner.³¹ Regrettably, Cone remarks, “most American theologians are too closely tied to the American structure to respond creatively to the life situation of the Church in this society.”³² The integrity of theological reflection is called into question by its manifest insensitivity to the exigencies of suffering which afflict its context. When theological activity transpires in the midst of “a dehumanizing social structure whose existence depends on the continued enslavement of black people,” the task of theology entails confronting that reality of oppression with prophetic honesty and transformative courage.³³ Instead of addressing the problem of unfreedom in their

²⁹ Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, xv.

³⁰ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 18.

³¹ James H. Cone, “Theology’s Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 55, no. 3-4 (2001): 1-14.

³² Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 96.

³³ *Ibid.*, 2.

society, however, US theologians have exhibited a proclivity for identifying with the configurations of power that maintain and legitimate that social order: “Theology here is largely an intellectual game unrelated to the issues of life and death. It is impossible to respond creatively and prophetically to the life-situational problems of society without identifying with the problems of the disinherited and unwanted in society. Few American theologians have made that identification with the poor blacks in America but have themselves contributed to the system that enslaves black people.”³⁴

In response to the compromised status of the theological conversation in North America, Cone calls for a “new way of doing theology from the perspective of black enslavement,” underscoring the methodological reorientation that is necessary for an adequate engagement with the significance of the gospel in the contemporary context of white supremacy.³⁵ Suggested in this corrective is a relentless vision of freedom that is not amenable to classification in terms of gradations by which more or less “degrees of human freedom” might be indicated.³⁶ While Cone recognizes that “there may be different manifestations of inhumanity,” he nonetheless insists that “there are no meaningful ‘in-betweens’ relevant to the fact itself,” that is, with regard to freedom, dignity, respect, and racism.³⁷ This expressly undifferentiated understanding of freedom as either present in human experience or absent from it plays a key role in his assessment of black suffering and frames the challenge posed to theology in the need to appropriate the aforementioned optic of enslavement. Corresponding to the relational difference

³⁴ Ibid., 96.

³⁵ Ibid., 56; cf. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 3-20, 102.

³⁶ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 27.

³⁷ Ibid.

between treatment as a human being and as a thing, the freedom-enslavement contradiction signals the irreconcilable trajectories confronting the church and theologians in the world which gave rise to black liberation theology. It is in view of this link between reification and unfreedom—in essence, the pernicious “attempts to make ‘black being’ into ‘nonbeing’ or ‘nothingness’” that inhere in the legacy of white supremacy—that the terms *racism* and *slavery* can be described as “theologically and politically equivalent.”³⁸

The lived experience of the contradiction between the freedom that should exist in the world and the concrete conditions of unfreedom encountered in a world marked by anti-blackness concerns the second aspect of Cone’s situational analysis to be discussed in this section—namely, his reflections on the feeling of “existential absurdity.”³⁹ This “mood” stems from the reality of racial oppression and precedes the efforts to resist and transform that reality as discussed below.⁴⁰ Describing the constitutive discordance of this existential mood in a manner that further examines the reifying violence of white supremacy, Cone writes: “When [a black person] first awakens to [their] place in America and feels sharply the absolute contradiction between *what is* and *what ought to be* or recognizes the inconsistency between [their] view of [themselves] as [a human being] and America’s description of [them] as a thing, [their] immediate reaction is a feeling of absurdity.”⁴¹ In his analysis, absurdity emerges in black experience as an

³⁸ Ibid., 8-9, 63, 66n50, 152; Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 11-12, 18.

³⁹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 9-14, 108-113, 137-139; Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 16-17, 98-100, 108-109; Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 58-74, 112-113, 115-119, 123-128, 137-142.

⁴⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 9.

⁴¹ Ibid., 9-10 (emphasis in original).

existential response to the painful contrast of a dehumanizing world as defined by whiteness. It is an affective corollary of a paradoxical situation in which the basic expectation of intersubjective recognition is unsettled by an encounter with social processes that tend toward the erasure of the dignity of black humanity.⁴²

Absurdity, then, signals a fundamentally relational yet derivative mood that attests to the nature of an antecedent interaction between black humanity and white society.⁴³ As Cone observes, “It is not that the black [person] is absurd or that the white society as such is absurd. Absurdity arises as the black [person] seeks to understand [her or] his place in the white world.”⁴⁴ Born from the poignant tension between the self-awareness of black humanity and a concrete setting that is obstinately inhospitable to that recognition, the feeling of existential absurdity bespeaks the profound brokenness of a social order that assigns incommensurability to blackness. Upon facing the North American reality, Cone notes, the black person “is confronted with an almighty No and is defined as a thing. This produces the absurdity.”⁴⁵ Central to his treatment of existential absurdity is a guiding insight into the anthropological fracture at the core of white supremacy and its impact on black experience. In a world which “demands that [the black person] respond as a thing” or as “a nonperson” rather than as a human being, the lacerating dynamics of disregard serve to maintain an existing situation deeply at variance with the world as it should exist.⁴⁶

⁴² Ibid., 10-13; Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 16, 98-99.

⁴³ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 12-13.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 13; cf. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 16; Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 115-117, 123, 138-140.

⁴⁵ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 13.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 13; cf. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 99.

This apprehension of contradiction receives further attention in Cone's discussion of historical developments in the black church, in which he identifies two main responses to existential absurdity and considers their theological significance. With regard to the pre-Civil War black church, he mentions that while the principal themes of freedom and equality were embraced as signifying God's will for humanity, thereby inciting faith-based commitments of protest and even visions of rebellion, the incomprehensible reality of chattel slavery led to "a state of existential absurdity" among "most black preachers."⁴⁷ In the writings of Nathaniel Paul and Daniel A. Payne, for instance, Cone discerns a spiritual life disquieted by an "agonizing experience over God's existence" in light of the monstrosity of a world in which African slaves are "brutalized by the whips of white power."⁴⁸ The uneasiness of lived faith that accompanied the mood of absurdity during this period as exemplified in such sources did not reflect the difficulty of an oppressive God who sanctions the institution of slavery but rather of a just God who opposes the slavery that nonetheless persists in the world. From the standpoint of Christian faith, the shock of experienced discontinuity between what is and what should be acquires a new dimension of intensity on account of the hope in a living God who "hates slavery" and wills freedom.⁴⁹

Faith in a God of freedom and justice in the midst of widespread unfreedom and injustice encountered a "contradiction which disturbed the very 'soul' of the black preachers."⁵⁰ Indeed, the absurdity generated by the interaction between black humanity

⁴⁷ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 105-109, 116-117.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 109-111.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 110; cf. Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 34-39, 58-59, 62-74.

⁵⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 110.

and the world of anti-black violence faced by the antebellum black church found challenging expression in the language of Christian faith, which at times resembled that of “a Job or a Habakkuk questioning the righteousness of God” in its manner of protesting the unjustifiable suffering of slavery continuing in the absence of God’s intervention.⁵¹ The spiritual agony from which this cry of dissatisfaction arose forms the focus of the question that Cone poses in discussing the black experience of faith before the Civil War: “Why are we still living in wretched conditions when God could end this evil thing with one righteous stroke?”⁵²

Ultimately, however, this acute distress of yearning for God’s justice in North America remained intertwined with the conviction that “God was alive and...working in history against the evils of slavery.”⁵³ While its experienced distance resulted in the agitated Christian identity that Cone describes, the justice of God continued to form an indispensable principle of faith and was affirmed as coming—a promised transformation of the existing reality of dehumanization. This vital anticipatory orientation of Christian faith provided what Cone designates “a restless peace,” a comforting attunement to the inevitable concretion of the divine will that simultaneously incited human struggle against the contradiction of racial oppression.⁵⁴ Before God’s future of freedom and

⁵¹ Ibid. It should be noted that Cone revisits the relationship between existential absurdity and antebellum Christian faith in subsequent reflections on the spirituals, wherein he recognizes an affirmation of God as liberator of the oppressed which, in spite of the difficulties created by the lived contradiction of slavery and the expressions of deep pain that appear in many songs, did not include “direct attacks upon God” or faith-based modes of protesting “the apparent divine neglect to end slavery.” Rather, the spirituals are presented as evidencing an encounter with absurdity that emphasizes faith in God’s enduring presence amid black suffering and maintains that “trouble will not have the last word.” Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 34-46, 58-74.

⁵² Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 58.

⁵³ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 112; cf. 110; Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 71.

⁵⁴ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 112-117.

equality, the antebellum world of black suffering perpetuated by white supremacy appeared in an eschatological light which fostered a Christian hope characterized by “impatience” and “protest” with regard to such a context; in view of a just future, Cone writes, “the present became intolerable” and “the truth of God” gave rise to a distinct sense of responsibility for changing it.⁵⁵ Seeking to overcome existential absurdity by “joining the world and making it what it ought to be,” this active dissatisfaction with the world as it is illustrates the historically effective value of the divine promise that receives emphasis in the eschatological perspective of black liberation theology.⁵⁶ The disjuncture between what is and what ought to be resounds with an imperative for humanization when evaluated in relation to God’s coming justice.

In contrast to this mode of engaging absurdity, the second response that Cone discusses concerns the developments he identifies in the post-Civil War black church. With regard to the shifting structures of anti-black violence in the wake of the end of institutional slavery and the impact of this historical process on the black church, Cone laments: “The black church gradually became an instrument of escape instead of, as formerly, an instrument of protest...The rise of segregation and discrimination in the post-Civil War period softened its drive for equality...Black churches adopted, for the most part, the theology of the white missionaries and taught blacks to forget the present and look to the future.”⁵⁷ That is, the contemporary efficacy of the promise was vitiated

⁵⁵ Ibid., 114-116; cf. 142-143.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 142-143; cf. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 135-142.

⁵⁷ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 118-119; cf. Cone, preface to the 1989 edition to *Black Theology and Black Power*, xxv-xxviii; Cone, *Said I Wasn't*, 61, 106.

by means of a compromised prophetic presence and otherworldly eschatology.⁵⁸ Indeed, Cone contends that the black minister after the Civil War appropriated the values of an oppressive social setting to the extent of becoming “the transmitter of white wishes, the admonisher of obedience to the caste system,” and of contributing “more than any other one person in the black community” to the damaging process of reinforcing “the white system of black dehumanization.”⁵⁹ The intersecting problems of mimicry, complicity, and resignation by means of an ahistorical vision of God’s justice ultimately amounted to the notable impoverishment of creative resistance that he describes as “the apostasy of the black church.”⁶⁰

It is in presenting this critical appraisal of the trajectory of the black church that Cone attends to the corresponding defeatist orientation to existential absurdity which differs from that of the pre-Civil War black church. After the Civil War, he suggests, the black church began to exhibit an internalized sense of freedom in deferment and a lack of hope regarding the task of overcoming the contradiction between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be: “The contrast between white treatment of black people as things and God’s view of them as persons is so great that it is easy for blacks to think that God has withdrawn from history and the ‘devil’ has taken over...Instead of seeking to change the earthy state, they focus their hopes on the next life in heaven.”⁶¹ Such an

⁵⁸ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 118-122, 126-127, 137-139.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 118-119; cf. 121-122, 129, 148. See also Cone’s recollections on the nature of his critique of the black church in connection with his experiences in the years 1969-1970 with certain black nationalist and black revolutionary groups in Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 54-57; cf. James H. Cone, “Black Theology and the Black College Student,” in *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Boston: Beacon, [essay orig. publ. 1976] 1999), 121-129.

⁶⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 119, 120; cf. 122; Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 38, 57-59, 127, 134-135.

⁶¹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 138.

expression of hope, insofar as it exhibits a disconnect from the process of transforming concrete conditions of suffering, harbors an underlying “hopeless faith” which “implies that absurdity has won and that one is left merely with an unrealistic gesture toward the future.”⁶² Capitulating to the existing reality of inhumanity, the post-Civil War black church, in Cone’s assessment, effectively conflated the world which should exist with the heavenly world. In light of this repressive eschatological model, he concludes that “the most corrupting influence among the black churches was their adoption of the ‘white lie’ that Christianity is primarily concerned with an otherworldly reality.”⁶³

The twofold periodization of the black church and the disparate approaches to the mood of absurdity which Cone addresses bring into stark relief key issues pertaining to the final aspect of the context of black liberation theology to be highlighted in this section—namely, the emancipatory-humanizing process of black resistance to ongoing white supremacy. Amid the reifying character of the absurd, he notes, the following “crucial question” confronts black humanity: “How should I respond to a world which defines me as a nonperson?”⁶⁴ Such a dehumanizing situation requires an emancipatory response of black self-affirmation which contests the logic of anti-blackness and insists on the exigencies of establishing freedom and justice on the basis of the intrinsic dignity of black humanity.⁶⁵ It is precisely this kind of responsive process of humanization that

⁶² Ibid., 138-139.

⁶³ Ibid., 137.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 7-9, 13-14, 16, 19-23; Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 7, 10-17, 23-29, 37-39, 99, 101-102, 108-109.

Cone identifies as the liberative significance of the Black Power movement in his earliest writings.⁶⁶

In presenting a “constructive definition” of Black Power, Cone writes that it refers to the “complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary.”⁶⁷ As such, Black Power signifies “black freedom, black self-determination, wherein black people no longer view themselves as without human dignity but as men [and women], human beings with the ability to carve out their own destiny.”⁶⁸ Refusing to accept the violence of racialized misrecognition and enslavement by cultivating an affirmation of blackness that aims to transform the concrete conditions of white supremacy, the “humanizing force” of Black Power resides in the process of subverting the ontological negations of absurdity and participating in a liberative struggle for black being.⁶⁹ As the critical awareness that “whites do not have the last word on black existence,” Cone observes, Black Power expresses the revolutionary importance of black lives speaking for themselves and determining their own identities in opposition to white attempts to define blackness.⁷⁰ The emancipatory-humanizing response to absurdity is black-initiated, black-led, and black-centered.

The responsive source of communal agency and decision-making in the black revolution is a primary concern in Cone’s analysis of self-determination in the context of

⁶⁶ Cone, “Christianity and Black Power,” 3-12; Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 1-34, 43-45, 48, 59-64, 70-71, 123-132, 136, 143-156, 168-171; Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 12, 24-25, 46, 61, 62, 70, 72, 74, 106, 121; cf. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 44-53; Cone, *For My People*, 10-24; Cone, *Said I Wasn’t*, 7-18, 32-37, 45-48, 71.

⁶⁷ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 6.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 7-9, 13-14, 19.

⁷⁰ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 24, 62.

Black Power. For instance, in his reflections on the meaning of white questions and ideas about “an appropriate response” to racial oppression in the United States, Cone mentions that “it is time for whites to realize that the oppressor is in no position whatever to define the proper response to enslavement. He [or she] is not the slave, but the enslaver.”⁷¹ The response to the absurd is to be decided by those who have been assaulted and wounded by its relational deformities. Indeed, such an approach remains indispensable to the task of uprooting the mechanisms of white domination, since efforts to decentralize whiteness in accordance with white methods and principles would simultaneously reinforce the very normativity to be transformed. It is this fundamental problem of regenerated racism that Cone addresses in remarking that “the real menace in white intellectual arrogance is the dangerous assumption that the structure that enslaves is the structure that will also decide *when* and *how* this slavery is to be abolished.”⁷² Revolutionizing in the midst of absurdity necessitates an inversion of agency in the prevailing order of enslavement. The process of black self-affirmation and self-determination requires a reorientation that exemplifies the liberative vision of Black Power: “The time has come for white Americans to be silent and listen to black people.”⁷³

Essential to this humanizing rupture of the established arrangements of power is the constructive dimension of black cultural life which Cone describes as “the creation of new values independent of and alien to the values of white society.”⁷⁴ To dislodge white hegemony entails a qualitative shift in the direction of “a new cultural ethos among the

⁷¹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 23.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 24 (emphasis in original).

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

oppressed blacks of America, so that they are no longer dependent on the white oppressor for their understanding of truth, reality, or—and this is the key—what ought to be done about the place of black sufferers in America.”⁷⁵ Without a transformative engagement with whiteness on an axiological-cultural level, he suggests, the black revolutionary process will not sufficiently foster the freedom of self-determination that allows for overcoming absurdity.⁷⁶ In contrast to the mimicry of values that serves to perpetuate an exclusionary logic of white normativity, the creation of new values grounded in the black experience offers a liberative affirmation of communal identity that contributes to the work of dismantling the structures of enslavement.⁷⁷ Cultivating ways of living, thinking, and relating in everyday life on the basis of “a system of black values that deny that ‘white is right’ and stress the beauty of being black” constitutes an integral feature of the emancipatory movement as presented in Cone’s writings.⁷⁸

The revolutionary commitment to freedom through systemic change and cultural revival yields a framework of liberation that enables Cone to identify a critical continuity between the antebellum black church and the emergence of the Black Power movement in the 1960s. The pre-Civil War black church—which, due to its character of protest and active struggle against unfreedom, he describes as “the precursor of Black Power”—had an awareness of the pressing need for black self-determination inasmuch as it recognized that “the system itself was evil and consequently urged slaves to rebel against it.”⁷⁹ That

⁷⁵ Ibid., 146.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 146-147, 153-156; cf. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 20, 24, 27-29.

⁷⁷ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 147-148, 151-152, 155, 166-167; cf. 19-23; Cone, *Said I Wasn't*, 16-17.

⁷⁸ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 167.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 106, 146-147, 155; cf. 123, 127.

is, the envisioned corrective to anti-black violence was not to be actualized *within* the dehumanizing structures but rather *against* them, engendering an alternative nexus of social conditions in which black consciousness would not be expected to accommodate to an organizing principle of whiteness. In this oppositional stance of the pre-Civil War black church, Cone suggests, a cultural reorientation remained operative and continues to afford a fruitful resource for black liberation theology.⁸⁰ Attending to the persisting forms of this tradition of creative black resistance, he contends that “today the Black Power movement is an expression of this same revolutionary zeal in the black community.”⁸¹ The emancipatory-humanizing spirit of black self-affirmation at the time of Cone’s first writings prolonged the demand for racial justice proclaimed by black ministers during chattel slavery and recovered under the prophetic leadership of Martin Luther King Jr.⁸² Like the black church before the Civil War, the liberative task of Black Power involves a deliberate break with the values of white society in order “to change the structure of the black community—its thought forms, values, culture.”⁸³

It is in this context of black revolution in the United States that black liberation theology was born. Remarking on his disagreement with King’s negative assessment of Black Power, Cone recalls the catalyzing impact of black revolutionary consciousness on his own thinking at the beginning of his academic career: “Black Power expressed what I had been feeling from the time Stokely Carmichael first shouted the phrase in Mississippi in June 1966...Black Power simply meant that Negroes were tired of being exploited and

⁸⁰ Ibid., 123, 146-147.

⁸¹ Ibid., 155.

⁸² Ibid., 122-123; cf. 129; Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 37-38.

⁸³ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 155.

humiliated. As a theologian, I felt compelled to write a manifesto to white churches announcing that Negroes could no longer tolerate the violation of their dignity. I had to give voice to the feelings of rage in the Negro community, and especially the rage inside me.”⁸⁴ Impelled to examine the theological significance of black resistance to ongoing enslavement, he began to develop a new way of doing theology in the setting of North American white supremacy. In the renewed cry for liberation sounded by Black Power, Cone encountered a challenge to revisit the contemporary meaning of the biblical message and the question of God’s involvement in the world. The critical meditations on Christian faith which followed this encounter resulted in the substantial contribution of black liberation theology.

It is important to note that Cone's construction of a black theology of liberation is not merely a theoretical engagement with the black revolutionary process but also a lived participation in the reality of black self-affirmation which vitalizes that process. As he recounts in his memoir, the irruption of the Detroit rebellion in July 1967 profoundly affected him while teaching at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan, inciting him to seek new theological formulations of black dignity while exposing pervasive anti-blackness and thus to discard the strategic “mask” which he had learned to wear while growing up in Jim Crow Arkansas. He describes this turning point as follows:

The Detroit rebellion deeply troubled me and revolutionized my way of thinking. I could no longer write the same way, following the lead of Europeans and white Americans. I had to find a *new* way of talking about God that was accountable to black people and their fight for justice...For about a year after joining the faculty at Adrian College I had done what was expected of a Negro. But then Detroit exploded and so did I. My explosion shook me at the core of my racial identity,

⁸⁴ Cone, *Said I Wasn't*, 7-8.

killing the “Negro” in me and resurrecting my black self. I felt a *black fire* burning inside me, so hot I couldn't control it any longer.⁸⁵

Reflecting on the sense of urgency which led him to begin articulating a new theological understanding of blackness, Cone repeatedly contrasts his humanizing experience of writing theology with the acquired practice of wearing the survival mask, which had always functioned, as mentioned above, “to disguise our true selves” in accordance with expectations and arrangements of power defined by whiteness, thereby inhibiting honest expression and activity.⁸⁶ “Writing my first book,” he observes, “was the most liberating experience I've ever had. I felt that I had been waiting all my life for this, to take off my mask and tell white folk—especially my former professors at Garrett and Northwestern—what I really thought.”⁸⁷

In developing a black theology of liberation, then, Cone embodied the interrelated values of self-affirmation and emancipatory non-accommodation that inhere in the black revolution which he was examining theologically. Unapologetically insisting on the dignity of black humanity in the face of its continuing denial by white society, he began

⁸⁵ Ibid., 2, 6 (emphasis in original); cf. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 43-44.

⁸⁶ Cone, *Said I Wasn't*, 1-30, 32-33, 35-36, 51-68.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 36. In an earlier recollection of his initial attempts to think theologically in light of Black Power, Cone similarly frames the experience of writing theology in a manner that highlights a participation in the movement of black self-determination and resistance to white models. With regard to his 1968 essay titled “Christianity and Black Power,” he mentions: “I will never forget the event of writing that essay. It seemed that both my Christian and black identity were at stake...I no longer was going to allow privileged white theologians to tell me how to do theology. The writing of the essay provided the occasion for me to declare my liberation from the bondage of white theology. I knew that they would not like what I was saying, including many of my former teachers at Garrett. But that did not matter since I was not writing for their approval.” Likewise, Cone describes the process of expanding that essay into *Black Theology and Black Power* as “a therapeutic and a liberating experience,” and even as “a conversion experience” insofar as the event of writing the book entailed “experiencing the death of white theology and being born again into the theology of the black experience.” The cultural reorientation that remains central to black emancipation is reflected in the basic elements of the theological method which he embraced: “When it became clear to me that my intellectual consciousness should be defined and controlled by black history and culture and not by standards set in white seminaries and universities, I could feel in the depth of my being a liberation that began to manifest itself in the energy and passion of my writing.” See Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 44-52.

to exercise a theological voice that would no longer compromise the need to speak truth amid suffering and resilience in the United States: “Whites didn’t like the words ‘Black Power’ and ‘black theology.’ I couldn’t care less about what they liked or didn’t. As Carmichael said: ‘For once black people are going to use the words they want to use—not just the words whites want to hear.’ I wasn’t writing to please whites. I was writing to empower the wounded spirits of blacks who were trying to stay in the church and also struggle for justice as they embraced their blackness in America.”⁸⁸

The inspiration to search for new theological directions kindled by the emergence of the Black Power movement in 1966 and driving Cone’s earliest writings also gave rise to several important contributions by other black scholars and church leaders at the time. Among those contributions, a purposeful beginning is identified by Cone in July 1966, the month following Carmichael’s first public call for black power, when the newly formed National Committee of Negro Churchmen (eventually renamed the National Conference of Black Churchmen) issued its “Black Power Statement” in the *New York Times*.⁸⁹ In this statement, which Cone recognizes as marking the first step of the process

⁸⁸ Cone, *Said I Wasn’t*, 47; cf. 142. The significant connection between the removal of the mask, black self-determination, and Christian identity also appears in Cone’s remarks on the tenuous aftermath of the National Council of Churches conference in 1967. He notes, for instance, that the relationship between “the radical black clergy and the liberal white clergy” grew vexed since “whites were not accustomed to hearing blacks tell the truth in clear, forceful, and uncompromising language, especially their black clergy colleagues.” Furthermore, he proceeds to mention that “a similar problem emerged among conservative black ministers as well, because many had worn masks so long that they had forgotten their true identity.” See Cone, *For My People*, 11-17.

⁸⁹ For Cone’s discussion of the NCBC and the “Black Power Statement,” see Cone, *For My People*, 1, 5-6, 10-18; Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 44, 53-54. The text of the “Black Power Statement” is reprinted in Statement by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen, “Black Power,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, vol. 1, 1966-1979, rev. ed., ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 19-26. For the original publication of the NCNC statement, see “‘Black Power’: Statement by National Committee of Negro Churchmen,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1966, sec. 4, E5. The nearly full-page ad in the *New York Times* appears a few pages after a photograph of Carmichael (with Rep. Adam Clayton Powell) accompanying news review articles which, under the heading “Rights and Riots,”

by which black theology was created, black clergy and civil rights activists (including one layperson, Anna Arnold Hedgeman) affirmed in a clear and resolute manner the transformative work of Christian love amid the power inequities that continue to deny justice to black communities.⁹⁰ That is, the “Black Power Statement” connected the cry for black power with the meaning of Christian identity in the United States.⁹¹ In so doing, the statement set in motion what Cone describes as “a radical theological movement toward the development of an independent black perspective on the Christian faith,” an initiative that would soon stir his own constructive participation.⁹²

A major figure in shaping the theological vision and orientation of the NCBC was scholar and activist Gayraud S. Wilmore (1921-2020). Singled out by Cone as the voice that most influenced his own reflections on black theology, Wilmore served as the first chair of the theological commission of the NCBC and played a prominent role in crafting its statements.⁹³ In this capacity, Wilmore contributed a critical approach to the task of reexamining the Christian faith in light of black revolution and, as Cone observes, “laid the foundation for the early development of black theology.”⁹⁴ As chair of the theological commission, Wilmore prepared an important report in 1968 surveying the first two years of the NCBC with a focus on the concerns and issues that were increasingly demanding

discuss civil rights issues, the Black Power movement, and political misconceptions about the provenance of unrest in black communities (see sec. 4, E1)—all of which, including the role of the news media itself, are addressed in the NCNC statement.

⁹⁰ Cone, *For My People*, 1, 10-11, 18; “‘Black Power’: Statement by National Committee of Negro Churchmen,” sec. 4, E5.

⁹¹ Cone, *For My People*, 1, 11; cf. 15-18.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, xi-xii, 14, 18.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

theological attention among its members.⁹⁵ This document, the outcome of a project in which several black scholars and theologians were consulted on theological questions in connection with black religion and revolutionary change, conveys the sense of a shifting theological conversation.⁹⁶ An awareness of the pressing need for new modes of inquiry through which the relationship between the Black Power movement, Christian life, and liberation can be investigated finds expression in this report in tandem with glimpses of an incipient black theology.⁹⁷

Another early member of the NCBC whose work and leadership stimulated the formulation of black theology is Albert B. Cleage (1911-2000).⁹⁸ Pastor of the Shrine of the Black Madonna in Detroit, Cleage was involved in developing the black Christian nationalist movement as a communal context in which the relationship between Christ and black revolution could be proclaimed and lived out in a new, transformative way. In his 1968 collection of sermons titled *The Black Messiah*, a historical perspective is laid out that identifies in prevailing white images of Jesus a centuries-old dimension of white supremacy which must be overcome by recovering an understanding of Jesus that affirms his first-century life, Cleage maintains, as “a revolutionary black leader” who sought “to lead a Black Nation to freedom.”⁹⁹ This image of the historical Jesus as a black messiah,

⁹⁵ Gayraud S. Wilmore, “The Theological Commission Project of the National Committee of Negro Churchmen” (Fall 1968), appendix D in Warner R. Traynham, *Christian Faith in Black and White: A Primer in Theology from the Black Perspective* (Wakefield, MA: Parameter, 1973), 83-96.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 84, 86, 95-96.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 83-84, 95-96. See also the account of the theological commission project and related debates in Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1973] 1998), 242-249.

⁹⁸ Cone, *For My People*, 18-19.

⁹⁹ Albert B. Cleage Jr., *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 3-4; cf. 6-9, 20-21, 24-47. Mark L. Chapman, scholar of African and African American studies, identifies *The Black Messiah* and Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power* as “the two most important texts in the history of the Black theology movement.” Mark L. Chapman, “Annotated Bibliography of Black Theology, 1966-1979,” in

along with Cleage's notion of a black God and his broader rereading of biblical history, is at the heart of the struggle for black liberation in the United States that characterizes his nationalist program.¹⁰⁰ It is for these reasons that Cone remembers Cleage, whom he went to hear preach in Detroit, as "the only preacher I heard who had the courage to be unashamedly and unapologetically black."¹⁰¹ Though Cone and most members of the NCBC ultimately did not embrace the theological and nationalist arguments which most distinguished Cleage's contribution, the significance of his role in the emergence of black theology is aptly noted by Cone, who remarks that "Cleage inspired us all."¹⁰²

In the same year that saw the publication of *The Black Messiah*, J. Deotis Roberts (b. 1927) gave a conference paper attending to Black Power as an acute focal point for explicating the tasks of responsible theological activity in the United States.¹⁰³ The need for a black theology—or, as he puts it in a later essay, "black theologies"¹⁰⁴—as a critical corrective to the situational disconnect of North American theology, Roberts contends, bears upon the fundamental changes at the center of the black revolution.¹⁰⁵ A sustained engagement with this theological challenge is reflected in subsequent writings, wherein Roberts would work out a conception of black theology that he sharply differentiated

Black Theology: A Documentary History, vol. 1, 1966-1979, rev. ed., ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 449.

¹⁰⁰ Cleage, *Black Messiah*, 20, 37-43, 86-87, 98-99, 112-113. See also Albert B. Cleage Jr., *Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church* (New York: William Morrow, 1972).

¹⁰¹ Cone, *Said I Wasn't*, 14.

¹⁰² Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 54; Cone, *For My People*, 18-19. See also the references to the radicality of Cleage's theology in Wilmore, "Theological Commission Project," 83, 96.

¹⁰³ The paper was published the following year. See J. Deotis Roberts, "The Black Caucus and the Failure of Christian Theology," *Journal of Religious Thought* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1969): 15-25.

¹⁰⁴ J. Deotis Roberts, "Black Theology in the Making," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, vol. 1, 1966-1979, rev. ed., ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [essay orig. publ. 1973] 1993), 118.

¹⁰⁵ Roberts, "Black Caucus," 15-17, 20-24.

from the proposals of Cleage, Cone, and others.¹⁰⁶ Inseparable from liberation, the primacy of which Roberts emphasizes in agreement with Cleage and Cone, is a healing and more fully humanizing process of reconciliation, an important insight which became one of the distinguishing marks of Roberts's participation in the conversation on black theology and established in his theological project a touchstone for revolutionary work that seeks to embody a viable alternative to relational brokenness.¹⁰⁷

These foundational figures, along with other voices in the early years of black theology, illustrate the theological consciousness that awakened with the rise of the Black Power movement. Cone's meditations on God's active presence in history were forged out of that consciousness. As will be seen in the following sections, many of the issues noted here in connection with early contributions to the movement feature in significant, albeit oftentimes distinctive, ways in Cone's theology of liberation.

2.3 THE EXODUS AS CREATIVE REVOLUTION: DIVINE RIGHTEOUSNESS AMID REALITIES OF ENSLAVEMENT

The challenge of carrying out a theological analysis of the gospel and God's self-revelation from the standpoint of the black revolution in the United States revolves around the contemporary pertinence of the biblical theme of liberation. A key insight into

¹⁰⁶ See J. Deotis Roberts, "Black Consciousness in Theological Perspective," in *Quest for a Black Theology*, ed. James J. Gardiner and J. Deotis Roberts (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1971), 62-81; J. Deotis Roberts, "Black Theology and the Theological Revolution," *Journal of Religious Thought* 28, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1971): 5-20; J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971); Roberts, "Black Theology in the Making," 114-124; J. Deotis Roberts, *A Black Political Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974).

¹⁰⁷ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 9-10, 24-25, 27-29; Roberts, "Black Theology in the Making," 119-121; Roberts, *Black Political Theology*, 25, 118, 138, 220-222.

the axial status of that theme in the biblical heritage affords Cone a theological basis for approaching the emancipatory process of black self-determination in terms of God's ongoing activity in a world marked by white supremacy. As he recalls, the very insight into the preeminence of liberation as a scriptural theme was enabled by the black experience and the renewed struggle for freedom:

I began to read the Bible through the lens of Black Power, black arts, and the black consciousness movement. A revolutionary Jesus leaped off the pages of scripture into my mind, enabling me to see things I had not seen before....Jesus's ministry was essentially liberation on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. I didn't need a doctorate in theology to know that liberation defined the heart of Jesus's ministry. Black people had been preaching and singing about it for centuries. When I turned away from white theology and back to scripture and the black religious experience, the connection between Black Power and the gospel of Jesus became crystal clear. Both were concerned about the liberation of the oppressed.¹⁰⁸

It is in a transformative vision of liberation from injustice that Cone discerns a profound continuity between the core biblical message and the commitment to eradicating anti-black structures of dehumanization. Indeed, his analysis of their relationship ultimately yields a thesis of identity: "If the gospel of Christ...frees [one] to be for those who labor and are heavy laden, the humiliated and abused, then it would seem that for twentieth-century America the message of Black Power is the message of Christ himself."¹⁰⁹ This general perspective on the link between the gospel and black emancipation exemplifies Cone's mode of engaging the theme of liberation as it appears throughout the biblical corpus.

¹⁰⁸ Cone, *Said I Wasn't*, 14-15; cf. 16-18, 45, 47, 71; Cone, preface to the 1989 edition to *Black Theology and Black Power*, xxv; Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 40-44, 48-49, 64-69; Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 1-39. See also note 2 above.

¹⁰⁹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 43; cf. 44, 45-49, 55, 67-69, 70-71, 100, 123, 127; Cone, *Said I Wasn't*, 9, 11-12, 15, 17-18, 36-37, 47, 71.

Among the biblical resources which Cone appropriates in formulating a theology of liberation, the exodus narrative enjoys a prominent role. As early as *Black Theology and Black Power*, he describes the exodus as “the most significant revelatory act in the Old Testament,” observing that it “demonstrated God’s purposes for [humanity]” and “showed that [God] was the Lord of history, that [God’s] will for [humanity] is not to be thwarted by other human wills.”¹¹⁰ The biblical account of the exodus depicts an image of God in relation to humanity and recognizably active in history in order to ensure that the human condition will become what it was meant to be. In the Hebrew Bible, the self-revelation of God in the exodus is paramount. It is necessary, however, to consider these remarks on the exodus—which, to be sure, amount to a quite limited treatment of the narrative in *Black Theology and Black Power*—in light of the larger framework of creation that Cone discusses in his first book. Without recourse to Cone’s theology of creation, the meaning of the divine will for humanity revealed in the exodus remains insufficiently explicated.

In Cone’s understanding of creation, the liberative significance of revolutionary activity already appears in sharp contrast to the alienating trajectory of dehumanization and the attendant deterioration of intersubjectivity. Commenting on the Genesis accounts, he mentions that humanity “was created to share in God’s creative (revolutionary) activity in the world (Gen 1:27-28). But through sin [the human person] rejects [its] proper activity and destiny.”¹¹¹ The negation of the Creator’s purpose for humanity is the result of sin, which Cone describes as the human “desire to become ‘like God’” and

¹¹⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 72.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

preside as “the creator of [one’s own] destiny.”¹¹² Essentially an unhinging disavowal of the distinction between creator and creature, sin consists in the human attempt to be more than human while in effect debasing humanity; that is, the self-deifying human person, Cone writes, “becomes subhuman, estranged from the source of [its] being, threatening and threatened by [its] neighbor, transforming a situation destined for intimate human fellowship into a spider web of conspiracy and violence.”¹¹³ Created to participate in the creative work of God, humanity finds itself in an existential state of aberration that breeds damaged forms of social relationality and networks of harm which eclipse its intended communal flourishing before the Creator.

The opposition between God’s creative purpose for humanity and the sinful path of descent into a subhuman condition of social antagonism correlates with that between freedom and enslavement in Cone’s reflections. For instance, in a discussion of revolutionary activity that serves to elucidate its aforementioned connection with creative activity, the transcendent basis of human freedom is identified and framed in terms of political resistance to state-sanctioned injustice: “Black people must be taught not to be disturbed about revolution or civil disobedience if the law violates God’s purpose for [humanity]. The Christian [woman or] man is obligated by a freedom grounded in the Creator to break all laws that contradict human dignity. Through disobedience to the state, [one] affirms [one’s] allegiance to God as Creator and [one’s] willingness to behave as if [one] believes it.”¹¹⁴ With the creative will of God as its ultimate source, human

¹¹² Ibid., 71-72.

¹¹³ Ibid., 72.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 155-156.

freedom exhibits primordial significance as well as radical responsibility in the face of social forces that obstruct the divine intention for humanity. It is for this reason that Cone writes, “If the biblical *imago Dei* means anything, it certainly means that God has created [humanity] in such a way that [its] own destiny is inseparable from [its] relation to the Creator. When [one] denies [one’s] freedom and the freedom of others, [one] denies God.”¹¹⁵ In effect, the extent to which freedom is respected or endangered in society reflects the extent to which creation has been embraced or repudiated, respectively. As a systemically transformative response to the unfreedom of estrangement from God’s purpose, the cultivation of creation advances with revolutionary intensity.

In expounding the liberative character of the relationship between the gospel and Black Power, Cone provides a concise definition of freedom that further demonstrates its fundamental role in the theology of creation: “Simply stated, freedom is *not doing what I will but becoming what I should*.”¹¹⁶ These diverging modes of human behavior express the two different orientations toward the existential status of the human person as a creature of God whose prescribed activity is to share in the creative process. Freedom as a trajectory of humanization means living with and for others in accordance with the communal intention of the Creator mentioned above, thereby evincing God’s creative will for humanity. With reference to his definition of freedom, then, Cone asks: “Is this not why God became [human] in Jesus Christ so that [humanity] might become what [it] is?”¹¹⁷ It is through freedom that human becoming preserves its integrity against the state

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 156; cf. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 74-76, 90-94; Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 35.

¹¹⁶ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 44-45 (emphasis in original).

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 45.

of estrangement brought about by the sinful efforts to supplant God's creative purpose with humanity's own will.

As Cone notes, the gift of such freedom is the work of Christ, who is "the special disclosure of God to [humanity], revealing who God is and what [God's] purpose for [humanity] is."¹¹⁸ Accordingly, the life and teachings of Jesus make present a freedom that coheres with the creative will of God and humanizes by healing the fractured corpus of relationality. In Jesus, God enters "into the very depths of human existence for the sole purpose of striking off the chains of slavery, thereby freeing [humanity] from ungodly principalities and powers that hinder [its] relationship with God."¹¹⁹ That is, the divine self-revelation in Christ is a decisive reconciling event whereby "a restoration of diseased humanity" enables the human creature to reunite with itself as such and thus to embody, in a manner that nurtures the intrinsically communal meaning of the renewed existence, its intended freedom in "fellowship with God."¹²⁰ Humanity encounters the freedom for which it was created in Jesus of Nazareth, whose relational model of universal solidarity displays a guiding partiality toward "the unwanted of society" and makes present a way of being human which exposes the destructive quintessence of distorted desires.¹²¹ The liberative revelation of God in the reintegrating work of Christ invites humanity to arise from the existential abjection of self-denial "with a willingness to share in God's creative activity in the world."¹²²

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 39; cf. 41; Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 29-31, 37-39, 51-52, 110-128.

¹¹⁹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 40; cf. 46.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 166-168; cf. 41-42, 46, 57-60, 72-73, 141.

¹²¹ Ibid., 40-44, 51-53; cf. 59; Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 2-3, 5-6, 113-119.

¹²² Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 73.

Without the humanizing response of a concrete commitment to the process of restoring God's creation, the alternative of unfreedom continues to govern the subhuman ruins among which volitional disorders signal an operative insensitivity to the connective fabric of intersubjective responsibility and sustain systems of conflict. In proclaiming the reign of God, Cone notes, Jesus directly confronts the self-oriented betrayal of freedom that amounts to a rejection of God's creative purpose. Bringing into christological focus the creational notion that human freedom does not consist in the arbitrary virulence of an uninhibited existence, he observes that "the message of the [reign of God] strikes at the very center of [the human] desire to define [one's] own existence in the light of [one's] own interest at the price of [their sister's or] brother's enslavement."¹²³ The narcissistic projection of the human will that presumes to displace the will of God by refashioning the objective of its own workings in the world maintains an absence of freedom which produces pain and unjust suffering in the lives of others. As a situation of enslavement, however, the deployment of unrestrained activity does not mean that only some are able to experience freedom, albeit in a deeply irresponsible manifestation, while others endure unfreedom as a consequence. In Cone's diagnosis of humanity's tragic failure to become what it is, the reflexivity of enslavement marks the anti-creative state of sin insofar as one "who enslaves another enslaves [oneself]. Unrestricted freedom is a form of slavery. To be 'free' to do what I will in relation to another is to be in bondage to the law of least resistance."¹²⁴ Dehumanization through renunciation of the Creator's intention for

¹²³ Ibid., 41; cf. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 116-118.

¹²⁴ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 47; cf. 48, 70, 78, 156, 164; Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 103; Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 107.

communal life in favor of forging one's own purpose to the detriment of others generates a spurious image of freedom which yields its underlying reality of captivity before the self-revelation of God.

It is within the theological framework furnished by this vision of creation and the enslaving severance from its dynamic of relational harmony that the significance of the exodus in Cone's earliest reflections on black liberation is most fully appreciated. As an illustrious act of divine self-revelation in the Hebrew Bible, the exodus conveys with exceptional clarity the historical process through which God works to ensure that human beings do not "become less than the divine intention for [them]" as communicated in the meaning of creation.¹²⁵ This process of undoing the plunge into subhuman conditions is described by Cone as "a course of not-so-gentle persuasion for the liberation and restoration of [God's] creatures," indicating the inevitably conflictual feature of God's creative activity in a world which unconscionable human desire has devastated.¹²⁶ The exodus offers a paradigmatic expression of the liberative orientation of God's creative involvement in a situation disfigured by the dissolution of freedom and community that results from an ostensibly enclosed mode of existing.

In the exodus, the pernicious deviation from the Creator's intention for humanity in a concrete denial of freedom undergoes transformation before "the righteousness of God," an important theological category in Cone's analysis pertaining to the primordial horizon of historical liberation as God's creative activity become restorative.¹²⁷ As the

¹²⁵ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 72.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 49-53, 58-59; cf. 34.

ultimate source of justice and a transcendent reality within whom justice abides, God acts in the world in a manner that reflects justice: “Whatever God does must be *just* because [God] is justice.”¹²⁸ Divine activity in the midst of historical injustice, then, consists in “effecting [God’s] purpose despite those who oppose it” since a God who is righteous “cannot pretend that wrong is right.”¹²⁹ Accordingly, the exodus reveals the righteousness of God insofar as it attests the divine work of “putting right what [human beings] have made wrong.”¹³⁰ By way of redirecting human history, God’s righteousness tends toward restoring the creative purpose in the world and establishing freedom through a corrective encounter with the condition of enslavement. The liberating activity of God in the exodus instantiates a loving commitment to carrying out the process by which humanity will become what it should have been from the beginning.

Exemplifying with historical potency the righteousness of God, the exodus marks a communal experience of knowing God through a transformative act on behalf of a subjugated people. In working to rectify the wayward trajectory of human self-interest, then, God’s self-revelation in emancipating the Israelite slaves exhibits a structure of partiality toward the victims in which Cone discerns profound epistemological value: “Israel as a people initially came to know God through the exodus...It is significant to note the condition of the people to whom God chose to reveal [God’s] righteousness. God elected to be the Helper and Savior to people oppressed and powerless in contrast to the proud and mighty nations.”¹³¹ This foundational experience of divine activity as focused

¹²⁸ Ibid., 50 (emphasis in original).

¹²⁹ Ibid., 50, 58.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 50.

¹³¹ Ibid.

on those who suffer from injustice, he notes, sets into motion a humanizing history of proclaiming the centrality of the poor in light of God's creative will. With regard to the exodus and the Sinai covenant, for instance, he mentions that "the history of Israel is a history of God's election of a special, oppressed people to share in [God's] creative involvement in the world on behalf of [humanity]...Israel's task is to be a partner in God's revolutionary activity and thus to be an example to the whole world of what God intends for all [human beings]."¹³² Continuing in the message of the prophets and in the gospel of Jesus, the creative-revolutionary commitment to the primacy of the poor that broke through in the liberation from Egyptian slavery remains at the heart of a vibrant tradition in which the divine purpose for humanity is emphatically asserted.¹³³ It is in view of this exodus-based tradition of God's effective justice that Cone concludes: "If God is to be true to [Godself], [God's] righteousness must be directed to the helpless and the poor, those who can expect no security from this world."¹³⁴

The critical theological prism that Cone derives from the revelatory heritage of the exodus affords an interpretive standpoint from which to address the question of God's liberative activity in contemporary North America. A loving partiality toward the victims of structural oppression conjoins the situations of violence in ancient Egypt and the

¹³² Ibid., 72-73.

¹³³ Ibid., 50-51, 73. Cone's discussion in these pages reflects an incipient version of the triad of the exodus, the prophets, and Christ that will play a notable role in his development of black liberation theology. As he recalls in his memoir in reference to *A Black Theology of Liberation*, "Exodus, prophets, and Jesus—these three—defined the meaning of liberation in black theology. I never deviated from that core insight." While this remark appears in relation to the book which followed *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone also indicates that the importance of the triad for him predates his theological corpus altogether inasmuch as it stemmed from "the spiritual depth of Southern black religion that shaped my life in Bearden. At the center of this faith is Jesus's cross, the exodus, and the prophets." Cone, *Said I Wasn't*, 67, 125.

¹³⁴ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 51.

United States in spite of their vast contextual differences and historical distance: “By choosing Israel, the oppressed people among the nations, God reveals that [God’s] concern is not for the strong but for the weak, not for the enslaver but for the slave, not for whites but for blacks.”¹³⁵ Particularities notwithstanding, both systems of slavery proceed from a more fundamental level of bondage in which an obfuscation of the *imago Dei* takes place through the unbridled human will and unleashes a social calamity that revolves around the collective affliction of domination. In response, divine righteousness works toward overturning the baneful departure from the creative purpose for humanity through a liberating process in which the most vulnerable take precedence. As a decisive mediation of God’s self-revelation, the emancipatory commitment to the Israelite slaves in Egypt is exemplary of a special relationship between God and the oppressed, thus offering Cone a key resource for reflecting on the active presence of the Creator in the revolutionary movement in black America.

While the exodus features as an essential revelatory act in *Black Theology and Black Power*, the theological status of the black revolution is presented in eminently christological terms. As noted above, the creative-revolutionary momentum which was catalyzed by the divine self-revelation in the exodus and invested Israelite history with its global orientation was continued in the work of the prophets and the definitive revelation of God in Christ. As such, several aspects of Cone’s analysis of God’s liberative activity in Christ deserve attention in light of their bearing on the contemporary relevance of the exodus. First, it is necessary to observe that Cone discusses God’s effective justice in the

¹³⁵ Ibid., 73.

world today as the ongoing work of the Spirit of Christ. The emancipating movement of God among those whose humanity is under assault is not a relic of the revelatory past but rather a dynamic reality which charges the present with christological vitality: “If the gospel is a gospel of liberation for the oppressed, then Jesus is where the oppressed are and continues his work of liberation there. Jesus is not safely confined in the first century. He is our contemporary, proclaiming release to the captives and rebelling against all who silently accept the structures of injustice.”¹³⁶ In the lives of women and men committing to a communal process of self-determination amid the enslaving apparatus of white supremacy, the God whose creative will was manifested in liberating the Israelite slaves likewise acts today as the Holy Spirit who is “accomplishing the work of salvation begun in the election of Israel and continued in Christ.”¹³⁷ Guiding the black revolution is the freedom-restoring disclosure of God in Christ, who “not only fulfills [God’s] purposes for [humanity] through [God’s] elected people, but also inaugurates a new age in which all oppressed people become [God’s] people.”¹³⁸

The more expansive status of the people of God in the new era instituted by Christ highlights another issue relating to the constructive appropriation of the exodus in black liberation theology. In continuity with the partiality toward the oppressed characterizing God’s self-revelation in the exodus, the process of liberation in the United States means that God in Christ “has taken on blackness” as an identificatory mode of “moving black people with a spirit of black dignity and self-determination so they can become what the

¹³⁶ Ibid., 43-44; cf. 64-69.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 64-69.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 77-78; cf. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 2-3, 6.

Creator intended.”¹³⁹ The intersection of God’s liberation of the Israelite slaves, the work of Christ, and black resistance to dehumanizing conditions provides Cone with a basis for directly engaging the question of the people of God in the world of white supremacy. He mentions, for example, that God’s “affirmation of black people is made known not only in [God’s] election of oppressed Israel, but more especially in [God’s] coming to us and being rejected in Christ for us. The event of Christ tells us that the oppressed blacks are [God’s] people because, and only because, they represent who [God] is.”¹⁴⁰ Grounded in a radicalized conception of the preferential relationship between God and the victims of injustice as depicted in the exodus, Cone’s approach to the contemporary status of the people of God is framed in terms of the universalizing effect of God’s insertion into the very lived experience of oppression in Jesus of Nazareth.

This christological perspective on the shared experience of social rejection and the reassertion of God’s will against enslavement allows Cone to revisit the link between divine righteousness and the people of God in light of the US context. Integrating these themes in view of their continuing relevance, he writes:

What, then, is God’s Word of righteousness to the poor and the helpless? “I became poor in Christ in order that [humanity] may not be poor. I am in the ghetto where rats and disease threaten the very existence of my people, and they can be assured that I have not forgotten my promise to them. *My righteousness will vindicate your suffering!* Remember, I know the meaning of rejection because in Christ I was rejected; the meaning of physical pain because I was crucified; the meaning of death because I died. But my resurrection in Christ means that alien powers cannot keep you from the full meaning of life’s existence as found in Christ. Even now the [reign] is available to you. Even now I am present with you because your suffering is my suffering, and I will not let the wicked triumph.” This is God’s Word.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 78, 147; cf. 129, 133, 136.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 52 (emphasis in original).

Between the revelation of the righteousness of God among the Israelites in Egypt and its emancipatory activity among the people of God in contemporary North America, the bodily exposure to the bite of injustice through which God in Christ became a victim established a concrete level of identification with the oppressed and thereby ensured the blackness of God's creative revolution today. The resurrection offers a message of life that cannot be reduced to a promise of otherworldly joy but rather, like the liberating act of the exodus, alters the aberrant course of history in the direction of the freedom which should exist in this world. It is for this reason that Cone considers Christian identity to be integrally connected with the reality of inflicted suffering: "To be Christian is to be one of those whom God has chosen. God has chosen black people!"¹⁴²

Cone's critique of eschatological models in which God's promise is relegated to a heavenly future raises a final point relating to his understanding of the exodus. In framing a viable alternative to "the tendency of some to interpret eschatology in such a way that a cleavage is made between our world and God's," he mentions that "genuine biblical faith relates eschatology to history, that is, to what God has done, is doing, and will do for [God's] people."¹⁴³ The creative-revolutionary process of revealing and enacting God's purpose in history does not comprise a trajectory of restorative work from which the divine promise can be extricated and analyzed in isolation. On the contrary, as Cone suggests, such an attempt to separate the promise from history simultaneously effaces its significance: "It is only because of what God has done and is now doing that we can

¹⁴² Ibid., 171; cf. 136.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 142.

“speak meaningfully of the future.”¹⁴⁴ As the principal revelatory act in the Hebrew Bible, the exodus occupies a major role in the liberative process that serves to enunciate in a concrete fashion the meaning of the justice and freedom to come. Along with God’s self-revelation in Christ and emancipatory presence in the black revolution, the act of freeing the Israelite slaves informs Christian hope and preserves a transformative element in its vision of the world.

Relaying the overthrow of an oppressive order and a movement in which God’s creative will marks a new path for interhuman relationality, the exodus illustrates in a pronounced manner what Cone describes as the “pervasively eschatological” character of the biblical sources.¹⁴⁵ This feature of the biblical texts, he notes, appears in what renders them important—namely, their image of “a God who is involved in history, effecting new forms of human life in the world.”¹⁴⁶ Divine activity in specific situations as depicted in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament communicates the notion that “every human order stands under [God’s] judgment” and thus remains susceptible to the transformative re-ordering that results in a new communal reality. Invariably defining social conditions and value systems, this openness to radical change before the righteousness of God is the reason “why again and again in the Bible a new order is expected which will come into being because of God’s decision to make human life really human.”¹⁴⁷ The anticipation of a humanizing shift in history expresses an essential biblical perspective which “looks

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 151-152.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 151.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

to the future, to a time when the new will displace the old.”¹⁴⁸ In its transition from a dehumanizing order to a new experience of what it means to be human, the structure of the exodus reflects the future-oriented faith that Cone discerns throughout the Bible. As a key resource for the eschatological insight into the lack of finality in the prevailing orders shaped by self-serving (in)human desire, God’s self-revelation in disrupting the system of Egyptian slavery exemplifies the revolutionary vehemence of the process by which the world is made what it was intended to be all along.

It is within this anticipatory framework of the coming justice of God and its basic opposition to enslavement in view of the *imago Dei*, paradigmatically on display in the exodus, that Cone situates the humanizing work of uprooting the reifying order of white supremacy. The momentous shift between contrasting orders which he recognizes as central to black self-determination transpires as an emancipatory process that expresses God’s creative purpose for humanity: “The Black Power movement is a transition in the black community from non-being to being. In the old order, black people were not allowed to be human; we were what white America permitted us to be—no-things. We took on false identities that destroyed our real selves, our beautiful black selves. The new order (partially realized now, but not fully consummated) is an order that affirms black self-identity.”¹⁴⁹ As with the fundamental difference between Israelite slavery in Egypt and the experience of communal freedom after the exodus, so too does the difference between the orders of black enslavement and black dignity in the United States depend entirely on the creative-revolutionary activity of God as liberator. The reorientation that

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 152.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

characterizes both sets of orders—that is, in the exodus and the contemporary process of black self-affirmation—manifests the rectifying guidance of divine righteousness amid situations of entrenched violence resulting from the human rejection of the Creator’s will in order to forge its own purpose in the world. In response to the dehumanizing social relations produced by the alienating desire “to be God” in place of becoming what the human person is meant to be, the liberative self-revelation of God opens history to new dimensions of existence and instills in Christian faith a critical attunement to what is to come.¹⁵⁰ This conception of the future invites the people of God to confront the order of North American anti-blackness with the living message that “we are on the threshold of a new order—the order of a new black community.”¹⁵¹

2.4 A HEART AS BLACK AS CHRIST: THE EXODUS AND THE LIBERATIVE TASK OF THEOLOGY

In the systematic exposition of the relationship between blackness and the gospel

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 71-73, 142-143, 151-152. With regard to Cone’s discussion of “the essence of sin” as the human “desire to become ‘like God’” and thus to act as “the creator of [one’s own] destiny,” it seems pertinent to underscore his critique of the “God-behavior” which he identifies in the legacy of white supremacy (164). Indeed, the connection between this particular expression of the deviation from God’s creative purpose and the unfreedom that dwells at the heart of uninhibited freedom (as discussed above) can be recognized in the following passage: “White oppressors are incompetent to dictate the terms of reconciliation because they are enslaved by their own racism and will inevitably seek to base the terms on their right to play God in human relationships” (164). Similarly related to this notion of sin are Cone’s remarks on the “inflated self-evaluation” of white Christians who seek to maintain “control of the black [person’s] destiny” (63-64), the white church’s attempts to ground various forms of racial violence in God’s will (83-86), the idea that “‘law and order’ is the sacred incantation of the priests of the old order” of structural racism in the United States (100; cf. 84, 90, 93), and the unquestioned conflation of the national structures and God’s will that compromises the credibility of the conversation among US theologians (98). This aspect of his analysis of anti-black oppression further illustrates the importance of approaching the relationship between the exodus and God’s liberative activity in the United States from the perspective of creative revolution. See also the treatment of sin as whiteness, described as “the desire of whites to play God in the realm of human affairs,” in Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 106-108; cf. 93, 103.

¹⁵¹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 152.

that Cone provides in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, the contemporary significance of the exodus is further developed in light of the black revolution. Establishing from the outset that liberation is the content of Christian theology, he offers a brief survey of the biblical basis for that indispensable point of departure which begins with the exodus and the election of Israel. With reference to Exod 19:4-5, Cone remarks: "Though it may not be entirely clear why God elected Israel to be God's people, one point is evident. The election is inseparable from the event of the exodus...Certainly this [i.e., Exod 19:4-5a] means, among other things, that God's call of this people is related to its oppressed condition and to God's own liberating activity already seen in the exodus."¹⁵² Divine liberation of the enslaved Israelites and election are interconnected in a manner that irreversibly shapes the relationship with God in the wake of the exodus. As Cone writes, "By delivering this people from Egyptian bondage and inaugurating the covenant on the basis of that historical event, God is revealed as the God of the oppressed, involved in their history, liberating them from human bondage."¹⁵³ A foundational act in the history of biblical faith, the exodus communicates a lived experience of God's partiality toward the most vulnerable that profoundly affects the understanding of divine activity in the world and the ongoing challenge of interpreting that activity which qualifies the task of theological reflection.¹⁵⁴

The survey of biblical sources illustrating the centrality of liberation for theology

¹⁵² Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 2. The passage in Exod 19 as quoted by Cone from the Revised Standard Version (RSV) reads as follows: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples." This biblical text is similarly interpreted in the discussion of the righteousness of God in Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 50.

¹⁵³ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 2.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-4.

exhibits the aforementioned triadic structure of the exodus, the prophets, and Christ.¹⁵⁵ While the exodus pertains to the oppression of the Israelites in ancient Egyptian society, the message of the prophets mainly revolves around the exigency of justice as expressed in God's concern for "the oppressed within the community of Israel."¹⁵⁶ As such, an important distinction emerges in Cone's presentation of divine liberation as it appears in the exodus and the prophetic tradition: whereas the former reflects a situation of violence in which Israelite suffering was collectively inflicted from without, the latter primarily addresses dynamics of injustice internal to Israelite society.¹⁵⁷ Pervading the liberative vision of the prophets, he observes, is an insistence on "Yahweh's concern for the lack of social, economic, and political justice for those who are poor and unwanted in society," as well as a reassurance that "God will vindicate the poor."¹⁵⁸ It should be emphasized, however, that the distinction between the meaning of the exodus event and the context of the prophets ultimately attests to the persisting value of the former in shaping Israelite communal life. As will be discussed below, Cone's interpretation of the problem of sin in the Israelite community as a state of "alienation from the source of its being, the exodus and Sinai events," affords a view of the prophetic tradition as essentially seeking "to call

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 2-3. See note 133 above.

¹⁵⁶ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 2.

¹⁵⁷ Several years later—notably, in his "first attempt" to engage in a direct way the problem of sexism in the black church—Cone would articulate this distinction in the following manner: "The gospel bears witness to the God who is against oppression in any form, whether inflicted on an oppressed group from the outside or arising from within an oppressed community. The Exodus is the prime example of the first instance, and the rise of prophecy is a prominent example of the second. But in both cases, Yahweh leaves no doubt that oppression is not to be tolerated." James H. Cone, "New Roles in the Ministry: A Theological Appraisal," in *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Boston: Beacon, [essay orig. publ. 1979] 1999), 117; James H. Cone, introduction to "Part V: Black Theology and Black Women," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, vol. 1, 1966-1979, rev. ed., ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 281-282.

¹⁵⁸ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 2.

the community back to the source of its life” and hence as “pointing back to the exodus and covenant.”¹⁵⁹ Prophetic attention to injustice within the community remains based on the abiding relational significance of God’s emancipation of the Israelite slaves from an external oppressor.

As the final and definitive element in the biblical triad that undergirds Cone’s theological analysis of liberation, God’s self-revelation in Christ accomplishes the work of freeing every oppressed group “to rebel against all powers that threaten human life.”¹⁶⁰ Consistent with the perspective put forth in *Black Theology and Black Power* as noted above, a key aspect of the christological dimension of Cone’s understanding of liberation as developed in this book lies in the universalizing sweep of God’s responsive love for the victims of injustice: “If the history of Israel and the New Testament description of the historical Jesus reveal that God is a God who is identified with Israel because it is an oppressed community, the resurrection of Jesus means that all oppressed peoples become his people. Herein lies the universal note implied in the gospel message of Jesus. The resurrection-event means that God’s liberating work is not only for the house of Israel but for all who are enslaved by principalities and powers.”¹⁶¹ While the exodus establishes God’s preferential concern for the Israelites as an enslaved people and the prophets assert the divine commitment to the oppressed within the community of ancient Israel, the work of Christ ensures that everyone who endures the pain of exclusionary violence receives the same transformative love of God.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 105.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 2-3.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 3.

This triadic expression of the biblical image of God as a God who sides with the oppressed serves to preclude the possibility of impartiality in Cone's vision of theological activity. Since God is partial, he contends, the effort to find ways of conceptualizing and articulating God's ongoing self-revelation in the world must likewise reflect a sensitivity to that partiality. For instance, he mentions that "the task of theology...is to explicate the meaning of God's liberating activity so that those who labor under enslaving powers will see that the forces of liberation are the very activity of God. Christian theology is never just a rational study of the being of God. Rather it is a study of God's liberating activity in the world, God's activity in behalf of the oppressed."¹⁶² As such, theology inhabits a tensional horizon—that is, it cannot circumvent a conflictual interaction with a reality of preventable suffering without simultaneously abandoning its own identity and objective. For this reason, Cone writes that "the language of theology challenges societal structures because it is inseparable from the suffering community" and simply cannot address "the nature of God without confronting those elements of human existence which threaten anyone's existence as a person."¹⁶³ In attending to the God of justice who identifies with the most vulnerable, theological production engages a humanizing process through which it can embody a commitment of solidarity and embrace "its sole reason for existence as a discipline: to assist the oppressed in their liberation."¹⁶⁴

When carried out in light of black resistance to white supremacy in the United States, Cone remarks, theological reflection on the God of the oppressed encounters a

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 4; cf. 1, 6-10, 17-20, 29-33, 38-39, 43-48, 50-52.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 4.

liberative activity whose basic meaning eludes any approach for which a color-blind presence of God is deemed appropriate in such a context.¹⁶⁵ “In a racist society,” he notes, “God is never color-blind. To say God is color-blind is analogous to saying that God is blind to justice and injustice, to right and wrong, to good and evil.”¹⁶⁶ The self-revelation of the God of justice in a situation marked by anti-black violence cannot be adequately interpreted from a standpoint of ostensible indifference to color. Illustrating the biblical basis for this position in connection with the triadic model of liberation, his appropriation of the exodus for this purpose signals an understanding of the event which is not restricted to the departure from Egypt: “Yahweh takes sides. On the one hand, Yahweh sides with Israel against the Canaanites in the occupancy of Palestine. On the other hand, Yahweh sides with the poor within the community of Israel against the rich and other political oppressors. In the New Testament, Jesus is not for *all*, but for the oppressed, the poor and unwanted of society, and against oppressors.”¹⁶⁷ Although the difference between God’s relationship with the Israelites and with the Egyptians in the exodus would have readily exemplified Cone’s notion of divine partiality, his recourse to the Israelite conquest of Canaan alongside the message of the prophets and Christ reflects a reception of the exodus in which its continuing pertinence resides not only in the act of liberating the Israelite slaves but also in God’s enduring commitment to the Israelites as depicted in the occupation of the promised land. Directing this threefold image of God’s identification with the oppressed toward the question of a color-neutral God amid racial

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 5-6; cf. 7-9, 30, 36-39, 55-57, 60-66, 119-128.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. (emphasis in original).

injustice, Cone asserts that “the meaning of this message for our contemporary situation is clear: the God of the oppressed takes sides with the black community.”¹⁶⁸

The exodus informs not only Cone’s repudiation of the notion that God is color-blind but also his important extension of that critical assessment in formulating the blackness of God. Moving beyond the objection to the idea that a focus on color is inessential to understanding God’s activity in the United States, he proposes that “there is no place in black theology for a colorless God in a society where human beings suffer precisely because of their color.”¹⁶⁹ In view of a God who identifies with those who suffer “to the point that their experience becomes God’s experience,” Cone maintains that an emphasis on the blackness of God is indispensable to theological analysis that seeks to preserve its Christian integrity.¹⁷⁰ He writes, “Because God has made the goal of blacks God’s own goal, black theology believes that it is not only appropriate but necessary to begin the doctrine of God with an insistence on God’s blackness.”¹⁷¹ As an expression of God’s liberative involvement in a setting of white supremacy, the blackness of God is a contemporary manifestation of the divine righteousness to which the biblical sources attest, especially in the exodus and the work of Christ: “The blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition God’s own condition. This is the essence of the

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 63.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 7-8, 9-10, 12, 55-57, 59, 60-66. It is important to note that Cone frames his use of the language of blackness in terms of Paul Tillich’s understanding of “the symbolic nature of all theological speech” and thus incorporates this lexicon into his constructive reflections in light of the need to “use symbols that point to dimensions of reality that cannot be spoken of literally” (7). In addition to the meaning of blackness as “a *physiological* trait” referring to “a particular black-skinned people in America, a victim of white racist brutality,” then, Cone also employs the term as “an *ontological* symbol for all those who participate in liberation from oppression” (204n5; emphasis in original).

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 63.

biblical revelation. By electing Israelite slaves as the people of God and by becoming the Oppressed One in Jesus Christ, the human race is made to understand that God is known where human beings experience humiliation and suffering.”¹⁷² The emancipatory self-revelation of God in the exodus constitutes a pivotal feature of the theological method which leads Cone to discern blackness in the immanence of God.¹⁷³

Further examining the interconnectedness between the exodus, Christ, and God’s blackness, Cone considers the liberative nature of God in relation to Trinitarian theology. He presents this perspective as follows:

Taking seriously the Trinitarian view of the Godhead, black theology says that as Creator, God identified with oppressed Israel, participating in the bringing into being of this people; as Redeemer, God became the Oppressed One in order that all may be free from oppression; as Holy Spirit, God continues the work of liberation. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Creator and the Redeemer at work in the forces of human liberation in our society today. In America, the Holy Spirit is black persons making decisions about their togetherness, which means making preparation for an encounter with whites.¹⁷⁴

Reframing the creative significance of the exodus as discussed in the previous section, this Trinitarian optic allows Cone to foreground how the liberation from slavery in Egypt and divine blackness in North America coalesce in the manifold self-revelation of God in history. In addition, the expansive embrace of all afflicted peoples definitively disclosed in God’s redemptive work in Christ establishes a vital dimension in the basic continuity

¹⁷² Ibid., 63-64. For Cone’s discussion of the historical Jesus as “the Oppressed One,” see pp. 111-119.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 59-61, 76-78. Cone develops his theology of God on the basis of “two hermeneutical principles” which further demonstrate both the centrality and the continuing significance of the exodus for theological analysis. These two principles, respectively, operate to ensure the following: (1) that every Christian interpretation of God “arises from the biblical view of revelation, a revelation of God that takes place in the liberation of oppressed Israel and is completed in the incarnation, in Jesus Christ”; and, as a result, (2) that such interpretations of God concern “the God who is participating in the liberation of the oppressed of the land” (60-61).

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 64.

between the exodus and the blackness of God today. Among other things, the meaning of this continuity calls attention to the creational caliber of God's emancipatory decision "to make the black condition *God's* condition" in the contemporary activity of the Spirit.¹⁷⁵ The liberative work of the Holy Spirit in the revolutionary response to white supremacy is a prolongation of God's effective partiality toward the oppressed as revealed to the Israelite slaves and universally amplified in the gospel of Christ. An inevitably frictional process, the self-revelation of God in identifying with blackness entails a contestation of every mechanism through which the dignity of black humanity is neglected.

Another link, albeit indirect, between the exodus and the theology of creation in Cone's conception of liberation can aid in elucidating his appropriation of the conquest of Canaan and thus warrants consideration. In expounding the blackness of God in light of his understanding of God as creator, Cone asserts the necessity of interpreting the Priestly account of creation in Gen 1 in relation to the experience of the Babylonian exile, which shaped the guiding concerns of the Priestly source in seeking "to make theological sense of the history of Israel as an oppressed people."¹⁷⁶ The impact of the exilic context on the biblical authors and the reality of collective pain which gave rise to their narratives, he suggests, cannot be disregarded without severely misconstruing the first creation account in Genesis.¹⁷⁷ Accordingly, Cone approaches the message of Gen 1 in terms of its value as a transformative image of creation that affirms the humanity of the oppressed: "God as creator means that humankind is a creature; the source of its meaning and purpose in the

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 12 (emphasis in original); cf. 87-94.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 74-75.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 75.

world is not found in oppressors but in God.”¹⁷⁸ The violence and suffering of oppression does not define the existence of its victims. It is only from the Creator that the human person as creature receives its most fundamental dimensions of meaning and a narrative that activates an awareness of those indelible existential structures among the oppressed can stir defiance of injustice.¹⁷⁹

With reference to the concrete modes of engaging an oppressive context which the foregoing notion of God as creator can cultivate among the wounded, Cone mentions that “this view of God undoubtedly accounts for the exclusivism of Israel in a situation of political oppression.”¹⁸⁰ That is, the Israelites, reclaiming the definition of their humanity that stems from the Creator in opposition to the definition implied by the dehumanizing practices imposed on them by another group, proceeded in ways that aimed to implement strict communal boundaries to the detriment of non-Israelites. This proposed intersection between the liberative significance of the theology of creation and exclusionary thinking bears upon the exodus, the prime example of God’s creative response on behalf of “Israel when other political powers threatened its existence as a community.”¹⁸¹ As an event of “political emancipation,” God’s self-revelation to the Israelite slaves in Egypt “and their subsequent entering into the land of Canaan” reflect the exclusionary element that Cone grounds in the revolutionary orientation toward God as creator.¹⁸² The departure from Egypt, he observes, “involves destruction of an enemy” and results in biblical images of

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 75-76.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 75.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 47; cf. 92-93.

¹⁸² Ibid., 47, 75-76.

God as “a warrior” who vanquishes the Egyptians attempting to redefine the humanity of the Israelites by means of coercive labor.¹⁸³ The conquest of the promised land, in which God “sides with Israel against the Canaanites,” likewise displays an exclusionary model of relationality insofar as it envisions the defeat and dispossession of the inhabitants of Canaan for the purpose of Israelite occupation.¹⁸⁴ Cone’s insight into the communal ramifications of the act of recognizing God as creator in the midst of political oppression carries theological implications that are relevant to his understanding of God’s creative involvement in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt and into Canaan.

In this connection, it seems pertinent also to highlight an important development in Cone’s treatment of the righteousness of God. Introduced in *Black Theology and Black Power* as a designation for God’s restorative activity in response to human negations of the creative purpose and discussed in light of the foundational event of the exodus, divine righteousness is revisited in *A Black Theology of Liberation* as the “aspect of God’s love” that requires analysis in terms of the symbols of wrath and destruction in order to avoid truncating the liberative meaning of God’s work.¹⁸⁵ The wrathful and destructive facets of divine love, Cone maintains, are essential to the effective character of God’s partiality toward the oppressed in the ineluctably tensional dynamic of liberation. To this end, he critiques the impoverished theological perspective that arises from the acceptance of a wrathless God: “A God without wrath does not plan to do too much liberating, for the two concepts belong together. A God minus wrath seems to be a God who is basically not

¹⁸³ Ibid., 47; cf. 127-128.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹⁸⁵ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 49-53, 58; Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 66-74.

against anything.”¹⁸⁶ Historical liberation entails an oppositional momentum, and Cone’s exposition of the righteousness of God offers a corrective to notions of divine love which reinforce an image of impartiality by failing to account for that idea of confrontation. He writes, “If God is a God of the oppressed of the land, as the revelation of Christ discloses, then wrath is an indispensable element for describing the scope and meaning of God’s liberation of the oppressed. The wrath of God is the love of God in regard to the forces opposed to liberation of the oppressed.”¹⁸⁷ Without this crucial aspect of divine love, the revolutionary sonority of revelation falls silent and the fractured conditions of social domination continue unabated.

As a liberative event involving destruction and conflict, the exodus cannot belong to a revelatory history in which God’s love is devoid of wrath. The oppositional process of terminating the reality of Israelite subjugation in Egypt and guiding the conquest of Canaan exhibits the antagonistic meaning of divine righteousness as described by Cone. Furthermore, this collisional feature of God’s liberative activity indicates that the creative and destructive levels of the work of God are not mutually exclusive but rather interlock in a single revelatory act. It is for this reason that Cone, in probing the black revolution from the standpoint of God’s righteousness, notes: “Love is a refusal to accept whiteness. To love is to make a decision against white racism. Because love means that God meets our needs, God’s love for white oppressors could only mean wrath—that is, a destruction of their whiteness and a creation of blackness.”¹⁸⁸ The blackness of God in the United

¹⁸⁶ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 69-70.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 74; cf. 20, 55-56, 58, 59, 62-63, 70, 72, 94-96, 100-101, 107-109, 120-124. This liberative perspective on the correlation between creative and destructive activity in the world is already present in

States expresses a continuation of the creative dimension of the exodus and thus signifies the elements of destruction and wrath that inhere in that emancipatory movement. Divine love leads the Israelites to freedom and dynamizes black self-determination only through a transformative confrontation with their respective causes of suffering. “What we need,” Cone mentions in reference to divergent ways of understanding the love of God, “is the divine love as expressed in black power, which is the power of blacks to destroy their oppressors, here and now, by any means at their disposal. Unless God is participating in this holy activity, we must reject God’s love.”¹⁸⁹

In the presence of this revelatory turbulence that Cone perceives in the blackness of God, North American theology faces the methodological challenge of embodying the destructive-creative work of love or positioning its identity in relation to the enslavement of white supremacy. Theological reflection that opts for the former as the appropriate response to the contemporary self-revelation of God necessarily enacts the oppositional trajectory which characterizes liberation in the context of racial oppression: “In order to be Christian theology, white theology must cease being *white* theology and become black theology by denying whiteness as an acceptable form of human existence and affirming blackness as God’s intention for humanity.”¹⁹⁰ That is, divine blackness calls for theology

Cone’s analysis of black emancipation in *Black Theology and Black Power*. While not explicitly framed in terms of the wrath of God, the following examples reflect this general approach to the creation-destruction relationship: Cone’s description of the theological task in terms of “creating a new understanding of black dignity among black people, and providing the necessary soul in that people, to destroy white racism”; the suggestion that a “creative response among white people to black humiliation” would be inseparable from “the activity of destroying racism in the structure of the white community”; and his view of black theology as “moving black people with a spirit of black dignity and self-determination so they can become what the Creator intended” while seeking “to destroy the influence of heretical white American Christianity.” Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 132, 133, 147. See also Cone’s remarks on the relationship between deconstruction and construction in the process of developing black theology in Cone, *Said I Wasn’t*, 40-46.

¹⁸⁹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 70.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9 (emphasis in original).

to participate in the emancipatory process and thereby to self-identify in accordance with God's creative activity in the present. Such a commitment forms a concrete precondition for developing an adequate analysis of the meaning of God. As Cone writes, "Those who want to know who God is and what God is doing must know who black persons are and what they are doing...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!*"¹⁹¹

Blackness as an ontological symbol in Cone's theology of liberation designates the salvific gift of lived solidarity with the victims of white domination.¹⁹² Synonymous with salvation, blackness is formulated by Cone as a fundamentally adventitious and gratuitous experience of faith in the God whose righteousness is manifested in the work of uprooting the dehumanizing order of whiteness.¹⁹³ Accepting God's gift of blackness, he observes, means undergoing a subject-transforming internalization of the contrastive irruption of God's revolutionary activity in the world today: "To *believe* is to receive the gift and utterly to reorient one's existence on the basis of the gift. The gift is so unlike what humans expect that when it is offered and accepted, we become completely new creatures. This is what the Wholly Otherness of God means. God comes to us in God's blackness, which is wholly unlike whiteness. To receive God's revelation is to become black with God by joining God in the work of liberation."¹⁹⁴ The difference between the

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 65 (emphasis in original).

