

## AN HISTORIC OVERVIEW OF THE FOUNDATIONS OF BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY

---

- I       Negros in slavery and the period called Reconstruction
  - I       How the Bible was used to liberate the Negro mentally & spiritually
  - II       Some final thoughts on Modern Black Liberation teachings
- 

### I

Far and wide these days, people's attention has been turned in the direction of the preachments of Black Nationalist preacher, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Famous, as of now, because of his relationship to Presidential hopeful Barack Obama, he has lifted the spirit of black liberation theology to levels unknown since prior to the modern day era of civil rights activities. But the roots of black liberation teaching extend far backwards into American history. As is the case with vegetation, so the case with our subject under discussion, roots are unseen to the natural eyes, and unless there is extensive digging, root structures are rarely discerned. In my opinion, it is improper to speak of one source for black liberation teaching. There was no main black liberation textbook; since it is historical and its foundations are 'supposedly' based on Scriptural principles. So it is best to at least acknowledge this from the outset.

#### HISTORY ILLUSTRATION #1

In a conversation with the two Boston lawyers, Samuel E. Sewall and David Lee Child, the notable figure John C. Calhoun reportedly made this statement that "if he could find a Negro who knew Greek syntax, he would then believe that the Negro was a human being and should be treated as a man." Just think of the crude asininity of even a great man! Mr. Calhoun went to Yale, to study the Greek syntax, and graduated there. His son went to Yale to study the Greek syntax, and graduated there. His grandson, in recent years, went to Yale, to learn the Greek syntax, and graduated there. Schools and Colleges were necessary for the Calhouns, and all other white men to learn the Greek syntax.

And yet this great man knew that there was not a school, nor a college in which a black boy could learn his A.B.C.'s. He knew that the law in all the Southern States forbade the Negro instruction under the severest penalties. How then was the Negro to learn Greek syntax? How then was he to evidence to Mr. Calhoun his human nature? Why, it is manifest that Mr. Calhoun expected the Greek syntax to grow in *Negro Brains* by spontaneous generation! {italics his} But Alexander Crummel was a black man who studied Greek from 1846-53 at Queens College of Cambridge University. Alexander Crummel's (1819-1898) essay 'The attitude of the American mind toward the Negro,' was published in 1898

According to the historical record, the reconstruction era (1863-1877) initially, became the period in which black

liberation teachings arose. The end of the War between States left our nation bitterly divided and uneven in its general theological outlook. Many old school theologians of the South such as Robert L. Dabney, and Southern classicists like, Basil Gildersleeve, worked hard in defense of maintaining the status quo. Although these are only two prominent persons out of hundreds, their writings are still published within scholarly guilds for reading today, but normally edited, for clarity, so that they won't be offensive to the reader.

Traditionally in American history the American emancipation is given significant place in the annals of history, and rightly so. It was an act that brought untold freedom to thousands of people. But the emancipation was not as quick in coming as is normally described in today's history books. In fact, in Texas the last of the slaves were not freed until 1865. This is why in the black community and tradition December 1865 is the regular birthday of black folk's freedom. Immediately after the termination of the Civil War illiterate colored people needed jobs in order to support their families. Without title deeds to property the Negro was left with no other choice than to stay on where they had already been formerly employed as slaves (although there were also cases where slaves moved in search of new opportunities and on a quest to find family members sold long ago). So from slavery to indentured servitude they found a credible way to obtain means. Describing the culture of such times is difficult.

#### HISTORY ILLUSTRATION #2

Sometime ago the "USA today" newspaper published these comments: In 1900, Sen. Benjamin Tillman of South Carolina gave a speech on the Senate floor in which he defended the widespread lynching of blacks. "We of the South have never recognized the right of the negro to govern white men, and we never will," he goes on to say "We have never believed him to be equal to the white man and we will not submit to his gratifying his lust on our wives and daughters without lynching him."

Many of the words used in colloquial African American speech today were used in former times as terms of degradation. The notorious 'N' word that TV critics and others despise has been frequently used for more than a few centuries. Indeed, in my personal copies of some recordings from the 20s and 30s, when a library of congress researcher traveled throughout the South interviewing former and ex-slaves, they, the Negros, used THIS WORD for themselves quite generously in their own speech. The tapes are revealing.

