

Introduction

The black theology movement, now about 35 years old, has from the beginning demanded that black Americans tell God's story through their own experience, as a privileged perspective upon God's nature and work. The story they tell points beyond where many black and womanist theologians have been willing to take it. It is not only a story of survival "in the wilderness," as womanist theologians such as Delores Williams contend, nor even a story of survival and liberation, as black theologians such as Major Jones contend -- but of the further blessing (in J. Deotis Roberts and Martin Luther King, Jr.) of liberation *and reconciliation*. The themes of survival, liberation, and reconciliation in the black Church's own faith, which appropriates Old Testament stories of deliverance as its own, require an expansion of soteriology in both the black and womanist traditions. Both the internal dynamics of black and womanist theology, and the needs and faith of African American Christianity, call for a renewed embrace of the soteriological metaphor of sacrifice. The cross is a place of deliverance: and not as merely a supreme sign of God's solidarity with sufferers, nor merely the theater of God's victory for the just over evil, but a redemptive sacrifice on behalf of those defeated by justice's victory.

This paper does not call black and womanist theologians to accept the corrections of "white theology" (though such a call, like its converse, would not necessarily be illegitimate). Instead, it draws out the resources of *their own* traditions, and particularly the resources of the black Church's deeply experiential and biblical visions of theodicy and salvation. It reviews the historical and theological setting of black faith, then considers the constructive black and womanist soteriologies of Major Jones and Delores Williams, focusing on the reasons for their common rejections of sacrificial theories of atonement.

By locating their soteriological claims in the wide narrative context of black faith (which centers in Israel, Jesus, and Church), it supports their affirmations. However, that context implies something more than what either author is willing to grant: Needs over the course of the lives of God's people for more than merely survival or even liberation, and a wider variety of resources for fulfilling God's promises. Among these resources is atonement in the form of sacrifice, which reconciles the liberated to God and to each other after they engage in oppression of their own. It follows that a stronger affirmation of the sacrificial theory of atonement respects and can further strengthen the black Church's resources for negotiating Christian life *after liberation*. The soteriological resources of black faith can respect the redemptive power of suffering in Christ (Col. 1:24, Eph. 1:4, Rom. 8:28) without endorsing the suffering God sent Jesus to end. Black and womanist theology can respect the problem of evil without falling into a false dilemma that classifies all suffering either as glorifying and self-redemptive, or as defiling and oppressive.

Is God a White Racist? The Theodical Occasion of Black Faith

To be African-American is to be a member of a cultural and linguistic nation (*ethnos*) defined in part by its West African cultural heritage, by its forcible removal from Africa at the hands of African as well as European captors,¹ by its estrangement from the cultures of both its mainly white context and its own past, by the ultimately unintelligible modern European concept of "race," and by shared experiences in slavery and segregation. These factors shaped African American faith in countless ways.

Above all (for our purposes), black America retained the deep faith in a supreme God that it inherited from African religion.² White Christians have tended to think black America's African religious heritage was something that stood in the way of the gospel. In fact, it was almost the opposite. Traditional African religions usually worshiped a powerful, providential creator God, who once lived close to humanity, but withdrew to the sky after an ungrateful and accidental human act.³ Black America's continuing belief in this transcendent Lord saw it through its encounter with the

¹ That west Africans experienced such cruelties testifies to the theodical power of west African theology even before the rise of European slavery. It was no naïvely hopeful faith that crossed the Atlantic in the slave ships.

² Major Jones, *The Color of God: The Concept of God in Afro-American Thought* (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1987), 17-20.

³ James H. Evans, Jr., *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 56.

inhumanities of both its African and American experience, including its encounter with the racist gospel of white America.

However, its faith in God the creator was put under incredible stress. White supremacist theology in the nineteenth century posited that blacks were biologically inferior, because they were children of Noah's son Ham (Gen. 9:25).⁴ Slaves were taught from both Testaments that the God who created them had made them to be the perpetual servants of God's superior white children. Quite rightly, they reacted with shock and pain, not unlike modern-day Jobs: God is still God; but can the God we have been worshiping really be a white racist?⁵

Thus theodicy -- the problem of evil in a world created by a good God -- became the fundamental frame of black Christian theology.⁶ We need only slightly expand this thesis by William R. Jones to claim that *evil and God's response to it* take central places in black American theologies. This profoundly distinguishes them from theologies for whom questions of evil and deliverance are more marginal.

Which Chapter in Which Story?

American Africans have offered a whole spectrum of answers to Jones' question, from acceptance of God's racism to radical rejection. Most found the resources to deny that God is a white racist.⁷ Some simply lost their faith in God. Others associated God's withdrawn presence-in-absence with their status as outsiders, finding in their otherness a reflection of God's own.⁸ An "Ethiopic" school of interpretation found in biblical Egypt, Ethiopia, and Cush the glorious past of African civilization, and used it to conduct its own triumphalist culture-war against the white West.⁹ Still others turned the slaveholders' theology on its head, literally reversing it, so that the original, unfallen humanity was black (Eden is not in Europe, after all) and that sin caused the creation of white people. White racist theology thus begot a black racist theology that drew on its own genetic pseudoscience.¹⁰

Slaveholders had shorn slaves and their descendants of their geographic home, their ethnic heritage, and their family relationships. In effect, they had "de-narrated" black America. Ironically, this de-narration became the foundation of new African-American stories:

⁴ Evans, 36-38.

⁵ William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 115-117, quoted in Major Jones, 23-24.

⁶ Major Jones, introduction.

⁷ William R. Jones himself embraces an existentialist variety of free-will theodicy he calls "humanocentric theism." He claims that God's gift of human freedom makes humanity the co-creator of its existence, relegates God's involvement to persuasion rather than coercion, and leaves African-Americans in charge of whether to resist or endure suffering. To alleviate suffering, they "must desanctify it by taking it out of the hands of God. African-Americans must rely only on themselves and seek their own liberation." See Evans, 64-65, referring to William R. Jones, 193.

⁸ Evans, 57-58, calls this "the ungiven God" of African-American theology.

⁹ Evans, 41-44, notes that this hermeneutic "decentered" the Bible's own salvation narrative (43).