¹⁹² Ibid., 5-10, 64-66, 106-109, 124-128, 203-204n4, 204n5.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 66; cf. 128.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. (emphasis in original). Cone's understanding of blackness as an ontological symbol first appears in *Black Theology and Black Power*, where he discusses God's work of reconciliation in Christ as signifying that "we can only be justified by becoming black" and proposes that "reconciliation makes us all black." Clarifying the meaning of the "radical change" which defines this process of reconciliation, he articulates a

blackness or whiteness of theological discourse, then, amounts to the nature of the faith from which it stems—namely, a faith in the God of the oppressed or in the idol of the oppressors.¹⁹⁵ In view of this crossroads, Cone asserts that white theologians seeking to respond in a Christian manner to the black revolution and “join us in this divine work must be willing to lose their white identity—indeed, destroy it.”¹⁹⁶ Expressive of the tensional character of divine love in situations of injustice, the destructive-creative shift from whiteness to blackness provides Cone with a basic epistemological metric for the purpose of evaluating theological production in the United States.

The God who is known in the liberative passage from whiteness to blackness is the same God who was known in leading the Israelites from slavery to freedom. Both in Egypt and in the United States, God’s self-revelation collapses oppressive structures and inaugurates possibilities of communal life in favor of the most vulnerable. With regard to God’s liberation of the Israelite slaves, Cone emphasizes the entanglement of destructive and creative activity in noting that “revelation is what Yahweh *did* in the event of the exodus; it is Yahweh tearing down old orders and establishing new ones.”¹⁹⁷ Describing the exodus as “a revelation-liberation,” he attends to the epistemic status of the disruptive

vision of blackness that anticipates the developments of his second book: “Being black in America has very little to do with skin color. To be black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are. We all know that a racist structure will reject and threaten a black [person] in white skin as quickly as a black [person] in black skin. It accepts and rewards whites in black skins nearly as well as whites in white skins. Therefore, being reconciled to God does not mean that one’s skin is physically black. It essentially depends on the color of your heart, soul, and mind...The real questions are: Where is your identity? Where is your being? Does it lie with the oppressed blacks or with the white oppressors?” Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 171; cf. 3, 77-78, 127-128, 170; Cone, *Said I Wasn’t*, 47-48.

¹⁹⁵ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 55-66, 203-204n4.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 62-63; cf. 97, 103.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 29 (emphasis in original).

love of God in history, which can be apprehended only through the eyes of faith.¹⁹⁸ He writes, “Other persons could have been aware of the exodus of a small band of Hebrews from Egypt and their subsequent entering into the land of Canaan, thereby establishing themselves as a recognizable community from about the twelfth century BC; but only those with the faith of Israel would know that those liberative events were God’s self-revelation.”¹⁹⁹ This perception of divine presence in the emancipatory process renders faith correspondingly conflictual insofar as it consists in “saying yes to God and no to oppressors.”²⁰⁰

The radical nature of the change that remains at the heart of Cone’s interpretation of the exodus and its implications for faith resurfaces in his theological understanding of blackness. As in the revelatory act of freeing the Israelite slaves, the dissolution of social arrangements that violate human dignity and the emergence of a new order are intrinsic to God’s liberative work in the United States. In the black revolution, divine righteousness confronts a national context permeated with the violence of anti-blackness and strikes at its very identity: “To be black is to be committed to destroying everything this country loves and adores.”²⁰¹ This accounts for Cone’s discussion of theology as a “dangerous” discourse, tasked with analyzing and explicating God’s blackness and thus yielding insights that “will always move on the brink of treason and heresy in an oppressive society.”²⁰² Interpreting divine self-disclosure in the contemporary setting of white

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 47.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 47; cf. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 44.

²⁰⁰ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 48.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 20; cf. 55-57, 107.

²⁰² Ibid., 55-56.

supremacy ignites in theology an intensely subversive voice, for “it is impossible to confront a racist society, with the meaning of human existence grounded in commitment to the divine, without at the same time challenging the very existence of the national structure and all its institutions, especially the established churches.”²⁰³ The far-reaching reconstruction of North American social reality that shapes Cone’s vision of God’s ongoing identification with the oppressed accords with the profundity of the transition which he recognizes in the emancipatory event of the exodus.

In reference to the contemporary response of faith to God’s revolutionary activity, it is necessary to foreground the christological significance of blackness. Bringing into focus the tensional character of the responsive process that defines one’s relationship with Christ in the world today, Cone remarks: “The meaning of Jesus is an existential question. We know who he is when our own lives are placed in a situation of oppression, and we thus have to make a decision for or against our condition. To say no to oppression and yes to liberation is to encounter the existential significance of the Resurrected One.”²⁰⁴ Faith in Christ, therefore, entails a concrete choice to oppose injustice through involvement in a transformative movement and converges with the participatory notion of faith that appears in Cone’s treatment of the Israelite community’s response to God’s activity in the exodus.²⁰⁵ While the enslaved Israelite population embraced the liberative disclosure of God through the “perception of its being and the willingness to fight against nonbeing” after the departure from Egypt, seeking to cultivate a communal life in Canaan

²⁰³ Ibid., 55.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 119-120.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 47-48.

based on a covenantal recognition of the exodus, the following of Christ today pivots on resistance to malignant formations of enslavement as an expression of the salvific gift that “transforms our nonbeing into being for God.”²⁰⁶

Specifying the confrontational structure of lived faith in the context of white supremacy, Cone asserts the importance of the black Christ for an adequate reception of God’s self-revelation today. He presents this key christological insight as follows: “The black community is an oppressed community primarily because of its blackness; hence the christological importance of Jesus must be found in his blackness. If he is not black as we are, then the resurrection has little significance for our times.”²⁰⁷ The resurrection, Cone mentions, signifies that Jesus lives in the present and does so in a manner that continues his first-century commitment to the oppressed as portrayed in the New Testament accounts; accordingly, the contemporary presence of Christ “must be where human beings are enslaved,” and it is this perspective which leads Cone to declare that “any statement about Jesus today that fails to consider blackness as the *decisive* factor about his person is a denial of the New Testament message.”²⁰⁸ Recognition of Christ’s continuing identification with the most vulnerable is indispensable for the response of faith amid the liberative re-ordering that occurs in the shift from whiteness to blackness.

In relation to this ongoing shift toward a new order of justice, Cone’s analysis of the black Christ reflects his insistence on the wrathful element of divine righteousness as essential to the act of overturning systemic forms of dehumanization, further illustrating

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 47-48, 53, 93, 100-101, 104-106, 108, 119-120, 124-125.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 120.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 113, 114, 119, 120, 121 (emphasis in original).

the contemporary pertinence of the dynamics of liberation which he observes in the exodus. For example, Cone views in the christological axis of blackness a freedom-oriented work of decentering cultural and theological legacies of whiteness, a revelatory process which he delineates in terms of divine combat. He writes: “Value perspectives must be reshaped in the light of what aids the self-determination of black persons. The definition of Christ as black means that he represents the complete opposite of the values of white culture. He is the center of a black Copernican revolution.”²⁰⁹ The emancipatory transition toward new conditions that favor human dignity moves antithetically to the axiological spectrum of a society designed in conformity with anti-blackness. As a result, a qualitative inversion remains integral to the liberative activity of God in the United States. Dislocating white definitional hegemony by rehabilitating deprecated and silenced perspectives exemplifies the belligerent aspect of God’s love: “Inasmuch as this country has achieved its sense of moral and religious idealism by oppressing blacks, the black Christ leads the warfare against the white assault on blackness by striking at white values and white religion. The black Copernican revolution means extolling as good what whites have ignored or regarded as evil.”²¹⁰ This conflictual image of God’s self-revelation in a situation of white normativity attests to the persisting import of the aforementioned idea of God as liberating warrior who defeated the Egyptian oppressors.

The creative work of the black Christ in upending the cultural-ideological edifice of white supremacy is inseparable from Cone’s conception of sin and the prominent role of the exodus therein. Formally, the notion of sin is presented as designating “a condition

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 121.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

of estrangement from the source of meaning and purpose in the universe,” which amounts to “a definition of being in relation to nonbeing” by means of rejecting one’s own identity and seeking to be otherwise.²¹¹ However, Cone departs from approaches to the problem of sin that move on a theoretical level of contextual indeterminacy and yield universal abstractions into which all particular experiences can be subsumed, and instead discusses the meaning of sin in strictly communal terms.²¹² With regard to the reality of sin in the United States, then, he distinguishes between modes of relevance to the black and white communities, noting that since “sin is a concept that is meaningful only for an oppressed community as it reflects upon its liberation, it is not possible to make a universal analysis that is meaningful for both black and white persons.”²¹³ This means that for members of the white community, Cone suggests, sin is “the definition of their existence in terms of whiteness.”²¹⁴ That is, sin as fallenness into nonbeing concerns the white community in relation to the “belief that persons can affirm whiteness and humanity at the same time,” which implies a failure to recognize whiteness as “the condition that is responsible for Amerindian reservations, black concentration camps, and the rape of Vietnam.”²¹⁵ It is this community-specific treatment of the estranged condition that frames Cone’s view of “the possibility of reconciliation” in Christ as necessitating “the destruction of whiteness, which is the source of human misery in the world.”²¹⁶

In reference to the black community, he mentions that sin signifies “a desire to be

²¹¹ Ibid., 103-104.

²¹² Ibid., 104-108.

²¹³ Ibid., 106.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 107.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 107-108.

white” and thus entails a “loss of identity.”²¹⁷ In this sense, sin indicates a resignation to oppression by “saying yes to the white absurdity—accepting the world as it is by letting whites define black existence.”²¹⁸ The problem of sin is interpreted by Cone in relation to the black community in a manner which underlines the complicity that emerges in the absence of self-determination. Hence he addresses the recovery of blackness as a vital and revitalizing corrective to the estranging impact of whiteness: “We have reinforced white values by letting whites define what is good and beautiful. But now we are being born anew; our community is being redeemed. This is so because we are perceiving the true nature of black existence.”²¹⁹ The tensional process of transposing the axiological landscape of white supremacy and reclaiming definitional power as a humanizing act of communal freedom manifests the reconciling work of the black Christ.

The foregoing differentiation in the meaning of sin as it pertains to the white and black communities extends and recontextualizes the regulative function of the exodus in Israelite society that Cone elaborates in his discussion of sin. Establishing the theological basis for the communally circumscribed notion of sin, he considers the Israelite context in respect to the condition of self-interested separation which affects community members who surmise “that one can live independently of the source that is responsible for the community’s existence.”²²⁰ This communal source, he notes, lies in the exodus event and the ensuing relationship between the Israelites and the God who emancipated them: “Sin in the community of Israel is nothing but a refusal to acknowledge the significance of the

²¹⁷ Ibid., 108.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 109.

²²⁰ Ibid., 104.

exodus and the covenant as God's liberating activity...It is counting Yahweh's activity as secondary by refusing to define the community in terms of divine liberation."²²¹ The life of the Israelite community receives its fundamental purpose and orientation from God's revelatory act among its politically oppressed ancestors in Egypt. As a state of alienation from its existential source, sin in the Israelite community means to live in such a way that denies the enduring relational value of the exodus.²²²

In developing this exodus-based analysis of sin in the Israelite community, Cone describes the ontological depths into which the imperative of liberation is inscribed and thereby saturates every aspect of what it means to be human. Turning to the prophets, for instance, and proposing that their message consists in "reminding the community of its reason for being in the world," he offers the following synopsis of the prophetic vision of the exodus as a primordial reality that ultimately demarcates being from nonbeing: "The essence of their concern is to call the community back to the source of its life. They are saying that unless we *become* what we *are*, we will no longer be. Sin is living a lie—that is, trying to be what we are not. To be is to know that one's being is grounded in God's liberating activity."²²³ Without integrating into everyday life the values of freedom and justice which became palpable in the exodus, the members of the Israelite community perform the untruth "that liberation is not the definition of being in the world."²²⁴ This negation of the foundational event of divine righteousness transpires as a disconnect from the communal horizon which makes it possible to be.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid., 104-105.

²²³ Ibid., 105 (emphasis in original).

²²⁴ Ibid.

Cone's examination of sin as a divergence from communal integrity in which the historical experience of oppression provides a vantage point that allows for the condition of estrangement to be recognized produces a theological model that enables him to reflect on shared dimensions in the Israelite and black communities. He approaches the problem of sin in relation to both communities as an identity-fracturing process which obstructs liberation through the appropriation of extraneous values that are incongruous with what the human person is meant to be. In addition, Cone highlights the importance of conflict in averting sin in both contexts. This perspective impels him to mention in connection with the sustaining role of the exodus in the Israelite community that "failure to destroy the powers that seek to enforce alien laws on the community is to be in a state of sin."²²⁵ Whereas acquiescence to external forces that threaten to destroy communal existence in light of its source amounts to sin, a counter-destructive response to such forces in order to prevent alienation from the liberative heart of the community safeguards against sin. It is for this reason that Cone frames the heritage of the exodus in the Israelite community in terms of confrontation: "The election of Israel is a call to share in Yahweh's liberation. It is not a position of privilege but of terrible responsibility. To be Yahweh's people, Israel must be willing to fight against everything that is against this liberation."²²⁶ The exodus-based purpose of the community is therefore betrayed "when Israel tries to define its existence according to the pattern of other nations and thus believes that its existence is dependent on some source other than Yahweh's liberating activity."²²⁷ Such a prospect of

²²⁵ Ibid., 104.

²²⁶ Ibid., 100.

²²⁷ Ibid., 105.

sin requires active defiance of anti-exodus values that menace communal uniformity from without and interfere with the cohesive being-toward-liberation.

Similarly, Cone interprets black compliance with “a society that defines blackness as evil and whiteness as good” as exemplifying the state of communal estrangement that the concept of sin encapsulates.²²⁸ The untruth of sin is enacted in the black community, he asserts, when its members do “not rebel against every infringement of white being on black being” and thus, in a manner resembling the peril of nonbeing within the Israelite community, stand at variance with the source of the community for accommodating an axiological system that functions to authorize the reality of black suffering.²²⁹ This view of the relationship between communal life and ongoing resistance to sin accounts for the emphasis on the revaluative presence of the black Christ. As Cone writes, “By becoming a black person, God discloses that blackness is not what the world says it is. Blackness is a manifestation of the being of God in that it reveals that neither divinity nor humanity reside in white definitions but in liberation from captivity.”²³⁰ Continuing the existential congruity that Cone perceives in the tradition of God’s self-revelation in the exodus as an abiding resource for exposing harmful ideological assemblages that can serve to mediate communal self-understanding, the black Christ inherently subverts the cultural machinery of white domination and embodies the freedom-with-others for which the human subject was created. Indeed, the revolutionary unity between freedom and blackness appears in Cone’s theology as an expression of emancipatory noncooperation with the calibrations

²²⁸ Ibid., 108-109, 121.

²²⁹ Ibid., 108-109.

²³⁰ Ibid., 121.

that are systemically assigned in the North American setting of racial oppression: “To be free is to be black—that is, identified with the victims of humiliation in human society and a participant in the liberation of oppressed humanity. The free person in America is the one who does not tolerate whiteness but fights against it, knowing that it is the source of human misery. The free person is the black person living in an alien world but refusing to behave according to its expectations.”²³¹

Just as the Israelite community could evaluate the liberative adequacy of other sources for social life on the basis of its own source (i.e., the exodus) and thereby identify sin, so too, Cone notes, can the black community in light of the source of its existence; thus he mentions “that blacks, like Israel of old, know what sin is because they have experienced the source of their being and are now able to analyze their own existence in relation to the world at large. They know what nonbeing (sin) is because they have experienced being (black power).”²³² The tension between whiteness and blackness as it emerges within Cone’s framework of sin concerns an ontological fissure between sources that are destructive or essential, respectively, to communal flourishing in the context of white supremacy. Black self-determination grounds the community in God’s liberative work and counters the aberration of unbecoming which the prevailing order of whiteness

²³¹ Ibid., 101-102. This approach to the juncture of freedom and blackness intersects with Cone’s call for the transformation of white identity as described above in relation to his understanding of blackness as an ontological symbol. In reference to the possibility of changing communities, for example, he addresses the challenge of “conversion” for members of the white community and suggests that “it will be necessary for them to destroy their whiteness by becoming members of an oppressed community. Whites will be free only when they become new persons—when their white being has passed away and they are created anew in black being. When this happens, they are no longer white but free, and thus capable of making decisions about the destiny of the black community” (97).

²³² Ibid., 106.

incessantly imposes. It is in view of this revelatory source of communal existence as a guiding dynamism of righteousness in the struggle against nonbeing and the salvific participation in freedom that Cone asks, “How could we speak about God’s revelation in the exodus, the conquest of Palestine, the role of the judges of Israel without seeing parallels in black history?”²³³

In the effort to conceptualize and articulate this revolutionary process by which the human person embraces its creative source, theological discourse in the United States does not have the option of producing analysis from the putative safety of enclosure. On the contrary, theology remains Christian insofar as it maintains an organic connection with the revelatory activity which, as mentioned above, Cone identifies as the center of the black revolution: the black Christ. “To be a disciple of the black Christ,” he writes, “is to become black with him.”²³⁴ Without a transformative encounter with the black Christ, Cone warns that theology will not overcome the specious “universalism” which not only deflects the necessary focus on unjust suffering but in fact consolidates the existing arrangement of society according to whiteness.²³⁵ It is only through a lived commitment to the oppressed, he admonishes, that theology can avoid becoming “an abstract, dispassionate discourse on the nature of God in relation to humankind” and insert itself into the task of contesting “the threat of nonbeing” that characterizes white supremacy.²³⁶ Consequently, the creative freedom that is offered in blackness remedies

²³³ Ibid., 48; cf. 127-128.

²³⁴ Ibid., 123.

²³⁵ Ibid., 4-10, 70-74, 84-87, 106, 120-122,

²³⁶ Ibid., 17-18.

what Cone refers to as “the sin of American theology,” which entails an “identification with unreality” that effectively hinders the work of naming, critiquing, and extirpating racism.²³⁷ Theology takes on its liberative purpose in solidarity with the community of the oppressed, a loving partiality that recreates and reorients the nature of its contribution in the world.

This communal matrix of integral theological reflection conveys the ongoing need for the existential response to God’s self-revelation among the victims of dehumanizing treatment that Cone describes as “beginning with the exodus.”²³⁸ The preconditions for formulating responsible conceptions of God include the experience of recognizing and sharing in the historical movement of divine righteousness against enslavement. In this way, contemporary theology, challenging approaches to the meaning of revelation in the United States which do not exhibit as their norm “the manifestation of Jesus as the black Christ who provides the necessary soul for black liberation,” remains in communion with the revolutionary reality that first irrupted in response to Israelite suffering in Egypt.²³⁹ With the incarnational heart of the emancipatory process as its own guiding principle, theological discourse does not simply exert its theoretical energies in interpreting God’s activity in the struggle for the dignity of black humanity but also participates in it. By internalizing and responding to the christological dimension of blackness, it becomes possible for theology to take part in the perduring dynamic of “tearing down old orders and establishing new ones,” as typified in the exodus event.²⁴⁰

²³⁷ Ibid., 18-20.

²³⁸ Ibid., 128.

²³⁹ Ibid., 38; cf. 121.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 29.

2.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the significance of the exodus in Cone's theology of liberation. In light of his analysis of the persisting conditions of white supremacy in the United States and the revolutionary movement of black self-affirmation that seeks to end the suffering of oppression, the chapter addressed the vision of communal liberation that informs Cone's theological appropriation of the exodus. The objective of elucidating the fundamental role of the exodus in Cone's theology brought into focus the importance of considering the manner in which it interlocks with a variety of other theological areas; in particular, the foregoing discussion highlighted essential connections between Cone's approach to the exodus event and his understanding of God, creation, revelation, sin, the human person, the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, and the reign of God. The interpretation of the exodus presented in this chapter concerns the lasting revolutionary value of a central expression of divine love as it relates to the contemporary context of dehumanizing racial violence. Recognizing in the revelatory act of the exodus a God whose commitment to the victims of structural injustice becomes tangible in the experience of liberation, Cone develops a key theological insight into the transformative continuity between the Israelite departure from Egypt and the emancipatory process of black self-determination in the United States. Finally, this chapter identified and explicated the implications of Cone's approach to the exodus with regard to the challenge of Christian faith and the task of theological reflection today.

The exposition of Cone's reception of the exodus account provided in this chapter concludes the first part of the dissertation. Beginning the transition from paradigmatic conceptions of the exodus in classical liberation theologies to critical reevaluations of such models, chapter 3 will introduce the Palestinian liberation theology of Naim Stifan Ateek.

CHAPTER 3

FRACTURED BEGINNINGS: THE CONTEXT AND ECCLESIAL TASK OF THE PALESTINIAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY OF NAIM STIFAN ATEEK

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter commences the second part of the dissertation. Consisting of four chapters, this second part of the project focuses on contextually distinct expressions of the critical reception of the paradigmatic model of the exodus theme as it appears in the classical formulations of Latin American and black liberation theologies. Chapters 3 through 5 comprise a section in the second part of the dissertation in which the reception of the biblical narrative of the exodus in Palestinian theological discourse will be discussed. Specifically, these chapters offer an analysis of the model of liberation theology developed by Naim Stifan Ateek, Anglican priest and co-founder and director of Sabeel, an ecumenical liberation theology center based in Jerusalem.¹

Ateek (b. 1937) is an Arab Palestinian theologian and an Israeli citizen whose ministry and theological contribution led to the emergence of a Palestinian theology of liberation in the late 1980s. As with classical Latin American and black liberation theologies, Ateek's articulation of Palestinian liberation theology highlights the critical significance of proceeding in a contextually responsive manner in order to preserve the integrity and liberative value of theological reflection. As such, this chapter will survey Ateek's discussion of the specific conjuncture of historical conditions that gave rise to

¹ The origins and role of Sabeel will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Palestinian liberation theology in the first place. This treatment of the context and genesis of Palestinian liberation theology will provide the framework for the material to be examined in chapters 4 through 5—namely, the emergence and praxis of Sabeel, Ateek's understanding of the nature of the biblical heritage, and his approach to the exodus narrative.

Before proceeding to discuss the historical, ecclesial, and structural realities underlying and stimulating Ateek's theology in multiple ways, however, it is important to foreground three unique features of this context that intensify and deepen the complexity of the problematic to be treated in the section on Palestinian liberation theology. These features intersect not only with the specifically Christian theological conversation on which these chapters focus, but also with the larger constellation of historical, geopolitical, social, cultural, demographic, and non-Christian religious conversations pertaining to the question of historic Palestine. First, unlike other critical interrogations of the exodus narrative and its turbulent afterlife in different geopolitical settings, the theological discourse considered in this section stems, in a generatively self-conscious manner, from the same geographic region at stake in the biblical themes of the promised land and the conquest of Canaan. This dimension of thematically ingrained geography shapes the Palestinian theological engagement with the exodus/conquest narrative in profound ways, kindling in the theological imagination a sensitivity to continuity that remains irreducible to dynamics of typological reproduction.² Simply put, Palestinian

² Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann observes the biblically freighted character of the region: "The dispute between Palestinians and Israelis is elementally about land and secondarily about security and human rights. Various appeals are made to the Bible, especially concerning the disputed land. The appeal of the contemporary state of Israel to the Bible concerning the land is direct and simple. It is that the land of

theological activity reflects in a unique way the epistemological status of place.³

The second feature further magnifies this exceptional element of continuity in the context of Israel-Palestine on the level of demography: the ancient Israelites described in the biblical accounts of the exodus from Egyptian slavery and the conquest of Canaan are identified as the progenitors of contemporary Jewish populations, including the various groups of Israeli Jews and extremist settlers who deploy such narratives in pernicious ways against Palestinians. Unlike the examples of other groups who have attempted to recontextualize the biblical trajectory of the exodus/conquest under different historical and geographic conditions, the appropriation of this theme in the context of modern political Zionism is marked by a distinctive genealogical consciousness that perceives in

promise was given initially and unconditionally to Israel and thus to the ongoing community of Jews. It is a promise made to Abraham, reiterated to succeeding generations in the ancestral narratives of Genesis and then to the generation of the exodus.” Indeed, as a biblical scholar, he views this dimension of “deep memory and heritage” as making it “impossible to consider the biblical theme [of land] apart from this contemporary dispute, even though the biblical legacy is only a small ingredient in the contemporary conflict.” Walter Brueggemann, *Chosen? Reading the Bible amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 2, 27. See also Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), xv-xvi, 1-25.

³ To be sure, liberation theologies in general emphasize the epistemological significance of location, and land-based spiritualities are central to American Indian sacred practices and intellectual traditions. Insertion into the world of the poor, for instance, is a basic methodological process that appears throughout the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Ignacio Ellacuría, James Cone, Jon Sobrino, and many others. For example, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Contestation in Latin America,” trans. Paul Burns, in *Contestation in the Church*, ed. Teodoro Jiménez Urresti (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 40-52; Ignacio Ellacuría, “Utopia and Propheticism from Latin America: A Concrete Essay in Historical Soteriology,” trans. James Brockman, J. Matthew Ashley, and Kevin F. Burke, S.J., in *A Grammar of Justice: The Legacy of Ignacio Ellacuría*, ed. J. Matthew Ashley, Kevin F. Burke, S.J., and Rodolfo Cardenal, S.J. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 8-55; James H. Cone, “The Gospel and the Liberation of the Poor,” *Christian Century* 98, no. 5 (February 18, 1981): 162-166; Jon Sobrino, “Theology in a Suffering World: Theology as *Intellectus Amoris*,” trans. José Pedrozo and Paul F. Knitter, in *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 27-46.

This key methodological insight certainly pertains to the Israel-Palestine context; as discussed below, however, this method produces a quite different relation to the biblical sources when it involves inhabiting sites in opposition to the mediating aura of dispossession which they receive from some of those sources.

the vision and project of the settler movement a continuation of the experiences and inheritance of biblical Israel.⁴ This ancestral dimension of the settler context is often inextricably linked with that of biblical geography mentioned above.⁵

The third feature to highlight introduces yet another element of complexity into the issue of demographic continuity as it relates to the focus of this section: it is not uncommon for modern-day Palestinians to claim Canaanite ancestry. This genealogical discourse assumes various forms and aims, ranging from including the Canaanites as one among many groups comprising an ethnically heterogeneous ancestral heritage of contemporary Palestinians to positing an Arab provenance for the ancient Canaanites

⁴ Although this point will be discussed further throughout this section, it is perhaps helpful here to provide some examples. Israel Zangwill (1864-1926), an early organizer of political Zionism in England, records mentioning in a speech given in New York in 1904—as he later described it, once he had “become fully aware of the Arab peril...as the outstanding obstacle to Zionism”—that “Palestine proper has already its inhabitants...so we must be prepared either *to drive out by the sword the tribes in possession as our forefathers did*, or to grapple with the problem of a large alien population, mostly Mohammedan and accustomed for centuries to despise us.” Israel Zangwill, *The Voice of Jerusalem* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 92 (emphasis mine).

Similarly, Rabbi Chaim Simons mentions that Lehi—a Zionist paramilitary group also known as the Stern Gang—held a conference in 1949 “at which one of the delegates, Dr. Sabo, proposed transferring most of the Arabs and giving the rest rights in the same way as ‘our Forefathers destroyed the Canaanites and afterwards wrote “and you shall love the stranger.”” Chaim Simons, *Herzl to Eden: A Historical Survey of Proposals to Transfer Arabs from Palestine, 1895-1947* (Kiryat Arba: Nansen Institute, 1994), 345.

⁵ Biblical scholar Moshe Greenberg observed in the mid-1990s the presence of a “nonobservant” group of nationalist Jews in the state of Israel, writing that for them the Bible is “first of all a charter...to the land of Israel. They are fond of biblical topography—landscapes and routes of military campaigns, and are eager to identify ancient sites of Jewish settlement.” He notes that since 1967 this group is increasingly forming alliances with religious Jews, giving “birth to a militant nationalist religious movement” that “sees itself as the latest link in the chain of authentic Judaism that goes back to scriptural beginnings.” Moshe Greenberg, “On the Political Use of the Bible in Modern Israel: An Engaged Critique,” in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, ed. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 464-465.

Likewise, Brueggemann writes that “the contemporary Zionist movement would have us believe that Judaism is equated with the land and, consequently, with support for the state of Israel as the present embodiment of the land of promise.” Brueggemann, *Chosen?*, 35; cf. 37-39, 56-57.

themselves.⁶ Central to this claim is the question of indigeneity and the manner in which it frames national consciousness amid experiences of displacement and the expropriation

⁶ Numerous examples are available for a comparative study of the different modes of this discourse. Since a study of this nature would far exceed the parameters of this dissertation, the following references are offered to illustrate the claim of Canaanite descent and to convey a sense of its significance in the context of political Zionism. In a 1946 letter to the *New York Times*, Samir Shamma (of the Arab Office in Washington, DC) responded to a proposed removal of the Arab Palestinian population to Iraq by highlighting moral, legal, and historical considerations. He writes: “The Arabs of Palestine have been uninterruptedly living in that country at least for the last thirteen centuries. A great number of the peasants, who form 70 per cent of the Arab population of Palestine, are descendants of those who worked the land centuries before the Jewish migration from Egypt in Biblical times.” Samir Shamma, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, January 8, 1946. More explicitly, at a UN Security Council meeting in 1980 on “the situation in the Middle East,” the following remarks were made by the representative of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Mr. Dajani, specifically in relation to a “bill before the Israeli Knesset proposing passage of a basic law relating to the annexation of Jerusalem”: “For us, the Palestinian people, Jerusalem is the capital of our homeland Palestine and it has always been its symbol since our forefathers, the Arab Canaanite Jebusites, established it over 3,000 years ago in a distinctly strategic location consecrated to God.” Record of the UN Security Council, 24 June 1980, “Status of Jerusalem (Folder 1),” Foreign Office Files for the Middle East, 1979-1981 Collection (Government Papers, The National Archives, Kew, 1980), <http://www.archivesdirect.amdigital.co.uk>. At another UN Security Council meeting a week later, Mr. Nuseibeh, the representative of Jordan, made a similar assertion concerning how “scientific and archaeological scrutiny have established beyond any shadow of a doubt that the indigenous and ancestral inhabitants of Jerusalem and Palestine were the Canaanite Semitic Arabs who had migrated to Palestine from the Arabian Peninsula more than 5,000 years ago—that is, 2,000 years before the emergence of the prophet Moses and his followers in the land of Canaan.” Record of the UN Security Council, 30 June 1980, “Status of Jerusalem (Folder 1).” See also Nuseibeh’s remarks several years earlier in Record of the UN General Assembly, 26 October 1977, “Arab-Israel dispute at the United Nations (Folder 2),” Foreign Office Files for the Middle East, 1975-1978 Collection (Government Papers, The National Archives, Kew, 1977), <http://www.archivesdirect.amdigital.co.uk>; a similar position is expressed by the representative of Somalia, Mr. A. M. Adan, in Record of the UN Security Council, 27 June 1980, “Status of Jerusalem (Folder 1).”

More recently, Palestinian presidents Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas have repeated the claim. For instance, archaeologist and historian Eric H. Cline quotes Arafat’s Land Day speech on March 30, 2000: “Our forefathers, the Canaanites and Jebusites...built the cities and planted the land; they built the monumental city of Bir Salim [Jerusalem].” Eric H. Cline, *Jerusalem Besieged: From Ancient Canaan to Modern Israel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 12 (brackets in the original); cf. 33-34. It is worth noting that Cline describes such claims as “a new tactic in the attempt, begun by the Palestinian Authority a decade or more earlier, to gain control of modern Jerusalem,” and suggests this tactic “may be taking advantage of” arguments made in biblical scholar Keith Whitelam’s 1996 book *The Invention of Ancient Israel* (12, 312n3). However, the first example of this ancestral claim provided above demonstrates that it originated much earlier, predating not only the PLO, but also the state of Israel. Keith W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (London: Routledge, 1996).

An instance of Abbas expressing the position of Canaanite ancestry appears in his remarks at a UN Security Council meeting in February 2018: “We are the heirs of the Canaanites who lived in Palestine more than 5,000 years ago and whose descendants have remained there to this day. Our great people remain rooted in their land.” Record of the UN Security Council, 20 February 2018, Meetings, Meeting Records, S/PV.8182 (United Nations, 2018), http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.8183.

of ancestral lands. Effectively a counter-memory, the idea of a continuing Canaanite presence in modern-day Israel-Palestine derives from its biblical mediation an evocative force that can activate dimensions of national primordiality, historical erasure, cyclical violence and accumulated trauma, territorial (up)rootedness and belonging, and the inherited legacy of an immemorial underside—even while producing an orientation of critical reflexivity toward certain biblical traditions.⁷ In essence, the modern Palestinian assertion of Canaanite ancestry signals a refusal to delink geography and national identity by recourse to the distant past as a decolonial resource.⁸

⁷ Palestinian historian Nur Masalha has critiqued forms of this counter-discursive ancestral claim (e.g., as found in the writings of Palestinian Christian Henry Cattán) as reproducing “mythological historiography” and thereby perpetuating an oversimplified Canaanite-Israelite binary that is no longer considered tenable by some archaeologists and biblical scholars. Nur Masalha, *The Bible and Zionism: Invented Traditions, Archaeology and Post-Colonialism in Israel-Palestine* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 251-253. Much of the material in those pages is reproduced with various modifications in the concluding chapter of Masalha’s more recent work *The Zionist Bible: Biblical Precedent, Colonialism and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Routledge, 2013), 234-243, 249-253. Interestingly, archaeologist William Dever develops an ideological and archaeological critique of many of the same “minimalist” sources that Masalha draws on, while nonetheless embracing an “indigenous origins” model for the early Israelites that ultimately converges with Masalha’s position. See William G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); William G. Dever, “Ethnicity and the Archaeological Record: The Case of Early Israel,” in *The Archaeology of Difference: Gender, Ethnicity, Class and the “Other” in Antiquity: Studies in Honor of Eric M. Meyers*, ed. Douglas R. Edwards and C. Thomas McCollough (Boston, MA: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2007), 49-66; William G. Dever, “The Exodus and the Bible: What Was Known; What Was Remembered; What Was Forgotten?,” in *Israel’s Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience*, ed. Thomas E. Levy, Thomas Schneider, and William H. C. Propp (Switzerland: Springer, 2015), 399-408.

An earlier, albeit undeveloped, critical perspective on the emerging Palestinian discourse of Canaanite descent appears in the work of historian Rashid Khalidi. He observed “a relatively recent tradition which argues that Palestinian nationalism has deep historical roots,” noting that its “extreme advocates...anachronistically read back into the history of Palestine over the past few centuries, and even millennia, a nationalist consciousness and identity that are in fact relatively modern”—a tendency that includes “a predilection for seeing in peoples such as the Canaanites, Jebusites, Amorites, and Philistines the lineal ancestors of the modern Palestinians.” Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 149, 253n13.

⁸ It is important to mention that the strategy of framing this Palestinian-ancestral claim as a critique of modern political Zionism is not an exclusively Palestinian phenomenon. For instance, English Jewish historian and activist Lucien Wolf (1857-1930), known for his significant work on anti-Judaism in Europe and his public opposition to the political Zionist movement, responded in a 1919 open letter to Israel Zangwill’s proposed transfer of the Arab Palestinian population to an area outside of Palestine—as Zangwill later designated it, his “suggestion of amicable race-redistribution or a voluntary trek”—with the

These three features of the Israel-Palestine context—thematically interlocking and discursively incendiary—highlight fundamental issues that inform the theological conversation examined in these chapters. In particular, the intimately related geographic and demographic valences of the setting in which Palestinian theology remains grounded put into relief the unique set of layered challenges it faces when engaging the biblical accounts of the exodus/conquest and questions relating to justice, peace, and liberation. To be sure, the discussion of these three elements by no means aims to exhaust the pertinent characteristics of the situation in Israel-Palestine; they are foregrounded in these preliminary contextual remarks in light of their explicit, notable interplay with the biblical themes that are at the center of this dissertation. Other important aspects of this context will be addressed throughout the chapters on Palestinian liberation theology.

3.2 FROM BEISAN TO BEIT SHE'AN: THE FIRST EXPERIENCE OF OCCUPATION AND THE NEW REALITY OF EXPULSION

Palestinian theology of liberation was born under conditions of settler colonial processes of collective dispossession, institutionalized racial violence, and military

following argument: “The Zionists, however dear may be their memories of 2,000 years ago, came to the land as strangers, while the so-called Arabs—by which is meant the fellahin or peasantry—are the indigenous population who were in the country before the first invasion of our people, and who have remained there ever since...If the so-called Arabs were really Arabs—that is, natives of Arabia—and if the Jews were really Palestinians—that is, indigenes of Palestine—there might be something to be said for your argument on the crazy basis of Territorial Nationality, which is the root curse of all our policies. But the Arabs are not Arabs. They are only the Moslemised descendants of the indigenous Canaanites, and hence they are in their rightful homeland which, however poor and feckless they may be, is their own.” Simons, *Herzl to Eden*, 74-76. Wolf’s response to Zangwill’s vision of indigenous removal anticipates Palestinian modes of contesting political Zionism later in the twentieth century. For a historical study on the evolution of transfer proposals in modern political Zionist discourse based on declassified Israeli archival documents, see Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of “Transfer” in Zionist Political Thought, 1882-1948* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992).

occupation. Resistance to an ongoing reality of unjust suffering and communal damage provided the concrete impetus for revisiting the Christian tradition in light of the yearning for justice and life resounding throughout the occupied territories of Palestine. Indeed, the enduring impact of the 1967 War on everyday life in Palestinian communities, including Palestinian Christians, is pivotal in Ateek's account of the origins of liberation theology in Palestine: "Palestinian liberation theology, as other liberation theologies, begins with its context and takes that context very seriously. The Palestinian context continues to be one of occupation and oppression."⁹ Before further discussing the significance of the current military occupation of Palestinian territories for Ateek's development of a theology of liberation, however, it is necessary to note that Ateek's experience of occupation predates 1967, and even the establishment of the state of Israel. His earliest memory of occupation stretches back to 1948, when he and his family still lived in their hometown of Beisan (now Beit She'an).

Ateek writes about this childhood experience: "I had just turned eleven in 1948 when the Zionists occupied my hometown, Beisan... We had no army to protect us. There was no battle, no resistance, no killing; we were simply taken over, occupied, on Wednesday, May 12, 1948."¹⁰ He recounts how he "watched the Zionist troops, the Haganah, come into town past our door, watched them enter every house in the neighborhood, looking for weapons. They searched our house, too, but did not find any.

⁹ Naim Stifan Ateek, *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), xiii; cf. 4-5, 11, 13, 24.

¹⁰ Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 7.

My father had never owned a gun; he did not believe in doing so.”¹¹ The pre-1948 life in Beisan that Ateek so vividly remembers—planting the garden with his father, the weekly Bible studies and church events held at his home, and Bedouins who would visit Beisan to shop and trade—ended abruptly with the arrival of Zionist paramilitary forces. “When the soldiers occupied our town in 1948,” Ateek recalls, “our simple and unpretentious life was disrupted.”¹²

Ateek describes a troubling sense of uncertainty and terror that fell upon the inhabitants of Beisan in those days. He mentions that some “fled their homes, horrified when news of what the Jewish soldiers had done in Deir Yassin reached them...I remember the many friends and neighbors who came to store their valuables with us before leaving town. Some even left their house keys, asking us to look after their homes while they were gone. They expected to be away, staying with relatives in less dangerous areas, for a few days or weeks.”¹³ The atmosphere of panic and fear that gradually permeated Palestinian communities was not limited to Beisan. Ateek recalls that one of

¹¹ Ibid. The Haganah Organization was established as “an underground ‘national’ or ethnic militia” during the British Mandate of Palestine and would later become “the army of the new state, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).” Benny Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 11-12, 16.

¹² Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 8. See also Naim Stifan Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation: The Bible, Justice, and the Palestine-Israel Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 1-2.

¹³ Ibid., 8-9; cf. 31. The Palestinian village of Deir Yassin (Ateek’s transliteration as “Yasin” has been left unaltered in the above quotation) was the site of a massacre that took place on April 9, 1948. Israeli historian Ilan Pappé describes it as “the most notorious” of the massacres carried out by Zionist soldiers. He writes that “the Hagana decided to send the Irgun and Stern Gang [see note 4 above] troops” to Deir Yassin, and “as they burst into the village, the Jewish soldiers sprayed the houses with machine-gun fire, killing many of the inhabitants. The remaining villagers were then gathered in one place and murdered in cold blood, their bodies abused while a number of the women were raped and then killed.” Regarding the question of the “accepted number of people massacred”—which Pappé considers “likely” to have been “deliberately inflated in order to sow fear among the Palestinians and thereby panic them into a mass exodus”—he makes the following observation: “One only has to be told that thirty babies were among the slaughtered in Deir Yassin to understand why the whole ‘quantitative’ exercise...is insignificant.” A letter signed by Albert Einstein “along with 27 prominent Jews in New York” (including Hannah Arendt) was published in the *New York Times* later that year, condemning the massacre and those responsible as

his older sisters had recently fled her home in Haifa with her husband and children, seeking safety with the rest of her family in Beisan.¹⁴

The military occupation of Beisan continued for two weeks (during which the state of Israel was proclaimed on May 14, 1948). Ateek describes the determinative outcome of the occupation for his family at the end of the two weeks: “On May 26, the military governor sent for the leading men of the town; at military headquarters, he informed them quite simply and coldly that Beisan must be evacuated by all of its inhabitants within a few hours. My father pleaded with him, ‘I have nowhere to go with my large family. Let us stay in our home.’ But the blunt answer came, ‘If you do not leave, we will have to kill you.’” His father returned home with the painful news of this ultimatum, asked the family (seventeen in total) to “carry... whatever was lightweight yet valuable or important,” and in a couple of hours they—along with other remaining residents of Beisan—arrived at a designated meeting area in the center of town in accordance with military orders. The indelible imprint that such traumatic events would leave on the mind of the eleven-year-old boy finds expression approximately forty years later in a moment of critical retrospection: “I can recall with great precision what happened, almost minute by minute.”¹⁵

At the center of town, Ateek recounts, soldiers separated the Palestinian residents

terrorists who “have preached an admixture of ultra-nationalism, religious mysticism, and racial superiority”—indeed, as reflecting a fascist political orientation which the authors of the letter compare to the Nazi Party. Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 90-91, 271n8; cf. the illustration of the *New York Times* report of the Deir Yassin massacre, plate 7; Isidore Abramowitz et al., letter to the editor, *New York Times*, December 4, 1948.

¹⁴ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 9. This sense of trepidation was surely exacerbated by the military confiscation of radios during the occupation (see Ateek’s reference to this practice on p. 10).

¹⁵ Ibid., 9-10. See also Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 3.

into groups according to religious identity: Muslims and Christians. “The Muslims,” he writes, “were sent across the Jordan River to the country of Transjordan (now Jordan).” Along with other Christians, Ateek’s family was transported by bus to Nazareth, a city soon “flooded” with other Palestinians “either fleeing or expelled from neighboring towns and villages.” Occupation took root as a new reality of dispossession, and their lives were irreversibly transformed: “Within a few hours, our family had become refugees, driven out of Beisan forever.”¹⁶

3.3 DISPLACEMENT AND RUPTURE: THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL REALITY OF THE NAKBA

This formative experience of originating occupation and displacement, when considered in its larger context of interconnectedness with all other such experiences—personal and communal—simultaneously afflicting hundreds of Palestinian towns and villages, yields a sense of the historical rupture that subsequently came to be designated the Nakba. Ateek offers the following commentary on what the term signifies: “Nakba, Arabic for catastrophe, refers to what happened to the people of Palestine as a result of the establishment of the state of Israel on their land. It is not the establishment of Israel itself that is called Nakba, but the effect which this event had on the Palestinian people.”¹⁷ Primarily a language of shared memory and pain, Nakba names “the main

¹⁶ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 10-11.

¹⁷ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, xiv. For treatments of the history of the term, its conceptual range, oral histories of the Nakba, and key issues involved in transmitting and responding to these memories, see Ahmad H. Sa’di and Lila Abu-Lughod, eds., *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Nur Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory* (London: Zed Books, 2012); Nahla Abdo and Nur Masalha, eds., *An Oral History of the Palestinian Nakba* (London: Zed Books, 2018); Jamil I. Toubbeh, *Day of the*

event that turned Palestinian lives upside down” and thus receives significant attention in Ateek’s diagnosis of his concrete situation.¹⁸

In Ateek’s reflections on the Nakba, a multidimensional understanding of this inverted reality is developed in order to address the expansive impact of what transpired in 1948. Adopting terminology and categories introduced by Palestinian Christian and Sabeel co-founder Cedar Duaybis, Ateek speaks of a “threefold Nakba” consisting of (1) the human Nakba, (2) the identity Nakba, and (3) the faith Nakba.¹⁹ The human Nakba— aspects of which receive expression in Ateek’s recollection of forced exile from Beisan discussed above—disturbed the economic and social conditions of Palestinian life, causing “significant human trauma” and poverty due to “the loss of Palestinian homes, lands, and possessions.”²⁰ In an interview given in 1998, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Nakba, Ateek expounded on this dimension of the tragedy as follows:

Long Night: A Palestinian Refugee Remembers the Nakba (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998); Salman Abu Sitta, *Mapping My Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2016); Ronit Lentin, *Co-Memory and Melancholia: Israelis Memorialising the Palestinian Nakba* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); Fatma Kassem, *Palestinian Women: Narrative Histories and Gendered Memory* (London: Zed Books, 2011); Anaheed Al-Hardan, *Palestinians in Syria: Nakba Memories of Shattered Communities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Yair Auron, *The Holocaust, Rebirth, and the Nakba: Memory and Contemporary Israeli-Arab Relations* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017).

In addition, several collections of oral histories from Palestinian refugees who lived through the Nakba are currently available online in various formats. For example, see the Nakba Oral History Project’s “Oral History Interviews Listing,” Palestine Remembered, posted March 31, 2004, <http://www.palestineremembered.com/OralHistory/Interviews-Listing/Story1151.html>; “Testimonies,” Zochrot, accessed August 19, 2018, <https://zochrot.org/en/testimony/all>; “Nakba Archive,” the Nakba Archive, accessed August 19, 2018, <http://nakba-archive.org/>. As of this writing, the collaborative Palestinian Oral History Archive project (based at the American University of Beirut) has not yet launched its announced multimedia online platform. See “Palestinian Oral History Archive,” Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut, accessed August 19, 2018, <http://website.aub.edu.lb/ifi/programs/poha/Pages/index.aspx>.

¹⁸ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 31.

¹⁹ Ibid., 25-29. See Cedar Duaybis, “The Three-Fold Nakba,” *Cornerstone* 66 (Summer 2013): 8-9. In her article, Duaybis refers to the third component as a “theological Nakba” (8).

²⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 26.

“Within a very short time—a few months—three quarters of a million Palestinians were displaced from their homes, and three quarters of the land of Palestine was conquered. Some fled, many were forced out of their homes at gunpoint. Over 400 Palestinian villages and towns were depopulated, and Palestinians were forcibly removed from over 650 other localities. Palestinians were displaced from over 1,200 locations in Palestine. The children of the children of these refugees still live in horrible conditions in Gaza and elsewhere. This is...*al-nakbah*.”²¹ This particular aspect of the threefold Nakba concerns the basic materiality of the injustices, the wounded social world in which Palestinians suddenly found themselves, and the harmful psychological consequences of such a rudimentary contradiction in lived experience.

The second component of the threefold catastrophe—the identity Nakba—refers to “a crisis of identity” that resulted from the “physical uprooting” denoted by the concept of the human Nakba. Ateek writes, “Overnight, Palestinians in Israel went from living in their own homes and lands to being strangers in their own country...Palestinian Christians and Muslims had to renegotiate what it meant to be Christian or Muslim, Palestinian, and Arab in the new Israeli state that did not want them.”²² That is, the new reality that confronted Palestinian communities in 1948 comprised an assault not only on where they lived and how they lived, but also on who they were. Palestinian self-understanding would now be mediated by a historical process that rendered their presence

²¹ Naim Stifan Ateek, “The Palestinian Story: An Interview with Naim Ateek,” *Christian Century* 115, no. 18 (June 17, 1998): 609-610. In a short reflection on the Nakba written on Christmas that same year, Ateek cites research placing the figure of depopulated Palestinian towns and villages at 531. Naim Ateek, preface to *Holy Land—Hollow Jubilee: God, Justice and the Palestinians*, ed. Naim Ateek and Michael Prior (London: Melisende, 1999), xi. See also Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 33, 35.

²² Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 27.

a problem and their memories a threat. Ateek mentions that this “loss of identity” was reinforced by subsequent efforts “to erase Palestinian culture, history, and memory,” including attempts to prohibit or discourage the use of specific terms (e.g., “Palestine” and “Palestinians”), symbols (e.g., the Palestinian flag), and to ban certain materials from appearing in school textbooks (e.g., Palestinian historical narratives).²³ The nature of the displacement that affected Palestinian life, then, was both geographic *and* existential. Amid the disruptive magnitude of the human Nakba, a reconfiguration of the Palestinian subject was put into motion through the mechanisms of othering and assigning social incommensurability that inhere in colonial processes. This level of dehumanization illustrates the identity Nakba.²⁴

The third aspect of the threefold Nakba is the faith Nakba. Particularly pertinent to the challenges facing Palestinian theological reflection, the faith Nakba signifies the

²³ Ibid., 27-28. See also Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 36-38; Pappé, “The Memoricide of the Nakba” and “Nakba Denial and the ‘Peace Process,’” in *Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, 225-234, 235-247; Noga Kadman, *Erased from Space and Consciousness: Israel and the Depopulated Palestinian Villages of 1948*, trans. Dimi Reider (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Rochelle A. Davis, *Palestinian Village Histories: Geographies of the Displaced* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

²⁴ This aspect of the Nakba is compounded by the long history of representational patterns that Palestinian postcolonial critic Edward Said has termed Orientalism. In his 1979 book on Palestine (a deliberate intervention into public discourse on the topic), Said addresses the importance of engaging the logic of Orientalism in relation to the pervasive misrecognition of Palestinians: “Most of all, I think, there is the entrenched *cultural* attitude toward Palestinians deriving from age-old Western prejudices about Islam, the Arabs, and the Orient. This attitude, from which in its turn Zionism drew for its view of the Palestinians, dehumanized us, reduced us to the barely tolerated status of a nuisance.” After highlighting academic complicity in this tradition and the axiological duplicity underlying the lack of critical attention to the question of Palestine, he observes that “to the West, which is where I live, to be a Palestinian is in political terms to be an outlaw of sorts, or at any rate very much an outsider. But that is a reality, and I mention it only as a way of indicating the peculiar loneliness of my undertaking in this book.” In many ways, Said’s reflections on “Palestinian experience” anticipate Ateek’s notion of an identity Nakba: “Until 1976...I do not think it is wrong to say that even Palestinians concurred in their own derogation, and hence in their own unimportance as construed by Zionists and experts.” Edward W. Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), xiv-xviii (emphasis in original); cf. 3-45, 56-82; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978). See also the discussion of the European imperial setting for the emerging perception of Palestinians in Maxime Rodinson, *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?*, trans. David Thorstad (New York: Monad Press, 1973), 30-33, 39-51; Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians*, 5-6.

deeply shaken Christian life that emerged as a corollary to the wreckage of the world in which Palestinians used to live. Ateek's discussion of the faith Nakba highlights two distinct yet related issues resulting from the new context: (1) an experience of disjuncture between lived faith and the church, and (2) a troubled relationship with the biblical text. Regarding the first point, Ateek makes the following observation: "At the heart of the faith Nakba was the harsh juxtaposition between the church and the day-to-day life of Palestinians. For the first eighteen years following the Nakba, Palestinians were placed under very strict military rule that controlled every aspect of their lives. Yet within the church nothing seemed to have changed—the liturgy, the Bible readings, the sermons, the hymns—in spite of the fact that people's lives had been turned upside down."²⁵ This ecclesial disconnect was diagnostic of the need to cultivate a process of contextualization

²⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 28. Ateek's comments on this aspect of the faith Nakba resemble German political theologian Johann Baptist Metz's critique of idealist theologies. Metz observes that the semblance of extrication from history and society prevents the idealist subject from being "nourished by a certain uneasiness, indeed a certain shock, an experience of nonidentity," which is inevitably encountered in "those social contradictions and antagonisms that are the stuff of painfully lived historical experience, and within which historical subjects constitute themselves." Indeed, he developed political theology "as a sort of corrective...to situationless theologies, to all theologies that are idealistically closed-off systems or that continually barricade themselves behind theological systems." Johann Baptist Metz, "The New Political Theology: The *Status Quaestionis*," in *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1998), 23-24; Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2007), 74.

Specifically, Metz's reflections on the catastrophe of Auschwitz capture the unacceptable placidity which Ateek describes in relation to the church: "What Christian theologians can do for the murdered of Auschwitz and thereby for a true Christian-Jewish ecumenism is, in every case, this: Never again to do theology in such a way that its construction remains unaffected, or could remain unaffected, by Auschwitz. In this sense, I make available to my students an apparently very simple but, in fact, extremely demanding criterion for valuating the theological scene: Ask yourselves if the theology you are learning is such that it could remain unchanged before and after Auschwitz. If this is the case, be on your guard!" Johann Baptist Metz, "Christians and Jews after Auschwitz: Being a Meditation Also on the End of Bourgeois Religion," in *Love's Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz*, ed. John K. Downey (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 48.

With regard to "the imposition of martial law on October 21, 1948," Ateek provides the following description: "The military administration was aimed at controlling and restricting the movement of Israeli Palestinians. No Palestinians were permitted to leave their places of residence without a permit from the military governor of the district. This proved to be a very powerful weapon of control, since it reduced the

in the life of the church. The continuity of the church in Palestine as an institution which appeared to remain impervious to the calamity that befell the surrounding communities, he suggests, compromised its relevance and prophetic presence.²⁶

As for the second element of the faith Nakba, Ateek mentions that the relationship between Palestinian Christians and the biblical sources changed notably in the wake of the human Nakba. Specifically, he expresses that the Christian faith of many Palestinians became disquieted by certain tendencies in the Hebrew Bible that gained new meaning in the aftermath of 1948. Prior to that year, Ateek writes, “the Old Testament was considered to be an essential part of Christian Scripture, pointing and witnessing to Jesus.”²⁷ The shifting political reality, however, entailed what Ateek describes as a

interaction of Palestinians with one another—it literally fragmented our community... These travel permits specified not only the dates on which they were valid, but also the destinations, the routes to be taken, and the time of return.” Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 34.

²⁶ To be sure, this is not to suggest that the church was entirely unresponsive or that it did not suffer. Ateek notes that “church institutions had to open their doors to thousands of refugees” and Christians provided humanitarian services, recalling how his father, “almost from the beginning... though himself a refugee, worked with church organizations collecting clothing and food for other refugees.” Moreover, he writes that the church was “segmented by the war, as a result of which church members either fled or were displaced. Many churches lost most of their membership; others simply closed.” The church, Ateek mentions, “suffered as its people suffered... and became a victim itself.” Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 11, 55-57, 61-62. He observes, however, that the church’s “acts of charity were not accompanied by political action.” Noting that the spiritual life of the Palestinian church had not been adequately prepared to exercise a critical presence in society, Ateek writes: “When the catastrophe struck, our Christian community was not ready for it... Instead of outrage at the injustice, on the part of Christians there was silence and submission; instead of the prophetic outcry, there was painful resignation.” Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 3-4, 29.

In an essay reflecting on the origins and contribution of Sabeel, Ateek describes the situation as follows: “After the catastrophe hit, the immediate need for the churches was to address the humanitarian crisis of the thousands of Palestinian refugees who became homeless. In short, the Palestinian Christian faith was built on simple trust in God. It was not resilient enough or deep enough to withstand the political storm of the loss of their homeland, Palestine. The prophetic response was weak and individualized. As a result of the Nakba, the Christian community like its larger counterpart, the Muslim community, was thrown into total disarray.” Naim Ateek, “Reflections on Sabeel’s Liberation Theology and Ecumenical Work (1992-2013),” in *Theologies of Liberation in Palestine-Israel: Indigenous, Contextual, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Nur Masalha and Lisa Isherwood (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 22.

²⁷ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 77. In an endnote, Ateek addresses the terminology used in this book: “I have chosen to use the terms ‘Hebrew Scriptures’ and ‘Old Testament’ interchangeably, as each seemed appropriate. For Christian readers, the term ‘Old Testament’ is the most familiar, while for Jews the more

“political abuse” of biblical texts that unveiled previously unrecognized features of familiar themes and stories, enabling them to speak with a new sonority. He portrays this decisive hermeneutical transition as follows:

Many previously hidden problems suddenly surfaced. The God of the Bible, hitherto the God who saves and liberates, has come to be viewed by Palestinians as partial and discriminating... Since the creation of the State [of Israel], some Jewish and Christian interpreters have read the Old Testament largely as a Zionist text to such an extent that it has become almost repugnant to Palestinian Christians. As a result, the Old Testament has generally fallen into disuse among both clergy and laity, and the church has been unable to come to terms with its ambiguities, questions, and paradoxes—especially with its direct application to the twentieth-century events in Palestine.²⁸

Ateek’s account suggests that the events revolving around the establishment of the state of Israel produced an epistemological break among Palestinian Christians that catalyzed a reorientation toward the Hebrew Bible. As discussed in greater detail below, the resulting sensitivity to the biblical narratives called into question their liberative integrity and posed a formidable challenge for the formulation of a Palestinian theology of liberation. Simply put, a major task facing such a theology required finding a way to recover the status of the Hebrew Bible as the word of God for Palestinian Christians without falling back into the naivete of exonerating or remaining inattentive to unsettling messages in the biblical heritage.

This threefold understanding of the Nakba begins to indicate the layered context of suffering that eventually gave rise to Palestinian liberation theology. However, Ateek’s

appropriate designation is ‘Hebrew Scriptures.’ When either term is used the reference is always to the same body of material” (195-196n4). While I consider it immensely important to overcome supersessionist language and modes of thinking, Ateek’s terminology will be retained in quotations throughout this dissertation in order to convey his theology as accurately as possible.

²⁸ Ibid., 77.

treatment of the historical complexity of the Nakba is not restricted to his analysis of it as a multidimensional catastrophe. His reflections on the fracturing experiences of communal dispossession and its far-reaching consequences do not approach the problem as an isolated cluster of events; rather, he situates the Nakba in a larger historical sequence that precedes it (primarily in the form of conditions that contributed to and accelerated its irruption) and continues to unfold afterward (mainly as an ongoing dialectic between further solidification of the new reality and resistance to it). The changes that inverted Palestinian lives in 1948 belong to a broader process that receives significant attention in Ateek's discussion of the Palestinian theological context.

3.4 THE HORROR OF THE SHOAH: RECOGNIZING SUFFERING WITHOUT PRODUCING NEW SUFFERING

In terms of the historical conditions that preceded the Nakba, Ateek recognizes “the magnitude of the tragedy” of the Holocaust as a major force among the events leading to the establishment of the state of Israel.²⁹ He observes that “Western anti-Semitism, culminating in the atrocities of the Holocaust in the early 1940s, helped speed up the process of Jewish immigration to Palestine and heightened the urgency of creating a Jewish homeland.”³⁰ Indeed, Ateek proposed early on that “new attitudes” among both Israeli Jews and Palestinians would be necessary as a foundation for peacemaking, enjoining the latter to “become really conscious of and sensitive to the horror of the Holocaust, Nazi Germany’s attempt to exterminate the Jews,” and to “understand the

²⁹ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 32. See also Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 22-23.

³⁰ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 104.

extent of the trauma for the Jews.”³¹ This process of internalizing the disaster of the Holocaust would allow Palestinians—who, as Ateek mentions, “had nothing to do with it”—to “face Israel quite candidly and state that the only justification that the Palestinians will accept for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine is the Holocaust.”³² That is, he called for Palestinian acceptance of the specifically Jewish status of the state of Israel on the basis of a productive acknowledgment of the horror of the Shoah.³³

While Ateek notes that “no sane person would deny that what Jews suffered in the Holocaust was unspeakably horrible and should never be repeated,” he also expresses a

³¹ Ibid., 168.

³² Ibid., 168-169; cf. 164, 165-166, 167, 170, 174.

³³ In a highly polemical treatment of Ateek and Sabeel, Christian media analyst Dexter Van Zile writes that the “message of Ateek’s dissertation and first book is that the Jewish people are not entitled to a sovereign state of their own,” and presents Ateek as concluding that “the Jews are not a nation entitled to a sovereign state of their own.” Dexter Van Zile, “Updating the Ancient Infrastructure of Christian Contempt: Sabeel,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 23, no. 1-2 (Spring 2011): 13, 17. These statements are demonstrably false and reflect an easily identifiable misreading of Ateek’s writings, as shown by the above quotation (and accompanying references) from *Justice and Only Justice* (Ateek’s first book, which was based on his dissertation). Ateek asserts the Jewish status of the state of Israel multiple times in *Justice and Only Justice*. There is little ambiguity in the following passage: “The preservation of Israel as a Jewish state is important not only to Israeli Jews but to Jews all over the world. I believe that we must honor their wish and accept it. In fact, the Palestinians should eventually guarantee the survival of Israel by accepting it as a Jewish state.” Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 166.

Van Zile also misrepresents Ateek’s position on the two-state solution, writing that a 2006 Sabeel document “asserts that its [and thus Ateek’s] vision for the future is ‘One state for two nations and three religions.’ In such a state, Jews would by definition be a minority, and a beleaguered one at that. Ateek knows this, but does not say so explicitly” (17). Ateek does in fact mention this explicitly, and precisely as his rationale for embracing a two-state solution. In *Justice and Only Justice*, for instance, Ateek notes that “the *ideal* solution” is “one united and democratic state for all Palestinians and Jews,” and then proceeds to write that while this solution “is the best and the easiest to implement...I would have to agree, with Israel, to reject it. Israel insists above all on being a Jewish state. As a part of a democratic, binational Palestine, the Jews would eventually become a minority in the country...So in spite of all of its attractiveness, the idea of a binational state must be discarded” (165-166; emphasis mine). This position—which involves a key distinction between the ideal solution and the formally accepted solution—is reflected rather clearly in the Sabeel document mentioned by Van Zile, which contains a section forthrightly titled “The Genuine Hope: Two sovereign and fully democratic states.” Contrary to Van Zile’s claim, the document does not offer the one-state solution as Sabeel’s “vision for the future” but rather as “the ideal and best solution,” while plainly stating “our vision involves two sovereign states, Palestine and Israel.” Sabeel, *The Jerusalem Sabeel Document: Principles for Just Peace in Palestine-Israel*, May 15, 2000, <https://sabeel.org/2000/05/15/the-jerusalem-sabeel-document-principles-for-a-just-peace-in-palestine-israel/>.

critical awareness of the ways such recognition has been distorted into the legitimization or erasure of Palestinian suffering.³⁴ For instance, he writes: “In light of the enormity of the Holocaust, the rights and wishes of over a million Palestinian Arabs in Palestine seemed trivial and insignificant. One can even say that the Palestinians were the easy scapegoats. Indeed, millions of innocent Jews perished because of the sin of antisemitism, but the Palestinians were compelled to pay the price by their dispossession and loss of homeland. They were expecting self-determination as elaborated in the McMahon-Sherif Hussein correspondence, but instead, their Palestine and its people were sacrificed on the altar of Western guilt.”³⁵ Ateek views the Holocaust from the standpoint of its ecliptic shadow, simultaneously attending to “the genuine suffering of Jews” that it caused and to the ways it “has been used to justify all the wrongs and injustices committed by Israel...while the world looked, unwilling to act against a new injustice.”³⁶ Put differently, the task of doing theology after Auschwitz from the ruins of the Nakba is irreducible to the exigencies of confronting the horror unleashed by Nazi Germany; in addition to the

³⁴ Ateek, “Palestinian Story,” 610.

³⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 32. The McMahon-Hussein correspondence (1915-1916) consists of letters exchanged between Hussein bin Ali, Sharif of Mecca, and Sir Henry McMahon, British High Commissioner in Egypt. The letters promised British support for Arab independence after World War I in exchange for an Arab revolt against Ottoman rule and have generated much debate regarding the territorial scope of the promised independence, especially in relation to the status of Palestine. The collection of letters has been described as “the most controversial correspondence in the history of Anglo-Arab relations.” Timothy J. Paris, *Britain, the Hashemites and Arab Rule, 1920-1925: The Sherifian Solution* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 25. See also Elie Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth: The McMahon-Husayn Correspondence and Its Interpretations, 1914-1939*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014); Victor Kattan, *From Coexistence to Conquest: International Law and the Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1891-1949* (New York: Pluto, 2009), 39-40, 98-116; Isaiah Friedman, *The Question of Palestine: British-Jewish-Arab Relations: 1914-1918*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1992), 65-96; Isaiah Friedman, *Palestine: A Twice-Promised Land?*, vol. 1, *The British, the Arabs and Zionism, 1915-1920* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2000).

³⁶ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 56. See also Naim Ateek, “Pentecost and the Intifada,” in *Reading from This Place*, vol. 2, *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 73; Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 177; Ateek, “Palestinian Story,” 610.

challenges of that insurmountable historical horizon, Palestinian theologians committed to proceeding in a contextually responsible manner must address its misuse in reinforcing conditions that render their communities invisible.³⁷

3.5 EARLY VISIONS OF PALESTINIAN DEPOPULATION: THE RISE OF MODERN POLITICAL ZIONISM AMID EUROPEAN ANTI- JUDAISM

The foregoing discussion on the Holocaust is not intended to imply that Ateek views it as the historical cause of the Nakba. While recognizing that the Holocaust played a major role in accelerating the processes that ultimately resulted in the expropriation of Palestinian land, he explains that the discourse of a national project involving the strategic removal of the Palestinian population long preceded the Nazi seizure of power, highlighting the emergence of modern political Zionism in the late nineteenth century. In a 1995 essay, for instance, Ateek writes that “the seeds of the [Israel-Palestine] conflict go back almost a hundred years when some Jewish leaders in Europe were beginning to evaluate the brunt of living among Western Christians and the toll it had exacted on

³⁷ For a discussion of the challenges facing Christian theology after Auschwitz, see Metz, “Christians and Jews after Auschwitz”; Johann Baptist Metz, “Facing the Jews: Christian Theology after Auschwitz,” in *Faith and the Future: Essays on Theology, Solidarity, and Modernity*, with Jürgen Moltmann (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 38-48; Johann Baptist Metz, “On the Way to a Christology after Auschwitz,” trans. J. Matthew Ashley, in *Who Do You Say That I Am? Confessing the Mystery of Christ*, ed. John C. Cavadini and Laura Holt (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 147-153.

For an analysis of the misuse of the Holocaust, see Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2003). Political scientist Norman Finkelstein—whose parents were “survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto and the Nazi concentration camps,” but whose remaining family “on both sides was exterminated by the Nazis”—examines the “exploitation of the Nazi genocide” and critiques its effect of vitiating the tragedy, desecrating its memory, and deflecting attention to Israeli violence against Palestinians. He describes his project as aiming to restore “the integrity of the historical record and the sanctity of the Jewish people’s martyrdom” (xiii, 3-8).

Jewish life. The Jewish community of Europe, which had suffered considerably from anti-Semitism, was subjected to oppression and pogroms.”³⁸ The modern movement toward Jewish emancipation, beginning in revolutionary France in the late eighteenth century and gradually spreading to other European nations (e.g., Westphalia, Prussia, England), aimed to overcome a painful history of Christian anti-Judaism and a multitude of discriminatory restrictions of Jewish rights; however, Ateek notes that while the movement granted Jews “equality of rights and citizenship” and generated a conversation on the prospect of assimilation into European civil society, it failed to uproot the fundamental problem. In fact, he remarks that—precisely by removing legal obstacles and creating new civic opportunities— “emancipation also brought the evil of anti-Semitism into full view.”³⁹

This troubling exposure of pervasive European anti-Judaism in the new era of Jewish “emancipation” and social “progress” provided a notable impetus in the rise of modern political Zionism. In particular, Ateek mentions the example of the Dreyfus affair in France, which involved “the 1894 court-martial of Alfred Dreyfus, who, although innocent of the charge of espionage against him, was nonetheless convicted because he was Jewish.”⁴⁰ The Dreyfus affair, during which anti-Jewish sentiments were publicly expressed in numerous publications as well as in riots and demonstrations, “drove Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) to finally discard the idea of assimilation and to write *The*

³⁸ Ateek, “Pentecost and the Intifada,” 71; cf. Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 22-23.

³⁹ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 21-22.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

Jewish State (1896), which set forth his ideas for political Zionism.”⁴¹ In 1897, the year after Herzl’s “modern solution to the Jewish question” found expression in his foundational text, he convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, marking the official founding of the political Zionist movement.⁴²

Ateek observes that modern political Zionism began as a secular movement and faced considerable opposition from religious Jews, who viewed Herzl’s Zionism “as a nonreligious, even an antireligious, movement.”⁴³ He writes that “almost all the Orthodox leaders rejected Zionism and denounced Herzl, saying that the establishment of a Jewish

⁴¹ Ibid. See also Jean-Denis Bredin, *The Affair: The Case of Alfred Dreyfus*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Braziller, 1986); Albert S. Lindemann, *The Jew Accused: Three Anti-Semitic Affairs; Dreyfus, Beilis, Frank, 1894-1915* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Michael Burns, *France and the Dreyfus Affair: A Documentary History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1999). Historian Henry Cohn, while recognizing that Herzl himself attributed his Zionism to the Dreyfus affair, suggests that “standard accounts of [Herzl’s] sudden conversion to [the] Zionist solution for the Jewish problem stress the immediate shock of the trial and condemnation of Dreyfus, but underestimate the background of virulent antisemitism in Herzl’s adopted home town, Vienna.” Accordingly, Cohn’s discussion of Herzl’s “conversion” places the emphasis on “the political antisemitic movement in Vienna,” proposing that Herzl “later confused the reasons which had inspired his first Zionist enthusiasms by superimposing on them his subsequent concern for Dreyfus.” Herzl’s own account from 1899 is translated by Cohn as follows: “I was turned into a Zionist by the Dreyfus Case. Not the present one in Rennes [August 7-September 19, 1899], but the original one in Paris, of which I was a witness in 1894...For the Jews there is no other help and salvation than to return to their own nationhood and settle in their own land and territory. That is what I wrote in my book *The Jewish State* in 1895 under the shattering impression of the first Dreyfus Case.” Henry J. Cohn, “Theodor Herzl’s Conversion to Zionism,” *Jewish Social Studies* 32, no. 2 (April 1970): 101-110.

⁴² See Theodor Herzl, *A Jewish State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution of the Jewish Question*, 3rd ed., trans. Sylvia d’Avigdor and Jacob de Haas (New York: Federation of American Zionists, 1917); Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 26; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 21. It is important to highlight the distinctly political character of this form of Zionism as it amounts to one among several expressions of Zionist thought and should not be understood as exhausting an otherwise diverse tradition. Indeed, historian Maxime Rodinson writes that Herzl “polemicized against Zionists who preceded him, against what was sometimes called *hovevei-zionism* [“the Lovers of Zion,” which began in Russia in the 1880s], and implicitly also against the ‘spiritual Zionism’ of Ahad Ha’am, who wanted only to form a ‘spiritual center’ in Palestine around which the ideal unity of the scattered Jewish nation could crystallize.” Rodinson, *Israel*, 43, 101n23. See also Yossi Goldstein, “Eastern Jews vs. Western Jews: The Ahad Ha’am-Herzl Dispute and Its Cultural and Social Implications,” *Jewish History* 24, no. 3/4 (2010): 355-377.

⁴³ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 23, 25-26. Similarly, religious studies scholar Leora Batnitzky demonstrates that “as a historical movement Zionism was distinctly secular and even antireligious.” Leora Batnitzky, “The Rejection of Jewish Religion and the Birth of Jewish Nationalism,” in *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 147-165. Notably, the First Zionist Congress was held in Basel since earlier plans to hold it in Munich were met with vehement opposition from a coalition of Orthodox and Reform rabbis and

state and the ‘ingathering of the exiles’ were reserved exclusively for the Messiah”; on the other hand, “Reform Jews...believed in the ‘mission of Israel,’ the spreading of the knowledge of ethical monotheism among humankind” and “did not regard themselves as a ‘nation.’”⁴⁴ The secular character of the early political Zionist movement, Ateek mentions, is reflected in the preliminary consideration of territories other than Palestine—such as Argentina, Uganda, Cyprus, Libya, and Arish (in North Sinai)—as potential areas for a Jewish state.⁴⁵ Ultimately, however, Palestine prevailed as the geographic focus of the Zionist vision, and with it the question of its indigenous population began to demand serious consideration.⁴⁶

As suggested above, the concept of transfer has played an essential role in the history of political Zionism as a viable solution to the perceived obstacle of a native

community leaders in that city. See Shlomo Avineri, *Herzl: Theodor Herzl and the Foundation of the Jewish State*, trans. Haim Watzman (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2013), 143-144; Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Introduction to Zionism and Israel: From Ideology to History* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 60. Rabbi Cohn-Sherbok mentions that, among other critics, “the executive of the German rabbinate condemned the efforts of the Zionists to create a Jewish national state in Palestine. This, they argued, was opposed to Scripture and distinguished between legitimate Jewish settlement in Erez Israel, and the Zionist project” (60).

⁴⁴ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 26. See also Aviezer Ravitzky, “‘Forcing the End’: Radical Anti-Zionism,” in *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, trans. Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 40-78.

⁴⁵ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 23, 27, 191n36. Rodinson notes that Leon Pinsker (1821-1891), a Russian “assimilationist who was converted to Jewish nationalism by the pogroms of 1881,” considered the possibility of Palestine, Syria, and North American territory as locations for a Jewish national homeland. He quotes Pinsker’s 1882 pamphlet titled *Auto-Emancipation*: “The goal of our efforts must not be the Holy Land, but a Land *Of Our Own*. All we need is a large territory for our ill-fated brothers, a territory that remains our own property and from which no foreign master can chase us.” Rodinson, *Israel*, 40-41 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁶ Ahad Ha’am (1856-1927), founder of cultural Zionism and “severe critic of the prevailing mode of settlement during the first decade of Zionist (or proto-Zionist) activity,” while himself not immune to the dominant manner of perceiving non-European peoples and cultures in his time (cf. note 24), is recognized as contributing “the first serious analysis of ‘the Arab issue’” in his 1891 article “Truth from Eretz Israel.” He spent nearly three months visiting Palestine earlier that year. Ahad Ha’am, “Truth from Eretz Israel,” trans. Alan Dowty, *Israel Studies* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 160-181; Alan Dowty, “Much Ado about Little: Ahad Ha’am’s ‘Truth from Eretz Yisrael,’ Zionism, and the Arabs,” *Israel Studies* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 154-159, 179-180.

presence in Palestine.⁴⁷ Highlighting this theoretical component of Zionist discourse, Ateek quotes a passage from Herzl's diary dated June 12, 1895: "We must expropriate gently the private property on the state assigned to us. We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it employment in our country. The property owners will come over to our side. Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly. Let the owners of the immoveable property believe that they are cheating us, selling us things for more than they are worth. But we are not going to sell them anything back."⁴⁸ Ateek discerns in the development of this basic idea of

⁴⁷ See notes 4 and 8. In his extensive study of the conceptual development of transfer in political Zionist discourse, Masalha remarks that "from the outset...this concept [of transfer] has occupied a central position in the strategic thinking of the leadership of the Zionist movements and the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine) as a solution to the 'Arab question' in Palestine. Indeed, the idea of transfer is as old as the early Zionist colonies in Palestine and the rise of political Zionism. It can be said to be the logical outgrowth of the ultimate goal of the Zionist movement, which was the establishment of a Jewish state through colonization and land acquisition—in other words, through a radical ethno-religious-demographic transformation of a country, the population of which had been almost entirely Arab at the start of the Zionist venture." He also highlights the broad extent of its acceptance, which he documents throughout the book: "It should not be imagined that the concept of transfer was held only by maximalists or extremists within the Zionist movement. On the contrary, it was embraced by almost all shades of opinion, from the Revisionist right to the Labor left. Virtually every member of the Zionist pantheon of founding fathers and important leaders supported it and advocated it in one form or another." Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians*, 1-2.

