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# The Misconstruction of The Book of Exodus as a Pure Liberation Narrative by Black Theology During the Civil Rights Movement

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## The Misconstruction of The Book of Exodus as a Pure Liberation Narrative by Black Theology During the Civil Rights Movement

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Alexander Bernhard

Few books in the Bible offer as rich a narrative as Exodus does. The tale of the Hebrews' deliverance from slavery in the land of Egypt through the grace of Yahweh is so stirring that it has been adopted by most groups facing oppression in the Judeo-Christian world. It stands as a symbol of Jewish chosenness and begins their still continuing quest for their promised land. On a larger scale, the simple idea of the powerful bully getting his due, as represented by the Pharaoh, and being defeated by the seeming underdog Israelites, is so compelling that it permeates into countless works. Exodus stands in many eyes as an example of the often jealous and incomprehensible Old Testament divinity actually acting in accordance with a human sense of justice. However, the interpretation of the meaning of Exodus, just like that of any other story, is subject to the environment and beliefs of the reader. To a certain extent any author, whether it be a paperback novelist, an academic, or a biblical writer, relinquishes some control over the message of their work when they put it out into the world. No reader can separate themselves from the text and thus their subsequent analysis. Indeed, this tension between objective and subjective conclusions is at the heart of much of the humanities disciplines and general academia. The gravity of this phenomenon of personal reading is much weightier when it comes to biblical texts because of their especially prominent standing in society and many moral structures.

Of course, such a story of emancipation resonated deeply with those involved in the struggle for civil rights in America during the second half of the twentieth century. It was out of this relationship between the Civil Rights Movement and biblical literature that Liberation Theology, or Black Theology (used interchangeably in this essay), was born. Black Theology was almost entirely concerned with Christianity and thus focused more so on the New Testament, but just as the Gospels lean on the books of the Old Testament, the Liberation Theologians included Exodus in their arguments. The Black Theologian James H. Cone was one of the most influential and prolific Black Theologians during the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>1</sup> He wrote that this reading of the Bible was an effort to "understand and reinterpret faith from the standpoint of the black struggle for liberation."<sup>2</sup> Another prominent Black Theologian, Allan Boesak, described this understanding of scripture as "liberation is not only 'part of 'the Bible or 'consistent with 'the Bible; it is the content and the framework."<sup>3</sup> It was through this effort that Cone and his contemporaries came to define Exodus as a story of absolute liberation, one of transformation from enslaved to free (Boesak, 18). Here, however, the environment and beliefs brought to the text by the readers have wrested the message from the text. As academic approaches tend toward seeing authorial intent maintaining primacy over the meaning of a text,

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<sup>1</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "The Black Experience of the Exodus," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 568, previously published in *Christian Mission in Reconstruction: An Asian Attempt* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Allan Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence: A Socio-ethical Study on Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1977), 9.

the fundamental differences between this specific, more interpretive heavy stance, creates a striking difference. Considering only what can be found in the text (to the best one's abilities) a strikingly different Exodus story emerges.

Reading with this intention, a different version of Exodus than that of Cone or Boesak emerges – one not of Yahweh bringing the Hebrews from enslavement to freedom, but rather one of a complicated and at times contradicting divinity that seems more inclined with the transition from serving an inferior mortal master to the servitude of the correct, divine, master. Yahweh's actual words and actions do not line up with the image of the benevolent bringer of freedom that Liberation Theology recognizes, but with those of a subtly intricate divinity who has no qualms about control, servitude, and establishing dominance in the earthly realm. This version of events obviously conflicts with the goals of the Liberation Theologians, many of whom also dedicated their lives to the Civil Rights Movement. Their construction of Exodus's liberation reading is swayed more by the abstractions they wished to draw and result-oriented thinking than the narrative the text actually gives up. Liberation Theologians did not pull their analyses out of thin air, but rather that the incongruities found between the text and their claims are overlooked and ignored.