¹⁰ An example is the teaching of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. See Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 164-166.

The Muslim's "X" symbolized the true African family name that he never could know. For me, my "X" replaced the white slave-master name of 'Little' which some blue-eyed devil named Little had imposed upon my paternal forebears. ... Mr. Muhammad taught that we would keep this "X" until God Himself returned and gave us a Holy Name from His own mouth.¹¹

Yet God provided the black Church much more than the story of having lost its story. As slaves and their descendants became Christians, they learned the stories in Scripture, and in them many found *their own* story. American Africans reinterpreted election according to their experience of their good but distant creator. And when God re-narrated black Americans, God called them not the children of Noah's cursed son Ham, not even the culturally superior children of Ethiopia, but the children of chosen, enslaved, and liberated *Israel*. America was not the Promised Land after all, as the Puritans had taught. America was Egypt. God was not the god of Pharaoh, but the God of Moses, the God of the disinherited and denarrated. Black America learned to see its destiny not in subjugation, but in exodus.¹²

Benjamin Mays' *The Negro's God* finds three successive African-American visions of salvation, each of which poses a different answer to whether "God is a white racist" in terms that associate the black American nation with the biblical story of Israel. The first, which predominated from 1760 to 1860, envisioned God's work as "liberative," accomplishing the black struggle for freedom as the God of Israel had lifted the Hebrews out of their Egyptian slavery. The second, which predominated from 1865 to 1914, envisioned God as no longer useful to the cause of justice and freedom for black America. Like wandering, grumbling Hebrews, emancipated but still segregated black Americans still knew God, but no longer as a liberator. The third, which predominated from 1914 to the time of Mays' writing in 1937, envisioned God as promising divine reparation for earthly suffering.¹³ Here the hopes of black America shifted from this world to the

¹¹ Malcolm X, 199.

¹² Evans, 41: "By identifying themselves with the Hebrews, African slaves declared themselves as insiders in the scriptural drama. ... While slaveholders focused on ancient Israel as a slaveholding society, the African slaves saw ancient Israel first as a nation descended from slaves."

¹³ Evans, 58, quoting Benjamin Mays, *The Negro's God: As Reflected in His Literature* (New York: Atheneum, 1969).

next, as the earlier optimism of the nineteenth century came crashing down on both white and black America.

These are different answers to the question of how black America's narrative is Israel's narrative. At their heart lie differing doctrines of election, salvation, and eschatology: How will black America's story conclude? Is the exodus a timeless principle of liberation, a manifesto that applies to any nation experiencing oppression? Or is it a one-time event, among whose original beneficiaries one must belong in order to experience its freedom? Is exodus past, present, or future? In what sense is it universal, and in what sense is it particular to the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

There was no lack of storytellers. Reading the land of their ancestors as the Land of Promise (and making the same eschatological mistake as the Puritans), some freed slaves went back to Africa and founded Liberia as a new Jerusalem.¹⁴ Some, including the Nation of Islam, looked forward to being separated from white America as the Hebrews had been separated from Egypt and Canaan. Others, among them Martin Luther King, Jr., awaited inclusion into the greater people of God, seeing black America in terms of "the foreigner living in the land" (Deut. 24:18-22). Still others found in black America lost tribes of Israel, and saw their redemption as the direct fulfillment of God's promises to Moses.

What Shape Salvation? The Soteriologies of Major Jones and Delores Williams

Black theology burst on the theological scene in the 1960's as an heir to this entire tradition of black reflection on God. Its theologians reclaim and reject various strands of their heritage, answering these questions and retelling the old stories in widely diverse ways. They overwhelmingly revive and intensify the liberationist strand of African-American faith that had predominated before the Civil War. James H. Evans, Jr. summarizes black eschatology in that one word: "liberation."¹⁵ Practically every writer in James H. Cone's and Gayraud S. Wilmore's two-volume historical survey embraces liberation as the overriding category of salvation. J. Deotis Roberts is an exception that

¹⁴ Cf. Evans, 154: "In thought coming out of the African Diaspora, heaven is often referred to as 'home,' and home often means 'Africa.' Hell meant the plantations of the American south and the Caribbean, the physical and temporal alienation that characterized slavery and colonization. Heaven meant the return to a state of community, mutuality, and wholeness."

¹⁵ Evans, 152. He develops a soteriology that is entirely liberative, calling Jesus both "a political messiah or liberator, and spiritual mediator/healer" (97). Jesus as healer and Jesus as liberator are essentially comparable categories, especially in the gospels.

proves the rule -- not because he denies liberation as a central concern of black theology, but because he goes so far as to place reconciliation alongside it as a necessary (and secondary) dimension.¹⁶ Likewise, black theologians generally interpret election in terms of liberation.¹⁷ African-Americans are people chosen along with Israel to share in Yahweh's liberation,¹⁸ or charged to achieve their own liberation as one of God's chosen black peoples.¹⁹

Major Jones. It is in the liberationist cluster that we may place *The Color of God: The Concept of God in Afro-American Thought*, by Major Jones, the late president of Gammon Theological Seminary. Jones's doctrine of God is a "radical orthodoxy" (Gayraud Wilmore) that affirms ecumenical doctrines of Trinity, Christology, soteriology, and pneumatology. It treats them not as corrective borrowings from a foreign, white theological tradition, as Joseph Washington might,²⁰ but as authentic embodiments of the fundamentally healthy black experience of God -- an experience Jones traces to a spiritual heritage not from America, Geneva, Wittenburg, or Rome, but from sub-saharan Africa.

For Jones, Christology is the black Church's historical answer to its particular problem of evil. God's providence culminates when the black messiah enters into solidarity with the oppressed, assuming and redeeming suffering humanity. Jesus disproves God's racism without compromising either God's power or goodness. Jones claims that black Christians see Christ's passion as securing

¹⁶ J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), and "Black Theology in the Making," in Cone and Wilmore, 1:118-119.

¹⁷ The exception here is Joseph Washington, who sees African-Americans as elect suffering servants whose mission is to witness to God's humanity. See Joseph Washington, *The Politics of God* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 158, quoted in William R. Jones, "Theodicy and Methodology in Black Theology," in Cone and Wilmore, 1:144.

