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# WE HAVE BEEN BELIEVERS

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*An African-American  
Systematic Theology*

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suggests, points to a reversal of fortunes. The Christian message declares that God in Christ is both our past and our future. Karl Barth suggested that “our memory of God accompanies us always as problem and warning. He is the hidden abyss; but He is also the hidden home at the beginning and end of all our journeyings.”<sup>3</sup> Hope, then, is the recognition and affirmation that God is the beginning and the end, that Jesus is the alpha and the omega. Hope is the redemption of history.

### History and Hope in African-American Experience

Slavery is the watershed event in African-American thinking on history and hope. The experience of slavery demanded a reshaping of traditional concepts of time, human destiny, life, death, immortality, and so forth. Ironically, the exploration of the meaning of slavery for African-American eschatological thought has often been more thoroughly examined by African-American creative writers than by theologians. Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, for example, chronicles the attempts of African-Americans to work through the horrors of slavery so that hope might be rejuvenated.

Eschatology in African-American theological discourse has been so often misunderstood because its content is essentially the realignment of the history and hope of black Christians. African-American Christians have thought of eschatology not just in terms of impending future doom, but also in light of what Mircea Eliade called “the terror of history.” Thus an adequate understanding of eschatology in African-American theological discourse requires a consideration of African notions of time and history and the adjustments that African slaves in the United States made in light of the Christian message and their situation of bondage.

In his groundbreaking work *African Religions and Philosophy*, John S. Mbiti examines the distinctive features of the notion of time from an African perspective. For the African mind, time is not a metaphysical concept. Thus there is no thought given to time as an academic concern. Africans think of time in relation to events that have occurred or that are likely to occur in the immediate future:

The most significant consequence of this is that, according to traditional concepts, time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually no future. The linear concept of time in western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite future, is practically foreign to African thinking. The future is virtually absent because events which lie in it have not taken place, they have not been realized and cannot, therefore, constitute time.<sup>4</sup>

The African mind, then, is focused more on the past than on the extended future. This is because time and events have to be experienced in order to be real. Time is not dissociated from events. Rather, it is a commodity or currency that owes its value to the coming and going of events. This, according to Mbiti, explains the absence of numerical calendars in traditional African societies. Time, for the African, is not to be lent or spent. The legendary and anecdotal resistance of African peoples to Western notions of punctuality and temporal expediency points to a different notion of time. Mbiti refers to this as "waiting for time" or "producing time" rather than wasting time.<sup>5</sup>

Because time is reckoned backward rather than forward, eternity for the African mind lies in the past rather than the future. The depth dimension of experience for the African lies in what has occurred rather than in what will occur. Whatever future there is for the traditional African mindset has to be virtually experienced to be real. Just as the immediate future is dependent upon the present, the present is dependent upon the past. The past, which Mbiti refers to as *Zamani*, is "the period of myth." This means that its meaning is not exhausted once its chronological life is over, but that the past continues to live in the present. The present, which Mbiti refers to as *Sasa*, is solidly founded on the past.

The thoroughly modern notion of historical progress, which has been so essential to the development of Western societies, is not part of traditional African thought.

In traditional African thought, there is no concept of history moving "forward" toward a future climax, or toward an end of the world. Since the future does not exist beyond a few months, the future cannot be expected to usher in a golden age, or a radically different state of affairs from what is in the *Sasa* and the *Zamani*. The notion of a messianic hope, or a final destruction of the world, has no place in [the] traditional concept of history. So African peoples have no "belief in progress," the idea that the development of human activities and achievements move from a low to a higher degree.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas in modern Western societies *utopia*, or *the Golden Age*, lies in the yet to be realized future, in traditional African societies they lie in the past.

On the level of the individual, these notions of time reflect the relation between the person and the rhythm of nature. The rhythm "includes birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, procreation, old age, death, entry into the community of the departed and finally entry into the company of spirits."<sup>7</sup> Two of the more important aspects of this understanding of time are the meaning of physical death and the meaning of space and time. In traditional African societies, the death of a member of the community does not portend the end of life but the passage

from one phase of participation in the community to another. When a person dies he or she lives on as part of the community as long as relatives and friends remember his or her name. These remembered ones, or ancestors, participate in a kind of personal immortality. When that person's name is no longer remembered — because there is no one left alive who remembers him or her by name — the process of dying is finally accomplished. However, the no-longer-remembered ones are not vanquished from the community. They are then referred to as the living dead and enter into a state of collective immortality. The participation of the ancestors and the living dead in the life of the community, along with the supreme value placed on procreation and the birth of children, means that the community in African traditional thought is held together by the power of ancient memory and immediate anticipation.