⁴⁸ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 166; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 21. In his encyclopedic historical survey of transfer proposals in modern political Zionism, Rabbi Simons—in agreement with Masalha's assessment of the pervasiveness of the concept—writes: "The issue of population transfer is a very delicate subject. For this reason, many proposers confined the exposition of their ideas to diaries, private correspondence and closed meetings. In public they either ignored the subject of transfer or spoke against it. Even those who did propose various schemes were often reluctant to specifically suggest compulsory transfer. They relied on various euphemistic expressions to convey their intentions regarding compulsion." With regard to this particular diary entry, he mentions that in 1895 "Herzl had not yet decided on the final location of the Jewish State." However, Simons also discusses Herzl's unpublished "Charter for Palestine" draft (located at the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem)—prepared several years later for the approval of Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II—noting that it would have granted Jewish settlers the right to transfer Palestinians to other parts of the Ottoman Empire and that "the wording in his Charter strongly indicates transfer of a compulsory nature." Simons, *Herzl to Eden*, 10, 13, 24. For further discussion of this document, see Walid Khalidi, "The Jewish-Ottoman Land Company: Herzl's Blueprint for the Colonization of Palestine," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 22, no. 2 (Winter 1993): 30-47. Khalidi observes that "a particularly relevant aspect of the document is the light it throws on how intrinsic in Zionism is the concept of the transfer of the indigenous population" (31).

population removal—which was envisioned in a multitude of ways by different leaders and organizers of the Zionist movement—the incipient political orientation that would eventually translate into the expulsion of his family from Beisan in 1948.⁴⁹

The problem of justifying collective displacement, then, did not stem from the horror of Auschwitz. It has formed a vital, albeit diversely articulated, component of political Zionism since its inception amid ubiquitous anti-Judaism in late nineteenth-century Europe. This prior history notwithstanding, Ateek emphasizes the immense impact of the Holocaust on the implementation of the political Zionist project. Indeed, he mentions that “if the Nakba necessitated the emergence of Palestinian liberation theology, the Holocaust was an essential part of its background.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ateek offers another example of the idea of transfer from a 1930 address to journalists by Menahem Ussishkin, president of the Twentieth Zionist Congress: “We must continually raise the demand that our land be returned to our possession...If there are other inhabitants there, they must be transferred to some other place. We must take over the land. We have a greater and nobler ideal than preserving several hundred thousands of Arab *fellahin* (peasants).” Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 166, 210n3; cf. Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians*, 37. Masalha also provides an excerpt of Ussishkin’s remarks from the records of a 1938 Jewish Agency Executive meeting (located at the Central Zionist Archives), in which he advocates forcible transfer: “We cannot begin the Jewish state with a population of which the Arabs living on their lands constitute almost half and the Jews exist on the land in very small numbers and they are all crowded in Tel Aviv and its vicinity...and the worst is not only that the Arabs here constitute 50 percent or 45 percent but that 75 percent of the land is in the hands of the Arabs...But if you ask me whether it is moral to remove 60,000 families from their place of residence and transfer them to another place...I will say to you that it is moral...I am ready to come and defend the moral side of it before the Almighty and the League of Nations. Only the British government could carry out the forcible removal and for this two things are required: a strong hand by England and Jewish money. As far as the money is concerned, I am certain that if England will use a strong hand the Jewish money will be found. We will approach world Jewry at large and say that we must remove from here 60,000 Arab families in order to release land for the Jews and for this millions are needed in the form of loans or contributions...I am talking about a transfer to Transjordan and not to the Arab state west of the [River] Jordan” (111-112).

⁵⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 34; cf. Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 23. Israeli historian and Holocaust scholar Yair Auron expresses a comparable view: “The ‘presence’ of the Holocaust in Eretz Yisrael [“the land of Israel”] in 1948, or to phrase it more provocatively, the ‘presence’ of the Holocaust in the Nakba has two aspects. The first is the physical presence of Holocaust survivors in the illegal and legal immigration in the years before, during, and immediately following the war, as well as in the 1948 battles...The second aspect is the metaphysical, spiritual, emotional presence of the Holocaust and its significance and repercussions as expressed in literary works written immediately following the war by writers who had participated in the battles.” Auron, *Holocaust, Rebirth, and the Nakba*, xxi; cf. 51-68.

3.6 THE IMPACT OF THE 1967 WAR: THE SECOND EXPERIENCE OF OCCUPATION

The exilic experience that befell Ateek and his family in 1948 was further reinforced a decade later. In 1958, he recalls, “the Israeli military governor had allowed the Palestinian Arabs living in Israel to move around without permits. My father took advantage of this temporary freedom to rent a pickup truck and take all of his children back for the first time to see our home in the town of Beisan.”⁵¹ Upon arrival, the family witnessed the other side of depopulation: “Israeli Jewish families were living in Palestinian homes. Some homes had been pulled down. Our little church was used as a storehouse. The Roman Catholic church and its adjacent buildings had become a school. The Orthodox church was left to rot. The Beisan we knew was left to gradually become a ruin while a new Israeli Jewish town was sprouting on the edge of it.”⁵² Amid traces of deracination, a new reality congealed and bespoke the vision of indigenous removal long interwoven with the political framework of Zionism. “Even today,” Ateek would write fifty years after his family returned to Beisan, “I clearly remember how we were not allowed even to look inside our home. The three houses built by my father that made up our home had been divided into smaller units, each occupied now by a Jewish immigrant family. It must have been very difficult for my father to see our home occupied by Jewish immigrants who had come from North Africa while he, the rightful owner, was prevented

⁵¹ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 3; cf. Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 12.

⁵² Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 12.

even from entering them.”⁵³ He mentions that “one occupant said very emphatically, ‘This is not your house; it is ours.’”⁵⁴

In retrospect, Ateek can recognize his first experience of occupation as the onset of a process that would thoroughly transform the world he knew as a child. His second experience of occupation began in 1967 and continues to this day.

Approximately two weeks after Ateek’s ordination as a priest in the Anglican Church on Trinity Sunday, May 21, 1967, the 1967 War began. He identifies the war as the first of two events that “impacted [his] ministry politically and theologically and contributed to the emergence of a Palestinian theology of liberation.”⁵⁵ Ateek describes the immediate results of the war as follows: “Israel’s preemptive strike swept through the Arab armies in an impressive victory that resulted in the occupation of the rest of Palestine, including the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip; parts of Jordan; and large territories from Egypt and Syria. The war had changed the map of the Middle East...Instead of redressing the 1948 injustice, the war further exacerbated matters.”⁵⁶

The link between these two experiences of military occupation—first in 1948 and then in

⁵³ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 3.

⁵⁴ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 12.

⁵⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 4; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 34-36. The second event will be discussed below.

⁵⁶ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 4; cf. Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 4, 38-39, 41; Ateek, “Pentecost and the Intifada,” 74-75; Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 23. Scholarship on the 1967 War is extensive and continues to generate lively discussion. The following works cover many of the major issues and exemplify the ongoing debates surrounding the origins, meaning, and legacy of the war: Donald Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem: The Six Days That Changed the Middle East* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984); Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2002); Tom Segev, *1967: Israel, the War, and the Year That Transformed the Middle East*, trans. Jessica Cohen (New York: Holt, 2007); Ami Gluska, *The Israeli Military and the Origins of the 1967 War: Government, Armed Forces and Defence Policy, 1963-1967* (London: Routledge, 2007); Wm. Roger Louis and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War: Origins and Consequences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Guy Laron, *The Six-Day War: The Breaking of the Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

1967—appears to have been palpable to Ateek, who writes that “the war brought back my childhood memories of the 1948 war, although at that time I was too young to comprehend the enormity of the tragedy. Now, as an adult, I relived the past in the lives of the people who lived in the occupied territories...I became keenly aware of the depth of the injustice committed against the Palestinians and also the foolishness and futility of war in resolving the conflict.”⁵⁷

The persisting effects of the 1967 occupation—designated the Naksa (Arabic for “setback”) by Palestinians—soon became clear to those now living under military rule in the Palestinian territories: “As the army consolidated its control over the West Bank and Gaza, Israel began to confiscate Palestinian land and build Jewish settlements on it. Israel started to enact oppressive military orders in order to further control the Palestinians. It started to do whatever it could to make the life of Palestinians difficult, thus encouraging them to emigrate. Through military conquest of the rest of Palestine, Israel was attempting in its own way to further implement the Zionist dream of expanding the

⁵⁷ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 4-5. A five-part study prepared by the United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights (UNDPR) titled *The Origins and Evolution of the Palestine Problem*, published separately between 1978 and 2014, contains the following description of the immediate consequences of the 1967 War: “The great majority of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza were made refugees—many for the second time, having sought refuge in these areas during the first exodus of 1948...The majority were now in total exile. In June 1967, of about 2.7 million persons of Palestinian origin, about 1.7 lived in Israel or the occupied territories—about 1 million in the West Bank, 400,000 in the Gaza Strip and 300,000 in the areas controlled by Israel. As a result of the 1967 war, almost half a million fled their homes, leaving about 900,000 Palestinians in the areas newly occupied by Israel, a total of 1.2 million under Israeli control. One million five hundred thousand were refugees in exile—in countries other than their own, their homeland under the control of the Jewish State.” UNDP, *Origins and Evolution of the Palestine Problem: Part II (1947-1977)* (United Nations, 1979), <https://www.un.org/unispal/history2/origins-and-evolution-of-the-palestine-problem/part-ii-1947-1977/>.

territory of the Jewish state.”⁵⁸ In addition, Ateek notes that among the readily observable consequences of the 1967 War was the activation and popularization of a religious dimension in the previously secular movement of political Zionism. He writes that “the war caused major internal shifts in the Israeli political parties, moving the whole country farther to the right. By the second half of the 1970s the Zionist movement started shifting from a secular to a religious form of Zionism and from an emphasis on the Holocaust to an emphasis on the Torah. This shift proved to be of great significance. It encouraged the confiscation of Palestinian land, the building of Jewish settlements, and the expansion of the settler movement.”⁵⁹ All of these features of the post-1967 context—everyday life under military occupation, the new state-sponsored settler reality, and the accompanying

⁵⁸ Ateek, “Pentecost and the Intifada,” 75. Ateek is here referring to the political Zionist concept of “Greater Israel,” which is defined in various ways but typically designates a territorial extent that far exceeds the current geopolitical borders of the state of Israel. Ateek offers the following example: “The World Zionist Organization proposed in 1919 the area needed for the establishment of a Jewish state. Besides the whole of Palestine, it included parts of Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan” (75n17). To be sure, he observes that today’s adherents to the ideal of Greater Israel are mostly extremists. He writes: “While I believe that the government of Israel has realistically abandoned that dream, some ministers and settlers have not abandoned their dream of taking over the entire West Bank and removing all Palestinian inhabitants (ethnic cleansing).” Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 26. See also his remarks on this concept in Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 101, 127-128, 177-178, 203n50.

An example of the tactics used to promote Palestinian emigration is discussed by Abba Aranki, who was born in Rehovot in 1947 and was attending college in the United States during the 1967 War. He writes, “When one of my younger brothers left for the US at the end of 1967 for his college education, he was asked to sign a paper saying that he gives up his right to return to the West Bank.” In reference to his own efforts to maintain residency status, he shares the following story: “I have twice gone through the painful process of applying for ‘permanent residency’ status in the place where I grew up and lived for 18 years, only to be rejected both times. I was very humiliated when I was asked why I was requesting such a status. I wanted to shout and say that this is my home and I should not be asking for residency in the first place. But I knew that answer would not work in my favor. Instead, I gave what I thought was a good reason. I pointed at my 78-year-old mother at the time, and said that she had a heart disease and I might have to stay with her beyond the 3-month visitor’s visa I am given. The Israeli soldier looked at my mother and said she looked healthy to him. When I got upset that my credibility was being questioned and said that I will bring him my mother’s medical records, he nonchalantly said that I should take her with me to the US!” Abba Aranki, “The Right of No Return,” *Cornerstone* 46 (Fall 2007): 9.

⁵⁹ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 34-35; cf. Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 101-102; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 10-11, 56-57, 76; Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 23; Ateek, “Palestinian Story,” 608-609. Rabbi Greenberg’s observations on the post-1967 situation in Israel-Palestine (see note 5 above) are in basic agreement with Ateek’s point here. Accordingly, he writes: “Our nation is at

appropriation of theological discourse as a resource for legitimating its perpetuation—formed a substantial challenge that required a response.

The immensity of this challenge and the nature of the appropriate forms of ecclesial praxis that became increasingly urgent seem to have impinged upon Ateek's vision of his role in church leadership: "Although I felt deeply about the importance of justice and peacemaking, I was conscious of my own inadequacy...Unclear about what to do, my immediate response was to immerse myself in the pastoral, educational, and ecumenical ministry of the church. Indeed, the war sharpened my awareness about the importance of being involved in the work of justice and peace. At the same time, I was conscious of my immediate pastoral responsibilities."⁶⁰ He would spend the following thirteen years immersed in a variety of ministerial practices, including teaching,

present undergoing a crisis of morale and morality to a large extent an effect of the territorial outcome of the Six-Day War. The crisis has been aggravated by the alliance of the extremes that invoke Scripture for legitimation. The religious camp has generated a sect of activists that has seized the stage and spreads its influence over the entire camp. They are motivated by a powerful conviction of their 'rightness' as they see it; theirs is the way of the Torah, and they have rabbis who give them moral support...They are sure of their calling to realize eschatology now, and their rabbis, unencumbered with political and social responsibility, legitimate their program by analogies drawn from old books, which tend toward self-aggrandizement and xenophobia. To these are allied the nationalists, whose main motive is collective egoism." Greenberg, "Political Use of the Bible," 464-465.

Biblical scholar and Catholic priest Michael Prior, who wrote extensively on the use of biblical sources in Zionist discourse and sharply criticized the pervasive complicity in oppression that he perceived in his field, addresses the religious impact of the 1967 War: "The war signaled the revival of 'territorial maximalism,' and, for those religiously inclined, a religious-national awakening. The occupation of east Jerusalem, Hebron, Shechem and Jericho was proof that a process of divine redemption was underway, founded on the trinity of the Land, the People, and the Torah of Israel." He also notes that the "first settlements (Kfar Etzion, Kiryat Arba and Hebron) were founded by young rabbis from the *Merkaz HaRav* [a yeshiva founded by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), who integrated the meaning of Zionism with messianic expectation]. Under their influence, the superficial nationalism that was secular Zionism was being displaced by a religious Zionism, issuing in the popular slogan, 'There is no Zionism without Judaism, and no Judaism without Zionism.'" Michael Prior, *Zionism and the State of Israel: A Moral Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 1999), 80, 81. See also Batnitzky, *Judaism Became a Religion*, 96-98.

⁶⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 5.

counseling, and fostering new interdenominational pathways that culminated during his experience serving the church in Haifa after moving in 1972.⁶¹

Ateek mentions that in those years he was “grateful to God for what was happening in the ecumenical ministry in Haifa”—which was bringing together clergy from every denomination in the area on a regular basis for prayer and study meetings, leading to the development of programs that were cultivating greater dialogue and communal sharing between the different churches—yet he admits that “something seemed to be missing.”⁶² The importance of this ecumenical dimension for the life of the church notwithstanding, Ateek’s attunement to a certain discontent with his ministerial direction eventually led him to pursue a doctor of ministry degree at San Francisco Theological Seminary.⁶³ These years of academic study would prove to be a key formative period for Ateek, who notes: “This is when I first began to articulate a Palestinian theology of liberation.”⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid. Palestinian theologian and Roman Catholic priest Rafiq Khoury—who, like Ateek, was ordained as a priest in 1967—has made similar observations regarding the emergence of ecumenical activity in response to the 1967 occupation. He writes, “The Palestinian people confronted the cruelty and oppression of the occupation with tremendous resilience and creativity at all levels. The same resilience can be said of the churches. Large-scale theological thought emerged among clergy and lay-people, as well as the establishment of theological centers and theology movements that engaged in developing contextual Palestinian theology and Christian thinking that dealt with the life and witness of Christians living under occupation...Moreover, the occupation has brought the different churches closer together. In the past decades we have witnessed regular meetings of the hierarchies of the different churches. Church authorities have had to get together to confront challenges created by the occupation. These meetings have produced united efforts in matters concerning the church and Christians living under occupation.” Rafiq Khoury, “Marking 40 Years of Occupation: Ramifications of the Occupation on the Life of the Church,” *Cornerstone* 44 (Spring 2007): 17.

⁶³ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 5.

⁶⁴ Ibid. Alain Epp Weaver writes that Ateek “started to lay the groundwork for what he would call a Palestinian liberation theology while serving as a priest in Haifa in the 1970s and then as a doctoral student in San Francisco.” Alain Epp Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land: Thinking Theologically about the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 53. As will be discussed below, Ateek’s early ecumenical ministry in Haifa anticipated key elements of the ecclesial vision that would later inform the work of Sabeel.

3.7 INTIFADA: POPULAR RESISTANCE AND COMMUNAL AWAKENING

After the completion of his doctoral degree, Ateek was transferred in 1985 from Haifa on Israel's northern coastal plain to serve the Anglican community at St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem.⁶⁵ Military occupation persisted as the daily reality of the Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, where St. George's Cathedral is located. Ateek mentions that the early years of the occupation had seen "relatively minimal resistance against the Israeli army" from Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, who "proved relatively docile" at the time.⁶⁶ Two years after his arrival in Jerusalem, this situation changed with the irruption of the first intifada. "The powder keg had to explode," he writes, "and it did in December 1987. After living under occupation and oppression for twenty years, the Palestinians began the intifada. It was a popular uprising of the whole Palestinian community of the West Bank and Gaza. The objective was to throw off the yoke of the oppressor. The Arabic word 'intifada' means 'to shake off'... The Palestinians were trying to shake off the occupation of their country."⁶⁷ The second of the two momentous events noted above that influenced Ateek's ministry and theological trajectory had begun.

⁶⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 5. Ateek's dissertation was titled "Toward a Strategy for the Episcopal Church in Israel with Special Focus on the Political Situation: Analysis and Prospect."

⁶⁶ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 43. He notes a few significant events that took place during the first two decades of the occupation—such as the Battle of Karamah in 1968 and the mass strike and protests across Israeli Arab towns on March 30, 1976, commemorated as Land Day—and contributed to the revitalization of "Palestinian consciousness" (Ateek also uses the term "Palestinianization" to describe this nascent process). Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 38-44.

⁶⁷ Ateek, "Pentecost and the Intifada," 75. Ateek mentions other meanings of the Arabic term *intifada*: "shaking off," "an abrupt awakening," and "uprising." Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 197n2.

Ateek views the first intifada as a milestone in the history of contesting the dehumanizing conditions to which Palestinian communities are subjected. His reflections on the uprising highlight its characteristics as a grassroots surge of togetherness that found self-conscious expression and made present to the world a national yearning for justice that asserted Palestinian humanity while exposing its systemic denial. He remarks, “The intifada not only unified the Palestinian people throughout the territories occupied in 1967, but it moved them to nonviolent direct action. It showed the world that the grassroots Palestinian community was able to organize and to resist peacefully.”⁶⁸ Reflecting a sense of communal agency and commitment that affirmed human dignity in a manner which could not easily be dismissed, this popular movement resounded as a cry for life and provided a source of strength and perseverance among Palestinians. Indeed, Ateek suggests that through the uprising “Palestinians did more for themselves than others have done for them in the last forty years.”⁶⁹ Whereas the “years of waiting for the United Nations and the international community to redress the injustice had been long and futile,” the experience of the first intifada “brought Palestinians hope, unity, organization, and self-respect.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 36. Ateek discusses the individual acts of violence that formed the immediate background to the intifada—namely, the murder of an Israeli Jewish salesperson in Gaza on December 6, 1987, and the four Palestinians killed when an IDF truck crashed into their car two days later—as well as the rioting that followed the military use of live ammunition on protesters throwing stones at IDF soldiers, fatally shooting a Palestinian teenager. He also addresses sentiments of hatred and resentment that spread among Palestinians after the intifada began. Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 45, 182. Nonetheless, he describes the first intifada as “one of the rare moments in Palestinian history when the nonviolent power of the people was exhibited at its best.” Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 6.

⁶⁹ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 47.

⁷⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 37; Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 47. The United Nations and international law are essential to Ateek’s vision of justice in Israel-Palestine. He repeatedly emphasizes their key role in the process of establishing a lasting and just peace for everyone in the region. At the same time, however, Ateek remains very much aware that the increasingly consolidated reality of dispossession offers few, if any, signs for optimism regarding the actualization of this role. Two years into the first

In a historical setting marked by a seemingly inexorable process of domination and deepening contradictions of lived experience, the intifada appeared as an inbreaking of solidarity in opposition to the continuation of a reality that should (and could) be otherwise. Its spontaneous, rapid diffusion throughout the occupied territories signaled the presence of a shared determination to transcend the “fear, hopelessness, despair, weakness, disorganization, and demoralization” that had characterized Palestinian communities up to that point.⁷¹ “It was totally unexpected,” Ateek observes, “It was not planned or calculated by the Palestinians.”⁷² In fact, he discerns in the uprising a dimension of mystery that ultimately defies explanatory investigation and intellectual comprehension: “Palestinians as well as others have tried to analyze the causes and background of the intifada, but many admit they cannot completely fathom the depth of what happened. The intifada is greater than any analysis of it. In other words, the real event exceeded the expectation of the people. This historic event changed many peoples’ lives. In those first few weeks and months of intifada, the Israeli occupying forces were

intifada he observed that “Palestinians on the West Bank and in Gaza live within the bounds of no less than twelve hundred orders issued by the military governor since 1967. By 1988, more than fifty percent of the Palestinians’ land had been expropriated by means of legislation enacted by the military government in flagrant violation of international law pertaining to occupied lands...International law is useless and ineffectual unless it is respected and enforced.” Offering several examples that demonstrate this ambiguous status of international law (i.e., the failure of its consistent implementation)—such as the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (1949), which states that “the occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies,” and the UN General Assembly’s recognition in 1979 that Palestinians “are entitled to equal rights and self-determination, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations”—Ateek concludes: “Yet in spite of all of these ambiguities, international law remains a very significant factor that could play a decisive role in achieving justice and peace in the Middle East if Israel were willing to submit to it.” He views “the United Nations as the best forum for establishing criteria that can determine and adjudicate justice and resolve conflicting claims.” Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 120-123, 158; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, xiii, 14, 153, 170, 171-172, 176, 183, 185; Ateek, “Palestinian Story,” 612.

⁷¹ Ateek, “Pentecost and the Intifada,” 76.

⁷² Ibid.

very harsh in their reaction against the Palestinians, but the people were still exuberant. They had finally broken many chains that the Israelis had imposed upon them.”⁷³

Ateek’s attention to the mood displayed by Palestinians during the intifada is reflective of the transformative meaning he recognizes in the movement. Despite military repression of the protests, Palestinians remained “exuberant”—they “felt a sense of exhilaration” that was not extinguished by the army’s violent response; those demanding recognition “were enthusiastic and excited” about the prospect of overcoming abjection; the qualitative shift from resigned voicelessness to “shouting...from the rooftops” testified to “a new and living experience that had left an indelible imprint on their lives.”⁷⁴ In short, the event of the intifada resonated as the refractory language of awakening. Vigorously refusing to comply with ongoing subjugation, Palestinians were recovering elements of a shared identity that had been lost beneath the ravages of the Nakba and the consequences of the 1967 War.⁷⁵ The uprising embodied a communal quickening and vim that could not be undone; as Ateek articulates it: “A new life has entered the dry bones of the Palestinians, and a new spirit has come upon them, bringing about a radical change in them.”⁷⁶ Ultimately, the process of humanization effected by

⁷³ Ibid. Ateek mentions that the military response “included severe beatings—crushing hands to prevent stone throwing, clubbing shoulders, legs, abdomens, and heads—the use of tear gas, rubber bullets, and live ammunition; arrests, night raids on homes, detentions, sieges of refugee camps, curfews, deportations, harassment, and humiliation.” In addition, the army employed terror tactics at places of worship, such as when soldiers stormed Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest site in Sunni Islam, on January 15, 1988, and attacked Muslim worshippers during Friday prayers. Ateek notes that “a similar incident” occurred two days later as Christian worshippers left the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 46.

⁷⁴ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 37; Ateek, “Pentecost and the Intifada,” 76.

⁷⁵ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 48.

⁷⁶ Ateek, “Pentecost and the Intifada,” 77. The unexpected change from dejection and weakness to “a new vitality” forms the crux of Ateek’s observation that “the intifada caused many Palestinian Christians to better understand what happened at Pentecost and to comprehend its meaning for them today.” Indeed, he

the intifada, albeit directly confronting the structural violence of military occupation and the accompanying apparatus of land expropriation, responded to a deeper experience of historical damage—that is, it constituted “the beginning of a process antithetical to the 1948 tragedy of Palestine.”⁷⁷

3.8 STIRRINGS AT ST. GEORGE’S CATHEDRAL: FAITH, UPRISING, AND THE EMERGENCE OF PALESTINIAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

It was in this context of collective resistance and a generative spirit of newness that Palestinian liberation theology first began to emerge as a distinctive grassroots mode of reflecting on lived experience in light of faith and of probing faith in light of lived experience. As the priest and pastor at St. George’s Cathedral during the intifada, Ateek ensured that “every Sunday the sermon revolved around the Gospel for the day and spoke to the situation and reality on the ground.”⁷⁸ He recalls how the uprising challenged him from the outset to preach in a manner that was “more relevant to [the] new political context,” thereby allowing his congregation to “hear the word of God addressing their

views the experience of the early church as an analogue to the Palestinian experience during the intifada, highlighting the new consciousness, courage, unity, and other elements common to both situations (77-80).

⁷⁷ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 48. It should be noted that the epistemological significance of the intifada emphasized in Ateek’s writings pertains not only to Palestinian consciousness but also to how this irruption of historical presence “opened the eyes of the world to the real tragedy of the Palestinians” (48). He writes, “Many people who had formerly viewed the Palestinians as terrorists now came to see them as victims of the government of Israel. Until the beginning of the intifada, most Western countries had been conditioned to view the Palestinians as poor and miserable refugees who needed humanitarian assistance. The intifada succeeded in drawing attention to the basic underlying fact that many people had forgotten or chosen to forget that the Palestinian problem was not just about refugees but about a nation that had been denied its human and political rights. The condition of ‘refugeedom’ resulted from their forced expulsion from their homes and their land.” Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 105; cf. Ateek, “Pentecost and the Intifada,” 76-77.

⁷⁸ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 37-38.

particular situation of life.”⁷⁹ Unlike his earlier experience amid the 1967 War, Ateek was now better prepared to exercise the ministerial imagination in creative ways and cultivate forms of communal life that would promote justice, nonviolence, love, and hope.

At the center of his leadership vision during these years was the importance of maintaining a contextually sensitive orientation. This key insight—a hallmark of the methodology of global liberation theologies—yields an awareness of responsibility for the situation one inhabits, focusing in a special way on the experience of unjust suffering, as a fundamental criterion for the liberative integrity of lived faith. “If the Bible had nothing to say to them in their pain and sorrow,” Ateek writes about the members of his congregation in Jerusalem, “in the midst of injustice and oppression, then the Bible had no relevance for their lives.”⁸⁰ Accordingly, the task of presenting the biblical message in relation to the unfolding reality of military occupation, settler colonialism, and popular resistance formed a pivotal aspect of Ateek’s initial ministerial response to the intifada. He mentions that “justice and truth” became central to his sermons as he developed “a prophetic response in the spirit of the great prophets of the Old Testament, on the one hand, and, on the other, in the spirit of Jesus and the New Testament.”⁸¹

The weekly sermons began to generate conversations among the Christians who attended St. George’s Cathedral. Ateek recounts, “After worship, the community gathered around coffee to reflect in light of the Gospel on their life under the illegal Israeli occupation. People shared their stories and experiences. They struggled with the

⁷⁹ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 8.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*; cf. Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 24.

meaning of their faith under occupation.”⁸² It was in this ecclesial setting of thinking through difficult questions of faith in light of the troubled world of everyday life that “the seeds of a Palestinian theology of liberation began to sprout and grow.”⁸³ Between proclamation and inquiry, announcing the good news and examining its challenges in light of the wounds of concrete history, the Christian community in Jerusalem took the first steps in the direction of formulating a new theological approach to the struggle for justice in Israel-Palestine. Ateek highlights the important role of popular theological expression in this development: “Every Sunday, the Palestinian Christian community of faith was doing theology on the ground in a contextual, pragmatic, and meaningful way. The main credit goes to the people themselves. The best political analysis as well as the best theological ideas came from the men and women of Jerusalem.”⁸⁴ At the heart of the emerging moment of creativity in the life of the Palestinian church were the voices and contributions of the members of Ateek’s congregation.

3.9 RESPONDING TO THE CRIES OF THE FAITHFUL: PASTORAL AND BIBLICAL CHALLENGES

By nurturing this process of communal reflection and constructive theologizing that arose at St. George’s Cathedral, Ateek witnessed how the insights he had “first articulated as a graduate student in Berkeley began to take form within this community of faith where the people of God wrestled with how they should apply the word of God to

⁸² Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 38.

⁸³ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 9; cf. Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 24; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 37-39.

⁸⁴ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 38.

their daily lives.”⁸⁵ However, the theological status of the word of God was neither unequivocal nor devoid of substantial pastoral problems. As discussed above, the threefold Nakba of the Palestinian experience entailed a deeply problematized relation to various features of the biblical inheritance. Ateek’s comments on the faith Nakba suggest that Palestinian Christian engagement with the biblical sources after 1948 frequently took place within a horizon of reciprocal contestation. Moreover, this frictional encounter with the Bible had become further amplified in the wake of the 1967 War. The aforementioned ascension of religious Zionism and theopolitical frameworks as a discursive appendage to the military occupation heightened the sense of uneasiness surrounding Palestinian interaction with certain biblical narratives.⁸⁶

This biblically charged atmosphere had a direct destabilizing effect on the role of Scripture in the Palestinian church. Ateek identifies the resulting pastoral challenge as one among several factors that demonstrated the need for elaborating a Palestinian theology of liberation. He writes, “Some of us Palestinian clergy were working with our people at the grassroots and listening to their cries. We found ourselves needing to give them help and respond, not only to their physical sufferings, but also to the way these sufferings were being aggravated by the religious argument in the political conflict. Where is God in all of this? Why does God allow the confiscation of our land? Why does God allow the occupation and oppression of our people? We needed to work out a

⁸⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 9.

⁸⁶ Historian Michael Oren observes this discursive dimension of the occupation in the nomenclature of the 1967 War. Noting that “the exceptional honor of actually naming the war” was given to the chief of staff of the IDF, Yitzhak Rabin (prior to becoming the Israeli prime minister several years later), he writes: “Among the titles proposed—The War of Daring, the War of Salvation, the War of the Sons of Light—Rabin chose the least ostentatious, the Six-Day War, evoking the days of creation.” Oren, *Six Days of War*, 309.

Palestinian theology of liberation as a pastoral response to many such questions.”⁸⁷

Simply on the basis of the conditions of suffering and the violations of human dignity which Palestinians were enduring, perplexity of lived faith would appear to be inescapable for those embracing a non-retributive understanding of God in terms of historically effective love and justice; to compound such an afflicting experience of persisting injustice with a grammar of divine promises and theological justification can magnify that perplexity of faith to a scandalous degree.

The pastoral factor that Ateek describes is entangled with the distinctly biblical problematic that comprises yet another element exemplifying the need for a carefully crafted liberation theology in the Palestinian context. He mentions that “many of our Palestinian Christians wanted to abandon the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, which was being used against them. They wanted to have nothing to do with this scripture. They did not want to have it read in church to them.”⁸⁸ The biblical problems that had emerged after 1948, whereby previously unnoticeable layers of meaning were uncovered in familiar narratives and concepts, were exacerbated by the prominence of biblically grounded discourses and practices of violence after 1967. For instance, Ateek quotes the response of Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Nissim (1896-1981), leader of the Sephardic community in Israel in 1967, when asked—just a few days after the war—about withdrawal from the occupied territories: “It is forbidden by the Torah for all Jews,

⁸⁷ Naim Stifan Ateek, “The Emergence of a Palestinian Christian Theology,” in *Faith and the Intifada: Palestinian Christian Voices*, ed. Naim S. Ateek, Marc H. Ellis, and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 4; cf. Naim Stifan Ateek, “The Beginning of the Center,” *Cornerstone* 1 (Spring 1994): 3.

⁸⁸ Ateek, “Palestinian Christian Theology,” 4.

including the Israeli Government, to return even one inch of the territory of Eretz Israel now in our hands.”⁸⁹ Similarly, Ateek notes “the emergence of the *Gush Emunim* (“block of [the] faithful”), sometime later, [which] signaled the beginning of a deep-rooted religious claim to the whole of the land. For this religious group the victory of the 1967 war was a very clear indication of the faithfulness of God to the Jewish people and a vindication of the rightness of the state of Israel.”⁹⁰ The theology of this fundamentalist group conflates the settler movement and the idea of the divine promise of land, considering it to be “against God’s Law, the Torah, to give up one inch of the biblically promised land.”⁹¹ As a priest affirming the centrality of the Bible to the Christian faith and actively seeking to integrate its liberative message in the daily life of his community,

⁸⁹ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 101; cf. the comments on the Zionist concept of Greater Israel in note 58 above.

⁹⁰ Ateek, “Palestinian Christian Theology,” 2. Israeli political scientist Ehud Sprinzak describes Gush Emunim as “an Israeli messianic movement committed to establishing Jewish settlements in the West Bank (biblical Judea and Samaria)” and which included “highly respected members” who “had committed several stunning acts of anti-Arab terror in the West Bank” since 1980. This “terror group” within Gush Emunim had devised “a very elaborate plan to blow up the Muslim Dome of the Rock on Jerusalem’s Temple Mount, for ideological-religious reasons.” Ehud Sprinzak, “From Messianic Pioneering to Vigilante Terrorism: The Case of the Gush Emunim Underground,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 10, no. 4 (1987): 194. See also Eliezer Don-Yehiya, “Jewish Messianism, Religious Zionism and Israeli Politics: The Impact and Origins of Gush Emunim,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 23, no. 2 (1987): 215-234.

⁹¹ Ateek, “Palestinian Christian Theology,” 2. Drawing on the work of Allan C. Brownfeld, editor at the American Council for Judaism, Ateek mentions that members of the movement “believe that what appears to be confiscation of Arab-owned land for the building of Jewish settlements is not an act of stealing but one of sanctification. For them, the land is redeemed by being transferred from the satanic to the divine sphere.” Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 55-57. In addition, North American political scientist Ian S. Lustick writes that “Gush rabbis and ideologues regularly refer to the local Arabs as ‘Canaanites’ or ‘Ishmaelites,’ and weigh the implications of the terms Joshua offered the Canaanites before his conquest of the land, or the circumstances under which Abraham expelled Ishmael, for the determination of policy in current circumstances. Thus Rav Tzvi Yehuda cited Maimonides to the effect that the Canaanites had three choices—to flee, to accept Jewish rule, or to fight. These are the choices, both suggest, that frame the appropriate attitude for Jews to take toward Palestinian Arabs. Of course, the decision by most Canaanites to fight ensured their destruction. The same fate awaits present-day non-Jewish inhabitants of the land who choose to resist the establishment of Jewish sovereignty over its entirety.” Ian S. Lustick, *For the Land and the Lord: Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1988), 78. See also Nur Masalha, “From Secularism to Messianism: The Theology and Geopolitics of Neo-Zionism, 1967-2006,” in *The Bible and Zionism: Invented Traditions, Archaeology and Post-Colonialism in Israel-Palestine* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 135-164.

Ateek perceived in the steady escalation of such harmful rhetoric an injunction to revisit the relationship between the biblical sources and the theme of justice.

These two distinct yet entwined factors—the pastoral and the biblical—gave rise to some of the most fundamental questions that would inform the theoretical concerns of Palestinian liberation theology.⁹² On the one hand, the longings of distressed faith were the expression of agony and confusion before God. At times, this experience of uneasy faith *before* God could harbor a defamiliarizing sense of having been (dis)placed *against* God. Ateek attends to this antagonistic uncertainty when he writes, “There is a special problem of theodicy for us Palestinians. How can one justify what God is said to be doing? Has God become an enemy to the Palestinians, the adversary of Palestinian aspirations to liberation?”⁹³

On the other hand, the biblical framing of the settler program and the ongoing processes of land appropriation positioned Palestinians, whether implicitly or explicitly, as the collective obstruction of salvation history, thereby reinforcing the disquieting idea of a people assailed by God.⁹⁴ The resonances of divine hostility corresponded to a reorientation toward certain biblical themes occasioned by a context in which their

⁹² Ateek mentions two other factors that necessitated the development of a Palestinian theology of liberation: (1) the “indigenous factor,” which involves attending to the role of “foreign expatriate clergy” in Palestinian churches and calling for Palestinian Christians to “define the meaning of this land to [themselves] in response to [Jewish and Christian Zionist] theological and biblical claims”; and (2) the “theological factor,” by which Ateek refers to an understanding of “how Christ is related to this historical process.” Ateek, “Palestinian Christian Theology,” 4.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹⁴ Samuel J. Kuruvilla, scholar of politics and theology in Israel-Palestine, highlights this link between the pastoral and biblical factors in his discussion of Ateek’s ministry amid military occupation: “The Zionist nature of the state of Israel meant that Palestinian Christians were left asking sensitive questions about the all-encompassing love of God and whether God actually loved the Palestinian people as much as [God’s] ‘chosen’ people, the Jews. They also started asking questions about the necessity of still adhering to and reading the Old Testament or ‘covenant’ with all its too obvious biases towards the Jewish people. Palestinian pastors were concerned about the impact that the occupation and the prolonged Arab-Israeli

exclusionary force was unleashed: “The Bible is being used by both Jews and Western Christians to silence us, to make us invisible, to turn us into the negated antithesis of God’s ‘chosen people.’”⁹⁵ Accordingly, the challenges of contributing an adequate theology of God and a hermeneutical model in light of the particularities of the Palestinian experience, thereby engaging the lived faith of Christians who “feel despair” and “feel that God is against them,” assumed critical importance for Ateek.⁹⁶

3.10 APOCALYPTIC PHANTASMAGORIA: THE PROBLEM OF CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

It is necessary here to underscore a major contextual component of Ateek’s project that has been noted in the foregoing discussion but warrants special attention due to the analytical exertion it has elicited since the inception of Palestinian liberation theology—namely, the critique of Christian Zionism. As indicated above, Ateek

conflict could have on the Christian psyche in the Holy Land and the Middle East at large.” Samuel J. Kuruvilla, *Radical Christianity in Palestine and Israel: Liberation and Theology in the Middle East* (London: Tauris, 2013), 120.

⁹⁵ Ateek, “Palestinian Christian Theology,” 5. This experience of historical-theological erasure stems from the problem of the synthetic impact of the 1967 War on religiosity and state violence: “Religion [after 1967] was used not to critique unethical and immoral behavior, but to support and encourage robbery. Religion became a servant of the state, and God was and is being used to legitimize and sanction crime.” Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 56-57.

⁹⁶ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 82; cf. 77-81; Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 26-33; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 143-147. In a critique of theologies—Jewish, Christian, and Islamic—that either sanction violence (e.g., by means of armed resistance) or perpetuate domination (e.g., by adopting a “passive” stance with regard to political engagement), Ateek maintains that “the central theological obstacle” to proceeding in a responsible manner always concerns the theology of God. “If our theology of God is mistaken,” he writes, “it is inevitable that our theology of neighbor will automatically be so as well, and vice versa...As a faithful people, our theology of God determines our theology of neighbor; and, if we want to help people change their theology of neighbor, we must confront their theology of God. If our theology of God is based on our sacred texts, interpreted literally without any analysis, then our theology of God will become static and we will truly remain paralyzed.” Naim Ateek, “La teología de la liberación como test para una religión auténtica: El caso palestino,” in *Libertad y esperanza: A Gustavo Gutiérrez por sus 80 años*, ed. Consuelo de Prado and Pedro Hughes (Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 2008), 270 (my translation).

recognizes that the disturbed relationship between Palestinian Christians and Scripture resulted from a particular manner of repurposing biblical narratives that appears not only in Jewish Zionist discourses, but also in a variety of Christian theological and exegetical writings. In fact, he observes that Christian Zionism predates the modern political Zionist movement, highlighting the early contributions of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), Lord Shaftesbury (1801-1885), and William Eugene Blackstone (1841-1935).⁹⁷ The steady growth of Christian Zionism throughout the nineteenth century reshaped the intersection of biblical interpretation, doctrine, and eschatology to such an extent that it made possible a positive Christian reception of Herzl's Zionist vision at a time when a quite different reception was common among religious Jews: "When the Zionist movement came into

⁹⁷ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 81, 83-84. Darby, originally an Anglo-Irish Anglican priest but eventually opting to leave the Church of England, is recognized as the founder of dispensationalist theology. Darby's Zionism has recently been defended by Paul Richard Wilkinson, assistant minister at Hazel Grove Full Gospel Church in Stockport, England, who classifies Ateek and others as part of a "reactionary movement" he designates "Christian Palestinianism." Wilkinson writes that "Christian Palestinianism is an inverted mirror image of Christian Zionism," stating that the latter "cannot divorce itself from the political outworking of prophecies which relate to Israel's restoration and the return of Jesus Christ." At the same time, he suggests that this Christian Zionist commitment is "harmonious with the teachings of John Nelson Darby, who believed that the Christian 'has no business to mix himself [sic] up' in politics," and contrasts this idea with the "political" direction of those who belong to the movement of Christian Palestinianism. In effect, Wilkinson simultaneously sanctions Christian support for a violent process of ethnic cleansing and collective dispossession, frames that support as an apolitical expression of Christian identity, and censures the victims of that process (and those accompanying them in solidarity) for developing Christian models of resistance. The problematic biblical-political binary that is operative in Wilkinson's remarks notwithstanding, this troubling legitimization—if not erasure—of unjust suffering by recourse to a certain understanding of "biblical prophecy" and eschatology is precisely what incites Ateek's critique of Christian Zionism. Paul Richard Wilkinson, *For Zion's Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 48-66.

With regard to Lord Shaftesbury and Zionism, see Donald M. Lewis, *The Origins of Christian Zionism: Lord Shaftesbury and Evangelical Support for a Jewish Homeland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). As Ateek notes, it was Shaftesbury who first introduced the formulation: "A country without a nation for a nation without a country" (83).

Concerning the origins of Christian Zionism, Epp Weaver writes: "Its roots...can be traced back to the late 1500s and to restorationist theologies (which, as the name suggests, hoped and prayed for the restoration of the Jewish people to the land)...Christian Zionism in the United States today, meanwhile, has roots reaching back to the Puritans." His discussion of the development of Christian Zionism highlights the contributions of Darby, Shaftesbury, and Blackstone. Epp Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, 69-74.

being, the three major Jewish religious organizations—the Orthodox, the Conservatives, and the Reform—rejected it as a heresy. While Jews at the time rejected it, Christian Zionists welcomed and embraced it.”⁹⁸

The response of some Christians surpassed a mere embrace of Herzl’s political movement by actively seeking to influence its development in accordance with their systematized understanding of biblical texts. For example, Ateek mentions that “when Blackstone heard that Theodor Herzl was considering the possibility of setting up the Jewish state in countries of the world other than Palestine, he sent him a Bible, marking in red all the references that emphasized Palestine as the only venue to be considered because of its Jewish roots.”⁹⁹ The post-1967 context has seen the rise of more extreme manifestations of the Christian Zionist desire to affect the course of history. Ateek writes that “for Christian Zionists and other evangelicals the 1967 occupation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank served as the final proof of the approaching end of history.”¹⁰⁰ The rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple—made feasible by the geopolitical remapping that

⁹⁸ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 84. Religious studies scholar Yaakov Ariel, who notes the roles of Shaftesbury and Blackstone as “proto-Zionists” prior to the emergence of political Zionism, writes that “Pietists and evangelicals showed much interest in the new movement and offered support” for Herzl’s project since the 1890s. Indeed, he mentions that “when the first Zionist Congress convened in Basil in 1897, a number of Christians came as guests to show support”—the motivation for which “Herzl did not comprehend” but nonetheless was content with its favorable results. Yaakov Ariel, “Biblical Imagery, the End Times, and Political Action: The Roots of Christian Support for Zionism and Israel,” in *The Bible in the Public Square: Its Enduring Influence in American Life*, ed. Mark A. Chancey, Carol Meyers, and Eric M. Meyers (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 37, 43; cf. 43-44.

⁹⁹ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 84. Similarly, Ariel mentions that “William Hechler, a German-British believer in the imminent second coming of Jesus, became an advisor to Herzl and his liaison to the Protestant Christian rulers of Europe.” Ariel, “Biblical Imagery,” 43. Blackstone, a US Methodist who drew on Darby’s dispensationalist theology, has been described as the “Father of Zionism” by “some Jewish groups and even a U.S. Supreme Court Justice.” Jonathan Moorhead, “The Father of Zionism: William E. Blackstone?,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53, no. 4 (December 2010): 787; cf. 795-796, 799-800. Moorhead mentions that the marked Bible which Blackstone sent to Herzl was once on public display at the Herzl Museum in Jerusalem (795n34).

¹⁰⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 35.

resulted from the war—captivated the Christian Zionist imagination. However, when the established Muslim presence on the Temple Mount came to be perceived as an obstacle to rebuilding the temple, “an Australian Christian Zionist tried to enhance the process by setting Al-Aqsa Mosque ablaze” in 1969.¹⁰¹

The guiding star of many contemporary Christian Zionist systems is a particular conception of the second coming of Jesus as contingent on the fulfillment of certain historical events pertaining to the state of Israel and thereby charging Christians with the task of facilitating the creation of those preconditions, which invests such efforts with a galvanizing eschatological import insofar as they ultimately expedite the return of Christ.¹⁰² As with religious Zionism, the framework of Christian Zionism effectively

¹⁰¹ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 85. For further discussion of the importance of rebuilding the temple for Christian Zionism, see Yaakov Ariel, “Israel in Contemporary Evangelical Christian Millennial Thought,” *Numen* 59, no. 5/6 (2012): 476-480. Ariel writes that “the prospect of rebuilding the Temple began to excite premillennialist Christians as the one event standing between this era and the next” (476). His treatment of this theme includes a brief account of Dennis Michael Rohan, the Australian Zionist to whom Ateek refers. Ariel mentions that Rohan “decided to change the existing reality and help bring about apocalyptic events” after volunteering at an Israeli kibbutz, “convinced that God had designated him for that task” (477). See also Ariel, “Biblical Imagery,” 58.

¹⁰² Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 79-82; Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 65-66; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 35. Ariel recognizes the practical efficacy of this basic element of Christian Zionist thought: “Motivated by a biblical messianic faith and the belief that a Jewish commonwealth in the land of Israel is a necessary stage in the preparation of the way for the return of Jesus of Nazareth to earth, a number of Protestant clergymen, writers, businessmen, and politicians supported, and at times labored actively for, the restoration of the Jews to Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth there.” In addition, Ariel addresses the continuing significance of Blackstone’s conflation of Christian Zionism and US nationalism: “He asserted that the United States has a special role and mission in God’s plans for humanity: that of a modern Cyrus, to help restore the Jews to Zion...God has chosen America for that mission on account of its moral superiority over other nations, and America will be judged according to the way it carries out its mission. This theory enabled American evangelicals to combine their messianic belief and understanding of the course of human history with their sense of American patriotism.” Ariel, “Biblical Imagery,” 37, 42-43.

The accentuated shared core of Christian Zionist thought should not imply homogeneity or even compatibility between its various expressions. As Epp Weaver remarks, “While Christian Zionists today disagree amongst themselves on points of biblical interpretation, understandings of the end times, and the question of missionary efforts to Jews, they agree that support for Zionism and the State of Israel is an urgent Christian duty and that God will bless those who support the State of Israel and the Jewish people.” Epp Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, 71.

renders any activity that seeks to impede the divine chronology from actualizing—such as Palestinians resisting expulsion from their homes and protesting the state-approved demolition of their villages in order to construct Jewish settlements—as expressive of the work of the enemies of God. Ateek discusses the example of Episcopal priest and theologian Paul Matthews van Buren (1924-1998), who “refers to God as fighting against the Arabs on the side of the Jews in 1948 as in the time of Joshua.”¹⁰³ In van Buren’s writings, he observes, biblical Israel and the modern state of Israel appear to be indistinguishable and equally demonstrative of divine promises coming to fruition in the domain of history, prompting Ateek to ask: “Does God act in a vacuum with Israel, as if there were no nations living around it? Does God act with total disregard for morality? About which God is van Buren writing?”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 63. Van Buren studied under Karl Barth and was associated with “the Death of God” movement. See Roger D. Haight, “Paul van Buren’s Secular Salvation,” *Philippine Studies* 14, no. 4 (October 1966): 666-680.

¹⁰⁴ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 63-64. While Ateek notes that such views “might be expected from a rabid literalist, but seem very strange coming from a person like van Buren,” his treatment of Christian fundamentalists intimates that common ground can be identified in the idea that “there is no justice here for the Palestinians; they must resign themselves to accept God’s plan for history” (63, 66). Epp Weaver mentions that van Buren offers an example of “Christian championing of Zionism not linked to eschatological schema” yet remaining committed to the idea that “the establishment of the modern nation-state of Israel represents a necessary dimension of the outworking of God’s promise of the land.” Epp Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, 78.

Elsewhere, Ateek addresses the Christian Zionist disposition of Arthur James Balfour (1848-1930)—who, in his capacity as the United Kingdom’s foreign secretary, issued the Balfour Declaration in 1917, which declared British support for “Jewish Zionist aspirations” and “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people” (arguably in conflict with other British promises at the time; cf. note 35 above)—and illustrates a similar problem in his thinking by quoting the following passage from his writings: “Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires or prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.” Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 84-85; see also appendix B for the full text of the Balfour Declaration.

Michel Sabbah, the first Palestinian to be appointed Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem (1988-2008), observes a comparable dynamic in his fourth pastoral letter. Remarking on the Palestinian experience of being “confronted by the Bible,” he provides examples of some of the questions that are asked by Palestinian Christians: “The Bible narrates stories of violence that have a striking resemblance to our present history, and that are attributed to God...Does the Bible justify the present political claims? Could we be victims of our own salvation history, which seems to favor the Jewish people and condemn us? Is

This series of questions encapsulates some of the core problems identified by Ateek as requiring the elaboration of a theology of God and a liberative hermeneutical approach to the Bible. The premise of Ateek's description of Christian Zionism as a theology marked by violence and exclusion—indeed, as a “modern-day heresy” and a “biblical aberration” that remains “antithetical to the spirit and love of Christ and the New Testament”—is a commitment to understanding the biblical message in terms of love, peace, and justice for all peoples.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, the biblical interpretations of Christian Zionism are inseparable from a particular conceptualization of God, a “god of Armageddon” that is associated with eschatological violence and thus, Ateek suggests, differs radically from “the God of Golgotha—the God who loves us unconditionally and who is present with us in our pains and sorrows.”¹⁰⁶ While this Armageddon-infused notion of God harbors an expectation of violence to come, Palestinian perspectives on Christian Zionism remain critically attentive to the ways in which it sanctions and

that truly the Will of God to which we must inexorably bow down, demanding that we deprive ourselves in favor of another people, with no possibility of appeal or discussion?” Sabbah recognizes the presence of both Jewish and Christian groups that “seem to confirm the fears and anguish of the Palestinians” by insisting on a theology of the land that deprives Palestinians of their ancestral connection to it. His discussion of these problems calls attention to the coercive element that aggravates the multilayered injury, noting that “fundamentalist Christians would go so far as to directly link all of the present history with the fulfillment of specific biblical prophecies. They even accuse local Christians who do not agree with their views as being ‘unbiblical’ and not true believers.” As in Ateek's experience, the pastoral ramifications of this situation are a prime concern for Sabbah, for whom it is “understandable that such [fundamentalist] positions should lead to spiritual confusion and religious rebellion among those who have been driven away from their homes and their land, who have lost their loved ones in a succession of wars, or who have experienced prison and torture for having desired to reclaim their rights.” Michel Sabbah, “Reading the Bible in the Land of the Bible,” in *Faithful Witness: On Reconciliation and Peace in the Holy Land*, ed. Drew Christiansen, S.J., and Saliba Sarsar (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2009), 26-27.

¹⁰⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 10, 78-79, 88-90. See also Naim Ateek, Cedar Duaybis, and Maurine Tobin, eds., *Challenging Christian Zionism: Theology, Politics and the Israel-Palestine Conflict* (London: Melisende, 2005).

¹⁰⁶ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 90-91.

participates in patterns of violence that already exist.¹⁰⁷ The practice of providing “Israeli expansion [with] theological underpinnings supported by scriptural language” and reinforcing a theology of God that can be operationalized as a vindication of devastation served to deepen Ateek’s driving conviction: “There is a need to critique violence and evil being done in the name of God and God’s word but there is also an equal need to highlight the rich biblical tradition in both the Old and New Testaments that can help in the pursuit of peace and freedom.”¹⁰⁸

While the tensional mode of interacting with biblical sources became more severe for Palestinian Christians after the 1967 War, its harrowing origins are found in the

¹⁰⁷ Epp Weaver mentions two sources that are relevant to this point. The first is an experience recounted by Alex Awad, former pastor at East Jerusalem Baptist Church and professor at Bethlehem Bible College, that exemplifies the Christian Zionist proclivity for siding—on theological grounds—with systemic violence against Palestinians. In July 2000, during a meeting of Palestinian evangelical churches that took place in Bethlehem, a participant from the United States asked one of the pastors if she could address the audience. Awad offers the following description of what occurred when this visitor was given a microphone: “She professed to the Palestinian Evangelical Christians assembled there that she had a word from the Lord for them. ‘God,’ she said, ‘wanted them all to leave Israel and go to other Arab countries.’ She added that they must leave to make room for God’s chosen people, the Jews. She warned the pastors and the audience that if they did not listen to the instructions which God had given her, God would pour his [sic] wrath on them.” After sharing this experience, Awad notes: “This is not an isolated example by an overzealous Christian Zionist; every one of those pastors gathered in that assembly could tell similar stories.” See Alex Awad, “Christian Zionism: Their Theology, Our Nightmare!,” *Mennonite Central Committee Peace Office Newsletter* 35, no. 3 (2005): 2.

The second source mentioned by Epp Weaver is the 2006 *Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism*, issued by Patriarch Sabbah and other Palestinian church leaders. The document offers a clear negative assessment of Christian Zionism as perpetuating “a worldview where the Gospel is identified with the ideology of empire, colonialism and militarism. In its extreme form, it laces an emphasis on apocalyptic events leading to the end of history rather than living Christ’s love and justice today.” Explicitly rejecting Christian Zionism as a distortion of “the biblical message of love, justice and reconciliation,” the church leaders critique its complicity in violence, which serves to “advance racial exclusivity and perpetual war rather than the gospel of universal love, redemption and reconciliation taught by Jesus Christ.” In contrast to Christian Zionists who “condemn the world to the doom of Armageddon,” they invite all peoples “to liberate themselves from the ideologies of militarism and occupation. Instead, let them pursue the healing of the nations!” See Michel Sabbah et al., “Palestinian Church Leaders’ Statement on Christian Zionism: I. ‘We Stand for Justice: We Can Do No Other,’” *Holy Land Studies* 5, no. 2 (2006): 211-212; Epp Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, 74-76.

¹⁰⁸ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 10, 11.

Nakba.¹⁰⁹ As such, the earliest stirrings of a Palestinian theology of liberation in the form of popular reflection at St. George's Cathedral shared in the recuperative thrust and communal awakening that characterized those years due to the intifada. Whereas the process of retrieval initiated by the uprising set into motion a corrective to the identity Nakba and demanded justice for victims of dispossession and military occupation, the rise of Palestinian liberation theology signaled the persistence of a damaged Christian life moving in the direction of overcoming the faith Nakba. Ateek articulates this counter-dynamic of salvaging as follows: "If the Nakba of 1948 marked the destruction of the Palestinian community, and the intifada of 1987 marked the return to national consciousness, then, for the Palestinian Christian community, the emergence of a liberation theology marked the return to a more authentic faith and commitment in the service of God."¹¹⁰ The recovery of identity expressed in the grassroots resistance movement provided the direct stimulus for a renewal of self-understanding among Palestinian Christians—the "empowering *kairos*" that yielded a new theological approach to the Israel-Palestine context.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Although Ateek does not use the language of a "faith Naksa" to explicate the link between the faith Nakba and the post-1967 context, the idea that would be suggested by such a category is present in his writings. This idea (but not the terminology) also appears in the essay by Duaybis from which Ateek borrows the analytical category of the threefold Nakba. She writes, "Our faith crises had intensified after the six-day war when the rest of historic Palestine—the West Bank, East-Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip—fell under Israeli occupation. Religious Zionism flourished and it was evident that they would hold onto the land 'that God had given them.'" Duaybis, "Three-Fold Nakba," 9.

¹¹⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 39; cf. Ateek, "Sabeel's Liberation Theology," 24.

¹¹¹ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 39. While Ateek emphasizes the catalyzing importance of the intifada for the development of Palestinian liberation theology, he also observes that both stem from the same historical experience: "The intifada of 1987 triggered the rise of Palestinian liberation theology, but it was not its original source. Its roots lay dormant in the Palestinian Nakba of 1948" (37).

3.11 CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided an overview of the major contextual factors which led to the emergence of Palestinian liberation theology and continue to shape its discursive production. Beginning with Ateek's childhood experience of permanent expulsion from his hometown of Beisan in 1948 and proceeding to situate that foundational experience within a larger historical process of oppression and injustice, the chapter offered a discussion of the various forces contributing to the concrete and ideological conditions under which his theological project first took form. The manifold connections between European anti-Judaism, modern political Zionism, Christian Zionism, the Holocaust, the (threefold) Nakba, the post-1967 period in Israel-Palestine, the first intifada, and the birth of Palestinian liberation theology at St. George's Cathedral in East Jerusalem have been addressed in light of their ongoing treatment in Ateek's writings, thereby simultaneously engaging significant elements of the self-understanding of Palestinian liberation theology.

In addition to identifying the series of events and movements that eventually catalyzed Ateek's theological development, this contextual framework has served to highlight substantial challenges facing Palestinian Christian life in particular and thus requiring critical attention in the formulation of a Palestinian theology of liberation. Specifically, this chapter presented as key issues the intersecting challenges concerning the need for a contextually responsive theology of God and a renewed engagement with the biblical corpus that confronts its increasingly tensional aura in connection with the particularities of Israel-Palestine. Indispensable to the task of examining the reception of the exodus narrative in Ateek's writings, the following chapter will further explicate the

meaning and impact of these challenges in the continuing work of Palestinian liberation theology.

CHAPTER 4

CHRIST AT THE SOURCE OF PALESTINIAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY: THE PRAXIS OF PROPHETIC NONVIOLENCE AND THE FRICTIONAL NATURE OF THE BIBLICAL CORPUS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 4 continues the discussion on the Palestinian theology of liberation developed by Naim Stifan Ateek as introduced in the previous chapter. Proceeding to consider the initial efforts to formulate the incipient mode of Palestinian theological reflection and to renew the life of the Palestinian church, this chapter will attend to the spiritual, ecclesial, and theological significance of the various challenges addressed in chapter 3 as major elements of Ateek's context. These challenges, including the key theological issues concerning the conception of God and the role of the Bible in situations shaken by the cries of unjust suffering, remain vital to the task of analyzing Ateek's approach to the biblical account of the exodus. In particular, the discussion in this chapter will present the establishment of Sabeel and Ateek's ongoing reconceptualization of the difficulties involved in engaging the biblical sources as prime examples of his attempt to respond to the challenges of the Israel-Palestine context in a liberative manner. Both of these important examples, as will be seen in the following sections, evince the centrality of Christ in Palestinian liberation theology.

The chapter will begin by providing an account of the emergence of Sabeel and foregrounding fundamental features of its praxis and vision of liberation. This treatment of concrete steps in the direction of embodying the values of transformative justice and

peace will identify a critical orientation and dynamic commitment to love that are similarly essential to Ateek's hermeneutical framework. Following the discussion of Sabeel, then, the final sections of this chapter will introduce the basic problems and themes informing Ateek's understanding of the biblical heritage. The analysis of the Bible in Palestinian liberation theology will then be resumed and further developed in the next chapter.

4.2 THE WAY OF LIVING STREAMS: SABEEL AND THE FOLLOWING OF JESUS

The years following the irruption of the intifada saw the first formal exposition of the new theological approach emerging at St. George's Cathedral as well as pragmatic organizational efforts to promote its vision of ecclesial praxis and offer institutional resources that would facilitate its concrete pursuit. In 1989, amid the unfolding popular uprising, Ateek's *Justice and Only Justice* became the earliest substantial statement of the nascent theology, introducing its context, methodology, and aims to communities across the globe.¹ "The book was launched at St. George's Cathedral soon after it was published," Ateek mentions, "and it became a basis for the fledgling [Palestinian liberation theology] movement. By the Grace of God the movement slowly spread inside the country as well as abroad."² He remembers the "atmosphere of excitement and

¹ Ateek recalls that his manuscript had already been submitted to Orbis Books when the intifada started, requiring him "to rush in a few added pages to cover the intifada so that the book would not be dated even before it was published." Naim Ateek, "Palestinian Liberation Theology: The Beginnings," *Cornerstone* 66 (Summer 2013): 3-4.

² Ibid., 4; cf. Naim Stifan Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation: The Bible, Justice, and the Palestine-Israel Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 129; Naim Ateek, "Reflections on Sabeel's Liberation Theology and Ecumenical Work (1992-2013)," in *Theologies of Liberation in Palestine-Israel:*

hopeful expectation for this movement” that resulted from these initial steps toward revitalizing the Palestinian church.³

Following the book launch, the first international conference on Palestinian liberation theology was held at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in 1990.⁴ This event—to which several international theologians contributed, including Rosemary Radford Ruether, Marc Ellis, and Mary Hunt—was “focused on introducing the concept of a distinctively Palestinian theology” in the larger context of global liberation theologies.⁵ Ateek describes these years as a period of discerning “where the Holy Spirit was leading” the Palestinian church, a time during which Palestinian Christians and others sought “greater clarity and assurance as to whether it was God’s will that [they] should continue

Indigenous, Contextual, and Postcolonial Perspectives, ed. Nur Masalha and Lisa Isherwood (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 24.

³ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 129.

⁴ Tantur, located between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, provides educational programs and in-residence research opportunities in a community setting that actively fosters hospitality and respect for others. The institute was established in 1972, several years after the Vatican purchased the property and leased it to the University of Notre Dame. “History and Aims,” About Us, Tantur Ecumenical Institute (website), accessed October 6, 2018, <http://tantur.org/about-us/history-aims/>.

⁵ Naim Stifan Ateek, *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 13; Naim Stifan Ateek, “The Beginning of the Center,” *Cornerstone* 1 (Spring 1994): 3. The proceedings of the conference are published in the volume *Faith and the Intifada: Palestinian Christian Voices*. In the preface to the book, Ruether mentions that the “conference hoped not only to bring together Palestinian Christians, but also to assemble international representatives of liberation theologies around the world to reflect with them and to learn from them.” Palestinian Christians were “aware that many liberation theologians around the world...thoughtlessly used themes of ‘exodus’ and ‘promised land’ with little sense of the negative use of such biblical themes to oppress and colonize the Palestinians.” In light of this tendency, she writes that Palestinians participating in the conference “also hoped to conscientize the world community of liberation theologians, to make them aware of the negative underside of many biblical themes, when these are used in an exclusivist, ethnocentric sense as a theology of conquest.” Regrettably, the efforts to involve liberation theologians from other contexts did not produce the desired outcome: “Invitations went out to liberation theologians around the world, to Latin America, North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Unfortunately, most liberation theologians were not prepared to put the Palestinian issue on their agenda. No Latin American theologian came, although many showed initial interest. Africa and Asia were better represented...Europe was represented only by Ireland...Thus in this book the section on international response is much more North American than was the original hope.” Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The Conference and the Book,” in *Faith and the Intifada: Palestinian Christian Voices*, ed. Naim S. Ateek, Marc H. Ellis, and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), x-xi.

to develop this new ministry.”⁶ Eventually, the ministerial initiatives and ideas inspired by the 1990 conference led to the establishment of a “permanent center and the founding of *Sabeel*,” the ecumenical liberation theology movement.⁷

Adopted as an official name in 1993, Sabeel designated the growing presence of a justice-oriented, dialogically motivated spiritual commitment to engaging and contesting life-denying conditions by means of creative nonviolence.⁸ The Arabic term *sabeel* has two meanings that Ateek connects to the nature of the movement. The first meaning is “the way,” which he describes as a reminder to “those of us who are Christians that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”⁹ Expressive of the movement’s grounding in Christ and faith-based approach to eradicating structural violence, the way or path it follows entails an ongoing attempt to reproduce the model of humanity encountered in Jesus of Nazareth. This christological sense of the term captures a foundational feature of Sabeel’s work and values: “Sabeel’s theology, philosophy, and ideology are biblically based and founded on the life, teachings, and example of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ In addition to the christological connotation of this meaning of *sabeel*, Ateek highlights the use of “the

⁶ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 129-130; cf. Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 25; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 13.

⁷ Ateek, “Beginning of the Center,” 4 (emphasis in original); cf. Sabeel’s purpose statement at the end of each *Cornerstone* issue, also included in Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 153. See also the account of Sabeel’s beginnings by co-founder Nora Carmi, “Snapshots of Our Activities over the Last Ten Years,” *Cornerstone* 34 (Fall 2004): 7-11.

⁸ Naim Ateek, “In Thanksgiving to God: Sabeel, Ten Years On,” *Cornerstone* 34 (Fall 2004): 2; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 10; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 131. However, compare the following passage, perhaps a typographic error: “At the end of 1992, the name Sabeel was adopted.” Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 25.

⁹ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 130.

¹⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 10.

Way” as a name by which the early followers of Jesus were known.¹¹ While reinforcing the fundamental element of spirituality, this reference to discipleship also serves to emphasize the “action and dynamism” suggested by the name Sabeel—“it is an active word”—signaling “a movement of people who are on a journey” and “walking the way seeking justice and peace.”¹²

The second meaning of the Arabic term discussed by Ateek is that of “a fountain or spring of living water.”¹³ As with the first meaning of *sabeel*, he reflects on this sense of the word in a christological register, writing that it “reminds us of the words of Christ, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water”’ (John 7:37-38).”¹⁴ Drawing sustenance from Christ, the struggle for life and human flourishing is continuously renewed and vivified by the sacramental source that enacts its message: death is not the final word of history. This understanding of the name Sabeel indicates a recognition that the long journey toward liberation, albeit laborious and imperfect, is thoroughly and effectively graced. In a short piece commemorating the tenth anniversary of Sabeel, Ateek gives expression to this theological perspective on the praxis of Sabeel: “It is God who is the source of our work. Everything that has been accomplished through the work of Sabeel is due to God’s mercy.”¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid., 130-131; cf. Ateek, “In Thanksgiving to God,” 2. For the use of this term in reference to the early Christian community, see Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22.

¹² Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 13; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 131. Elsewhere, Ateek phrases this point in the following way: “The name Sabeel remains an inspiration for us. We are walking the Sabeel of justice and peace, the Sabeel of freedom and reconciliation.” Ateek, “In Thanksgiving to God,” 2.

¹³ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 131.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ateek, “In Thanksgiving to God,” 1.

4.3 THE DUAL IMPERATIVE: JUSTICE AND PEACE INEXTRICABLY LINKED

As a center for liberation theology in occupied East Jerusalem, Sabeel embodies its Christian vision and ministerial imperative in several ways. Seeking to emulate the universal embrace of the God of life, the thirst for justice that drives the work of Sabeel exhibits a critical sensitivity to ways of thinking and living that exclude, deny, or wound others. As such, Sabeel calls for transforming violence without conforming to its ways; that is, it maintains that the only hopeful approach to healing lies in eliminating the causes of oppression without reinscribing and thus perpetuating their operative logic of severed relationality.

Prior to the establishment of Sabeel, Ateek had already begun formulating this challenge in terms of the “dual imperative” of the church in Israel-Palestine—namely, its prophetic ministry and its peacemaking ministry.¹⁶ Whereas the prophetic imperative of the church concerns its fundamental responsibility “to analyze and interpret events theologically” in order to proclaim the need for justice on the basis of its holy source, the peacemaking imperative reminds the church of its equally inherent role as “a catalyst of peace and reconciliation.”¹⁷ The former requires the church to “discern carefully the signs of the time and allow the mind of Christ to bear upon them,” by which an evaluative optic becomes active and provides essential criteria for ascertaining what is consonant with the

¹⁶ Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 151-162.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

God of justice and what is not.¹⁸ On the other hand, the church, “by its very nature in Christ,” is called to exercise this transformative orientation toward reality in a manner that makes present the love of God by “lifting high the banner of peace” and “constantly challenging the credibility of war and violence.”¹⁹

As the dual imperative indicates (and contrary to what the title of Ateek’s first book may seem to suggest), justice—while indispensable and fundamental—does not suffice for the theological understanding of liberation that Sabeel represents.²⁰ Ateek

¹⁸ Ibid. Ateek is here alluding to the Pauline expression that appears in 1 Cor 2:16: “For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.” His understanding of this Pauline notion is informed by the work of Welsh New Testament scholar Charles Harold Dodd (1884-1973), from whom Ateek quotes a passage suggesting that “one of the most striking features of the early Christian movement” was the immediate—even if “only partial”—knowledge of God in which the followers of Jesus were invited to share. Dodd interprets the Pauline “mind of Christ” in light of this empowering epistemic relation, which bestows reliable criteria upon the Christian for assessing what is consistent and what is inconsistent with God (80-81). As will be shown below, this insight is significant for Ateek’s development of a Palestinian theology of liberation.

¹⁹ Ibid., 152, 154. Ateek’s reflections on the attainability of peace in history are qualified by occasional indications of substantial anthropological and eschatological limitations. For instance, Ateek recognizes that the fallen human condition poses formidable challenges to peacemaking, which he describes as “a costly and difficult task because of the immensity and intensity of evil and human brokenness in the world” (150; cf. 123-130, 139-140, 183). While emphasizing the obstacles resulting from the human “propensity toward sin and evil,” he rejects fundamentally negative conceptions of the human person—for instance, that of early modern English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), who proposed that the natural state of the human person is war against all others—thereby retaining a fundamentally positive, albeit deeply troubled, understanding of human nature that does not preclude the important work of peacemaking (129, 209n17). Ateek insists that “peace is more fundamental than war,” and thus maintains that the church must proclaim and pursue its possibility. Indeed, his pre-Sabeel discussion on the need for establishing such a center designates it “a Center for Peacemaking in Israel-Palestine” (158). At the same time, however, Ateek mentions that “peace is too elusive to be fully attained in the world,” noting that the reality toward which Christians must strive ultimately bears an “eschatological dimension” (150). “The vision of total peace and harmony,” he writes, “lies at the consummation of history” (150; cf. 154-155, 207n4).

²⁰ The title *Justice and Only Justice* derives from Deut 16:20: “Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” Ateek’s discussion of this biblical passage, however, does not communicate an understanding of justice as sufficient. On the contrary, he reflects on this passage in the context of discussing the possibility of peace and reconciliation on the basis of justice; that is, “justice and only justice” will provide the necessary foundation for the ongoing process of liberation, but will not exhaust it (176-177; cf. 138-150, 159, 167-168). Moreover, Ateek frames the meaning of “justice and only justice” in light of a Jewish interpretation of Deut 16:20 that, highlighting the repetition of the term *justice*, identifies the first *justice* as pertaining to the Jewish people and the second to others. Advancing this commentary on the text in relation to the Israel-Palestine context, he writes: “The creation of the State of Israel, after the tragedy of the Holocaust, has rendered some justice to the Jewish people by giving them a home where they can live in peace. Although this home was built on the ashes of other peoples’ homes, on their pain and suffering, it has gradually come to be accepted by the Palestinians.

observes that since “God’s justice cannot be separated from God’s peace and love and mercy,” Christians should remain attentive to deformations of justice that attempt to extricate it from those transcendent features and appropriate it in accordance with the fragmented reality of the fallen human subject.²¹ This “fragmentation of the human being,” with its constitutive divergences and frailty, tends to disintegrate the idea of justice by reducing it to the domain of retributive desires or accommodating it to the “intoxicating” effects of power, frequently negating justice and effectively perpetuating its opposite.²² In discussing the “propensity to talk about justice in a strict sense,” for instance, Ateek notes that such an approach to justice—that is, as a “blind, impersonal, and exacting” mechanism—often “leaves the persons, the human family, or the nation involved fragmented and lost.”²³ As a humanizing corrective to this truncated model of justice, Sabeel aims to foster a vision of justice that preserves its interconnection with love, mercy, peace, righteousness, and reconciliation.²⁴

Such a holistic understanding of transformative praxis informs the call to critical engagement with violence that inheres in the dual imperative. The critical range of this approach is not restricted to external forms of violence that have been identified and

It is time now to go further and implement the second ‘justice,’ justice to the Palestinians...Justice to the Palestinians means the creation of a Palestinian state” (177; cf. 166). In short, the title of the book, when considered from the standpoint of Ateek’s framework, expresses the foundational status of justice in the form of a two-state solution as the necessary point of departure for the work of healing.

²¹ Ibid., 138-142.

²² Ibid., 124-130, 139.

²³ Ibid., 139.

²⁴ Ateek suggests that different approaches to justice can serve either to dehumanize or to humanize: “The search for strict justice, with its overtones of retaliation, can all too easily lower people to the level of the inhuman or even the subhuman; while the exercise of mercy and reconciliation can lift them up to the level of the genuinely human and even to the divine.” Ibid., 142; cf. the discussion—similarly in the context of addressing the insufficiency of justice, even when it leads to peace—on the subhuman, the human, and the divine models of conflict resolution in Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 183-187. See also Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 119-122.

require prophetic intervention, but also includes a reflexive sensitivity to *how* those forms of violence are to be contested. This attention to the importance of prefigurative method aims to ensure that the process of witnessing against the negation of love does not itself unwittingly enact that same negation. Illustrating this commitment, Ateek writes that Christian Zionism “must be confronted and challenged in a spirit of love so that we who challenge it do not become guilty of what we criticize.”²⁵ The prophetic orientation toward justice is not compromised or enervated by the peacemaking ministry of the church; on the contrary, the latter seeks to elevate and safeguard it against deterioration in a sinful world.

Integral to the praxis of Sabeel, nonviolence reflects a vital aspect of the biblical message that Palestinian liberation theology develops in relation to its context of military occupation:

Against human propensity and predisposition for the use of violence, Sabeel reaches back to its source of faith and lifts up the words, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil” (Romans 12:17; 1 Peter 3:9), “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). We must not mirror evil. We must mirror Christ. We must not become what we loathe... We know that on the one hand, it is right to resist the evil occupation of our country, while on the other hand, in resisting the oppressive, inhuman, and brutal occupation, there is a danger that Palestinian organizations can become evil in the process.²⁶

Ateek maintains that Palestinian acts of violence and armed resistance are inadequate ways to respond to oppression. While recognizing the necessity for analyzing the conditions of dehumanization that breed desperation and reactionary violence in the first place, he insists that such approaches “will not contribute to the liberation of Palestine.

²⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 79.

²⁶ Ateek, “In Thanksgiving to God,” 4.

Every time we pick up a knife, fire a shot, turn a car into a weapon, or fire a missile from Gaza into Israel, we act foolishly.”²⁷ The only viable path toward justice is that which participates in the love and peace that are inseparable from its restorative goal: “Only the methods of nonviolence can uphold the humanity of Jew and Palestinian alike when the conflict finally ends. Moreover, because nonviolent resistance does not impinge on or

²⁷ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 118. Ateek’s analysis of the Israel-Palestine context offers a gradational understanding of violence, highlighting the foundational role that structural violence plays in generating counter-violence. Emphasizing that explanation is not justification (and remaining clear in his rejection of all forms of violence), he attends to “the roots of the conflict” as a precondition for properly examining the cyclical “evolution of violence in Palestine.” For example, see Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 35-48, 101-102, 115-117, 121-129, 178-185.