Exodus's divergent message of the transferring of ownership of the Hebrew people and the might of Yahweh, rather than one of absolute liberation, can be seen both before and after the flight from Egypt. When Moses has been tasked with convincing Pharaoh to relinquish control of the Hebrews, Yahweh "Hardened the heart of Pharaoh" a total of six times (Ex 9:12). His reasoning for this was "I will multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt" (Ex 7:3). This is a divinity who clearly can exercise the power to alter people's actions and yet openly chooses to wield this power to establish His own divine sovereignty. He makes this choice at times even at the cost of prolonging the suffering of His chosen people. The importance of His active choice to keep His people enslaved but actually increase the severity of their oppression cannot be overstressed, and He does so *six times* (Exodus 5). Such a choice is not that of a benevolent, freedom-bringing leader but more so that of a fickle, somewhat ego-driven leader determined to establish Himself. The other plague narratives do not depict Him as hardening the Pharaoh's heart which means that Yahweh is not a force to be easily labeled, but He is certainly not as benevolent as Liberation Theory wants Him to be in this instance. Just as Black Theology at times incorrectly constructed a simply benevolent Yahweh, it would be equally misguided to deem Him as wholly malevolent. The issue of the hardening of the Pharaoh's heart however shows that the God of Exodus is complicated and has divergent characteristics which make it impossible to ascribe a uniform will to Him. It is through this inadequate examination of the complexities of the text that the presuppositions of Liberation Theologists surface. This ambiguity of will though does cast the Hebrews as the chosen people only in a secondary sense, and pawns in Yahweh's quest for restored self-image first and foremost.

There is no question that the same power Yahweh wields to harden Pharaoh's heart could be applied to the advantage of Hebrews. It is this same type of power that He exercises so that they may leave Egypt laden with the gold and silver of the Egyptian people. In describing the Exodus to come, Yahweh tells Moses that "each woman shall ask her neighbor and any woman living in the neighbor's house for jewelry of silver and gold...so you shall plunder the Egyptians" (Ex 3:22). This blatant contradiction in Yahweh's supposed interest in

delivering the Hebrews from slavery, and the ways in which He chooses to use His power, lends itself perfectly to the notion that this narrative does not rest solely on a mass emancipation, but rather that the main character is in fact even Yahweh, and not His people.

The Two major components of these shows of force thus come into focus. The first can only be understood through Pharaoh's standing in Ancient Egyptian culture. Unlike some of the later Christian monarchies established in Europe where the monarch was believed to have been chosen by God, Pharaohs were actively considered to be part divinity themselves. Thus, Yahweh is not just picking a fight with a powerful mortal but is exhibiting to doubting humans His status as the sole ruling divinity. This is a theme that is repeated more clearly as the Israelites struggle to claim their promised land and come into contact with other cultures, each with their own their deities, and God seeks to prove himself in the mortal realm. The second goal of these excess feats of strength is to specifically indoctrinate the Hebrews with a belief in their God's supreme powers for their coming hardships. The narrator of Exodus expresses this immediately after the Israelites have successfully fled Egypt, telling the reader that "Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD" (Ex 14:31). This establishing of supremacy over the Israelites previous earthly master is clearly meant to instill an obedience and devotion in the Chosen People, and thus conflicts with the core of Exodus being about purely the people's liberation through the hand of God. This consistent thread of Yahweh's usage of power lends itself particularly well to the second pillar of an academic reading of the text, that once physically out of Egypt, the Hebrews are nowhere near free. It is necessary for God to display His power so that there can be no questions of the validity of His right to control His people (although questions inevitable do arise).

It is only once Pharaoh has been totally subdued that the second step of transferring custody of the Hebrews is promulgated. Namely, this involves the giving of Mosaic law, which is framed in such a manner as to resemble treaties at the time of conquering states and their vanquished subsidiaries.<sup>4</sup> This clearly makes the Hebrews, if not enslaved, then certainly not free and at the very least in servitude to Yahweh. The first words the Israelites hear from God after the Red Sea episode are "If you will listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God, and what is right in his sight ... I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians" (Ex 15:26). This type of relationship not only parallels that of the Pharaoh and the Chosen People, but that of master and slave for time immemorial. The Pharaoh too brought down punishments on the Israelites for their attempts to go against his wishes (Exodus 5). Yahweh is not telling the Israelites to go as they please and revel in their newfound freedom, but rather immediately places them in a similar type of relationship to the one they just experienced, only with a righteous divine master at the helm now (this is not to mitigate the importance of this difference, but rather to illustrate the similarities between the two situations).