Mbiti observes that “space and time are closely linked, and often the same word is used for both.”<sup>8</sup> This means that one cannot speak meaningfully of time in the African sense without also speaking of the meaning of sacred space:

Africans are particularly tied to the land, because it is the concrete expression of both their Zamani and their Sasa. The land provides them with the roots of existence, as well as binding them mystically to their departed. People walk on the graves of their forefathers, and it is feared that anything separating them from these ties will bring disaster to family and community life. To remove Africans by force from their land is an act of such great injustice that no foreigner can fathom it.<sup>9</sup>

The traditional African, then, is linked to land and ancestors along a specific space-time continuum. Although there is a danger of idealizing traditional African concepts, Mbiti concludes his analysis with the observation that the impact of Christianity upon the African has been both profound and enduring. In terms of the influence of Christian ideas of eschatology on African concepts of time Mbiti suggests that the conflicting visions of time and history may be responsible for the political instability of African nations.<sup>10</sup> While the advent of the idea of a distant future may have great potential for the African, it can also be the harbinger of tragedy and disillusionment.<sup>11</sup>

Mbiti outlines the significance of African notions of time for Christian eschatology in his work *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*.<sup>12</sup> He concludes that the absence of the idea of an extended future among Africans significantly affected the reception of eschatological preaching by missionaries. To say that Jesus was coming soon meant to the African that his arrival could be expected almost immediately. Since even the missionaries did not believe this, Africans had to make cognitive adjustments in their appropriation of the Christian faith.

With the onset of the slave trade traditional African notions of time and history ran headlong into European concepts. The crisis engendered by this encounter is described in such narratives as *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. In essence, the African concept of cyclical time contrasted with the European concept of linear time. In order to make sense of the tragic and cataclysmic events of kidnapping and the Middle Passage, enslaved Africans were compelled to move "from a conceptualization of time that rejects change to one that is able to embrace change and thus potentially at least lend it order."<sup>13</sup> While the European emphasis on the unique and unrepeatable character of each moment provided a place, in the scheme of things, for the unspeakable horror suffered by the slave, the human relationship to time was quite different from that found in traditional African thought. In the Western mode, the human relationship to time "typically becomes one of individual ownership, a relationship reflected in idioms that show that, as the saying goes, time is money: the object of private ownership, it can be spent, wasted, lost, found, taken or stolen like so many gold doubloons."<sup>14</sup> Time, having become a currency of sorts, is taken out of the hands of the enslaved African. Thus in addition to a physical dislocation, the enslaved African also experienced a kind of "temporal dispossession." From that point on, African-Americans have lived with accusations of "bad timing" whenever their liberation struggle threatened the dominant order.

An example of this is found in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." In responding to his critics regarding the prudence of his nonviolent protests in the South, King observed, "I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was 'well timed' in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation."<sup>15</sup> In King's view the reason that his adversaries are unable to understand the urgency that African-Americans feel in their quest for the full rights of citizenship is rooted in conflicting notions of time. In answering the frequent refrain that the acquisition of equal rights by African-Americans would happen eventually, King states,

I had hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth concerning time in relation to the struggle for freedom. . . . Such an attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively. More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. . . . We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.<sup>16</sup>

This response reflects the seizure of time by the oppressed as part of the their liberation struggle and the adjustments that African-Americans

made to alien conceptualizations of time. Black people in the New World were able to hold in a necessary tension both traditional African and newly encountered European ideas regarding time. As Bonnie J. Barthold observes,

The balance that has been achieved between traditional African culture and Western influence reflects an essential facet of African culture: its well-documented capacity to absorb foreign influence into existing institutions. There is no single explanation for this ability, which in fact preceded Western influence in Africa.<sup>17</sup>

Concomitantly, African-Americans have been able to hold on to facets of traditional culture — including ideas about time — as a form of rebellion against oppression.