In this regard, Ateek’s contextual diagnosis intersects with some of the contributions of the Latin American church. For instance, Jon Sobrino discusses the important analyses of violence put forth in the documents of the 1968 CELAM conference in Medellín, Colombia, as well as in the writings of Óscar Romero and Ignacio Ellacuría. Sobrino mentions that Medellín approaches violence in terms of “a scale of types” that begins with structural injustice as a form of “institutionalized violence.” Similarly, Romero’s pastoral letters rank violence in a manner that identifies structural injustice as “the primary and worst of all types of violence” insofar as it “generates, on the one hand, repressive violence by the state and ultra-right-wing groups to maintain it and, on the other hand, the violence of popular insurrections as a response.” As such, Romero “stressed the primary necessity to fight first of all against structural injustice.” Last, Ellacuría also addresses the impact of structural violence, which inherently “generates the violence of repression (from armies and paramilitary groups),” and views revolutionary violence as “the objective, and very often historically inevitable, response” to the structural and repressive levels of violence. In his analysis, the violence of armed resistance “represents the struggle of the oppressed and repressed for their liberation.” Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 212-214.

The structural analysis and attention to stratification that Sobrino highlights in these approaches to the reality of violence prevent an oversimplified neutralization of different forms of violence. On this basic diagnostic level, specifically in examining the key link between structural and derivative violence, they coincide with Ateek’s understanding of violence in the Israel-Palestine context. However, on an evaluative level, there is a significant discontinuity worth noting: Sobrino mentions that Medellín, albeit preferring nonviolence, applies “the principle of a legitimate response of insurrectionary violence” under certain conditions; Romero, although always calling for nonviolent solutions, “followed the traditional doctrine of just war” in relation to armed resistance; and Ellacuría, while observing that “armed struggle is always an evil,” considered revolutionary violence as “justified and, to a point, obligatory” if it contributes in a substantial way to the “good of the poor majorities” (ibid.). In contrast, Ateek’s position is unyielding in its categorical rejection of violence, leaving no theoretical room for negotiating the potential legitimacy of counter-violence. Moreover, while lamenting the proclivity for violence that haunts fallen humanity, he does not frame armed resistance as an inevitable response to more fundamental forms of violence. On the contrary, Ateek suggests that the possibility of nonviolence is never foreclosed. For example, in discussing the rise of Hamas as a violent response to oppression, he observes that this was not an inevitable outcome: “I must clarify that the Muslim community was not bound to adopt the armed resistance for its struggle. It could have been possible for it to adopt also [i.e., as Sabeel did] the method of nonviolence.” Ateek, “In Thanksgiving to God,” 2-4.

violate the human dignity of people, it contributes later to more effective reconciliation and healing.”²⁸

4.4 CHRISTOLOGICAL DIVERGENCES: CRITIQUING THE MILITARIZATION OF JESUS

Embodied peacemaking as an essential dimension of Sabeel’s Christian identity exemplifies the project of christological recuperation that characterizes Palestinian liberation theology. In particular, Ateek’s discussion of the nonviolent role of the church highlights the significance of regional Eastern Christian perspectives on the way of love displayed in the life and teachings of Jesus. He mentions that “the fundamental Christian attitude toward conflict and war familiar to the Christians in the Middle East is that of Jesus—the way of nonviolence. It is very difficult to study the life of Jesus in the Gospels and not conclude that nonviolence was his philosophy...For Eastern Christians, this is their tradition, their Gospel milieu, their heritage.”²⁹ Ateek distinguishes this aspect of the Eastern Christian tradition in the Middle East from a notable theological shift that took place within Western Christianity as the church expanded in the historical context of Roman imperial domination. This shift amounted to “another attitude toward war after the Constantinianization of Christianity in the fourth century,” namely, the embrace of just war theory.³⁰

Ateek describes this development in the history of Christianity as threatening the

²⁸ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 125.

²⁹ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 134. For Ateek’s overview of the history of Eastern Christianity, see Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 17-24.

³⁰ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 134-135.

church with an imperial eclipse of its living source. The insidious reconciliation of church and empire set into motion a process of abandoning the way of Jesus that continues to impact the integrity of the church and the life of discipleship today: “Christians began to deviate from the *sabeel* (or way) of Christ when we began to glorify military power, when we made peace with empire and became a part of it. We justified war and baptized it. We became merciless with our enemies and started to kill people in the name of God...Church fathers such as Augustine and Ambrose were instrumental in promoting this theology, and walking hand in hand empire and Christianity marched through history together.”³¹ Prior to the Constantinian shift, Ateek notes, Christians “lived in the shadow of the cross and its meaning,” enduring various forms of persecution without recourse to armed resistance.³² Discussing the lifeway of early Christians before the turning point of the fourth century, he remarks: “They were convinced that the way of Christ was the way of the cross. Discipleship for them meant following in the footsteps of Christ, and this could include the way of suffering.”³³ When the Roman Empire eventually ceased to persecute the church and began to conjoin imperial power and ecclesial life, loyalty to Christ (and thus the credibility of its prophetic witness) became deeply compromised. “Christ was co-opted by the powers and used in the service of the state,” Ateek writes, “Jesus Christ was militarized.”³⁴

In contrast to the Constantinian trajectory of the church, Ateek identifies the

³¹ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 92.

³² *Ibid.*, 100.

³³ *Ibid.*; cf. Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 161-162.

³⁴ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 100.

church in Israel-Palestine as illustrating a regional Eastern Christian conviction regarding the model of Jesus. Indeed, he suggests that nonviolence is “the only way of life that really makes sense to Eastern Christians.”³⁵ Observing an important contextual factor in relation to this orientation, he mentions that “Eastern Christians, including Palestinian Christians, still live in a pre-Constantinian world. They constitute a minority in the various countries of the Middle East. They have to live their faith and witness, at times daily, in difficult situations.”³⁶ While cautioning that his description of the relation between the nonviolence of Jesus and Eastern Christianity is not intended to imply that Eastern Christians are always committed to nonviolent action, Ateek proposes that the aforementioned similarity of their setting to that of the pre-Constantinian church amounts to “a special foundation which lends itself to the work of peace and reconciliation” in the context of Israel-Palestine; that is, the experience of communal marginality and the lack of “state or secular power” contribute to the lived faith of Christians by strengthening their knowledge that “the way of Jesus is not the way of war but of peace.”³⁷

³⁵ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 135.

³⁶ Ibid.; cf. 161.

³⁷ Ibid., 135, 161; Naim Ateek, “Pentecost and the Intifada,” in *Reading from This Place*, vol. 2, *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 69-70. Lebanese philosopher Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab suggests that the demographic context of Ateek’s work as a member of a minority community (i.e., as a Palestinian Christian) perhaps warrants attention as an epistemological resource, observing that such a communal setting could have provided a vantage point for discerning and recovering elements of the Christian tradition that are essential to Ateek’s model of praxis. While noting that this minority position leads Ateek to recognize that “the challenge of a liberation theology is, among other things, to transmogrify this marginalized minority condition into one of dynamic witness,” she also mentions that “it may be the disguised blessing for Arab Christians to have a minority status that enhances their sensitivity to the prophetic vocation of their faith, especially when they manage to resist despair and emigration—knowing, of course, that even within this minority group, the prophetic voice would itself be a minority voice.” Adopting the expression of Moroccan literary critic Abdelkebir al-Khatibi, she writes that “such a prophetic theology would be *une pensée autre*, a ‘different thought,’ ...born of the margins,” resistant to triumphalism and non-relational modes of thinking. Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 208-213.

4.5 LIBERATION THEOLOGY AS THEOLOGICALLY LIBERATING: OVERCOMING INHIBITIONS

Retrieval of the way of Christ in a manner that renders explicit its deeply political significance comprises a major element of the critical activity of Palestinian liberation theology. Such a task cannot circumvent the need to resist and contest theological frameworks that serve to conceal this (or any other) distinguishing mark of the ministry of Jesus: “We cannot continue to remain complicit. We must reject and condemn the church’s adoption of the warrior messiah image because it is a deviation from the gospel of Christ...In today’s world, where violence and warfare have increased, it is important for us as Christians to review this [post-Constantinian] history and recognize where we have fallen. We must consciously try to rediscover the way of Christ.”³⁸ In light of the dual imperative, then, Sabeel proclaims the recovery of this path—an active presence that consistently refuses both imperial violence and counter-violence—not only as offering a liberative understanding of God’s justice bearing on the reality of suffering in Israel-Palestine, but also as liberating the theological imagination itself and enabling it to recalibrate its ministerial terrain. Insofar as the ongoing articulation of a theology of liberation forms one of Sabeel’s main objectives, Ateek notes, it simultaneously faces the challenge of another basic responsibility: the liberation of theology.³⁹

While Ateek views the Palestinian Christian attunement to the nonviolence of

³⁸ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 100-101; cf. 92-96, 136-138, 180.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 10-13. The similar terminology and methodological orientation notwithstanding, Ateek does not draw on the much earlier work of Juan Luis Segundo in discussing the liberation of theology. See Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology*, trans. John Drury (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, [1975] 2002).

Jesus as a fruitful resource for cultivating ecclesial praxis, he acknowledges that it does not suffice for liberative faith. In reference to the vulnerable minority status of the Palestinian Christian community, he writes: “In difficult and dangerous times, and in order to survive, their theology over time became a theology of resignation, isolation, and noninterference.”⁴⁰ Knowledge of the way of peace as modeled and taught by Jesus did not necessarily preclude a “submissive and passive” faith; on the contrary, the theological insight into the principle of nonviolence often accommodated to the silencing of the prophetic ministry in politically repressive situations.⁴¹ “Such silence is deadly,” Ateek observes, and Sabeel is tasked with overcoming the attendant “stagnant and dormant theologies” by steadily “articulating a theology that helps liberate our theologies and, at the same time, helps us understand what it means to walk with God and do God’s work in the world today.”⁴² Formulating a theologically cogent approach to liberation requires awakening theology from its slumber of complacency and complicity.

This process of liberating theology in order for theological reflection to receive and pronounce its liberative word is not confined to the problem of quiescence. Ateek mentions that the liberation of theology also concerns “biblical misinterpretation and misunderstanding” and encompasses “those biblical passages that glorify violence and present God as a god of war.”⁴³ That is, remedying the conditions which inhibit an adequate theological expression of liberation entails engaging problematic currents in the theological reception of biblical materials as well as in the biblical sources themselves.

⁴⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 11-12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12.

The work of dislodging the various hindrances to thinking theologically in ways that remain uncompromisingly life-affirming and promotive of intercommunal flourishing constitutes a preeminent area of Sabeel's ministry.

The ecumenical character of Sabeel testifies to the importance of liberating theology from the ossifying spell of communally damaging paradigms. Ateek discusses the long history of theological controversies and denominational divisions that have affected the Palestinian Christian community.⁴⁴ "From an ecclesiastical perspective," he laments, "it has been...a sad history of a fragmented body of Christ, with so many Christian divisions and splits."⁴⁵ In continuity with his earlier ecumenical ministry in Haifa, however, his initial description of the dual imperative that would eventually guide the work of Sabeel underscored its unifying and healing value. Ateek writes that "the dual imperative...would help the different churches [in Israel-Palestine] to concentrate on a common plan of action rather than focusing their attention on internal differences. It would emphasize the positive rather than the negative aspects of the situation"⁴⁶ The prophetic and peacemaking ministries are "the responsibility of all the Christian churches in the land" and "provide a positive channeling of the energy of the various churches," offering the opportunity to foster a robust interdenominational presence grounded in

⁴⁴ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 17-23; Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 50-62.

⁴⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 23.

⁴⁶ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 152-153. Palestinian Mennonite and Sabeel co-founder Jonathan Kuttab recounts the sense of interdenominational unity that emerged from the proto-Sabeel discussion groups: "Palestinian Christians from all denominations found that we shared similar concerns, worries, faith issues, and outlooks. We were surprised to find that as we read the Bible and prayed and discussed together, we faced similar theological issues, whether we were Catholic, Greek Orthodox, evangelical, Armenian, or something else." Such experiences would eventually carry over into the ministry of Sabeel: "Our efforts were to bring Palestinian Christians together and make our faith a living reality, rather than a set of dogmas and rituals practiced every Sunday." Jonathan Kuttab, "A Relevant Faith," *Cornerstone* 66 (Summer 2013): 20-21.

weightier matters—that is, inviting a transition “from quiescence to dynamism” that upholds a theological conversation liberated from delusions of enclosure and enriched by shared service on the path toward liberation.⁴⁷

The theologically liberating movement in the direction of ecumenical witness poses a persisting challenge for Sabeel. Ateek regrets that the work of “transcending denominationalism and finding our true identity in Christ”—which, to be sure, does not entreat Christians to abandon the particularities of their faith tradition but rather to cherish them while recognizing “the importance of working together ecumenically”—remains impeded by “the narrow religious denominationalism of Middle Eastern Christianity.”⁴⁸ Calling for “a more radical biblical revolution for our churches here and abroad,” his position on the preconditions for this ongoing difficulty suggests an acute need for the liberation of theology: “Many are still bogged down with antiquated interpretations that reflect [a] narrow understanding of God and exclusive interpretations of the Bible that have imprisoned and choked Christians for generations.”⁴⁹ Embedded in the ecumenical ministry of Sabeel, then, is the task of surpassing the reality of denominational separatism by exposing its untenable theological foundations and restoring a productive sense of theological openness amid the “beautiful mosaic...and rich liturgical and ecclesiastical heritage” of Palestinian Christianity.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 155, 157.

⁴⁸ Ateek, “In Thanksgiving to God,” 4-5; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 13.

⁴⁹ Ateek, “In Thanksgiving to God,” 5

⁵⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 23. It should be noted that while Ateek views the dual imperative as facilitating the ecumenical dimension of ecclesial life in Israel-Palestine, the reconciliatory significance of the latter is “as significant as the work of peacemaking itself.” That is, the love that finds expression in ecumenical healing carries intrinsic value and not simply consequential or functional value. Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 156; cf. Ateek, “In Thanksgiving to God,” 4.

In addition to its ecumenical orientation, Sabeel sustains relationships with non-Christian faith communities as well as with non-religious groups. Ateek writes that Sabeel, while firmly situated in Christ as its foundation, is “joined by other people of other faiths—Christians, Muslims, and Jews—as well as secular people,” all of whom share a commitment to justice and peace in Israel-Palestine.⁵¹ This model of communal heterogeneity stems from a relational spirituality that affirms the transcendent depths of togetherness: “God is the creator of all, and God’s love and care embraces all. We are all members of the same human family whom God has created. We seek to relate to one another in love and respect for the dignity of every human being, to serve one another, and to work together for justice and peace for all people.”⁵² An understanding of God that brings into stark relief the common humanity that transfuses differences and inspires one to traverse those differences in a spirit of loving encounter affords a liberating corrective to insular theologies that derogate otherness.

Special emphasis is given to Sabeel’s relationship with the Palestinian Muslim community, to which the majority of Palestinians belong. The perennial problem of baleful representation and the general rise of anti-Muslim sentiments directly threaten Palestinian populations, thus forming an exigent part of the context to which Palestinian liberation theology seeks to respond. Ateek highlights the distinct pertinence of this area of Sabeel’s interfaith activity: “Islam has been cast as the enemy of the western world and the enemy of freedom and liberation. Islamophobia is a phenomenon that must be addressed. Sabeel has a role to play in tackling the local Christian-Muslim agenda as well

⁵¹ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 131; cf. Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 158-159.

⁵² Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 140.

as the international one. As Christian Palestinians, we have a responsibility to work with our Muslim brothers and sisters in presenting the true face of Islam. At the same time, we need to work together against extremist Islamists that damage the good relations between our two religions and mar the face of their own religion.”⁵³ Exemplifying the praxis of prophetic nonviolence, Sabeel protests the pernicious othering of Muslims and Islamic tradition, actively nurturing Christian-Muslim understanding as an indispensable element in its vision of justice.

4.6 ENGAGING WORLD AND WORD: THE THEOLOGY OF GOD IN TENSION

The ecumenical and interfaith dimensions of Sabeel’s work reflect the dual imperative as well as the anti-exclusionary notion of God that provides its theological basis. This foundational theological insight, inasmuch as it engenders opposition to both theological discourses and concrete realities that are fundamentally incompatible with its message of transformation, betrays an unmistakably tensional weight. The prophetic ministry, animated by “a concept of God that is both biblically and theologically based,” aims to name, expose, and abolish conditions of inhumanity that continue to be imposed on the disinherited.⁵⁴ Peacemaking, on the other hand, which illustrates in a concrete manner the occurrence of “a new conversion experience” whereby “a new knowledge of

⁵³ Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 35; cf. Ateek, “In Thanksgiving to God,” 4; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 24; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 13-14. In his blueprint for Sabeel’s ministry, Ateek mentions the work of “de-stereotyping Western images of the people of the Middle East.” Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 159.

⁵⁴ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 153-154.

God” has become operative, subsists in contesting the destructive cycle of violence and every theoretical framework that enshrines its defining values.⁵⁵ Contrastive and denunciative, the source of historical defiance that resides at the theological core of Sabeel’s ministry exclaims the eminence of life against the tragic reality of its effacement by oppression.

This tensional potency at the heart of Sabeel, while evincing the liberative biblical image of God’s partiality toward the victims of injustice and thereby attesting that its inspiration for the praxis of prophetic nonviolence derives from biblical testimony, also tends to the biblical text itself when its contents endorse injury to others.⁵⁶ Disavowal of such theological tendencies in the Bible, however, is irreducible to a critical sensibility that is brought to bear upon the Bible *from without*; rather, Ateek maintains that this critical friction belongs intrinsically to the biblical inheritance—that is, it is *internal* to the Bible and thus always precedes its application as a biblical hermeneutic by readers today. An expression of Ateek’s contextual (dis)location as a Palestinian Christian, the intensely nonsynthetic configuration of the biblical sources that emerges in Palestinian liberation theology provides the conceptual apparatus that frames his approach to the exodus narrative.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 155-156.

⁵⁶ With regard to this acknowledgment of biblical inspiration, an example appears in Ateek’s discussion of the theme of “divine concentration and apparent bias toward the powerless and the oppressed,” mainly as it appears in the Hebrew Bible. Having presented this “biblical principle” of “God’s principal concern” for those who suffer from injustice, Ateek mentions that “once this biblical and theological idea is understood, it should produce political responsibility.” Rather than accommodating passivity, hope in the God of the oppressed should give rise to congruent praxis, “inviting people to become co-laborers with God.” Such an understanding of God offers “a strong incentive” to pursue God’s justice in a history that remains deeply marked by its negation. Ibid., 130-134, 141-142.

4.7 NAVIGATING A FRICTIONAL BIBLICAL TEXT: THE CENTRALITY OF THE THEOLOGY OF GOD

In his account of the Palestinian Christian experience of the Bible in the aftermath of 1948 and 1967, Ateek examines the liberative status of biblical narratives by attending to the interaction between biblical texts and contemporary readers in a way that does not subsume either side of that relation into the other. As a result, his treatment of the role of the biblical heritage in the Christian tradition displays a twofold accountability structure that exonerates neither text nor reader by recourse to an apologetic emphasis on problems of misinterpretation or an exclusively text-oriented critique, respectively. Encompassing both the diverse content of biblical sources and modes of appropriating it, this evaluative range signals a distinctive feature of Palestinian liberation theology in comparison to the classical formulations of liberation theology. While this comparative perspective on the hermeneutical contribution of Palestinian liberation theology is not developed in Ateek's writings, the following general observation on the predominant approach to the biblical materials in liberation theology indicates an awareness of the distinction: "Liberation theologians have seen the Bible as a dynamic source for their understanding of liberation, but if some parts of it are applied literally to our situation today the Bible appears to offer to the Palestinians slavery rather than freedom, injustice rather than justice, and death to their national and political life."⁵⁷ As the applicative language in this passage illustrates,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 75. When Ateek does provide comparative remarks on global liberation theologies, the focus is on the shared commitment to critiquing systemic injustice across contextual differences. The specific misuse of the Bible that characterizes the Palestinian context is contrasted with the general liberative approach to reading Scripture that is embraced by the "global theological movement" to which Palestinian liberation theology belongs. For example, see Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 9-13; Naim Stifan Ateek, "What Is Palestinian Liberation Theology?," *Cornerstone* 1 (Spring 1994): 2-3.

Ateek often employs terminology that suggests analytical oscillation between the level of the text and that of the reader; however, as discussed below, the hermeneutical lexicon of misuse and manipulation that appears throughout Ateek's engagement with irresponsible forms of biblical interpretation does not necessarily signify a discontinuity between the theological orientation of a particular text and its appropriation by the reader. Adherence to biblical perspectives and distortion of the biblical message do not always amount to a binary from the standpoint of Palestinian liberation theology. Ateek's understanding of the nature of the biblical tradition is key to considering the significance of this insight into the text-reader relationship as it pertains to the question of liberation.

Essentially, the context-sensitive approach to the biblical sources that Ateek

This global-comparative context has been noted by other theologians and scholars. For instance, biblical scholar J. David Pleins recognized early on that Ateek's *Justice and Only Justice* "shifts the liberation dialogue into a new key" insofar as it "forces us to grapple with some rather disturbing aspects of theological reflection and biblical interpretation that come to the fore when issues of liberation are raised in relation to the Middle East situation but which are glossed over or treated rather differently in other situations where liberation theology seeks to engage prevailing injustices." Comparing Palestinian liberation theology with its Latin American and South African counterparts, Pleins—noting a shift in focus from "economic and class structures" to the historical experience of expulsion and expropriated land—identifies in Ateek a methodological reorientation toward the biblical sources "that is more complex than the typical Latin American or South African treatments of these materials." In light of Ateek's approach to the Bible, Pleins situates him closer to the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Itumeleng J. Mosala. J. David Pleins, "Is a Palestinian Theology of Liberation Possible?," *Anglican Theological Review* 74, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 134-136, 137-142.

Similarly, biblical scholar Fernando Segovia, in a substantial and insightful reflection on Ateek's theological project—an essay presented as "an act of solidarity by way of criticism"—observes that "the proposal [of Palestinian liberation theology] differs, from the start [i.e., since the publication of *Justice and Only Justice* in 1989], in rather significant ways from the by-then well-established tradition of liberationist thinking." In addition to the shift in focus from "the global political economy forged by capitalism" (i.e., as it appears in Latin American liberation theology) to "oppression by way of deprivation of land and property as a result of armed conflict and military occupation" (or "geopolitical oppression"), Segovia too identifies the shift in the approach to the Bible: in place of "the sustained appeal to the Bible—by way of support—as the Word of God that stands, fully and unambiguously, with the poor and the oppressed in their struggle for social justice" (i.e., as reflected in Latin American liberation theology), he mentions that Palestinian liberation theology resembles "feminist biblical criticism" in its "explicit recognition of the ambiguity of the Bible and... resolve to 'save' and 'redeem' the Bible, but not as a whole, as source and resource for justice." Fernando F. Segovia, "Engaging the Palestinian Theological-Critical Project of Liberation: A Critical Dialogue," in *The Biblical Text in the Context of Occupation: Towards a New Hermeneutics of Liberation*, ed. Mitri Raheb (Bethlehem: Diyar, 2012), 29-30, 32-34, 36-38, 47; cf. 42-45, 48-66, 397n31.

elaborates as one of the principal tasks of a Palestinian theology of liberation aims to provide a model for identifying and responding to the fundamentally different theological expressions that are encountered when reading the Bible. These diverging voices within the biblical corpus articulate conflicting understandings of God—namely, as inclusive, universally loving, and a presence of peace, or as exclusionary, nationalistically invested, and manifesting terror. Ateek highlights the importance of recognizing this element of contestation between scriptural traditions for thinking theologically about the relational meaning of God in light of lived experience: “The Bible is a record of the dynamic, sometimes severe, tension between nationalist and universalist conceptions of the deity. For Palestinian Christians, this theme is one of the most fundamental theological issues, since it is directly related to the concept of God. This is why it demands attention in a Palestinian theology of liberation.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, such a recognition does not concern only certain sections or particular books among the biblical materials since “the tension between the inclusive and the exclusive concepts of God permeates the entire Bible. The two are dynamically related, always influencing and affecting one another.”⁵⁹ Pervading the biblical texts, this characteristic of theological friction warrants constructive analysis in the process of pursuing the liberation of theology.

In his exposition of the principle of God’s partiality toward the oppressed and the transcendent source of expansive justice, for instance, Ateek appeals to a multitude of

⁵⁸ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 92; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 51, 54-56, 58-77, 95-100, 109-111, 122-129, 130-138, 140-150, 162-164; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 47-82; Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 26-33; Naim Ateek, “Who Is My Neighbor?,” *Interpretation* 62, no. 2 (April 2008): 157-161.

⁵⁹ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 92.

liberating expressions of these themes found throughout the Hebrew Bible, including the testimony of Exodus, Deuteronomy, Kings, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Amos, Jonah, Micah, and other texts.⁶⁰ He remarks that “the concept of God as inclusive in character and just in all ways becomes clearer when one consider the recipients of God’s justice. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, God shows special concern for the underprivileged, the disadvantaged, and the vulnerable. This attribute of God, as concerned for the welfare of the weak, is not peculiar to one section of the biblical literature but is characteristic of the Pentateuch, the Prophets, the Writings, and the New Testament.”⁶¹

Among this diversity of scriptural voices proclaiming the God of justice for whom the victims come first, Ateek places special emphasis on the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures, in which he recognizes a “deep, profound, and mature understanding of God.”⁶² While he draws attention to the presence of “some profound insights in the Torah, as well as in the Writings that are included in this [prophetic] tradition,” Ateek notes that this tradition revolves around “the great prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures.”⁶³ Specifically calling attention to the expanding apprehension of God’s mercy and love that appears in this tradition, he connects its importance to the major contribution it made in the process of overcoming more nationalistically restrictive and inadequate notions of

⁶⁰ Ibid., 86-97, 115-150; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 15, 67-77, 97, 131-136, 143-145; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 52, 54, 60-82.

⁶¹ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 130.

⁶² Ibid., 96; cf. Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 29.

⁶³ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 96, 198n37.

God: “The best illustrations for the inclusive nature of God...are those given by the prophets, who saw God as a God of justice and righteousness who demands ethical living of all nations.”⁶⁴

Such a universalizing theological trajectory notwithstanding, Ateek maintains that the Hebrew Bible “vacillates between exclusivity and inclusiveness.”⁶⁵ In contrast to the liberating model of God’s justice for all, he addresses another influential tradition that is identifiable in the biblical sources and ultimately qualifies those particular sources as “texts that can be very detrimental to our faith.”⁶⁶ In *Justice and Only Justice*, the first biblical narrative that Ateek provides as an example of this exclusionary depiction of God concerns the Israelite conquest of Canaan. Discussing the account of the destruction of Jericho in Josh 6, he mentions “God’s injunction to ‘utterly destroy all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and asses, with the edge of the sword,’” and invites readers of the narrative to probe the idea of God that it reflects in order to assess the pedagogical value and validity of this particular biblical message.⁶⁷ This story of divinely decreed massacre serves as a prime illustration of the need to exercise a hermeneutic of critical discernment in reading the Bible. “For Palestinian Christians,” Ateek writes, “the core question that takes priority over all others is whether what is being read in the Bible is the Word of *God* to them and whether it reflects the nature,

⁶⁴ Ibid., 96; cf. 117-119; Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 28-31.

⁶⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 58.

⁶⁶ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 47.

⁶⁷ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 83.

will, and purpose of *God* for them.”⁶⁸ The challenge of ascertaining the revelatory status of biblical narratives and themes remains interlocked with the fundamental questions posed by the theology of God.

Ateek’s writings make abundantly clear the importance of persistently examining this problematic biblical tradition as part of his larger theological project. He provides numerous instances of other expressions of this conception of God, including the episode of the “small boys” whom Elisha cursed in the name of God for calling him “baldhead,” which resulted in two bears mauling forty-two boys (2 Kgs 2:23-24), the Torah passages in which Moses instructs the Israelites to “utterly destroy” the “seven nations” inhabiting Canaan and proscribes extending mercy to them as well as intermarrying (e.g., Deut 7:1-3), and the prohibition against accepting an Ammonite or a Moabite into the Israelite community (Deut 23:3-6).⁶⁹ In similar fashion to the narrative recounting the destruction of Jericho, Ateek seeks to establish the reader’s orientation toward these biblical sources in markedly evaluative terms. With regard to the message of “ethnic annihilation,” for examples, he writes: “Texts such as this are used today to justify killing or expelling Palestinians—Christians and Muslims...Such texts reflect a tribal and an exclusive way of thinking that, to a large extent, was later critiqued and repudiated within the Old Testament itself.”⁷⁰ A crucial element in the emerging corrective to the faith Nakba, the cultivation of a hermeneutically viable encounter with the understanding of God that is transmitted in such biblical materials should prompt the reader to ask: “Does the God of

⁶⁸ Ibid., 79 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁹ Ibid., 83; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 50-51; cf. 49-50. The seven nations mentioned in Deut 7 are the following: Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites.

⁷⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 51; cf. 48; Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 27.

love who loves all people equally order the ethnic cleansing of the indigenous people of the land?”⁷¹

4.8 MATURATION IN AN UNSYSTEMATIC KEY: REVELATION AND THE (TWOFOOLD) PROBLEM OF RECEPTION

As indicated by the language of theological maturation applied to the prophetic tradition and the idea of a gradually appearing message in the Bible that challenges the exclusionary notion of God, Ateek embraces a developmental model of revelation in his approach to the biblical corpus. Recognizing the importance of a biblical hermeneutic that fosters an appreciation for the growing and deepening apprehension of God among the biblical authors—a developing theological imagination and discourse which bespeak the limitations of the human condition—he observes that “what is reported as the words and deeds of God in certain passages of the Bible is not at all the same thing as the authentic Word or the knowledge of God. God has indeed been revealed to us throughout history, but this revelation has been communicated through the human medium. Humans are not only limited by the scientific and historical knowledge of their time; they are equally, miserably, limited in their religious knowledge, that is, in their understanding and perception of God.”⁷² The rise of biblical voices witnessing to the universal justice and salvific embrace of God signals a generative experience of more profound contact

⁷¹ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 50.

⁷² Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 85-86.

with transcendence and thereby yields new theological insights that render untenable the conflicting (and conflictual) tradition that bears the imprint of “an early stage of human understanding of God’s revelation.”⁷³

The model of developing knowledge of God that frames Ateek’s treatment of the biblical texts should not imply a historical system of mechanistic progress. While focused on the process of “deepening maturity” and thus naturally accentuating the movement in the direction of overcoming harmful ways of thinking about God, Ateek mentions that “this developing understanding was not always systematic and consistent. At times, one could detect tension, struggle, and even regression.”⁷⁴ Characterizing the jagged circuit of “growing understanding” as one of “unsystematic development,” he suggests that the nature of the human reception and mediation of God’s self-revelation requires an active, discerning readership in order not to fall into the trap of “reanimating” exclusionary theological tendencies in the contemporary world.⁷⁵ However, the detrimental snare of biblical misappropriation remains a substantial problem today: “Tragically...we still have

⁷³ Ibid., 82; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 51-52, 61, 65-66. Ateek notes that “it is difficult to point to a specific date when the inclusive view of the sovereignty of God began to take hold” among biblical authors, citing eighth-century examples of theological growth in Amos and First Isaiah. In spite of these early voices, however, Ateek highlights the importance of the exilic experience (586-ca. 538 BCE) as a turning point in the theology of God. The impact of this historical “disaster” seems to have “stretched the people’s understanding of God.” It was during this period, he suggests, that the “universalist concept [of God] began to crystallize.” Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 92-93, 107-110, 196n7; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 63-64, 72-75, 130-134; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 51-52, 60-61, 63-65, 68, 81, 84; Naim Ateek, “The Earth Is the Lord’s: Land, Theology, and the Bible,” in *The Land Cries Out: Theology of the Land in the Israeli-Palestinian Context*, ed. Salim J. Munayer and Lisa Loden (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 179-180; Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 28.

⁷⁴ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 196n7; cf. 92-93.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 80-83, 101, 196n7. Two points concerning this “unsystematic” process of theological maturation deserve mention here. First, while Ateek views the tension between the two basic theological traditions as characterizing the Bible in its entirety, he does not propose an oversimplified version of this binary that would allow for all biblical books or authors to be easily classifiable in terms of a universally oriented or an exclusionary concept of God. “These were not two defined and distinguishable camps,” he writes, “with all of those who espoused a universalist and inclusive view on the one side and those who rejected it on the other. The same prophet could be the author of both views, affirming both, swerving from one to the other;

people who refuse to shed such ideas and continue to cling to an antiquated exclusive tribal theology that in its extreme form expresses itself in violent behavior and vicious crimes against others.”⁷⁶

Reversive theological thinking pertains not only to the contested understanding of God found among the biblical materials but also to contemporary readers of the Bible who, encountering articulations of divine belligerence and exclusivism, persist in uncritically internalizing such ideas. The slow and frictional process of unsystematic development which affects the workings of the theological imagination in the biblical sources, in combination with “the propensity of human nature,” produces conditions for biblical appropriation in which “it is easy for people of every century to mistake the tribal and exclusive as the authentic message of the Bible. This tension between the tribal and universal continues to affect us today.”⁷⁷ Failure to discern the presence of diverging traditions in the biblical heritage by tacitly neutralizing the dynamic theological

or else, as so often happened, later redactors might have made sure that the prophet’s view was balanced by including the other view.” A single theological voice or text, then, may “fluctuate between an exclusive and inclusive view of God, people, and the land, and vacillate between a nationalist and a universal view.” As an example of this ambivalence, Ateek mentions the adjoining of “racist utterances,” violent nationalism, and “universalism” in Second Isaiah.

Second, just as notable expressions of the sublime theological imagination appear in the preexilic period, so too do adverse articulations of God after the exile. The absence of unilinear growth in Ateek’s notion of unsystematic development is evident in his treatment of the sharp “return to dogmatic traditions and exclusionary laws” that can be recognized in some responses to the exilic tragedy found among the biblical sources. As discussed in chapter 5, he identifies in the postexilic leadership model of Ezra and Nehemiah “the beginning of the establishment of a religious tradition that leaned toward traditionalism, conservatism, exclusivity, and xenophobia.” Ibid., 93, 96; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 54-56, 63, 73, 130-134, 142-143; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 68-69, 76, 81, 83-84; Ateek, “Earth Is the Lord’s,” 180.

⁷⁶ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 66; cf. 143-144.

⁷⁷ Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 28. Comparable to the aforementioned limitations imposed on the work of peacemaking as a result of the fallen human condition (see note 19 above), theological anthropology surfaces in Ateek’s brief comments on the persistence of the “question of exclusivity versus inclusivity.” This tension remains a problem in the contemporary world “because it has to do with human nature, human reason, human temperament, and the human psyche.” Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 83-84.

multiplicity of its testimony results in a deeply impoverished reception of the biblical message.⁷⁸ Reminding his readers of the regrettable interpretive tendencies that pervade Christian history, Ateek remarks: “The Bible has been the object of much misuse and abuse; and the need to correctly understand and interpret it is a daunting task that is difficult to attain. We know from the history of the Christian church in various parts of the world, how the Bible has been used to justify many things...Christians have justified war, slavery, polygamy, discrimination against women and many other evils by appealing to certain biblical texts.”⁷⁹ In response to these hermeneutical obstacles facing Palestinian Christians who are presented with disparate portrayals of God in the Bible, Ateek asserts

⁷⁸ In several ways, Ateek’s earliest reflections on the theological diversity comprising the Hebrew Bible anticipate biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann’s concept of the “polyphonic character” of the Hebrew Scriptures. Developed in his classic 1997 work *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Brueggemann’s analysis of the biblical text as polyphonic was not yet available at the time Ateek first formulated his Palestinian theology of liberation in *Justice and Only Justice*. In his 2008 book *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation*, however, Ateek does engage Brueggemann’s concept, but this discussion is limited to the questions it raises for how Christians approach the Hebrew Bible and does not seek to integrate the notion of polyphony into Ateek’s model of a tensional biblical text (see pp. 53-54). In his foreword to Ateek’s most recent book, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, Brueggemann appears to hint in passing at the concept of the polyphonic text when he expresses hope that Zionist readers of Ateek “will show interest in the radical reinterpretation of texts that takes place in the Hebrew Bible itself” (xviii), but the theme does not receive explicit treatment in this book.

While the connection is not addressed in an explicit manner by Brueggemann or Ateek, it seems difficult not to recognize an affinity between the key insights of “polyphonic reading” and the conflicting theologies of God to which Palestinian liberation theology attends in examining the nature of the biblical texts. In brief, the polyphonic character of the Bible—terminology which Brueggemann derives from New Testament scholar Mark Coleridge—refers to the “quality of *many voices as the voice* of the text,” the “unsettled” and “variegated quality of the text” that offers not only multiplicity of theological views but “dissonance” and “contradictory intentionalities.” This polyphonic or “profoundly plurivocal” testimony, in which “the primary mode of articulation is disputatious and permeated with contrariness,” inherently defies the efforts of “hegemonic interpretation” and “totalizing” approaches that aim to collapse the “disjunctions and contradictions” of the Hebrew Bible into a theologically stable synthesis. In this regard, the pervasive tension between discordant theologies that is foregrounded in Ateek’s nonsynthetic orientation toward the biblical sources intersects with basic elements of Brueggemann’s understanding of polyphony. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, [1997] 2005), xiii, 88-107, 326-327 (emphasis in original); Walter Brueggemann, “Biblical Theology Appropriately Postmodern,” in *The Book That Breathes New Life: Scriptural Authority and Biblical Theology*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 131-139.

⁷⁹ Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 27-28.

the significance of Christ as a critical compass for navigating the developmental variance of the biblical terrain.

4.9 HERMENEUTICAL PRISMS: CHRIST, LOVE, AND THE WORD OF GOD

Consistent with both the practice and the theological basis of Sabeel's dual imperative, Ateek identifies Jesus of Nazareth as the criterion for assessing the revelatory value of biblical narratives. He writes: "In Palestinian liberation theology Jesus Christ becomes the hermeneutic, the lens or principle of interpretation through which Christians can examine, test, evaluate, and determine the authentic word of God for them and differentiate it from what is unauthentic and meaningless to their life of faith."⁸⁰ This approach to the biblical sources is grounded in the conviction that "in Christ and through Christ and because of Christ Christians have been given a revealed insight into God's nature and character."⁸¹ Knowledge of God, from the standpoint of Christian faith, is fundamentally a knowledge that is defined and nourished by the life and teachings of Jesus.⁸² The task of engaging the tensional theological development that Ateek describes as structuring the biblical texts receives as its hermeneutical key "the revelation of God in Christ."⁸³

This specifically Christian mode of reading the Bible attends to the conflicting

⁸⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 44.

⁸¹ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 79-80.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 80.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 81; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 45, 48-51, 83-104; Ateek, "Earth Is the Lord's," 175.

conceptions of God in a manner that remains informed and guided by the understanding of God that stems from Christ. “If Christians wanted to know what God is like,” Ateek notes, “they needed to look at Jesus Christ; and if they wanted to have a glimpse of the nature of God, they needed to see what Jesus Christ taught us about God and showed us in his life and relationships with others.”⁸⁴ The resulting theological model provides an evaluative template by which the Christian reader of scripture “can measure the authentic word of God.”⁸⁵ Bringing the epistemic force of the “mind of Christ” to bear upon the biblical voices “can determine the validity and authority” of their testimony in Christian life.⁸⁶

In this regard, Ateek’s writings indicate a development in his position on the aim of adjudicating biblical depictions of God by means of a Christ-based hermeneutic. His earliest description of this hermeneutical key involves a distinction between the value of biblical passages, on the one hand, and their validity and authority, on the other. This distinction is presented as follows:

There are certain passages in the Old Testament whose theological presuppositions and even assertions need not be affirmed by the Christian today, because they reflect an early stage of human understanding of God’s revelation that conflicts with the Christian’s understanding of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Although these passages need not impose particular doctrinal views or obligations on the contemporary Christian, they remain valuable pedagogically. Their value lies partially in their negative aspect: they clarify what God is not, as much as what God is. They offer the Christian a picture of God that contradicts the way God has come to be understood and known through Jesus Christ. Viewed from this perspective, the whole Bible is valuable, but not all of its parts have the same value and authority. Every part of the Bible that brings people to an understanding of God’s self-revelation in Christ has both authority and validity for the Christian. The Bible, therefore, remains the Word of God, “profitable for

⁸⁴ Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 26.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 80-83.

teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” [2 Tim 3:16]; but it is continuously submitted to an authoritative concept, that is, the revelation of God in Christ.⁸⁷

In Ateek’s early account of his hermeneutical method, then, the entirety of the biblical corpus exhibits pedagogical value, albeit in markedly different ways: certain texts hold negative, contrastive value as a result of their objectionable concept of God, while others display value as authoritative and valid texts. It is the validity and authority of a biblical passage—not its status as valuable—that the application of a christological optic seeks to ascertain. Thus Ateek counsels Christian readers who encounter “difficult” biblical texts to ask, “Does this fit the picture I have of God that Jesus has revealed to me? Does it match the character of the God whom I have come to know through Christ? If it does, then that passage is valid and authoritative. If not, then I cannot accept its validity or authority.”⁸⁸ Neither response renders the passage devoid of value.

In his most recent work, however, Ateek’s approach to biblical sources that are at variance with the conception of God revealed in Christ yields a subtle modification to the hermeneutical model articulated in *Justice and Only Justice*. In his *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, Ateek maintains that biblical narratives ascribing terror and exclusivism to God are neither authoritative *nor valuable* to contemporary Christians. He addresses the revelatory status of such texts in light of the relation between inimical representations of God and the lived experience of Palestinian Christians:

It is important to emphasize that the conflict over Palestine has revolutionized our reading and understanding of the Bible. Frankly, the sacred position that the Bible has held for many people has been called into question due to texts that depict God as being violent. As we have pointed out before, most of those texts reflect a

⁸⁷ Ibid., 82-83; cf. 196-197n8.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 81-82; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 45, 50-51.

tribal and exclusive understanding of God that was critiqued and rejected by later prophetic writers. Such texts do not contain any word from God for us. They do not reflect the mind or spirit of Christ. When we apply the hermeneutic of love, they fail the test. As we have seen, they were critiqued and transformed within the Old Testament itself. They have no value for us. Therefore, we can no longer say simply that the Bible is the word of God. We can no longer make such a blanket statement. God can still speak to us through some biblical texts, but Jesus Christ must be the determining hermeneutic.⁸⁹

Whereas the denied validity and authority of certain biblical passages remains compatible with recognizing their pedagogical value as the word of God in Ateek's early work, his recent analysis of these themes reframes them as irreconcilable. No longer proposing the communicative dialectic that preserves the possibility of receiving the liberative word of God through its textual contradiction—an evaluative orientation by which “we are free to open ourselves to hearing what God in Christ has to say to us through [an unfavorable] text today”—Ateek's current direction suggests that no word of God is identifiable in or through such texts: “In no way do they constitute a word of God for us.”⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 141; cf. 48-54, 147.

⁹⁰ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 82; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 49. In his constructive-critical dialogue with Ateek's theology, Segovia—focusing largely on the hermeneutical model developed in *Justice and Only Justice*—notes Ateek's “religious-theological approach to the Bible” as the word of God, describing it as “a very high view of the character and purpose of Scripture” (and thus consistent with “traditional liberation”). On the other hand, Segovia observes that Ateek, in comparison to other liberation theologians, “takes a different turn”—indeed, a “highly unusual” turn—within this framework insofar as he recognizes within the word of God “two basic strands” that differ in terms of authority and normativity. In this regard, Segovia views Ateek as reconceptualizing the word of God. Among the several constructive “critical challenges” which Segovia mentions in the final section of his essay, he links Ateek's “strong affirmation of the Bible as the Word of God” with an approach that emphasizes “divine authorship-inspiration” (in contradistinction to “human authorship-inspiration”). Such an understanding of the Bible, Segovia writes, “merits reconsideration in the light of critical developments”—namely, from the standpoint of texts both as “literary-rhetorical-ideological constructions” (and thus interacting in complex ways with “discursive and material frameworks”) and as “linguistic-semantic products of polysemous character” (and thus “lacking a determinate and stable meaning”). Such perspectives problematize “any claim...that the Bible is the Word of God and that in it God speaks to Christian communities.” As an alternative trajectory, Segovia suggests an emphasis on “the need for critical dialogue with the biblical texts and other readings of such texts” and an approach that maintains “respect for the texts as foundational documents for the Christian tradition, without demanding subservience.” Segovia, “Palestinian Theological-Critical Project,” 52, 56-59, 68-69.

In addition to this notable methodological shift, Ateek has recently expanded the evaluative apparatus of his theological framework by presenting the category of love as a distinct hermeneutical key alongside that of Christ. Without seeking to imply that love is not already present in the Christ-centered hermeneutic, Ateek introduces the concept of the love hermeneutic in a manner that expresses the sensitivity to non-Christian traditions associated with Sabeel's interfaith commitment: "I also use *love* as a hermeneutical tool, especially, love of God and love of neighbor. This is also quite valid. Many Christians might prefer the Christ hermeneutic, while others might find the love hermeneutic more appealing due to its encompassing nature. In essence, either hermeneutic can work and can help us test and measure the moral and spiritual value of the text to our daily life."⁹¹

Segovia's reflections on the Palestinian contribution to global liberation theology foreground key issues that may require further clarification as this transnational conversation unfolds. For instance, it is necessary to consider Ateek's notion of the word of God—as it emerges in this early formulation—in a manner that remains attentive to its constitutive ambiguity (and, by extension, to its deeply human imprint). While this point surfaces in Segovia's expository remarks on Ateek, it does not feature in his later critical observation which implies that Ateek's conception of the word of God suspends the authorial agency of the human subject. As noted above, even invalidated biblical materials remain the word of God at this early stage in Ateek's elaboration of a hermeneutical framework. To be sure, the important methodological and theoretical perspectives mentioned by Segovia remain crucial, even in light of this qualification, and would serve to enrich and deepen Ateek's discussion of biblical authority and validity. Nonetheless, it seems to be a qualification that should not be sidelined in considering Ateek's relation to a model of "divine authorship-inspiration," as it can safeguard against the risk of critiquing a truncated version of his understanding of the Bible. Moreover, it is necessary to maintain the visibility of this human-authorial component in attempting to discuss the aforementioned possibility of accessing the divine pedagogy, contrastively, by means of unfavorable texts. This communicative dialectic is premised on the recognition of the human-authorial role and likewise remains inseparable from Ateek's notion of the word of God. Similarly, Ateek's approach to theological maturation, especially as a process reflective of fluctuating orientations toward God and other human subjects, strongly suggests an operative appreciation on his part of the human contribution to both strands of the biblical corpus. Last, Segovia's proposed alternative that avoids "demanding subservience" could be interpreted as implying that Ateek's understanding of the Bible as the word of God involves such a demand for subservience, which again would seem to require a truncated representation of his model by effectively divesting it of its fundamentally evaluative mechanism. Engaging the analysis of the Bible as the word of God as developed in Palestinian liberation theology in light of its full conceptual range, both on the expository level *and* on the critical-constructive level, facilitates not only the global-comparative study of Ateek's theology but also the task of identifying his own theological development since the 1980s.

⁹¹ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 45 (emphasis in original).

Application of “the hermeneutic key of love” aims to examine the content of biblical narratives—above all, their portrayal of God and the treatment of others that such a portrayal fosters—in terms of the principle of “loving the neighbor as oneself.”⁹²

Like the hermeneutic that proceeds on the evaluative basis of the mind of Christ, the love-centered approach to the biblical sources has as its foundation the theological insight that “love is the essence of God’s nature.”⁹³ That is, the love hermeneutic retains what is most essential to Ateek’s Christ hermeneutic without framing it in explicitly christological terms. It is from this central idea—namely, that the most profound and authoritative expressions of the theological imagination in the Bible envision God as a God of love for all peoples—that Ateek derives a thematically distinct criterion for assessing the message and liberative value of biblical texts today: “God’s love becomes the hermeneutic by which we can judge any attribute that we ascribe to God or any action that we undertake in God’s name...The ultimate hermeneutical key is thus love of God and love of neighbor. This is the key that measures any verse or passage of scripture. It can help the reader to determine whether it is a word of God for us or not.”⁹⁴ This same criterion of God’s universal love constitutes the core of the hermeneutic that is guided by the knowledge of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, who is “the paradigm of the love, faith, mercy, and compassion that we need to exhibit in our daily life.”⁹⁵

⁹² Ibid., 61; cf. 146-147.

⁹³ Ibid., 146.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 146-147; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 141.

⁹⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 147; cf. 87-93. It is worth noting that Ateek’s understanding of God as a love that should orient not only our reading of the Bible but also our actions underscores the primacy of God’s love for us: “To love God takes on a different dimension when we realize that God’s love has preceded our love for God” (87). See also Ateek, “Who Is My Neighbor?,” 165; Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 26-27.

While enabling critical evaluation of biblical images of God, the theology of God that emerges from the life and teachings of Jesus remains eminently continuous with the liberative theological expressions that abound in the Hebrew Bible. Highlighting this essential continuity between the Hebrew Bible and the God proclaimed by Jesus, Ateek observes that the knowledge of God in Christ “is the concept of God that has matured through the period of biblical history.”⁹⁶ In particular, he situates the ministry of Jesus in the prophetic tradition of affirming God’s justice and love for all peoples, especially the most vulnerable: “Jesus drew on the prophets and stood in their tradition...To stand in the great prophetic tradition was to recognize the prophets’ maturing understanding of God. Jesus represents the continuing link with the prophetic tradition.”⁹⁷ The task of reading Scripture in light of the revelation of God in Christ, then, aims not only to ascertain which passages are theologically harmonious or compatible with that paradigmatic reality, but also to identify a vital dynamic of continuity. As such, Ateek mentions that he approaches the Hebrew Bible “with an eye toward those narratives that reflect the inclusive and nonviolent message of Christ,” seeking those biblical voices which “correspond to a view held by Christ” and thus witness to a shared and deepening theological horizon in which damaging visions of God and destructive human relations are denounced as contrary to divine justice.⁹⁸ The centrality and fullness of God’s revelation in Jesus—in whose life, crucifixion, and resurrection is made present the liberating gift of love and new life for all creation—receive emphasis in Palestinian

⁹⁶ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 80.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 97-98; cf. Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 29; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 15-22.

⁹⁸ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 54, 58.

liberation theology in a manner that also celebrates his integral participation in a living tradition that proclaims God's universal and partial love as "the heart of the biblical message."⁹⁹

4.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined two significant expressions of the larger process in which Ateek's Palestinian theology of liberation plays a foundational role—namely, the ongoing attempt to formulate a substantial response to the challenges of the Israel-Palestine context in light of Christian faith in the God of the oppressed. The two instances addressed in this chapter—the emergence of Sabeel and the development of a critical framework for engaging the biblical sources—serve to highlight key issues in Ateek's theological project that require attention in order to present his approach to the exodus narrative in a contextually responsible manner. In particular, the emphasis on prophetic nonviolence, the centrality of Christ and love, the fundamental importance of the liberation of theology as a ministerial imperative, the contrastive nature of a liberative theology of God, and the difficulties involved in the process of appropriating an internally tensional biblical corpus—themes which remain deeply interconnected in Ateek's theology—brings into focus a series of dynamic, practical, and theological

⁹⁹ For Ateek's understanding of the cross and resurrection, see Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 6, 140-141, 149-150, 161-162, 185-186, 204-205n90; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 11, 76-77, 92-103, 111-114, 124-129, 136-139; Ateek, "Pentecost and the Intifada," 77-79; Ateek, "In Thanksgiving to God," 6; Naim Ateek, "A Look Back, the Way Forward," *Cornerstone* 66 (Summer 2013): 2; Naim Ateek, "Christ's Way: The Cross," *Church and Society* 94, no. 1 (2003): 120-121; Naim Ateek, "A Palestinian Theology of Jerusalem," *Church and Society* 96, no. 1 (2005): 92-93; Naim Ateek, "Jerusalem: From Brokenness to Wholeness," *Church and Society* 96, no. 1 (2005): 136-139.

commitments that frame his reception of the exodus account. Continuing the discussion on Ateek's understanding of the Bible as a frictional text, the following chapter will further probe important elements of his hermeneutical model and its relevance to the Palestinian experience of dispossession.

CHAPTER 5

LOVE AT THE HEART OF THE BIBLICAL HERITAGE: CRITICAL HERMENEUTICS, LAND, AND THE CANAANITE ANALYTIC

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The discussion in this chapter continues the engagement with Naim Stifan Ateek's ongoing development of the critical biblical-hermeneutical framework that was introduced in chapter 4. Whereas the previous chapter presented Ateek's understanding of the biblical corpus as a deeply intra-tensional heritage that nonetheless remains vital to the Christian faith and situated his mode of interacting with the Bible in relation to the forms of ecclesial praxis reflected in Sabeel, this chapter will address more directly the issues and themes that receive attention in specific examples of scriptural friction which appear in Ateek's writings. Throughout the following treatment of conflicting theological trajectories in the Bible, the problematic of the exodus/conquest narrative will be drawn into proximity by means of Ateek's appropriation of the question of the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan as a methodological resource in the analysis of biblical sources. The important function of Canaan as a critical space from which Ateek interrogates the liberative integrity of scriptural traditions and models of God, neighbor, and land will establish a preliminary orientation to the exodus theme, which will be revisited in the constructive material presented in chapter 7.

In addition, the discussion in this chapter will continue to attend to Ateek's articulation of a hermeneutical framework as a significant response to the challenges of the Israel-Palestine context by highlighting various points of contact between the

identified examples of tension among the biblical narratives and the concrete setting within which Palestinian liberation theology remains grounded. These intersections between clashing theological traditions in the Bible and contemporary realities of unjust suffering, as will be seen below, feature in Ateek's writings as signifiers of an imperative facing readers of biblical texts today—namely, to exercise hermeneutical acumen in the process of engaging Scripture in order to discern the transformative vision of love that constitutes the heart of its message.

5.2 JONAH AT THE ZENITH: CONTESTING EXCLUSIONARY MODELS IN THE POSTEXILIC PERIOD

Ateek's commonly employed grammar of the *heart* or *core* of the biblical message provides an important component of a taxonomic lexicon serving to signify the liberative theological axis of the Bible that subverts exclusionary modes of thinking about God and neighbor, whether they are found among the biblical sources or beyond.¹ This core message of the Bible amounts to an understanding of God that is commensurate with

¹ This terminology communicates the same idea in Ateek's writings when used in relation to faith (e.g., "the heart of the faith tradition"). In addition to *heart* and *core*, he also makes use of language that pertains to the concepts of truth, essence, authenticity, and depth for the same taxonomic purpose. For examples of this varying set of formulations, see Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 6, 78, 79, 85, 100; Naim Stifan Ateek, *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 57, 67, 72, 73, 78, 89, 90, 95, 96, 141, 142, 162; Naim Stifan Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation: The Bible, Justice, and the Palestine-Israel Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 44, 45, 50, 79, 80, 82, 88, 141, 143, 146; Naim Ateek, "The Earth Is the Lord's: Land, Theology, and the Bible," in *The Land Cries Out: Theology of the Land in the Israeli-Palestinian Context*, ed. Salim J. Munayer and Lisa Loden (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 175; Naim Ateek, "Reflections on Sabeel's Liberation Theology and Ecumenical Work (1992-2013)," in *Theologies of Liberation in Palestine-Israel: Indigenous, Contextual, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Nur Masalha and Lisa Isherwood (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 27, 31; Naim Ateek, "In Thanksgiving to God: Sabeel, Ten Years On," *Cornerstone* 34 (Fall 2004): 5, 6; Naim Ateek, "La teología de la liberación como test para una religión auténtica. El caso palestino," in *Libertad y*

the Christ hermeneutic and the love hermeneutic.² It is no surprise, then, that Ateek describes the book of Jonah—a text in which he observes that “the heart of Old Testament theology is encapsulated” and “reaches its...climax”—as offering “a good hermeneutic by which one can determine and measure the authentic message of scripture within the Old Testament itself.”³ In Ateek’s reading, the prophetic theology that finds expression in the story of Jonah is a prime example of the expansive conception of divine embrace that qualifies as authoritative and valid from the evaluative standpoint of either the Christ hermeneutic or the love hermeneutic. Although his early reflections on Jonah in *Justice and Only Justice* are quite brief, identifying the text as “one of the strongest voices against an exclusive view of God” while suggesting that its message is surpassed by depictions of God in other prophetic writings, Ateek’s understanding of the narrative develops in his subsequent books, where Jonah becomes “the text par excellence” of the Hebrew Bible and contributes a “revolutionary” resource for the liberation of theology, thus itself assuming the status of a hermeneutic lens.⁴

esperanza. A Gustavo Gutiérrez por sus 80 años, ed. Consuelo de Prado and Pedro Hughes (Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 2008), 270-275.

² The analytical interchangeability of the heart of the Bible and the liberative notion of God appears throughout Ateek’s reflections on the tensional nature of the biblical corpus. For instance, among the challenges facing the church in Israel-Palestine, he highlights the following question: “How can the Church, without rejecting any part of the Bible, adequately relate the core of the biblical message—its concept of God—to Palestinians?” Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 78. Similarly, he writes that “the core message of the Bible is not about an exclusive God,” cautioning that “if one is not faithful to the heart of the message of the Bible and the criteria of interpretation—for Christians, this is our knowledge of God revealed to us in and through Jesus Christ—one cannot expect to arrive at a sound theological conclusion.” Before proceeding to discuss a selection of conflicting biblical texts, he poses a guiding question: “Which texts constitute the heart of the biblical message from God that agree with God’s revelation in Jesus Christ and correspond to the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves?” Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 141-142; cf. 71-77.

³ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 76-82; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 55, 71-72, 76-77, 144.

⁴ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 96, 110, 143; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 54-55, 67-77, 144; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 76-82. In *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation*, Ateek acknowledges that—in comparison to the treatment of Jonah suggested in his earlier book—he has begun

Ateek approaches the theological significance of Jonah in light of the issues and debates characterizing the postexilic context. Key to appreciating his reflections on the liberative message of the narrative, Ateek's discussion of the historical setting of the book of Jonah is exemplary of his larger framework in which the internally tensional nature of the Bible receives emphasis. He mentions that Jonah "was authored by a brilliant theologian who was reflecting on the situation of life in his community toward the end of the fourth century BC...Some of the inclusive theology that emerged from the writings of prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah had faded, and many people had regressed to a tribal way of thinking. Instead of becoming more open to other nations, they were reverting to a more exclusive understanding of God and neighbor."⁵ Reflecting basic elements of Ateek's concept of unsystematic development, this situation of shifting theological models after the exile entailed a discourse of racial purity and exclusionary forms of social life amid the "significant demographic changes" encountered by the exiles returning from Babylon to the province of Judah following an edict from Cyrus, king of Persia (539-530 BCE).⁶ The "greater ethnic and racial mix of people living in the country" in the early postexilic period saw a mixed response: "On the one hand, some

to "understand the text in a more radical and revolutionary way," expressing "excitement and delight in sensing the power of the story of Jonah in the context of Old Testament theology and its relevance to the Palestine/Israel conflict today" (71).

⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 76. Regarding his acceptance of the position of scholars who situate the composition of Jonah in a postexilic context, Ateek recognizes that "some scholars dispute the linguistic and historical evidence for such a late date," but he sees no "overwhelmingly persuasive evidence to the contrary." His treatment of Jonah in light of this historical setting alternates between a conditional language expressing caution (e.g., "if the author were writing between 400 and 200 BCE") and a language of unqualified confidence as in the above quotation. Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 72, 201n5.

In terms of the gendered language which Ateek employs in reference to the author of Jonah, he concludes his chapter on Jonah in *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation* by posing the following question: "Could [the book of Jonah] have possibly been written by a woman liberation theologian who cut across every religious taboo?" Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 77.

⁶ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 72-73; cf. 130-131, 142-143.

voices did advocate universalism and a greater acceptance of diversity. On the other hand, competing voices expressed bigotry and a narrow nationalism...In essence, the writer of Jonah seems aware that some positive theological developments gained during the exile, including important expressions of universalism expressed by Second Isaiah and others, were being replaced by a narrow xenophobia within the community.”⁷

As examples of the exclusionary trajectory that was increasingly compromising the liberative openness of the postexilic theological imagination, Ateek cites the attention given to “the purity of Jewish blood” by Nehemiah, governor of the province of Judah and administrative reformer, and Ezra, priestly scribe and religious reformer, and the resulting “conflicts with some people in the land, especially the Samaritans.”⁸ The theological vision of the postexilic leadership grounded its aggressive opposition to intermarriage (Ezra 9-10; Neh 13:23-30), the related commitment to rigid nationalism, and “the growing presence of xenophobia.”⁹ At the heart of this mode of communal enclosure lies a particular way of thinking about God: “If for Ezra and Nehemiah the

⁷ Ibid., 73; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 68-70.

⁸ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 72; cf. 130-131, 142-143; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 58-60, 68-69, 81.

⁹ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 131. The above reference to blood purity is, in part, an allusion to the theme of “the holy seed” as it appears in Ezra’s severe condemnation of intermarriage (Ezra 9:2). Ateek cites this passage in addressing the problem of “bigotry and racism” in the postexilic setting and quotes Walter Brueggemann’s observation that this “phrase [in Ezra] intends a biological identity...The exclusion was in order to guarantee the purity of the land and of Israelite society.” It is pertinent to note that these remarks by Brueggemann in his book *Chosen?* appear in a section titled “Ezra, the exclusionist,” and also that he mentions Hebrew Bible scholar Joseph Blenkinsopp’s translation of the phrase in Ezra as “holy race.” Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 59, 63; Walter Brueggemann, *Chosen? Reading the Bible amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 3-5.

Similarly, Rabbi Moshe Greenberg discusses the biblical expression “holy seed” in relation to an emerging idea of racial exclusivism that amounted to a distortion of the tradition of election. “The concept of an eternal election,” he writes in regard to the postexilic period, “eventually merged with a doctrine of spiritual-racial superiority, rooted, it seems, in the biblical term ‘holy seed.’ (It was Gershon Cohen who pointed out to me the fateful transformation of this spiritual concept into a biological one.)” Comparing an earlier figurative use of “holy seed” in Isa 6:13 with the perspective of Ezra 9:2, Greenberg identifies a shift toward the notion that “holiness inheres in the seed and is hereditary.” He also offers a critical treatment of

exile resulted from the people's sin against God, then it was of prime importance to strictly adhere to the law in order to prevent another national disaster."¹⁰ Unfavorable to the social heterogeneity that was present in Judah after the exile, the theology of God embraced by Ezra and Nehemiah is viewed by Ateek as containing a mechanism of othering that provided one of the main motivations for the composition of Jonah.

This problematic notion of God, Ateek notes, was central to the manner in which "Ezra and Nehemiah forced those Jews who married wives from the land to drive out their wives and their children in order to be obedient to the law of God."¹¹ Their efforts to reorder Jewish life after the return from Babylon entailed the need to remedy the "abomination" of marriages "with the local people of the land"—among whom Ezra 9:1 lists Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites, five of which belong to the indigenous "nations" to be destroyed (cf. Deut 7:1-3) and two of which are not allowed to join the Israelite community (Deut 23:3-6)—and its perceived threat to racial purity.¹² The ensuing marriage reforms, either by expulsion of those whose biological descent is identified as non-Israelite (Ezra 10:2-5, 10-44; Neh 13:28, 30) or through methods of coercive violence (Ezra 10:8; Neh 13:25), inform the troubled hermeneutical sensitivity that Ateek communicates: "We ask, what god would require the breakup of families? What kind of god did Ezra and Nehemiah believe in? Surely this was a human decision that was attributed to God. It reflects human ignorance

the persistence of this racialized conception of holiness "in the literature of the Sages and its interpreters," including its dehumanizing iteration as "the denial of 'the image of God' to gentiles." Moshe Greenberg, "A Problematic Heritage: The Attitude Toward the Gentile in the Jewish Tradition—An Israel Perspective," *Conservative Judaism* 48, no. 2 (1996): 31-35.

¹⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 131.

¹¹ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 60.

¹² *Ibid.*, 59; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 130-131, 142.

of the character and nature of God.”¹³ Such questions signal the concept of theological tension that is operative in Ateek’s discussion of Jonah’s historical context and they are promptly answered by recourse to his criterion for hermeneutical evaluation: “The only assurance that it is from God is when it fulfills the hermeneutic of love.”¹⁴

Intimately related to the condemnation of mixed marriages that appears in the theological tradition of Ezra and Nehemiah is—as the aforementioned passages from Deuteronomy indicate—the theme of exclusive rights in relation to God’s people and promised land. As illustrated in the claim to Jerusalem expressed in Neh 2:19-20, Ateek notes, heredity intersects with territoriality in ways that incite geographically inflected practices of othering and breed realities of animosity on the basis of a restrictive concept of God.¹⁵ In this particular passage in the book of Nehemiah, an exchange is recounted in which Nehemiah, whose decision to restore the city walls of Jerusalem was met with “some opposition from local non-Jewish leaders,” declared “to them clearly and unequivocally that Jerusalem belonged exclusively to Jews. For Nehemiah, non-Jews had ‘no share or claim or historic right’ in Jerusalem (Neh 2:20).”¹⁶ Evaluative in nature, Ateek’s response to Nehemiah’s position as presented in this narrative suggests an epistemic interplay between his hermeneutical criterion and what might be designated a Canaanite locus of interrogation: “Nehemiah’s words disregarded the fact that Jerusalem, according to the biblical account, was not a town of Judah but was conquered by David

¹³ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 60. This quotation—in both phraseology and orientation—is suggestive of an important point that bears mentioning: it is not uncommon for the language which Ateek employs in the process of evaluating the exclusionary theological imagination to evoke the problem of idolatry.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 68-69; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 142-145; Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 32.

¹⁶ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 69; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 142.

by force against the will of its indigenous Jebusite (Canaanite) inhabitants (2 Sam 5:6-9), who would have taken issue with Nehemiah's exclusive words. What about the Jebusites' claim and historic right in Jerusalem?"¹⁷ The relationship between place and communal belonging as determined by a theological trajectory of exceptionalism and its logic of racial purity is decentered in the prophetic act of attending to those who are turned away or whose dignity is negated by such ideas.¹⁸ It is in light of the continuation of these salient tendencies toward ethnocentric notions of God in the postexilic period that Ateek considers the theological insights of the book of Jonah and its pertinence to the Israel-Palestine context.

Critically intervening into this "religious malaise," the biblical author chose an "ideal" protagonist for the narrative through which the theological climate after the exile would be engaged—namely, the prophet Jonah, whose only other appearance in the Hebrew Bible portrays his prophetic activity in relation to the expansion of the national borders of the Northern Kingdom (2 Kgs 14:23-25).¹⁹ This intertextual dimension of Jonah's identity forms the basis for Ateek's description of his character in the story as "a believer in ethnic nationalism" who "hated the Assyrians with a passion because they had conquered and destroyed his country, the kingdom of Israel."²⁰ Thus the main character of the story, "heartbroken and devastated by the annihilation of his people," represents a theological model defined by the human proclivity for an other-oriented and collectively deployed understanding of retributive justice: "He was hoping that 'his' God would

¹⁷ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 69.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 76-77, 79; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 68-69, 73.

²⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 69, 73; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 76.

avenge the blood of his people by obliterating Assyria, especially its capital, Nineveh.”²¹

Indeed, Jonah expresses that his own death is preferable to the extension of God’s love to his worst enemies (Jonah 4:1-3).²² The only satisfactory outcome from the perspective of his nationalist theology would be the “total destruction” of Assyria as a manifestation of the divine will.²³

In the familiar story of Jonah’s initial refusal to deliver God’s message of repentance to the Ninevites through a failed (and quite humorous) attempt to flee God’s presence, the incident of the storm at sea and his brief residence inside a great fish, and the eventual repentance of the inhabitants of Nineveh, Ateek identifies three main areas to which the author of Jonah contributes a liberative vision: a theology of God, a theology of the people of God, and a theology of the land. In regard to the theology of God, Ateek recognizes in the book of Jonah a profound statement of “the one God, the creator of the world and the Lord of history,” a God who “is not limited to one country or to any one place but everywhere,” precluding the possibility of evasion by mere relocation.²⁴ This ubiquity of God is relational in a universally “gracious, merciful, and loving” manner, “even to Jonah’s enemies, because that is the nature of God”—hence the reason the disgruntled Jonah offers for his unsuccessful escape plan (Jonah 4:1-2).²⁵ The idea of God expressed in the book of Jonah is not that of “a prejudiced and unfair god who is the

²¹ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 76; cf. Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 96, 143.

²² Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 96, 143, 198n39; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 69-70; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 78.

²³ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 69. Ateek mentions that Jonah’s anti-Assyrian sentiments “could be described by the words of the prophet Nahum,” who “celebrates the fall and destruction of Nineveh” and regards this event as an act of “God’s judgment against Israel’s most oppressive enemy.” Ateek quotes Nah 3:1-7 to illustrate this theological view of Nineveh’s fall (69-70).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 78.

prisoner of a particular group” but rather “an inclusive God” whose “love and care embrace all people and nations, including the people of Assyria.”²⁶ God’s message of repentance to the Ninevites reflects God’s love for them and depicts “a God of justice who demands just living from all people.”²⁷ In the narrative of Jonah, Ateek observes, a theology of God as loving creator critiques and overcomes exclusionary ways of thinking while seeking “to reveal God’s larger purpose for humanity—one God, one humanity, one world.”²⁸ The author presents a God whose “love encompasses all of humanity, not just the people of Jonah,” and who “calls all people who do wrong and commit evil to repentance and seeks their salvation and liberation.”²⁹

This expansive amplitude of divine love that defies demographic circumscription evinces the theology of the people of God that Ateek perceives in Jonah. Contrasting this universal message of the biblical narrative with the delimiting theology of its nationalistic protagonist, Ateek writes that “the essence of the story of Jonah is that God’s people are not restricted to Israel.”³⁰ The tradition of understanding God’s people in an exclusive key constituted a guiding concern for the author of Jonah. In Ateek’s reading of the story, the core insight expressed by the author directly engaged “one of the most difficult issues that faced the community” after the exile and aimed “to liberate God from the narrow theology of the day.”³¹ Serving an important role—albeit reluctantly—in the repentance of the Ninevites, the protagonist of the narrative witnesses with great poignancy God’s

²⁶ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 73; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 78.

²⁷ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 73.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 63, 64, 74; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 80.

²⁹ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 73; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 78-79.

³⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 74; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 79.

³¹ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 74. Ateek’s characterization of the “inadequate theology of the people of God” to which the author of Jonah sought to respond bears interesting similarities to Brueggemann’s

loving embrace of his enemies and thereby becomes a powerful symbol of the failure of exclusionary theological models. “It became clear to Jonah,” Ateek remarks, “that God’s people are not limited to one racial or ethnic group. God’s people include all people. The people of Nineveh, Jonah’s worst enemies, were among the people of God.”³² Corrective in its contextual orientation, the theology of the people of God that Ateek recognizes in the book of Jonah advances the relational dimension of the aforementioned theology of God, effectively decentering the demographic axis of postexilic discourses in which the idea of God harbors the disavowal of others.

In addition to the critical theme of the people of God, the relational element of the theology of God that Ateek discerns in the book of Jonah also concerns the question of land. Describing this aspect of Jonah “as revolutionary as the book’s theology of God and God’s people,” Ateek approaches its theology of the land with similar emphasis on God as creator of the world, rendering untenable conceptions of “a territorial God” dwelling

discussion of “mono-ideology” as a tradition of theological “exceptionalism” which he interprets Amos as seeking to contest. Describing mono-ideology as a demographic extension of monotheism—that is, in the form of the concept of “mono-people” or “mono-ethnism”—in which the “one and only Yahweh had as a partner a one and only people Israel, so that there was taken to be a complete commensurability between the ‘onlyness’ of Yahweh and the ‘onlyness’ of Israel,” Brueggemann examines the presence of this relational theme in biblical narratives concerning divine promise, national uniqueness, and cultic centrality while highlighting its political significance. He suggests that the message of Amos aimed to challenge the idea that “Israel alone is Yahweh’s people” by “introducing a radical pluralism into the character of Yahwism, a pluralism that subverts Israel’s self-confident mono-faith.” In contrast to the exclusionary claims of mono-ideology, Brueggemann identifies in Amos a “subversive notion” of multiple salvation histories—a vision in which “Yahweh...has other partners who are subjects of Yahweh’s propensity to liberation,” and among whom are found nations regarded as enemies by Israel. The tensional and expansive theological attention to ideas of God and God’s people that Brueggemann recognizes in Amos, while pertaining to a different historical context, displays basic elements of Ateek’s treatment of the radical message articulated by the author of Jonah in response to comparable problematic traditions in the postexilic period. Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus in the Plural (Amos 9:7),” in *Texts That Linger, Words That Explode: Listening to Prophetic Voices*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 89-103, 126n5.

³² Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 79; cf. 80.

and acting in only certain regions.³³ He notes the broadening impact of the Babylonian exile on this area of the theological imagination and observes that it occasioned a greater appreciation for a God who is not geographically confined or marked by the parameters of regionalism.³⁴ Just as the corrective theologies of God and God's people presented by the biblical author are contrasted with those of the story's protagonist, so too does Ateek highlight the disjuncture between their respective theologies of the land: "The story of Jonah emphasizes that there is no one particular land that belongs to God. God is the God of the whole world. Jonah's theology of land was restricted to his own country. He believed that God was a tribal god who has no business looking after or caring for other lands or nations that lay outside the boundaries of Canaan, the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah."³⁵ Contrary to the inhibiting territorial theology of its main character, the book of Jonah offers a liberative message of God's concern for every land and for all of the inhabitants of the world.³⁶ Irreducible to specific lands or localities, divine love—as the ultimate source of creation as such—transcends the horizons of place.³⁷

³³ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 74; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 77.

³⁴ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 74-75.

³⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 79.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ To be sure, this is not to suggest that place is theologically unimportant in Ateek's work. On the contrary, particular places bearing the wounds of spaces of injustice and oppression receive attention as sites of special encounter with transcendence. For instance, Ateek highlighted this feature of place in a 2003 sermon at the end of a Lenten "Solidarity Visit": "I believe we have been with Jesus. I believe you have met him in the face of the poor and oppressed Palestinians. You have met him in Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahur. You have walked with him in Nablus and Zababdeh. You have seen him in Ramallah and Ain Arik, and you have experienced him on the shores of the Sea of Galilee when he came to us in the Breaking of the Bread. You have walked where Jesus is still walking. You have been where Jesus is still present, not so much in the holy sites, important as they may be, but by being with the people of God, the oppressed." Naim Ateek, "Christ's Way: The Cross," *Church and Society* 94, no. 1 (2003): 121; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 126.

In addition, Ateek proposes a vision of a Jerusalem shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, which would establish the city "as a paradigm of peace and goodwill" and allow it to become "a city of God in which justice reigns and peace is an experienced reality." The theological premise of this vision reflects the theologies of God, the people of God, and land which Ateek identifies in the story of Jonah: "In

Through these three interrelated areas—the theology of God, the theology of the people of God, and the theology of the land—the author of Jonah engaged a persisting tradition of religious and communal insulation that remained at variance with a vision of universal togetherness in the presence of the Creator. While this liberative vision appears throughout the biblical sources, Ateek no longer interprets Jonah simply as one inclusive voice among others but rather as a book which “possesses some attributes that enable it to surpass, theologically speaking, prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah.”³⁸ Whereas Ateek, in light of his understanding of theological maturation as an unsystematic process, attends to the vacillating contents of other prophetic articulations in the Hebrew Bible, his reading of Jonah detects in the story an exceptional consistency in presenting an “inclusive and universal message” grounded in the conviction “that any religion that reflects a tribal and xenophobic god cannot be genuine”; indeed, it is for this reason that Ateek concludes that

the final analysis, Jerusalem belongs to God, and our merciful and wise God has placed Muslims, Jews, and Christians as its stewards. Instead of claiming that Jerusalem belongs to this group or that group, we all belong to Jerusalem. A plan for permanent peace will be our way to honor God by the doing of justice and to returning Jerusalem to God as a city of peace.” Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 172-177; cf. Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 173-175; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 68-71, 115-117; Naim Ateek, “A Palestinian Theology of Jerusalem,” *Church and Society* 96, no. 1 (2005): 95-97.