They set the tone for the black consciousness and psyche of the day. Unable to read, write, lacking economic autonomy, without privilege to eat in white people's restaurants, unable to live in certain areas of town, theologically reckoned as persons without souls, and not able to worship equally in white churches, they have risen to a place where today blacks are able to pen their names to million dollar contracts for all kinds of endeavors. From 1855 until WWII, there was a renaissance of awareness that sought to restore dignity to the blacks. Mostly, this was derived from the sermons of the black preacher because he was the main funnel for the dissemination of information.

There were many at the time in the colored communities who, in some strange way or another, had acquired the ability to read letters, and in some cases, even write their own name. Even Fredrick Douglas was taught to read by his owner's wife. Amid the times, there could be found schools run by a few freedmen and the more numerous clandestine schools run by sympathetic whites and black leaders of the African Methodist Episcopal Churches and others.

Not all of white America believed in slavery. We may also speak of abolitionist movements that had a line of history that stretched back, well beyond the pale of American soil. Quakers, Wesleyans, Congregationalists, independents and others like Henry W. Beecher were adamantly opposed to slavery. Beecher even made trips to the South in order to purchase slaves so that they could later be released as free men and women upon reaching the North.

Moreover, there are cases extant of slave-owners that granted freedom to their Negroes prior to the Civil War and/or Emancipation Proclamation of President Lincoln. But it was the minister who exercised the greater influence in the social strata. Their labors often entailed teaching blacks how to read. Reading is certainly powerful for any people group because now they can grow mentally aware of things beyond their normal realms of perception.

The first, to enjoy this new (secret) education was often (or became) the Reverend. Whether learning in a private setting with a white person, or from another independently educated black man or woman, he led the people along the path of his learning. Sunday schools and black Churches emerged during these 'underground' efforts.

This is the foundation of Black Nationalism and later Black Liberation Theology. The former a polity and the latter a doctrine, combined, they caused colored people, listening to stories from the bible, to re-imagine and re-interpret them in ways necessary for their empowerment. This was accomplished by rehearsing the tales of Ethiopian eunuchs, early Egyptian peoples who were dark skinned as portrayed in extant hieroglyphics, and by interjecting Simon of Cyrene as the black man that carried the cross for Jesus. By the time the inspirational preacher had finished whooping the crowds into hysteric, albeit, joyful frenzies, the furrows for black self esteem had been plowed and sown with 'holy seeds' from God's Word.

As far as the liberation movement itself, it was grounded by a desire to see a cultural black renaissance; with a sense of pride in one's being, physical features, and heritage. Aside from the early Marcus Garvey movements, which bemoaned the plight of black people in America and desired a return to African soil, these 'good feelings' of blackness had to be nailed down to scripture. Although a good many blacks taken from Africa were originally Muslim, with their assimilation into the American ethos they subsequently saw the light, one might say, and became Christian. Therefore the most powerful tool available to the minister of the day was the Bible.

Initially, used not in racist ways, but in an ethnological frame, the scriptures were expounded in ways to meet the needs of its community. Remember, this was the Jim Crow era which gave birth to the KKK. Fear was rampant; justice was a non-entity and equal pay was non-existent for a black person. In the end, there were mass migrations from the South toward Northern cities. Most of the Midwest industrial areas are still populated by people who came up from Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia et cetera.

Now, newly planted in the North, a greater, but restricted, freedom was allowed for blacks. Still holding to the cultural norms of the small towns and cities from whence they journeyed, they found themselves in a dilemma. How do we mobilize and motivate a people with no sense of identity? For the most part, relatively few could ever count their generations beyond 3, possibly four ancestors. Families had been sold and divided up so often, that the

effects of it were still strongly felt by the following freeborn generations.

## II

The easiest way to face the issues of the day were to rethink them in light of the Gospel and to link them to prophetic passages that dealt with a new day to come in which there would be no slavery. The book of Revelation was one of the great textbooks for Black Liberation preachers in earlier days because at the end of the book, heaven is declaimed as a place where sin, fear and tears would be no more.

There was never an idea that only blacks would be there in attendance there, but that it was the ideal place, being inclusive, whereas, white America (at the time) was exclusive to those who were not their own.