In addition to different notions of time, enslaved Africans had attitudes toward the past different from their enslavers. For its enfranchised inhabitants “the New World was a place of new fortunes, new hope, new identity, where new ideas could be put into practice with minimal impediment. The past could be scuttled.”<sup>18</sup> This sentiment found more contemporary expression in the expansion of laissez-faire capitalism into the hinterland of potential markets. It was in this context that the industrialist Henry Ford once declared that “history is bunk.” This new hope and the rejection of the past by a people seeking liberation from the tradition-bound societies of feudal Europe were intricately linked to their squatters’ claim to ownership of an untamed and supposedly uninhabited land. In essence, their new hope was tied to their new land. African slaves, on the other hand, had been robbed of both their past and their homeland. In their place was a history of degradation and a land not their own. Thus the content of any meaningful eschatological discourse in the African-American context must take into account the attempts to murder that history and reclaim their land.

The conditions of slavery in the United States made it often impossible or imprudent for African slaves to speak directly of their hopes. They were compelled to find a language that would unmistakably express their hopes for a reversal in their fortunes and at the same time conceal that message from the slaveowners. The apocalyptic language found in the Bible was a ready vehicle. Its striking and colorful images of a radically different future, while rejected by most post-Enlightenment Christian communities, were the cornerstone of African-American public Christian discourse. Talk of rapture, heaven, pearly gates, and winged saints fills African-American folklore and still heavily influences preaching in some African-American churches.

There are at least three reasons that apocalyptic language suited the purposes of newly converted African Christians in slavery. First, this

language reflected an ancient cosmology that put God firmly in charge of the universe. Second, it was consistent with the political interests of the oppressed people whom God promised to deliver. Third, this language was the expressive vehicle for the imagination of people convinced of their future liberation. This language did more, however, than simply describe the future; it told a story. The story of God's rectification of the world called its hearers into creative participation in the promised salvation. As slave Christians listened to their preachers describe the vision of John on the island of Patmos, they knew that they were called to *be* among those whom John saw coming up out of the great tribulation. They were not mere observers but participants in God's liberating work. The purpose of this creative, imaginative language was to put the hearer where John was, "In the Spirit on the Lord's Day" (Rev. 1:10), in the right place and the right time. Apocalyptic language contained intimations of a new order and a new reality that spoke to the deepest yearnings of a dislocated and estranged people.

### Eschatology in Black Theology

Eschatology, along with Christology, were the two most controversial themes in early black theology. While Jesus Christ is the primary symbol of the Christian faith, eschatology points to the moving force within the believing community. In nascent black theology three central eschatological motifs were clearly present. The first related eschatology to the existence of evil in the world, reflecting what M. H. Abrams called the "theodicy of the landscape." The second related eschatology to God's benevolence within the created order, reflecting God's terrestrial promise. The third motif related eschatology to the determination of African-American Christians to survive and prosper in difficult circumstances, reflecting the anatomy of hope.

An example of the first motif is found in the writings of James Cone. In his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, he rejects the apparent otherworldliness of traditional black religion. Black theology, he argues, cannot accept any perspective that does not compel the oppressed to deal with the evil in this world.

If eschatology means that one believes that God is totally uninvolved in the suffering of men because he is preparing them for another world, then Black Theology is an earthly theology! It is not concerned with the "last things" but with the "white thing." Black Theology like Black Power believes that the self-determination of black people must be emphasized at all costs, recognizing that there is only one question about reality for blacks: What must we do about white racism? There is no room in



this perspective for an eschatology dealing with a “reward” in heaven. Black Theology has hope for this life. The appeal to the next life is a lack of hope. Such an appeal implies that absurdity has won and that one is left merely with an unrealistic gesture toward the future. Heavenly hope becomes a Platonic grasp for another reality because one cannot live meaningfully amid the suffering of this world.<sup>19</sup>

Cone also argues that there is no place in black theology for the traditional notion of heaven as reward because it would mask the thirst for freedom among the oppressed:

The idea of heaven is irrelevant for Black Theology. The Christian cannot waste time contemplating the next world (if there is a next). . . . There is no place here for a reward. . . . The free Christian man cannot be concerned about a reward in heaven. Rather, he is a man who, through the freedom granted in Christ, is ready to plunge himself into the evils of the world, revolting against all inhuman powers which enslave men.<sup>20</sup>

Eschatology must rivet the attention of the oppressed on the theodicy of the landscape or the evils of the world. This meant that eschatology had to be related to the historical experience of the oppressed and through them focused on the redemption of the world:

Black Theology insists that genuine biblical faith relates eschatology to history, that is, to what God has done, is doing, and will do for his people. It is only because of what God has done and is now doing that we can speak meaningfully of the future. With a black perspective, eschatology comes to mean joining the world and making it what it ought to be.<sup>21</sup>

