

“COME TO MY HELP LORD FOR I’M IN TROUBLE”: WOMANIST JESUS AND THE MUTUAL STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION

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I looked at my hands, to see if I was the same person now I was free. There was such a glory over everything, the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven.

I had crossed the line of which I had so long been dreaming. I was free; but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom, I was a stranger in a strange land, and my home after all was down in the old cabin quarter, with the old folks, and my brothers and sisters. But to this solemn resolution I came; I was free, and they should be free also; I would bring them all there. Oh, how I prayed then, lying all alone on the cold, damp ground; “Oh, dear Lord,” I said, “I ain’t got no friend but you. Come to my help, Lord, for I’m in trouble!” [Loewenberg and Bogin, 220].

“I’m in trouble,” Harriett Tubman said. What was the source of her trouble? She was finally free. Her prayers had been answered; her dream had come true. She had reached the “state” which she perceived to be like heaven - freedom - the long awaited reality. Freedom in her understanding was the essence of the good news of the gospel. What happens when we encounter the good news of the gospel? We are taught that the Christian response is to go forth in all the world and “spread the gospel” to others. Even from a Christian point of view, then, it is not difficult to understand the yearnings of Harriet Tubman. The gospel experienced, must be shared; freedom experienced, must be shared. However, it is not uncommon that the gospel, when encountered creates dilemmas which are not easily resolved. The gospel keeps us in a perpetual cycle of decision making. We must say yes to the gospel, and that yes is manifested in life as lived daily; or we can say no even by our inactivity. The dilemma for Tubman meant trouble. Just as life in

general, for Black people was a perpetual state of “trouble”, certainly for an escaped slave, the thought of going back into the den of iniquity was a source for grave concern. For there were both political and social (negative) consequences, even possible death.

But for Tubman, the challenge was both a personal one and a religious one. The will for her family members and others to have the “heaven-like” experience was matched only by her Christian beliefs. The nature of her Christian belief was of such that, as sung in the old time gospel song, she “just couldn’t keep it to herself”. Yes, freedom experienced is indeed freedom shared. What happens when the nature of the gospel and the nature of the existential situation render one in direct conflict with the “human principalities and powers that be?” Isn’t that often what being a Christian means? - - challenging unjust and evil powers.

In the experiences of Black Women, Jesus was ever-present; he has commonly been perceived and experienced as being present in “times of trouble”. Ntozake Shange in her choreopoem, *FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF*, commented through one of her characters that to speak of Black Women’s existence as “colored and sorry” is to be redundant. (Shange, 43) Sadness or sorrow (the pain, the sufferings) are perpetually a part of the African American Woman’s reality; so much so that, whatever else the consideration, these components are always present in the lives of Black Women. Consequently, to be “colored and sorry” is to be redundant. In the same way, one could say that to speak of Black Women’s existence as being in trouble, or more to the point, having trouble, is to be redundant. The multi-dimensional nature of Black Women’s oppression means that “trouble” is always in the way. Contrary to another old gospel song, “Trouble in my Way, We Have to Hide Sometimes”, it is literally impossible to hide. The pervasiveness and interconnectedness of racism, sexism and classism, and other forms of oppression which define a good portion of the lives of Black Women, make “trouble” inescapable. Jesus, for many Black Women, has been the consistent force which has enabled them not only to survive the “troubles” of the world, but to move beyond them and in spite of them.

In this essay, I will explore three sources of the troubles of African American Women, with special reference to the problem of Christology. Essentially, I argue that the central christological problem rests in the fact

that Jesus Christ historically has been and remains imprisoned by the socio-political interests of those who have historically been the keepers of principalities and powers. This Jesus has been a primary tool for undergirding oppressive structures. I, therefore, wish to discuss the “troubles” of African American Women by exploring three ways in which Jesus has been imprisoned: 1) The imprisonment of Jesus Christ by Patriarchy; 2) The imprisonment of Jesus Christ by White Supremacy; and 3) the imprisonment of Jesus Christ by the Privileged Class. Then, in conclusion, I wish to explore the implications for the liberation or the redemption of Jesus Christ based on the lived realities of African American Women.

THE HISTORICAL IMPRISONMENT OF JESUS CHRIST BY PATRIARCHY

It is no accident that in the course of Christian history, men have defined Jesus Christ so as to undergird their own privileged positions in the church and society. This is evidenced by the fact that Jesus Christ is so often used to justify the subordination of women in the church. An understanding of the context in which this kind of interpretation emerges, provides explications of the interpretation itself.