Specific places, however, are theologically significant for Ateek not as a result of intrinsically differentiating characteristics but due to their manner of mediating the Creator who sustains and transcends them. As such, he emphasizes the sacramentality of all creation and situates the holiness of land within a corresponding spirituality: “It is true that the land of Israel-Palestine has been singled out as host to great events in history, but I do not believe that it is intrinsically more holy than other lands. If God has done great things here, God has done great things everywhere. If God loves this land and its peoples, this is a sign—a sacrament—that God loves each and every land and its peoples. The whole Earth is the Lord’s. This is all God’s world. The whole world should be holy. It is all sacramental... The land can, however, *become* holy to those who put their trust in the God of the whole universe, whose nature does not change—a God of justice for all, who desires goodness and mercy for all people living in this and every land.” Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 110-111 (emphasis in original); cf. 200n84; Ateek, “Palestinian Theology of Jerusalem,” 89-92. See also Ateek’s discussion of Jesus as pointing Christians “beyond geography” and of the new Jerusalem as an anti-imperial communal space of “life with God,” where he concludes: “When the place becomes more important than the human being who is present there, we have strayed far from the knowledge and love of God.” Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 145-150; cf. 59-66, 88-91; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 101-103; Ateek, “Palestinian Theology of Jerusalem,” 90.

³⁸ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 54.

the theology of the book of Jonah “stands as the zenith of Old Testament theology.”³⁹ More than a hermeneutical metric internal to the Hebrew Scriptures, the challenging text of Jonah “provides a theological climax that points where authentic theology should be going.”⁴⁰ Born in a setting of conflicting theological orientations, Jonah invites its audience to overcome pain-generating expressions of religious identity by reimagining God as creator who lovingly embraces all peoples and geographies.

5.3 TENSIONS POSTEXILIC AND CONTEMPORARY: JONAH AS A RESOURCE FOR LIBERATION IN ISRAEL-PALESTINE

The theological friction in the midst of which the author of Jonah lived, however, continues as various forms of “exclusive and racist theologies” remain noticeably potent in the contemporary world.⁴¹ “The tension continues,” Ateek observes, “and we observe it on a daily basis.”⁴² Thus he notes that the liberative message of Jonah “continues to speak to the malady of our times,” which perpetuates basic problems characterizing the context of the biblical author, and “must be emphasized in the face of exclusive modern theologies.”⁴³ It is in this oppositional capacity that the role of the book of Jonah as a guidepost for “authentic theology” gains significance today. In particular, Ateek mentions that “the message of Jonah has great relevance for those of us who live in Israel-Palestine as it addresses the core religious and theological issues underlying the conflict.”⁴⁴ The

³⁹ Ibid., 54-55, 72; cf. 71, 77; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 79, 80.

⁴⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 72; cf. 73; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 80.

⁴¹ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 79.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 75; cf. 76.

theological vision through which the author of Jonah contested certain trajectories of the postexilic theological imagination, Ateek suggests, is equally pertinent to the problems that have become increasingly pronounced for Palestinians after 1967.

As a “theological statement about authentic religion and faith,” the book of Jonah offers a model for religious life that calls into question the integrity of conceptions of the people of God and the land that inflict harm upon others.⁴⁵ On the basis of God as creator of all, Ateek asserts, an “authentic understanding of the people of God rejects all the exclusionary forms of racial superiority and accepts that all people are God’s people.”⁴⁶ In terms of the relation to land, an “authentic understanding...rejects the exclusionary monopoly of one people that brings about the negation, expulsion, and ethnic cleansing of the people of the land and accepts the inclusive view that calls people to share it with others (the Palestinians) on the basis of truth and justice.”⁴⁷ Contrary to the tradition which Ateek identifies in the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah—and which he describes as continuing in “the Nehemiahs of today” who “claim exclusive rights to Jerusalem and deny the rights of others to live there”—the contemporary challenge of Jonah lies in the fundamental insight that “it is wrong to restrict God’s love.”⁴⁸ Were this insight to be

⁴⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 80; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 73.

⁴⁶ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 80.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 77, 143. In his discussion of “the exclusive paradigm of Nehemiah” as it operates in the Israel-Palestine context, Ateek utilizes this category to critique both Jewish Zionists and Palestinian extremists. Describing it as “a paradigm that will never lead to peace” because “it is built on selfishness and greed, on control and negation of others,” he writes: “Slogans such as ‘Jerusalem is Jewish’ or ‘Jerusalem is Islamic’ reflect this narrow, exclusive, and xenophobic paradigm. With it in place, future reconciliation does not seem possible” (149-150). While Ateek’s earlier critique of the Zionist concept of “Greater Israel” and the extremist Palestinian “absolute ideal” of “regaining...the whole of Palestine” does not yet illustrate this particular appropriation of Nehemiah, it reflects similar concerns and maintains that both models are incompatible with justice. See Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 127-128, 203n50-51. The Nehemiah paradigm also pertains to Christian Zionism. Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 81.

deeply and thoroughly appropriated in the Israel-Palestine context, Ateek suggests, the reality of structural violence would be transformed and the rudimentary obstacles to justice would be overcome, allowing the process of healing to commence.

The question of land is at the center of the ongoing violence in Israel-Palestine and thus features as a guiding problematic in Ateek's approach to biblical texts, including in his discussion of the relevance of Jonah to the Palestinian experience. This attention to the contextually freighted theme of land as it appears in biblical narratives often entails a decentering recognition of the indigenous Canaanite population as a key analytic in the process of examining the liberative status of those passages. In addressing the pertinence of Jonah's message today, for instance, Ateek mentions that "Jewish religious extremists and Christian Zionists both advocate the expulsion and transfer of Palestinians from Palestine into Jordan."⁴⁹ Foregrounding the biblical antecedent of "this form of ethnic cleansing through annihilation or expulsion of the indigenous people of the land," he cites the example of God's instructions to the Israelites as relayed by Moses in Num 33:51-53: "When you cross over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, destroy all their figured stones, destroy all their cast images, and demolish all their high places. You shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess."⁵⁰ Such an understanding of God, people, and the land as a legitimating basis for implementing the violent project of

⁴⁹ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 76. See also the remarks on the political Zionist concept of transfer in chapter 3, notes 4, 8, 47, 48, and 49.

⁵⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 76. In addition to this passage in Numbers, Ateek mentions that "other references to the expulsion or destruction of the people in the land can be found in Deut 7:1-2; 9:1-3; 20:16-17; Josh 6:21" (201n8). See also Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 49-51.

Palestinian depopulation, Ateek observes, is firmly situated within the frictional range of Jonah's liberative threefold message: "As is amply clear, the theological underpinnings of such a position are exactly what the author of Jonah condemned centuries before. The message of Jonah is as relevant today as it was then."⁵¹

Prototypical of contemporary negations of the legitimacy of Palestinian presence in Israel-Palestine, the biblical theme of Canaanite dispossession could be interpreted as representing the theological antipode to the climactic heights attributed to Jonah in Palestinian liberation theology. The message of Jonah, which Ateek proposes "can be a significant resource for peacemaking and for arriving at a solution to today's Middle East conflict," reframes the conception of land and its inhabitants without which the conquest of Canaan would become impossible to articulate.⁵² Contrasted in Ateek's writings as theologically incongruous, the idealized erasure of the Canaanites and the heart of the Hebrew Bible that finds paramount expression in the narrative of Jonah typify approaches to Palestinian dispossession that perpetuate suffering or foster justice, respectively.

In another example concerning the disparity between these two biblical traditions, Ateek—calling upon the state of Israel to adopt a new, transformed theology as essential to the process of attaining justice and peace among Israelis and Palestinians—illustrates the adverse influence of US Christian Zionists by quoting President George W. Bush's speech to the Knesset in 2008, the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of the state of Israel, which describes it as "more than the establishment of a new country. It was the redemption of an ancient promise given to Abraham and Moses and David—a homeland

⁵¹ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 76.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 71, 75-77.

for the chosen people Eretz Yisrael.”⁵³ Remarking that such a view “may have disastrous political implications for peace in Israel-Palestine,” Ateek proceeds to ask: “Was he the victim of a Zionist script writer? Had he weighed the full impact of his words, or did they reflect a Christian Zionist exclusive theology on his part?...President Bush mentioned the promise of the land to Abraham, Moses, and David, but had he read the commandment God gave to Moses regarding the land for the fulfillment of the promise?”⁵⁴ Citing the text from Num 33 mentioned above as a biblical antecedent of the Zionist concept of transfer, he poses a challenging set of questions that again betrays a Canaanite locus of interrogation:

Was President Bush suggesting such a resolution [i.e., as the ancient Israelites were instructed to do to the Canaanites] to the conflict today? Was he promoting the idea of the transfer and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians? Does this reflect his concept of God? Does he know that this is precisely the solution promoted by a number of Israeli Jewish leaders including ministers and Knesset members and American Christian Zionists? Did he realize that he was citing some of the most ancient and primitive tribal theologies about the land and glossing over the more inclusive, universal, and enlightened theologies of the great prophets of the Old Testament? Did he intentionally ignore texts that could have contributed to justice and the making of peace between Israelis and Palestinians?⁵⁵

As a liberative alternative to the understanding of God, people, and land reflected in biblical narratives bearing upon the Israelite conquest and occupation of Canaan, Ateek refers to the book of Jonah as a potential “model for a new theology” that would reorient the state of Israel in a manner that “can lead to peace.”⁵⁶ The message presented in Jonah “challenges leaders and people to see the inclusive nature of the one God, an inclusive

⁵³ Ibid., 162-163.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 163.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

theology of the people of God that embraces all of humanity, and an inclusive theology of land that opens the way for the sharing of the land between Israelis and Palestinians.”⁵⁷

Antithetical to the exclusionary framework that authorizes violence against Canaanites, the theological vision of Jonah becomes an invitation to overcome oppressive modes of inhabiting land with others in the approach to biblical sources developed in Palestinian liberation theology.

These vibrant and explicitly context-interactive features of the reception of the narrative of Jonah in Ateek’s writings are conveyed in his description of its author as “the first Palestinian liberation theologian, someone who has written the greatest book in the Old Testament.”⁵⁸ In light of its profound theological insights and its ongoing relevance to the situation in Israel-Palestine, the book is invested with paradigmatic value and viewed as a powerful resource for enriching faith: “For us Palestinian Christians, it [i.e., the book of Jonah] is our spiritual and theological life line.”⁵⁹

5.4 A JERUSALEM BEYOND HOMOGENEITY: PSALM 87 AS A CRITICAL IMAGE OF BELONGING

As noted above, the story of Jonah belongs to a more extensive tradition that witnesses to the principles of universal justice, mercy, and peace which inhere in the hermeneutic of love and the mind of Christ. Another biblical voice that Ateek interprets as critiquing the model adopted by Ezra and Nehemiah—indeed, as “the first critical

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 71. Ateek also refers to the author as “an archetypal Palestinian liberation theologian” (54) and as “a Jewish liberation theologian.” Ateek, “Earth Is the Lord’s,” 179.

⁵⁹ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 77.

reaction against” their exclusionary theology—is that of Ps 87.⁶⁰ Describing it as an early postexilic text, he writes that “the image presented in Psalm 87 is of God standing at the gate of Jerusalem, welcoming all into the city, including Israel’s worst enemies. Rahab, a mythological beast, represents Egypt, and then Babylon, Philistia, Tyre (representative city of Phoenicia), and Ethiopia.”⁶¹ In Ateek’s reading, the psalmist demonstrates an understanding of God and the city of Jerusalem that parts ways with the homogenizing approach that refuses the participatory presence of others.

The theological orientation that Ateek discerns in Ps 87 coheres with the theme of divine love extending even to Israel’s enemies as expressed in Jonah. Jerusalem, Ateek suggests, is envisioned in the psalm as “the spiritual mother of all of God’s children,” establishing a natal link between the several nations described as knowing God and Zion (Ps 87:4-5): “Even those empires or nations perceived to be enemies of Jerusalem are invited by God to worship and be renewed in the holy city.”⁶² It is for this reason that he considers the far-reaching theological perspective articulated in Ps 87 in contradistinction to the restrictive claim to Jerusalem associated with Nehemiah. Portraying the psalmist as “a theologian/poet with a wonderful inclusive vision of Jerusalem that embraces all people,” Ateek writes that “this vision is certainly the antithesis of Nehemiah’s view.”⁶³ Whereas the paradigm represented by Nehemiah effectively delegitimizes or represses the indigenous Canaanite claim to Jerusalem and idealizes the city as a rigidly defined

⁶⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 69; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 144; Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 32-33.

⁶¹ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 143-144; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 69-70.

⁶² Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 144; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 70; Ateek, “Palestinian Theology of Jerusalem,” 89.

⁶³ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 145; cf. Ateek, “Sabeel’s Liberation Theology,” 32.

territorial inheritance, the author of Ps 87 imagines Jerusalem in a manner that celebrates its historical heterogenous openness.⁶⁴

Comparing the “archetype of Psalm 87” with Nehemiah’s refusal to share the city of Jerusalem, Ateek contends that “Jerusalem cannot and should not be the exclusive claim of one nation or one religion.”⁶⁵ In part, this position entails a historical argument regarding the indigenous residents of Jerusalem:

Before David conquered it by force, it was a Canaanite town inhabited by Jebusites. According to the book of Joshua, written most likely during or after the exile, “But the people of Judah could not drive out the Jebusites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem; so the Jebusites live with the people of Judah in Jerusalem to this day” (Josh 15:63). The prophet Ezekiel also recognized the non-Israelite origin of Jerusalem: “Thus says the Lord GOD to Jerusalem: Your origin and your birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite” (Ezek 16:3).⁶⁶

By means of this Canaanite-based strategy of disturbing the dissimulating platform of sameness, Ateek exposes the inadequacy of exclusionary claims to Jerusalem by restoring to visibility the negation which lies beneath their foundations. The lived geography of Jerusalem, while inseparable from a history of violence and suffering, ultimately exceeds and resists the full implementation of its theoretical reconfiguration in favor of one group and to the detriment of others: “The city seems to vomit out exclusion.”⁶⁷ Troubling the territorial *ours* of Nehemiah, the vantage point coinciding with the memory of the native Jebusites furnishes a critical space from which to assess other conceptions of land that also perpetuate harm and seek to erase the presence of entire communities: “Nehemiah’s

⁶⁴ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 69-71; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 142-145, 150.

⁶⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 150.

⁶⁶ Ibid.; cf. Ateek, “Palestinian Theology of Jerusalem,” 88-89.

⁶⁷ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 150; cf. Ateek, “Palestinian Theology of Jerusalem,” 89, 92, 94.

words about Jerusalem did not make sense at the time. How much less palatable can they be when applied to Jerusalem of the twenty-first century?”⁶⁸

As a corrective to “this ugly, destructive picture of Jerusalem” revolving around expulsion and the concrete denial of alterity, the embrative image of the city appearing in Ps 87 “knows no exceptions,” ensuring that “all the people and religions of the region are welcome as well as those who arrive from far away.”⁶⁹ In the wide-ranging vision of the psalmist Ateek recognizes a liberative model of relationality that can become a helpful resource in the task of pursuing a just and lasting peace in the context of Israel-Palestine. “Since 1967,” he writes, “Israel has claimed exclusive sovereignty over the city [of Jerusalem], refusing to share it equitably with the Palestinians. Psalm 87 provides a basis for sharing.”⁷⁰ Reflecting the heart of the Bible, the psalm challenges contemporary approaches to the city not simply to surpass claims of ownership which produce the suffering of injustice, but also to avow—in a manner that exhibits the universal scope of divine love—that “Jerusalem does not belong only to all the people of Israel-Palestine, it belongs to the world.”⁷¹

5.5 REIMAGINING LAND AND HABITATION: EZEKIEL, LEVITICUS, AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Similarly illustrating the love-affirming core of the biblical message, Ezekiel is interpreted by Ateek as contesting exclusionary theologies during the period of the exile

⁶⁸ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 69.

⁶⁹ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 150.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 145; cf. Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 70-71.

⁷¹ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 150.

in Babylon.⁷² A precursor to the author of Jonah, the prophetic-priestly voice of Ezekiel constitutes an important step along the way in the unsystematic growth of the theological imagination that would eventually find revolutionary expression in the story whose author Ateek designates the earliest Palestinian liberation theologian. In contrast to the devastation of the Canaanites as formulated in the passages cited above from Numbers and Deuteronomy, Ateek encounters in Ezekiel an understanding of God and an approach to inhabiting land with others that promote healthy forms of communal life.⁷³

He reflects on the theological implications of the message communicated in the following passage in Ezekiel: “So you shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel. You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance, says the Lord GOD” (Ezek 47:21-23). In this (re)orientation toward the land—wherein, Ateek writes, “God demands an equal inheritance for all the residents in the land, regardless of their ethnic or racial background”—he identifies a notable departure from the fate assigned to the Canaanites in other biblical texts: “These words of Ezekiel must have seemed a great contradiction of the many injunctions in the Torah against even making peace with the indigenous people of Canaan.”⁷⁴ Whereas the conquest narratives express the ideal of

⁷² Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 60-68; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 63-64, 127, 130-132; Naim Ateek, “Who Is My Neighbor?,” *Interpretation* 62, no. 2 (April 2008): 160-161; Ateek, “Earth Is the Lord’s,” 180.

⁷³ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 49-51, 60-66, 68; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 64, 132; Ateek, “Earth Is the Lord’s,” 180.

⁷⁴ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 64.

destroying or expelling the various nations residing in Canaan, Ezekiel's vision of the future redistribution of Israelite tribal territories embraces the non-Israelite who inhabits the land as an equal.⁷⁵

Equality is the key theme in Ateek's discussion of this passage. In order to convey the significance of this theme he offers a comparison with Lev 19:33-34, which reads: "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God." Ateek notes that "this commandment transcends the natural propensity of humans, and recognizes the humanity of others, and reaches out in love to them."⁷⁶ Highlighting the importance of overcoming the limitations of intracommunal notions of love, Ateek remarks on the text in Leviticus: "One can only applaud its deeper and more enlightened religious insights. The understanding of neighbor has been broadened, and the circle has been enlarged to include the resident alien."⁷⁷ While the Leviticus passage "lifts up an ordinary human injunction to a higher moral level," Ateek observes that it does not consider the identity of the alien in terms of "full equality" since "there is no mention that aliens can enjoy an equal share of the land."⁷⁸ In his reading, the model of neighbor presented in Leviticus seeks to ensure that resident aliens are loved as citizens are loved while nonetheless continuing to reside in the land as a group to whom the land does not belong. "In our contemporary language," Ateek suggests, "it could mean that the human rights of aliens

⁷⁵ Ibid., 64, 132; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 68, 81.

⁷⁶ Ateek, "Who Is My Neighbor?," 159.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

must be respected as that of other citizens,” but the very comparison between alien and citizen is premised on the difference between them.⁷⁹

In Ezekiel, on the other hand, the relationship between resident aliens and the land signifies greater integration and belonging. Ateek frames the difference between the two biblical perspectives as follows: “Whereas resident aliens in Leviticus remain aliens in the land, the resident aliens in Ezekiel enjoy the right not only to share the land, but to inherit it and their children after them. In other words, they cease to be resident aliens.”⁸⁰ Equal inheritance of the land among Israelites and non-Israelites fundamentally alters the alien status assigned to the latter. No longer simply recipients of a paternalistic love from a primary group of inhabitants by whom the land is claimed, the model of neighbor that Ateek perceives in Ezek 47 affirms that resident aliens shall “share the land on an equal basis.”⁸¹ It is for this reason that Ateek describes the prophetic imagination of Ezekiel as contributing “a theology that transcends Leviticus.”⁸² Insofar as the theology of Ezekiel “raises the standard demanded by God by eliminating the basic discrimination regarding the land,” it offers an understanding of the other that works to undermine the injurious dynamic of othering that can remain operative even in traditions in which an expanding concept of love of neighbor may be detected.⁸³

Ezekiel’s vision of equally shared land provides Ateek with a critical standpoint

⁷⁹ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 63.

⁸⁰ Ibid. In this regard, a development appears to have taken place in Ateek’s interpretation of Ezek 47 as presented in his most recent book, which implies a change from his earlier suggestion that the passage expresses an equal and therefore just sharing of the land with aliens who evidently remain aliens alongside Israelites. See Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 63-64; Ateek, “Who Is My Neighbor?,” 160; Ateek, “Earth Is the Lord’s,” 180.

⁸¹ Ateek, “Who Is My Neighbor?,” 160.

⁸² Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 62; cf. 63-64; Ateek, “Who Is My Neighbor?,” 160.

⁸³ Ateek, “Who Is My Neighbor?,” 160.

from which to probe the intersecting issues concerning indigeneity in relation to both the ancient Canaanites as represented in the biblical sources and contemporary Palestinians as represented in Zionist discourses. In light of the language employed for non-Israelites in Ezekiel, Ateek mentions that “the ancient Israelites, as well as the modern religious settlers, consider the people of the land—the Palestinians—aliens. But the indigenous people of the land, the Palestinians, were and are aliens only with regard to the ancient Israelites and modern settlers; they were not aliens to the land.”⁸⁴ Indigenous presence undergoes redefinition before the alienating gaze of dispossession, which exhibits forms of misrecognition often serving to sever native populations from the land. Ultimately, however, Ateek insists on the biblical insight that “the land belongs to God” and *all* of its inhabitants are “mere aliens and tenants.”⁸⁵ Reflecting on Ezekiel’s prophetic image of sharing as well as on other biblical sources that proclaim God’s ownership of the land (Lev 25:23; Ps 24:1), he directly addresses the revelatory value of narratives pertaining to the conquest of Canaan: “Since the land belongs to God and all the people are only aliens and tenants living on God’s land, it cannot be that God would have commanded the expulsion and annihilation of the indigenous people of the land.”⁸⁶ Rather, the contents of such texts and the contemporary reproduction of their essential structure in Israel-Palestine exemplify the severe shortcomings of certain ways of thinking about God.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 62. It is important here to note Ateek’s point that the term Palestinian “is not an ethnic denotation, but a geographic one.” Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 197n8. His rather loose use of the demonym Palestinian as inclusive of ancient Canaanites reflects the idea that, “although the country has been known by different names, the two by which it has been identified the longest have been Canaan and Palestine.” Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 16.

⁸⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 61, 65, 68, 73, 81; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 59, 65.

⁸⁶ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 65.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

The understanding of God as creator that is emphasized in Ateek's discussion of Jonah likewise emerges in his interpretation of Ezekiel as a resource for evaluating the elimination of the Canaanites as idealized in other biblical passages. He writes, "It is clear that in the Torah there are only two solutions to the problem of the indigenous people of the land: expulsion or annihilation. Either alternative would be devastating because it would be an affront to their creator and an inhuman act to their fellow humans."⁸⁸ As the ultimate source of all that exists, God sustains the land and its inhabitants as "a loving God who loves and cares" for all peoples.⁸⁹ Unlike the texts which reflect an anti-Canaanite theology, Ateek recognizes in Ezekiel the basic insights of this theology of creation. In this regard, the main impact of the resulting prophetic witness is twofold: "On the one hand, Ezekiel critiques the theology of Numbers and Deuteronomy regarding the indigenous people of the land; on the other hand, he advocates a different theology based on his new understanding of God. All the people of the land regardless of their ethnic backgrounds must live together in justice and peace, sharing the land and enjoying the good earth that God has given to them."⁹⁰

On the basis of this vision of equality and harmonious diversity in a shared land as gifted by the Creator, Ateek attends to the institutionalized forms of inequality that affect contemporary Palestinian communities. Instead of aligning itself with Ezekiel's prophetic image of sharing and justice for all inhabitants, he notes, the state of Israel "enshrined its inequality by affirming Israel as a Jewish state, giving a privileged status to

⁸⁸ Ibid., 68.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 61, 65, 68, 81.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 68; cf. 81; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 64, 132.

its Jewish citizens.”⁹¹ Specifying one of the legal mechanisms by which inequality is openly maintained by the state, he writes: “Jewish citizens of Israel are ‘nationals’ of Israel, while Palestinians cannot be nationals of the state. There is no common Israeli nationality for all citizens. In essence, there is a built-in structural discrimination between the two. As it plays itself out in real life, it is racism and it is detrimental to full equality and peace.”⁹² It is not only in light of Ezekiel’s message of geographic belonging and communal dignity that Ateek critiques the racialized arrangements of power in Israel-Palestine but also in terms of “the human rights standard of Leviticus,” which he views the state of Israel as likewise failing to meet due to “its blatant violations of the human rights of Palestinians, whether inside Israel or in the occupied Palestinian territories.”⁹³

⁹¹ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 64.

⁹² Ibid.; cf. Ateek, “Who Is My Neighbor?,” 160-161. For further discussion of institutionalized racism, Israeli law, and exclusionary national identity, see Roselle Tekiner, “Jewish Nationality Status as the Basis for Institutionalized Racial Discrimination in Israel,” *American-Arab Affairs* 17 (June 1986): 79-98; Roselle Tekiner, “Race and the Issue of National Identity in Israel,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23, no. 1 (1991): 39-55; Saree Makdisi, “Apartheid / ~~Apartheid~~ / [],” *Critical Inquiry* 44, no. 2 (Winter 2018): 304-330.

For a recent expression of this policy, see the nation-state bill, officially known as Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People, passed into law by the Knesset on July 19, 2018. Among other clauses, the law states: “The actualization of the right of national self-determination in the state of Israel is unique to the Jewish people.” “Full Text of Basic Law: Israel as the Nation State of the Jewish People,” July 19, 2018, Knesset News (Knesset, 2018), https://main.knesset.gov.il/EN/News/PressReleases/Pages/Pr13978_pg.aspx. See also Sabeel’s response (authored by Ateek) to the nation-state bill, wherein the law is described as evidencing the “apartheid status” of the state of Israel in the absence of democratic equality. Sabeel, “Statement on Israel Nation-State Law,” August 7, 2018, <https://sabeel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Israel-nation-state-law-final.pdf>.

An awareness of such contextual tendencies underlies Segovia’s reading of “Palestinian theology and criticism as an exercise in racial-ethnic and minority theory and practice.” In light of his interest in the global-comparative analysis of discursive engagements with “the racial-ethnic problematic,” framed as “the dynamics and mechanics of unequal power involving the formations and relations of race and ethnicity,” he observes: “In Palestinian theology and criticism I see the overt insertion of the Palestinian problematic, its sense of disenfranchisement and displacement, of minoritized control, within the nation-state of Israel and its explicit definition as a Jewish state.” Fernando F. Segovia, “Engaging the Palestinian Theological-Critical Project of Liberation: A Critical Dialogue,” in *The Biblical Text in the Context of Occupation: Towards a New Hermeneutics of Liberation*, ed. Mitri Raheb (Bethlehem: Diyar, 2012), 78.

⁹³ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 64-65.

While exclusionary nationalist frameworks inherently perpetuate processes of othering and thereby appear more readily comparable to the perspective of Leviticus as interpreted by Ateek, the prohibition of oppression and the love of the resident alien required by Lev 19:33-34 ultimately signify a relational ethic that remains to be actualized in his context insofar as the fundamental rights of Palestinians continue to be denied.⁹⁴

An important example of the justice-proclaiming heart of the biblical message as articulated in Palestinian liberation theology, Ezekiel's model of equal inheritance among Israelites and non-Israelites inevitably participates in the tensional horizon of both the biblical corpus and contemporary theological discourse. Consistent with the principles for evaluating the revelatory integrity of biblical sources as well as the challenges of social reality, Ateek concludes that "Ezekiel's theology can pass the hermeneutic of love of God and love of neighbor."⁹⁵

5.6 AMALEK IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES: ANNIHILATION BETWEEN TEXT AND SETTLER THEOPOLITICS

One final moment of friction in the biblical materials deserves attention in light of

⁹⁴ There has been some development in Ateek's understanding of the relationship between Lev 19 and the treatment of Palestinians by the state of Israel. In his 2008 essay "Who Is My Neighbor?," Ateek describes the problem of exclusively Jewish nationality in the state of Israel as "consciously or unconsciously" rooted in "the way Israel interprets the Leviticus text." Discussing state violence against Palestinians after 1967, he writes that "the government of Israel has been confiscating their land, building settlements, denying their rights, and oppressing them. The premise behind this goes back to an exclusive interpretation of Leviticus and other texts, i.e., that the land belongs to the Jewish people only and the Palestinians have no rights to it. They are considered 'resident aliens,' and Israel refuses to implement international law, end its occupation, and give the Palestinians their freedom and independence. Again, it is Ezekiel versus Leviticus." In his more recent *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, however, the state's approach to Palestinians is closer to Leviticus than Ezekiel but nonetheless fails to embody its message of love and respect for the rights of the resident alien. Ateek, "Who Is My Neighbor?," 160-161; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 62-65.

⁹⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 68; cf. 61.

its appropriation in the contemporary context of Israel-Palestine. In addition to the texts calling for the elimination of the Canaanites, the theme of collective extermination also appears in various biblical passages relating to the Amalekites. Ateek directly engages the issues revolving around this biblical tradition and addresses their agitating continuity today in light of the Palestinian experience.

“The Amalekites,” Ateek writes, “were a nomadic tribe that lived in the south of Palestine in the Negev (ancient Edom). Since the Amalekites were far from kind to the ancient Israelites in their journey to Canaan, God wanted to exterminate them (see Deut 25:17-19).”⁹⁶ His discussion of the thematic relevance of Amalek brings into focus the disquieting series of events concerning the rejection of Saul’s kingship and the message of the prophet Samuel as recounted in 1 Sam 15. In particular, Ateek first cites God’s instructions to Saul, king of Israel, as relayed by Samuel (1 Sam 15:2-3) and Saul’s subsequent failure to implement the exhaustive military campaign of eradication by which God seeks to punish the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:7, 9): “Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.’ ...Saul defeated the Amalekites....Saul and the people spared [King] Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that

⁹⁶ Ibid., 52. The passage from Deuteronomy cited by Ateek reads: “Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way, when you were faint and weary, and struck down all who lagged behind you; he did not fear God. Therefore when the LORD your God has given you rest from all your enemies on every hand, in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; do not forget.” See also Exod 17:8-16; Num 24:7, 20.

was valuable, and would not utterly destroy them.”⁹⁷ The divine call for the unmitigated obliteration of the Amalekites—illustrating the biblical concept of *herem*, which signifies a devotional condition of annihilation or total destruction—required Saul to execute an absolute proscription, the contravention of which is conveyed in his decision to exempt Agag, livestock, and perhaps other valuable property of the Amalekites.⁹⁸

As a result of his incomplete extermination of the Amalekites, Saul receives a message from Samuel concerning God’s rejection of his kingship. The judgment of God that Samuel delivers (1 Sam 15:22-23) and the grisly account of his own attempt to rectify Saul’s costly disobedience (1 Sam 15:33) are cited by Ateek: “‘Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obedience to the voice of the LORD? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is no less a sin than divination, and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king....’ And

⁹⁷ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 52-53; cf. Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 84.

⁹⁸ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 53. Discussing the concept of *herem*, Rabbi Greenberg describes it as designating “a state of ‘negative sanctity’ of what is abhorrent to God and must be delivered up” to God by means of annihilation. In his treatment of various instances of the *herem* law, Greenberg addresses its application to the Canaanite nations and observes that the issue of the historicity of the conquest narratives “may salve our consciences, but only aggravates the problem—that, under no pressure of facts, the biblical authors found compatible with their faith a divine command to commit genocide, whose fulfillment does credit to Joshua and his army!” Moreover, his proposed evaluative approach for contemporary readers of such biblical passages exhibits some of the main concerns guiding Ateek’s reflections on the biblical heritage. For instance, Greenberg writes: “Jews, a people massacred systematically on the basis of an ideology that justified genocide, cannot regard as timeless torah an ideological legitimization of mass killing. Our historical experience forbids us to admit such concepts into the treasury of eternal values of our heritage. In the face of our history, to suggest that the war-*herem* concept remains in any way valid is to merit the contempt of civilized [humanity], to become a model of what must be avoided rather than a model of what deserves to be emulated, and to defame Judaism.” Jewish readers who encounter the concept of *herem* in the Bible today, Greenberg contends, “must...annul the present authority of that concept in all its forms.” Greenberg, “Problematic Heritage,” 28-31. See also Moshe Greenberg, “Herem,” *EncJud* 9:10-13.

Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the LORD.”⁹⁹ The theology of God underlying this exchange and its emphatically violent orientation situate 1 Sam 15 among the biblical materials which act as a stimulus for Ateek’s project of liberating theology.

From the standpoint of the hermeneutical metric presented in the foregoing discussion, Ateek’s assessment of this narrative is consonant with the understanding of the liberative core of the Bible with which he contrasts the objectionable notions of God found in other biblical trajectories. He offers the following evaluation of the revelatory significance of 1 Sam 15: “Texts such as this surely reflect a primitive understanding of God, tribal ethics in ancient societies that should not be taken literally...When people believe that such texts constitute the word of God, and in God’s name go out and act on it by oppressing and killing others, they are committing crimes against God and fellow human beings.”¹⁰⁰ Evidently falling short of the decisive criterion of love which Ateek derives from the depths of the biblical heritage, the content of this passage ascribes to God a set of values and a mode of relating to others which are essentially incompatible with the Creator whose justice and embrace extends to all peoples. The nature of the message expressed in this biblical account—that is, the dissimilarity between its concept of God and the paradigmatic vision of love or Christ—demonstrates the difficulties and susceptibilities that characterize the hermeneutical interaction between text and recipient as understood in Palestinian liberation theology.

Specifically, Ateek identifies two “serious” theological problems in the material pertaining to the Amalekites as recounted in 1 Sam 15—namely, “what it tells us about

⁹⁹ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 53.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

God, and what it tells us about Samuel the prophet of God.”¹⁰¹ In terms of the theology of God communicated in the narrative, he mentions that “God is portrayed as a tribal god who has been carrying a deep grudge against the Amalekites that goes back hundreds of years,” suggesting that the fierce manifestation of the divine will in the form of collective punishment reflects “a god who has been created in the image of those who are thirsty for revenge.”¹⁰² Irreconcilable with “the God of mercy and compassion,” the understanding of God transmitted in this biblical text does not simply occlude the divine pedagogy that inspires the subversion of exclusionary practices which neglect the basic dignity of others but also unequivocally reinforces those very practices.¹⁰³

In regard to the figure of Samuel, Ateek describes him as “a blind executioner who mirrors the god of revenge and does not see the Amalekites as humans.”¹⁰⁴ Samuel is presented as embodying the obedience to God which Saul failed to display and the act of slaughtering Agag captures this quality quite grimly. The theological message that is associated with Samuel in this narrative provides Ateek with another opportunity to note the internally frictional character of biblical literature. Referencing the idea that “to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam 15:22), Ateek observes that while Samuel accepts the priority of obedience over worship, this position is “critiqued” by the prophet Hosea, whose theology of God is more expansive and attentive to the imperative of love.¹⁰⁵ In contrast to the message of Samuel, Ateek cites the prophetic perspective expressed in Hos

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 54.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 53-58.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 54.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

6:6: “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”¹⁰⁶ Indicative of a different way of understanding the divine will, Hosea’s theology, he mentions, proclaims “that steadfast love trumps worship,” the veracity of which eventually is “confirmed” by the teachings of Jesus (e.g., Matt 9:13; 12:7).¹⁰⁷

The ongoing recontextualization of the biblical theme of Amalek in Israel-Palestine offers another unsettling illustration of what is at stake in the reception of texts such as 1 Sam 15. “In 1984,” Ateek writes, “Rabbi Moshe Segal—who was formerly aligned with Menachem Begin’s terrorist underground, the Irgun—compared the Palestinian residents of the West Bank and Gaza to the Amalekites.”¹⁰⁸ The following passage appears in a letter written by Rabbi Segal for members of Gush Emunim: “One should have mercy on all creatures...but the treatment of Amalek—is different. The treatment of those who would steal our land—is different. The treatment of those who spill our blood—is different.”¹⁰⁹ In response to the menacing thematic connections activated by this discursive conflation of Palestinian presence with the biblical Amalekites, Ateek exclaims, “The rabbi is lifting material from the Hebrew Scripture that applied to a stage of Israelite development over three thousand years ago and using it in the twentieth century to incite the extermination of a whole people! Since he has labeled

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 54-55.

¹⁰⁸ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 84.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 84-85. See also the remarks on Gush Emunim in chapter 3, notes 90-91, as well as in note 112 in the present chapter. The excerpt from Rabbi Segal’s letter is quoted by Ateek from an article by investigative journalist Robert I. Friedman. See Robert I. Friedman, “The Right’s Greater Israel: No Land, No Peace for Palestinians,” *Nation*, April 23, 1988, 562-565. Friedman mentions that in the letter Segal also quotes from Num 33 (discussed above as a problematic biblical antecedent of ethnic cleansing cited by Ateek) and reproduces its injunction to “drive out all the inhabitants of the land” in order to possess the land (563).

the Palestinians as ‘Amalek,’ they do not fall under the category of ‘all creatures’ and therefore ‘mercy’ does not apply to them.”¹¹⁰ The charged image of Amalek can be deployed in a manner that ignites a bleak dimension of othering, bracketing its target at the fundamental level of creation and thereby investing it with a unique exposure to what is otherwise not permissible among creatures as such.

Demonstrating that the alarming position of Rabbi Segal “should not be seen as an isolated incident,” Ateek notes that “a more respected scholar, Rabbi Israel Hess of Israel’s Bar-Ilan University, published an article, ‘The Genocide Ruling of the Torah,’ which also compared the Arabs to Amalek and stated bluntly that their extermination has been mandated by the Torah.”¹¹¹ Similarly, Ateek mentions that many in the 1980s were surprised by reports that “young Yeshiva students in Kiryat Arba were learning that

¹¹⁰ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 85.

¹¹¹ Ibid. The article by Rabbi Hess is discussed by journalist David Hirst, who quotes Hess as writing that “the day will come when we shall all be called upon to wage this war for the annihilation of Amalek.” Hirst notes that Rabbi Hess “advanced two reasons for this. One was the need to ensure ‘racial purity.’ The other lay in ‘the antagonism between Israel and Amalek as an expression of the antagonism between light and darkness, the pure and the unclean, between the people of God and the forces of evil, an antagonism that continues to exist in regard to the children of Amalek through all generations’—currently embodied by the Arab nations.” David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch: The Roots of Violence in the Middle East* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 2003), 85.

Similarly, Israeli journalist Shulamit Aloni—in a critique of rabbinic theological tendencies in the occupied territories that serve to consolidate settler power and dehumanize Palestinians—writes, “I recall the essay by the late Rabbi Israel Hess, the rabbi of Bar-Ilan University, who wrote in the university newspaper that ‘we are all obligated to carry out genocide,’ because he did research and discovered that the Palestinians are descendants of Amalek, the tribe that the Torah commands us to destroy (and that has become a symbol of evil for Jews). Rabbi Prof. Emanuel Rackman, who was then president of the university, brought about his dismissal. It’s no coincidence that in the settlements the Palestinians are called ‘Amalek,’ and the intention is obvious to everyone.” Shulamit Aloni, “Losing God’s Image,” *Haaretz*, September 15, 2004, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.4839314>.

Nur Masalha mentions that Hess’s article, published in 1980 “in the student bulletin *Bat Kol*,” was not the first publication to associate Palestinians and Amalekites, noting that the rabbi of Ramat Gan, Rabbi Moshe Ben-Tzion Ishbezari, had made this connection in a 1974 book. With regard to Hess’s article, he observes that the “use of the Arabic term *jihad* leaves no doubt as to whom such a war of ‘annihilation’ should be waged against.” Nur Masalha, “From Secularism to Messianism: The Theology and Geopolitics of Neo-Zionism, 1967-2006,” in *The Bible and Zionism: Invented Traditions, Archaeology and Post-Colonialism in Israel-Palestine* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 150-151.

today's Arabs are the Amalekites that God instructed the Jews 'to fight eternally and destroy.'"¹¹² Today, however, "with the growing number of religious settlers, it has become common knowledge."¹¹³ The identification of Palestinians as contemporary Amalekites, further intensifying the explicitly racialized logic of incommensurability by qualifying it with the ultimacy of a metaphysical antinomy, transpires as an appropriation of the entanglement of God and terror to which certain biblical traditions attest. When viewed through the evaluative prism that forms the nucleus of Ateek's hermeneutical framework, however, such biblical traditions appear as manifestly discordant with the core biblical message of love, thereby rendering it a *misappropriation* to receive their contents in the way Zionist settler discourse has been increasingly operationalizing the violent theme of Amalek in the post-1967 period.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 55. Ateek is here referring to David K. Shipler's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1986 book *Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land*. See David K. Shipler, *Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land* (New York: Broadway Books, 1986), 166-167, 193-194, 214.

Masalha mentions earlier works discussing the theme of Amalek in settler discourse. For instance, he notes Danny Rubenstein's 1982 book (in Hebrew) *On the Lord's Side: Gush Emunim*, which shows "that this notion permeates the Gush Emunim movement's bulletins." Drawing on Rubenstein's work, Masalha offers an excerpt of a 1980 article in *Nekudah*, the main publication of Gush Emunim, "written by Gush Emunim veteran Haim Tzoriyah, entitled 'The Right to Hate,' which reads: 'In every generation there is an Amalek. The Amalekism of our generation finds expression in the deep Arab hatred towards our national revival in our forefathers' land.'" In addition to Rubenstein, Masalha refers to Israeli historian Uriel Tal, in light of his important and widely publicized research in the early 1980s, as having done "more than anyone to expose the 'annihilationist' notions preached by the rising messianic force in Israel." Tal's work identified "three stages or degrees" in which religious Zionist settler discourse refers to Palestinians: (1) "the reduction of the Palestinians in Jerusalem and the West Bank to the *halacha* status of 'resident alien'"; (2) "the promotion of Arab 'transfer' and emigration"; and (3) "the implementation of the commandment of Amalek, as expressed in Rabbi Hess's article 'The Commandment of Genocide in the Torah'—in other words, 'annihilating' the Palestinian Arabs." He remarks that Tal, "who had also done extensive research on anti-Semitism between the two world wars, concluded that these messianic doctrines were similar to ideas common in Germany during the Weimer Republic and the Third Reich." Masalha, "From Secularism to Messianism," 151-152; cf. 153-159.

¹¹³ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 55.

¹¹⁴ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 85.

5.7 RECEPTION AND EQUIVOCITY: THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ENGAGING A FRICTIONAL TEXT

As the above examples of Ateek's conception of scriptural tension suggest, the problem of biblical misappropriation is irreducible to that of the misunderstanding of particular biblical materials on the part of the reader. The model of the text-reader relationship that emerges in Palestinian liberation theology reflects a hermeneutical setting in which it is possible for readers to apprehend the contents of certain biblical sources in a manner that evinces both accuracy *and* misappropriation. This possibility, which exhibits as its basic features a methodologically indiscriminate mechanics of reading a conflicted scriptural inheritance and an inadequate concept of God that remains receptive to—if not actively promotive of—the production of human suffering, exemplifies the nature of the hermeneutical challenges arising from the vital *theological difference* which structures Ateek's critical category of the heart of the biblical message. His position that in the biblical legacy there abides a liberative core which reveals divine love and justice for all peoples, especially for the oppressed, is fundamentally demarcative, aiming to make recognizable the profound theological disjuncture characterizing the biblical corpus. "As it is possible to use the Bible in order to advocate for violence and war," Ateek writes, "it is also possible to use the Bible in order to promote justice and peace. Similarly, as it is possible to justify the oppression of the Palestinians, and even their ethnic cleansing in the name of an exclusive God, it is also possible to promote the sharing of the land and the peaceful and harmonious living

between Palestinians and Israelis.”¹¹⁵ While both trajectories of biblical reception remain possible and can be pursued in continuity with their respective traditions as they appear in the Bible, they do not represent equally valid practices of biblical appropriation since the texts themselves—when filtered through the metric of humanizing love—correspond to theologies of God in discontinuity with one another.¹¹⁶ More important than the contents

¹¹⁵ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 79-80.

¹¹⁶ In her reflections on the hermeneutical model developed in *Justice and Only Justice*, biblical scholar Mary Schertz compares Ateek’s approach with that of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and suggests that while both are “genuinely helpful” in relation to *how* to read the Bible ethically, neither theologian “deals directly enough” with an important “second level of the issue”—namely, the “more critical question” which asks *why* the oppressed should “continue to read and live by a text that can and has been used against them” and thereby situates theologians on “a deeper level of grappling with the issues of ethical reading or liberation hermeneutics.” Ateek, she writes, “does not deal directly with the question of the helpfulness or hurtfulness of the Bible for oppressed people” but rather “seems to accept the validity of the Bible and a biblical approach to a Palestinian theology of liberation as a given without carefully articulating the rationale for those decisions.” Mary H. Schertz, “People, Power, and Pages: Issues in Ethical Interpretation,” in *Faith and the Intifada: Palestinian Christian Voices*, ed. Naim S. Ateek, Marc H. Ellis, and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 140-146.

In considering this point, it seems important to recall that in his first book Ateek distinguishes between the validity and authority of biblical sources, on the one hand, and their value, on the other. This key distinction pertains not only to Schertz’s remark that Ateek uncritically accepts the “validity” of the Bible but also to the question of why the biblical tradition, in spite of contents that are susceptible to modes of appropriation which can perpetuate injury, continues to be considered a helpful resource in Palestinian liberation theology. Central to this hermeneutical distinction is the theological claim that it bears upon the reception of a message which is revelatory of divine love, presenting the reader with the transformative knowledge of God as given in Christ—from a Christian perspective, the ultimate criterion for how to live one’s life. This approach to the Bible—that is, reading it in a manner that is methodologically evaluative and critically sensitive to misappropriation—“calls attention to the heart of the biblical message,” as Ateek notes, the humanizing profundity of the biblical heritage that yields the valid liberative dimension which can impact everyday life (see notes 1 and 2 above). In addition to the emphasis on a transformative exposure to the God of justice as a guiding reality of love, Ateek’s discussion of the contemporary role of the Bible does indeed appear to revolve—quite intensely, in fact—around the question of its “helpfulness or hurtfulness...for oppressed people,” and in so doing produces a model for engaging biblical texts that enables the reader to identify passages conveying oppressive messages as reflecting not who God is, but precisely who God is not. Accordingly, the ethical question to which Schertz calls attention—namely, why a biblical approach as such should remain legitimate for Palestinian liberation theology—is one that seems to pervade Ateek’s construction of a liberative hermeneutical metric and structure his understanding of *how* biblical texts should be read (i.e., in a way that does not simply assume their validity); that is, the *how* and the *why* questions are interconnected in Ateek’s treatment of the Bible. The position regarding Schertz’s “second level of self-disclosure” that can be recognized in Ateek’s reflections is encapsulated in the idea that the use of biblical texts against Palestinians, while grounded in a problematic theological trajectory that is demonstrably present in the Bible, ultimately amounts to a misuse of those texts insofar as such injustices are fundamentally incompatible with the heart of the biblical message: love.

Moreover, the sustained effort to reexamine the biblical legacy in order to maintain its vitality, a task that has characterized Palestinian liberation theology since its inception, belongs to the larger process

of the biblical sources, Ateek suggests, is the question of *how* one approaches, examines, and internalizes their contents: “It all depends on the readers’ biblical lens and the hermeneutical key they use.”¹¹⁷ His hermeneutical concept of the heart of the Bible simultaneously affirms that the biblical heritage offers an encounter with the word of God and renders that heritage criticizable, implicating both the text and the reader.

In regard to the biblical text, Ateek’s theological project entails an ongoing task of elaborating its ambiguities and deeply frictional character. Contrasting the “deeper” and essential dimension of the biblical message with its exclusionary and oppressive sources, he seeks to identify and cultivate the former in light of its revelatory value as well as in terms of the critical resources it can offer for engaging those scriptural traditions which depict God inimically.¹¹⁸ The pervasive tension between these two biblical levels notwithstanding, the larger process of unsystematic theological development to which

of overcoming what Ateek—borrowing the formulation of Cedar Duaybis—would eventually designate the faith Nakba. That is, the ruptured relationship between Palestinian Christians and their sacred texts is itself a feature of their historical experience of oppression, further exemplifying the interlocking status of the *how* and *why* questions in Ateek’s theology. While certain elements of the resulting reorientation to the Bible cannot simply be erased, the attempt to heal a damaged Christian identity by recovering the liberative message of the Hebrew Bible transpires as a response to the wounds of dispossession. This task appears in Ateek’s work as a decolonial act, and yields a recuperative vision that refuses to be determined by the reality of oppression. Whereas Schertz’s comments suggest that the second-level question of the legitimacy of the Bible should be considered *in relation* (i.e., applied) to the oppressed, the faith Nakba signifies that in this particular case the conditions of the latter already harbor the former.

Last, Ateek—as expressed by the concept of the faith Nakba—inhabits a context marked deeply by the misuse of biblical sources to perpetuate injustice. The salient biblical factor of his lived setting, then, renders the Bible an essential resource to be examined in the pursuit of justice, peace, and reconciliation in Israel-Palestine. Ateek states directly why he has “deliberately chosen to stay as much as possible within biblical parameters in this study: to invoke the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures, in order to make it clear that the Jewish people have such a good, meaningful biblical tradition to which they can turn.” As such, his engagement with biblical sources does not only attend to those against whom they are deployed but also aims to cultivate their liberative value across religious traditions in order to promote the necessary modes of communal healing in his particular context. Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 6, 75-86, 116, 196-197n8; Naim Stifan Ateek, “The Emergence of a Palestinian Christian Theology,” in *Faith and the Intifada: Palestinian Christian Voices*, ed. Naim S. Ateek, Marc H. Ellis, and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 4-5; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 28-29.

¹¹⁷ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 80; cf. 81-82.

¹¹⁸ For instance, see Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 89-90, 95-96, 134, 138.

they belong and contribute precludes a simplistic organization of biblical books according to a taxonomic binary, particularly since a single biblical voice can be identified by Ateek as vacillating between the conflicting trajectories.¹¹⁹ A synthetically reconciled biblical corpus, upon which the coherence of systemic unification would be imposed in a manner that conceals the multiple ideological mediations through which the generative revelatory experiences of the biblical authors inevitably receive expression, would neutralize the pivotal difference between the “two distinct strands of religious thought” which Ateek discerns within the Hebrew Bible and thereby dissimulate the fissured axiological topography of the Bible.¹²⁰ The mode of interacting with biblical texts elaborated in Palestinian liberation theology aims to ensure that the general equivocal structure of the Bible remains visible while insisting on the authority of its theologically unequivocal core message—namely, uninhibited love.

As regards the reader of such a multidimensional corpus, Ateek’s hermeneutical model establishes as a primary challenge the task of exercising a consciousness of critical differentiation in order not to internalize materials which impede the pursuit of justice. In identifying the presence of objectionable materials among the biblical sources, he does not preclude an approach in which their uncritical reception would continue to be viewed as an illustration of the misuse and exploitation of the Bible.¹²¹ Without implying an apologetic exoneration of problematic biblical texts, the lexicon of misinterpretation

¹¹⁹ See chapter 4, note 75.

¹²⁰ Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 81; cf. 141-142.

¹²¹ For example, see Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 6, 75, 77-78, 84-86; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 51, 53, 78-79, 88-91, 141.

remains relevant for Ateek as a signifier of the damage which transpires in the absence of an evaluative interaction with such texts. That is, the process of misappropriating biblical sources pivots on a misunderstanding of the degree to which those sources constitute valid resources for knowledge about God. Reflecting an undialectical encounter with the biblical materials, the misuse of narratives that portray God in terms of violence and exclusivism does not necessarily stem from a defective comprehension of their content but rather from the inadequacy of the theological optic through which that content is considered.¹²²

In light of this conception of the text-reader relationship, then, Ateek suggests that to derive an exclusionary theology from the Bible amounts to an abusive hermeneutic not because the biblical sources are devoid of such tendencies but rather because it requires one to disregard the deepest dimension of the biblical witness. This approach to the problem of biblical misappropriation can be observed in his remarks on John Hagee, prominent US Christian Zionist and founder of Christians United for Israel. Noting that

¹²² This relation between the biblical text and the reader can be contrasted with Ateek's early analysis of the relation between human subjects and power since both relations feature the concept of abuse in quite different ways. With regard to the latter relation, he suggests that power—while not at all incompatible with justice when both are considered in reference to their transcendent source in God, “in whom justice and power are one” and are “founded in goodness and love”—can become destructive and “abused terribly” by humanity. The problem relating to power, as Ateek describes it, is “not inherent in power itself” but rather originates in “the sinful human condition” that can (and often does) introduce a change into the reality of power which deforms it into a mechanism for implementing and maintaining varieties of injustice. In the relation between human subjects and power, then, abuse takes place in a way that distorts an originally good and justice-invested gift from God. This understanding of abuse differs markedly from that which concerns the misappropriation of biblical sources. In the act of exploiting biblical texts, the reader misuses the texts not by introducing a change into their meaning but precisely by accepting it into their life in a way that fails to recognize the message as incompatible with the God of justice. The abuse of power occurs as discontinuity with the purpose of power as gift; the abuse of scripture occurs as uncritical continuity with specific texts, which—insofar as it neglects the heart of the biblical message—ultimately signifies discontinuity with the purpose of God's self-revelation as gift. For the discussion on power, see Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 123-130.

Hagee “claims that he is acting out God’s will,” Ateek writes: “When he was asked about his view of Hamas, his response was very biblical. He opened his Bible and read from the King James version, Deuteronomy 20:10-14.”¹²³ The passage, which relays instructions to the ancient Israelites regarding geographically distant cities and thus does not reflect the *herem* to be imposed on the nations inhabiting Canaan, was cited as follows:

When thou comest nigh unto a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it. And it shall be, if it make thee answer of peace, and open unto thee, then it shall be, that all the people that is found therein shall be tributaries unto thee, and they shall serve thee. And if it will make no peace with thee, but will make war against thee, then thou shalt besiege it: And when the LORD thy God hath delivered it into thine hands, thou shalt smite every male thereof with the edge of the sword: But the women, and the little ones, and the cattle, and all that is in the city, even all the spoil thereof, shalt thou take unto thyself; and thou shalt eat the spoil of thine enemies, which the LORD thy God hath given thee.¹²⁴

The perspective expressed in this biblical text, Ateek comments, reflects a historical context in which such an “ethics of war” was widely shared. His critique of Hagee’s appeal to Deut 20, however, is not exegetical but essentially theological, and it is premised on an assessment of the revelatory value of the passage cited: “The tragedy, however, is when people in the twenty-first century, like John Hagee, attribute these words to God and believe that they can be applied today. This is a very repulsive, dangerous, and heretical theology.”¹²⁵ From the standpoint of Ateek’s hermeneutical framework, the heretical character of Hagee’s “very biblical” position results from the failure to employ an apparatus of critical discernment in the appropriation of scriptural

¹²³ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 88.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

traditions and thus to safeguard against a textual fetishism of sorts which ineluctably reinscribes a dehumanizing theology of God.

It is in response to the general persistence of biblical misappropriation and to the specific impact of such tendencies in the context of Israel-Palestine that Ateek insists on the need for continuously deepening reflection and dialogue on the biblical heritage. He articulates the problem succinctly: “The Bible remains both a blessing and a curse.”¹²⁶ Its intra-frictional dynamic exceeds the corpus and unfolds hermeneutically in the form of inconsonant concepts of God, humanity, and land. Accordingly, Ateek calls for “a more radical biblical revolution...here [i.e., in Israel-Palestine] and abroad. A revolution that, at one and the same time, takes the Bible seriously and elucidates its deeper message, but also rejects the violence and terrorism found in it and refuses to sugar-coat it, spiritualize it, or justify it with untenable explanations.”¹²⁷ The thematic interconnections of biblical

¹²⁶ Ateek, “In Thanksgiving to God,” 5.

¹²⁷ Ibid. With regard to Ateek’s understanding of the nature and meaning of the biblical corpus, it is necessary here to acknowledge and respond to a charge—or, in some instances, a loosely indicated association—which, while not yet leveled at Ateek with the systematic precision that characterizes a formal critique, occasionally appears in the literature and carries profound contextual, ideological, theological, and christological implications, and thus deserves attention. Articulated with varying degrees of caution, the issue concerns a perceived relation between Ateek’s theology and Marcionism, the system developed in the second century by Marcion of Pontus. As early as 1992, for example, biblical scholar Elizabeth Smith Gamble critiqued Ateek’s method as subjecting the Bible “to Marcion-like tendencies to uproot it from its Jewish heritage in order to find liberation motifs which support Palestinian political aims.” More recently, Kuruvilla, in discussing the work of others, makes reference to the link between Ateek and Marcionism, even when that link is not explicit in the writings under discussion. Without providing specific citations, he also mentions that “many Western Christian critics of Ateek and Sabeel have referred to him in the context of Marcion and Marcionism.” In addition, Palestinian theologian and Lutheran minister Munther Isaac connects Ateek’s hermeneutical model with Marcionism. The relation between Ateek’s theology and “that ancient heretic Marcion” has also been suggested by biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine. Elizabeth Smith Gamble, “Indigenous Palestinian Liberation Theology: A Critical Examination of Current Literature,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 27 (July 1992): 85; Samuel J. Kuruvilla, *Radical Christianity in Palestine and Israel: Liberation and Theology in the Middle East* (London: Tauris, 2013), 126; Samuel Jacob Kuruvilla, “Radical Christianity in the Holy Land: A Comparative Study of Liberation and Contextual Theology in Palestine-Israel” (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2009), 63, 101n277, 148, 209; Sam Kuruvilla, “Reading the Hebrew Bible in Palestine: Letters and Speeches of Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Michel Sabbah,” review of *Faithful Witness: On Reconciliation and Peace in the Holy Land*, by Michel Sabbah, ed. Drew Christiansen, S.J., and Saliba Sarsar, *Holy Land Studies* 8, no. 2 (2009): 239-240;

Munther Isaac, "Reading the Old Testament in the Palestinian Church Today: A Case Study of Joshua 6," in *The Land Cries Out: Theology of the Land in the Israeli-Palestinian Context*, ed. Salim J. Munayer and Lisa Loden (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 218-219, 224-225; Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006), 184. See also Tim Meadowcroft, *The Message of the Word of God: The Glory of God Made Known* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 165-167; Heikki Räisänen, "Marcion and the Origins of Christian Anti-Judaism: A Reappraisal," in *Challenges to Biblical Interpretation: Collected Essays 1991-2001* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 202; Yohanna Katanacho, "Sorry Rev. Naim, I Cannot Agree with You!," review of *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation: The Bible, Justice, and the Palestine-Israel Conflict*, by Naim Stifan Ateek, Come and See (website), January 2, 2018, Book Reviews, <http://www.comeandsee.com/view.php?sid=1343>.

Such a charge requires, at minimum, either an oversimplification of Ateek's approach to the Bible or an oversimplification of the Marcionite system. While it is possible to observe a general point of contact in their denial of the authority of particular biblical passages, Ateek and Marcion (or what, in the absence of extant primary sources, appears to have been proposed by Marcion according to his representation in polemical writings) exhibit fundamental differences in terms of their methods for engaging such texts, their classifications of such texts, the larger theological frameworks within which they interpret such texts, and the conclusions they draw from such texts. These differences do not concern ancillary or inessential features of the Marcionite system but rather pertain to its basic, distinguishing tenets, and thus serve to dissociate Ateek from Marcion on foundational issues at stake in any comparison between both figures.

The pertinent—and, in my view, decisive—issues which require consideration in order to assess the relation between Palestinian liberation theology and the Marcionite system can be presented as follows: (1) Marcion adopted a literalist method of interpreting the Hebrew Bible, whereas Ateek explicitly eschews literalism and recognizes a process of growth and development in the understanding of God that appears in the Hebrew Bible—thus their respective models of revelation are fundamentally different; (2) Marcion, as a result of his literalism, articulated a theological system featuring two separate gods, an inferior Creator (as depicted in the Hebrew Bible) and the superior transcendent God of love (as depicted in Marcion's abridged version of the New Testament), whereas Ateek affirms one God as loving creator and encounters the only living God in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament—thus their respective theologies of God are fundamentally different; (3) Marcion, on the basis of his literalist system of ditheism, developed an understanding of profound discontinuity between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (i.e., as sources corresponding to different gods), whereas Ateek, while rejecting exclusionary materials in the Hebrew Bible, nonetheless insists on a profound continuity between the (heart of the) Hebrew Bible and the New Testament—thus their respective hermeneutical frameworks are fundamentally different; (4) Marcion, in light of the posited discontinuity between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, viewed the prophets of the Hebrew Bible as proclaiming an evil demiurge and displaying ignorance of the superior good God revealed in Christ, whereas Ateek extols the prophetic tradition and firmly situates Jesus in its trajectory of justice and love while foregrounding its basis in the goodness of the Creator—thus their respective approaches to the prophetic tradition are fundamentally different; (5) Marcion, in developing his anti-Creator theology and the idea of an absolute difference between the Hebrew Bible and Christ, claimed that Christ came into the world to abrogate the order of the Creator as represented in the Hebrew Bible, whereas Ateek views Jesus as deepening and perfecting the liberative image of the Creator as represented in the Hebrew Bible—thus their respective christologies are fundamentally different; and (6) Marcion, due to the logical ramifications of his anti-Creator christology, maintained a docetistic understanding of Christ as appearing in the world without human birth or enfleshment (as such a mode of existence would require participation in the order of the demiurge), thereby existing impassibly, whereas Ateek emphasizes the importance of the full humanity (without denying the full divinity) of Christ, especially for Palestinian Christians, and the experience of historical suffering which he endured—thus their respective positions on the incarnation and the experiential horizon of Christ are fundamentally different.

This important series of fundamental differences between Ateek and Marcion illustrates the difficulties in suggesting a convergence—or even a compatibility—of any sort between their theologies. In essence, the Marcionite system is emphatically and uncompromisingly antithetical to the Hebrew Bible, an orientation that is grounded in a repudiation of the Creator as the inferior deity to which that scriptural

narrativity, however, do not always render harmful elements readily identifiable among the scriptural sources. In some instances, it becomes necessary to probe the larger narrative framework and coalescent theological notions in order to recognize features of biblical narratives that yield the presence of problematic perspectives in unexpected sources. Consequently, the challenges concerning a responsible and humanizing approach to the Bible are not confined to the reception of those texts in which forms of exclusion and social negation are conspicuous; they also pertain to modes of theological production that seek, on the basis of a commitment to justice and solidarity with the most vulnerable, to contest and overcome the misuse of biblical sources through a sustained focus on cultivating their liberative significance for a broken world.

The theological-conceptual range of certain biblical texts, when (re)examined from specific contextual locations marked by particularly resonant experiences of suffering, may unveil troubling dimensions of meaning and proximities of danger in

tradition witnesses. Ateek, on the other hand, recognizing that both inclusive and exclusionary trajectories pervade the Hebrew Bible, affirms the former as revelatory of God's justice and love (even to the extent of identifying in the story of Jonah a hermeneutical lens internal to the Hebrew Bible) and rejects the latter as reflecting discordant ways of thinking about God which reveal more about the limitations of human knowledge than about the nature of God. Like Irenaeus of Lyons—and despite salient hermeneutical differences between them—Ateek is abundantly clear that (1) the God who creates is the God who saves, and that (2) the Hebrew Bible testifies to this indispensable theological insight, neither of which can be accepted from the standpoint of Marcionite theology. If it is indeed possible to identify two gods in Ateek's theology, the difference would be not between the Creator of the Hebrew Bible and the God of Jesus but rather between God as creator and God as created—that is, it would concern the problem of idolatry (cf. note 13 above).

For further discussion of the main issues relating to Marcion and Marcionism, see Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Sebastian Moll, *The Arch-Heretic Marcion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010); Dieter T. Roth, *The Text of Marcion's Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Andrew Hayes, *Justin against Marcion: Defining the Christian Philosophy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2017). For passages in Ateek's writings relating to the various points mentioned above in contradistinction to Marcionism, see Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 109, 116-117, 160; Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 62, 74-75, 145, 162-163, 170; Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 54, 60, 61, 65, 80, 82, 83, 88; Ateek, "Sabeel's Liberation Theology," 28; Ateek, "Teología de la liberación," 270-275.

ostensibly liberative materials. In this regard, the exemplary biblical narrative in the context of Israel-Palestine is the account of the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery and the conquest of Canaan.

5.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter has expanded on the theological problem of the biblical corpus as a tensional heritage, both internally as well as in relation to the present-day setting in which Palestinian liberation theology continues to be worked out, introduced in chapter 4. By way of examining more concretely Ateek's understanding of the nature of the Bible, the discussion in this chapter focused mainly on a series of scriptural examples which he identifies as transmitting incompatible theological models and addresses in light of the Palestinian context. This continued exposition of the hermeneutical orientation that remains central to Palestinian liberation theology has required attending to a variety of key issues pertaining to the challenges of biblical reception as viewed from a location of collective displacement and inferiorization. Prominent among such issues is the conception of land, particularly in relation to questions of habitation, indigeneity, the theology of God, the logic of racial othering, and the larger framework of creation. Closely related to these intersecting themes and areas of inquiry as they appear in Ateek's writings is the representation of the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan in the biblical sources. The instances of scriptural friction treated in this chapter have illustrated Ateek's employment of a Canaanite analytic in the process of assessing the revelatory status of biblical texts. Accordingly, his ongoing attempt to craft a liberative approach to the Bible

as a direct response to the reality of suffering in Israel-Palestine pertains to the reception of the exodus narrative not only as a vital methodological point of departure but also with regard to the evaluative recourse to Canaan as a critical space. The status of the exodus account in Palestinian liberation theology will be revisited in a more direct manner in the constructive material of chapter 7.

As the concluding chapter of the second part of the dissertation, chapter 6 will present the critical response to the paradigmatic model of the exodus that appears in the theological contribution of Delores S. Williams.

CHAPTER 6

INVISIBILIZED CANAANITES AND THE NOT-ALWAYS-LIBERATOR GOD: THE REEXAMINATION OF THE EXODUS PARADIGM IN THE WOMANIST THEOLOGY OF DELORES S. WILLIAMS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter continues the second part of the dissertation in examining critical responses to paradigmatic conceptions of the biblical account of the exodus as developed in classical formulations of liberation theology. Turning to the pioneering work of Delores S. Williams (b. 1937), chapter 6 focuses on the reception of the exodus paradigm in her contribution to womanist theology.¹ In order to introduce some of the important questions and problems that Williams engages in her theology, the following presentation will first address the relationship between the discourse of white feminism and black women's experience as it appears in her writings. This preliminary discussion will offer a general perspective on the task of womanist theology as Williams articulates it as well as identify certain areas of analysis that will resurface in her evaluation of the appropriation of the exodus in black liberation theology. The chapter will then proceed to consider the assessment of the exodus paradigm in Williams's theology, attending to the significance of two distinct features of her critique: (1) a "rereading" of the biblical story of Hagar, and (2) a process-centered reintegration of the biblical account of the conquest of Canaan.

¹ For some suggestive remarks on "feminist/womanist pioneering" as oriented toward liberation and thus providing a notable contrast to the colonial legacy of early American pioneering, see Delores S. Williams, "Womanist/Feminist Dialogue: Problems and Possibilities," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9, no. 1/2 (Spring-Fall 1993): 67.

These aspects of her approach to the exodus will be explicated in relation to traditions of biblical appropriation in the black community and the corresponding images of God, the challenges of womanist hermeneutics, and the contemporary exigencies of theology.

6.2 “A DEEP SHADE OF DIFFERENCE”: WHITE FEMINIST ANALYSIS AND BLACK WOMEN’S EXPERIENCE

In her writings throughout the 1980s, Williams began to formulate in various ways the critical importance of contesting and remedying the flagrant erasure of black women’s experience in white feminist discourse as well as in black theology.² Engaging

² In her collaborative work with other feminist theologians from 1982 to 1984 as a member of the Mud Flower Collective, Williams (under the pseudonym Bess B. Johnson) recounts a key moment that shaped the development of her own sensitivity to important differences between white women’s experience and black women’s experience. Recalling a course on feminism in which she was the only black woman, Williams describes “being stunned for days” upon learning that the shock expressed by the white women in the classroom as a result of their experience of exclusion stemmed from a sincere expectation of inclusion. She writes, “I’ve always known I’m not included. I guess I’m just beginning to realize this real difference between women in white and black cultures... The fact of exclusion comes as no surprise to black women.” This early insight into the different experiences that black women and white women bring to feminist analysis anticipates what would remain a guiding concern of Williams’s work—namely, the twofold task of challenging feminist conceptions of women’s experience that do not account for black women’s experience and reorienting the conversation by naming and examining black women’s experience. It is for this reason that Williams, in dialogue with the other members of the Mud Flower project, insists that her understanding of feminism “always has to be preceded by the word black” and “involves struggle against what I call the trinity of sexism, racism, and classism.” The Mud Flower Collective, *God’s Fierce Whimsy* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1985), 14-15, 74; cf. 9-11, 66-67, 151. For Williams’s initial use of a pseudonym as a member of Mud Flower, see Stina Busman Jost, *Walking with the Mud Flower Collective: God’s Fierce Whimsy and Dialogic Theological Method* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2014), 134-135.

On the other hand, as early as 1983, writing as a graduate student at Union Theological Seminary, Williams indicates the need for a critical engagement with the androcentric shortcomings in representative works of black theology. Observing the problematic tendency among white theologians in the United States to view black theology “as ‘a thing apart’ from the development of what is called the tradition in systematic theology,” she identifies in the methodological aspects of black theology a significant contribution which renders untenable the homogenizing propensities in North American theology that serve to conceal its “decidedly pluralistic” character. In view of this critique of exclusionary discourses, Williams closes the essay by gesturing toward the manner in which black theology itself remains susceptible to a comparable assessment from the standpoint of feminist theology, which offers a “critique of the core symbolism of the Christian religion” whereby it “challenges black theologians and all other Christian theologians to ask again: ‘who do we say God is, and what kind of language do we use to say it?’” Delores S. Williams, “Black Theology’s Contribution to Theological Methodology,” *Reflection* 80, no. 2 (January 1983): 12-16.

the neglect of *black* women's experience of oppression in the works of white feminists as an expression of white supremacy and the omission of black *women's* experience of oppression in black theology as a reflection of patriarchy in the black community, she calls attention to the intersectional task of developing a theological corrective that will "bring black women's history, culture, and religious experience into the interpretive circle of Christian theology and into the liturgical life of the church."³ Intrinsic to the process of constructing a womanist theology, then, was a critical interaction with modes of theological reflection which effectively reproduce societal forces of injustice affecting the lives of black women while nonetheless remaining "organically related" to womanist theology insofar as they also highlight elements of oppression that are inseparable from black women's experience.⁴

The challenge of conceptualizing and articulating "a God who affirmed the inextricable unity of blackness and womanness and freedom" thus gave rise to a new way of doing theology which would be characterized by an acute apprehension of a troubling dialectic wherein oppressed groups seek to overcome particular forms of social suffering while simultaneously reinforcing other configurations of domination as well as further obstructing the recognition of its victims—a problem which, as will be discussed below, features in Williams's reassessment of the exodus paradigm in black liberation theology.⁵

See also the pertinent remarks on liberation theologies in Mud Flower Collective, *God's Fierce Whimsy*, 18-21.

³ Delores S. Williams, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices," *Christianity and Crisis* 47, no. 3 (March 1987): 70.

⁴ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1993] 2013), xvii-xviii; cf. 158.

⁵ Delores S. Williams, "Searching an Identity: Or the Conditioning Molding Me Into Myself," in *Transforming the Faiths of Our Fathers: Women Who Changed American Religion*, ed. Ann Braude (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 119.

It is for this reason that she offers the following observation on the basic procedure of womanist theology: “As black women retrieving our experience from ‘invisibility,’ each of us retrieves from the underside of the underside partial facts about ourselves and partial visions of missing parts of our experience.”⁶ In this section of the chapter, the tension between invisibilization and black women’s experience that Williams addresses in relation to white feminist discourse will serve to introduce some of the key concerns that shape her work and inform her treatment of the exodus.

Recounting the trajectory of personal growth through which her feminist identity was deepened and redefined by the dimensions comprising womanist identity, Williams underscores several levels of discontinuity between the prevailing expressions of the former and the lived experiences of black women in the United States.⁷ Such instances of salient disconnect, she recalls, evidenced a failure in the aim of North American feminist discourse to engage and embrace the experiences of all women.⁸ Among the multiple examples that Williams discusses as having heightened her sense of the need to reframe the feminist conversation as she had initially encountered it, the issues concerning the analysis and meaning of women’s experience are paramount. In her evaluation of this fundamental area of feminist discourse, Williams attends to interrelated problems in

⁶ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 10.

⁷ Williams, “Searching an Identity,” 116-132; Delores S. Williams, “Black Theology and Womanist Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Edward P. Antonio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 60-62. See also the brief biographical outline at the end of Williams’s dissertation, where she mentions this important development in her life (which, it should be noted, frames the entire project) in connection with the years during which she pursued advanced academic degrees: “I become a feminist, then a feminist-womanist.” Delores Seneva Williams, “A Study of the Analogous Relation between African-American Women’s Experience and Hagar’s Experience: A Challenge Posed to Black Liberation Theology” (PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1990), [374] (original page numbered as 1 but appears at the end).

⁸ Williams, “Searching an Identity,” 120-121; Williams, “Black Theology and Womanist Theology,” 61; cf. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 163-166; 216n9.

probing how dominant treatments perpetuate different patterns of oppression, function to norm harmful conceptions of the human person, and consolidate the visibility of some women while sustaining the invisibility of others. Central to the emergence of womanist theology, the process of interrogating notions of women's experience as presented in the works of white feminists prompted a focused commitment to reconceptualize feminist visions of justice in light of what Williams describes as "my stubborn insistence that I am *all that I am: Black and Woman*. And I will be!"⁹

This intervention into the ascendant models of feminist thought in North America is readily recognizable in Williams's essays from the mid-1980s. In an analysis of black women's experience of oppression and strategies of resistance based primarily on the writings of Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960), Margaret Walker (1915-1998), and Alice Walker (b. 1944), for instance, she observes at the outset the exclusionary approach to women's experience marking the majority of feminist literature: "When the women's movement mushroomed in America during the 1970s, women's experience of oppression became a major issue. The publishing industry flooded the market with literature describing the nature of women's lives in general and women's oppression in particular. Afro-American women, however, identified racial and class biases operating in the women's movement. They claimed that most assessments of women's experience (and of women's oppression) were exclusive. They said these assessments were based almost entirely on data about Anglo-American middle-class women. Therefore, Afro-American

⁹ Williams, "Searching an Identity," 117 (emphasis and capitalization in original).

women began to name and to define their own experience of oppression.”¹⁰ In addition to the main task of bringing into view the experiences of black women, the corrective that is effected through such a process of naming and defining realities which white feminism had largely disregarded is presented by Williams as offering important resources for the self-critical development of feminist theology in the United States.¹¹ By challenging the restrictive frameworks of feminist reflection that revolves around white middle-class women and expanding the diagnosis of violence against women, the contribution of black feminism foregrounds a distinct history of oppression and active defiance which reorients the engagement with the meaning of women’s experience and yields new possibilities for the communal work of theology.

In particular, Williams discerns in the writings of Hurston, Margaret Walker, and Alice Walker a depiction of “black women’s oppression as a multidimensional assault” in which she identifies three important aspects.¹² The first dimension of this experience of oppression that Williams discusses is “the assault upon black women’s reproductive and nurturing functions,” which includes the pervasive sexual violence against slave women (e.g., the “forced-breeder relationship” imposed by slave owners), coercive nurturing of white children, domestic violence in relationships with black men, and dehumanizing treatment by complicit white women.¹³ In reference to Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966), for example, she mentions the repeated sexual assaults on Sis Hetta, a young slave, by

¹⁰ Delores S. Williams, “Women’s Oppression and Lifeline Politics in Black Women’s Religious Narratives,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1, no. 2 (1985): 59.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 60, 69-71.