In his next theological text, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone develops and refines his perspective on eschatology. Rather than rejecting the otherworldliness of black Christianity, he critiques the distortions present within much Christian eschatology. Cone points to the escapism of the privileged and their attempts to avoid the question of death and mortality.<sup>22</sup> He affirms that the “eschatological perspective must be grounded in the historical present, thereby forcing the oppressed community to say no to unjust treatment, because its present humiliation is inconsistent with its promised future.”<sup>23</sup>

Eschatology must challenge the present order. The power of Christian eschatology is rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it is this that introduces the possibility of change within the historical experience of the oppressed.<sup>24</sup> Cone then observes that the function of the concepts of heaven and life after death cannot be adequately assessed on the basis of their misuse by the dominant classes. “Black theology cannot reject the future reality of life after death — grounded in Christ’s resurrection — simply because whites have distorted it for their own selfish purposes.”<sup>25</sup> While Cone is more sympathetic to the

possible value of traditional notions of eschatology, he resists the use of these notions to dull the revolutionary fervor of the oppressed. "The future is still the future. This means that black theology rejects elaborated speculations about the end. It is just this kind of speculation that led blacks to stake their whole existence on heaven — the scene of the whole company of the faithful with their long white robes. Too much of this talk is not good for the revolution."<sup>26</sup>

In his third theological text, *God of the Oppressed*, Cone affirms the role of eschatological vision in the liberation struggle of the oppressed. He notes:

There is included in liberation the "not yet," a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. This simply means that the oppressed have a future not made with human hands but grounded in the liberating promises of God. They have a liberation not bound by their own strivings. In Jesus' death and resurrection, God has freed us to fight against social and political structures while not being determined by them.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, Cone argues that while eschatology must be grounded in history, it is not limited by what is historically possible. Liberation is

... beyond history and not limited to the realities and limitations of this world. God is the sovereign ruler and nothing can thwart his will to liberate the oppressed. . . . Liberation then is not simply what oppressed people can accomplish alone; it is basically what God has done and will do to accomplish liberation both in and beyond history.<sup>28</sup>

He concludes that traditional notions of eschatology in African-American Christianity, including its apocalyptic language, have a constitutive role in the liberation struggle:

I contend that black people's experience of liberation as hope for a new heaven and a new earth represents a new mode of perception, different from the experience of white people. When black people sing, "When the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there," they are referring to more than a metaphysical reality about heaven. For the "roll up yonder" is not about an object but about black subjects who have encountered liberation's future.<sup>29</sup>

In Cone's theology, one can observe a movement from the rejection of otherworldliness, to a critique of distorted otherworldliness, to an appreciation of the role of eschatological vision in the liberation struggle of the oppressed. However, the common element in this perspective is the relation of eschatology to the evil of the world, or the theodicy of the landscape.

An example of the second major theme in black eschatology is found in the writings of J. Deotis Roberts. Whereas Cone relates eschatology primarily to history, Roberts relates it to ethics. In his first book

on black theology, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*, he argues:

Ethics and eschatology are related in Black Theology. This is the basis of the black hope. This is the bridge between the *now* and the *not yet*, the promised and the fulfilled. . . . Things hoped for and reached after always elude complete fulfillment, but the promises and ideals of the Christian faith inspire us to keep “reaching.” Indeed, a Christian dies reaching.<sup>30</sup>

In this perspective, eschatology is concerned with the intangible dimensions of reality. Thus the symbols of heaven and hell are described in corresponding terms.

Eternal life is a *quality* of life. . . . Eternal life is the “abundant” life. The heaven which is the consummation of the Christian experience of forgiveness and sanctification is not a *space* but a state. . . . Hell is not a place but a state of experience.<sup>31</sup>

Because the symbols of heaven and hell do not refer to physical realities, the telos of human striving, the reign of God, points to the moral and spiritual essence of human existence. Heaven represents the best of human potential and hell is the worst of human possibilities. In this perspective the world is not hostage to evil forces but is moving toward an eventual fulfillment. It embodies the terrestrial promise of God. This promise is the result of God’s benevolent outpouring upon all of creation:

Creation of nature and of human life is good. Whereas the affirmation of creation as good sharpens the question of evil in a world where creation is declared good by a God who is all-goodness and all-power, it also says yes to *this life* and all the material goods and services that make life worth living.<sup>32</sup>