An aspect of the social context in which Christianity, as we know it, developed, and in which we now live, is “patriarchy”. Defined in the male consciousness, patriarchy assumes male dominance and control, making normative the centrality of men and the marginality of women. The primary roles of men and the secondary roles of women, effectively insures a hierarchy in sex or gender roles. Moreover, patriarchy embraces “the whole complex of sentiments, the patterns of cognition and behaviour, and the assumptions about human nature and the nature of the cosmos that have grown out of a culture in which men have dominated women”. (Collins, 51). That is to say, patriarchalism is a way of looking at reality so that role assignments are not arbitrarily given, but they are apart of the rational and systematic structures of perceived reality itself. Patriarchy has been called a “conceptual trap” which ensnares its victims and keeps them in place through the constant reinforcements of society which cooperate to keep the male status quo in place. It’s like being in a room, and unable to imagine anything in the world outside of

it. (Gray, 17) It becomes difficult then for either men or women to imagine themselves outside of their prescribed roles; and when this does happen, in the case of women, they are treated as “exceptions”, as long as the system remains in place.

Living within these parameters means living with dualism which effectively, keeps men in superior and women in inferior positions, thus rendering men as authority figures over women. Just as Jesus has power and authority over men and women, men have power and authority over women and children.

The christological import of these effects of patriarchy, of course, is that the divine is generally associated with what it means to male in this society. In another place, I have explored the specific correlation between patriarchal assumptions about gender roles and the issue of women’s leadership in the church. (Grant, *passim*) However, suffice it to say here that the lingering controversies regarding leadership/ordination/placement of women in the church are overwhelmingly and distortedly christological.

Women have been denied (humanity, personhood, leadership, equality, etc.) because of the Church’s history of negative christology. This aspect of the negative christology has resulted primarily from over emphasis on the maleness of Jesus. The maleness, in actuality, has become idolatrous. In fact, the maleness of Jesus has been so central to our understanding of Jesus Christ that even the personality of Jesus, and interpretations of Christ have been consistently distorted. In effect, Jesus has been imprisoned by patriarchy’s obsession with the supremacy of maleness.

Feminists have sought to break the prison of patriarchy. Using gender analysis, many of the historical, biblical and theological interpretations have been challenged. Feminist theologians have been working diligently to overcome the sin of patriarchy. They have been able to break from the conceptual trap by taking seriously women’s experiences as the context and one of the sources of biblical interpretations. Seeing reality through the eyes of women has lead to the rereading of biblical texts and the revising of biblical and theological interpretations. In many instances, some feminists have been able to reform Jesus; other have attempted to liberate Jesus and women by suggesting that though Jesus can be seen in relation to the male physical reality, Christ transforms maleness and may take on female or feminine forms. Still some feminists have argued the uselessness of these revisionist ap-

proaches, for in their views, to speak of Christianity and patriarchy, is to be redundant.

As victims of sexism, Black Women, along with other women are once removed from the image of God.

THE HISTORICAL IMPRISONMENT OF JESUS BY WHITE SUPREMACY IDEOLOGY

As I explore the problem of Christology from the perspective of an African American Woman, the question of sexism and its function in the historic oppression of women must be adequately addressed. Feminists have provided some significant analyses that have helped in breaking the prison of patriarchy, pointing directions for eliminating the sin of sexism from our lives, our churches and societies.

For African American Women, however, the question is much broader than the sin of sexism. Racism, in the view of many, has been the basic defining character in the lives of African American Women in North America. Recent publications continue to document the contemporary manifestations of racism in our every day lives. Unfortunately, the church has not escaped this sinful reality. On the contrary, the Church has been a bastion of the sin of racism. This is reflected not only in the practice of much of its populace, but in structures and in its theology (theologies). Studies on church leadership (even present patterns), and the history of theology would confirm this. Theologically, perhaps this is nowhere more apparent than in the christological issue wherein negative color symbolism has been institutionalized in Christian theology. The constant battle between light and dark, good and evil (God and devil), White and Black, is played out daily in racial politics of the dominant culture (Euro-Americans), and at the same time, theologically legitimated and institutionalized in the racial imageries of the divine. The racism is reflected in the fact that the white imagery is presented as normative and to the exclusion of any other possible imagery of Jesus or God.