¹² *Ibid.*, 60.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 60-62; cf. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 32-37, 54-63.

Master Dutton, the owner who “attempted to break Hetta’s spirit by constantly raping and impregnating her,” thus leading to her death at the age of twenty-nine.¹⁴ Williams also notes that Vyry, the main character of the novel and one of the many children resulting from the pernicious breeder role inflicted upon Sis Hetta, endures humiliating and cruel treatment from Miss Salina (Big Missy), Dutton’s wife, when she is required to begin caring for their children at the age of seven.¹⁵ Remarking on the significance of this first aspect of black women’s experience of oppression, Williams considers its relationship to the experience that tends to govern the focus of the writings of white feminists: “The Afro-American woman’s oppression is distinct from that of the Anglo-American woman. The Afro-American woman’s sexuality, procreative powers, even her capacity to nurture, are appropriated by the white ruling class, providing economic benefits and personal comforts for white men and women. This continual violence, physical and psychological, destroyed the bodies and spirits of many black women.”¹⁶

The second dimension of oppression is the assault upon the self-esteem of black women through “the use of alien aesthetic criteria to assess black women’s beauty and value.”¹⁷ Illustrating the harmful effects of internalizing “Anglo-American standards of feminine beauty” in the black community, Williams calls attention to the degrading and disdainful treatment of Celie, the protagonist in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982),

¹⁴ Williams, “Women’s Oppression and Lifeline Politics,” 60-61. See Margaret Walker, *Jubilee*, 50th anniversary ed. (Boston: Mariner Books, [1966] 2016).

¹⁵ Williams, “Women’s Oppression and Lifeline Politics,” 62; cf. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 45-47.

¹⁶ Williams, “Women’s Oppression and Lifeline Politics,” 62.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 60; cf. Williams, “Womanist Theology,” 67-68; Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 75-81, 162-163; Williams, “Searching an Identity,” 121, 126; Williams, “Black Theology and Womanist Theology,” 60, 71n3.

who “is constantly told she is skinny, black, and ugly,” and is forced to inhabit a position in which “she is of no value except as a ‘workhorse’ to clean her husband’s house, work in his fields and care for her stepchildren.”¹⁸ Aestheticizing whiteness and deprecating blackness, Williams suggests, attest to the persisting legacy of the baneful system of values underlying chattel slavery. She writes, “Derived from the slavocracy’s primary ethical principle that ‘white is right,’ this alien aesthetic (modeled on white female characteristics) falls heavily upon black women. Because of favoritism based on skin color and quality of hair, black women often internalize this value.”¹⁹ Instances of colorist and white-mediated perceptions of black women also appear in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), in which Williams recognizes examples of how “black men give preferential treatment to those black women who most closely resemble white women” while “darker and more negroid women are valued far less.”²⁰ The impact of these relational practices on the black community, she asserts, steadily undermines black women’s assessment of their own worth.²¹

The third and final aspect of the multidimensional assault that Williams delineates consists of a “denial of black women’s *independent right* to choose and maintain positive, fulfilling, and productive relationships.”²² In the various novels that provide resources for reflection in this essay, the impediments to black women’s relational freedom stem from the influential roles exercised by other men and women, black and white, as well as from

¹⁸ Williams, “Women’s Oppression and Lifeline Politics,” 62; cf. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 47-51. See Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (Boston: Mariner Books, [1982] 1992).

¹⁹ Williams, “Women’s Oppression and Lifeline Politics,” 63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 62. See Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 75th anniversary ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, [1937] 2013).

²¹ Williams, “Women’s Oppression and Lifeline Politics,” 60, 62-63.

²² *Ibid.*, 64 (emphasis in original).

unjust institutional forces. Prevented by her sexually abusive stepfather Alphonso from choosing a husband, Celie (in *The Color Purple*) is forced by him to marry Albert simply “because [Alphonso] wants her out of his house so that he can molest her younger sister, Nettie.”²³ Moreover, Celie’s marriage to Albert amounts to another abusive relationship on several levels, and Albert “denies Celie any relationship with her sister” after the latter resisted his attempt to rape her.²⁴ In *Jubilee*, Williams observes, slavery is the obstacle that does not allow black women to exercise the right of “choosing friends, lovers, husbands, and maintaining ties with their children.”²⁵ She notes the painful recognition of shattered possibilities in Vyry’s words to Randall Ware, a free black man whose desire to marry and emancipate Vyry fails to concretize due to her unwilling slave master (and father), Dutton: “You and me didn’t have no chance to make a marriage. Slavery killed our chance.”²⁶ Among the different examples cited in the discussion of this dimension of black women’s experience of oppression, Williams concludes, a common theme emerges: “Black women are denied their right to the pursuit of happiness.”²⁷

In addition to the tripartite analysis of oppression, Williams examines a variety of strategies which black women use in response to the manifold assault that she elucidates. Rather than simply capitulating and “passively submitting to this brutal oppression,” women in the aforementioned literary texts embody a range of oppositional practices that reflects different power dynamics and modes of refusal.²⁸ She notes that “some female

²³ Ibid., 64-65.

²⁴ Ibid., 64; cf. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 48.

²⁵ Williams, “Women’s Oppression and Lifeline Politics,” 64.

²⁶ Ibid., 64.

²⁷ Ibid., 65.

²⁸ Ibid.

characters assume defiant attitudes and develop physical strength” as distinct ways of objecting to the assault on their reproductive and nurturing resources (e.g., Hetta, while “powerless to resist Master Dutton’s repeated rapes,” adopts an attitude in her dealings with everyone that conveys a poignant sense of the violence she is forced to endure; in *The Color Purple*, Sofia is sentenced to serve as the mayor’s family maid and finds ways to communicate that her coerced nurturing of white children does not mean she loves them).²⁹ Another strategy of opposition appears in processes by which “women form strong bonds with other women and with men to increase self-esteem and to develop new possibilities for mutual relationships.”³⁰ As a notable instance of this strategy, Williams mentions Celie’s connection with Shug, a blues singer with whom Celie develops “a lesbian relationship that helps her gain a new and positive sense of herself,” enabling her to overcome her abusive husband’s dehumanizing treatment and become economically self-sufficient.³¹ Similarly, Janie (the main character in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*) and Vyry (in *Jubilee*) are both identified by Williams as freely entering into relationships with specific men and thereby encountering new trajectories of healing in their respective life situations.³²

Together with the strategy of forming generative bonds, the characters of Celie, Janie, and Vyry share what Williams describes as “a political strategy to challenge the authorities governing women’s lives” by means of seeking to “distance themselves from

²⁹ Ibid., 61-61, 65.

³⁰ Ibid., 65.

³¹ Ibid., 65-66; cf. Delores S. Williams, “‘The Color Purple’: What Was Missed,” *Christianity and Crisis* 46, no. 10 (July 1986): 231; Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 48-51.

³² Williams, “Women’s Oppression and Lifeline Politics,” 66.

the sources of their oppression.”³³ In the case of Celie, this strategy of distancing can be recognized in her decision to leave her husband Albert’s house and begin exploring self-determination while temporarily living with Shug.³⁴ Likewise, the process of personal removal from domains of physical, psychological, and emotional harm is effected by the choices of women in the other novels. As Williams writes, “Vvry runs away to escape slavery. Janie Starks leaves Eatonville with Tea Cake [the male partner alluded to above] and defies the authority of community mores.”³⁵ Each of these examples is cited by Williams as depicting a vital mode of resistance in the face of multifaceted violence against black women.

The final strategy of opposition that Williams discusses in regard to this selection of writings by Hurston, Margaret Walker, and Alice Walker concerns a “revaluing of values” that yields a change in consciousness bearing directly on foundational elements of communal life and thus sustains efforts to refashion social existence.³⁶ In particular, she addresses a liberating shift from restrictive and damaging conceptions of love and religious themes to a consciousness that is transformed in ways that engender relational conditions which are conducive to black women’s self-affirmation. Noting the essential role of love in connection with ethically envisioned action throughout the history of the black community (e.g., in blues music, folk traditions, the civil rights movement, and

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 66-68. In an early treatment of “transformations of consciousness” (both positive and negative) as one of several “active constituents” of “the black experience” (an expression which consistently appears in quotation marks throughout this particular essay) in the context of black theology, Williams highlights its direct pertinence to questions of self-worth, relationality, and the process of removing obstacles to black liberation. Williams, “Black Theology’s Contribution,” 12-16.

preaching), Williams observes that Hurston's novels reflect the idea that "black women have been conditioned to love black men in a self-sacrificing way, and some black men use love to manipulate black women."³⁷ An obstruction to self-care and the development of healthy relationships, such an understanding of love undergoes reexamination as part of the struggle against black women's oppression. As an example of the reassessment of religious notions, Williams returns to Celie's pivotal experience with Shug and its impact on certain ways of thinking about "God, men and church" which Celie had "held all her life."³⁸ A momentous transition toward a more relational and empowering view of God is initiated in Celie's spiritual life through her probing and evaluative conversations with Shug about different ways to understand the meaning of God since "the effect of this re-viewing shows Celie that her image of 'God as man' has limited her perception of the connectedness of all reality."³⁹ This revaluing of religious values, Williams writes, plays a crucial part in awakening the spirit of self-determination that Celie exhibits in choosing no longer to suffer her husband's assaults and pursuing the liberative possibilities which communal identity affords.⁴⁰

Two interrelated features of these strategies of resistance pertain to key issues that emerge in Williams's writings on the relationship between the core concerns of womanist

³⁷ Williams, "Women's Oppression and Lifeline Politics," 66-67. In later critical remarks on Cornel West's "love ethic," Williams cites the same passage from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* which she references here and suggests that his notion of love of others could be "problematic for many black women." She writes, "The social history of black women is full of the negative consequences black women have realized in their unqualified and unrestrained love of others (especially in their love of some black men)." Delores S. Williams, review of *Race Matters*, by Cornel West, *Theology Today* 51, no. 1 (April 1994): 160-162.

³⁸ Williams, "Women's Oppression and Lifeline Politics," 67.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 67, 69.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 67-69. For further discussion of the significance of Celie's transforming understanding of God in relation to her experiences of oppression and liberation, see Williams, "'Color Purple,'" 230-232.

thought and white feminist discourse: the status of such strategies as (1) “lifeline politics” and (2) inherently religious activity.⁴¹ These modes of refusing oppression are designated lifeline politics, Williams remarks, in order to signal that “they help women maintain continuity with their past,” enabling them to “hold on to traditional supportive alliances while they struggle to create new relational forms of independence for themselves in the present.”⁴² She recognizes this element of continuity in the characters discussed above, including Vyry (who “clings to the black family and black religion as she forges a new relationship with the town’s white people as a midwife”) and Celie (who “never forsakes her friendship with Sofia, Mary Agnes and Nettie, even as she develops a new and meaningful relationship with Shug”).⁴³ While lifelines can foster and strengthen practices that aim to effect liberative change, the analytical range of this concept as employed by Williams exceeds the dynamics of creative processes and also serves to bring into focus continuities that warrant critical attention. This latter function of the intersectional optic furnished by the concept of lifeline politics is inseparable from Williams’s engagement with white feminists in light of black women’s experience of oppression and strategies of resistance.

The retentive nature of lifelines applies not only to the transmission of relational resources that can facilitate trajectories of transformation, but also to the perpetuation of social forces that are fundamentally at variance with the work of cultivating alternatives to oppression. In the context of “the conflicts emerging as Anglo-American and Afro-

⁴¹ Williams, “Women’s Oppression and Lifeline Politics,” 60, 68-69.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

American women struggle together for empowerment,” Williams raises the problem of potentially racist or sexist lifelines which would prolong realities of suffering affecting women in different ways: “White women may hold on to traditional, supportive alliances that are racist. Thus, racism becomes a conflict impeding the progress of Afro-American and Anglo-American women struggling to create meaningful relations for independence and liberation. On the other hand, Afro-American women may hold on to traditional supportive alliances that are sexist. Sexism becomes an issue preventing women from coming together to establish relationships that yield independence and liberation.”⁴⁴ As such, lifelines can involve the preservation of distinct elements of women’s oppression and thereby inhibit, from within, movements seeking to eradicate precisely those social conditions which negate the full humanity of women. Feminist commitments to concrete transformation, she asserts, require a self-critical apparatus in order to remain attentive to the persisting danger of unwittingly replicating their own antithesis.

Prominent among the numerous ways in which arrangements of social domination can be reinscribed in the very process of crafting liberative activity is the proclivity of white feminist voices to erase black women’s experience of oppression. In particular,

⁴⁴ Ibid., 70-71. In other texts, Williams also underlines the risks of perpetuating classism, ableism, heterosexism, sizeism, individualism, colorism, ethnocentrism, elitism, or any exclusionary distortion of relationality. For example, see Delores S. Williams, “Piety and Preparation for New Life,” *Christian Century* 107, no. 32 (November 1990): 1020; Delores S. Williams, “Kairos Time: Challenge of the Centrisms,” *Christianity and Crisis* 52, no. 1 (February 1992): 17-18; Delores S. Williams, “Lethargy in Christendom,” *Christianity and Crisis* 53, no. 4 (April 1993): 90; Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, xvii, 158-163, 165-166, 184-185, 192-193; Williams, “Womanist/Feminist Dialogue,” 67-72; Williams, review of *Race Matters*, 160; Delores S. Williams, “Searching for a Balm in Gilead,” *Living Pulpit* 9, no. 4 (October-December 2000): 6-7; Williams, “Searching an Identity,” 121-128; Williams, “Black Theology and Womanist Theology,” 60, 61-62, 70-71, 71n3.

For Williams’s use of the concept of lifeline as a diagnostic tool in the context of addressing specific obstacles in theological education which prevent the institutional integration of key insights from the liberation theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez, see Delores S. Williams, “Liberation: Summing Up the Negatives,” *Christianity and Crisis* 49, no. 9 (June 1989): 183-184.

Williams expounds the link between such exclusionary practices and the limitations of utilizing patriarchy as the primary category for feminist analysis of women's experience. Central to her assessment of the paradigmatic status of patriarchy in feminist discourse is a critical awareness that the multidimensional assault upon black women outlined above does not derive exclusively from men; rather, as Williams observes, "white males, black males, and white females are the authors of this oppression of black women."⁴⁵ Since the framework of patriarchy does not adequately register what she describes as the "terrible oppressor-oppressed relation existing between Anglo-American and Afro-American women," its theoretical ascendancy means that the feminist conversation in the United States developed largely in reference to a truncated image of women's historical suffering which omits the reality of black women.⁴⁶

Accounting for this painful aspect of "women's relational history" is one of the main challenges that Williams poses to North American feminist theology, a task which entails tracing the malignant lifelines of white supremacy that are deeply embedded in the national past: "Anglo-American and Afro-American women have their relational origins in the American slavocracy. The terms of this relation were oppressor (Anglo-American women) and oppressed (Afro-American women). While the male-dominated economic sector of the slavocracy exploited black women's reproductive capacities in order to produce more slaves and therefore more capital, the female-dominated domestic sector exploited the black woman's nurturing capacities in order to provide greater comfort for

⁴⁵ Williams, "Women's Oppression and Lifeline Politics," 60.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 69; cf. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 164-165.

families of the white ruling class.”⁴⁷ This historical perspective, she proposes, would impel the liberative visions of feminist theology beyond the strictures generated by the analytical lens of patriarchy and allow for the articulation of a more cogent understanding of women’s experience. Without an honest and critical recognition of the extent to which white women participated in the commodification and domination of black women since the inception of their relationship, the feminist conception of women’s oppression would remain a mechanism of white normativity.

Connected with this historical task is a twofold reorientation that would similarly contribute toward releasing feminist theology from the enclosure of whiteness through a discerning sense of “women’s relational experience with women.”⁴⁸ While the focus on patriarchal violence yields an interpretation of women’s experience marked principally by their relations with men, a more expansive reflection that encompasses relationships between women is presented by Williams as enabling an “examination of women’s participation in the culture of women in a negative and positive way.”⁴⁹ That is, the latter approach to women’s experience indicates the importance of attending to dimensions of meaning that exceed “male-female interaction” and leads to a “recognition of women’s oppression of women, of women exchanging and merging cultural patterns so that new redemptive possibilities emerge for *all* women.”⁵⁰ On the one hand, the negative aspects of women’s relational experience with women attest to the importance of acknowledging “the brutalities women inflict upon women...as part of the heritage of the American

⁴⁷ Williams, “Women’s Oppression and Lifeline Politics,” 69.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 70; cf. Williams, “Black Theology and Womanist Theology,” 59-62.

⁵⁰ Williams, “Women’s Oppression and Lifeline Politics,” 70 (emphasis in original).

woman's experience" (e.g., in *Jubilee*, Miss Salina's treatment of Vyry; in *The Color Purple*, Sofia's exploitation by the white mayor's wife); on the other hand, the positive aspects of the relational experience between women bespeak a vital level of encounter that catalyzes transformation and self-discovery (e.g., the relationship between Celie and Shug).⁵¹ The feminist appropriation of this twofold perspective on women's experience, Williams remarks, "could create a much needed self-critical hermeneutic which would extend the boundaries of feminist theology beyond the social and religious concerns of Anglo-American middle-class women."⁵²

This critical assay of dehumanizing legacies in white feminist thought is further pursued and intensified in another essay from the mid-1980s, where Williams probes the significance of reconceptualizing feminism in a manner that ruptures its complicity in the continuation of white supremacy.⁵³ In this exposition of the invisibilizing propensities of North American feminism, the manifestly racist character of movements for women's rights in the nineteenth century is framed as the ideological precursor of the exclusionary impact of patriarchy as the determinative category in contemporary feminist discourse. Citing various examples of salient anti-blackness among early white proponents of women's rights, including suffragists and abolitionists, Williams proceeds to consider the persistence of this problematic conjuncture of social processes today, asserting that "the contemporary feminist movement—in both its secular and religious manifestations—is

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Delores S. Williams, "The Color of Feminism: Or Speaking the Black Woman's Tongue," *Journal of Religious Thought* 43, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1986): 42-58.

no less infested with racism than its predecessor, the women's suffrage movement."⁵⁴ In the explicitly hierarchical understanding of racial difference which suffragist leaders (and anti-slavery activists) Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) displayed in some of their arguments for women's rights, for instance, is the same logic of white superiority and misrecognition which Audre Lorde (1934-1992) perceived in the work of Mary Daly (1928-2010), specifically in her book *Gyn/Ecology*.⁵⁵ Although the thematic mediations of racial othering may differ among the diverse expressions of white feminism which Williams references, the underlying normativity that she identifies

⁵⁴ Ibid., 43-46.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 45-46. Drawing on the work of historian Paula Giddings (b. 1947), Williams cites examples of the rhetorical strategies utilized by Anthony and Stanton in their weekly newspaper *The Revolution*. In regard to Anthony, Williams mentions her "observation that the Republican Party had elevated two million black men and given them the dignity of citizenship by giving them the vote. 'With the other hand,' Anthony claimed, 'they [the Republicans] dethroned FIFTEEN MILLION WHITE WOMEN—their own mothers and sisters, their own wives and daughters—and cast them under the heel of the lowest orders of manhood.'" As an illustration of Stanton's condescending views (which also applied to immigrants), the following excerpt is provided: "In view of the fact that the freed men of the South and the millions of foreigners now crowding our shores, most of whom represent neither property, education nor civilization, are all in the progress of events to be enfranchised, the best interests of the nation demand that we outweigh this incoming pauperism, ignorance and degradation, with the wealth, education, and refinement of the women of the republic" (45). See Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Harper Perennial, [1984] 2001).

In reference to Lorde, Williams notes that in her letter to Daly she "chides" the latter for "using her words (Lorde's) to corroborate her (Daly's) analysis of what she sees as sexist practices in black cultures" (46). While expressing a deep appreciation for Daly's work in her letter (written on May 6, 1979), Lorde communicates a severely critical reception of *Gyn/Ecology* as a work which "feels like another instance of the knowledge, crone-ology and work of women of Color being ghettoized by a white woman dealing only out of a patriarchal western european frame of reference." Calling attention to the cumulative effect of Daly's neglect of African goddess traditions and discussion of "noneuropean women...only as victims and preys-upon each other," Lorde challenges her to develop a self-critical perspective on the function of white normativity in her own thinking: "Mary, I ask that you be aware of how this serves the destructive forces of racism and separation between women—the assumption that the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background, and that nonwhite women and our herstories are noteworthy only as decorations, or examples of female victimization...This dismissal does not essentially differ from the specialized devaluations that make Black women prey, for instance, to the murders even now happening in your own city." Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing, [letter orig. publ. 1980] 1984), 66-69. See also Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon, [1978] 1990); Alexis De Veaux, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 233-238, 246-253, 405n18.

as unifying and shaping their particularities remains an operative contradiction and thus troubles the relationship between the feminist movement and black women.⁵⁶

In addition to this obstacle, Williams underscores the “limited and problematic” aspects of the notion that “patriarchy is the major source of all women’s oppression” and therefore sufficiently accounts for black women’s “*total* experience of oppression in North America.”⁵⁷ Explicating the evaluative insight into the prevailing approaches to patriarchy that appeared in her earlier call for self-critical development in the work of white feminists, Williams reasserts the necessity for a framework that also encompasses the power dynamics between black and white women. That is, a key challenge facing feminist analysis of women’s experience lies in a constructive recognition of “the power of a certain group of females to oppress other groups of females.”⁵⁸ Such a shift in the feminist conversation in the United States, she observes, inevitably revises the primary role of patriarchy as a diagnostic category and requires a more differentiated conception of the forms of violence inflicted upon women: “This inclusion of a group of women as oppressors—an assessment that speaks the truth of the Afro-American woman’s history in North America—renders the feminist patriarchal critique of society less valid as a tool for assessing black women’s oppression *resulting from their relation to white-controlled American institutions*.”⁵⁹ Forging new analytical tools emerges as an indispensable task

⁵⁶ Williams, “Speaking the Black Woman’s Tongue,” 46-47; cf. 42-43. To avoid confusion with an earlier essay cited below and also titled “The Color of Feminism” (the source from which the 1986 essay derives its title), citations of the 1986 text will refer to the subtitle instead of the main title.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 47 (emphasis in original).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 48-56 (emphasis in original). It is important to note that while Williams does not view patriarchy as a helpful category for naming the oppression of black women that derives specifically from “*white-male-white-female dominated social systems*,” she does consider the category to be “useful for assessing black

of feminist thought in light of these basic theoretical limitations and the commitment to a liberative vision that embraces all women.

Another inadequacy that Williams highlights in relation to the role of patriarchy in white feminism is the failure “to place emphasis upon what appears to be a positive side of patriarchy with regard to the development of white-American women.”⁶⁰ While the foregoing treatment of patriarchy in terms of black women’s experience brings its conceptual boundaries into stark relief, the idea that patriarchy harbors an unexamined network of privileges for white women indicates that the category, even when properly demarcated, has been used to expose only certain social distortions. Without denying the oppressive dimension of the patriarchal conditions affecting the lives of white women or the need for “black women liberators” to promote the activity of white feminists who aim to eradicate those conditions, Williams also perceives a constellation of advantageous factors in the general relationship between white women and white patriarchy: “White American patriarchy, in its institutional manifestations, affords many white female children and white female adults (as groups) the care, protection, and resources necessary for intellectual development and physical well-being. White American patriarchy has thus provided white women with the education, skills, and support (and often financial resources) they need to get first chance at the jobs and opportunities for women resulting from the pressures exerted by the civil rights movements in America.”⁶¹ In discussing the positive side of patriarchy, Williams seeks not to undermine or trivialize its negative side

women’s relation to black males and to those institutions where black males have the authority” (57). This distinction in the pertinence of patriarchy accounts for the emphasis in the above quotations and elsewhere.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 48; cf. 50, 55.

⁶¹ Ibid., 48, 50, 54; cf. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 164.

but rather to describe the problem of a particular kind of oppression that is systemically interrelated with the maintenance of another reality of oppression—namely, that of racial domination.

The historical and theoretical components of Williams's assessment of feminist discourse interlock in the form of a harmful lifeline, an issue which she directly engages in the process of intervening into the conversation and elucidating the distinct nature of black women's experience of oppression under the rubric of *demonarchy*.⁶² The language of demonarchy is introduced in Williams's essay in view of her caution that, with regard to black women's experience, "it is a misnomer to name oppressive-rule with words that only identify men as oppressors of women."⁶³ By way of seeking a suitable lexicon for the task of naming and examining the experiences of black women in the United States, she expands the analytical amplitude of feminism beyond the critique of patriarchy and toward a focus on an ongoing reality of "racist-gender oppression" which originated in slavery as the product of the actions of white men and white women.⁶⁴ The differences between patriarchy and demonarchy are presented as follows: "Patriarchy, *in its white institutional form*, can also be understood as the systemic governance of white women's lives by white women's fathers, brothers, and sons using care, protection, and privilege as instruments of social control. Demonarchy can be understood as the demonic governance of black women's lives by white male and white female ruled systems using racism, violence, violation, retardation, and death as instruments of social control."⁶⁵ This way of

⁶² Williams, "Speaking the Black Woman's Tongue," 52-55.

⁶³ Ibid., 50; cf. Williams, "Black Theology and Womanist Theology," 61.

⁶⁴ Williams, "Speaking the Black Woman's Tongue," 51-54.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 52 (emphasis in original).

framing the “qualitative difference” between the experiences of oppression among black women and white women leads Williams to infer that “black women, *in their relation to white-controlled American institutions*, do not experience patriarchy.”⁶⁶ Demonarchy is a multidimensional situation of abjection which corresponds neither to “the underside of history” from which white women struggle against sexism nor to “the underside of the underside of history” from which black men confront racism, but rather to an experience of the world “from rock-bottom.”⁶⁷

The challenge that demonarchy poses to North American feminism is not simply that of including another mode of women’s oppression alongside patriarchy. Rather, it is a significantly more complex matter that involves attending to the hierarchical disparity between patriarchy and demonarchy, analyzing how the former contributes to the latter without reabsorbing demonarchy into the orbit of patriarchal causality, and maintaining a self-critical perspective on the peril of feminist participation in the oppression of black women.⁶⁸ With regard to the final point, the misrecognition reflected in the tendency to neutralize the profoundly dissimilar realities afflicting white and black women amounts to one of many practices by means of which the exclusionary values of white normativity continue to be reinforced: “The failure of white feminists to emphasize the *substantial*

⁶⁶ Ibid., 51, 54 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁷ Ibid., 51n23.

⁶⁸ While the discussion of the positive side of patriarchy affords a sense of its role in perpetuating white supremacy, Williams explicitly rejects the idea that white women’s oppressive impact on black women ultimately expresses the far-reaching effects of their patriarchal setting. She writes, “One cannot accept the argument that white women, in their affiliation with American institutions, are forced by patriarchal structures (or by patriarchal condition) to oppress black women, and therefore, patriarchy—or male rule—really is responsible for the oppression of all women relating to society’s institutions... White American women cannot be relieved of the responsibility for choices they made/make in their roles as oppressors” (ibid., 50).

difference between their patriarchally-derived-privileged-oppression and black women's demonically-derived-annihilistic-oppression renders black women invisible in feminist thought and action."⁶⁹ As a conduit of concealment, this pitfall exemplifies the racism that threatens to vitiate the lifelines informing feminist visions of liberation. The erasure of black women's experience in the very process of pursuing social transformation marks a persisting concern in the development of Williams's womanist theology and reemerges as a guiding sensibility in her later evaluation of the exodus paradigm in black liberation theology.

Inseparable from the issues relating to lifeline politics is the second aspect of the strategies of resistance to black women's oppression that was noted earlier—namely, their inherently religious character. In this connection, Williams writes that the various expressions of refusal in the face of multidimensional assault “are informed by women's experience of transcendence, of faith, of ritual, and of God.”⁷⁰ Illustrating the religious significance of the different strategies of opposition depicted in the novels by Hurston,

⁶⁹ Ibid., (emphasis in original). In an earlier essay, Williams directs this critique toward Rosemary Radford Ruether, whom she recognizes as challenging Christian theology with a feminist vision of transformation while nonetheless remaining “as exclusive and imperialistic as the Christian patriarchy she opposes.” This dialectic of social domination which Williams identifies in Ruether's work consists in the perpetuation of white supremacy through an invisibilization of black women. She writes, “Just as Christian patriarchy only makes visible and valuable the concerns of men, Ruether only gives visibility and authority to the concerns of white, non-poor feminist women.” Observing that “the invisibility of poor and black women is glaring” in Ruether's treatment of feminist theology and model of ecclesial praxis, Williams asserts that “when Anglo-American feminist theologians advocate transformations in social and religious institutions only on the basis of their gender oppression, these theologians inadvertently reinforce another evil that continues to prevail in most theological academies: the evil of white supremacy.” While focused on Ruether's theology in particular, the essay encapsulates key elements of the broader assessment of white feminism discussed above and revolves around a crucial insight into a dynamic of reproduced oppression which, as will be seen in the following sections of this chapter, will play a pivotal role in Williams's reflections on the exodus as a paradigm. Delores S. Williams, “The Color of Feminism,” *Christianity and Crisis* 45, no. 7 (April 1985): 164.

⁷⁰ Williams, “Women's Oppression and Lifeline Politics,” 68; cf. 60.

Alice Walker, and Margaret Walker, she cites the importance of prayer and a liberative experience of God as resources enabling black female characters “to sustain themselves as they fight oppression” and seek ways to cultivate equitable social conditions: “Vyry, running away from slavery, prays fervently. Celie writes letters to God...As Celie and Shug join in a love relationship which provides independence for Celie, they share their understanding of their experiences of God. This sharing liberates Celie’s mind from the domination of ‘man-consciousness.’ She gains a more profound understanding of God’s relation to her and to the world.”⁷¹ Grounding the search for healing through communal transformation amid uncertainty and insecurity, the religious horizon within which this process unfolds serves to orient and vitalize the lived hope that becomes concretely effective in struggles of self-affirmation.

The religious nature of black women’s strategies of political resistance to violence evinces a vision of spiritual life that abides throughout Williams’s reflections on the faith of black women in the United States. This relational model of spirituality eschews the untenable severance of the religious from the political which dualist theologies presume to be possible and centers on a generative source of fortitude in the face of multilayered injustice.⁷² Accordingly, in her analysis of demonarchy, Williams maintains that the

⁷¹ Ibid., 68-69. This understanding of the religious meaning of the strategies of resistance used by female characters in the novels mentioned above accounts for Williams’s description of these literary texts as “religious narratives.” As she explains, this designation is applied to the writings of Hurston, Alice Walker, and Margaret Walker “because religious language, religious practices and religious issues help effect the resolution of the plots” (59n*).

⁷² For instance, see Mud Flower Collective, *God’s Fierce Whimsy*, 120-123, 150-151; Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, xiii-xix, 5-6, 33-39, 44-53, 96-100, 107-108, 120-123, 179-180, 182, 208, 210-211, 219n9; Delores S. Williams, “Visions, Inner Voices, Apparitions, and Defiance in Nineteenth-Century Black Women’s Narratives,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 21, no. 1/2 (Spring-Summer 1993): 81-89; Delores S. Williams, “Keep On Climbing Up,” *Christian Century* 110, no. 27 (October 1993): 927-928; Williams, “Searching an Identity,” 115-132; Williams, “Black Theology and Womanist Theology,” 69-70.

liberative activity of the black church involves the work of “casting out the demonic—the socially, politically, economically, and spiritually demonic rule that threatens the life of black people and the life of the human spirit.”⁷³ Demonarchy, then, as a “socio-political-spiritual” reality of “radical evil” which ecclesial praxis must engage with the objective of expelling, signals the exigencies of a lived faith that cannot attempt to extricate itself from such a context without simultaneously deteriorating its own integrity.⁷⁴ As Williams notes, “The importance of this emphasis upon casting out the work of the demonic is that it allows the black church to understand its liberation action in terms of the connection between the spiritual and political dimensions of its life and history.”⁷⁵ The communal task of subverting the systemic assault on black women coheres with the active presence of a God who revitalizes and nourishes the afflicted.⁷⁶

In her earliest reflections on the theological directions that were opening up in the wake of Alice Walker’s definition of the term *womanist*, Williams calls attention to the interplay between the liberative activity and “fierce survival struggles” of black women, their spiritual experiences and traditions, mothering and nurturing, community building, and the process of reimagining relationality in accordance with anti-exclusionary values.⁷⁷

Addressing the multiple lifelines (or “lines of continuity”) embedded in Walker’s coinage

For an early affirmation of the notion of experience in black theology with regard to its importance as an integral category that “delivers the theological imagination” from the tendency to “compartmentalize history into sacred and ordinary spheres,” see Williams, “Black Theology’s Contribution,” 15-16.

⁷³ Williams, “Speaking the Black Woman’s Tongue,” 57-58.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 58. In contrast to what Williams earlier in the essay designates the “productive patriarchal intent of white patriarchy” in relation to white women (48), one of the several aspects of its positive side, the nature of “radical evil” signifies the destructive intent of demonarchy (57, 58; cf. 48-49, 50). See also the relation between demons and “destructive forces” in Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 146.

⁷⁵ Williams, “Speaking the Black Woman’s Tongue,” 58.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 57-58.

⁷⁷ Williams, “Womanist Theology,” 66-70. For the original presentation of the term *womanist*, see Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1983), xi-xii.

on the basis of “the black folk expression ‘You acting womanish,’” she observes that the cultural context from which *womanist* derives offers helpful resources for retrieving a mode of social identity that is “less individualistic” and exhibits “much less rigidity in male-female roles, and more respect for female intelligence and ingenuity than is found in bourgeois culture.”⁷⁸ As an example of this “folk context” that also links with another lifeline indicated in Walker’s definition (i.e., in the words of a daughter who announces to her mother, “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me”), reference is made to the leadership role and freedom-imbued legacy of Harriet Tubman (ca. 1822-1913), “whose liberation activity earned her the name ‘Moses’ of her people.”⁷⁹ Along with the memories of other black women whose faith and social struggles remained interwoven, the model of resistance embodied by Tubman presents an assemblage of themes and practices that occupy an important place in the development of womanist theology.

Tubman’s faith-sustained intervention into institutionalized subjugation expresses the dimensions of mothering and nurturing which Williams recovers as crucial features of black women’s history that furnish womanist theology with critical categories.⁸⁰ This key connection appears in Williams’s commentary on the aforementioned definition provided by Alice Walker, whose “womanist reality begins with mothers relating to their children and is characterized by black women (not necessarily bearers of children) nurturing great

⁷⁸ Williams, “Womanist Theology,” 66-67; cf. Williams, “Searching an Identity,” 121.

⁷⁹ Williams, “Womanist Theology,” 67; Walker, *Our Mothers’ Gardens*, xi; cf. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 36, 60, 229n27; Williams, “Searching an Identity,” 125-126.

⁸⁰ Williams, “Womanist Theology,” 68-69, 70.

numbers of black people in the liberation struggle (e.g., Harriet Tubman).⁸¹ The tasks of mothering and nurturing, Williams notes, are vital to the larger process (shared with men) of survival and community building in order to attain a “productive quality of life” for all persons.⁸² Insofar as habitual self-care and self-love prevent a disproportionate allocation of communal responsibility to black women, motherhood and nurturance form essential aspects of the mutual work of fashioning social conditions that promote love, respect, equity, recognition, justice, cultural integrity, and spiritual health.⁸³

In *Sisters in the Wilderness*, the analysis of black women’s communal impact as mothers and nurturers reasserts the interrelated spiritual and political significance of these roles. Elucidating the expansive meaning of “the mothering and nurturing functions of slave women,” for instance, Williams mentions that these roles frequently involved “the tasks of protecting, providing for, resisting oppression and liberating,” diverse practices which “suggest strength” and hope in the midst of tragic situations “where hope seemed absurd.”⁸⁴ It was in the enduring depths of spiritual sustenance—an expression of black religion which Williams describes as “the black woman’s God-consciousness and God-dependence in relation to her role as mother and nurturer”—that resilience and activity in defiance of menacing circumstances were ultimately rooted and continuously renewed.⁸⁵ Exemplary of this faith-enlivened response to anti-black oppression, Tubman’s work on behalf of communal liberation demonstrates her role as “a black female nurturer” who

⁸¹ Ibid., 68; cf. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 33, 36, 51-53.

⁸² Williams, “Womanist Theology,” 68.

⁸³ Ibid., 67-69.

⁸⁴ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 36-37, 51-52.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 39; cf. 34-35, 37, 39, 41, 44-45, 46, 51-53.

risked her own life in strategically opposing “the law in order physically and spiritually to nurture hundreds of black people from bondage in the South to freedom in the North.”⁸⁶ The “spiritual-political connection” that saturates Tubman’s commitment to resistance and marks her place among other “black salvation-bearers” corresponds to a particular tradition of experience and encounter with God in which Williams discerns a preeminent resource for womanist theology.⁸⁷ As she writes in her preliminary remarks on Walker’s momentous definition of the term *womanist*, “Harriet Tubman often ‘went into the spirit’ before her liberation missions and claimed her strength for liberation activity came from this way of meeting God. Womanist theology has grounds for shaping a theology of the spirit informed by black women’s political action.”⁸⁸

The specific forms of violence that give rise to that tradition of political activity and the accompanying visions of transformation are indicative of what Williams refers to as the “deep shade of difference” between womanists and white feminists, a notion which is conveyed in the well-known apothegm that closes Walker’s definition: “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.”⁸⁹ While maintaining “a ‘blood relationship’” with other expressions of feminist thought, the particularities of womanist analysis entail a distinct range of experiences, concerns, resources, objectives, and strategies that disclosed new possibilities for theological reflection.⁹⁰ At the heart of the response that Williams offers in view of the theological pathways that are uncovered through the process of naming and

⁸⁶ Ibid., 36, 52, 60, 97.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 107, 185; cf. 182.

⁸⁸ Williams, “Womanist Theology,” 70; cf. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 97, 107.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 68; Walker, *Our Mothers’ Gardens*, xii.

⁹⁰ Williams, “Searching an Identity,” 132.

examining black women's experiences are the biblical narratives of Hagar.⁹¹ Interpreting these narratives in the historical context of biblical appropriation in the black community and in light of the lives of black women in North America, she identifies in the accounts of Hagar and Ishmael an "analogue for African-American women's historic experience" and thus establishes their relevance for explicating the meaning of God's word to black women and the black community amid suffering and survival undertakings.⁹² Even in Tubman's Mosaic role as nurturing liberator, Williams recognizes a life that typifies the "historical black Hagar" whose commitments to resistance involved braving perilous realities on the basis of spiritual experience and faith in God's active presence in their political work.⁹³ At once a Hagar and a Moses, the figure of Tubman evokes biblical themes which are central to Williams's assessment of black liberation theology. As will be seen in the following section, the critique of the paradigmatic model of the exodus remains entangled with the significance of Hagar in Williams's theology.

6.3 READING MOSES THROUGH HAGAR: THE HERMENEUTICS OF SURVIVAL AND BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY

In the discussion of lifeline politics as susceptible to problematic continuities that compromise the struggle for liberation it was mentioned that Williams addresses not only the potential transmission of racism among white women but also that of sexism among

⁹¹ See Williams, "Womanist Theology," 70; Williams, "African-American Women's Experience and Hagar's Experience"; Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*; Williams, "Searching an Identity," 122, 130-132; Williams, "Black Theology and Womanist Theology," 65-67.

⁹² Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 3-5; cf. Williams, "Searching an Identity," 130-131.

⁹³ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 96-97, 107.

black women. “Black women,” she asserts in regard to this danger, “need to say ‘No!’ to forces in the black community contending that black male liberation is more important than female struggles for self-determination and self-esteem. When black women say ‘yes’ to this contention, they perpetuate sexism.”⁹⁴ Related to this admonition to remain critically attentive to the obstructive power of sexism, moreover, is the earlier reference to Williams’s retention of patriarchy as furnishing an effective lens for analyzing social and institutional dynamics in the black community (in contradistinction to the category of demonarchy in connection with white-controlled institutions). Specifying one of the areas in which it is necessary to cultivate alternatives to patriarchal arrangements of communal life, for instance, she insists that “the black church—like feminism—must add materials to its life and thought which speak the black woman’s tongue—materials that show women and men to be equal in both power and authority—materials that speak in new, meaningful, and inclusive theological categories.”⁹⁵ This creative process of activating resources for theological reflection which signify models of relationality that contest the logic of patriarchy, an approach which coincides with the womanist task of applying “the scrutiny of justice principles” to the biblical texts themselves, denotes some of the major methodological concerns at work in Williams’s reexamination of the exodus paradigm in black liberation theology.⁹⁶

Among the initial steps that proved vital to the project of rehabilitating cultural sources which are amenable to the challenge of doing theology from the standpoint of

⁹⁴ Williams, “Women’s Oppression and Lifeline Politics,” 71.

⁹⁵ Williams, “Speaking the Black Woman’s Tongue,” 58; cf. Williams, “Womanist Theology,” 69-70. See also note 59 above.

⁹⁶ Williams, “Womanist Theology,” 69; cf. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 214-215n4.

black women's experiences, an anti-androcentric hermeneutical reorientation marked a turning point in Williams's analysis of the biblical heritage in the black community.⁹⁷ In recounting this important shift, she describes the previously unrecognized male-centered filter which had been operative in her approach and constricting her understanding of the materials: "I had not realized before that I read African-American sources from a black male perspective. I assumed black women were included. I had not noticed that what the sources presented as 'black experience' was really black male experience."⁹⁸ It was only through a determination to begin interpreting cultural sources with, as Williams puts it, "my female identity fixed firmly in my consciousness" that the far-reaching impact of androcentric values and thought became more readily perceptible and new trajectories gained visibility.⁹⁹ Refocusing in this manner the method of engaging the communal-historical matrix of theology set in motion the interrelated tasks of probing a gendered dynamic of erasure and constructing a fruitful framework for carrying out a critical dialogue with black liberation theology.

The preliminary results of this hermeneutical break presented Williams with new possibilities for the development of womanist theology. She recalls the excitement of gradually uncovering a "women-centered tradition" of biblical appropriation in the black community which would awaken a set of questions that remained unexplored in black liberation theology: "I discovered that even though black liberation theologians used biblical paradigms supporting an androcentric bias in their theological statements, the

⁹⁷ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 1; cf. Williams, "Searching an Identity," 117-119.

⁹⁸ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 1.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

African-American community had used the Bible quite differently. For over a hundred years, the community had appropriated the Bible in such a way that black women's experience figured just as eminently as black men's in the community's memory, in its self-understanding and in its understanding of God's relation to its life."¹⁰⁰ This crucial recovery of the composite character of biblical appropriation throughout the history of the black community led Williams to distinguish between two main traditions: (1) a tradition of liberation and (2) a tradition of survival and quality of life.¹⁰¹

Centered on the theme of liberation, the first tradition highlights biblical accounts depicting a God who responds to the oppressed and proclaims the divine presence amid efforts to overcome injustice. In particular, this tradition, Williams notes, portrays "God relating to men in the liberation struggles."¹⁰² Biblical events and figures associated with the theme of liberation appear in the spirituals, slave narratives, and the sermons of black preachers whose message underscored God's activity in favor of the subjugated.¹⁰³ Such an appropriation of the biblical materials revolved around a specific collection of familiar images and stories that enunciated a powerful word of contrast against slavery and white supremacy: "Moses, Jesus/God, Paul and Silas delivered from jail, Shadrak, Meshack, and Abednego delivered from the fiery furnace and 'My God delivered Daniel and why not every man'—all of these references appeared in the deposits of African-American

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 1-3. See also the first and second précis as well as the first chapter of Williams's dissertation for further reflection on the link between this process of discovery and the task of challenging the androcentric tendencies of black liberation theology. Williams, "African-American Women's Experience and Hagar's Experience," précis I (pages numbered 1-2), précis II (pages numbered 1-12 but appearing after the first précis), chap. 1 (pages numbered 1-46 but appearing after the table of contents).

¹⁰¹ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 1-5.

¹⁰² Ibid., 2.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

culture.”¹⁰⁴ Accordingly, the biblical account of the emancipation of the Israelite slaves from Egypt features prominently in this tradition, comprising the paramount expression of liberation appropriated from the Hebrew Bible.¹⁰⁵ Observing the “analogous relation” between the Israelite slaves and black slaves that defined this way of interacting with the exodus narrative, Williams mentions that “this biblical story—as well as its appropriated aspects in black American culture—is androcentric and emphasizes male leadership roles in the liberation struggle.”¹⁰⁶ Representative of the broader set of biblical materials that corresponds to this first tradition of appropriation as well as the larger liberation tradition itself, the androcentric character of the exodus will inform the critical dialogue with black liberation theology.

While describing this tradition of biblical appropriation in the black community as androcentric, Williams notes that both men and women incorporated the scriptural figures and narratives connected with the theme of liberation.¹⁰⁷ Examples from the writings of Julia Foote (1823-1901), Jarena Lee (1783-1864), and Zilpha Elaw (ca. 1790-1850) lead her to conclude that the conflation of male authority and liberative activity which seems to be endemic in these biblical sources did not prevent some women from drawing on “this tradition to give meaning to their religious experience and to their struggle for social justice.”¹⁰⁸ Its androcentric orientation notwithstanding, the liberation tradition of biblical appropriation offered resources that also enriched the faith and commitments of black

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Williams, “African-American Women’s Experience and Hagar’s Experience,” 1, 3 (précis II), 4-5, 14, 29-30, 31, 32n38 (chap. 1).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 29-30.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 5-8 (chap. 1).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 8 (chap. 1).

women. Recognizing in such stories and images a message of hope, Williams suggests, “some black women...have felt themselves empowered by the liberation understanding of God and Moses regardless of the tradition’s clear emphasis upon male dominance and regardless of the basic invisibility of female authority figures in the tradition.”¹⁰⁹

Twentieth-century theological reflection on the liberation tradition in the context of black self-determination and self-affirmation saw the emergence of a black theology of liberation. As with the pertinent biblical sources and the cultural forms illustrating their appropriation in the black community, Williams traces the androcentric thread through the rise of black liberation theology and its guiding concerns. She writes, “Black male theologians had reflected upon these sources [i.e., the liberation tradition of biblical appropriation] and also had been inspired by the liberation emphasis in the 1960s black cultural and political revolution. So they produced black liberation theology.”¹¹⁰ Like the liberation tradition that it revitalizes in its major formulations, black liberation theology discerns paradigmatic value in the exodus account. Specifying the scriptural narratives that are most significant in shaping the works of black liberation theologians, Williams remarks: “Their validating biblical paradigm in the Hebrew testament was the exodus event when God delivered the oppressed Hebrew slaves from their oppressors in Egypt. Their Christian testament paradigm was Luke 4, when Jesus described his mission and ministry in terms of liberation.”¹¹¹ Divine liberation of the oppressed as reflected in the exodus and proclaimed by Jesus at a synagogue in Nazareth provided a “normative claim

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 2; cf. 171; Williams, “Searching an Identity,” 130.

¹¹¹ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 2.

for biblical interpretation” that would continue to undergird important methodological issues throughout the development of black liberation theology.¹¹²

The foregoing androcentric triad of biblical materials, biblical appropriation, and the theology of liberation impels Williams to articulate a critical assessment of the extent to which black liberation theologians are equipped to confront the multitude of problems facing the black community. In regard to the paradigmatic use of the liberation tradition of biblical appropriation in black liberation theology and focusing on the central role of the exodus texts in particular, she identifies an analytical inhibition that is far-ranging in its veiling effect and therefore requires liberation theologians to conduct a thorough reconsideration of the way such paradigms function in their writings:

This paradigmatic usage also [i.e., in addition to the problem of supporting the androcentric bias in black liberation theology] provides no way for black theology to address many of the crucial issues facing the black community today—the issues of sexism, survival, domestic violence, economic deprivation, the possibility of the exploitation of black women and children (e.g., through surrogacy and the demand for fetal tissues to be used in transplant operations), genocide, reproductive rights, sexual exploitation, the exploitation of motherhood and nurturing, systemic oppression, stratification oppression (along ethnic, class, gender and aesthetic lines), the need of positive quality of life for black families, economic and spiritual empowerment for the destitute black people wandering the North American streets homeless, sick, hungry—people who may well be referred to as “fourth world” people making up an estate of chronic poverty.¹¹³

Paradigms, she maintains, have profound implications for the primary task of establishing

¹¹² Ibid., 2; cf. 127-143.

¹¹³ Williams, “African-American Women’s Experience and Hagar’s Experience,” 31-32; cf. 3 (précis II). It is important to underline that Williams does not propose an oversimplified causal link whereby certain biblical materials (through the medium of communal appropriation) are identified as the *source* of the androcentric bias in black liberation theology. Rather, as suggested above, she contends that such texts and their appropriation function paradigmatically to support that bias and its theoretical limitations. In this connection, it should be noted that Williams, in discussing the traditions of biblical appropriation in the black community, mentions that while “sexism abounds in the black world,” womanist scholars have not yet “ferreted out the source(s) of this sexism.” Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 170.

the range of problems that will receive attention as well as the nature of the attention that will be given to them.¹¹⁴ In light of this understanding of the consequences of paradigms in theology, Williams asserts that “the liberation tradition of African-American biblical appropriation (centered in God’s deliverance of Israelites from Egypt) cannot provide issues which focus upon women’s experience. Since women are primarily invisible in the biblical stories associated with this liberation tradition, women’s issues are invisible in the theologies which make this tradition paradigmatic for their understanding of God’s involvement in human history.”¹¹⁵ Delimiting the perceptual ambit of black liberation theology, the paradigmatic status of the exodus narrative contributes to the processes in which black women’s experiences are rendered socially absent.

Unlike the liberation tradition of biblical appropriation in the black community, the second tradition that Williams recognizes in the cultural sources “emphasized female activity and de-emphasized male authority.”¹¹⁶ Comprising a rich point of departure for constructive and dialogical work in womanist theology, this tradition focuses on Hagar, “a female slave of African descent who was forced to be a surrogate mother, reproducing a child by her slave master because the slave master’s wife was barren.”¹¹⁷ As a slave in Abraham’s household whose struggle for survival and encounters with God enabled her to “make a way out of no way,” Hagar is presented in the biblical narratives in a manner that exhibits “striking similarities” with black women’s experiences in the United States, thereby offering Williams an analogical framework for interpreting the varied forms of

¹¹⁴ Williams, “African-American Women’s Experience and Hagar’s Experience,” 32n38.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 2.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 2-3.

communal appropriation that compose this tradition.¹¹⁸ Examples of the appropriation of Hagar appear in the visual arts (e.g., nineteenth-century sculptor Edmonia Lewis's carved marble statue titled *Hagar*), novels (e.g., abolitionist Frances Harper's 1892 work *Iola Leroy*, analogizing Hagar and a former slave mother; Toni Morrison's 1977 novel *Song of Solomon*, featuring a character named Hagar who reflects an outsider status), poetry (e.g., Frances P. Reid's "Hagar" and Maya Angelou's "The Mothering Blackness," both of which indicate a relationship between black women and Hagar), and sermons in the black church.¹¹⁹ The numerous cultural sources attesting to the vitality of the biblical figure of Hagar as a generative signifier in the black community provided the impetus for Williams to name and examine the meaning of a tradition that is distinct from that of liberation and would yield substantial theological challenges.

Whereas the liberation tradition of African-American biblical appropriation is not conducive to a theological reflection on the particularities of women's experiences due to its mechanism of invisibilization, the axial image of Hagar in the second tradition invites a "rereading" of the pertinent texts in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 16:1-16; 21:9-21) by which "a route to black women's issues" can be brought into view and afford new directions for theology.¹²⁰ The manifold congruity that Williams identifies between the story of Hagar and black women's experiences therefore serves as a critical resource in the development of womanist theology. These points of intersection entail a variety of concrete afflictions,

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 2-5; cf. 6-8, 171, 175-176, 217-218n2, 218n5; Williams, "Womanist Theology," 70; Williams, "Searching an Identity," 122, 130-132.

¹¹⁹ Williams, "African-American Women's Experience and Hagar's Experience," 8-11; cf. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 2, 217-218n2, 218n4.

¹²⁰ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 6-7, 15-31, 127-157, 171-176.

modes of responding to such conditions of oppression, and the nature of the relationship with a God who makes possible a forward momentum. A helpful sense of the interactive basis for expanding the contemporary theological conversation that Williams discerns in the Hagar narratives is aptly communicated in the following series of correlations:

Hagar's heritage was African as was black women's. Hagar was a slave. Black American women had emerged from a slave heritage and still lived in light of it. Hagar was brutalized by her slave owner, the Hebrew woman Sarah. The slave narratives of African-American women and some of the narratives of contemporary day-workers tell of the brutal or cruel treatment black women have received from the wives of slave masters and from contemporary white female employers. Hagar had no control over her body. It belonged to her slave owner, whose husband, Abraham, ravished Hagar. A child Ishmael was born; mother and child were eventually cast out of Abraham's and Sarah's home without resources for survival. The bodies of African-American slave women were owned by their masters. Time after time they were raped by their owners and bore children whom the masters seldom claimed—children who were slaves—children and their mothers whom slave-master fathers often cast out by selling them to other slave holders. Hagar resisted the brutalities of slavery by running away. Black American women have a long resistance history that includes running away from slavery in the antebellum era. Like Hagar and her child Ishmael, African-American female slaves and their children, after slavery, were expelled from the homes of many slave holders and given no resources for survival. Hagar, like many women throughout African-American women's history, was a single parent. But she had serious personal and salvific encounters with God—encounters which aided Hagar in the survival struggle of herself and her son. Over and over again, black women in the churches have testified about their serious personal and salvific encounters with God, encounters that helped them and their families survive.¹²¹

It is through an analysis of the theological significance of this tradition, which Williams names the “survival/quality-of-life tradition of African-American biblical appropriation,” that an alternative to liberation emerges as a way of understanding God's response to the oppressed in history.¹²²

¹²¹ Ibid., 2-3.

¹²² Ibid., 3-5.

In her rereading of the biblical story of Hagar, Williams employs a hermeneutic in which the underside of the narrative establishes the locus of interrogation. Reflecting the influence of Mexican-born biblical scholar and liberation theologian Elsa Tamez, the aim of this approach is to interpret the relevant texts in Genesis “from the position of the slave woman Hagar rather than from the perspective of slave owners (Abraham and Sarah) and their culture.”¹²³ This attempt to “re-see” the biblical accounts of Hagar’s experiences in order “to uncover...the deeper meanings that a superficial encounter with the text often misses,” Williams observes, is consonant with the appropriation of those sources in the black community.¹²⁴ The survival/quality-of-life tradition features “Hagar as the central human figure rather than Sarah or Abraham.”¹²⁵ While consistent with the community’s identification with Hagar, this method of engaging the biblical materials participates in a tensional relationship with “the biblical community.”¹²⁶ An inevitable discordance in any rereading of the biblical narratives in light of their internal dynamics of invisibility, these “tensions” are not simply theological but also (and more fundamentally) intercommunal: “The African-American community’s identification with the non-Hebrew, female slave Hagar (rather than with Abraham and Sarah), is not consistent with the community that gave us the scriptures.”¹²⁷ Both the methodological orientation to the biblical texts that

¹²³ Ibid., 7; cf. 219n10; Williams, “African-American Women’s Experience and Hagar’s Experience,” 1 (précis I), 38-40. See also Elsa Tamez, “The Woman Who Complicated the History of Salvation,” *CrossCurrents* 36, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 129-139.

¹²⁴ Williams, “African-American Women’s Experience and Hagar’s Experience,” 38-39, 40; cf. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 7.

¹²⁵ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 7.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 131.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

shapes Williams's rereading of Hagar's story and the element of discontinuity which she foregrounds are determinative of her reassessment of the exodus paradigm.

The key theological insight that prompted Williams to differentiate between the liberation tradition and the survival/quality-of-life tradition concerns the significance of God's response to Hagar as depicted in Genesis.¹²⁸ Specifically, two separate but related accounts in Gen 16:1-16 and 21:9-21 pertain directly to Hagar's experiences with Sarah and Abraham as well as her ensuing encounters with God in the wilderness, and thus play a critical role in formulating the theological difference between survival and liberation. In the first sequence of events, Hagar is introduced as Sarai's Egyptian slave who is offered to Abram as a surrogate mother in lieu of his barren wife (Gen 16:1-3).¹²⁹ "Because she was a slave," Williams remarks, "Hagar had no control over her body or her labor. Her body, like her labor, could be exploited in any way her owners desired. Her reproduction capacities belonged to her slave holders, Abraham and Sarah. Thus surrogacy became a major theme in Hagar's story of exploitation."¹³⁰ Following this "coerced experience" of motherhood, a situation of conflict arises between Hagar and Sarai that results in Hagar's decision to escape from her owners (Gen 16:4-6).¹³¹ It is in the wilderness that Hagar, as a pregnant runaway slave, experiences the first of two encounters with God described in the biblical sources (Gen 16:7-14).

Essential to Williams's theological conception of survival and critical evaluation of the methodological principle for biblical interpretation that black liberation theology

¹²⁸ Ibid., 4-6, 19-22, 24-31, 127-135, 166-176.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 4, 15-16, 54.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 54.

¹³¹ Ibid., 15-19.

puts forth, the nature of God's response to Hagar in Gen 16 furnishes womanist theology with a major scriptural resource for addressing the relationship between God's activity and the reality of oppression. The text recounts that God (or "the angel of the LORD") finds Hagar in the wilderness, asks where she is coming from and where she is going, and listens to Hagar's response: "I am running away from my mistress Sarai" (Gen 16:7-8).¹³² While the choice to escape from slavery affords temporary liberation, Williams mentions that "Yahweh has other plans for Hagar, which will determine her survival and the quality of life she must form and endure for several years."¹³³ In response to Hagar's answer, God instructs her to return to her owner Sarai "and submit to her," promising to gift Hagar with an abundant posterity and announcing the birth of a child whom she shall name Ishmael (Gen 16:9-12).¹³⁴ Hagar's first encounter with God as portrayed in Gen 16 not only relates extrinsically to the liberative process that began with her escape from oppression but also reverses that very process, sending her back into the world of slavery from which she was fleeing.¹³⁵

Attending to the theological implications of this account, Williams recognizes in the divine response to Hagar's suffering an image of God that does not cohere with that of God as liberator. The biblical narrative, she suggests, expresses "what appears to be God's support of slavery" and presents an episode in which "God is not concerned with nor involved in liberation."¹³⁶ Indeed, the only noticeable process of liberation in Gen 16

¹³² Ibid., 19-20.

¹³³ Ibid., 18-19, 20.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 20-21.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 4, 18-20, 24, 25, 176.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 20.

is initiated by Hagar herself in choosing to run away from Sarai, an act of defiance which leads Williams to observe that “Hagar becomes the first female in the Bible to liberate herself from oppressive power structures.”¹³⁷ Although Hagar manages to find a way out of a situation of slavery and physical abuse, taking measures to attain basic freedom and thus appearing to be “momentarily in control of her destiny,” this trajectory runs contrary to the will of the God she meets in the wilderness.¹³⁸ Instead of legitimating, securing, or guiding the process of Hagar’s liberation, God’s response brings about the restoration of Hagar’s status as Sarai’s slave. That is, the relationship between God and Hagar does not evince the historical work of liberation in favor of the most vulnerable as a fundamental mode of divine self-revelation. In view of this “non-liberative” dimension of Hagar’s first encounter with God, Williams concludes that “the angel of Yahweh is, in this passage, no liberator God.”¹³⁹

It is important to emphasize that the rereading of Gen 16 that Williams develops does not identify a different kind of liberative activity, a prolonged, subtle, or circuitous process that would be distinguishable from its more readily recognizable counterpart in the exodus but which nonetheless exhibits God’s liberative presence in the end. Rather than perceiving in the narrative an alternative strategy of divine liberation, she interprets the biblical account as depicting an alternative *to* God’s liberation. In contrast to the emancipatory experience of the Israelite slaves leaving Egypt, the religious experience of Hagar the Egyptian slave does not mark a rupture of her oppressive conditions but instead

¹³⁷ Ibid., 18; cf. 4, 24, 25, 176; Williams, “Searching an Identity,” 131.

¹³⁸ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 19.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 20, 128.

resituates her in that precise setting. Parting ways with the work of Tamez, for instance, with whom Williams shares common methodological and interpretive ground but whose framework of liberation results in some crucial differences, she notes their agreement in viewing Gen 16 as reflecting “Yahweh’s concern for the survival and future quality of life for Hagar and Ishmael” but insists that Tamez’s “initial attempt to put this aspect of Hagar’s experience with God into a liberation mode stretches the text beyond what it declares.”¹⁴⁰ Strategies of survival and quality of life, Williams asserts, should not be confused with liberative activity. Whereas Tamez offers a rereading that seeks to shed light on what are considered to be “liberative impulses in God’s actions in relation to Hagar and Ishmael,” Williams interprets the story of Hagar in a manner that “does not see God’s action in this text as particularly liberative.”¹⁴¹ For Williams, it is not a question of *how* God liberates but of *whether* God liberates Hagar, and the answer provided in her rereading is that the God who interacts with Hagar in the wilderness and instructs her “to resubmit herself to her oppressor Sarah, that is, to return to bondage,” participates not in Hagar’s liberation but in her survival.¹⁴²

Lacking adequate resources and security in the wilderness, Hagar is directed by God to return to Sarai as a way of ensuring survival and quality of life for herself and her expected child.¹⁴³ In place of liberation, God aids Hagar, Williams suggests, by “helping her come to see the strategies she must use to save her life and her child’s life.”¹⁴⁴ The

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 20; cf. 174-175. See Tamez, “Woman Who Complicated the History of Salvation,” 129, 134, 137.

¹⁴¹ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 174.

¹⁴² Ibid., 4.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 4, 19-20, 174-175.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 174.

precarious and challenging reality of the wilderness for a pregnant runaway slave offered little reason for Hagar to hope in a viable future. In the home of her owner, on the other hand, Hagar would be economically safe and sufficiently protected in order to give birth to Ishmael and care for his well-being.¹⁴⁵ In Williams's rereading, then, God's response to Hagar in Gen 16 enables her to act strategically and avert a tragic outcome. Instead of continuing in a wilderness that promised no survival, Hagar's encounter with God leads her "to go back to her oppressor and make use of the oppressor's resources."¹⁴⁶ While the decision to return to her owner's household secures the future of Hagar and Ishmael, Williams does not interpret the biblical narrative as indicative of divine partiality toward Hagar as a result of the suffering she endures. On the contrary, Williams maintains that "God is clearly partial to Sarah" and reiterates the non-liberative significance of God's relationship with Hagar: "Regardless of the way one interprets God's command to Hagar to submit herself to Sarah, God does not liberate her."¹⁴⁷ The optic of survival does not remove or mitigate problematic aspects of the story but rather affords a hermeneutical vantage point from which to bring such aspects into clearer focus.

Questions about God's partiality and the theme of survival reappear in Williams's treatment of the second account in Genesis relating to Hagar. Several years after the birth of Ishmael (Gen 16:15-16), Sarah gives birth to Isaac and soon begins contriving to retool the claim to primogeniture by imploring Abraham to expel Hagar and her son from the household (Gen 21:1-10).¹⁴⁸ Ultimately, however, it is God's intervention in the affair

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 4, 20-29, 174-175.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 174.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 128.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 25-27.

that Williams views as decisive. Citing the texts that mention the pain which the prospect of expelling Hagar and Ishmael brings to Abraham and that portray God as instructing Abraham to carry out Sarah's plan (Gen 21:11-13), Williams comments: "Whereas God's voice entered the Genesis 16 episode in conversation with Hagar and not her oppressors, in this episode (Genesis 21) God first communicates with Hagar's oppressor Abraham. In both episodes God sides with Sarah...It is God who ultimately destroys Ishmael's right to claim primogeniture and receive the appropriate inheritance. Abraham heeded the advice of God."¹⁴⁹ The role of God in this second account occasions a new situation of severe vulnerability for Hagar and Ishmael. Suddenly homeless, without economic resources or family-based protection, and facing a downward path of seemingly inevitable ruin, Hagar once again finds herself in the wilderness, this time with a son and unable to return to the household of Abraham and Sarah (Gen 21:14-16).¹⁵⁰

Describing the bleak ramifications of the expulsion as recounted in the biblical text, Williams writes that "the Genesis 21 narrative reveals that when their resources for survival (water and bread) had run out, Ishmael was near death and Hagar was a short distance away crying, unable to bear seeing her son perish."¹⁵¹ In the midst of calamity, Hagar experiences another vital encounter with God, whose response to the suffering mother in the wilderness ensures survival for her and her son (Gen 21:17-21). Asking Hagar not to fear, God urges her to pick up Ishmael from where she left him and again promises a plentiful posterity before enabling her to catch sight of a nearby water well

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 27; cf. 175-176, 222n31.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 27-29.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 29.

(Gen 21:17-19). Perseverance becomes possible for Hagar and Ishmael because of the God who continues to accompany them and guide them forward in spite of disquieting circumstances: “Hagar is assured that, contrary to the child’s near-death appearance, he will be great. God renews the promise made to Hagar in Genesis 16 and to Abraham in Genesis 21:13. Ishmael will survive. We assume Hagar obeyed, for God gave her new vision to see survival resources where she saw none before.”¹⁵² The second wilderness experience that is presented in the story of Hagar attests to the inextricable link between her relationship with God and survival. It is God’s active presence in Hagar’s life that empowers her to perceive a way out of a foreboding situation in which no way out was previously discernible.

Neither of the two episodes in Genesis concerning Hagar’s experiences depicts an image of God that Williams recognizes as supporting the hermeneutical commitments of liberation theology. In both Gen 16 and 21, the divine response to Hagar’s predicament is interpreted in Williams’s rereading as oriented toward survival and quality of life, which she sharply differentiates from liberation. This is not to suggest, as mentioned above, that liberation is altogether absent from these biblical accounts; it is very much present in the events described but, as Williams notes, “finds its source in human initiative” and signals a process that “is not given by God.”¹⁵³ Unlike in Gen 16, however, the human catalyst of

¹⁵² Ibid., 29-30; cf. 4-5, 174-176.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 4; cf. 24, 25, 176. An early instance of the core insight that Williams eventually develops in terms of the theological distinction between liberation and survival can be recognized in *God’s Fierce Whimsy*, specifically in her recollections of the way she understood God in the 1960s during her involvement in the civil rights movement. Recalling the persisting role of faith in her life, Williams describes how its relation with “coping and struggling and hope” informed her participation in the movement: “When I would get in those situations, real tight spots, like civil rights and battles of the sixties, God would come through—not to deliver us from this, but certainly to *move the struggle* and to *clear the lines*. It was like, you know, God’s going to come down and move these mountains...God was going to move the struggle, and somehow, we

the liberative process in Gen 21 is not the oppressed but the oppressor. This difference in agency is framed as follows: “In Hagar’s story liberation is self-initiated and oppressor-initiated. Human initiative ‘sparks’ liberation—not divine initiative. In Genesis 16 Hagar liberates herself; she is a run-away slave. In Genesis 21 Sarah, her oppressor, initiates Hagar’s liberation. God merely agrees with Sarah. In both instances Hagar is liberated into precarious circumstances.”¹⁵⁴ Whether it originates in the decisions of the oppressed or the oppressor, liberation in Williams’s analysis of these narratives does not stem from God’s activity in the world. The primary theological dimension that the rereading of these specific sources brings into view expresses a message of survival and quality of life that involves dependence on God and occupies a frictional place alongside liberation in the African-American heritage of biblical appropriation.

The aforementioned intercommunal tension (i.e., between the black community and the biblical community) that Williams discusses in connection with the identificatory practices which are intrinsic to the survival/quality-of-life tradition surfaces in the form of an acute theological inquiry into the interlocking themes of God’s partiality toward Sarah and non-liberative response to Hagar’s suffering. Rereading Gen 16 and 21 from the position of Hagar yields a critical perspective on the relationship between God and the oppressed that allows Williams to reexamine certain images of God that appear in the biblical materials as well as in the writings of liberation theologians. Simultaneously inviting an evaluative sensitivity to its own unsettling features and offering a valuable

knew, something would happen. So I guess it was more a God of hope and faith than any God who would come in and make it all right.” Mud Flower Collective, *God’s Fierce Whimsy*, 121 (emphasis in original).

¹⁵⁴ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 176.

resource for dialogue with liberation theology, the biblical story of Hagar is reframed by Williams in a manner that demonstrates the critical capacities of its underside, even in regard to its own content. For example, a Hagar-centered reflection brings under scrutiny the image of God communicated in the same Genesis narratives that introduce her role in the history of salvation and relate her divinely grounded survival:

While God is concerned about Ishmael's and Hagar's survival, there are some questions womanists must ask about God's relation to the terms of survival upon which Hagar lives in Abraham and Sarah's household. Does God care more about the oppressor Sarah than about the oppressed Hagar? When Sarah becomes jealous of Ishmael and decides that he—though firstborn—will not inherit along with her son Isaac, she demands that Hagar and Ishmael be thrown out of the house. Abraham opposed this, but God intervened telling him to do as Sarah asks. What are we to say about God's action here? Can we conclude that what looks like God favoring the oppressor female is just the way the story is told in the Bible, that it is not necessarily the way God actually behaves with regard to oppressed-oppressor relationships? If we answer this question affirmatively, do we not discredit all biblical descriptions of God's actions in relation to humankind?¹⁵⁵

Without undermining the importance of survival, quality of life, and faith in a God who aids in the task of making a way out of no way as meaningful elements in the history of biblical appropriation in the black community, Williams maintains a need for confronting aspects of the scriptural accounts of Hagar that are interrelated with the absence of divine liberation. This non-liberative activity of God and the tensional character of identification with Hagar in the survival/quality-of-life tradition generate challenging questions not only in reference to the biblical sources but also as regards their use in black liberation theology, especially in the reception of the exodus narrative.

As an alternative to the tension that arises between the biblical community and the

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 175.

black community when the latter identifies with a non-Hebrew slave, the relationship to the biblical community that inheres in the liberation tradition of biblical appropriation is marked by congruence. In particular, Williams highlights the communal as well as the theological identification with the Israelite slaves in the exodus account as reflecting a tradition of aligning with the biblical community that contrasts with the Hagar-oriented approach, both on a methodological level and in terms of the degree to which the victims who are concealed within the biblical narratives are rendered visible: “Yet the African-American community has also [i.e., in addition to the practice of identifying with Hagar] seen a relation between its life of bondage and that of the ancient Israelites in Egypt. At this point the consistency between the two communities is maintained. Black people, and black liberation theologians, have in this instance identified strongly with the Hebrews and not with other people whom the former slaves (the Israelites) are reported to have destroyed, like the Canaanites.”¹⁵⁶ The communal compatibility that revolves around the liberative significance of the exodus, she suggests, transpires in relation to a persisting misrecognition of the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan, whose envisioned annihilation in the biblical sources is inseparable from the divine work of emancipating the Israelite slaves.¹⁵⁷ Embracing the paradigmatic value of the exodus narrative while bypassing the survival/quality-of-life tradition and its evaluative implications for biblical hermeneutics, black liberation theology carried out a contemporary retrieval of the preeminent account of God’s liberative activity in the Hebrew Bible without the necessary methodological tools for engaging the dynamics of oppression which the narrative itself harbors in its

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 131.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 133.

Canaanite underside. As such, the harmonious relationship that is sustained between the biblical community and the black community in the perduring legacy of identifying with the Israelites in the exodus does not entirely eliminate the presence of tension but rather effectively preserves its function within a process that Williams describes as “the awful reality of victims making victims in the Bible.”¹⁵⁸

This specific pattern of oppression in which an already oppressed group becomes directly involved in the oppression of another group, a practice that Williams contends is perpetuated in the biblical texts themselves, is closely associated with another tension in relation to which black liberation theology is presented as exhibiting basic deficiencies. The second tension, she asserts, lies in the faith of the black Christian community and requires a theological exposition that would provide “a true rendering” of that faith in order for the community to “see, on the basis of its way of appropriating the scripture, that it expresses belief in a God who liberates (the God of the enslaved Hebrews) and a God who does not liberate (the God of the non-Hebrew female slave Hagar).”¹⁵⁹ That is, the two traditions of African-American biblical appropriation that Williams discusses under the rubrics of liberation and survival/quality-of-life bespeak an internally tensional faith that ascribes both liberative and non-liberative dimensions to God’s relationship with the oppressed. Contrary to the guiding vision of black liberation theology and its construal of the revelatory value of the exodus, she insists on the need to elucidate the theological significance of the faith of the black Christian community without omitting or undermining its affirmation of a God who does not always liberate. The ascendant image

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 132.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 131-132.

of God as liberator of the oppressed indicates an elided conception of faith that appears to remain impervious to the meaning of Hagar's encounters with God.

As a variable feature of God's mode of responding to the oppressed, liberation does not suffice as a determinative hermeneutical principle or totalizing category in the process of examining and articulating the image of God that is portrayed in the biblical narratives. To be sure, Williams's tradition-based notion of the tensional relationship between God and liberative activity in the life of faith is not primarily a theological statement on divine transcendence, wherein the limitations of the immanent language of liberation would be at stake and the implications of faith in a God who is absolute mystery would bear on an incomprehensible reality which the theme of liberation cannot exhaust. The source of this tension lies elsewhere—namely, in the affirmation of a God who is not simply *more* than a liberator in terms of excess or who is encountered *not only* as a liberator in terms of relational depth but whose effective presence among those who suffer from injustice can range in purpose from liberative to *otherwise* than liberative. It is not the idea of divine liberation as such, then, that Williams calls into question in light of the two traditions of African-American biblical appropriation but rather a certain way of thinking about the activity of God in the world as invariably and definitively bringing about liberation. The vision of a God who liberates cannot be disentangled from that of a God who does not liberate without compromising its communal integrity.

Seeking neither to dispense with liberation as a pertinent theological category nor to propose a model of diverging hermeneutical paths between which theologians must choose, Williams's rereading of the story of Hagar uncovers levels of friction in faith that can serve to recalibrate the horizons of the theological imagination and generate dialogue

on the relationship between liberation and survival. While the challenges posed to black liberation theology signal various possibilities for critical dialogue, Williams also frames the need to probe the interaction between the tensional images of God as an opportunity for dialogue with other womanist and feminist theologians whose work is more heavily influenced by an understanding of God as liberator. The task of analyzing the dissimilar images of God in view of historical realities of oppression, she notes, calls for a form of dialogue with “feminist and womanist liberationists” that would illustrate the importance of attending to both God’s liberative and non-liberative activity.¹⁶⁰ Instead of considering these theological differences from a perspective of mutual exclusivity, such dialogue would yield multiple ways of addressing the preserved tension and explicating its impact on lived faith in a world disfigured by unjust suffering: “The liberationist may say God relates primarily to liberation efforts. The survivalist may say God relates primarily to survival/quality-of-life efforts. Some feminists and womanists may say God relates to the oppressed both ways at different times or at the same time. Again, the issue is not who is right or wrong. The issue is an understanding of biblical accounts about God that allows various communities of poor, oppressed black women and men to hear and see the *doing* of the good news in a way that is meaningful for their lives.”¹⁶¹ Inasmuch as theological

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 172-176.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 176 (emphasis in original). It bears mentioning that the problem of the dissimilar images of a God who liberates and does not liberate as it connects with Hagar’s story and black women’s experiences also appears, albeit in a markedly different manner, in Williams’s earlier reflections on the concepts of God in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. In the 1986 essay titled “‘The Color Purple’: What Was Missed,” Williams foregrounds (as she had previously done in the 1985 essay on lifeline politics discussed above, specifically in terms of the “revaluing of values”) the importance of “Walker’s portrayal of the protagonist Celie’s understanding of God’s relation to her life,” observing that this theme functions throughout the novel to convey “some of Walker’s most significant messages about black women’s oppression and liberation.” In particular, Williams highlights the crucial change in Celie’s way of thinking about God as essential to the process of her self-determination: “Celie’s initial notion of God shows us that black Christian women often support their own victimization when they cling to traditional ideas about God.

dialogue bears the imprint of a liberation-survival binary, a conceptual hindrance affects ongoing efforts to understand the Christian faith and communicate an integral framework for interpreting how God responds to the oppressed.