¹⁸ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 181. Cone redefines the Church as "that grouping [of all men] which identifies with the suffering of the poor by becoming one with them" in "The White Church and Black Power," in Cone and Wilmore, 1:78.

¹⁹ Albert B. Cleage, Jr., "The Black Messiah," in Cone and Wilmore, 1:103.

²⁰ Joseph R. Washington, Jr., "Are American Negro Churches Christian?" in James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 1:92-100.

God's love and release for them, in a "more or less classical representation of the traditional doctrine of the atonement" that combines the concerns of Anselm and Abelard (83). Yet blacks appropriate these categories *according to their relevance* to black faith: "We reformulate every Christological question across the full range of God's own experience in Jesus Christ as he lived among us, when we ask: 'What does this mean for Black people'" (84)? This means Christology is reformulated according to particularly black doctrines of theodicy and deliverance. "Black theology believes in Jesus in all the generic senses of traditional Christology; but more importantly, Black theologians consistently revise the meaning of Jesus as specifically pertinent to Black people, as specifically the Christ of their liberation" (86).

The result does look somewhat "Abelardian," but not particularly "Anselmian." In effect, Jones' liberation Christology abandons the historically dominant soteriology of the Reformed and Arminian traditions, from whose categories black American theology has usually drawn, and returns to the theme of *Christus Victor* that (according to Gustav Aulén) once dominated the Christian world, continues to dominate in Eastern Orthodoxy and Lutheranism, and increasingly dominates among theologians of liberation.

At the same time, Jones casts *Christus Victor* along particularly African-American lines. Against Joseph Washington's notion of black election to suffering servanthood, Jones teaches election in terms of the *blackness* of Jesus' incarnation, a particularity that identifies with the black American nation in a way that reaches out to oppressed peoples everywhere. God would never "restrict partnership (with humanity) to an elected people, so that they only by their obedience to a covenant might enter into his fellowship. Rather, God lowered himself and freely accepted the worst conditions of the human race, bar none" (99) The ethnic identity of African America is "rather a profound and mysterious assignment from God by which Black people have been called to bear

witness to the message of his judgment and his grace to all nations, and especially to White America” (98). Jesus’ identification with the oppressed over against their oppressors makes his victory over oppression *their* victory -- the vindication of all God’s oppressed peoples.

Likewise, Jones cannot accept any account of atonement (for instance, Anselm’s satisfaction theory and its descendant, Calvin’s penal-substitution theory) that depends on the category of redemptive suffering, “any identification of oppression and suffering with redemption” (98). Given Jones’ use of blackness as a sign of election, one can see why. From the theodical frame of Jones’ perspective, the ideas of atonement as redemptive suffering and election as nationhood are a fatal combination. They would narrate black suffering as God’s wrath-satisfying “redemptive requirement.” Black America would be God’s scapegoat -- and white America would be among the beneficiaries. “Blackness ... is not what it was said to be by generations of White theologians -- a sign of God’s wrath. Blackness is not a sign of punishment for being Black” (98).

Jones calls the cross “more burdensome example” of God’s solidarity and identification with the oppressed, “than redemptive requirement” to satisfy God’s wrath. “God lowered himself” not as an expiatory or propitiatory sacrifice, but as a sign of solidarity with the oppressed and grace toward oppressors. Any “sacrificial” dimension is only in the sense that it is costly to Jesus himself. It cannot be a sacrifice *to God*.

Delores Williams. Our second soteriology, *Sisters in the Wilderness* by Delores Williams of Union Theological Seminary,²¹ shares Jones’ theological method, but arrives at radically different conclusions. Like her black Church, and like Jones, Williams engages in what she calls a hermeneutic of “identification-discernment” in which believers read the biblical stories to discern where they belong in its narratives, and where and how God will meet them in their predicaments.

²¹ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993).

With a method reminiscent of Tillich's correlation method,²² Williams looks for where the faith of oppressed black women resonates with Scripture and tradition. Only there are Scripture and tradition allowed authority.

How do oppressed black women experience the work of God? *Not* as liberation. Women remain at the mercy of racial, class, and gender oppressors. Williams' project best fits the middle era of Mays' analysis, in which God was no longer viewed as a liberator. From their common theological starting point, "Is God a white racist?" black and womanist theologians reason differently. Where the black (male) Church has identified with Israel *in exodus* as paradigmatic of their own standing in America, she on behalf of oppressed black women identifies with Hagar and Jesus *in the wilderness*.

In making the exodus narrative normative, male black theologians marginalize the non-elect people whom God sustains in the wilderness of their exclusion and invisibility.²³ The patriarchal male identification with elect Israel-in-exodus ignores the traditional female identification with Hagar as *non-elect*. It is in the wilderness that modern-day Hagers, chased out of their social world by oppressors both male and female, meet the Jesus of the temptation narratives.

This has tremendous consequences for Williams' interpretation of Jesus' life and death. Both are significant; but only the former aids the salvation of black women. In their *survival* rather than their deaths, Hagar and Jesus offer ways for God's most invisible and marginal people to survive.

"Jesus ... does not conquer sin through death on the cross. Rather, Jesus conquers the sin of temptation in the wilderness by resistance" (166). Only the ministry of the *living* Jesus offers resources for "the oppressed of the oppressed" to survive the "double jeopardy" (Frances Beale) of their blackness and femininity (144). "God through Jesus Christ gave [black women] new vision to

²² See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago), 1.3-68, 2.13-16, cited in Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 15.

²³ Williams, 145-148.

see the resources for positive, abundant relational life. ... God helps [the invisible] make a way out of no way” (198). Williams’ soteriology of the wilderness holds up the temptation narrative as the paradigmatic saving event in Jesus’ career, and the ethics of the Kingdom of God as portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels as the font of social healing.

This experience naturally produces radical critiques of non-womanist doctrines, including rival doctrines of election and atonement. In Williams’ experience, election as nationhood is a poisonous doctrine. How can blackness be a “mysterious identification” between God and God’s people, when women of color are being oppressed by their fellow nationals? Besides, Hagar and Ishmael are “internationals” -- Hagar an Egyptian expatriate, Ishmael a boy of “mixed race.” Rather, Williams experiences God’s favor as taking *familial* form: Hagar and Ishmael help each other survive in the wilderness. The wilderness redefines even the resurrection. It is not a manifestation of Jesus’ victory at the cross (cf. Col. 2:14-15), but a victory of Jesus’ ministerial vision over evil’s attempts to kill it, of which the cross was only one example, and an unnecessary one at that (164-165).