These oppressive ideologies and theologies have been developed in the context of racial/White supremacy. The ideology of White supremacy produces the kind of racism with which we have been afflicted throughout most of the history of this continent as we know it. Racism, according to Joel

Kovel "... is the tendency of a society to degrade and do violence to people on the basis of race, and by whatever mediations may exist for this purpose" [Grant, 199 (Kovel,x)]. These mediations are manifested in different forms, and are carried on through various disciplines: psychology, sociology, history, economics, art and symbolism of the dominant (White) group. Racism is the domination of a people which is justified by the dominant group on the basis of racial distinctions. It is not only individual acts, but a collective, institutionalized activity. As C. Eric Lincoln observed,

[f] or racism to flourish with the vigor it enjoys in America, there must be an extensive climate of acceptance and participation by large numbers of people who constitute its power base. It is the consensus of private persons that gives racism its derivative power ... The power of racism is the power conceded by those respectable citizens who by their actions or inaction communicate the consensus which directs and empowers the overt bigot to act on their behalf. [Grant, 199 (Lincoln, 11-12)]

Racism, then is not only measurable by individual actions, but by institutional structures, and theoretical precepts. Its presence is guaranteed even in the absence of any particular human carriers.

Now, theological and specifically, christological expressions of this racism are represented in our common imaging of Jesus Christ and of God. The irrationality used here is similar to that used in the sin of sexism. For example, even though we insist that God is a spirit and Jesus died for us all, we persist in deifying the maleness of both God and Jesus, certainly giving men a social, political and theological edge over women. With regard to the sin of racism, though we claim God as spirit and Jesus as being for all, we have consistently and historically represented God and Jesus a white. We have infact diefied "Whiteness".

Even in popular culture, God, as reflected in Hollywood (of the movie "Oh God"), has been given to us as residing in the midst of pure whiteness, and being represented by "an old white man" (perhaps the only thing approximating accuracy in the image of God presented is "old"; if eternity implies anything, perhaps it implies old, even though the concept of "eternity" is believed to defy all such human categorizations. The "eternal nowness" of God can be perceived to the ageless). In other words, Christian consensus (albeit

based upon and grounded in the history of theology) enables “respectable christians” to accept without question, the destructive negative color symbolism of Christian theology. No wonder some Black folks are still singing and praying “Lord wash met whiter than snow”, inspite of the problematic nature of related scriptures at best. (cf. Bailey, p.180 and Felder, p.42)

In the White Church Tradition, Jesus Christ has functioned as a status quo figure. Because historically Christology was constructed in the context of White supremacy ideology and domination, Christ has functioned to legitimate these social and political realities. Essentially, Christ has been White. This is evidenced not only in the theological imagery, but also in the physical imagery of Jesus himself. In a society in which “white is right and black stays back”, and white is symbolized as good and black evil, certainly there would be socio-political ramifications of color with respect to Jesus. The implication that white/light is good and black/dark is evil functions, not only with respect to humanity, but also with respect to human’s concept of their deity. The late Bishop Joseph Johnson put the point strongly this way:

Jesus Christ has become for the white church establishment the “white Christ”, blue eyes, sharp nose, straight hair, and in the image of the Black man’s oppressor. The tragedy of this presentation of Jesus Christ by the White church establishment is that he has been too often identified with the repressive and oppressive forces of prevailing society. The teachings of the “white Christ” have been used to justify wars, discrimination, segregation, prejudice, and the exploitation of the poor and the oppressed people of the world. In the name of this “white Christ” the most vicious form of racism has been condoned and supported [Johnson,NBCT,JITC, 25]

To counteract this historical and theological trend, Black theologians have called not only for a new departure in theology but even more specifically for a new christological interpretation. The White Christ must be eliminated from the Black experience and the concept of a Black Christ must emerge. Theologians like Cone, Wilmore, Cleage, and others have argued this point from various perspectives. some argue for literal blackness; some for symbolic blackness. The point is to uplift the oppressive ways in which the negative images have functioned for Black and White People. It’s a question of images in relation to human beings. We have been given to believe that

Blacks are not in the image of God. for this reason many still harbor beliefs, strong feelings and attitudes about the inferiority of Blacks even when our intellect tells us otherwise.

African American Women as women and Black persons are thus twice removed from the image of God.

THE HISTORICAL IMPRISONMENT BY THE PRIVILEGED CLASS

Isn't it interesting that what for some have been called theological paradoxes and dialectical tensions, for others have been in actuality historical contradictions, which have led to social, economic and political imprisonment?

