

2

THE SLAVE NARRATIVES AS A SOURCE OF BLACK THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE: THE SPIRIT AND ESCHATOLOGY

GEORGE C. L. CUMMINGS

In all the books that you have studied, you never have studied Negro history, have you? You studied about the Indians and white folks, but what did they tell you about the Negro? If you want Negro history, you will have to get it from somebody who wore the shoe, and by and by from one to the other, you will get a book.

(Mr. Reed, former slave)

The challenge of contemporary black theological discourse in the United States is to determine the values, symbols, and images from the black experience that will empower the contemporary black liberation struggle. The challenge to continue to devise a black theology that is distinctively grounded in the historical experience of African American people has been articulated in a variety of contexts.¹ The aim of this essay is to contribute to contemporary black theology in the United States by engaging in the process of utilizing the slave narratives as a source for theological ideas and interpreting the significance of the Spirit and the eschatology in them.

of freedom; and physical manifestations of being possessed by the Spirit. In the midst of the dialectic of struggle and hope black slaves attributed their hope to the Spirit of God. Of those who survived slavery, no one expressed a sense of self-hood better than George Cato:

Yes sah! I sho does come from dat old stock who had de misfortune to be slaves, but who decided to be men, at one and de same time, and I'se proud of it.²¹

The slaves' accounts of their encounters with the presence of the power of God in the Spirit and of the significance of these visions provide us with insight into their courage, hope, and extraordinary heroism in the face of suffering and oppression. Their encounters with the Spirit became the basis of their eschatological hope in the God who would ensure their future.

ESCHATOLOGY IN THE SLAVE NARRATIVES

The eschatological hopes that emerge from these interviews reflect a connection between the presence of the Spirit of God and the hopes and aspirations of the slave community. My aim here is to engage in the descriptive/interpretive task as the slaves tell their story. As much as eschatology, traditionally, has been defined as that which constitutes the basis of human hope, then Carl Braaten correctly asserts:

The meaningfulness of Christian eschatology depends on its structural correspondence to the factor of hope in human life. Eschatology promises fulfillment; hope presupposes something lacking. Human beings hope for what they lack. If we are in bondage, we hope for deliverance; if we sit in darkness, we hope for light. The lack may be described by such metaphors as illness, darkness, slavery, alienation, lostness, exile, even death. It is the mission of hope to respond to a situation of distress by sending out a signal for help.²²

As noted earlier, the presence of the Spirit was seen by slaves as the basis for their prayers for freedom "someday," and they

were willing to engage, on the basis of that hope, in acts of defiance against masters who had the power of life and death over them, in order to obey God, affirm their rights as human beings, and in some cases escape from slavery. Anderson Edwards tells of the content of his preaching in the presence of his master, on the one hand, and in his absence, on the other:

I've been preaching the gospel and farming since slavery time. I jined the chu'ch eighty-three years ago, when I was a slave of Master Gaud. Till freedom, I had to preach what they told me to. Master made me preach to the other niggers that the good book say that if niggers obey their master, they would go to heaven. I knew there was something better for them, but I darsen't tell them so, 'lest I done it on the sly. That I done lots. I told the niggers — but not so master could hear it — that if they keep praying the Lord would hear their prayers and set them free.²³

The tension of living amid despair and hope, hopelessness and courage, powerlessness and expectant optimism is immediately evident in his testimony. The clash between optimism and pessimism was resolved in knowing that “there was something better for them,” which resulted in the subversive message that if they prayed God would answer their prayers and bring freedom. God had revealed that there was a future of freedom for them that was guaranteed by the presence of the Spirit.

Evidently, Anderson Edwards had an eschatological hope that grounded his preaching and activity in the Spirit. He continued,

Master had told us that if we be good niggers and obey him that we would go to heaven. But I felt all the time there was something better for me. So I kept praying for it till I felt the change in my heart. I was by myself down by a spring when I found the Lord.²⁴

According to Edwards's testimony, his encounter with the Spirit of the Lord and consequent change of heart is primordially linked to his hope for freedom and a transformed future.

Yearning for freedom, praying for freedom, preaching for freedom, and working for freedom were concrete expressions of the eschatological views of the slaves and of their life in the Spirit.