The benevolence of God is the guarantee of the earth’s promise to provide what is necessary to make life more human. Eschatology does not refer primarily to the radical transformation of the world but to an anticipatory fulfillment of its potential. In the response to the persistent idea in African-American social and political thought — the acquisition of a separate land where black people could fortify their indigenous customs and values — Roberts claims that since the whole earth is the Lord’s, there should therefore be no place on that earth that God’s people cannot be at home. The entire earth holds the promise of God. In his second book on black theology, *A Black Political Theology*, Roberts refines the relationship between eschatology and ethics:

The future of black religion and the black church may well depend upon what black theologians can contribute to a correlation between eschatology and ethics in the black experience. . . . Eschatology can no longer

be a mere addendum to black theology. It is at the center of any theology which endeavors to bring a meaningful hope to the weak and the powerless. Ethics is also pivotal to a theology that is concerned with the liberation of the oppressed in the here and now. Black theology has a unique promise of ushering eternity into time without surrendering a grasp upon eternal hope.<sup>33</sup>

Roberts makes it clear that eschatology in black theology must take account of the influence of the African past.

As we look at our African past and our Afro-American past and present, we need to work through all the streams of thought and faith which converge in our understanding of ethics and eschatology. It is important that we take the best from our heritage to enrich our understanding of human destiny here and hereafter, personal and collective. How we handle our personal identity crisis as well as our quest for peoplehood is bound up with the relation between ethics and eschatology. All that we are and all that we hope to be as persons and as a people is at stake.<sup>34</sup>

In essence, the terrestrial promise means that there is no necessary contradiction between one's reach for eternal life and being an agent of liberation and reconciliation in the world.

Gayraud Wilmore's book *Last Things First* is an example of the third motif in African-American eschatology. In light of Mbiti's analysis of time and eschatology in traditional African thought, Wilmore examines the nature of history and hope among Christian slaves in the United States. He argues that "Christian slaves were an eschatological people who believed that Christ was coming again and that there would be a radical transformation of the world and in relationships between people."<sup>35</sup> The anatomy of the hope of African-American Christians must take into account the distinctive problem of the delayed Parousia caused by the conflict between African and European conceptualizations of time and history.

Wilmore suggests three responses of the slaves to this problem. Some slaves turned away from Christianity, never fully embracing the legitimacy of the Gospel preached to them by white Christians. Others adopted an "immediatist" posture and claimed that the pentecostal possession of the spirit was evidence that the reign of God had already come. The third response was to embrace a vision of the reign of God as the model for and judgment upon the present order.<sup>36</sup>

The key to understanding the complexity of eschatology in African-American Christianity is the inseparability of the material and the spiritual dimensions of life. This is reflected in the language that black Christians have used to express their hope for better things to come. Talk about "new shoes" and "white robes" — concrete earthly images — are juxtaposed with talk about "crowns and wings." For Wilmore, this points to "the worldliness and concreteness of the black

religious imagination."<sup>37</sup> It draws from ordinary life the tropes of transcendence. It addresses the satisfaction of physical needs and the fulfillment of spiritual hunger.

The major signposts in the anatomy of black hope are (1) the variety of influences on the African-American eschatological perspective. Besides the African notion of time, "other influences must be seen in America, including other elements of the African heritage, those coming from Native American religions (with which many slaves had close acquaintance), from white revivalism, and from the slaves' own perception of their situation and what needed to be done to deal with it";<sup>38</sup> (2) the fact that black eschatology is neither "crassly materialistic or hopelessly otherworldly";<sup>39</sup> and (3) that the eschatological vision of God's reign should be understood as "liberation from sin, slavery, and second-class citizenship, but also as freedom from bigotry, hatred, and the alienation of people from one another in the land of their birth and common destiny."<sup>40</sup> The anatomy of black hope is the map of the African-American religious imagination. Indeed, it may be that the hope of American Christianity rests with the people to whom little more than hope has been entrusted.

### History, Hope, and Freedom

Eschatology in black theology is inseparable from the struggle of African-Americans for freedom. As one theologian puts it, "the whole of Black eschatology could be summed up in one word: *liberation*. Black theologians proclaim that God is the Liberator who acts in history to set people free from whatever keeps them in bondage to a life which is less than human."<sup>41</sup> It is impossible to understand fully the significance of eschatology in African-American religious experience without attention to its role in the freedom struggle of black people. Eschatology refers to the consummation and rectification of history and the persistence of hope. The vision of a new order was indispensable to Africans languishing in the foul embrace of slavery because it kept the fires of freedom burning in their hearts. Yet they were not content to claim solely an inner freedom. The idea of the reign of God or the Promised Land compelled them to proclaim and approximate it in their individual and collective existence.