For Williams, the significance of the cross lies in its purely negative symbolism. It is “the image of human sin in its desecrated form ... an image of defilement, a gross manifestation of collective human sin” (166). Any positive saving significance for the cross would validate suffering and sacralize violence. It would support and intensify the suffering African-American women have endured for centuries. Cross-centered soteriologies not only leave Williams’ people invisible, marginal, and unliberated, but withhold the resources they need to survive at the hands of patriarchs and racists. For Williams, the category of atonement is one long exercise in underwriting oppression (162-164). “There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross,” she insists. “God does not intend black women’s surrogacy experience. Neither can Christian faith affirm such an idea. Jesus did not

come to be a surrogate. ... As Christians, black women cannot forget the cross, but neither can they glorify it. To do so is to glorify suffering and to render their exploitation sacred. To do so is to glorify the sin of defilement” (167).

The patriarchal notion of national election and the category of redemptive suffering are incompatible with Williams’ vision, as they are incompatible with Jones’. In Williams’ account, they would glorify women’s surrogacy -- as if all blacks were elect, but some where more elect than others. On these grounds, she dismisses *all* of the traditional atonement theories (ransom, satisfaction, victory, and moral influence) as resting on the category of “redemptive suffering,” meaning the defilement of black women, even if they develop it in different ways. She also accuses both the pioneers of black theology and traditional theologians like Martin Luther King, Jr. of leading black women “passively to accept their own oppression and suffering -- if the women are taught that suffering is redemptive.”²⁴

Black and Womanist Theology in Panoramic Perspective

Granting the force of both of these arguments, one common feature of both asks for deeper analysis. This is Williams’ at first puzzling conviction that Jesus’ survival in the wilderness, or Jones’ claim that Jesus’ acceptance of the worst conditions of the human race, offers hope for the world. Since the puzzlement is greater with regard to Williams, we shall begin there.

Jesus’ conduct in the wilderness and even in his itinerant ministry seem by themselves to offer less than complete liberation for the world’s most invisible and marginal people. Jesus is sent to Israel, not to “Hagarenes,” an agenda he sometimes makes insultingly clear. His survival in Egypt and his triumph in the wilderness bring him back *out* of those God-forsaken places and back into

²⁴ Williams, 200. These claims leave me utterly confused about another claim she makes of the black Church: “The black church cannot be *made* respectable because it is already sacralized by the pain and resurrection of thousands upon thousands of victims” (205). If sacralization by pain and resurrection is not redemptive suffering (cf. 1 Peter 3:17-4:2, etc.) what is?

Israel, whose lost sheep alone he shepherds. The ethics of the kingdom specify perfect obedience to the Law of Moses, which theocratically marginalizes both women and Gentiles. Its institutional organization restores an Israel with twelve *men* under an eternal *King*. Jesus leaves scraps of survival for Syro-Phoenician dogs, but nothing like the inheritance he promises his Jewish followers. How then can Williams claim that Jesus' career offers more than scraps as resources for women in the wilderness?

Williams can do it because oppressed black women are implicitly identifying Jesus' and Hagar's narratives from a panoramic perspective that ends in the full inclusion of Gentile men and women under God's eschatological rule. They interpret the wilderness narratives in the context of the whole biblical story. They follow God's sustenance of both Hagar and Jesus through to their happy conclusions: "Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand," the angel tells Hagar, "for I will make a great nation of him" (Gen. 21:18); "Tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee," the angel tells the women at the tomb. "There you will see him, just as he told you" (Mark 16:6). *Both* the "survival" and "liberation" strands of biblical assurance *are* for Williams' people after all. That is why both are deeply embodied in the black Church's practical faith.

This broader perspective peeks through only occasionally in Williams' analysis. For black women who "read the entire Hebrew testament from the point of view of the non-Hebrew slave," she says, "there is no clear indication that God is against their perpetual enslavement."²⁵ Then does Williams consider soteriologies of liberation universally illegitimate, or only ineffective for black women? It is never completely clear. At times Williams seems to reject other visions of the atonement entirely (166-169). At other times, she seems merely to deny that the "liberative" strand

²⁵ Williams, 146.

in black biblical experience applies to *black women* (2-6). Then perhaps -- since many women in the black Church *do* experience God as a liberator, and do not reject faith in the cross -- it applies also to those black women whose experiences of God *are* liberative. The scope of Williams' critique of rival visions is hard to identify, because the scope of her inquiry is purposefully limited to the experience of oppressed black women, and she has narrowed this definition specifically to exclude experiences of liberation. While she admits that the Bible supports a soteriology of liberation, she finds it not ultimately important to *her* people. Her method is not about describing themes in the biblical narrative, but about allowing "poor, oppressed black women and men to hear and see the *doing* of the good news in a way that is meaningful to them" (199). Her circle seems completely closed: Liberation can only be meaningful to those who have experienced it. To have experienced liberation is no longer to be oppressed. No longer to be oppressed is no longer to be among the population with whom Williams is concerned.

Of course, what poor, oppressed blacks hear and see is theory-laden. Its meaning depends on its context, and its context is the whole economy of salvation as the black Church has appreciated it -- the panoramic biblical frame in which black faith has historically found its stories of survival.²⁶ Williams' vision *does* facilitate survival -- but only by promising more.

This is equally, though less dramatically, true of Jones' account of how black America appropriates God's promises of liberation. During Jesus' career, there is every indication of his solidarity with oppressed Israel as its divinely accepted representative, but little indication of his solidarity with Gentile sufferers, even those whose sufferings resemble Israel's. The conviction that Jesus has assumed and redeemed suffering *humanity*, that Jesus' blackness resembles the blackness

²⁶ This frame is consistently biblical, whether as a pre-critical "biblicism" that dominates in the pews, or a "canonical criticism" more at home in the post-liberal academy. See, for instance, the distinctions as James Sanders develops them in *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

of *the nations*, comes only as Gentiles -- indeed, Gentile *centurions!* -- believe promises that have only reluctantly been addressed to them (Acts 10). Only on the basis of their faith can Jones ultimately claim that Jesus did not “restrict partnership (with humanity) to an elected people. . . . Rather, God lowered himself and freely accepted the worst conditions of the human race, bar none” (99).