John Crawford, a Mississippi ex-slave, explained that he believed that his mother's prayers were based on a hope that was realized in Abraham Lincoln:

At night in our little log cabin in the quarters Mammy bring the wash pot out of the yard an set it in the middle of the floor and she laugh and cry and sing a little, then she puts her head down in the pot clear to her shoulders and mumbles. We chilluns say "What you sayin' Mammy?" She say "I'm prayin' for the freedom" . . . strangest thing is that while Mammy was in her spell of prayin' that a little boy was eight-year old up North who grew up and set the niggers free.²⁵

In addition to the views that linked the promise of freedom and hope for the future with the life of the Spirit, the slaves had special views on the presence of the eschaton and its future fulfillment. In other words, they knew something about heaven and hell, as well as of who would occupy each place. Uncle George King believed that hell was the plantation where he had been born in South Carolina, and that the devils there had been white people. The interviewer explains that Uncle George will

tell you that he was born on two hundred acres of hell, but the white folks called it Samuel Roll's Plantation . . . [with] plenty room for that devil overseer to lay on the lash and plenty room for the old she-devil mistress to whip mammy til' she was just a piece of living raw meat.²⁶

For George King hell and devils were a present reality in his concrete historical experience. Another ex-slave spoke of being present at the deathbed of his master and having the master tell them "to bring him seven thousand dollars to pay [his] way out of hell" and commenting that his master "coudn'ta got out of hell, the way he beat my mammy."²⁷ Jack Maddox expressed

similar views during an interview in which he and his wife Rosa shared their experiences:

Yes, I was born a slave and so was Rosa. We got out of the chattel slavery, an I was better for getting out, but Rosa don't think so. . . . She say her white folks were good to her. But don't you expect me to love my white folks. I love them like a dog loves hickory. I was settin' here thinking the other night 'bout the talk of them kind of white folks going to heaven. Lord God, they'd turn the heaven wrong side out and have the angels working to make something they could take away from them. I can say these things now. I'd say them anywhere—in the courthouse, before the judges, before God. 'Cause they done done all to me that they can do.²⁸

Heaven was viewed as a place of eternal rest where “someday . . . we'll be free of the yoke of bondage.” Their hope was to be free. Slave testimony viewed death, heaven, and escape as possibilities for alleviating their great burden of bondage; their persistent hope for the future was tied to their faith in God. What would the future be like for black oppressed slaves?

Perhaps the word *reversal* is the best description. Heaven was to be a reversal of the present order. In the present they had no home, but in heaven they did. “My Lord! Po' mourner's got a home at las'. Mourner's got a home at las'.” In the present they were enslaved, but in heaven freedom awaited. “And before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be free.” Moreover, the easy freedom of the white slave holder would be reversed. Frederick Douglass claims “slaves knew enough of the orthodox theology of the time to consign all bad slave holders to hell.”²⁹ That is, the future eschaton meant judgment by a just God: “You shall reap what you sow.”

The future meant mercy for slaves and retribution for their masters. In fact, sometimes they were very specific about the reversal of the present order of exploitation, saying that in the life to come there would be black and white people, but the white people would be slaves and the black people would have

dominion over them. However, the most basic and commonly expressed aspect of the reversal in the narratives and conversion stories is that God will turn death into life, a life of freedom and justice.

It is this future reversal that aroused discontent and made the present subject to radical change. The exciting vision of what was to come released the power of the future into their lives, bringing not only the strength to survive but also the courage to strive toward freedom. The eschaton was not an opiate; it functioned proleptically. The transcendent future was also the present. The “home over yonder” and the “promised land” of the spirituals were for the slaves both an “otherworldly” promise and a “this worldly” hope for freedom.

In fact, when the slaves sang words like “O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan,” it is often hard to distinguish whether they meant life after death or a freed life in the North or back in Africa. One simply has to conclude that both meanings were intended, that they anticipated the future in the present, and that the future was occurring ahead of time, that is, proleptically. This is beautifully expressed in the words of Harriet Tubman when she gained her freedom in the North. “I looked at my hands to see if I was de same person now I was free. Dere was such a glory ober de fields, and I felt like I was in heaven.”³⁰

That the transforming power of the final future was experienced proleptically by the slaves is most evident in the slave conversion stories from the book *God Struck Me Dead*. The experience of being “struck dead” was a proleptic experience. With “death” came the end and the future reversal. In the conversion stories it is as if the Spirit transports them from their present strife to the end and they see, hear, and feel God’s act of deliverance. For example, in the story “Waist-Deep in Death,” we find this passage:

Then God took me off. I experienced death, the way I’m going to die. . . . I heard groaning while in hell. Then he lead me into the greener pastures.³¹

The experience of being led through a judgment scene and then arriving in heaven is common. The passage from the conversion story “God Struck Me Dead” is perhaps the most telling:

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost led me on to glory. I saw God sitting in a big armchair. I saw the lamb's book of life and my name written on it. A voice spoke to me and said, "Whosoever my son sets free is free indeed. I give you a through ticket from hell to heaven. Go into yonder world and be not afraid, neither be dismayed, for you are an elect child and ready for the fold."³²

The future salvation and liberation of the person is truly experienced. The freedom of the end becomes real in the present. And with this proleptic experience of heaven comes the call to go back unafraid into "yonder world," the world of oppression. The experience of heaven, that one is an elect child and free, gives strength to continue in the struggle. The call to go back to do God's will, after the conversion experience, is also common in the stories.³³ Therefore, the conversion experience was inseparable from the present.