{During slavery and later, in reconstruction, the average black was unable to read. Lacking in all of the 'critical tools' needed to be able to make sense of the Word of God, he was left with imitating what was heard and often parroting those things he believed was stated in scripture. The authorized version of 1611 being the main textbook, English remained a formidable obstacle for the Negro preacher. The inability to read led to faulty pronunciations which in turn gave birth to phonemes and syntax that obscured meanings. The Negro rarely made use of the word "very," often substituting the word "powerful" for the sense of this word very. Rather than saying, as we would, "he was a very strong man" the man of the reconstruction era would more likely say, "he was a powerful strong man." By utilizing it in this sense, an adjective became adverbial in meaning. These old South accents are carry-overs into Modern Southern vernacular. Early black dialectal patterns allowed for some dramatic renderings in colloquialisms that few outsiders could grasp. This is why the black sermon was considered dangerous, it could apply biblical stories to everyday life, making the unseen a heartfelt reality, and in the end colored folks saw themselves in the text being expounded; however loosely interpreted. The Apostle John's exile to Patmos was often likened to plantation life. In other words, the plantation was viewed as the Negro's exilic isle of Patmos. Exiled from Africa, cut off from family and friends, the Apocalypse of John portrayed the conflict between good and evil, with good winning out. The colored people envisioned, in dramatic fashion, a world where racial discrimination would be no more, and then, rose up and preached accordingly }

During slavery, as defined by law, organized colored churches had to be under the rule of white persons. Negro ministers were required to conduct meetings under the superintendence of a white male. This ensured that the Negro did not preach what was unacceptable to the stability of the general order. As often was the case, white ministers preached the servitude texts of Paul as despondent colored were made to sit in the church balcony. Restricted by these conditions, the black parson felt constrained to be politically correct in his public theology while privately

holding a belief in liberation and freedom for the blacks, based upon scriptures in the bible as he read and interpreted them. So what began as an identifiably cultural and theological premise grew into a movement that in a few cases turned radical.

It is one thing to espouse an idea; it is another for the idea to be embraced by multitudes who desire to act on the idea positively, and in some cases, negatively. The NAACP is an early example of the positive type. Originally, led and directed by clergymen, they sought the betterment of the black people as a class in society. But the Black Panther movement of the 50s and 60s sought to integrate violence with their fight for freedoms enjoyed by white people but enjoined from use in the black community.

#### HISTORY ILLUSTRATION #3

The noted historian Eric Foner describes a day in his American history class back in the 1950s. He says the teacher, Bertha Berryman, stated that the Reconstruction Act of 1867, which granted black men the right to vote, was the worst law in all of American history. Professor Foner goes on to say that his questioning of her conclusion brought about a stern rebuke. It is obvious by the Civil Rights Act of the late 60s under Lyndon Johnson, that the act of 1867 was no law at all.

As the dust settled after the Civil War, many blacks had hoped for changes radical enough to remit past damages suffered by them. These expectations though, were quickly dashed when they saw that voting privileges were extended unto them, but, only at the cost of risking one's life to go to the polling booth. Such intimidation and fear was leveled on the colored community of the day that some wondered if the Jim Crow era was any better than slavery. The despair during these harsh times was lightened only by their frequent visits to the Negro Church. Here, the music elevated their souls, and there, they were furthered encouraged by the robed black man in the pulpit. With sermons designed to uplift, he, the preacher, in a moment, was transfigured into a skilled physician of the heart; and Black Theology was experimented with in such ways, that the Negro pastor's sanctuary became a veritable hospital for healing the wounded & broken hearted.

Recurrent throughout the last 150 years of black theological preaching is the epistle of Paul to Philemon. As an epistle, it does convey a heartfelt message; a runaway servant is somehow brought to the Apostle Paul's side and then converted. It could be that Onesimus (the servant) had fled from some terrible disaster that occurred in his region

during that day. But lacking the background material needed to piece it all together, we can know that Onesimus' conversion became the occasion for Paul's letter to Philemon. Paul asks for an acquittal for his newly converted friend and further requires that Philemon remember that he is also indebted to him. In the following paragraphs I have provided the reader with some critical resources for understanding the Apostle Paul's epistle to Philemon.

*{General background info}* Philemon has been questioned, with respect to its Colossian problems. Assuming that Philemon was at home in Collosae, the city was wrecked by earthquake 64-7AD and never rebuilt, and Paul was near {the} end of his life in 64. If Onesimus ran away at a {time of} disaster with some provisions, that would suit the letter, and not necessary to mention the earthquake which everyone would have known.