Unlike the paradigmatic reception of the exodus account and the attendant notion of a consistently liberative God, the nonuniform approach to the significance of faith that is presented by Williams retains a sense of constructive openness to a certain aspect of relational oscillation in God's self-disclosure. The expanded sensibility that a womanist reflection on Hagar contributes to the theological conversation on divine activity in the world involves a recognition that "the truth of the matter may well be that the Bible gives license for us to have it both ways: God liberates and God does not always liberate all the oppressed...The biblical stories are told in a way that influences us to believe that God makes choices. And God changes whenever God wills."¹⁶² Both liberation and survival fail independently to furnish a suitable optic for examining the versatility of God's work in history; when the two themes are conjoined, however, a tension-informed orientation

Shug Avery helps Celie transform her understanding of God, and we become aware that black women must arrive at notions of God which accommodate their struggle for liberation *as women*." It is in this context of addressing oppressive and liberative conceptions of God in the lives of black women as depicted in *The Color Purple* that Williams introduces the biblical narrative of Hagar as exemplifying the idea of God which Celie gradually expunges through her relationship with Shug. Calling attention to the harmful link between Celie's view of God (as male, white, otherworldly, etc.) and her "passive acceptance of her victimization" by her stepfather and husband—a notable insight into the novel that recognizes how Celie's "understanding of the person, role, and law of God conditions her to accept this oppression"—Williams writes: "Like the Old Testament God of Hagar, Celie's God is one who hears. He is not one who liberates raped and brutalized women. Nevertheless, Celie believes this hearing God stands by her as she suffers." In this essay, then, the God whom Hagar encounters in the Genesis narratives is not simply differentiated from liberative activity but presented as coinciding with an image of God that must be critiqued and renounced in order to foster the kind of relationality that "empowers black women with the knowledge of how best to fight for their liberation." The contrast between Hagar's God and liberation is not framed as a tension to be preserved but as an expression of the necessity to overcome the former model of God (along with the larger theological aggregation to which it belongs) since it serves to sustain the conditions of violence that require transformation. Williams, "'Color Purple,'" 230-232 (emphasis in original).

¹⁶² Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 176.

toward God's relationship with the oppressed allows for an appreciation of fluidity and variation in the concrete effects of the divine presence among the afflicted. It is the latter perspective, incorporating critical elements of the theological corrective gained through a womanist rereading of Hagar's story, that undergirds key facets of Williams's inquiry into the appropriation of the exodus narrative in black liberation theology.

The issues concerning these two distinct yet interrelated tensions that Williams discusses (i.e., the intercommunal and faith-indwelling tensions) coalesce in a powerful and evocative manner in an intersectional assessment of the dynamics of invisibilization that she discerns in black liberation theology and the paradigmatic status of the exodus account. Framing the nature of this methodological problem in terms of the conditions of possibility for the basic process of solidarity that is central to black liberation theology, she delineates the self-critical work which will have to be undertaken in order to embody that core commitment to the most vulnerable in the United States:

If black liberation theology wants to include black women and speak in behalf of the most oppressed black people today—the poor homeless, jobless, economically “enslaved” women, men and children sleeping on American streets, in bus stations, parks and alleys—theologians must ask themselves some questions. Have they, in the use of the Bible, identified so thoroughly with the theme of Israel's election that they have not seen the oppressed of the oppressed in scripture? Have they identified so completely with Israel's liberation that they have been blind to the awful reality of victims making victims in the Bible? Does this kind of blindness with regard to non-Hebrew victims in the scripture also make it easy for black male theologians and biblical scholars to ignore the figures in the Bible whose experience is analogous to that of black women?¹⁶³

Hermeneutical neglect of the underside of the biblical corpus and the correlative image of a God who does not liberate, on the one hand, and the flagrant absence of black women's

¹⁶³ Ibid., 132.

voices, on the other, appear in Williams's critique as interfacing theological shortcomings that warrant consideration with specific regard to the function of the exodus narrative in black liberation theology. As an exemplary image of God's mode of responding to those whose humanity is under assault, the biblical account of the exodus plays a dissimulating role insofar as it contributes to a reified conception of divine self-revelation by means of which the theological importance of Hagar as an analogue to black women's experiences is rendered incommensurable. The paradigmatic sonority of God's emancipatory activity among the Israelite slaves in Egypt is such that it effectively silences vital dimensions of both the biblical inheritance and the black community.

While analysis of the portrayal of God in scriptural sources other than the exodus story is imperative for Williams's formulation of the theological reconceptualization that a womanist approach deems indispensable, the account of the liberating process in which God brings the Israelites out of Egypt contains its own disruptive subalternity—namely, that of the envisioned Canaanite destruction mentioned above. This underside within the narrative of the exodus itself, an intrinsic component of the pertinent biblical texts which will be discussed in the following section, signals the dialectical feature of Williams's appraisal of the paradigmatic model of interpretation developed in the writings of black liberation theologians.

6.4 INVISIBILITIES IN WORD AND WORLD: THE VICTIMS OF THE EXODUS AND THE CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF IDENTIFICATION AS A THEOLOGICAL CORRECTIVE

In the Hebrew Bible, the narrative sequence that begins with an event of liberation

from slavery and continues with a precarious experience in the wilderness which involves an encounter with God takes more than one definite form. As a basic process that shapes the biblical story of Hagar, this series of occurrences assumes particularities that serve to communicate what Williams describes as Hagar's "self-initiated liberation" from slavery, a resulting situation of insecurity in the wilderness, and a non-liberative encounter with God, who instructs Hagar to return to her owner and thereby ensures her survival.¹⁶⁴ As a process that defines the biblical account of the exodus, this trajectory commences with an irruption of God's liberative activity among the Israelite slaves in Egypt and unfolds in the challenging conditions which the former slaves endure in the Sinai desert, where they enter into a covenant relationship with God. The communal and theological implications of the different relationships between God and liberation that find expression in these two biblical stories are explored in critical-dialogical ways in Williams's engagement with the reception of the exodus in black liberation theology. That is, a womanist rereading of the meaning of God's role in the life of Hagar (and Ishmael) as presented in Gen 16 and 21 is employed in an evaluative capacity to stimulate a rethinking of the paradigmatic value of the exodus and the interlocking methodological issues addressed in the previous section of this chapter. However, it is not only from this intertextual, Hagar-centered standpoint that Williams interrogates the significance of the exodus in black liberation theology but also on the basis of its internal coherence, problematizing the very liberative integrity at the heart of its distinction as a paradigm. This immanent level of the assessment of the exodus pivots on a recognition that the departure from Egypt belongs to a larger biblical

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 24-25.

sequence which culminates in the conquest of Canaan, a process marked by the Israelite attempt to carry out the collective obliteration of the native population as commanded by the God who liberated them from slavery.¹⁶⁵

The turn to the question of the Canaanites in Williams's treatment of the exodus takes place in the context of expounding the salient disjuncture between the image of God's liberative work among all oppressed peoples as maintained in black liberation theology and the biblical materials in which abide "the oppressed of the oppressed" for whom liberation remains elusive.¹⁶⁶ In particular, the persistence of the institution of slavery in the Bible, especially in view of the additional inequities pertaining to non-Israelites and women in that regard, amplifies Williams's insight into the story of Hagar as exemplary of a world in which the oppressed do not always experience a God who liberates them. Calling attention to numerous texts that authorize or fail to proscribe the practice of slavery as such (e.g., Exod 12:43-45; 20:22-23:33; Lev 19:20-22; 25:39, 46;

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 131, 133, 242n9. In his memoir, James Cone highlights the importance of these two aspects of Williams's assessment of the exodus paradigm in black liberation theology—namely, her recognition of the absence of God's liberation in Hagar's experience and reflections on the nature of the liberation at work in the exodus in light of the Canaanites. Discussing the opportunities for theological growth that resulted from the many challenging but fruitful interactions with his students at Union Theological Seminary, Cone turns his attention to Williams's contribution by way of a notable observation: "Black women's criticism was much sharper than any coming from whites or black men, and none was sharper and truer than the criticism of Delores Williams, who took her first theology course with me during the early 1970s." He proceeds to summarize the major components of Williams's critique, describing the aforementioned insights as follows: "God didn't liberate Hagar, Williams reminded me, but was present with her in the wilderness, enabling her to procure survival and quality of life with her son, Ishmael. 'What do you have to say about that, Mr. Black Theologian?' I could hear her caustic retort... 'Furthermore,' she said, 'Moses' and Israel's liberation out of Egypt led to the genocide of the Canaanites, which is what happened to Native Americans in the United States.' Liberation is a deeply problematic theme, with many ethical and religious contradictions. Although it's a prominent biblical theme, I now saw clearly its ambiguities." The lasting impact of these key areas of Williams's response to the reception of the exodus in black liberation theology is suggested by Cone's view of her as the foremost critic of his work and clearly expressed in his acknowledgment of the enduring status of this twofold problem, for as he remarks in this portrait of his theological journey, "These were difficult questions and issues. I had no answers. I still don't." James H. Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 119-121.

¹⁶⁶ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 128-136.

Jer 34:8-22; Eph 6:5; Col 3:22; Phlm 10-21) and thus belong to what she distinguishes as “a non-liberative thread running through the Bible,” Williams foregrounds the freight of an ambiguity in the biblical witness that bears negotiating and prevents lending credence to the assertion that the scriptural basis of theology offers an undifferentiated view of the divine response to unjust suffering.¹⁶⁷ Whereas black liberation theology affirms that the essential meaning of God’s response to oppressive conditions in society lies in a process of concrete transformation that carries panoramic value for the underside of history, the womanist analysis developed by Williams yields an interpretation of God’s partiality not as simply and synoptically directed *toward* the oppressed at large but as opting *between* groups of oppressed peoples:

The point here 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. Likewise, there is no clear opposition expressed in the Christian testament to the institution of slavery...The fact remains: slavery in the Bible is a natural and unprotested institution in the social and economic life of ancient society—except on occasion when the Jews are themselves enslaved. One wonders how biblically derived messages of liberation can be taken seriously by today’s masses of poor, homeless African Americans, female and male, who consider themselves to be experiencing a form of slavery—economic enslavement by the capitalistic American economy. They may consider themselves outside the boundaries of sedentary, “civilized” American culture.¹⁶⁸

To universalize the liberative reach of divine activity in the world requires employing a hermeneutic that effectively bypasses the gradations of oppression found throughout the

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 128-130. Since Williams does not here specify the Pauline passages cited above but rather simply refers to “the reasons why Paul advises slaves to obey their masters and bids Onesimus, the slave, to return to his master and later advises the master to free Onesimus” (130), it seems suitable to supply the relevant sources.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 129-130.

biblical corpus and affords an understanding of the biblical message that is most closely associated with the position of those communities who are not excluded from the orbit of God's partiality (e.g., the Israelite slaves in the exodus account).

This hermeneutical attunement to those biblical spheres of oppression in which a deprivation of God's liberation appears to be accepted signals the parting of ways that is communicated in Williams's analysis of the appropriation of the exodus story in black liberation theology. Delineating the non-liberative dimension in the scriptural sources as exemplified by the inequality embedded in the preservation of slavery as an institution, she contends that "womanist theologians, especially those who take their slave heritage seriously, are therefore led to question James Cone's assumption that the African-American theologian can today make *paradigmatic* use of the Hebrews' exodus and election experience as recorded in the Bible."¹⁶⁹ Insofar as the biblical witness seems to circumscribe God's opposition to violations of human dignity and "sends out equivocal messages about the liberation of slaves, especially about the liberation of female slaves," the hermeneutic that is engaged in womanist theology as formulated by Williams allows for a discernment of fundamental difficulties in the attempt to identify in the exodus account an expression of the divine will for all who suffer unfreedom.¹⁷⁰ A critical focus on biblical figures who appear as recipients of an alternative to God's liberative work in history seeks to maintain the visibility of those whose experiences are not integrated into the exodus message of justice. As Williams writes, "Even though Cone sees that for the Hebrews 'election is inseparable from the event of the exodus,' he does not see that non-

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 130 (emphasis in original).

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 129-131, 241-242n6.

Hebrew female slaves, especially those of African descent, are not on equal terms with the Hebrews and are not woven into this biblical story of election and exodus.”¹⁷¹ The outside of the exodus, which comprises a vital scriptural locus for womanist theology, falls into further obscurity before the paradigmatic optic of black liberation theology.

In order to rectify the approach to biblical texts that produces something like an exodus paradigm and thereby disregards non-liberative dynamics throughout those same texts, Williams proposes a hermeneutical framework which revolves around an explicit awareness of operative modes of identification in the act of biblical interpretation. This renewed sense of the structures of alignment in which one always participates as a reader of the biblical sources, a corrective which she presents as “a womanist hermeneutic of *identification-ascertainment*,” entails a threefold process through which the practice of identifying is examined on subjective, communal, and objective levels.¹⁷²

Inquiry into the subjective level of identification directs theologians to “their own faith journey with regard to its biblical foundations” and thus invites them to “discover with whom and with what events they personally identify in scripture.”¹⁷³ This moment of identification-ascertainment pertains directly to the subject who carries out the task of doing theology. The second level, the communal practice of identification, involves “an analysis of the biblical foundation of the faith journey of the Christian community with which they [i.e., theologians] are affiliated,” which enables theologians to ascertain “the

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 130. For the passage quoted by Williams, see James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1970] 2018), 2.

¹⁷² Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 132-133 (emphasis in original).

¹⁷³ Ibid., 132.

biblical faith, events and biblical characters with whom the community has identified.”¹⁷⁴

As can be observed in Williams’s discussion of the two traditions of African-American biblical appropriation, these identificatory marks of communal life are manifested “in sermons, songs, testimonies by the people, liturgy, ritual and in its socio-political-cultural affiliations in the world.”¹⁷⁵ While the subjective and communal aspects of identification-ascertainment function to instill in theologians an appreciation of “the biases they bring to the interpretation of scripture,” the objective level requires analysis of the biblical texts themselves as inscriptions of identification.¹⁷⁶ This final moment in the threefold process of bringing into plain view the network of identification at work in every act of reading the Bible aims to examine “*both* the biblical events, characters and circumstances with whom the biblical writers have identified *and* those with whom the biblical writers have not identified, that is, those who are victims of those with whom the biblical writers have identified.”¹⁷⁷

Methodological attention to the workings of identification in all interactions with biblical narratives is developed by Williams in a manner that underscores the significance of both sides of the reader-text relationship. With regard to the reader(s), for instance, she notes that “by engaging this womanist hermeneutic of *identification-ascertainment*, black liberation theologians will be able to see the junctures at which they and the community need to be critical of their way of using the Bible.”¹⁷⁸ That is, the ongoing reception of

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 132-133.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 132-133 (emphasis in original).

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 133 (emphasis in original).

the biblical sources comes under renewed scrutiny in light of the explicit consciousness of bias that is obtained by inquiring into subjective and communal modes of identifying with certain figures and events in the Bible. However, since this process of reception concerns a biblical witness in which particular practices of identification as well as non-identification are pervasive, the apprehension of effective bias includes the Bible within its purview. As a result, Williams mentions that “engaging this [womanist] hermeneutic also allows black theologians to see at what point they must be critical of the biblical text itself, in those instances where the text supports oppression, exclusion and even death of innocent people.”¹⁷⁹ These elements of the reorientation that Williams challenges black liberation theology to enact, maintaining the integrity of its contribution by interrogating the adequacy of both the appropriation of scriptural narratives and the contents of those same narratives, play an indispensable role in her evaluation of the exodus paradigm.

It is through an intentional repositioning of itself in relation to the Bible in light of the womanist hermeneutic of identification-ascertainment, Williams suggests, that black liberation theology will be able to attend to those experiences of dehumanization that are otherwise foreclosed in its discourse. Inhabiting both the biblical sources and the concrete world in which theological production takes place, such evanescent experiences intersect in important ways in Williams’s assessment of black liberation theology, prompting her to name the crucial link between its androcentric proclivities (as outlined in the previous section) and its hermeneutical limitations: “This study suggests that if black liberation theologians want to respond to...questions about black liberation theology’s bias against

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 133.

black women, they must assume an additional hermeneutical posture—one that allows them to become conscious of what has been made invisible in the text and to see that their work is in collusion with this ‘invisibilization’ of black women’s experience.”¹⁸⁰ As a method of critical reflection that is designed to foster this kind of consciousness of what has been made to disappear, the womanist hermeneutic of identification-ascertainment is an imperative resource for theologians who are committed to the struggle for justice and solidarity with the most vulnerable. Without the implementation of such a corrective, she cautions, the work of liberation theology risks proceeding along a demarcated and reified underside of history which has generated its own underside.

A prime example of an underside inflicted with invisibility by another group of victims emerges in Williams’s rereading of the exodus as interconnected with the biblical account of the conquest of Canaan. By way of illustrating the differences that a womanist hermeneutic of identification-ascertainment can make in theology and communal life, she names the narrative of collective suffering that tends to be rendered absent in readings of the exodus as a paradigmatic expression of God’s relationship with those who experience oppression: “Womanist theologians, in concert with womanist biblical scholars, need to show the African-American denominational churches and black liberation theology the liability of its habit of using the Bible in an uncritical and sometimes too self-serving way. This kind of usage has prohibited the community from seeing that the end result of the biblical exodus event, begun in the book of Exodus, was the violent destruction of a

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 132. The corresponding passages in Williams’s dissertation connect the contents of the questions facing black liberation theology with the reality of “the oppressed of the oppressed in the black community, i.e., poor black women.” Williams, “African-American Women’s Experience and Hagar’s Experience,” 293.

whole nation of people, the Canaanites, described in the book of Joshua.”¹⁸¹ This way of approaching the biblical narrative of the Israelite slaves in Egypt, she argues, neglects the meaning of their liberation as the inception of a process that culminates in dispossession and conquest. To identify exclusively with the liberation-related events and figures with whom the biblical authors identified gives rise to a theological perspective in which the non-liberative dimensions of those accounts are effectively disjoined and a text-critical imagination remains unexercised.

The layered mechanics of concealment that Williams perceives in this method of biblical appropriation warrants a transformation in strategies of reading for which the problem of Canaanite suffering does not appear. Thus she urges that “black liberation theologians today should reconceptualize what it means to lift up uncritically the biblical exodus *event* as a major paradigm for black theological reflection.”¹⁸² Instead of defining the exodus strictly in terms of God’s emancipatory activity among the oppressed Israelite slaves (i.e., as an event), a more responsible and critically guided reading would view in that liberative moment a beginning that puts into motion a complex trajectory toward the occupation of Canaan. The latter approach, she notes, serves to remedy the paradigmatic model by promoting a comprehensive understanding of the significance of the exodus as a narrative sequence in which a variety of episodes are inextricably linked: “To respond to the current issues in the black community, theologians should reflect upon exodus from Egypt as *holistic story* rather than *event*. This would allow the community to see the exodus as an extensive reality involving several kinds of events before its completion in

¹⁸¹ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 133.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 133 (emphasis in original).

the genocide of the Canaanites and the taking of their land.”¹⁸³ In contrast to the status of invisibility that is perpetuated in black liberation theology, the reframing of the exodus in Williams’s work transpires as an unveiling of its victims. Moreover, the womanist mode of confronting what has been precluded from recognition in the exodus across the three distinct levels of identification described above is presented as a methodological resource for black liberation theology to incorporate in addressing the contemporary situation of the black community. Recovery of what is missing in the paradigmatic conception of the exodus interlocks with the task of surmounting the exclusionary biases of theology in the world today.

Rethinking the departure of the Israelites from Egypt as part of a larger process that unfolds throughout several books of the Hebrew Bible provides the necessary shift in perspective, Williams observes, for the black community to “see the violence involved in a liberation struggle supposedly superintended by God.”¹⁸⁴ This violence is not limited to the conquest of Canaan but rather features in the exodus narrative from the outset in what she views as “the violent acts of God against Israel’s oppressors, the Egyptians.”¹⁸⁵ It is a violence, then, which bookends a multifaceted story about divine liberation in history. In its final episodes, the story of the exodus recounts the entrance into Canaan, initiating an occupation-intensive segment of a liberative trajectory which depicts, for example, “the violent acts of the Hebrews, sanctioned by God, as they killed every person in the land of Jericho except Rahab and her family.”¹⁸⁶ The conflation of the images of God as liberator

¹⁸³ Ibid., 133 (emphasis in original); cf. 142.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 133.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

and as active participant in the annihilation of entire populations that Williams is able to probe by considering the exodus as a holistic story is construed as a theological challenge in which the catastrophic is uncovered in the biblical theme of liberation and requires an adequate response. From the vantage point of Williams's rereading, it is untenable for theologians to develop the liberative message of the exodus while forgetting that "God is supposed to have sanctioned genocide in the land of Makkedah, in Libnah and in the Promised Land of Canaan."¹⁸⁷ Within the vision of liberation associated with the exodus story lies the theological problem of the oppressed of the oppressed and the dynamics of erasure which the womanist hermeneutic of identification-ascertainment aims to expose.

The troubling awareness of those whom a paradigmatic reception of the exodus leaves out of the resulting understanding of liberation opens new paths for theology and demonstrates the value of approaching the biblical texts with a critical sensitivity to the structures of identification that can affect interpretation. Among the theological changes that become possible through cultivating such an orientation to the biblical sources is a revitalized effort to seek an image of God that is not overdetermined by harmful ways of thinking which represent the interests of some oppressed groups at the expense of others. As Williams writes, "This kind of reflection upon exodus as a holistic story rather than as one event allows black theologians to show the black community the awful models of God projected when the community and theologians use the Bible so that only Israel's or the Hebrews' understanding of God becomes normative for the black community's

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. Both Makkedah and Libnah are mentioned in Joshua as Canaanite cities that were destroyed and subsequently repopulated by the Israelites (see Josh 10:10-32, 39; 12:7-16; 15:20-42; 21:13).

understanding of how God relates to its life.”¹⁸⁸ To render audible the muffled cries of the Canaanites in the biblical account of the exodus is to furnish an impetus for theological reflection to reexamine the nature of certain concepts that are derived from the Bible and become definitive in communal self-understanding. That is, the Canaanite (in)visibility in the exodus unsettles this paradigm and others like it, propelling theology to inquire anew into the potential perils of its foundational narratives. “On the basis of this holistic story,” Williams mentions in reference to the unabridged version of the exodus that she recovers as an indispensable resource for articulating a credible and socially relevant theology, “the black community and black theologians must explore the moral status of violence in *scripture* when the violence is mandated and/or supported by God.”¹⁸⁹ Recognition of the Canaanites as the oppressed of the previously oppressed Israelites informs the theological task of developing responsible notions of God by sustaining a reevaluation of biblical materials in which an integration of the divine will and violence takes place.

The womanist analysis of the exodus paradigm that Williams puts forth does not require dispensing with the biblical narrative of the exodus or the theme of liberation in theological discourse. Indeed, she emphasizes the importance of maintaining the memory of the liberation tradition of African-American biblical appropriation in which the exodus event plays a central role: “What is suggested here is *not* that black theologians in their use of scripture ignore the fact of black people’s identification with the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. This is part of African-American Christian history and should be

¹⁸⁸ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 133.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 133 (emphasis in original).

remembered by the community.”¹⁹⁰ This persisting attention to the significance of the exodus account in the black community is not reduced to an ongoing appreciation of its function in the past but also concerns its contemporary theological value. As Williams proceeds to clarify, “Neither do I mean to suggest that black theologians should refrain from referring to the texts in the book of Exodus and to Jesus’ words in Luke 4 in ways that are meaningful for the exposition of the gospel in our time. Nor should liberation language and liberation ideas be lost to black theology.”¹⁹¹ The womanist challenge to reconceptualize the exodus in light of the perceived workings of identification, then, does not enjoin theologians to abandon the biblical account as such but rather invites them to carry out a consequential shift in the prevailing ways of thinking about its message. It is not the aim of Williams’s critique to replace the theme of liberation with that of survival and quality of life, as discussed in the preceding section. Both liberation and the exodus continue to afford categories for spiritual reflection, social diagnosis, and communal growth with which theologians should remain in productive, critical contact.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 134 (emphasis in original).

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 134.

¹⁹² It is pertinent to note that in a short piece published between the writing of her dissertation (submitted in May 1990) and the arrival of *Sisters in the Wilderness*, two texts containing the same critical approach to the exodus/conquest account and its appropriation in black liberation theology, Williams offers a reflection on “the oppressed-becoming-oppressor question” which does not engage the exodus narrative in a manner that highlights its tragic endgame but rather “finds consolation in part of the story of the newly liberated slaves recorded in Leviticus 19.” Citing God’s call for the emancipated Israelites to embody holiness in Lev 19:1-2 (incidentally, as noted above, this chapter in Leviticus also features in Williams’s discussion of various biblical texts attesting to the persistence of slavery), she comments: “No doubt these ex-slaves understood what God meant by commanding them to be holy. After all, they had been liberated by God, had left the land of their bondage and now had the freedom to make laws compatible with whatever pattern of community life they themselves structured.” This understanding of holiness—which includes justice, righteousness, honesty, and love in human relationships as expressed in Lev 19:15-18, a message which the Israelites receive “after a fierce liberation struggle”—is described by Williams as prescribing “the ideal for any human community attempting to enhance the quality of relationships.” In this essay, then, the formerly oppressed Israelites are not contextualized in connection with the conquest of Canaan as an example of “the awful reality of victims making victims in the Bible” which she addresses in her dissertation and *Sisters in the Wilderness*; on the contrary, their experiences following the departure from Egypt are presented as an

This enduring interaction with the exodus narrative that Williams considers to be helpful in the ongoing development of black theology, however, is presented as adequate insofar as the exodus does not acquire an exclusive position in the attempt to understand how God relates to the black community. Unlike the continuing value of the exodus in black theology, this particular mode of appropriating the biblical narrative can no longer be viewed as conducive to the tasks of theological reflection in the world today according to Williams: "I suggest that African-American theologians should make it clear to the community that this black way of identifying with God *solely* through the exodus of the Hebrews and Jesus' reported words in Luke belongs to the black historical period of American slavery. Apparently this was the time when God's liberation of the Israelites or the exodus was the subject and 'predicate' of the biblical ideas undergirding African-American Christian theology. Such is not the case today."¹⁹³ Demarcating the context in which an exodus-based theological prism became predominant in the self-understanding of the black community, she contends that a different approach is necessary in order for theologians to address the distinct problems and questions that arise in the contemporary situation in a manner that resonates. In the absence of a theological approach that evinces a creative receptivity to contextual and communal dynamics, Williams advises, a static

instructive resource that can offer guidance on how oppressed groups may avoid turning into oppressors in the wake of liberation. While in this brief reflection Williams does refer to historical processes in which it is evident that the oppressed can become oppressors (e.g., the North American history of "poor, oppressed Europeans annihilating the native inhabitants" and establishing "one of the worst forms of slavery the world has known"), her remarks on the exodus focus on a perceived correlation between "the liberation struggle and a responsible love ethic." Such a seemingly variant interpretation of the exodus, lodged between two major critiques of its paradigmatic reception, is ultimately consistent with the caveat that it should not be discarded in theological discourse. Delores S. Williams, "After Liberation, What?," *Christian Century* 107, no. 31 (October 1990): 993.

¹⁹³ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 134 (emphasis in original).

image of the black community and its theological contribution is implicit. “To build contemporary systematic theology,” she writes, “only on the exodus and Luke paradigm is to ignore generations of black history subsequent to slavery—that is, to consign the community and the black theological imagination to a kind of historical stalemate that denies the possibility of change with regard to the people’s experience of God and with regard to the possibility of God changing in relation to the community.”¹⁹⁴ Safeguarding against this inferred sense of religious inertia involves tracing the pathways carved out by womanist theology, specifically in its retrieval of a Christian faith in tensional interplay with sources portraying a God who does not always liberate and whose liberative activity in history can translate into ruin for entire communities.

The tensions that come into view in Williams’s treatment of the survival/quality-of-life tradition of African-American biblical appropriation—namely, the inconsistency between the biblical community and the black community insofar as the latter identifies with Hagar, and the tensions within the faith of the black community insofar as it affirms a God who liberates and does not liberate—shape the metric by which appropriations of the exodus can be evaluated in contemporary theology. Such tensions serve to decenter the modes of identification that are at work in every act of engaging the biblical texts, marking the hermeneutical difference between reading and rereading that is central to the theological challenge that Williams poses. To construct a theological vision in the present exclusively on the exodus is therefore to fail to account for the Hagar-based tradition and its meaning in connection with the oppressed of the

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 134.

oppressed in the Bible as well as in the world. In addition, the womanist attunement to what has been relegated to invisibility throws into stark relief a fractured underside of the exodus that further disrupts theologies that proceed today to identify only with the trajectory of the Israelites as recounted in the narrative. By employing the critical ascertainment of the three levels of identification that Williams formulates as a corrective to black liberation theology, present-day reflections on the exodus can avoid the trappings of the paradigmatic model and engage the narrative in ways that neither display indifference to the problem of Canaanite suffering nor share in its erasure by deriving unambiguous images of liberation from the biblical sources. As a theological paradigm that effectively removes the oppressed of the oppressed from the field of recognition, the exodus in Williams's assessment also intersects with tendencies that hinder efforts to address black women's experiences, thus remaining unsuitable as an exclusive resource for the black community and theology today. Indeed, it is the process of remedying this method of biblical appropriation, which entails the concealment of an underside generated by another group of victims, that coincides with the theological task of black women as Williams describes it. Theological reflection, she observes, is carried out by black women in a manner that first seeks to recover aspects of experience "from the underside of the underside," amounting to a kind of work which differs from that of "the black male liberation theologian" in the fundamental sense that "the black female theologian...must also reconstruct and redeem from invisibility the life-world of African-

American women.”¹⁹⁵ The continuing reception of the exodus should facilitate rather than obstruct commitments to naming and restoring what has been made to disappear.

6.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided a discussion of the response to the paradigmatic model of the exodus in black liberation theology that appears in the contribution of Delores S. Williams. A major example of the critical shift toward reexamining the appropriation of the exodus narrative in the classical formulations of liberation theology, the womanist theology that is developed in Williams’s work was considered throughout the chapter in a manner that identified and explicated key areas of pertinence to the analysis of the exodus paradigm. Beginning with a treatment of Williams’s approach to the relationship between white feminist thought and black women’s experience, the chapter introduced several of the guiding concerns in her writings, such as the distinct and multidimensional character of black women’s oppression, the corresponding strategies of resistance as religious in nature, the role of different liberation movements in perpetuating the exclusion of black women, the ambiguity of lifeline politics, and the task of subverting forces that sustain the invisibilization of black women. Many of these issues reemerged in the subsequent sections of the chapter in which the status of the exodus in black liberation theology was directly addressed. The exposition of Williams’s evaluation of the exodus paradigm was presented in terms of a twofold organizational structure that highlighted (1) the centrality of the biblical figure of Hagar and (2) the conquest of Canaan. These points of friction in

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 10, 155.

the assessment of the paradigmatic conception of the exodus were expounded in relation to the survival/quality-of-life tradition of biblical appropriation in the black community, the method of rereading, the image of a God who does not always liberate, the womanist hermeneutic of identification-ascertainment, and the imperative of seeing the oppressed of the oppressed in both the Bible and contemporary society.

The presentation of Williams's response to the significance of the exodus in black liberation theology offered in this chapter concludes the second part of this dissertation project. In the third and final part of the dissertation, chapter 7 will engage a constructive exercise of reimagining the exodus narrative in light of the surveyed theological dialogue on its reception as a liberative resource.

CHAPTER 7

PROXIMITIES OF THE CATASTROPHIC: THEOLOGY, THE DIALECTIC OF SOLIDARITY, AND THE DECOLONIAL TASK OF REIMAGINING THE EXODUS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The third and final part of this dissertation comprises the present chapter. In light of the trajectory of the theological conversation addressed in the first and second parts of the project, the objective of chapter 7 is to contribute an analysis that serves to advance the discussion in a constructive and helpful way. As a result, the exposition of prominent examples of the paradigmatic reception of the exodus and the critical reassessment of that reception in parts one and two, respectively, affords the dialogical point of departure for the following pages.

This chapter develops a response to the question of the theological appropriation of the exodus that emerged in the preceding chapters by utilizing settler colonial studies as a theoretical framework for reconceptualizing the biblical narrative in the context of the preferential option for the oppressed. In particular, key insights gained from scholars examining distinctive features of settler colonialism will inform a reading of the reception of the exodus in Palestinian liberation theology that attends to critical intersections with the challenge articulated by Osage scholar Robert Allen Warrior. By placing indigenous interpreters of the exodus in dialogue with each other across contextually different yet analytically interlocking communal experiences, the chapter will be able to identify and

engage opportunities for fruitful interaction with the theological perspectives expounded in earlier chapters.

7.2 CANAAN REDUX: THE EXODUS PARADIGM, INDIGENEITY, AND THE MECHANICS OF SETTLER-COLONIAL ERASURE

In the readings of the exodus presented in chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation, the biblical narrative of God's self-revelation among the Israelite slaves in Egypt constitutes a critical resource for understanding the work of contesting and transforming realities of oppression in the contemporary world. The theologies of Gustavo Gutiérrez and James Cone develop the exigencies of lived solidarity with the most vulnerable in the context of multidimensional processes of liberation which correlate with the message of the exodus in significant ways. Both theologians discern in the exodus a paradigmatic expression of a God whose active presence in history exhibits a special love for the victims of injustice and involves an effective opposition to every form of domination and dehumanization. It is especially striking, then, that some theologians and interpreters of the biblical account identify oppressive tendencies in the texts themselves and therefore insist on the need to reevaluate the prevailing appropriation in classical theologies of liberation. A sensitivity to those elements of the exodus that can enunciate a different word to some communities, one that does not exclaim life and justice, troubles its articulation as a paradigm and gives visibility to what lies buried beneath its image of liberation.

This section of the chapter will highlight a specific kind of communal suffering in which the aforementioned sensitivity, a distinctly tensional relationship with the exodus

that brings into question its paradigmatic value, can be seen to arise from conditions that intersect with key features of the underside of the scriptural narrative. In particular, the nature of the (dis)location of indigeneity in contexts of settler colonialism will be linked with the hermeneutical attunement to the status of Canaan through which Naim Stifan Ateek and Robert Allen Warrior develop their respective reflections on the exodus. This approach to the contributions of Ateek and Warrior will help elucidate important areas of analysis that inform the work of reimagining the exodus in this chapter.

Before discussing the reception of the exodus in Ateek and Warrior, then, it will be helpful to address some of the distinguishing characteristics of settler colonialism that are relevant to this final part of the project. Across the different contexts that scholars in the field of settler colonial studies have been engaging with renewed interest since the late 1990s is the centrality of land.¹ In settler-colonial processes, land expropriation is an enabling activity as it furnishes one of the most fundamental conditions for instituting

¹ While the analysis of settler colonialism has expanded and developed in significant ways since the 1990s largely due to the work of Australian historian Patrick Wolfe (1948-2016), it is pertinent to note that the concept originated several decades earlier in the Israel-Palestine context. For early examples of the settler-colonial category in reference to a distinct form of colonialism, see Faye A. Sayegh, *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine* (Beirut: Research Center, Palestine Liberation Organization, 1965); Maxime Rodinson, *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?*, trans. David Thorstad (New York: Monad Press, 1973); Jamil Hilal, "Imperialism and Settler-Colonialism in West Asia: Israel and the Arab Palestinian Struggle," *Utafiti* 1, no. 1 (1976): 51-69. For more recent discussions of the history of the concept of settler colonialism, see Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1-15; Lorenzo Veracini, "'Settler Colonialism': Career of a Concept," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 41, no. 2 (2013): 313-333; J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, "'A Structure, Not an Event': Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity," in "Emergent Critical Analytics for Alternative Humanities," ed. Chris A. Eng and Amy K. King, special issue, *Lateral* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2016): note 7, <https://doi.org/10.25158/L5.1.7>; Lorenzo Veracini, "Introduction: Settler Colonialism as a Distinct Mode of Domination," in *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism*, ed. Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini (London: Routledge, 2017), 1-4; Francesco Amoroso, Ilan Pappé, and Sophie Richter-Devroe, "Introduction: Knowledge, Power, and the 'Settler Colonial Turn' in Palestine Studies," in "Special Issue on Settler Colonialism in Palestine," *Interventions* 21, no. 4 (2019): 454-458.

and sustaining the new social formations which settlement projects entail.² As Patrick Wolfe, whose work is widely recognized as advancing the study of settler colonialism in novel ways, notes: “Territoriality is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element.”³ The relationship that emerges between settlers and land, he observes in an earlier book, produces specific “racial calculations” and “a settler-colonial imperative” with regard to indigenous communities that signal the analytical need to distinguish settler colonialism from franchise colonialism.⁴ Whereas the latter form of colonialism historically revolved around the exploitation and commodification of indigenous labor, making “a colonizing minority” dependent on “an oppressed majority,” the settler-colonial orientation toward territory is “premised on displacing indigenes from (or *replacing* them on) the land” and thus designs a situation in which “the native...is superfluous.”⁵ In an essay that develops the significance of this distinction, Australian historian Lorenzo Veracini remarks, “If I come and say: ‘you, work for me,’ it’s not the same as saying ‘you, go away.’ This is why colonialism is not settler colonialism.”⁶ Insofar as settlers “conquer...space” in order to “make and remake places” in accordance with “the sovereignty they carry with them” collectively, the “master-servant relationship” that in franchise colonialism renders the

² Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassell, 1999), 1-3; Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387-393, 395-397; Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 3-4, 6-12, 17-24, 33-54; Lorenzo Veracini, *The Settler Colonial Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2-7, 21-24, 35-44, 49-67; Kauanui, “‘Structure, Not an Event.’”

³ Wolfe, “Elimination of the Native,” 388.

⁴ Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*, 1-3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1, 3 (emphasis in original). See also J. Kēhaulani Kauanui and Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism Then and Now: A Conversation between J. Kēhaulani Kauanui and Patrick Wolfe,” *Politica & Società*, no. 2 (2012): 246-249.

⁶ Lorenzo Veracini, “Introducing *Settler Colonial Studies*,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 1.

colonized populations indispensable can be differentiated from “the *dispensability* of the indigenous person in a settler colonial context.”⁷

Access to land, Wolfe maintains, is the “primary motive” for the settler-colonial principle that he designates “the logic of elimination.”⁸ In essence, this tendency of settler colonialism concerns the acquisition of territory for the establishment and continuation of settler societies through practices by which indigenous presences are eliminated—that is, made “to disappear” and forced “to get out of the way.”⁹ By way of specifying the kind of logic at work in the settler elimination of native inhabitants for the purpose of doing “something completely new with the land that was theirs,” Wolfe contrasts the different modes of racialization which black and Native American populations have experienced in the United States.¹⁰ During slavery, he writes, the emergence of “an inclusive taxonomy” resulted in a system which “automatically enslaved the offspring of a slave and any other parent.”¹¹ After slavery, this taxonomy would eventually become “fully racialized in the ‘one-drop rule,’ whereby any amount of African ancestry, no matter how remote, and regardless of phenotypical appearance, makes a person Black.”¹² On the other hand, the role of Native peoples in the formation of the United States—which, as mentioned above,

⁷ Veracini, *Settler Colonial Present*, 23, 40–41; Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 8 (emphasis in original).

⁸ Wolfe, “Elimination of the Native,” 387–388, 402.

⁹ Ibid., 387–389; Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism,” interview by J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, in *Speaking of Indigenous Politics: Conversations with Activists, Scholars, and Tribal Leaders*, ed. J. Kēhaulani Kauanui (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 346; cf. 352.

¹⁰ Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism,” 352; Wolfe, “Elimination of the Native,” 387–388; Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*, 1–2.

Throughout this chapter, the term *native* (lowercased) is used interchangeably with *indigenous*, while “Native” (capitalized) is always used specifically in reference to American Indians. The terminology used in the sources discussed in this chapter, while often (though not always) consistent with this practice, will be preserved in quotations from texts.

¹¹ Wolfe, “Elimination of the Native,” 387.

¹² Ibid., 387–388. See also Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism,” 349–350.

is not primarily that of an exploitable labor resource to be valued as such but simply “to vanish from the land”—corresponds to a “restrictive racial classification” that facilitates their erasure.¹³ This opposite tendency in the way American Indians have been racialized means, Wolfe writes, that “non-Indian ancestry compromised their indigeneity, producing ‘half-breeds,’ a regime that persists in the form of blood quantum regulations.”¹⁴ Since “their increase was counterproductive” to settlers (unlike the relationship between slave owners and black slaves), Native identities were constructed in a manner that diverged from the racialization of blackness in US history and deployed a land-oriented calculus of elimination rather than proliferation.¹⁵

As the preceding example indicates, the logic of elimination does not necessarily amount to genocide. Indeed, Wolfe cautions against a simplistic conflation of elimination and genocide, noting that, “though the two have converged—which is to say, the settler-colonial logic of elimination has manifested as genocidal—they should be distinguished. Settler colonialism is inherently eliminatory but not invariably genocidal.”¹⁶ This point, in which a hint of multiple strategies of elimination can be detected, is further clarified in connection with what Wolfe describes as “negative and positive dimensions” of settler colonialism: the negative aspect refers to “the dissolution of native societies” that settler colonialism seeks to effect; in positive terms, “it erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base.”¹⁷ It is in relation to the latter dimension of settler colonialism

¹³ Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism,” 350; Wolfe, “Elimination of the Native,” 388.

¹⁴ Wolfe, “Elimination of the Native,” 388; cf. 400, 408n63.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 388; cf. 391-392, 403-404.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 387; cf. 397-399, 401-403.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 388.

that a broad variety of eliminatory practices begins to come into view. As Wolfe writes, “In its positive aspect, elimination is an organizing principle of settler-colonial society rather than a one-off (and superseded) occurrence. The positive outcomes of the logic of elimination can include officially encouraged miscegenation, the breaking-down of native title into alienable individual freeholds, native citizenship, child abduction, religious conversion, resocialization in total institutions such as missions or boarding schools, and a whole range of cognate biocultural assimilations. All these strategies, including frontier homicide, are characteristic of settler colonialism.”¹⁸ In addition to genocide, then, settler colonialism secures territory by steadily eliminating the *indigeneity* of the communities already residing in desired spaces and thereby decreasing what is perceived as an obstacle to settler activity.

Wolfe’s formulation of the logic of elimination reflects the interconnectedness of settler-colonial processes, land, displacement, and replacement. The constitutive dynamic of removal and repopulation through which place is (re)created (from a settler standpoint) is likewise identified by Veracini, who observes that settlers as such are “territorialised in unprecedented ways (hence the pivotal importance of the term ‘settler,’ which implies a marked degree of fixation)” and directs attention to the concurrent impact on the native presence which settlers encounter in the land: “More than other political regimes (and in particular *colonial* regimes, where transient colonials do not commit to remaining in any specific place, and as it dispenses with the labour of colonised Others), a *settler* colonial project is predominantly about territory. At the same time, the territorialisation of the

¹⁸ Ibid., 388; cf. 396-397.

settler community is ultimately premised on a parallel and necessary deterritorialisation (i.e., the transfer) of indigenous outsiders. There is no way to avoid a traumatic outcome.”¹⁹ Settler colonialism involves, in part, a thorough redefining of lived relations with the land through which its availability is claimed and acted upon at the expense of peoples already inhabiting it.

Both Wolfe and Veracini examine settler colonialism in ways that emphasize the enduring character of its aforementioned aspects. As an operative principle of the kind of society that cannot be established without at once encroaching on indigenous homelands, the logic of elimination is irreducible to the question of societal origins or a foundational violence that becomes only a matter of retrospect; rather, it remains a generative force in settler societies today and will continue to function in that capacity so long as such societies exist. This persisting and complex apparatus for which the disappearance of indigeneity is a prime objective is explicated by Wolfe in precise terms: “Settler colonies were (are) premised on the elimination of native societies. The split tensing reflects a determinate feature of settler colonization. The colonizers come to stay—invasion is a structure not an event.”²⁰ In a situation where elimination is carried out on a structural level, it is not possible to account for the assault on indigenous life simply by attending to the far-reaching consequences of certain historical experiences or specific incidents that can (and do) take place in the contemporary world. Settler-colonial contexts require an analysis of the basic trajectory of effacement out of which diverse and ostensibly discrete

¹⁹ Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 80-81 (emphasis in original).

²⁰ Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*, 2. See also Patrick Wolfe, “Nation and MiscegeNation: Discursive Continuity in the Post-Mabo Era,” *Social Analysis*, no. 36 (October 1994): 96, 97, 128; Wolfe, “Elimination of the Native,” 388, 390, 399, 402.

violations of indigeneity continue to arise. “Settler colonialism names many things,” writes anthropologist Circe Sturm (of Mississippi Choctaw descent), “but among them it highlights ongoing attempts at political erasure while also refusing the idea that North American nation-states are in any sense *postcolonial* societies... Thus settler colonialism cannot be relegated to the past as something with only residual effects; rather, we need to understand it as an ongoing structure of oppression in which settlers actively maintain their rights to occupy indigenous territories in the present.”²¹

Through the lens provided by these core insights of settler colonial studies, the following pages will develop readings of Ateek and Warrior that can help in the work of constructively rethinking the relationship between the exodus narrative and Christian life in the present. In their assessments of the exodus paradigm, particularly when placed in conversation with one another and framed with an eye to distinct categories of the settler-colonial condition, Ateek and Warrior will be seen to recapitulate Canaan as a critical space from which it becomes possible to derive a challenging yet instructive message for theologians who turn to the exodus narrative in the spirit of liberation.

7.3 A PARADIGM IN SUSPENSION: PALESTINIAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF THE EXODUS/CONQUEST NARRATIVE IN TRANSPOSITION

Unlike the reception of the exodus that appears in the Latin American and black liberation theologies examined in the first part of this dissertation, the question of its

²¹ Circe Sturm, “Reflections on the Anthropology of Sovereignty and Settler Colonialism: Lessons from Native North America,” *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 3 (2017): 341-342 (emphasis in original).

paradigmatic value as a resource for liberation emerges in Ateek's work in relation to the hermeneutical sensitivity to geopolitical harm which he develops as a touchstone of Palestinian liberation theology (as discussed in chapters 3 through 5). While the image of God's partiality toward the oppressed signals a vital point of convergence between the basic insights shaping biblical appropriation in Latin American, black, and Palestinian theologies of liberation, Ateek's approach to the Bible as an intrinsically frictional corpus and to the challenges connected with its ongoing misuse in the Israel-Palestine context yields a markedly different assessment of the relationship between that image of God and the status of the exodus as a paradigm.²²

As described in the second part of the dissertation, Ateek's focus on formulating a theological response to the processes of collective dispossession and social erasure that continue to afflict Palestinian communities involves a commitment to the liberation of theology itself. A critical task that can be discerned in Ateek's project nearly every step of the way, including in his reevaluation of the paradigmatic significance of the exodus, the work of liberating theology forms an indispensable part of addressing the fractured experiences of Palestinian Christians in particular and cultivating a praxis of prophetic nonviolence. This guiding concern of Palestinian liberation theology reflects the acute shift in Christian life that falls under the rubric of the faith Nakba in Ateek's diagnosis of the multidimensional reality of Palestinian suffering. Among the various issues that he identifies as requiring renewed attention in order to pursue the liberation of theology in a credible and effective manner, the problem of biblical sources depicting an exclusionary

²² For Ateek's awareness of this notable difference, see Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 86.

model of God remains interrelated with the ruptured role of the Bible among Palestinian Christians as conveyed by the concept of the faith Nakba.²³ These interlocking areas of analysis in Ateek's theology furnish a key optic through which to consider his position on the necessary break with other liberation theologies on the specific question of the exodus paradigm.

The fostering of a critical interaction with the biblical heritage lies at the center of the theological vision which Ateek works out with the express aim, among other things, of recuperating an integral and contextually engaged faith among Palestinian Christians. In this orientation toward the Bible—which, as demonstrated in chapter 5, is inseparable from a liberative understanding of God as loving creator who embraces all peoples—it becomes imperative to confront the incongruous conceptions of God that pervade the corpus and to exercise an evaluative acuity in order to ascertain the relationship between a particular text and the transformative heart of the biblical message. Presented as a vital aid in the task of healing the damaged coherence between the biblical witness and the lived faith of Palestinian Christians, this hermeneutical framework seeks to nurture in the contemporary reader of Scripture the same spirit of contestation which Ateek recognizes, for instance, in the anti-exclusionary theologies of Jonah, Ps 87, Ezek 47, Hos 6, and in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. As was illustrated in the treatment of Ateek's approach to the tensional horizon of such biblical texts, the numerous forces at play in his

²³ For instance, see Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 75-86; Naim Stifan Ateek, "The Emergence of a Palestinian Christian Theology," in *Faith and the Intifada: Palestinian Christian Voices*, ed. Naim S. Ateek, Marc H. Ellis, and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 1-6; Naim Stifan Ateek, *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 10-14; Naim Stifan Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation: The Bible, Justice, and the Palestine-Israel Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 28-29.

context and contributing to the shared experiences out of which a Palestinian theology of liberation arises (e.g., expulsion, land expropriation, institutionalized as well as personal forms of racial violence, military occupation, the growing settler movement, theopolitical discourses, etc.) serve to impel a distinct mode of reading the Bible in view of indigeneity as a nexus between Palestinians and the biblical Canaanites.²⁴ In this regard, the process of liberating theology is carried out in Ateek's writings with a heightened attention to the images of God correlating with the different portrayals of the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan in the Bible and their implications for Israel-Palestine today.

The concrete locus of interrogation that generates this manner of probing biblical sources is freighted with a certain proximity to the negations and dynamics of othering that appear in familiar narratives concerning the Canaanites. Sharpened by the solicitude resulting from this inflicted and layered intersection with populations whose destruction or expulsion is ordered in the Bible, Ateek's evaluation of scriptural texts is conducted in a way that often foregrounds how the relationship with the land and its native residents is figured. It is through this Canaanite analytic, a methodological inflection that activates in Ateek's hermeneutic a directive of recognition through which narratives are decentered insofar as their theologies violate indigeneity, that the pertinence of the exodus account as a paradigm is addressed in Palestinian liberation theology.

In Ateek's earliest reflections on the appropriation of biblical texts that can offer liberative resources in the context of the Palestinian struggle for justice, a hermeneutical discontinuity with the predominant reception of the exodus in other liberation theologies

²⁴ This specific issue of an acknowledged correspondence with the Canaanites as represented in the biblical sources is distinct from that which appears in some of the ancestral discourses discussed in chapter 3.

across the world is acknowledged and explained. Although “most theologies of liberation have used the story of the Exodus as their paradigm,” he writes, “the way its message has been abused by both religious Zionists and Christian fundamentalists, who see in it a call for the physical return of the Jews to the land in [the twentieth] century, makes it difficult for Palestinians to appropriate at this time.”²⁵ To develop a theology of liberation in Israel-Palestine, Ateek suggests, requires accounting for a distinct orientation toward the exodus that is sensitized to how the biblical narrative has been operationalized to the detriment of Palestinians and therefore perceives more than the liberative dimension of the story that is affirmed in its paradigmatic expressions. The consequential abuses of the exodus that Ateek underscores as factors troubling the relationship between Palestinian Christians and the scriptural account do not signal a merely apologetic focus on the readers of the narrative but rather, as expounded in the discussion of the text-reader interaction in the earlier chapters on Palestinian liberation theology, remain integrated with a critical inquiry into the narrative itself.

An important concept that allows Ateek to approach the exodus story without disentangling text and reader or subsuming one into the other is that of *transposition*. By transposing into the present day certain biblical sources in which exclusionary ideas are adopted and framed in connection with the divine will, he cautions, readers unwittingly participate in a process of recontextualizing objectionable and dehumanizing values that ultimately reveal the limitations of human understanding in the search for God.²⁶ Such transpositions are carried out by contemporary readers of the Bible, yet the precondition

²⁵ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 86.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 81-87.

for their inadequacy is found in scriptural materials that ascribe to God a vision of justice which advantages some groups and denies others. The wounding effects of this process is exemplified in the transposition of the exodus narrative in the Israel-Palestine context and the resulting representation of indigenous space in which Palestinians become likened to the biblical Canaanites:

The events of the biblical Exodus from Egypt, read in light of an uncritically primitive concept of God, have been transposed by many Jewish religious Zionists and Christian fundamentalists into the twentieth century. This is theologically unacceptable from a Christian point of view. For the Jews who came to establish the State of Israel, their journey to Palestine was an exodus from the different nations where they had been living and a return to the promised land. Obviously, for them the imagery has connected the ancient past and the present. This uncritical transposition, however, makes the Palestinians appear to represent the old Canaanites who were in the land at the time and who *at God's command* needed to be dispossessed.²⁷

To perceive the exodus in light of this transpositional dynamic, then, positions Ateek at a distance from God's liberative activity among the Israelite slaves in Egypt and within the turbulent shadows of its endgame; that is, the word which the biblical narrative speaks to Palestinians today is heard from the walls of Jericho before the doorposts of Goshen. The disquieting asymmetry of this message, rendered palpable by a transposed exodus and the endangered indigeneity inherent in its scriptural sequence, induces Ateek to rethink the paradigmatic status of the exodus for a Palestinian theology of liberation.

There are three points regarding Ateek's reevaluation of the exodus as a paradigm in *Justice and Only Justice* that are worth noting here. The first concerns the location of his remarks on the need for alternatives to the exodus paradigm in Palestinian liberation theology—namely, at a transitional point in the construction of a hermeneutic that would

²⁷ Ibid., 86-87 (emphasis in original).

equip Palestinian Christians with critical tools for reading biblical texts in a setting which too often involves an inflicted antithesis between their presence and those texts. In the pages immediately preceding his reflections on the exodus paradigm, Ateek cites some examples of scriptural sources and transposition in which a harmful notion of God can be detected when viewed through his proposed hermeneutical lens.²⁸ As mentioned in chapter 4, the first biblical text that appears in Ateek's discussion of sources that are considered to be neither valid nor authoritative yet remain valuable in a pedagogical and contrastive sense is the account of the destruction of the Canaanite city of Jericho in Josh 6.²⁹ Before directing his attention to the question of the exodus paradigm and the similitude between Palestinians and the biblical Canaanites, Ateek establishes the revelatory deficiency of narratives relating to the conquest of Canaan and indicates the noxious ramifications of attempting to embody their ideals in the contemporary world.³⁰ This assessment forms a significant part of the larger hermeneutical treatment in which the focus on the exodus paradigm is embedded, presenting at the very outset a theological critique of a biblical tradition that will be revisited as inextricably linked with that of the departure from Egypt and identified as an active threat to Palestinian communities due to the transposition of those interwoven themes.

The pages following Ateek's observations on the different reception of the exodus in Palestinian liberation theology apply his hermeneutic to other biblical sources that can provide a more contextually sensitive and responsible message of liberation. In particular,

²⁸ Ibid., 81-86.

²⁹ Ibid., 83.

³⁰ Ibid., 83-84.

he explores the following materials: (1) the narrative of Naboth's vineyard, which tells of a landowner in Jezreel (in northern Israel) who declines to exchange or sell his vineyard at the request of Ahab, king of Israel, in response to which Jezebel, Ahab's Phoenician wife, contrives a plot to have Naboth executed in order to seize his ancestral land (1 Kgs 21:1-29); (2) the account of the "ecstatic prophets" from whom Ahab receives deceptive assurances about the outcome of a prospective military campaign against the Arameans (in Syria), in contrast to which the prophet Micaiah ben Imlah stands alone in voicing a bitter truth regarding the king's expected death in battle (1 Kgs 22:1-38); and (3) the psalmist who cries out to God as a refugee longing for a return home and maintains hope in a living God who hears, accompanies, and saves those whose suffering derives from a condition of forced exile (Pss 42-43).³¹ Retrieving these sources in accordance with his hermeneutical principles, Ateek asserts, can help cultivate among Palestinian Christians a vision of God's liberative activity in history that is "more relevant" and appropriate than the image encountered in the exodus story.³² Rather than promote hope in a God whose work of liberation comes to signify a collective assault on the indigenous presence in the land, this selection of biblical texts contributes to a land-based approach to divine justice in view of the tragedy of dispossession and (in the case of the ecstatic prophets) a critique of forms of state power and nationalistic commitments which eclipse truth.³³

The placement of the question of the exodus paradigm in between examples of scriptural narratives deemed inadequate in light of Ateek's hermeneutic and sources in

³¹ Ibid., 86-92.

³² Ibid., 87; cf. 86, 88-92.

³³ Ibid., 86-92; cf. 92-114.

which liberative value is recognized indicates that the exodus is not easily classifiable in terms of the conflicting trajectories pervading the Bible. While the initial discussion of the texts recounting the destruction of Jericho and the attention to the implications of a transposed exodus both highlight elements of the narrative that do not disclose the heart of the biblical message, Ateek situates his assessment of the paradigm in a manner that gestures toward something more in the exodus, other dimensions of meaning which are irreducible to the debasing themes of conquest and annihilation. In his earliest attempt to formulate a Palestinian theology of liberation, the exodus narrative is neither appropriated nor discarded in its entirety but rather effectively placed in brackets and strategically set aside as a source in deferment. Textual and contextual considerations attesting to the workings of a Canaanite analytic in Ateek's theology as well as to efforts to overcome the faith Nakba hold the exodus in hermeneutical abeyance.

The equivocal character of the exodus that begins to come into view through the in-between space it occupies in Ateek's reflections is connected to the second point that warrants mentioning—namely, that a future appropriation of the exodus is anticipated in Palestinian liberation theology. As suggested above by Ateek's reference to the abuses of the exodus preventing a liberative appropriation “at this time,” the bracketed status of the narrative is provisional and a latent significance is expected once again to become active under new conditions of geopolitical justice.³⁴ The biblical account of the exodus, he observes, “will be reclaimed eventually when Palestinians enjoy their own exodus and return to their homeland.”³⁵ This future reclaiming of the narrative, however, will face the

³⁴ Ibid., 86-87.

³⁵ Ibid., 87.

challenge of confronting the scriptural and transpositional perils associated with the role of Canaan in the story.³⁶ A renewed approach to the exodus that seeks to affirm a God who sustains the basic dignity of all persons will require a critical reorientation toward the narrative through which a refusal of its exclusionary features can be exercised.

Recuperating the liberative impulses of the exodus from the enabling standpoint of a historical transformation to come will involve reframing the conceptions of land and relationality that appear in the biblical account. This hermeneutical possibility stands in sharp contrast to the problem of reproduced domination that surfaces in Ateek's critique of transposition. As such, a narrative disentanglement will become necessary since, as he cautions, "the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan are, in the minds of many people, a unified and inseparable theme. For to need an exodus, one must have a promised land. To choose the motif of conquest of the promised land is to invite the need for the oppression, assimilation, control, or dispossession of the indigenous population."³⁷ Undoing this link, which Ateek describes as inhibiting the ability of Palestinian liberation theology "to find the whole of the Exodus event meaningful," will distinguish a future appropriation of the biblical story and inform the corresponding theological analysis of the process by which a Palestinian exodus and return come to pass—a trajectory toward communal liberation in Israel-Palestine that, unlike the Egypt-to-Canaan structure of the exodus, he hopes "will not result in conquest, oppression, or dispossession."³⁸ In essence, the envisioned work of

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid. It should be noted that Ateek's use of the expression "exodus event" here does not correspond to the way Delores Williams employs the same expression in her critical dialogue with black liberation theology (as discussed earlier in chapter 6). Rather, as a specific way of designating the larger process commencing with the departure from Egypt and concluding with the conquest of Canaan, Ateek's terminology is closer in meaning to Williams's approach to the exodus as "holistic story," a descriptor which she proposes as a

reimagining the relationship between exodus and land parts ways with a demarcated text at the points where its model of God serves as a vehicle for the catastrophic. A principal difference between a transposed exodus and what might be termed a transfigured exodus, this frictional horizon reemerges in Ateek's evaluation of what the departure from Egypt means for the Canaanites in the scriptural narrative: "Certainly the concept of a God who wills such horrors is not acceptable. Instead of the wars and bloodshed of the biblical account, it is my hope that Palestinians will return to *share* the land of Israel-Palestine. This is the kind of return that is willed by the God whom we have come to see in the overall biblical revelation—a God of justice, mercy, and peace."³⁹ In place of conquest, the theological significance of living in the land with others will be brought to bear on the reappropriation of the exodus in Palestinian liberation theology.

The idea of an exodus disentangled from its narrative sequence of dispossession is consistent with Ateek's position on the vacillation between harmful and liberative themes that can be found even within a single biblical text or author.⁴⁰ Indeed, this understanding of the biblical sources can be recognized in his reception of the aforementioned materials identified as making available more fruitful messages for theological reflection in the context of the Palestinian yearning for justice. In the first narrative that Ateek discusses after addressing the question of the exodus paradigm, for instance, the God of justice is a

corrective to the paradigmatic focus on God's liberating act in Egypt and the corollary invisibilization of the Canaanite victims (i.e., what she presents as an untenable preoccupation with the "exodus event," since the emphasis on the initiating event ultimately functions to remove the subsequent events from the field of theological recognition). See Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1993] 2013), 133.

³⁹ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 87 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁰ See the remarks on this aspect of Ateek's developmental understanding of revelation in chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation.

God who does not forget the lurid fate that befalls Naboth due to the methods by which Jezebel decides to satiate King Ahab's desire for his land (1 Kgs 21:17-24, 27-29).⁴¹ This key insight into a God whose enduring justice encompasses victims of land expropriation through violence, however, is not appropriated by Ateek in an undifferentiated manner. It is only through a critical identification and repudiation of its retributive element that the account of Naboth's vineyard comes to represent "more than a story of tragedy" and can serve as "a central biblical paradigm for a Palestinian theology of liberation."⁴² Without a hermeneutical intervention that insists on "the use of justice in a dynamic and creative way for the achievement of peace in the land," this unchallenged aspect of the biblical narrative (i.e., the severe punishment for the injustice committed against Naboth) would compromise its liberative integrity by countenancing an image of justice that is devoid of mercy and generates further injustice.⁴³

In addition, and more directly pertinent to the matter of a reappropriated exodus, the story of Naboth's vineyard contains a reference to the same tradition which troubles the question of the exodus narrative in Ateek's work—namely, the conquest of Canaan. After recounting God's dire message to Ahab as relayed by the prophet Elijah, the text proceeds to offer the following statement on the northern king: "Indeed, there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the LORD, urged on by his wife Jezebel. He acted most abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the LORD drove out before the Israelites" (1 Kgs 21:25-26). This comparison to

⁴¹ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 86-89.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 87-89.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 89.

one of the indigenous groups of Canaan, whose articulated dispossession forms the crux of the tension between the exodus paradigm and Palestinian liberation theology, does not appear in Ateek's treatment of the contemporary relevance of the account of Naboth's vineyard. The presence of this freighted theme of conquest in a scriptural narrative which Ateek describes as a paradigm affords another example of the theological fluctuation in response to which his hermeneutic is developed as a navigational tool. As with a future appropriation of the exodus without—and, indeed, against—its moment of elimination in regard to native populations, the story about God's concern for Naboth does not require acceptance in its entirety in order to yield liberative significance. Discordant interaction and paradigmatic value are not mutually exclusive in Ateek's theology, enabling him to discern a preeminent portrayal of divine opposition to the expropriation of land in a text that (even if parenthetically) also reinforces a theological assent to dispossession.

The third and final point relating to Ateek's position on the exodus/conquest story in *Justice and Only Justice* seeks to underline a facet of the analysis that only flashes by in his reflections on the biblical corpus yet signals a hermeneutical caution that deserves notice. In the assessment of the Jericho massacre that precedes Ateek's discussion of the exodus paradigm, a comparative note implies that it would be inaccurate to differentiate between the departure from Egypt and the entrance into Canaan in simplistic terms that advance a binary of liberative and pernicious episodes, respectively. Citing the text of Josh 6:21, which describes the Israelites instituting the *herem* on the city of Jericho by putting to death all of its inhabitants (with the exception of Rahab and her household) and livestock, Ateek observes that comparable theological tendencies are also present at the beginning of the exodus narrative and thus warrant the same evaluation: "Similarly, in the

Exodus story, it is the Lord who inflicts disease and plagues on the Egyptians (Exodus 7-12); it is the Lord who kills every firstborn in the land of Egypt (Exodus 12:29); and it is the Lord who fights for Israel and brings total destruction to the Egyptian army (Exodus 14-15).”⁴⁴ It seems important, then, to consider the emphasis on the conquest of Canaan in Ateek’s approach to the exodus without losing sight of related problems in the account of God’s self-revelation in Egypt. Although Ateek does not elaborate on the latter, such difficulties in the story indicate that the hermeneutical disentanglement through which a future appropriation of the exodus will take place cannot amount to a mere dissolution of the Egypt-to-Canaan structure. The tensional framework for engaging the biblical corpus that emerges in Palestinian liberation theology points toward a reception of the exodus which will involve reconceptualizing not only its message about inhabiting the land but also the depiction of God’s liberating activity among the Israelite slaves.

7.4 ANOTHER EXODUS: REFRAMING THE HERMENEUTICS OF LAND IN A PROPHETIC KEY

The challenge of disavowing an exodus process that culminates in dispossession with a view to embracing an exodus message that fosters the sharing of land is revisited by Ateek in an essay following the publication of *Justice and Only Justice* and originally presented at the first international conference on Palestinian liberation theology.⁴⁵ In this

⁴⁴ Ibid., 83, 197n10. See also the remarks on the biblical concept of *herem* in the section on the Amalekites in chapter 5 of this dissertation.

⁴⁵ Naim Stifan Ateek, “Biblical Perspectives on the Land,” in *Faith and the Intifada: Palestinian Christian Voices*, ed. Naim S. Ateek, Marc H. Ellis, and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 108-116. See also the brief discussion of the conference in chapter 4 of this dissertation.

essay, the thematic movement from conquest to shared habitation in connection with the exodus is not put forth in terms of an evaluative break with the atrocious outcome of the biblical narrative in order to rethink its image of the land and its residents. Rather, the transition toward an alternative way of living in the land traverses what Ateek describes as the fundamental difference between “two exoduses” that appear in the Hebrew Bible: (1) the account of the departure from Egypt, the period in the Sinai wilderness, and “the invasion of Canaan”; and (2) the return of the exiles from Babylon in the sixth century BCE.⁴⁶ A hermeneutical option for the latter exodus is maintained in the essay, reflecting Ateek’s developmental model of revelation and illustrating once again the importance of both sides of the text-reader relationship in his theology.

In contrast to the more familiar themes associated with the first exodus, the return of the exiles as a distinct exodus process in which a deepening theological vision can be detected is less prominent according to Ateek. He writes: “Very few people know about the second exodus. It is more quiet. It is significantly less dramatic than the first. Yet some of the prophets like Jeremiah thought that it would be a greater event than the first exodus.”⁴⁷ It is in the prophetic literature that Ateek identifies resources for affirming the ideals of this second exodus and articulating the ways in which they surpass those of the first exodus. The models of habitation which the returning exiles are called to embody, he contends, are more conducive to the tasks of theological reflection amid the challenge to

⁴⁶ Ateek, “Biblical Perspectives on the Land,” 110-111. See also Naim Stifan Ateek, “Whose Promised Land? An Interview with Naim Ateek,” *Witness*, no. 78 (April 1995): 20.

⁴⁷ Ateek, “Biblical Perspectives on the Land,” 111. The passage from Jeremiah which Ateek quotes from the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) reads as follows: “So, look, the days are coming, Yahweh declares, when people will no longer say, ‘As Yahweh lives who brought the Israelites out of Egypt,’ but, ‘As Yahweh lives who led back and brought home the offspring of the House of Israel from the land of the north and all the countries to which he had driven them, to live on their own soil’” (Jer 23:7-8).

“hammer out a new understanding of our relationship to the land” and engage the work of engendering forms of communal life marked by justice and dignity.⁴⁸ This perspective on the shifting relationality that finds expression in some prophetic voices and allows for an exodus-based conception of inhabiting the land that contests the logic of dispossession is evinced in Ateek’s remarks on Ezek 47:21-23, a text discussed earlier in chapter 5 of this dissertation. In light of the equal status of land inheritance and belonging that is extended to non-Israelite residents in this passage (which is part of Ezekiel’s lengthy description of the national restoration to take place after the exile), a crucial discontinuity with the idea of annihilating the Canaanites that belongs to the first exodus is highlighted: “This is an amazing change in the approach to the indigenous population. There is an amazing switch from the hostile language of Joshua. Here there is a clear indication that, after the exile, when the second exodus took place, there is a new understanding of the relationship to the land. There is an acceptance of the changes of history. Certain demographic changes had taken place, and the prophet pronouncing the word of God exhorts the people to accept these changes and to share the land with those who are living on it.”⁴⁹ Unlike the themes of expulsion and effacement that are salient in God’s instructions concerning the Israelite entrance into Canaan, Ezekiel’s vision of a new orientation to the non-Israelites inhabiting the land provides Ateek with an exodus message that can resonate with victims of settler-colonial projects and strengthen faith in a God whose justice is incompatible

⁴⁸ Ateek, “Biblical Perspectives on the Land,” 111-112, 114-115.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 111. As noted in chapter 5, the observed contrast between the message of Ezek 47 and the approach to the Canaanites in other biblical sources reappears in Ateek’s second book, *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation*, where he mentions that “these words of Ezekiel must have seemed a great contradiction of the many injunctions in the Torah against even making peace with the indigenous people of Canaan.” In this later discussion, however, Ateek commends Ezekiel’s theological breakthrough while cautioning that the exilic prophet’s “theology can also be quite narrow.” See Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 64; cf. 132.

with the coercive removal of native communities.⁵⁰

At the center of this way of differentiating between the first and second exodus, then, is a critical recognition of the implications for the question of indigeneity and a commitment to formulating a theological response that attends to the connections with the Israel-Palestine context. In the second exodus, Ateek argues, the ideals that menace the continuing presence of indigenous groups no longer define the approach to the land. “When one compares the two exoduses,” he remarks, “it is amazing that the first had all the negative attitudes toward the indigenous peoples who were already living in the land. Every time they are mentioned, the language is very hostile. They are supposed to be displaced or destroyed. There is no room for them in the land among the chosen people of God to whom the land was promised. The second is totally different. One gets the feeling that the returning exiles reflected greater realism. They were much more accepting of the people around them.”⁵¹ The theological fissure between the trajectory of dispossession in the first exodus and the image of sharing land that Ateek perceives in the second exodus represents the maturing notion of God that underpins his understanding of the Bible as a tensional heritage. Through this process of unsystematic growth, described in this essay as unfolding “mostly in a zigzag way,” the theological imagination shaped by the period of Babylonian domination would refigure the exodus tradition in a manner that invites the returning exiles “to learn that God is concerned about other people besides themselves.”⁵²

⁵⁰ Although Ateek does not reference Ezek 20 in this essay, it is pertinent to observe that this text contains a rereading of the first exodus from the context of the Babylonian exile and (like the passage from Jeremiah quoted above in note 47) frames the anticipated return of the exiles as a new exodus.

⁵¹ Ateek, “Biblical Perspectives on the Land,” 111.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 110.

In Ateek's reading, the second exodus as presented in the vision of Ezekiel moves in the direction of a decentered theology of the land which avows the significance of diversified space and thus manages to transcend the exclusionary collectivism of the first exodus.

In spite of this pronounced disparity between "the first war-like exodus, with its violent and bloody treatment of the indigenous people," and "the pragmatic nature of the second exodus," Ateek laments that the former prevails as a theopolitical resource in the formation of Jewish and Christian Zionist discourses in the post-1967 context.⁵³ "Instead of living up to the ideal and realism of the second exodus," he writes, "many have tried to draw their inspiration from the first. This is, indeed, a tragedy."⁵⁴ An option for the first exodus in the contemporary reception of these biblical narratives ultimately perpetuates "a more primitive concept of God and the world" which imperils the relationship between Palestinians and their ancestral homes.⁵⁵ As such, Ateek addresses the ramifications of settler and Christian constructs of land in Israel-Palestine through a theological critique of biblical appropriation in view of the divergence between both exoduses. In his analysis, it is incumbent on theologians to confront and examine the various biblical frameworks that furnish intersecting concepts of God and land for present-day readers who participate in a process of geopolitical negation.⁵⁶ A pained awareness of this hermeneutical problem is evident in Ateek's assessment of the legacy of the initial exodus and its meaning for the pursuit of justice in Israel-Palestine. As he mentions, "The tragedy today is that both the Jewish and Christian fundamentalists have received their inspiration from the vocabulary

⁵³ Ibid., 108-109, 112.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 112.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 108-109, 114-115.

of the first return to the land, rather than from the spirit of the second return. The first saw the indigenous inhabitants as wicked people who should be slaughtered and displaced. The second saw them realistically as people who should share the land.”⁵⁷

The new theology of land that Ateek discerns in the recontextualized tradition of the exodus affords a liberative alternative to the narrative of dispossession that disturbs the appropriation of the first exodus in Palestinian liberation theology. While elements of the earlier critique of a transposed exodus/conquest story can be recognized in this essay, the image of shared habitation derived from the second exodus seems to replace the idea of a future recovery of the (first) exodus without its destructive ending as proposed in *Justice and Only Justice*. That is, the creative process of rethinking the significance of the exodus that Ateek identifies within the biblical corpus itself, and which exemplifies the frictional-developmental model of revelation that informs his hermeneutic, allows for a contextually sensitive reflection on the exodus theme that already entails the value of sharing the land and thus does not require a disentanglement of the narrative. The return of the exiles from Babylon as interpreted by the prophetic imagination opens another path for Palestinian liberation theology to engage the exodus and renew its message of God’s love for the oppressed in light of indigenous cries for justice in the world today.

7.5 CENTERING THE CANAANITES OF THE WORLD: ROBERT ALLEN WARRIOR AND THE QUESTION OF THE EXODUS IN NATIVE NORTH AMERICA

Reading the biblical sources under conditions of settler colonialism in a different

⁵⁷ Ibid., 112.

geopolitical context, Osage scholar Robert Allen Warrior (b. 1963) likewise attends to the deleterious dimension of the paradigmatic reception of the exodus in classical liberation theologies. The communal histories and experiences of dehumanization, dispossession, and resistance that help to forge his distinct locus of interrogation as “an indigenous, and thus Canaanitic, critic of Christian scripture” make possible an approach to the exodus in which the thematic interplay of liberation and conquest remains pivotal.⁵⁸ In an important and often anthologized essay titled “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today,” written as a doctoral student in systematic theology at Union Theological Seminary and originally published in 1989 (the same year as Ateek’s *Justice and Only Justice*), Warrior considers the meaning of the exodus as a paradigm of liberation from the standpoint of Native American self-determination.⁵⁹ The assessment of the exodus narrative is presented in this essay as a critical prism through which to envision the possibility of responsible and truly dialogical forms of embodied solidarity between non-Native Christians and Native peoples.

This question of dialogue and solidarity in relation to the task of confronting the realities of oppression afflicting American Indian communities is introduced at the very outset of the essay by raising the idea of a Native American theology of liberation. The

⁵⁸ Robert Allen Warrior, “Response,” *Semeia*, no. 75 (1996): 207.

⁵⁹ Robert Allen Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today,” *Christianity and Crisis* 49, no. 12 (September 1989): 261-265. The essay earned an honorable mention from the Associated Church Press and was noted by the judges for the reflection it offers on the relationship between the biblical account of the conquest of Canaan and Native Americans. See the sidebar titled “1989 Award of Merit” in Robert Allen Warrior, Native American News, *Christianity and Crisis* 50, no. 7 (May 1990): 141.