Jones and Williams show us two sides of a black Church that appreciates the moments of Christ’s career with different degrees of intensity, yet still depends on the *whole* biblical story for those moments’ significance. Here its tradition does not depart from classical or contemporary Christian practice, as many non-black theologians allege, but resembles its fellow Christian traditions, and particularly (according to James Wm. McClendon, Jr.) the “baptist” tradition in which much of the black Church subsists.²⁷ We have all long engaged in Williams’ hermeneutic of “identification-discernment,” whether or not we have admitted it.

Yet once this feature of Jones’ and Williams’ visions is admitted, a Pandora’s box is thrown open. If they both depend upon a common biblical frame for their internal coherence, it seems that common biblical frame might support more than one vision. But then each vision’s exclusivity is undermined. If the gospel really is liberating to all, then how can Williams be right? If not, how can Jones? That is our next question to answer.

Keeping Perspective in Perspective

Jones’ preference for the passion narratives as expressions of a soteriology of liberation through solidarity, and Williams’ preference for the wilderness and ministerial narratives as expressions of a soteriology of survival, coexist alongside other Christian loyalties (black and otherwise) for particular biblical narrative moments as expressions and grounds of particular visions

²⁷ See James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume I* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1985), 31-35.

of atonement. Unfortunately, along with our honored traditions of soteriological favoritism come less honorable tendencies towards soteriological *exclusivism*. The black Church has not been spared this failing, which ultimately undermines both Jones' and Williams' visions of salvation.

The solution is not to adopt a supposedly "catholic" synthesis of atonement theories, exchanging the black Church's theological distinctives for a homogenized, even majoritarian "ecumenism." Nor is it for black America to follow the program of democratic liberalism and integrate with its neighbors. Like free churches and other beleaguered minorities, the black Church is right to worry that these false universalisms would be further theological invasions by the ones who marginalized it in the first place. (Besides, black and womanist theology's commitments to the privileged, even critically unassailable status of their own people's experiences make either proposal a tough sell, especially coming from a white, male, American, *Republican* theologian!)

A more compelling reason for soteriological inclusiveness is the biblical frame in which Church traditions implicitly read their texts in order to support their particular visions of salvation. As we have already shown, is not merely a "white" hermeneutical strategy, but is built into the practical faith of the black Church. Williams brings the later and broader perspective of Galatians and Ephesians to her reading of the Hagar narratives, in locating families' wilderness experiences in a greater narrative that looks *beyond* wilderness to another time (160). Major Jones appeals to the entire scope of God's economy of salvation in answering the fundamental question of whether God is a white racist.

Here my own mainly white theological tradition offers an illustration. A century ago, evangelicals called the doctrine of penal-substitutionary atonement one of the five "fundamentals" essential to authentic Christian faith. This soteriology was often developed exclusivistically in evangelical theology.²⁸ Today, however, internal as well as external forces increasingly push evangelicals into affirming soteriologies of moral influence, victory, and deification. These usually

²⁸ For example, Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1941), 373-391.

take places alongside substitutionary atonement, often qualifying and informing it, and sometimes critiquing it.²⁹ We have learned to see them not as deformed branches of our vine that need to be removed to preserve our health, or alien branches that must be grafted in to save us from our own weaknesses, but as growths that we have been too quick to prune.

If pursued and followed, the internal logics and panoramic narrative contexts of the black and womanist theological traditions provide further divine gifts of what Williams calls “*new vision* to see survival and quality-of-life resources where we have seen none before” (203). They deepen and widen the liberation that Jones’ black Messiah brings those who suffer. They do this by pointing to a fuller appreciation of black faith that is *more than* survival, and *more than* liberation. They keep the black Church alive and flourishing and unceasingly restless until it receives what was promised (Heb. 11:39). Furthermore, these further gifts ultimately undercut both Jones’ blanket denial of the redemptive quality of suffering, and Williams’ denial of the soteriological value of the cross. Why? Because in their different ways, both the black and womanist traditions locate black men and women’s salvation *with respect to Israel*.

In Christ, the nations have histories that are both already theirs, and fundamentally new. The Bible’s primordial and patriarchal narratives announce that the creation of the nations, including both Israel and black America’s ancestors, is *protologically* significant: They are part of the plan. The Bible’s prophetic and apocalyptic narratives announce that God’s inclusion of the same nations in the faith of Israel is *eschatologically* significant: It is through Jacob that all will be blessed.

Thus, along with the first-century Jewish and Gentile Church, black Americans experience the Hebrews’ call, enslavement, liberation, wandering, conquest, apostasy, exile, return, and

²⁹ In my opinion, they rescue it.

apocalyptic future as *in some sense* their own.³⁰ They appropriate and remember signs and wonders past, and learn a confident expectation of signs and wonders to come. Rather than splintering divine liberation into an exodus and conquest for every nation, which would simply perpetuate the cycle of violence among peoples, the gospel emancipates the black Church through the *one* exodus Jesus accomplished at Jerusalem (Luke 9:31). The survival and liberation of the African-American nation, like that of all the nations, is its unearned but long promised share in the survival and liberation of the nation of Israel.³¹

Black and womanist theologies rightly reclaim and emphasize chapters of the Christian story that many comfortably lukewarm Christians have chosen not to hear. But the scope of Israel's story must eventually point black theology beyond securing liberation for the oppressed, and must point womanist theology beyond gaining resources for survival in the wilderness, because Israel's canonical story is only begun in its opening chapters of exodus and wandering.³² When these storytellers choose not to hear other chapters of what is after all still *their* story, or when they conduct theological "dialogues" with only some chapters and not others, they undermine their own places in the story.