Take, for example, the notion of "servanthood", both in the Christian and secular contexts. Explorations into the area of domestic servanthood illustrate my point. In particular, a look at the relationship between White Women and Black Women vis-a-vis slavery and domestic service demonstrates that the Christian notion of servanthood has historically been used to reinforce a servant, subservient and obedient mentality in politically oppressed people. the catechisms which were taught to slaves were designed to clearly identify the earthly slavemaster as the god of the slave. One such catechism, Jones' Catechism admonished the slave to respond to the master

'with all fear', they are to be 'subject to them' and obey them in all things, possible and lawful, with good will and endeavour to please them well, ... God is present to see, if their masters are not [Raboteau, p.163 and Crum, p.204-5]

Even after slavery it appears that the attitude survived, for Black People in general and Black Women in particular have always been disproportionately relegated to being servants of White People. Still, they were given to believe that it was not only their civil duty, but their Christian or heavenly duty to obey ... In other words, Christian servanthood and socio-political servanthood were taught to be the same. But black People recognized the contradictions. So they sang:

I got-a shoes
Hou got-a shoes
all o' God's chillun got-a shoes.

when I get to heab'n,
goin' to put on my shoes,
I'm goin' to walk all ovah God's heab'n,

Even though people outside of the culture may interpret this message as mere concern for shouting, or the ecstasy that comes with various forms of spirituality, it infact was a challenge to the contradictions under which they lived. The refrain took an interesting twist:

Heab'n, heab'n,
Everybody talkin' 'bout heab'n ain't goin' dere;
Heab'n, heab'n,
I'm goin' to walk all ovah God's heab'n.
(Frazier, p.93)

Those Christian servants who have (had) the power to define the politically oppressed servants ought not to assume that their earthly political and social powers controlled divine things. they may be forced into dehumanized forms of servanthood, but divine retribution was to come.

Interestingly, even though we use the servanthood language with respect to Jesus, we have in effect made him apart of the bourgeoisie. He has become a privileged person, not unlike the so-called "christian servants" of the culture of oppressors. They specialize in maintaining their privileged positions in the church and society, while the real "servants" of the world are structurally and systematically disenfranchised. the real servants are the economically deprived, the socially ill, the politically impotents and the spiritually irrelevant, if in fact not spiritually empty.

Jesus has been made to escape all of these realities. Though he was born in a stable, he has been made royal --he's king of kings; Though he was a Jew, all traces of his Jewishness have been erased for all intents and purposes; Though he died the common death of a criminal, we've erased the agony, suffering and pain, in the interest of creating a "sweet Jesus".

In an interview with a Black pastor in which he interpreted the images on the stained glass windows just recently installed in his church, he commented: "The White Church has erased the pain from the face of Jesus. He does not suffer. The crucifixion is a painful experience. We show the pain

the agony, the suffering. It's the face of the Black Man --the face of Black People". It's the face of the real servants of the world (Johnson).

I am arguing that our servanthood language, existentially functions essentially as deceptive tactics for keeping complacent non-dominant culture peoples and the non-privileged of the dominant culture. Thus, our White Jesus, the Jesus of the dominant culture, escapes the real tragedy of servanthood. But oppressed peoples do not. christian theology and history have insured the embourgeoisement of this Jesus.

Being neither among the dominant culture nor the privileged class, again, Black Women and other non-white Women, because of their triple jeopardy, are three times removed from the image of Jesus/the image of God.

In effect, I am arguing (as other have done) that Jesus has been conveniently made in the image of White oppressors. William Jones some years ago asked the question "Is God a White Racist?" Feminists have asked "Is God/Jesus a male chauvinist pig? When poor people ask why Lord?, one could interpret this question to be, "Is God/Jesus for the rich and against the poor?" All of these oppressive conceptions about God/Jesus are re-inforced by the imagery and symbols including language. What is needed is a challenging of Christian theology at the points of its racist, sexist and servant languages, all of which are contrary to the real message of Jesus Christ.

African American Women's understandings of Jesus help us to see how Jesus is appropriated even inspite of the historical oppressive presentations of him.

WOMANIST JESUS: THE MUTUAL STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION

What we find in the experiences of African American Women is a process of mutual liberation: Jesus was liberating or redeeming African American Women, as African American Women were liberating or redeeming Jesus. The Jesus of African American Women has suffered a triple bondage or imprisonment as well. Jesus has been held captive to the sin of patriarchy (sexism), the sin of White supremacy (racism) and the sin of Privilege (classism). As such, he (Jesus) has been used to keep women in their proper place; Blacks meek, mild and docile in the face of brutal forms of dehumanization; and he has also been used to insure the servility of servants. African

American women heard twice (and sometimes three times) the mandate “Be subject..., for it is sanctioned by Jesus and ordained by God...” consequently, they (African American Women and Jesus) have suffered from the sins of racism, sexism and classism.