Without getting too technical, listed below are some definitions that may assist you in reading between the lines of Onesimus' circumstance. These notes were compiled in extensive dialogue with a classicist friend.

{Some Greek words and their meanings in Paul's day}

1. In the Philemon passage of verse 16, some English texts have the words "more than a slave" which leave the meaning inconclusive. When one says more, we should ask "more in what sense," a super slave? Our Greek text renders it as "*huper doulon*."

a. Yet if we use the English word "ABOVE" (a slave), this is better and implies something about social rank, it is certainly higher on the social order. But what comes out of this in modern use is our word for "brother", then all slaves are to be considered brothers, and blacks are "brothers" from the perspective of the New Testament.

b. BUT NOTE: the phrase "*huper*," also, means "*instead of*" as a classical use. This is good, not a slave, but *instead of* a slave, a family member.

2. Now, for the Greek word "slave," this word is used in such a wide swath of meanings that you can't get much out of it. But here are a few siftings:

a. Historically, conquered peoples were slave groups and their children were slaves. But there were house slaves who were "domestics" and these could have friendly status.

b. In the Roman Empire slaves of an owner are usually freed on his death, a contract that helps get good service, but also rising from the fact of too many slaves in the world.

c. *Liberti* or freedmen have a special legal status which can go as high as officers of the treasure. The Roman poet Horace's father was a freedman.

d. Then there are contract slaves or indentured servants with option to pay their contract out.

3. Brother in Greek is "adelphos," a genetic and family word, with etymology=a + delphos "womb." So meaning at least is initially familiar, as one who shares the same womb, a brother/sister. At times, a nephew, but always someone familiar.

Paul, more than likely, would like to see Onesimus usefully converted to a libertus or freedman status. *If* Philemon were a freedman who had risen to importance in Paul's world, then it would make sense to say "treat him not as a slave but higher up, in fact, your dear brother" as a libertus. Make him free as you were made free.

As you can see from the above notations, Paul believes that Onesimus should be received not as a slave but more along the lines of a brother in Christ; *brother, as in one 'of the same womb.'* If you can imagine the first century during Imperial Rome with all of its brutality and conflicted legal classes of people you can see why Philemon would be an important text in the sermons of Black renaissance pastors who emphasized black liberation.

Somehow from where they sit, the situation has not changed much at all for those of African American descent. So the answer, at least in their minds, is to preach a culturally relevant message to those who still feel "excluded" from certain segments of society. The reality is that conditions today are much better for blacks than they have ever been. The hurdle that remains is one of tenure. It has only been 40 years since blacks were allowed to vote and some of the ones who were staunch segregationists are still in positions of power and their relatives are now the major power brokers. Depending on where you live, the social sub sections of society might differ. For one living in Denmark, there is little ability to relate to those currently residing in Louisiana. The subtleties of discrimination being experienced on a day to day basis is real for them but it is only a topic of discussion for one unrelated to it.

In Paul's epistle to Philemon, in verse 16, the phrase *more than a slave* (RSV), and *above a servant* (KJV) is used as a matter of social rank {Class. Gk., *huper*, 'instead of'}. Their understanding of the English words which reflect the (Greek: *huper d{th}oulon*) underlying New Testament language, became a point of departure for many a message.

It was preached then and it still preached now by those who yet feel as though the black man or woman has never been extended a full and unqualified right hand of fellowship from those who have claimed Jesus as Lord and historically worshipped in Churches where blacks were nominal members. This topic will not vanish over night because as long as a people perceive injustices when it comes to equality, there will be liberationist preachers. One does not have to agree with them but their presence will remain for some time to come.

The Reverend Wright debacle is a prime example of what is believed by multitudes of blacks. For the first time it has hit the mainstream press but this is what a significant portion of the populace believes about the America in which they dwell. The person watching the TV sees America in one way, while the one sitting there in Wright's church sees America in another way. Call it evil, call it racist, or call it the ranting of a raving mad man, but in the end multitudes who embrace black liberation theology see two Americas.

Some go as far to mention three Americas, with the new immigrants forming another much favored group. The teaching of the black liberationists is promulgated in Seminaries, historically black colleges and many other locales. Except in the educational institutions it is not forthrightly stated as such. To be honest, unless you are a person of color, chances are that you would rarely, if ever, hear of it or know of it unless someone went out of their way to open it up and explain it to you. It is believed by many privately however, it is not endorsed publicly.