This debt to be repaid through servitude to God is openly acknowledged on the part of His people both before and after their deliverance. In the opening of Exodus when Yahweh's attention is called to the plight of the Israelites, He describes it as "their cry on account of their taskmasters" (Ex 3:7). Their cry is not rooted in their bondage, but rather in whom they serve, and their "taskmaster's" inadequacy. When the people burst into song directed towards God after the miracle of the Red Sea is performed, they reference themselves as "the people

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<sup>4</sup> Jon Douglas Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York, NY: Harper San Francisco, 1987), 26.

whom You acquired” (Ex 15:16). What follows is a second half of Exodus full of painstakingly detailed laws that must be followed by the Israelites to ensure their survival and eventual prosperity. These laws may not be as limiting as the labor-centric servitude previously experienced, but they serve to highlight that the goal of leaving Egypt was the ability to worship their God and be His subject, not to be totally free. Thus, the groundwork is laid for their supposed “freedom.” The idea is not that there was no point in leaving Egypt, the yearning to serve their God should not be dismissed, but that they have entered into a divine form of servitude, which is not the idea of liberation that Black Theologian would later come to extract from Exodus thousands of years later.

The Liberation Theology’s competing narrative of Exodus is rooted in a completely different image of Yahweh that positions Him purely as the deliverer of His people from Egypt. In their reading God is a friend of the Hebrews, one who feels their suffering with divine empathy and acts purely out of the interest of the Israelites. It is from this understanding of Yahweh from which all other conclusions of theirs about the text flow. This belief that it is Yahweh’s compassion that drives his actions totally reframes the entire Exodus narrative. This manifests itself in the way in which Liberation Theologians view the relationship between the Israelites and Yahweh. Allan Boesak explains this succinctly when he writes “The Exodus was a liberation moment in which the people of Israel were moving with God” (Boesak, 18). Boesak is not responding to the way the spirit of Yahweh is said to be accompanying His people but rather a fundamental difference in the understanding of God’s relationship to His people as moving together. Liberation Theology of course does not deny the power dynamic between Yahweh and the Hebrews, but rather it reinterprets His actions and words through a warmer and more benevolent lens. It is not that this construction of Yahweh does not exist, but rather it is not a constant given and consequently requires discussion.

This inconsistency can be seen clearly when Black Theology interprets the passages leading up to the actual exodus in which God hardens the Pharaoh’s heart. For them, this comes from an urge on Yahweh’s part to exhibit to the world His dedication to His people unashamedly. Boesak comments on this, writing that “Yahweh comes openly to the aid of His downtrodden people for all the world to see and know that He lives with and for His people” (Boesak, 19). In this reading Yahweh chooses to prolong the exodus to exhibit the lengths he is willing to go to for the Israelites. This also explains the increasing magnitude of the plagues, it is a buildup that culminates in the taking of all Egyptian firstborns, one would be hard pressed to imagine a more punishing and awe-inspiring thing to inflict on a people than the loss of a child en masse. This reading however takes no steps to address the examples of Yahweh’s actions that don’t align and the complicated essence of Exodus is not captured.

The key difference here between the academic and liberation reading of these shows of force is the shift in focus from Yahweh to his people. His love is such that it excludes any possible personal motivations and at the center of His considerations are always His people. Seeing the conclusions Liberation Theologians are wont to draw, this fits perfectly. It implies that God is paying close attention to the oppressed status of African Americans and has a certain emotional pull towards them. Indeed, Boesak characterizes the God of Exodus as first and foremost “The Liberator of the oppressed” (Boesak, 19). All notion of divine ego as an influence is removed and put in its place is a holy leaning towards the side of freedom and emancipation. While this reading makes sense in the context of the theologians’ current environment, it ignores

the historical context, namely the need for Yahweh to establish his divine sovereignty. It also fails to address the strong and direct contradictions that can be found in the text as previously demonstrated. It operates from the presupposition of the firm authority of the Judeo-Christian God and neglects the Pharaoh's status as a competing deity.