Far from distorting that place in the story, election plays a vital part in framing it. Jones' soteriology of participation in Christ's blackness, and Williams' conviction that God's favor takes familial rather than narrowly ethnic shape, are actually quite close to a Pauline doctrine of election --

³⁰ Jones and Williams sometimes imply and others allege that African-American Christianity is incompatible with Pauline soteriology. But the black soteriology of incorporation into Israel matches Paul's hermeneutical strategy for the Corinthians. Because the nations are adopted into Israel when they are adopted into Christ, Paul can tell the mainly Gentile, uncircumcised Corinthian believers that "*our* ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea" (1 Cor. 10:1). This resemblance should give black theologians pause before they disown other Pauline tropes. See Williams, 4-5, 164; Jones, 98-99 (though without naming Paul). See also, for example, Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (Civitas, 2000), helpfully reviewed in "Dionysus and Jim Crow," *The New Republic* 223 (8/28 and 9/4/2000), 9-10:42-49, here 46.

³¹ God's act of inclusion thus blesses all people, whether they are narrated by powerful and sinful discourses, denarrated and atomized by modernity, or renarrated by postmodern acts of their own fragmented and misdirected wills.

³² Though for Williams wandering is first *Hagar's* wandering, in appropriating the Israelite and temptation narratives, her tradition identifies also with Israel's forty years of wilderness wanderings and Jesus' recapitulation of them.

when Romans and Ephesians are read as answering the question of Jewish/Gentile relations rather than offering individualized salvation-histories of justification by grace through faith, as they often are in the Lutheran and Reformed traditions.³³

Jones' vision demands that we understand that the meek, poor, and oppressed are happy (*makarioi*, Matt. 5:3-12 and Luke 6:20-23) not *because* they are oppressed, but by virtue of their Christlikeness. They belong to a body liberated in Christ's death and resurrection, brought together for its own edification in the Spirit, as a new creation in the midst of the old. God's abundance is for them, in a community overflowing with spiritual gifts. Williams' vision must respect that Hagar's story ends happily because of her relationship to Abraham, and not merely in spite of it: "As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring" (Gen. 21:13). This connection is not made clear to Hagar,³⁴ but it is clear to the reader: All the families of the earth, even the "non-elect," are beneficiaries of God's choices. This is so fully true that through faith biological Hagarenes can become children of promise, while through law biological Israelites can become children of slavery (Gal. 4:21-31).

Monday's Coming: Beyond Survival and Liberation

The biblical frame of both black and womanist claims brings us back to theodicy and deliverance, where we find that the different situations of God's needy people require and receive different resources. In the wilderness, evil's most pressing problem is the threat it poses to survival itself; and God's provision is *sustenance* -- water for Hagar's and Moses' people, food from Ishmael's bow and from heaven. In slavery, the question is whether God is fundamentally against Hagar or the Hebrews; and God's answer is the promise and fulfillment of life together in *freedom* for bedouin Ishmaelites and emancipated Israelites respectively. In the former case, this comes in God's gift of the social space needed to grow a nation away from Abraham's and Sarah's oppression. In the latter case, it comes through the liberating blood of paschal lambs, which point

³³ I justify these claims more fully in "Annunciation as Election," *Scottish Journal of Theology* (forthcoming), *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), and *The Reason for the Season: Christology through the Liturgical Year* (in progress).

³⁴ While Williams uses source criticism to keep this "Elohism" passage artificially separate from chapter 16's Yahwist passage (31), and even to imply that the god of Abraham and the god of Hagar may be different gods (22-29), this is surely not how African American women typically read Hagar's story!

back to a lamb God would provide to spare Jacob's life (Gen. 22:8), and forward to a lamb slain to ransom saints from every nation (Rev. 5:9).

Then, in freedom, theodicy gains new occasions, in the evil perpetuated *among* God's people. Soon after Abraham's promise is fulfilled, Ishmael mocks Isaac, laughing *at* the second-born son of laughter (Gen. 21:9, cf. Gen. 21:6). This calls down the wrath of the defensive mother through whose folly he was named (Gen. 18:12-15).³⁵ Soon after the exodus, the sins of newly freed Israel accumulate: Oppression of fellow Hebrews, oppression of new Canaanite neighbors (not all of which is divinely sanctioned, Deut. 16:9-12), and the oppression of God that is idolatry.

For Ishmael and his mother, deliverance comes as fellowship in Egypt (Gen. 21:21). For Israel, it comes as a Law to preserve the nation's holiness, and a sacrificial system that cleanses it after the Law is violated. To be a liberated people is to be under a *new, just* master (cf. Rom. 6-7). After the gospel of exodus comes the law of Sinai. The survival strategy for wilderness wanderings includes the legal and priestly resources that continue to regulate the new life in and out of the Promised Land. When the new master's law is broken and the cycle of violence is unleashed *inside* the camp, the law demands reconciliation. This takes the form of sacrifice -- even the sacrifice of innocent blood in exchange for the lives of the guilty. The tabernacle and temple are systems for the liberation needed *after* liberation. They *maintain* God's identification with the oppressed after they themselves engage in oppression. They are resources of *reconciliation*. They point forward to the cross, which now liberates not as Israel's paschal lambs liberated the innocent, but as its sin offerings liberated the guilty.

This is the world and the Israel into which Jesus is born, suffers, and rises again.

³⁵ Williams does not develop this pun in the narrative, instead focusing on Sarah's repression in terms of the threat Ishmael posed to Isaac's inheritance (cf. 27-28). The effect is a clean distinction between victor and victim. Yet the text presents Ishmael's "playing" (*mtsakheq*, "laughing") as the occasion for Hagar's and his exile, and Paul interprets Ishmael's action as persecution (Gal. 4:29). This is the depressing moral ambiguity of a troubled household.

Israel's history in and out of its promised land, before Jesus' ministry and in its wake, proves that survival and liberation ultimately depend on reconciliation as much as reconciliation depends on them. How then do law, sin, and priesthood work among the liberated *black* people of God? Here black theology grows quiet. Cone and Wilmore's two-volume *Black Theology: A Documentary History* pays remarkably little attention to life *after exodus*. It offers much liberation, but precious little law.³⁶ In concentrating on the event of justification, it marginalizes the processes of sanctification.³⁷

For instance, Joseph A. Johnson, Jr. claims that Jesus' ministry liberates those on the fringe of society: the sick, the possessed, the gentiles, and even the guilty, "the prostitutes, the thieves, the murderers, the robbers." Johnson passes over the most problematic group of all -- the tax collectors -- but his point remains, that Jesus is the liberator of all. Yet how can liberation happen after God's people have themselves engaged in further oppression? Johnson says that Jesus "makes himself accessible to those who need him."³⁸ But from where comes his accessibility to the guilty? (And what about those *not* on society's fringes?)