In essence, eschatology plays two roles in the struggle against sin and bondage. First, it makes every historical gain only penultimate. In the struggle for a new social order, there is a great temptation to forget the tragic and ironic dimensions of historical efforts. In the exhilaration of revolutionary zeal, the eschatological vision will not let the Christian settle for anything less than the perfect reign of God. One might say

that the difference between the Christian revolutionary and the secular revolutionary is that the Christian asks each day, "How can we make it better?" Eschatology provides the historical model of perfection that prevents us from sacralizing any human social order.

Second, eschatology prevents momentary failures from becoming permanent defeats. Every liberation movement travels an uneven path. Even in the Christian mission to engage the world with the emancipating message of the Gospel, there are always low points when one's efforts meet resistance. But the sight of the Promised Land, though in the distance, continues to revive the weary. The apostle Paul captured this insight when he proclaimed, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor. 4:8-10). Eschatology provides a vision of hope that saves the oppressed from being overwhelmed by historical disillusionment.

Hope in African-American Christianity has more than one dimension. It is multidimensional because the liberation that the Gospel proclaims is multidimensional. Hope has a personal dimension. This aspect of hope is the focus of Christian affirmations regarding the resurrection of the body, immortality, and eternal life. Although this belief suffered greatly under the skeptical gaze of the scientific community, it persists among those who face the specter of death regularly.

Certainly, the doctrine has been problematic in the history of Christian thought. The notion of eternal life has been critiqued as "egoism" among the dominant classes and as an "opiate" among the dispossessed. Despite the abuses, the personal dimension of hope suggests that only those who truly value life and its beauty can fully appreciate the significance of resurrection. This means that pessimism is incompatible with belief in resurrection. Resurrection does not primarily refer to a sensationalist recomposition of decaying flesh, because, as African traditional thought suggests, we are more than flesh. The body is the unity of spirit and flesh. Resurrection, in black religious experience, points to the survival of the personality beyond death, and one's continuing existence in the presence of God and the company of saints. Only those who know what death is can know what the resurrection means. Only those who "die in Christ" can experience the joy of eternal life in Christ. This means that escape into materialism or the cheating of nature and the aging process beyond reasonable measures are incompatible with belief in the resurrection.

Hope also has a collective or interpersonal dimension. This aspect of hope is the content of Christian belief in heaven and hell, damnation and reward. Heaven, in African-American religious thought, usually refers to being in community with others, while hell is often described as a state of alienation, not only from God, but from others. Since

in African traditional thought, one's being is intimately related to the community, to be separated from solidarity with others is tantamount to nonexistence. Likewise, one's continued existence is tied to one's ongoing participation in community. This is the reason that, 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.

Hope has a cosmic dimension. This aspect of hope is the basis of the Christian affirmation of universal salvation. One of the inherent ironies of the Christian notion of salvation is summed up in the question, "If salvation is not possible for the worst of us, can it be a certainty for any of us?" The idea that salvation is available even to the worst of sinners has stirred its measure of controversy in Christian thought. The primary reason is that the multidimensionality of hope has often been obscured by the all-too-human tendency to claim what can only be God's prerogative. The point of the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) is that God determines one's fitness for salvation. One must ask, "If the future reality that the gospel proclaims is one in which humanity is divided between the delivered and the damned, to whom is the message of hope directed? Is judgment the opposite of hope? Is it possible that heaven and hell, judgment and redemption are possibilities for all of creation?" The cosmic dimension of hope points to the fact that God creates and redeems all that is. The multidimensionality of Christian hope in African-American religious thought has its roots both in African traditional thought and in the Bible. Both suggest that hope is wholistic, intergenerational, and universal.

History and hope, the origin and telos of faith, are related to freedom in African-American religious expression. The bequest of our African ancestors to their children are roots and wings. This is what Joseph gave to his descendants as they carried his bones into the Promised Land. This is what Jesus gave to his followers in the memory of his resurrection and the anticipation of his return. Our ability to nourish those roots and spread those wings will determine whether African-Americans, as a people, become pallbearers or torchbearers.