For a later discussion of the academic context that gave rise to the essay and the major turning point it marks in Warrior’s spiritual life, see Robert Allen Warrior, “Response to Special Issue on Religion and Narratives of Conquest,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 59, no. 1-2 (2005): 125-130.

designation “has a nice ring to it,” Warrior notes, and its development would seem to expand the North American theological conversation in practical directions for which a facilitating set of desires already exists.⁶⁰ He mentions, on the one hand, that “politically active Christians in the U.S. have been bandying about the idea of such a theology for several years now, encouraging Indians to develop it” and searching for a way “to include Native Americans in their political action” as an essential part of the larger commitment to refashion society with justice as a guiding principle; on the other, Warrior refers to the appeal that Christian involvement in the process of working to transform the unfinished history of colonial subjugation in the United States can have for Native activists, writing that “since American Indians have a relatively small population base and few financial resources, assistance from churches can be of great help in gaining the attention of the public, the media, and the government.”⁶¹ Despite what appears to be a feasible alliance in this situation—a “perfect marriage,” as Warrior puts it, between “Christians with the desire to include Native Americans in their struggle for justice and Indian activists in need of resources and support from non-Indians”—a need for caution is expressed in a way that highlights how such efforts can reproduce arrangements of normativity and power that contradict the meaning of Native self-determination:

The inclusion of Native Americans in Christian political praxis is difficult—even dangerous. Christians have a different way of going about the struggle for justice than most Native Americans: different models of leadership, different ways of making decisions, different ways of viewing the relationship between politics and religion. These differences have gone all but unnoticed in the history of church involvement in American Indian affairs. Liberals and conservatives alike have too often surveyed the conditions of Native Americans and decided to come to the rescue, always using *their* methods, *their* ideas, and *their* programs. The idea that

⁶⁰ Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” 261.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Indians might know best how to address their own problems is seemingly lost on these well-meaning folks.⁶²

This preliminary observation, which begins to bring into focus the challenge of naming a repressed heterogeneity that vitiates certain approaches to liberation from within, sets in motion a key insight that animates Warrior's reflections on the exodus on several levels.

The task of carving out critically informed and effective pathways for solidarity even in what Warrior describes as the current "new era for both the church and for Native Americans," a historical moment in which the trappings of the politics of inclusion have become more readily recognizable and Native voices continue to enunciate a decolonial praxis of self-determination, encounters "an enormous stumbling block" at the very point of departure—namely, the exodus paradigm.⁶³ As Warrior writes, "Most of the liberation theologies that have emerged in the last 20 years are preoccupied with the Exodus story, using it as the fundamental model for liberation. I believe that the story of the Exodus is an inappropriate way for Native Americans to think about liberation."⁶⁴ In its reception among oppressed peoples in numerous contexts, he notes, this biblical narrative has been viewed as an inspiring statement of God's partiality toward the victims of injustice and the direct relevance of such a message has allowed the story to become "a beacon of hope for many in despair."⁶⁵ The value of this kind of interaction with the theme of the exodus notwithstanding, Warrior calls attention to the larger trajectory of the liberation of the Israelite slaves in the biblical account, asserting that "the liberationist picture of Yahweh

⁶² Ibid., 261 (emphasis in original).

⁶³ Ibid., 261.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 261-262.

is not complete.”⁶⁶ It is in the end point of the departure from Egypt—which, as will be seen below, is irreducible to a problem of subsequent episodes in Warrior’s discussion of the narrative—that he identifies a formidable obstacle to productive dialogue between Natives and non-Native Christians.

With a view to making visible this inhibiting feature of the exodus that is excised in its reception as a liberative paradigm, Warrior turns to the importance for a previously oppressed people to secure its freedom by establishing new conditions that would help prevent a return of the unjust suffering to which they were once subjected. “A delivered people is not a free people,” he writes, “nor is it a nation. People who have survived the nightmare of subjugation dream of escape. Once the victims have been delivered, they seek a new dream, a new goal, usually a place of safety away from the oppressors, a place that can be defended against future subjugation.”⁶⁷ By addressing in general terms the process through which liberation from the dehumanizing experience of social domination occurs and emphasizing the collective movement toward a place in which the acquisition of freedom can be sustained, the shared moment of deliverance is presented as catalyzing a particular undertaking which, in the biblical narrative, is inseparable from the theme that Warrior contends is missing from the exodus paradigm. This connection with the exodus story is established in the next line: “Israel’s new dream became the land of Canaan. And Yahweh was still with them: Yahweh promised to go before the people and give them Canaan, with its flowing milk and honey. The land, Yahweh decided, belonged to these former slaves from Egypt and Yahweh planned on giving it to them—using the

⁶⁶ Ibid., 262.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 262.

same power used against the enslaving Egyptians to defeat the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan.”⁶⁸ The previously oppressed Israelites, then, are emancipated from slavery with the guiding purpose of entering into Canaan, the land of divine promise. This trajectory of liberation, necessitating the dispossession of the native populations residing in Canaan, becomes possible through the continuing presence and activity of the God who initiated the departure from Egypt. It is for this reason that Warrior, underscoring the idea that the exodus comprises an extended process, offers a simple yet challenging formula: “Yahweh the deliverer became Yahweh the conqueror.”⁶⁹

In Warrior’s understanding of the exodus paradigm, the account of the liberating event that commences the process described in the biblical sources resounds in a manner that effectively silences the larger process to which it belongs. As such, a crucial portion of the narrative, one which voices an ominous message concerning Native nations, does not figure into theological analysis yet persists beneath the exodus model of liberation as a threat to the indigenous world. This neglected underside of the exodus amounts to a substantial hindrance to the possibility of Native involvement with the images of social transformation associated with the liberation theologies in question. Unlike the readings of the narrative developed by the Latin American and black liberation theologians at the forefront of Warrior’s reflections in this essay, it is not with the liberated Israelites that he identifies as an indigenous reader of the Bible but rather with the different groups whose destruction is required by the God who liberates: “The obvious characters in the story for Native Americans to identify with are the Canaanites, the people who already lived in the

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

promised land. As a member of the Osage Nation of American Indians who stands in solidarity with other tribal people around the world, I read the Exodus stories with Canaanite eyes.”⁷⁰ By upholding a mode of inquiry that stems from a commitment to maintaining the visibility of indigeneity, Warrior locates himself in the critical space of what is forgotten in the exodus paradigm and registers the disruption of a method which permits bypassing collective annihilation in explicating the God of the oppressed, for “it is the Canaanite side of the story that has been overlooked by those seeking to articulate theologies of liberation.”⁷¹ Constructive dialogue between American Indian communities and liberation theologians, he suggests, cannot flourish without a thorough reassessment of the contemporary reception of the exodus narrative as a liberative resource.

Several of the challenges that arise in working through the exodus with an eye to intersecting experiences of indigeneity are highlighted in Warrior’s reflections on how to respond to the inadequacies of the paradigmatic model. Before discussing his proposed direction for engaging the exodus/conquest narrative, however, it is perhaps helpful to examine three distinguishable areas of the problem as diagnosed in this essay: (1) the nature of the thematic relationship between the departure from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan; (2) the narrative focus of Warrior’s hermeneutical concerns; and (3) a historical inference about the erasure of Canaanite identity. These aspects of Warrior’s presentation

⁷⁰ Ibid. While in this essay Warrior’s references to liberation theologies remain somewhat generic (only Gutiérrez is mentioned by name in connection with the role of the Bible in ecclesial base communities; see p. 264) and do not include citations of specific texts, some clarifying remarks on the question of his interlocutors appear in a later discussion of the essay: “In the late 1980s, when I was coming into the theological perspective that shaped the essay, liberation theology was something I learned as having just a few forms, primarily a Latin American version, articulated most famously by Gustavo Gutiérrez, and a North American version specific to African Americans, first articulated by my dissertation director James Cone.” Warrior, “Response to Special Issue,” 125.

⁷¹ Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” 262.

of the problem sharpen the lens through which to consider his remarks on the remaining possibilities for theologians and Native peoples in pursuit of justice.

As regards the first point, the relationship between deliverance and conquest is framed in Warrior's essay not simply as the chronological sequence of the biblical story (which, to be sure, remains important) but also in a manner that recognizes the thematic antecedence of Canaan as the promised land in spite of its native inhabitants. That is, the problem of dispossession, in terms of narrative chronology, is something that follows the departure from Egypt, but as a scriptural theme connected with the covenant, it precedes the entire period of Israelite slavery in Egypt as recounted in Exodus. Warrior establishes this larger thematic context in which the exodus is embedded by beginning his discussion of the pertinent biblical texts—which, as he mentions, aims to accentuate “some sections that are commonly ignored”—with God's promise to Abram in Gen 15: “The covenant begins when Yahweh comes to Abram saying, ‘Know of a surety that your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and they will be slaves there; but I will bring judgment on the nation they serve and they shall come out’ (Gen. 15:13, 14).”⁷² To this anticipation of the liberation from slavery in Egypt is added the other component of the divine promise expressed in this passage, the inheritance of a land in which others are already living: “Then, Yahweh adds: ‘To your descendants I give this land, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Jebusites’ (15:18-21).”⁷³ The integral significance of

⁷² Ibid. Quotations of biblical sources in Warrior's essay are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

⁷³ Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” 262. The text of Gen 15:21 also includes the Girgashites (another group frequently mentioned in biblical passages listing the native residents of Canaan) between the references to the Canaanites and the Jebusites.

the entrance into Canaan as part of God's liberating activity appears as a theme early on in the Bible and therefore qualifies the exodus narrative from the outset.

Tracing the course of this place-oriented theme through the exodus, Warrior proceeds to note that "the next important moment is the commissioning of Moses" and cites Exod 3:17, excerpting from God's message to the Israelite slaves as revealed to Moses at the burning bush: "I promise I will bring you out of the affliction of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey."⁷⁴ In this passage recounting God's self-revelation to Moses and marking the beginning of the process that eventually results in the liberation of the Israelites, Warrior discerns a reassertion of the covenantal structure that he first identifies in the divine promise to Abram. As he remarks on the text from Exod 3, "The covenant, in other words, has two parts: deliverance and conquest."⁷⁵ After the departure from Egypt, Warrior continues, the experience of the former slaves in the Sinai desert entails an apprehension of conditionality in their relationship with the God who liberated them: "If the delivered people remain faithful to Yahweh, they will be blessed in the land Yahweh will conquer for them (Exodus 20-23 and Deuteronomy 7-9). The god who delivered Israel from slavery will lead the people into the land and keep them there as long as they live up to the terms of the covenant."⁷⁶ The promised presence of God among the Israelites advancing toward Canaan requires a particular and ongoing response of faith from the people. In the wilderness, the developing relationship between

⁷⁴ Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," 262.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

God and the Israelites signifies, in Warrior's reading, that "the covenant is made more complicated, but it still has two parts."⁷⁷ Deliverance and conquest do not constitute a mechanistic process of liberation in the exodus narrative but rather accompany an active commitment on the part of the Israelites that is essential for that process to unfold.

Among the particularities of this commitment, which Warrior recapitulates as the involvement of the Israelites in "building a society where the evils done to them have no place," is found an exclusionary social model in relation to the indigenous populations of Canaan.⁷⁸ Referencing the practice of separation prescribed in Exod 23:31-33, he notes that "one of the most important of Yahweh's commands is the prohibition on social relations with Canaanites or participation in their religion. 'I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them or with their gods. They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods it will surely be a snare to you.'"⁷⁹ As the Israelites approach Canaan and prepare to dispossess the various peoples residing in the land, the possibility of a covenant between the two groups (i.e., Israelites and Canaanites) is again proscribed and the imperative of destruction is repeated (Deut 7:1-2).⁸⁰ At this point in the exodus/conquest narrative, Warrior writes, "the promises made to Abraham and Moses are ready to be fulfilled," yet Joshua and Judges offer conflicting accounts of the outcome of the entrance into Canaan; whereas a comprehensive conquest is indicated in parts of Joshua (Josh 10:40), Judges expresses the consequences of a broken covenant

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 262; cf. 263.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 262.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 263.

with God by depicting “the angel of the LORD” as allowing the Canaanites to remain in the land as “a snare” to the Israelites (Judg 2:3).⁸¹ Such discrepancies notwithstanding, the negative representation of the Canaanites remains interrelated with an idealization of dispossession and plays a fundamental role in the biblical narrative.

Warrior’s understanding of the exodus story throws into relief how the theme of conquest is not only already at work when Moses first brings news of God’s liberation to the Israelite slaves but in fact envelops the entire episode insofar as it can be identified in the divine promise to Abram. While the narratives recounting the military campaigns by means of which the Israelites attempt to carry out the injunction to eliminate the different indigenous groups follow the lengthy period in the wilderness, the reading of the exodus that Warrior presents in his essay challenges theologians to confront how its image of a God who acts on behalf of the oppressed is inflected by a vision of collective annihilation from the beginning. Thus he interprets the message of justice that emerges in the exodus narrative in view of the communities whose erasure is required for its implementation: “The laws put forth regarding strangers and sojourners may have stopped the people of Yahweh from wanton oppression, but presumably only after the land was safely in the hands of Israel. The covenant of Yahweh depends on this.”⁸² It is for this reason that he perceives in the exodus paradigm a semblance of liberation which can acquire such an

⁸¹ Ibid. It should be noted that the passage Warrior cites from Joshua offers a summary of the conquest in the southern region of Canaan (see 10:28-42). A similar statement concludes a subsequent account of the conquest of northern Canaan (11:23; for a description of the northern conquest, see 11:1-22). In contrast to such summaries of the conquest, however, several passages in Joshua attest to a continuing Canaanite presence (e.g., 13:1-6; 15:13-17; 17:11-13) and even reflect the theological perspective that, as Warrior observes, becomes effective in Judges (23:3-13).

⁸² Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” 263.

exemplary status in contemporary theology only through an appropriation of the biblical story that effectively extinguishes the cries of the Canaanites.

The foregoing exposition of the relationship between the exodus and conquest in Warrior's reflections on the biblical narrative directs attention to the second aspect of his assessment of the problem mentioned above—namely, the specifically narrative focus of his approach to the pertinence of the exodus for Native America today. In his discussion, Warrior takes into account some important developments in twentieth-century biblical scholarship on the emergence of early Israel and notes the degree to which the historicity of the exodus/conquest traditions has been called into question. He writes, for instance, that “most scholars, of a variety of political and theological stripes, agree that the actual events of Israel's early history are much different than what was commanded in the narrative. The Canaanites were not systematically annihilated, nor were they completely driven from the land. In fact, they made up, to a large extent, the people of the new nation of Israel.”⁸³ As alternatives to the conquest model for the origins of the early Israelites in Canaan, the models of peaceful infiltration (developed by German scholars Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth) and peasant revolt (contributed by US scholars George E. Mendenhall and Norman K. Gottwald) to which Warrior refers in his essay provide explanations for the historical world behind the biblical text that do not substantiate the familiar version of the entrance into Canaan.⁸⁴ However, the question of historicity, irrespective of the value

⁸³ Ibid., 262.

⁸⁴ Ibid. For helpful summaries of the different explanatory models for the emergence of the early Israelites and the ongoing conversations regarding the relevant archaeological data, see Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 79-90, 101-118, 329-339; William G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 41-74; Avraham Faust, *Israel's Ethnogenesis: Settlement, Interaction, Expansion and Resistance* (Sheffield:

of the investigations and critical conversations it stimulates, does not mitigate the harmful features of the exodus that are central to Warrior's reception of the narrative. It is in the hermeneutical possibilities of the narrative itself, he insists, that the danger lies.⁸⁵

Inasmuch as a dispossession-charged image of liberation can be encountered and internalized by readers of the biblical story, scholarly inquiry into its historical reliability is differentiated from Warrior's primary concerns. Since "historical knowledge does not change the status of the indigenes in the *narrative* and the theology that grows out of it," he suggests, such developments in biblical scholarship "should not allow us to breathe a sigh of relief."⁸⁶ The difficulties of the exodus/conquest narrative do not vanish in the wake of unfavorable conclusions regarding its historical accuracy. Indeed, this insight into the need for a distinctively narrative-based line of questioning, as Warrior recollects in a later reflection on his essay, marks a shift in his own engagement with the sources and redefined the nature of the analysis that he originally intended to contribute.⁸⁷ In the years prior to writing the essay, Warrior's approach to the biblical accounts of conquest was formed in dialogue with scholarly attempts to reconstruct the historical processes that gave rise to those traditions, as well as in light of his experience as a student of biblical archaeology in Israel during the summers of 1985 and 1986; moreover, his study of the reception history of such narratives in Jewish thought kindled an appreciation for fruitful ways of interpreting the biblical stories, even if those hermeneutical strategies "were not

Equinox, 2006), 170-187; Israel Finkelstein and Amihai Mazar, *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel*, ed. Brian B. Schmidt (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 53-55, 61-65, 74-83, 94-95.

⁸⁵ Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," 262-264.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 262 (emphasis in original).

⁸⁷ Warrior, "Response to Special Issue," 126-127.

dominant.”⁸⁸ After working in these areas for some years, Warrior recalls, he integrated elements of the research into a single project, crafting an argument that would soon be reassessed in his 1989 essay: “Bits and pieces of all of this textual, archaeological, sociological, and political analysis came together in a very long term paper that sits somewhere in a box or on a floppy disk with an outdated bibliography. After all that...these texts remain, texts that feature Yahweh promising someone else’s land to Isaac’s (not Ishmael’s) descendants, then commanding those descendants to wipe out the people of that land. At first, the ‘Canaanites’ essay was going to be a distillation of that longer piece, but eventually it became a response to it.”⁸⁹

The recognition of a narrative problem that outlives a sweeping diminution of its historical veracity therefore enabled Warrior to conceptualize a critical sensitivity to what remains dormant beneath the exodus paradigm. Appeals to the questionable historicity of the biblical sources, he argues, do not sufficiently take into consideration the relationship between the general readership and the text: “The research of Old Testament scholars, however much it provides an answer to the historical question—the contribution of the indigenous people of Canaan to the formation and emergence of Israel as a nation—does not resolve the narrative problem. People who read the narratives read them as they are, not as scholars and experts would *like* them to be read and interpreted. History is no longer with us. The narrative remains.”⁹⁰ Additionally, renewed theological interest in the formative role of narrative amplifies Warrior’s concerns and signals another aspect of the

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 127.

⁹⁰ Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” 262 (emphasis in original).

contemporary setting of biblical appropriation that impels his mode of probing the vision of liberation conveyed in the exodus. In his understanding of this tendency in theology, it becomes increasingly evident that an evaluation of the exodus/conquest accounts should attend to the interaction between scriptural interpretation, the communal acquisition of meaning, and corresponding forms of praxis:

Confronting the conquest stories as a narrative rather than a historical problem is especially important given the tenor of contemporary theology and criticism. After 200 years of preoccupation with historical questions, scholars and theologians across a broad spectrum of political and ideological positions have recognized the function of narrative in the development of religious communities. Along with the work of U.S. scholars like Brevard Childs, Stanley Hauerwas, and George Lindbeck, the radical liberation theologies of Latin America are based on empowering believing communities to read scriptural narratives for themselves and make their reading central to theology and political action. The danger is that these communities will read the narratives, not the history behind them.⁹¹

Communal recourse to a biblical narrative in which divine liberation interlocks with the theme of displacing or annihilating indigeneity as a means of ensuring the continuing presence of God's justice becomes more troubling for Warrior as theologians explore in new ways the generative force of narrative, particularly with respect to political praxis.

Like the developments in biblical scholarship concerning the historicity of the conquest accounts, no strategy for interpreting the texts can remedy the specter of Canaan in Warrior's articulation of the problem in this essay. He observes, for example, that "the text itself will never be altered by interpretations of it, though its reception may be."⁹² That is, the hermeneutical status of the exodus narrative is not static, but the possibility of a changing diversity of readings is premised on the persisting availability of a uniform

⁹¹ Ibid., 263-264.

⁹² Ibid., 264.

biblical text. Despite the new dimensions of meaning that different appropriations of the scriptural sources may yield, the canonical story is preserved, hence Warrior's assertion that "whatever dangers we identify in the text and the god represented there will remain as long as the text remains."⁹³ Through this view of the exodus as bearing an unceasing threat of calamity for American Indian peoples, the aforementioned theologians whose contributions Warrior specifies as illustrating the recovery of the function of narrative are deemed complicit in exacerbating the problem. As he proceeds to suggest, with allusion to the work of Nicaraguan liberation theologian Ernesto Cardenal (1925-2020) among the *campesinos* at the community he established in the Solentiname archipelago: "These dangers only grow as the emphasis upon catechetical (Lindbeck), narrative (Hauerwas), canonical (Childs), and Bible-centered Christian base communities (Gutiérrez) grows. The peasants of Solentiname bring a wisdom and experience previously unknown to Christian theology, but I do not see what mechanism guarantees that they—or any other people who seek to be shaped and molded by reading the text—will differentiate between the liberating god and the god of conquest."⁹⁴ For theologians to abet the role of narrative in the formation of communal life, especially with a hermeneutical principle of liberation, is in Warrior's diagnosis to intensify the risk of unleashing the vision of elimination that inheres in the exodus.

While such an idealization of collective destruction as it appears in the narrative is not attenuated by historical or interpretive frameworks according to Warrior, the position

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid. See Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, trans. Donald D. Walsh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

put forth in his essay nonetheless integrates both historical insights and the efficacy of interpretation in notable ways. Some of the major issues connected with the question of historicity in particular form the basis for the third component of Warrior's critique to be discussed here: a distinct concern about what the "indigenous origins" model for the early Israelites in Canaan implies for the work of liberation and communal self-determination. In the context of locating the problem with the exodus on a narrative level and cautioning that the "stories of deliverance and conquest...are ready to be picked up and believed by anyone wondering what to do about the people who already live in their promised land," Warrior considers what could be learned about the liberation process not only from the biblical sources but also from recent reconstructions of the historical preconditions which allowed for those narratives to arise: "They [i.e., the stories] provide an example of what can happen when powerless people come to power. Historical scholarship may tell a different story; but even if the annihilation did not take place, the narratives tell what happened to those indigenous people who put their hope and faith in ideas and gods that were foreign to their culture. The Canaanites trusted in the god of outsiders and their story of oppression and exploitation was lost. Interreligious praxis became betrayal and the surviving narrative tells us nothing about it."⁹⁵ Instead of furnishing an alternative to the severity of the biblical narrative, then, the results of historical research propel Warrior back toward the text with a lens through which a different apparatus of exclusion can be brought into focus. Though the importance of this historically informed argument may seem secondary in Warrior's analysis of the exodus, it is possible to recognize in such a

⁹⁵ Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," 263.

reading of the narrative an expression of the fundamental challenges addressed in the essay.

The historical perspective undergirding this area of Warrior's reception of the exodus, albeit unaccompanied by a reference to specific sources or scholars, corresponds to the explanatory model centered on a peasant revolt or social revolution as a key factor in the rise of early Israel. Introduced by Mendenhall and greatly expanded by Gottwald, the revolt model posits that "Israel was composed in large part of native Canaanites who revolted against their overlords and joined forces with a nuclear group of invaders and/or infiltrators from the desert (the exodus Israelites)," the latter consisting of "former slaves from Egypt" who brought with them a Yahwistic religion that "celebrated the actuality of deliverance from sociopolitical bondage."⁹⁶ In essence, the sociopolitical and economic situation in Canaan that led to the emergence of early Israel is identified in this model as a network of discrete and competitive city-states marked by local stratification, systemic domination of the countryside through a "tributary mode of production," and Egyptian imperial control.⁹⁷ It was out of—and in direct opposition to—this world of oppression in which centralized arrangements of power advantaged elite minorities to the detriment of the peasant majority that Israel formed as a new community. A predominantly indigenous revolutionary movement that Gottwald describes as "the antithesis of the feudal-imperial Canaanite system," the gradual process of resocialization through which Israelite identity

⁹⁶ Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 272; Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 BCE* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, [1979] 1999), 214. See also George E. Mendenhall, "The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine," *Biblical Archaeologist* 25, no. 3 (September 1962): 66-87; George E. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

⁹⁷ Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh*, 212-214, 389-398; Gottwald, *Hebrew Bible*, 272-273.

was forged involved “linking up exploited peoples across the boundaries of the old city-state divisions” in a manner that would effect “an entire counter-society” whose relational values were egalitarian.⁹⁸ This shared resistance to the prevailing order and commitment to creating a different way of life were galvanized by the faith in Yahweh of the exodus group. Exposing marginalized Canaanite populations to a religion that extolled Yahweh as a liberator from oppression and “promised continuing deliverance whenever Yahweh’s autonomous people were threatened,” this external segment of “proto-Israelites, who had broken away from the grip of the Egyptian empire and survived a trek through the desert, became a powerful catalyst in energizing and guiding the broad coalition of underclass Canaanites.”⁹⁹ From the perspective of the revolt model, Gottwald writes, this “exodus ingredient in the Israelite movement is generally granted as the ‘spark’ that provided high morale and coordination,” while “it was Canaanites who provided the ‘tinder’ of human forces in motion for the revolutionary conflagration.”¹⁰⁰

As an indigenous reader of the exodus narrative who maintains within his purview the contemporary challenges of liberation in North America, including the possibilities of viable solidarity between Native peoples and non-Native Christians, Warrior discerns in the historical process suggested by the revolt model a lesson that bears on what is most at

⁹⁸ Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh*, 489-492. The expression “feudal-imperial Canaanite system” is used by Gottwald in reference to a “functional interlock” between what he identifies as a “city-state feudal order” in Canaan and Egyptian imperial control over Canaan (see pp. 212-213, 389-398). With regard to “Canaanite feudalism” in particular, Gottwald cautions that he uses this designation “while remaining fully aware that it [i.e., the Canaanite feudal system] arose from peculiar Near Eastern developments and did not exhibit all the detailed features of European feudalism” (391). He further clarifies, “What marks the Canaanite system as feudal is its bonding by a network of regional dependencies with tenurial ties which locked a majority of the populace on the land” (391-392).

⁹⁹ Ibid., 214, 496; cf. xxiii, xlv-xlv, 36-40, 211, 491, 555-563, 584-585.

¹⁰⁰ Gottwald, *Hebrew Bible*, 272.

stake in his assessment of the biblical account. Momentarily setting aside the problem of the theme of collective destruction, he reframes the relevance of historicity to the texts in light of the implications of the posited revolutionary beginnings of Israel for the cultural survival and social memory of the Canaanites in the new community. By embracing the Yahwistic faith introduced into Canaan by the exodus group, he proposes, the revolting peasants simultaneously compromised their prior cultural identity and were drawn into a movement through which their historical experiences were eventually erased.¹⁰¹ Through the process of liberation from the situation imposed by the city-state system, the native groups also entered into an incipient set of communal relations that would result in the silencing of their voices and authorized abandonment as some biblical traditions were fashioned. In the exodus/conquest story, Warrior observes, the Canaanite background of Israel and the histories of suffering connected with the various indigenous inhabitants who participated in establishing an alternative form of social life all but disappear.¹⁰² The exodus narrative, as will be further discussed below, is in this way interpreted as attesting to a troublesome dynamics of homogenization and effacement that can be instructive for American Indian self-determination and sovereignty.

This aspect of Warrior's reflections on the exodus story ultimately diverges from views expressed by Gottwald regarding the relationship between the revolt model and the reception of the biblical text today. Though basic elements of Warrior's remarks on the implications of the revolt model can be recognized in Gottwald's work—for instance, the latter mentions, in reference to the exodus group that brought Yahwism into Canaan, that

¹⁰¹ Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," 263.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 263, 264.

“their experience became exemplary for all Israel, fundamentally shaping...the entire format of the Israelite traditions,” and notes how the conquest narratives seem to render “invisible” the Canaanite peasants who constituted “the large majority in the ranks of the Israelite movement”—it is nonetheless possible to identify a striking difference between their ways of evaluating the meaning of this historical thesis for contemporary readings of the biblical account.¹⁰³ In the 1999 preface to the reprint of *The Tribes of Yahweh*, for example, the impact of the revolt model on biblical appropriation is addressed in terms of the generally positive reception of the book among justice-seeking Christian and Jewish readers during the two decades since its publication. Gottwald states the following:

In short, *Tribes* encouraged left-oriented Christians and Jews to reclaim biblical traditions as a relevant resource for their own hopes and endeavors for social change. Particularly liberating was the claim of *Tribes* that early Israel not only did not annihilate Canaanites en masse, but never intended to do so. Israel’s quarrel was with “Canaanite” ruling classes and its resistance to rulers and bureaucrats was in reality a movement of socially and politically marginalized “Canaanites.” It could be plausibly claimed that Israel was the socioreligious consequence of an inner-Canaanite movement which revolved around control of political economy rather than around ethnic and religious claims per se...Church-oriented liberals and radicals no longer felt saddled with the task of explaining the total annihilation of Canaanites pictured in the book of Joshua as a historical reality, although they were faced with a disturbing alternative historical reality in that the late Deuteronomistic redactors of Joshua thought that total annihilation of Canaanites had been mandated by God and should have been carried out by their ancestors, whom the censorious redactors upbraid for failing to extirpate all Canaanites.¹⁰⁴

Whereas the scriptural theme of God’s call for annihilation remains problematic for both Gottwald and Warrior, the notion that an “indigenous origins” model of social revolution contains liberative hermeneutical value is not held in common. On the contrary, Warrior

¹⁰³ Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh*, 496, 584-585.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

detects in the historical reconstruction of the revolt model a vantage point from which the difficulties of the exodus appear to deepen. Not only does the suggestion that early Israel comprised a Canaanite majority and thus did not aspire to eliminate the native inhabitants fail to console Warrior, such ideas expand the range of his critical reading by inviting him to apprehend in the disputed contents of the biblical narratives a witness to the repressed presence of the historical Canaanites who helped bring about the new community.

These three aspects of Warrior's discussion of the exodus narrative—the thematic relationship between the departure from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan, the narrative-oriented understanding of the problem, and the historical inference about the erasure of Canaanite identity in light of the revolt model—serve to elucidate what Warrior identifies as a hindrance to productive solidarity between Native peoples and liberation theologies. This exposition of the challenges pertaining to the role of the exodus paradigm in Native North America provides a point of entry into Warrior's corrective to how contemporary readers engage the biblical story.

The first characteristic of the approach to the exodus that Warrior proposes aims to ensure that the invisibilization of the biblical Canaanites in both theology and praxis is actively confronted and disrupted. This redirected hermeneutical focus is prioritized in a manner that indicates an acute recognition of the potential for damage that is otherwise preserved in theological discourse and commitments to social transformation. The task facing not only theologians appropriating the exodus narrative but also every Christian is introduced in Warrior's essay as follows:

What is to be done? First, the Canaanites should be at the center of Christian theological reflection and political action. They are the last remaining ignored voice in the text, except perhaps for the land itself. The conquest stories, with all

their violence and injustice, must be taken seriously by those who believe in the god of the Old Testament. Commentaries and critical works rarely mention these texts. When they do, they express little concern for the status of the indigenes and their rights as human beings and as nations. The same blindness is evident in theologies that use the Exodus motif as their basis for political action. The leading into the land becomes just one more redemptive moment rather than a violation of innocent peoples' rights to land and self-determination.¹⁰⁵

As with the emphasis on the exodus as a narrative problem, this prescribed shift in the prevailing reception of the biblical account does not alter or change the text itself in any way. Warrior's call to center the Canaanites does not involve amending their depiction in Scripture or excising the theme of collective dispossession from the sources. Rather, it is precisely that injurious depiction and envisioned liquidation which readers are exhorted to foreground. Critical concentration on the indigenous residents whose dignity is denied in the liberation story is designed to counter entrenched neglect in theology and to foster more humanizing ways of interacting with the text.

To read the exodus with a special concern for the Canaanites allows theology to enact the anamnesis through which the absences in its own production and in its biblical sources can begin to give way to a responsible appropriation of the narrative. Restoring the visibility of the Canaanites in theological reflection by exercising a partiality toward the victims of the exodus, Warrior maintains, contributes to a broader acknowledgment of this biblical underside among contemporary readers while renewing the integrity of the hermeneutical enterprise. As he writes, "Keeping the Canaanites at the center makes it more likely that those who read the Bible will read *all* of it, not just the part that inspires and justifies them."¹⁰⁶ Analytical honesty and a sense of self-critical accountability are at

¹⁰⁵ Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," 264.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 264 (emphasis in original).

the heart of the reception of the exodus that Warrior deems necessary. This is pointedly expressed in the essay with reference to a frequently quoted passage from German critical theorist Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), incidentally also the epitaph on his grave (in both German and Catalan), which Warrior works into his remarks by posing a question:

And should anyone be surprised by the brutality, the terror of these texts? It was, after all, a Jewish victim of the Holocaust, Walter Benjamin, who said, “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” People whose theology involves the Bible need to take this insight seriously. It is those who know these texts who must speak the truth about what they contain. It is to those who believe in these texts that the barbarism belongs. It is those who act on the basis of these texts who must take responsibility for the terror and violence they can and have engendered.¹⁰⁷

The task of examining the exodus and formulating its significance in the present cannot circumvent its message of wreckage if theologians, especially those committed to justice, seek to employ credible ways of thinking through the biblical texts. A theological method which brings the Canaanites to the fore, Warrior suggests, marks the first step toward an understanding of the exodus story in which the thematic magnitude of liberation does not becloud the poignancy of the catastrophic.

As indicated in the above quotation, Warrior’s corrective is not confined to the relational possibilities between contemporary readers and the exodus narrative. Rather, a responsible path forward also requires attending to those episodes in the reception history of the exodus/conquest accounts that display how the portrayal of the Canaanites has been deployed against different groups in a variety of geopolitical contexts. An iteration

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 264. For the translation of Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History” from which Warrior quotes but which remains uncited in the essay, see Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” trans. Harry Zohn, in *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Routledge, 2005), 265-273. The quoted passage appears on p. 266.

of this concern that directs critical energy to the US context in particular is presented by Warrior as another component of the work to be carried out. He mentions that “we need to be more aware of the way ideas such as those in the conquest narratives have made their way into Americans’ consciousness and ideology. And only when we understand this process can those of us who have suffered from it know how to fight back.”¹⁰⁸ This second point that Warrior proposes as part of the challenge of redressing inadequacies in the interpretation of the exodus thus entails a specific and delimited practice of colonial discourse analysis as a precondition for developing effective forms of resistance. Among the numerous materials that are relevant to this preliminary project, the settler strategy of drawing on biblical demonyms in ways that would assign layers of adverse meaning to Native communities is salient. “Many Puritan preachers were fond of referring to Native Americans as Amalekites and Canaanites,” Warrior observes, “in other words, people who, if they would not be converted, were worthy of annihilation. By examining such instances in theological and political writings, in sermons, and elsewhere, we can understand how America’s self-image as a ‘chosen people’ has provided a rhetoric to mystify domination.”¹⁰⁹ The legacy of the exodus narrative in the United States betrays a tradition of recontextualizing the freighted lexicon of the biblical narrative by fashioning new Canaanites in a new promised land.¹¹⁰ In order to contest the North American reality

¹⁰⁸ Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” 264.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. For the sake of consistency, Warrior’s use of the uncouth term “Amelkites” has been modified to reflect the more familiar rendering of the name used elsewhere in this dissertation.

¹¹⁰ This theme reappears several years later in an essay on Pequot Methodist William Apess (1798-1839), whom Warrior describes as inheriting the ruinous aftermath of “settlers [who] believed that what they were doing in New England was a divinely ordained parallel to the Israelites taking possession of the Promised Land.” Pequots, along with other indigenous peoples who encountered the English settlers, corresponded to the Canaanites who were already inhabiting the land and thus, Warrior writes, “represented the underside of what many believed was a history foreordained by God.” As such, he recognizes in Apess’s Pequot identity

of inflicted suffering, Warrior contends, it is necessary to probe that historical current and its ongoing ideological permutations in relation to key features of national consciousness in the United States.

The final task identified in Warrior's essay consists in deliberating the role which the nature of the liberation process communicated in the exodus story should have among indigenous peoples in search of justice. A reflective and evaluative endeavor in which the future of Native self-determination affords the primary metric, this facet of the reoriented approach to the exodus is set forth in a manner that highlights the correlation between the problem of Canaanite erasure that arises in Warrior's reading of the revolt model and the contemporary issues of solidarity that frame his essay: "Finally, we need to decide if we want to accept the model of leadership and social change presented by the entire Exodus story. Is it appropriate to the needs of indigenous people seeking justice and deliverance? If indeed the Canaanites were integral to Israel's early history, the Exodus narratives reflect a situation in which indigenous people put their hope in a god from outside, were liberated from their oppressors, and then saw their story of oppression revised out of the new nation's history of salvation."¹¹¹ Rather than describe this inquiry into the relevance of the exodus for Native communities in terms of the biblical themes of dispossession and conquest, Warrior directs its focus toward a historical trajectory of indigeneity which the texts may ultimately serve to eclipse. By posing the question in this way, he facilitates an

and experience "a mirror of the horrors of the Puritan legacy." Robert Allen Warrior, "William Apess: A Pequot and a Methodist under the Sign of Modernity," in *Liberation Theologies, Postmodernity, and the Americas*, ed. David Batstone, Eduardo Mendieta, Lois Ann Lorentzen, and Dwight N. Hopkins (New York: Routledge, 1997), 191-193, 200.

¹¹¹ Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," 264.

assessment of the exodus not only on the level of a narrative telling of the liberation of an exogenous group at the expense of native populations but also on a historical level as the product of a dialectical movement in which the natives themselves attained a liberation that would eventually—due to the decisions of non-Canaanite participants—bring about their own negation. Those indigenous residents of Canaan who entered into a struggle for justice by forming alliances with an influential minority that brought a new religion into the region, Warrior notes, “were assimilated into another people’s identity and the history of their ancestors came to be regarded as suspect and a danger to the safety of Israel. In short, they were betrayed.”¹¹² In this sense, the message of the exodus narrative for Native North America appears as a palimpsest of sorts, harboring a trace of indigenous liberation beneath the images of annihilation and thereby prompting communities today to consider the potential long-term ramifications of the choices and activities through which social transformation is pursued.

These particular implications of the liberation process laid out in the revolt model and the contemporary context of American Indian self-determination are at the center of the kind of reflection that Warrior’s challenge involves. Thus, referencing the “foreign” Yahwistic religion of the exodus group with which the oppressed native populations of Canaan began to self-identify and which ultimately contributed a perennial distortion of the memory of those same native groups, he indicates the concerns driving the question of the exodus in connection with the present-day exigencies of liberation by asking, “Do Native Americans and other indigenous people dare trust the same god in their struggle

¹¹² Ibid.

for justice? I am not asking an easy question and I in no way mean that people who are both Native Americans and Christians cannot work toward justice in the context of their faith in Jesus Christ. Such people have a lot of theological reflection to do, however, to avoid the dangers I have pointed to in the conquest narratives.”¹¹³ Among those dangers, the communal loss of historical identity and ancestral traditions that Warrior infers from the revolt model faces theology with the synthetic logic of an active sameness for which the encounter with alterity becomes an opportunity for absorption. The violence of such a proclivity for hegemonic enclosure warrants the attention of Native Christians, he writes, and signals the need for all Christians committed to the liberation of indigenous peoples to cultivate in the theological imagination a respect for the continuing presence of non-Christian identities. As he proceeds to caution in view of the suggested link between the integration and the invisibilization of historical Canaanites, “Christians, whether Native American or not, if they are to be involved [in the Native struggle for justice], must learn how to participate in the struggle without making their story the whole story. Otherwise the sins of the past will be visited upon us again.”¹¹⁴

Since the historical perspective in which the foregoing remarks are grounded, as discussed earlier, does not resolve or alleviate the difficulties of the exodus narrative but instead augments Warrior’s critique by enabling him to uncover another dimension of the problem that also requires consideration, this final component of the direction outlined in the essay cannot disregard the distinct issues that emerge from the contents of the biblical texts irrespective of their historicity. Hence Warrior makes sure to reiterate this point in a

¹¹³ Ibid., 263, 264.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 264.

manner that secures its relevance to deliberations among indigenous communities as well as evokes a link between that evaluative process and categories that are important for the colonial discourse analysis described above:

No matter what we do, the conquest narratives will remain. As long as people believe in the Yahweh of deliverance, the world will not be safe from Yahweh the conqueror. But perhaps, if they are true to their struggle, people will be able to achieve what Yahweh's chosen people in the past have not: a society of people delivered from oppression who are not so afraid of becoming victims again that they become oppressors themselves, a society where the original inhabitants can become something other than subjects to be converted to a better way of life or adversaries who provide cannon fodder for a nation's militaristic pride.¹¹⁵

While the continuing availability of the exodus story sustains the risk of reproducing its destructive thread yet again, Warrior does not preclude the possibility of a commitment to liberation that can resist generating its antithesis—that is, that surpasses the model which appears in the biblical account and its reception in North America. In his reading, such a model of liberation conveys an image of former victims of oppression producing new victims of oppression as part of the transformative undertaking and therefore becomes necessary to incorporate into the task of deciding the contemporary role of the exodus as an imitable path toward justice. Whereas the above option between conversion (at once an allusion to the assimilative implications of the revolt model and the settler practice of constructing new Canaanite identities) and adversarial presence (at once an allusion to the antagonisms of the exodus/conquest narrative and the settler practice of constructing new Canaanites) represents a situation of threatened indigeneity, an alternative approach to liberation in which the dignity and sovereignty of Native nations are respected follows a course that inevitably leads beyond the confines of the exodus model.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

As a result of this understanding of the exodus narrative, Warrior himself opts, as he phrases it over a decade after the essay on the Canaanites, “to walk away from the text and the tradition out of which it comes.”¹¹⁶ The task of thinking through the exodus from a Canaanite locus impels him to part ways with its message and “go home to the drum, the stomp dance, and the sweatlodge.”¹¹⁷ It is possible to discern in Warrior’s choice an act of self-determination as refusal before an identified danger of communal disappearance. By engaging a praxis that affirms what he (with Cherokee scholar Jace Weaver) elsewhere, and in a different context, describes as a “people who want ‘out’—people who voice the demand for Native sovereignty (in all the complexities and simplicities of that term),” an alternative to the repressive liberation that afflicted the Canaanites may surface for their manifold counterparts in the present.¹¹⁸ This is the idea that Warrior articulates at the end of his reflections on the exodus, simultaneously offering a closing set of observations in which the larger question of solidarity framing the essay once more enters into view and broadening the scope of that initial question to include all non-Native traditions. He asks, “With what voice will we, the Canaanites of the world, say, ‘Let my people go and leave my people alone’? And, with what ears will followers of alien gods who have wooed us (Christians, Jews, Marxists, capitalists), listen to us?”¹¹⁹ Such questions, repurposing and recasting the language of the exodus by

¹¹⁶ Warrior, “Response to Special Issue,” 127.

¹¹⁷ This formulation appears in Warrior’s response to Cherokee theologian William Baldridge, who offered an insightful reflection on Warrior’s essay in a 1990 letter to the editor in *Christianity and Crisis*. Both the letter and Warrior’s response are reprinted in James Treat, ed., *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 100-103. The quoted text, taken from the closing line of Warrior’s response, is found on p. 103.

¹¹⁸ Robert Warrior and Jace Weaver, introduction to “Emergent Ideas in Native American Studies,” ed. Robert Warrior and Jace Weaver, special issue, *Wicazo Sa Review* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 9.

¹¹⁹ Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” 264.

centering the varieties of Canaan that otherwise would be foreclosed by the strictures of the biblical story, imagine anew the outcome of the revolt model in relation to the Canaanites of today. In so doing, Warrior indicates a strategic withdrawal through which contemporary Canaanites may be liberated from non-indigenous conceptions of liberation that can serve to obstruct their own struggle for a just future. It is not simply a departure but also the space for Native communities to forge their own distinct identities in their own homelands that would redefine the fate of North American Canaanites, although an uncertainty marks Warrior's questions regarding the nature of the communication and response that could contribute to such a process.

With these questions, Warrior gestures toward an approach to liberation that can recognize in the deficiencies of past attempts an instructive resource and carve out paths in accordance with the aspirations and yearnings of indigenous peoples. Though he does not rule out the possibility of solidarity between global Canaanites and the "alien gods" mentioned above, Warrior points to the value of rethinking those relationships in order to safeguard against the misstep of uncritically adopting notions of liberation that may lead to a place which itself requires liberation. This position gains greater clarity, albeit not one that rests on oversimplified or unequivocal formulations, as additional questions are posed and a suggestive response concludes the essay:

Is there a god, a spirit, who will hear us and stand with us in the Amazon, Osage County, and Wounded Knee? Is there a god, a spirit, able to move among the pain and anger of Nablus, Gaza, and Soweto? Perhaps. But we, the wretched of the earth, may be well-advised this time not to listen to outsiders with their promises of liberation and deliverance. We will perhaps do better to look elsewhere for our vision of justice, peace, and political sanity—a vision through which we escape not only our oppressors, but our oppression as well. Maybe, for once, we will just

have to listen to ourselves, leaving the gods of this continent's real strangers to do battle among themselves.¹²⁰

Self-recognition, rather than an expectation or demand to be recognized by the dominant order—a theme which, it should be noted, appears in various forms throughout Warrior's other writings on Native sovereignty and self-determination—becomes vital to the praxis that can help avert the repetition of a liberation which erodes into what it is not supposed to be.¹²¹ An indigenous-centered and foresighted liberation process in which non-Native participants can learn to listen and listen to learn, a commitment that Warrior describes in another essay as “the sweetgrass meaning of solidarity” due to the challenge and patience associated with lighting a braid of sweetgrass, locates in the axis of social transformation every Canaan persisting in the world today.¹²² Those who bear wounds that are veiled by

¹²⁰ Ibid., 264-265.

¹²¹ The theme of Native self-recognition plays an important role, for example, in Warrior's dissertation, titled “Tribal Secrets: Vine Deloria, Jr., John Joseph Mathews, and the Recovery of American Indian Intellectual Traditions” (published as *Tribal Secrets* in 1995). It is a comparative and constructive project that focuses on the contributions of Standing Rock Sioux scholar Vine Deloria Jr. (1933-2005) and Osage writer John Joseph Mathews (1894-1979) to develop a framework that could facilitate, increase, and reorient critical interaction between Native writers (as distinct, among other things, from a preoccupation with engaging non-Native sources, although Warrior notes that such a framework would ultimately enrich Native approaches to non-Native materials). The forms of dialogue between Native critics that Warrior envisions situate the work of Native intellectuals in the communal context of the struggle for sovereignty and self-determination, a distinct role that he names *intellectual sovereignty*. Robert Allen Warrior, “Tribal Secrets: Vine Deloria, Jr., John Joseph Mathews, and the Recovery of American Indian Intellectual Traditions” (PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1993); Robert Allen Warrior, *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

See also the discussions of the role and significance of Native studies, specifically as it relates to the contexts and experiences of Native communities as well as to non-Native discourses, in Robert Warrior, “The Native American Scholar: Toward a New Intellectual Agenda,” in “Emergent Ideas in Native American Studies,” ed. Robert Warrior and Jace Weaver, special issue, *Wicazo Sa Review* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 46-54; Robert Warrior, “A Room of One's Own at the ASA: An Indigenous Provocation,” *American Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (December 2003): 681-687; Robert Warrior, *The People and the Word: Reading Native Nonfiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xiii-xxxi, 181-187; Robert Warrior, “Native American Critical Responses to Transnational Discourse,” *PMLA* 122, no. 3 (May 2007): 807-808; Robert Warrior, “Organizing Native American and Indigenous Studies,” *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (October 2008): 1683-1691; Robert Warrior, “The Future in the Past of Native and Indigenous Studies,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35, no. 1 (2011): 55-58.

¹²² See Robert Allen Warrior, “The Sweetgrass Meaning of Solidarity: 500 Years of Resistance,” *Border/Lines*, no. 23 (Winter 1991/1992): 35-37. In this essay, which is a reflection on the quincentenary of

the history that inflicts them, a history driven by a different group's liberation project and thereby dissimulating the new experiences of suffering it brings about, can best conceive and tend the movement to defy that same history.

Through a critical turn to the Canaanites, Warrior reads the exodus narrative in a way that remains interconnected with Native North America, the discourses and practices of settler communities, national consciousness in the United States, a critique of classical expressions of liberation theology, the possibility of solidarity between Native peoples and non-Native Christians, and global histories of liberation initiatives that contain their own underside. In this essay, the reflections on the exodus in the context of indigenous visions of justice not only identify major problems for liberation theologians to address in their appropriation of biblical texts but also establish Warrior's relationship to liberation theology through his evaluation of the exodus narrative. His break with the exodus occurs as a break with liberation theology—indeed, with the Christian tradition altogether. To be sure, the essay (as shown above) does not conflate the assessment of the exodus with that of Christian identity; however, Warrior's analysis, which he later describes as “part of an exit strategy I used in leaving the Christian faith,” raises issues of liberation, Native self-determination, and communal erasure to which his own response was, in part, a return to Osage spiritual traditions.¹²³ In this way, the shift that Warrior considers at the end of his

1492, the “sweetgrass” aspect of solidarity is distinguished from that which Warrior relates to burning sage, namely, a smell that summons him “to respond, to organize people, to express indignation, to stand and say, ‘500 years and we are still here. We have never given up and never will!’” The latter inspires him to “disrupt” the celebrations of “five centuries of attempted genocide and cultural imperialism,” while the sweetgrass smell is associated with a certain “patience” that can sustain future-oriented activity and, as Warrior writes, “tells me to balance my indignation with the kind of work that will give us all something to celebrate the next time one of these anniversaries comes along” (35; cf. 37).

¹²³ Warrior, “Response to Special Issue,” 130; Warrior, “Tribal Secrets,” 6-7, 7n6, 8n8.

essay—carefully stated, so as to allow for deliberation and diverse views, as a potentially preferable approach to overcoming oppression in which the rediscovered voices of global Canaanites can offer a new liberative impetus within their respective communities—is embodied with resolute clarity in his own religious life.

7.6 REREADING AGAINST THE STRUCTURE OF INVASION: THEOLOGY AND THE OUT-OF-PLACE EXODUS

The approaches to the message of the exodus that Ateek and Warrior work out in light of distinct histories of indigenous suffering in Israel-Palestine and North America, respectively, offer responses to the prevailing reception of the narrative as a paradigm in liberation theology that intersect in a shared locus of interrogation: the correlation which both interpreters acknowledge between the native presences in their own contexts and the indigenous populations of Canaan as represented in the biblical sources. From this critical space in which Ateek and Warrior find themselves located as a result of different legacies of elimination, interrelated yet ultimately diverging ways of reading the exodus arise with a focus on dimensions of liberation that disrupt the paradigmatic model developed in the writings of prominent liberation theologians. As an extended process beginning with the departure from Egypt and leading to the conquest of Canaan, the vision of liberation that is presented in the exodus is recognized in both readings as antithetical to the search for justice among those in whom the cries of the Canaanites continue to resound today. This tensional distance between the exodus, on the one hand, and the contributions of Warrior and Ateek, then, derives from their sensitivity to the proximity of the distinct indigenous

worlds they inhabit to those who become the victims of a liberated people in the biblical narrative.

Reading the exodus from their respective new Canaans, Ateek and Warrior view the underside of the story not simply as a matter of the distant biblical past (or, in the case of Warrior, of the historical situation that may have produced that biblical past) but also as a persisting reality to be faced in the present. Their responses to the exodus, which are formulated in relation to notably different particularities (e.g., motivations, frameworks, communal experiences, constructive proposals, etc.), are responses to this enduring and recontextualizing character of an identifiable Canaanite abjection. In the morphological range that the erasure of indigenous Canaan signifies in the interpretations of Ateek and Warrior—conquest, annihilation, expulsion, assimilation, exclusion, misrepresentation, cultural amnesia—there is a convergence with the logic of elimination that Patrick Wolfe analyzes as a structure of settler-colonial processes. Both Warrior and Ateek diagnose the histories of collective dislocation and land expropriation out of which they write in terms that communicate the various ways in which those histories are ongoing. One of the tasks that Warrior envisions for Native studies, for instance, involves making visible “the still-present realities of the foundational history of this continent,” and he discusses the vital role of Native literary and cultural expressions that, by conveying the “ungovernability” through which Native nations continue to exist, “succeed in unsettling a history that in the minds of many is already complete.”¹²⁴ That is, the colonial significance of North America is irreducible to the question of national origins and, in what Wolfe refers to as

¹²⁴ Warrior, “Room of One’s Own,” 686; Warrior, “Native American Critical Responses,” 808.

the positive dimension of settler colonialism, abides as an eliminatory complex to which Native sovereignties afford a viable alternative.¹²⁵ It is against this backdrop of the settler structure of invasion, with its invariable negation of indigeneity as expounded by Wolfe, that the contemporaneity of Canaan acquires not only relevance but also methodological primacy in Warrior's reflections on the exodus.

Likewise, Ateek—as demonstrated in part two of this dissertation and earlier in this chapter—discusses the Palestinian experience of dispossession with reference to an active and thus unfinished historical process. In the Sabeel Christmas message of 2018, for example, he reprises some of the everyday challenges that continue to impact the relationship between Palestinians and their ancestral homelands, as well as several forms of resistance in which affirmations of indigeneity can be recognized today:

It has been another year in which refugees were denied rights, and another year of occupation in Gaza, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. There has been continued Jewish settler violence, home demolitions, arbitrary detention and arrests, deprivation of natural resources, and restriction of movement. While these are not new measures of occupation, the situation has been exacerbated by several political decisions. These include the ratification of the Nation State Law by the Israeli Parliament, the American decision to move their embassy to Jerusalem, and the defunding of UN operations designed to help Palestinian refugees... The March of Return has continued since the month of March, with Gazans of all ages demonstrating every Friday after noon prayers, seeking justice and the right to return to their villages. Various villages in Palestine and Israel also continue their regular nonviolent struggle against the harassment and oppression by Israeli forces. The Bedouins of Khan al-Ahmar (in occupied Palestine) and al-'Araqib (in Israel), along with fellow Palestinians, Israeli activists, and international supporters, have been steadfastly withstanding in the face of Israeli forces determined to remove them.¹²⁶

Such communal assertions of belonging to the land amid past and ongoing strategies of

¹²⁵ Wolfe, "Elimination of the Native," 388, 389, 390, 399, 403. See also the discussion on settler colonial studies earlier in this chapter.

¹²⁶ Naim Ateek, "Sabeel Christmas Message 2018," *Cornerstone*, no. 79 (Winter 2018/2019): 6.

displacement—what Lorenzo Veracini (as mentioned above) describes as the interplay of territorialization and deterritorialization in settler-colonial contexts—reflect the refusal to be erased as a native presence which finds a theological voice in Ateek’s implementation of a Canaanite analytic in the interpretation of Scripture.¹²⁷ By contesting the relationship to the land and its indigenous populations associated with the (first) exodus, Ateek offers a way of thinking about Canaan in light of God’s partiality toward the oppressed that also concerns the reality of Palestinian suffering in the present.

Through their different efforts at decentering the exodus, Ateek and Warrior place before liberation theologies the imperative to confront dimensions of the biblical account that signify the obverse of a movement to transform oppressive conditions. In this sense, it is possible to discern in their readings of the exodus an inverted aspect of the function of story that James Cone examines under the rubric of the *form* of black religious thought in North American Christianity. With a view to elaborating the differences between black and white modes of theology in connection with the disparate social contexts from which they stem, Cone contrasts the tendency to construct systems and schematize philosophical arguments that characterizes the discursive practices of white theologians with the images of God’s liberating activity in history that black religious thought has engaged in the form of story since slavery.¹²⁸ Black slaves, he observes in regard to the sociological difference underlying the forms of white and black religious thought, “intuitively perceived that the problem of the auction block and slave drivers would not be solved through philosophical debate. The problem had to be handled at the level of concrete history as that history was

¹²⁷ Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 80-81.

¹²⁸ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1975] 1997), 42-56.

defined by the presence of the slave masters. Slaves therefore had to devise a language commensurate with their social situation. That was why they told stories.”¹²⁹ The power of such stories—which, as Cone mentions, include the biblical themes of God liberating the Israelite slaves and the conquest of Jericho under Joshua—lies not only in what they communicate about the divine presence among oppressed peoples in the past but also in the extent to which they disclose the continuing work of that same God in the life of the recipients who seek justice.¹³⁰ That is, the stories help to show how experiences of anti-blackness are situated within the same history of salvation that is recounted, a history in which God responds to the afflicted in a liberative manner. In this way, the primary aim of the stories is not recollective but rather relational and efficacious, narrating what God has already done in order to bring into transformative focus what God continues to do in the world in which the story is told, thereby “breaking open a future for the oppressed not known to ordinary historical observation.”¹³¹

While the story of God’s self-revelation among the Israelite slaves could not only point to a past experience of liberation but also, as Cone contends, be told in such a way that would join that past with the world of black slaves, thus giving new vibrancy to the divine call to life in the midst of North American unfreedom, the contemporaneity of the exodus moves in another direction for Ateek and Warrior. As indigenous interpreters of the exodus engaging its message of liberation while struggling against the mechanics of settler colonialism, neither Warrior nor Ateek finds a source of hope in the idea that the

¹²⁹ Ibid., 50.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 49-53, 55.

¹³¹ Ibid., 50.

God who led the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan remains active in the present. On the contrary, it is from a twofold stance of discontinuity with the exodus and solidarity with its victims that the conversation about liberation becomes meaningful to both readers. To integrate indigenous Palestine or Native North America into the exodus/conquest image of justice, Ateek and Warrior maintain in their respective writings on the narrative, is to foreclose the path toward liberation for groups that have been made to occupy new spaces of Canaanite oppression today. Whereas the practice of storytelling that Cone discusses involves a humanizing experience in which “the oppressed are transformed, taken into another world and given a glimpse of the promised land,”¹³² it is *from* the promised land that Warrior and Ateek consider the implications of the exodus story. Insofar as the idea of liberation is discerned in the exodus from the hermeneutical standpoint of Canaan, it appears as a process to be known indirectly through the experience of another group and to be reimagined in view of the magnitude of its ramifications.

In their responses to this shared encounter with the exodus narrative, Warrior and Ateek develop approaches to the biblical sources that reflect how the eliminatory logic of settler colonialism provides an important context for understanding the commitments of solidarity and visions of justice pervading their writings. Thus when Warrior challenges Christian theology and social praxis with the critical task of centering the Canaanites as a more responsible way of appropriating the exodus, there is at work—in addition to the key nexus of indigeneity that he identifies—an anti-exclusionary relationality in which the imperative to attend to those experiences and voices that are effaced serves to orient

¹³² Ibid., 56.

every assessment of efforts to bring about change in the world. This focus on the need to enter into spaces that have been made to disappear in order to think and act in the most effective, creative, and credible manner shapes Warrior's self-understanding as an Osage scholar in a settler-colonial setting. In connection with the merits and problems of Osage nationalism, for instance, and the possibilities of communal life that can be fostered in a process of self-determination, he remarks: "We use our attitudes and our beliefs, and we bring those beliefs into a public forum and end up leaving some people out. That's the last thing people want to do, is leave people out. And I think that for American Indian people and Indigenous people around the world, one of our fundamental experiences is knowing what it's like to be left out. So this has been something I've also tried to reflect in my work; that's a real fundamental part of who we are. We need to make ourselves aware of who we're leaving out."¹³³ Resistance to a culture of abandonment, in which attempts at fashioning alternative social conditions neglect or fail to uphold an adequate sphere of belonging, features as a guiding concern not only in Warrior's reading of the exodus but also in his specific role as a Native intellectual.

This methodological attunement to social absences as an indispensable locus from which to examine struggles to transform situations of suffering is similarly foregrounded in Warrior's reflections on Palestinian postcolonial critic Edward Said (1935-2003), with whom he took courses at Columbia University during his years as a doctoral student at

¹³³ Robert Warrior, "Intellectual Sovereignty and the Work of the Public Intellectual," interview by J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, in *Speaking of Indigenous Politics: Conversations with Activists, Scholars, and Tribal Leaders*, ed. J. Kēhaulani Kauanui (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 337.

Union Theological Seminary.¹³⁴ In reference to Said—who, it is important to remember, first put forth a “Canaanite reading” of the exodus narrative in 1986 (preceding Warrior and Ateek in this regard) as a response to political theorist Michael Walzer’s *Exodus and Revolution*—and the continuing challenges posed by his contribution, Warrior highlights the call “for critics...to locate themselves on the farthest available margins of the world of human experience in which they come,” observing in such an exercise of solidarity a crucial resource for envisioning a different future.¹³⁵ As he writes, “Said’s injunction for the critic is to take up a position there in those places others find uncomfortable or don’t see at all. See and experience life from the standpoint of those cast aside, spit upon, and ignored. Stay there, give shape to what you see, and allow yourself to learn to see in new ways.”¹³⁶ Warrior’s reading of the exodus offers a prime example of the impetus to seek out those sites of exception that seem to lie outside the field of visibility due to the unease they produce, especially when their hiddenness is inscribed into discourses on liberation from oppression. By directing theologians to the “farthest available margins” to be found within the biblical narrative, he invites not only an altered way of seeing through which a new conception of the exodus could be formulated but also—and precisely as the kind of

¹³⁴ For Warrior’s account of his experience with Edward Said, both as a student in his courses and through the insights encountered in his writings, see Robert Warrior, “Native Critics in the World: Edward Said and Nationalism,” in *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, Jace Weaver, Craig S. Womack, and Robert Warrior (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 179-223. See also Robert Warrior, “Home / Not Home: Centering American Studies Where We Are,” *American Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (June 2017): 208-211; Warrior, “Intellectual Sovereignty,” 336-338.

¹³⁵ Warrior, “Home / Not Home,” 209. The sources relevant to the debate between Said and Walzer are as follows: Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Edward W. Said, “Michael Walzer’s ‘Exodus and Revolution’: A Canaanite Reading,” *Grand Street* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1986): 86-106; Michael Walzer and Edward W. Said, “An Exchange: ‘Exodus and Revolution,’” *Grand Street* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1986): 246-259. Interestingly, a reference to “the ‘Canaanites’ of the world,” a phrase that appears in the last paragraph of Warrior’s 1989 essay, is found in Walzer’s response to Said (247).

¹³⁶ Warrior, “Home / Not Home,” 210.

social praxis that self-critically aims to counter the habituated and oftentimes unwitting aversion of one's eyes from certain scenes of inhumanity—a qualitative shift which can engender a relationality that embraces the global Canaanites of today.

In this regard, Warrior's response to the paradigmatic understanding of the exodus narrative exhibits pertinent continuities as well as discontinuities with the hermeneutical impulses which can be derived by placing Gustavo Gutiérrez's exodus-centered notion of rereading (presented in chapter 1) in dialogue with the Hagar-based rereading of Delores Williams (discussed in chapter 6). Both Gutiérrez and Williams establish the constructive value of rereading biblical sources in different contexts of communal self-understanding in light of God's relationship with the oppressed. However, the modes of rereading that they describe can be seen to diverge on significant methodological and theological issues. For Gutiérrez, the tradition of rereading the exodus is set in motion by the exodus process itself and therefore already appears as a theological strategy of some biblical authors.¹³⁷ The Egypt-to-Canaan trajectory, he proposes, simultaneously fulfills a promise and opens history to the fulfillment of new promises, thereby initiating a dialectic of memory and creative freedom by which ongoing reinterpretations of the exodus are ensured. That is, Gutiérrez's analysis of the exodus as a paradigm involves the idea of its role as a living resource that remains articulate in ways that occasion unforeseeable readings of its main message as the community of faith undergoes new historical experiences. Inasmuch as he views in contemporary reappropriations of the exodus an extension of what commences in the biblical corpus itself and emerges in the world today from an encounter with God

¹³⁷ See the section in chapter 1 discussing Gutiérrez's interpretation of the exodus in the 1976 essay "God's Revelation and Proclamation in History."

as liberator, Gutiérrez's concept of rereading can be distinguished on several levels from that of Williams. In examining the Hagar narratives, Williams situates herself in relation to the underside of those biblical texts as the basis for a rereading that brings into critical focus aspects of the story which tend to elude theological discourse.¹³⁸ The hermeneutical grounds for such a reflection on Scripture, while consistent with the centrality of Hagar in the survival/quality-of-life tradition of African-American biblical appropriation, amount to a recentering of Gen 16 and 21 that cannot be carried out without at once entering into a tensional relationship with the community in which those stories originated. Rereading these accounts from the position of Hagar's experience, Williams develops a theological analysis in which the image of a God who does not always liberate furnishes an important safeguard against what she identifies as the deficiency of approaches which contribute to the invisibilization of the oppressed of the oppressed, both in the Bible and in society.

By framing Warrior's insistence on the exigency of reconceptualizing the exodus in connection with the multilayered disjuncture between the notions of rereading at work in the theologies of Williams and Gutiérrez, it is possible to wrest out elements of what it might mean to model a humanizing interaction with the exodus in the context of Christian faith. In terms of the core value of rethinking the exodus today from a place of solidarity with the most vulnerable, there is a certain level of consonance between the perspectives of Gutiérrez and Warrior. Both readers of the narrative convey the indispensable status of a commitment to the oppressed in the trajectories of reinterpretation which they envision for the present and future. Indeed, it should be noted in respect to this point of agreement

¹³⁸ These features of Williams's notion of rereading are treated in the sections on hermeneutics in chapter 6 of this dissertation.

(and without undermining notable discontinuities) that Warrior acknowledges the degree to which Gutiérrez and the preferential option for the poor influenced his own thinking as a student in the area of systematic theology, particularly in the method employed in his dissertation.¹³⁹ Published as *Tribal Secrets*, the dissertation project reflects what Warrior describes in retrospect as “the need to be methodologically self-conscious in attending to perspectives that had been ignored, debased, discounted, and marginalized.”¹⁴⁰ Though this fundamental concern—which further illustrates how Warrior understands his work in general, as discussed above—also guides his approach to the exodus, it does so in a way that remains at variance with Gutiérrez’s articulation of God’s preferential option for the poor. In contrast to a rereading that revolves around an apprehension of basic coherence between the exodus process and contemporary struggles against injustice, Warrior points toward a hermeneutical reorientation in which solidarity as a decolonial praxis interlocks with a reception of the exodus laden with friction. Unlike Gutiérrez, for whom the exodus affords a paradigmatic expression of God’s partiality to the afflicted which signifies anew as the disruptive exertion of that same divine love is experienced today, Warrior locates the exodus among the histories of exclusion to be unsettled. The kind of rethinking that Warrior proposes takes place within a commitment to the most vulnerable that does not incarnate the memory of the exodus in the present but rather brings the narrative into the relational orbit of that very commitment in order to foreground its intrinsic negations.

This difference in interpretive alignment with what transpires in the exodus marks the incongruity between its status in Gutiérrez’s theology as an exemplary image of the

¹³⁹ Warrior, “Native Critics in the World,” 193-195, 221n17.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 195. For information on Warrior’s dissertation, see note 121 above.

God who liberates the oppressed in history and the decentering of the story that Warrior pursues by identifying with the victims of its liberation process, the Canaanites—and it is here that the latter intersects with Williams's notion of rereading. The analysis of Gen 16 and 21 that Williams develops in constructing an analogical framework for addressing the experiences of black women in the United States is based on a view of the narrative from a dimension of oppression that does not appear as such in the biblical accounts—namely, the figure of Hagar. As such, Williams rereads these specific episodes through the prism of a marginality that is preserved within the biblical sources themselves and which must be recovered from invisibility if theologians strive to embody a commitment to the most vulnerable. In the story of Hagar, she maintains, a non-liberative experience of God's activity among the oppressed is recounted, a feature which coincides on a general level with Warrior's assessment of the outside of the exodus to which the indigenous residents of Canaan are relegated. His reflections on the exodus perceive in the representation of the Canaanites what amounts to an alterity to divine liberation in the biblical narrative and warrants a hermeneutical strategy that counters the patterns of disavowal which the sources enable. There is an important difference, however, between the Canaanites and Hagar regarding the non-liberative dynamics to which they correspond. For Williams, who rereads biblical texts from the underside of Hagar but also examines the question of the Canaanites in critiquing the exodus paradigm, the most striking difference between Hagar and the Canaanites is the difference between survival and destruction. Whereas the Hagar narratives attest that God does not always liberate the oppressed, the conquest of Canaan shows that God's liberative activity can translate into the catastrophic for entire communities which encounter in that liberation its dialectical other.

Though the rereading of biblical accounts that Williams contributes is carried out from the standpoint of Hagar rather than the Canaanites, the difference between survival and destruction remains pertinent to the challenge of reimagining the exodus in light of the structures of identification affecting Warrior's reception of the text. Indeed, it is the sensitivity to the workings of elimination associated with Warrior's location in a settler-colonial history that can fruitfully mediate a critical interplay between the distinct ways in which the concept of rereading operates in Williams and Gutiérrez. Insisting on the need for an approach to the exodus that asserts the primacy of the Canaanites due to the authorized denial of their humanity and probes the implications of that biblical theme for the future of indigeneity in North America, Warrior points toward a path through which the relationship between memory and creative freedom is redefined. The rethinking of the exodus that for Gutiérrez accompanies changing contexts and prevents that memory from ever becoming dormant, uncovering new dimensions of meaning that invite faith to grow in unexpected ways, undergoes a permutation in Warrior's reading in connection with a setting that brings him into proximity with the Canaanites. While Warrior recognizes in that nexus of indigeneity a basis for dissenting from liberation theology and frames his reflections on the exodus in terms of a decision to break with the Christian faith, these aspects of his experience bear some resemblance to the different crises and modes of questioning faith which Gutiérrez identifies in historical moments that deepen and enrich how the exodus message is understood. An underside comprising elimination, rather than the promise of survival that Williams discovers in God's response to Hagar and Ishmael, leads Warrior to dispense with the exodus as a valuable resource for Native peoples; it is precisely for this reason, however, that his "exit strategy" impinges upon the theological

imagination of interpreters who continue to engage the biblical narrative in the context of Christian identity. For such readers, Warrior's position can be eminently instructive and provide elements of a catalyst for a qualitative shift in theological thinking—such as that which Gutiérrez observes in the experiences of the Babylonian exile and the execution of Jesus, communal crises of faith that ultimately would yield creative reappropriations of the exodus—without being deemed sufficient.

To reconceptualize the exodus with a preferential option for the Canaanites from a situation of settler colonialism is, in effect, to resist the structural invasion through which the erasure of indigenous presence is constantly advanced. Instead of a rereading that has as its horizon what Gutiérrez describes as a participatory remembrance of the exodus that entails a struggle against injustice in the present, Warrior's method confronts the range of dehumanization that is inherent in the contemporaneity of Canaan in a manner which at once bears on the biblical narrative and the settler-colonial logic of elimination. With the eyes of a reader who is haunted by the persisting legacy of Canaan, Warrior discovers a new way of envisioning the biblical account that simultaneously strikes at the apparatus of erasure which continues to threaten the future of Native communities. The correlation of these two sets of problems in Warrior's treatment denotes the need to reconfigure the linkage that Gutiérrez posits between the present-day rereading of the exodus, conflict in the life of faith amid harmful ideologies, and the praxis of anamnesis in solidarity with those who are rendered historically absent. In Gutiérrez's understanding of rereading, the transformative radicality of the exodus can become palpable today on various levels of a larger movement toward justice for all, among which is included the active sub-version of histories—in the sense of historiographic production—that efface a subjugated underside

in accordance with prevailing ideologies. Such a response to the damage that is inflicted through an ideological distortion of memory, he contends, involves a profound rereading of history in addition to (and as a corollary of) that of the exodus, one that retrieves what has been unjustifiably erased and can thereby “*remake history...from below.*”¹⁴¹ As an irruption of “the ‘vanquished’ of history” through which the exodus image of “the God-poor relationship” gains fresh relevance today, this remaking of history opens new paths for faith and spirituality.¹⁴²

The dissolution of ideological mechanisms that promote the historical invisibility of entire peoples or shared experiences of oppression, however, cannot become a reality without a reorientation toward the exodus in which the impact of Warrior’s call to center the Canaanites is noticeable. A rereading of history with the aim of recovering what lies buried beneath its semblance of veracity on the basis of a memory that contains its own entombed traces of humanity—the vanquished of the exodus—is tasked with devising a safeguard against complicity. Moreover, the distinct work of surpassing ideologies that encode the eliminatory dynamics of settler colonialism is itself compromised insofar as the process of uprooting a logic that consists in effecting the disappearance of indigeneity can remain reconciled with the conquest of Canaan. To resist the diverse strategies of historical erasure without unintentionally reinforcing those practices, particularly in the context of an ongoing deterritorialization in which the specter of Canaan conjoins with

¹⁴¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio de Dios en la historia,” in *La fuerza histórica de los pobres* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, [essay orig. publ. 1976] 1982), 32 (my translation; emphasis in original); see Gustavo Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation in History,” in *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [essay orig. publ. 1976] 1983), 21.

¹⁴² Gutiérrez, “Revelación y anuncio,” 18, 31, 32 (my translation); see Gutiérrez, “God’s Revelation and Proclamation,” 8, 20, 21.

settler-colonial projects, requires a commitment to remaking history from a *below* that is not deserted when it inevitably leads theologians into the exodus. The reflexivity of an exodus-based recuperation of obscured histories plays out as a critical reimagining of the biblical narrative which is aptly described in language that Gutiérrez uses in expounding what it means to reclaim the gospel from below—scandalous, unpresentable, subversive, and a witness to a God who continues to speak from the least likely of places.¹⁴³ It is in an unseemly exodus of this sort, where the possibility of not encountering the voice of God among the cries of the Canaanites is untenable, that theologians in solidarity with the victims of history can identify a suitable resource for an understanding of the God-poor relationship which disturbs the logic of settler colonialism.

Interrupting the forgetfulness of suffering by neighboring the nocturnal side of the exodus evinces a praxis of unqualifiable belonging through which a new experience of the God who sides with those who are cast out becomes possible. In contradistinction to sanitizing construals of the exodus that can have the unwanted effect of augmenting the spell of indifference to certain realities of collective agony, a rereading of the exodus in view of God's partiality toward the excluded cannot circumvent the biblical dimension in which Williams finds "victims making victims."¹⁴⁴ For theologians and Christian readers to learn from and internalize the conversation-altering insights developed in the pivotal reassessments of the paradigmatic model presented in this dissertation, then, does not necessitate dislodging the exodus as a paradigm and replacing it with different—and presumably less problematic—paradigms for a theological imagination that remains

¹⁴³ Gutiérrez, "God's Revelation and Proclamation," 21-22.

¹⁴⁴ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 132.

essentially unchanged. Nor is it a matter of somehow “fixing” or making palatable what is broken in the story. Rather, the challenge is to engage the exodus in a different way, to sit with its brokenness as an indispensable site for working out what it means to love in a fractured world, and to allow a deepening interaction with the story to transform how the theological imagination is exercised. In the end, it is simply to read the exodus with the heart.

7.7 CONCLUSION

The challenges relating to the theological appropriation of the exodus introduced in parts one and two of the dissertation were revisited in this chapter with the objective of contributing a constructive response. To this end, the chapter introduced key concepts from the field of settler colonial studies that furnished a theoretical framework through which it became possible to examine important connections between Ateek and Warrior. The analysis of Ateek and Warrior in light of developments in the scholarship focusing on the distinctive character of settler-colonial contexts worked out an approach in which a sensitivity to the presence of intersecting concerns in their readings of the exodus does not undermine the numerous differences between the situational particularities of both interpreters. Those differences notwithstanding, the relationship between the acquisition of land, the logic of the elimination of the native, and the structure of invasion affords a lens through which the chapter was able to interrogate the meaning of a critical locus that links Warrior and Ateek in a shared proximity to the biblical image of Canaan. With the analytical resources and conceptual categories gained from the dialogue between Ateek

and Warrior, the chapter engaged the theological conversation presented in the earlier parts of the dissertation project by proposing an integrative notion of rereading in which a decentering of the exodus is inseparable from a praxis of solidarity with the oppressed in the world today. In particular, the contemporary work of reimagining the exodus story in the context of faith amid persisting legacies of inflicted invisibility, historical erasure, and the tragic dialectic in which a liberation process reproduces forms of oppression can serve to humanize insofar as the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan are neighbored. This tensional encounter with the narrative enacts the foundational vision of a God whose love is partial toward the victims of history and abides among them in a special way. The reflections in this chapter thus incorporate crucial insights from Gutiérrez, Cone, Ateek, Williams, and Warrior in formulating an account of what it means to read the exodus today. In so doing, the chapter crafted a response to central issues in a difficult yet necessary dialogue on the continuing role of the exodus in the theological imagination and Christian life, a question which seems destined to generate further discussion as theological interest in the field of settler colonial studies grows.

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