This theological and practical vacuum has understandable historical reasons, in black theology's reaction to a history of whites characterizing themselves as "noble, manly, wise, strong, courageous" and characterizing blacks as "patient, long-suffering, humble, self-effacing, considerate, submissive, childlike, [and] meek."³⁹ Arranged in this way, both white and black "virtues" excused and even glorified systematic oppression. In reclaiming the former virtues, black theology should not abandon the latter ones. They are no less crucial to forgiveness and

³⁶ Perhaps this comes from black theology's birth as a reaction to the integrationism of Martin Luther King, Jr., which is deeply interested in the ethical shape of life after liberation.

³⁷ Evans characterizes Cone's central concern as justification of the oppressed before God and the grounding of true humanity in the freely given acceptance of the oppressed by God -- "autonomy," and Roberts' as sanctification of the oppressed in their relationships with God and the human family -- "community." These are two functions of *empowerment* (112). Evans himself proceeds to concentrate on liberation.

³⁸ Joseph A. Johnson, Jr., "Jesus, the Liberator," in Cone and Wilmore, 1:203-213, here 212.

³⁹ Kyle Haselden, *The Racial Problem in Christian Perspective* (New York: Herper & Row, 1959), 42-43, quoted by Joseph A. Johnson, Jr. in Cone and Wilmore, 207.

reconciliation.⁴⁰ In rejecting a white *theologia gloriae*, black theologians have constructed a black one of their own. What can it offer when the violence is black-on-black?

What the black Church can offer is what the black Church already has: a robust soteriology of solidarity, survival, liberation, and reconciliation. The first Christians found many metaphors for the cross, which reflect many dimensions of salvation.⁴¹ Each echoes earlier chapters in the world's history of salvation, and depends on other dimensions for its health. The black Church has in different visionaries and different ages appreciated all of them.

One, a means of identification, takes up the imagery of God's presence in the tabernacle (John 1:14-18), envisioning the cross as the incarnate God's universal communion with sinning and sinned-against humanity. This is the basis of Roberts' twofold soteriology of liberation and reconciliation.⁴²

Another, a means of survival and healing, takes on two Johannine images. The first is the serpent Moses lifts up in the wilderness for healing (John 3:14), a type that foreshadows the cross conferring healing and life on the world (John 3:15-17). The second is the manna in the wilderness, a type that proclaims Jesus' crucified flesh and blood as bread from heaven (John 6:31) that again gives life to the world (John 6:32). The wilderness context for these images makes them obvious points of contact between the cross and womanist soteriology: They are given precisely to those who are born in slavery, homeless, landless, surrounded by enemies, and utterly dependent upon God for the next day's subsistence -- the "people who are no people."

⁴⁰ See Gregory L. Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

⁴¹ James Wm. McClendon, Jr. describes the "atonement theories" of Christian soteriology as Wittgensteinian "metaphors." See *Systematic Theology: Doctrine* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 199-213.

⁴² Roberts in Cone and Wilmore, 121-122: "The Incarnation is the Atonement."

Still another, a means of victory, takes on the imagery of Passover (1 Cor. 5), envisioning the cross as freeing captive Israel and recreating a people holy to God. This is the image with which black theology consistently resonates (for instance, in the work of James H. Cone).⁴³

A fourth, a means of sacrifice, takes up the imagery of sin offerings and Temple, envisioning the cross as freeing sinners through the shedding of innocent blood.⁴⁴ As we have seen, Jones rejects this vision by translating it in interracial categories, as a claim that the cross would free whites by the blood of blacks. Williams rejects it as endorsing a surrogacy that would interpret black women's suffering as redemptive and sacred. But (to answer Jones) the Temple was not an institution for forgiving Canaanite or Babylonian or Roman sins through Jewish blood; it was an institution for atoning for *Jewish* sins through the blood of animals. While Romans punished Jesus -- in part for being Jewish -- God did not. Rather, Jesus took on the sin of his people as a living sacrifice, at the Jordan and at Golgotha, and God accepted that sacrifice, liberating and exalting both the chosen Son (Luke 9:35) and the chosen people he represents. Likewise (to answer Williams), while Sarah punished Hagar -- in part for being Egyptian? -- God did not. Rather, God had mercy on her and heard her son's cry, turning exile into opportunity, out of fidelity to the promise to his chosen Abraham. Furthermore, the Temple was not an alternative to righteousness that allowed sinners to continue life as usual, but a sign of new righteousness that made a life of sin unthinkable. We would better translate Israel's sacrificial cult by claiming that the sacrifices of innocent animals maintained the holiness of *black America*, disinfecting it from the depravity of white America.

Temple practice culminated in one, and only one, atoning human sacrifice, which did not merely rehearse the old sacrificial arrangements and endorse their contradictions, but superseded the

⁴³ See for instance, "The White Church and Black Power," in Jones and Wilmore, 1:68-69.

⁴⁴ It is *perhaps* this sense that Cone can affirm in citing Mark 10:45's "ransom for many" as evidence that God's freedom for the poor is more than the liberation of slaves from bondage. See "Biblical Revelation and Social Existence," in Cone and Wilmore, 1:173.

system by resolving them. That sacrifice was performed not *by* a high priest against the victim's will, but *of* a high priest *according to* his will. Its most important feature is also its closest parallel with the old system: It was not performed on behalf of the innocent, but of the guilty (Rom. 8:3-4). This act reconciled Israel so fully to God that it rendered the sacrificial system not only unhelpful but misleading (Heb. 5-10), and opened a way even for the nations to enjoy God's blessings. The sacrifice of the cross is not a justification for lynchings, but an act of radical inclusion that warns the world never to lynch again in light of God's vindication of Jesus its victim.⁴⁵

"Friday's here," the black Church has long reminded itself, "but Sunday's coming." The statement comes from the heart of a black Church for which the death and resurrection of Jesus is its metanarrative. Black American Christians are carrying their crosses, hopeful of their present and coming vindication. "The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). Yet the middle chapters of Israel's saga, and the days after Ascension and Pentecost, remind us all that *Monday* is coming too - - a day after liberation, when yesterday's victims become today's repentant sinners.⁴⁶ It is on that day that freed slaves and mothers surviving on the margin learn that they too are capable of injustice, and that the life of their people depends on both law and forgiveness. It is on that day that they find a new taste in the blood they drink at Church -- the taste of freedom even for oppressors.