The difference between the two interpretations of Exodus is poignantly apparent in the disagreement in the purpose of Mosaic law that follows the flight from Egypt. Liberation Theory claims the strict following of Mosaic law is an aspect of freedom, and that God hands the law down as an opportunity for self-determination which was denied to His people in Egypt.<sup>5</sup> Here again is the Liberation depiction of Yahweh as being served by his people and in turn almost serving them. The Liberation Theologian Choan-Seng Song was more so concerned with interpreting Exodus in terms of Asian oppression, but in her writings on the link between Exodus and the Civil Rights Movement she says that "worshipping God in the land of freedom is the integral part of the struggle for liberation" (Song, 575). This reading however does not confront the fact that the law is something created without the Israelites' consent or input and is imposed on them with the threat of death and hardship should they refuse to comply. This argument is significantly weakened and almost rendered incomplete as a result of this oversight.

This is not to say that the academic reading believes the Israelites obey the law against their will. The practicing of the law was welcomed by the recently delivered Hebrews, but with a different intention behind it. For them it is a way of showing their appreciation for Yahweh and understanding their earthly emancipation cannot be had for free, without some discomfort and a measure of hardship. They are eager to adhere to it because by paying such a price even more weight to the acts of God that delivered them is given.<sup>6</sup> Here again, one can see a break in the evidence with the Liberation Theology's focus on the people as the center of the story. The Israelites undertaking of the burdensome Mosaic law stems from an understanding that if they were simply free after Egypt their deliverance would suffer in awesomeness and importance.

The deeper one digs into the text of Exodus and pays attention to the historical context of the work, the larger the divergence between Liberation Theology and the message on the pages seems. However, just as paying attention to the circumstances around Exodus is crucial to fully understanding its message, so too must one pay attention to the background that gave birth to Liberation Theology. In its case, the conclusions the authors draw about Exodus tell the reader more about the role of religion in the Civil Rights Movement than about Exodus. This, however, is not grounds to discount the works produced, but rather to read them with a fairer expectation of what to look for. Liberation Theology, in some sense, was utilitarian in its creation.

As the fight for racial equality spread it seems natural to want to reconcile it with the behemoth force in African American communities at the time, religion. It has long been a practice of Americans to present plans as manifest destiny. This has been applied to the transcontinental railroad, western expansion, and perhaps darkest of all Native American displacement and slavery. It has been used so because of its effectiveness in swaying popular opinion. Exodus, then, serves a similar purpose in Liberation Theology, allowing manifest destiny to now be applied to combat oppression and champion true emancipation. The richness

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<sup>5</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "The Black Experience of the Exodus," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 575, previously published in *Christian Mission in Reconstruction: An Asian Attempt* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977).

<sup>6</sup> The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was active in pre-war Germany as the Nazis were gaining power, and his work was mostly concerned with the New Testament. However, he captures this idea of "costly grace" when he wrote that "grace costs one his very life and must continue to cost him the same price day by day."<sup>6</sup>

of Liberation Theology lies in looking back on it and studying the way in which its creators meshed politics and religion while staying true to the world they experience day in and day out. Dismissing it because of the claims it offers about Exodus would be to miss out on this important aspect of the Civil Rights Movement. Black Theology should be read with an eye towards biblical anthropology rather than objective, impersonal, biblical analysis. For if today one allows Exodus to be distorted in the name of good, then there is no guard against it being wielded by the bringers of evil tomorrow.

This subjectivity, however, is by no means a phenomenon that started and ended with Liberation Theology. The idea of separating the reader from the text is arguably the goal of any literary analysis. But this requires a completing divorcing of one from their environment, upbringing, and even perception of reality. No written work can truly achieve this. In a fiction writer this self-involvement is lauded, but when it comes to academia it is viewed as a weakness. There is an unachievable bar set for objectivity, and to dismiss works because they do not reach this standard is to rob the world of a treasure trove of insights into humanity. Often it is the opinions that seem most obvious to one that are the most susceptible to being overly influenced by personal experiences.

When it comes to the Bible in particular it is tempting to fit the text to modern morality and consensuses. This, however, is a slippery slope at the base of which there is nothing but unruly subjectivity. It is important to acknowledge the shortcomings of works that in some cases serve as the foundation for our society, whether their nature be religious, political, or legal. It will be nearly impossible to move towards a better future if we are weighed down by the yoke of perfecting the past, a task that will have to be completed almost constantly. To do this would mean losing the actual meanings of such texts and to be left with only a record of how these texts were interpreted in each period. Liberation Theology serves as a microcosm for this but only exhibits a much larger habit. It is up to those of the present to recognize the past but unburden ourselves of a binding reverence for it in the name of striving for a greater future.

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