THE SPIRIT AND ESCHATOLOGY IN THE SLAVE NARRATIVES

Black theology asserts the priority of the black experience of enslavement and a struggle for liberation as the starting point of black theological discourse. Close scrutiny of the slave narratives shows that they can provide the raw material for an interpretation of the Spirit and eschatology in the slave narratives. The slave testimonies to the Spirit and eschatology entail a complex web of counter-hegemonic religio-cultural traditions that constituted the basis of their hope for a transformed future.³⁴ In addition, the slave narratives testify to the persistence of hope, human dignity, and self-affirmation that bear witness to the presence of the Spirit of God. This was the *pneumatōs* (God's Spirit), a liberating presence which created and sustained the will of an enslaved people against those people and institutions that perpetrated the exploitation of African American chattel. Whereas hegemonic religion and culture defined them as less than human, counter-hegemonic traditions functioned as an oppositional force, affirming their humanity and sustaining their hope. There are several dimensions of the Spirit's presence in the slave community that are evident in the testimonies.

The spirit of the Lord was revealed in the radical affirmation

of slave autonomy and independence manifest in the slaves' willingness to defy their oppressors in order to serve God. Religious life became a context for the affirmation of one's humanity by praying for freedom, shouting and dancing, holding secret meetings, and disobeying the oppressor. In the context of worship the black oppressed, who had no autonomy during the rest of their weekly routines, expressed themselves physically by dancing and running or orally by shouting. In this communal context black slaves discovered the sense of human self-worth that led them to reject the white oppressors' definition of them. The Spirit of the Lord allowed black slaves to transcend the horizon of their immediate experiences and to hope for a future in which they would be free. Freedom was not an abstract concept but a concrete hope that led them to hope and work for historical freedom. The significance of their expectations of hope and justice are to be found in the promissory character of God's eschatological presence in their community.

Some black slaves who had encountered the Spirit became entranced, danced, shouted, and then ran "clear off," and never returned. The Spirit of God sustained their aspirations as they prayed "someday, someday . . . this yoke will be lifted," and the Spirit was reflected in their ability to confront creatively their circumstances by creating new instruments of survival and liberation. They created the spirituals, one slave commented, because they had been revealed to them.³⁵ In addition, the Spirit nurtured respect and love in the oppressed community. This highlights the importance of the communal aspect of God's Spirit as it was evidenced in the manner and quality of human relationships within the slave community. The spirit of justice emerged in the slave testimonies as they bear witness to their own judgments concerning justice, righteousness, and good. Masters and mistresses who whipped human beings until they were raw flesh were devils who would go to hell, and they wouldn't be able to buy their way out of it. The witness of the narratives is to the Spirit of the Lord as the one who provided them with the faith to dance. The Spirit was the living and dynamic presence of God the Liberator erupting through the culture, religion, and history of the black oppressed in their struggle for freedom.

Concomitantly, the eschatological hopes and aspirations of the slave community became evident in the Spirit who guarantees the future as one of freedom and justice. The transfiguring presence of the Spirit of the Lord validated the will to freedom found in their testimonies. There is an immanent character to the slave testimonies concerning their visions of freedom. The eschatological views linked their ardent expectations of God's future with their historical struggle for freedom. Faith and hope, expressed in the radical affirmation of autonomy and independence in the slave community, express the ultimate vision of God's future of freedom. Within the meaning-world of the black slave there was an affirmation of the intersection of transcendence and immanence, such that the Holy Ghost could make black slaves escape to freedom. Their heavenly expectations profoundly shaped their earthly aspirations and activities. John White witnesses that the slaves "say the Lord told them to run away, get to the North."³⁶

The eschatological expectations shared in the slave testimonies showed that their encounter with the Spirit of the Lord enabled them to evolve a critique of racism and racists, dream a grand vision of freedom, nurture communal relationships, fight for freedom, defend each other, affirm their humanity, and hear the melody of the future with such clarity that they literally, in faith, were prepared at great cost to dance to the melody of the future by acting in the present to create it. "Strangest thing," said ex-slave John Crawford, "is that while Mammy was in her spell of prayin' that a little boy was eight-year old up North who grew up and set the niggers free."³⁷

IMPLICATIONS FOR A CONTEMPORARY BLACK THEOLOGY (USA)

From the perspective of contemporary black theology in the United States, the heart of Christian expectation and hope is that the oppressed One of God—the resurrected One—whose presence is celebrated in the community of faith, is the one who is witnessed to in the slave narratives as the Spirit of the Lord.

The hermeneutical basis for linking Jesus of Nazareth, and his message concerning the reign of God, with the manifestation of God as Liberator in black history and black culture, is pneumatology. This is the methodological ground whereby the black