However, in spite of this oppressive indoctrination, Jesus Christ has been a central figure in the lives of African American Women. they obviously experienced Jesus in ways different from what was intended by the teachings and preachings by White oppressors (and other oppressors). Four experiences demonstrate how African American women are able to liberate Jesus as Jesus liberated them: 1) Jesus as Co-sufferer; 2) Jesus as Equalizer; 3) Jesus means Freedom; and 4) Jesus as Liberator.

Jesus as Co-Sufferer. Chief among Black People’s experiences of Jesus was that he was a divine co-sufferer, who empowered them in situations of oppression. For Christian African American Women of the past, Jesus was a central point of reference. For inspite of what was taught them, they were able to identify with Jesus, because they felt that Jesus identified with them in their sufferings. There was mutual sufferings. Just like them, Jesus suffered and was persecuted undeservedly. Jesus’ sufferings culminated on the cross. African-American Women’s cross experiences were constant in their daily lives - the abuses physical and verbal, the acts of dehumanization, the pains, the sufferings. The loss of families and friends and the disruption of communities. but because Jesus Christ was not a mere man, but God incarnate, they, infact, connected with the Divine. This connection was maintained through their religious life --their prayer tradition and their song tradition. Their prayers were conversations with one who “walked dat hard walk up calvary and ain’t weary but to tink a’ nbout we all dat way”. (Carter, 49). The connection was also evidenced by the song tradition in which one could lament, “Nobody knows the trouble I see...but Jesus....”

Jesus as Equalizer. African American Women had been told twice that their inferiority and inequality were apart of the nature of things. they, along with African American Men, were taught that they were created to be the servant class for those in control. They were not to preach (in the case of women, and Black men in some traditions), and they were to acknowledge their place as apart of God’s providence. But African American Women ex-

perienced Jesus as a great equalizer, not only in the White world, but in the Black World as well. And so they would argue that the crucifixion was for universal salvation in its truest sense, not just for male salvation, or for White salvation. Because of this, Jesus came and died, no less for the woman as for the man, no less for Blacks as for Whites. Jarena Lee, in the last century said:

If the man may preach, because the Saviour died for him, why not the woman? Seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole saviour, instead of a half one? as those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach, would seem to make it appear [Lee, 15-16].

Because Jesus Christ was for all, he infact equalizes them and renders human oppressive limitations invalid.

Jesus Means Freedom. Perhaps no one better than Fannie Lou Hamer articulates Black Women's understanding of Jesus in relation to freedom. She takes us a bit further than the equality language by challenging our understanding of and desire for mere equality. She said:

I couldn't tell nobody with my head up I'm fighting for equal right[s] with a white man, because I don't want it. Because if what I get, got to come through lynching, mobbing, raping, murdering, stealing and killing, I didn't want it, because it was a shocking thing to me, I couldn't hardly sit down [Wright, p. 26].

We are challenged to move beyond mer equality to freedom. Freedom is the central message of Jesus Christ and the gospel, and is concisely summarized in Luke 4:18. Based upon her reading of this text her consistent challenge to the American public was that to be a follower of Jesus christ was to be committed to the struggle for freedom.

Jesus, The Liberator. the liberation activities of Jesus empowers African American Women to be significantly engaged in the process of liberation. Sojourner Truth was empowered, so much so that when she was asked by a preacher if the source of her preaching was the Bible, she responded, "No honey, can't preach from de Bible\$--can't read a letter". then she explained;

“When I preaches, I has jest one text to preach from, an’ I always preaches from this one. My text is, “When I found Jesus!”” In this sermon Sojourner Truth talks about her life, from the time her parents were brought from Africa and sold, to the time that she met Jesus within the context of her struggles for dignity and liberation for Black People and women. The liberation message of Jesus provided grounding for the liberation and protest activities of such persons as Sojourner Truth and many other women activists.

Both White Women and Black women have re-thought their understandings of Jesus Christ. They have done so against all odds. For they (both) live in the context of patriarchy, which has enabled men to dominate theological thinking and church leadership/ Black Women continue to suffer from the sin of White supremacy, wherein it is believed that the theological task belongs to Whites. In midst of all this women have emerged to say that women’s experiences, (African American Women, Hispanic Women, Native American Women) must be taken seriously; and even if men refuse to do so, women must forge ahead nonetheless.

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