The common lesson of these visions of atonement is not simply that the work of Christ is multidimensional, nor simply that different people may legitimately identify with different aspects of God's work on their behalf.⁴⁷ It is that the coherence and happy resolution of the narratives of

⁴⁵ Cf. Patterson.

⁴⁶ Cf. Roberts in Cone and Wilmore, 1:119: "I do not accept Black liberation versus White oppression as an adequate formula to cover the human condition of estrangement. Therefore, I do not hesitate to suggest liberation between Blacks and Blacks as well as between Blacks and Whites. It is unwise to make these structures too ironclad, for suppose the oppressed became the liberated? What happens to our theology then?"

⁴⁷ It is on these grounds that Wilmore is open to other visions of atonement, affirming that there may be "several valid approaches to the One Eternal God," even white ones. See "Black Power, Black People, Theological Renewal," in Jones and Wilmore, 1:132.

God's people depend upon the harmonious interplay of all of these visions of salvation (along with others), in order to bring survival *and* liberation *and* forgiveness *and* reconciliation to people in different stages of need. Only a soteriology of careful harmony can affirm what Miroslav Volf calls "solidarity in sin" without mistaking it for "equality of sin."⁴⁸ Jesus' death and resurrection bring *new life* for the dying, *vindication* for the innocent, *amnesty* for the guilty, and *peace* for all.

This harmony of soteriologies is not a *confusion* of soteriologies. It is crucial to the exodus story not to turn Passover into a sin offering. Any soteriology that relies too heavily on a satisfaction theory of atonement (as feudal, colonial, and postcolonial European soteriologies conveniently have) risks doing just that. It levels the world into a mass of common guilt, falsely condemns those "Hebrews" God has judged and acquitted, and showers a cheap grace on "Egyptian" oppressors that leaves them unjustified, unreconciled, unholy, unsaved. Jones' and Williams' rejections of redemptive suffering have great force against such soteriologies. Their critiques point non-liberation theologies toward more discerning theodicies and accounts of suffering, and toward more just visions of providence. But the converse is also true: It is equally dangerous to reduce salvation to a paschal acquittal of the innocent. This would polarize communities into camps of apparently absolute "Hebrew" innocence and "Egyptian" guilt, overlook the sins of the "communally innocent," nullify guilty verdicts on the basis of the apparent victimhood of perpetrators, and leave hardened oppressors no recourse but further oppression and renewed cycles of violence.

Conclusion

The needs around Jesus were obvious: sight to the blind, life to the dead, good news to the poor, a second chance to the unjust. And each group received just what they needed. Soteriology has been unable to settle on one controlling metaphor or theory, because so many different ailments

⁴⁸ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 81-82.

require so many different treatments. In rejecting the family of satisfaction and substitution theories, Jones and Williams rightfully hold up the experiences of their own groups as privileged glimpses of God's mercy in forms unknown, or even unacceptable, to others. So a grateful beggar once responded to the inquisitors who would not believe his story:

They called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (John 9:25).

Truly hearing such voices demands a thorough reconsideration of the supposedly "catholic" soteriological traditions that have ignored and silenced them. The perspectives of black, feminist, womanist, and other theologies of survival and liberation hold radical consequences for any community willing to listen to their testimonies.⁴⁹

Even so, Jesus' mercy could take unexpected forms. "He said to the paralytic, 'My son, your sins are forgiven'" (Mark 2:5). People cannot always identify what ails them, and the physician knows what we need better than we do (Matt. 6:8). Furthermore, the divine therapy takes different forms over the course of the processes of healing that are Christian lives. At times, the unctio of survival is enough (Mark 1:13). But mere survival is never *finally* enough. At times even the exhilaration of liberation is not enough (Rom. 6:22). Faith looks forward to perfection (Heb. 11:1, 40). The Catholic tradition respects this with an intricate taxonomy of grace, and a sacramental system that meets people at many different points of need. Protestant Orthodoxy respects this in an order of salvation that narrates every stage of a typical Christian life.

The Church's memory of God, both biblical and extrabiblical, is a compendium of little memories, redacted, collected, and canonized to respect the metanarrative in which all of these

⁴⁹ Here political correctness should not deafen us to all the *other* new testimonies from free churches, missionaries, Pentecostals, and indigenous Christian communities, as well as the testimonies of the more traditionally faithful, whose connections to the liberal academy are more tenuous and whose politics break the taboos of post-sixties liberalism. On some theological campuses, these are the marginal ones!

micronarratives have their place. The blind man of John 9 finds his experience contextualized in the narrative vision of the fourth evangelist, whose vision is contextualized alongside the first three as the Bible's gospels. There his voice becomes louder, not softer, echoing through every canonical page. Likewise, in African America God has been telling more than short stories. God has given this people parts in *the* story. If its otherwise laudable favoritism for particular scenes and characters makes it ignore their wider narrative, its "gospel" will fail to sustain, liberate, reconcile, or glorify. For the story's main character is a God of *both* the wilderness and the exodus, of both the desert and the New Jerusalem. This God both liberates those who survive, and forgives those who oppress after their liberation, while commanding them to forgive in return.

It is this panoramic perspective of the Bible's collective vision that the black Church has historically embraced (though, *pace* Mays, not always all at once). When one group's privileged account of salvation becomes a truncated, totalizing discourse, it fails even those privileged to have experienced it firsthand. But within the black Messiah's fellowship of mutual trust, people *can* know things they have not personally experienced ("blessed are those who have not seen and still believe," John 20:29). In is on such assurances of things hoped for that the conviction of black, and every other, Christian faith is built: "Friday's here, but Sunday's coming."