Since the liberationists look at blacks from a scriptural point of reference, they usually see blacks as a chosen people. Every bit as favored as the Jewish people of the Hebrew Scriptures. In many circles, Modern Liberia, which was re-established in 1822 by former slaves, is viewed as the black people's "nation of Israel." The feeling of oppression and the fact of a black diaspora (Zephaniah 3:10) has brought about new ways of viewing various prophetic passages of scripture. Predictions concerning Ethiopia, and Seba, are given prominence in today's multicultural milieu.

Various people groups have been enslaved by imperial powers at different times in history. Each people group, Jew, Arab and black, have used ancient texts as a path to their redemption.

### III

#### SOME FINAL CRITICISMS OF MODERN BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY

An attempt at the recovery of the roots of black liberation theology today wouldn't need to take your studies much further than the late 1960s. For some reason or another, this

era is given by many as the beginnings of the real liberation movement.

To look at the flotsam mass that has surfaced in the last for decades leads any rational observer to conclude that somewhere along the way, black theology (liberation theology specifically) took a wrong turn. With its current associations with and attachments to freedom fighters from Nicaragua to Palestine, it has lost its sense of relevance in today's society. That there have been reverses suffered on both sides of the Jewish-Palestinian problem few would query, but to be aligned openly with pronounced terrorist groups and their agendas has been less than constructive to the cause of Civil Rights in America.

With very little attention given to actually acknowledging and solving problems in the black community, and more energy spent on exploiting 'minority disenfranchisement,' a reachable goal is no longer existent. Now a political ideology, the Black liberation worldview is an aberrant and heretical form possessing little, if any, resemblance to its past origins. Listed below are just a few issues plaguing the liberation sect of today:

1. After the death of Martin Luther King Jr., the Civil Rights movement, as a whole, turned doctrinally to a more social agenda. The neo Civil Rights leaders were less interested in the proof texts of the Bible for their talks and more inclined to debate the histories of the blacks with few solutions to the issues they were raising.

By the 80s, these new crops of trail blazers, unlike the old vanguard, were not solid clergymen of one cohesive faith. Some were of no faith at all, having little concern for the religious history of blacks. Others were of a more militant nature, the nation of Islam, who sees all white people as inbred with the devil. Elijah Muhammad's empowerment teachings from his book "Message to the Black Man" is the source spring for many black nationalists, and his thought has been covertly smuggled into liberation theological beliefs; portraying Christianity as white men's religion.

2. The rise of Socialism brought new thinking to the minds of many leaders. As far back as the Negro educator W.E. B. Dubois, who himself was a former professor of Greek and Latin, a few black leaders had feverishly embraced communism as a rule of life. In the 40s, it was

the notorious Rapp-Coudert hearings that sent many communist educators packing.

But, by the 70s, this old construct was revived in {Che} Guevarian style and being advocated as an organizational scheme much more preferable to a Christian molding. Indeed, this is where the black liberation theological movement stands now.

It is an *ad hoc* mixture of home grown Christian truths and diluted Socialist ideologies. The mingling of Jesus and Marx has made liberation theology attractive to those looking for the love and tolerance of Jesus as well as the Marxist principles of a class-less sharing of resources.

3. Furthermore, an over emphasizing of the 'birth defects' of America has been detrimental to the liberationist's cause. I want to go on record saying that horrible effects from slavery have persisted into modern times and can be easily illustrated by vast differences in education for blacks and others and also in the kind of investments made by societal leadership in the neighborhoods of the suburbs and of those in the ghetto. *Yet, I still do not embrace Modern Liberationist theology.*

By blaming others for their predicament in life they have laid bare the roots of their problems: (1) antipathy towards Caucasians in history; that is now played out in angry, caustic rhetoric that they believe is objective. (2) An appearance of racist attitudes in speeches and writings that betray stealthily held beliefs & motives of the heart. (3) Even, the promotion of black culture, apart from its historic connection to Christianity, has created an isolationist frame of mind that hinders interaction with other ethnic groups.

4. Without the clergymen of the past to give direction to the people, a new type of educated leader came to the forefront, the black historian. Caught up in the whirlwind theory of identity politics he, and others, has mapped out a new ethnocography with Hispanic, feminist and broad views at the forefront. Armed with citations from 18<sup>th</sup> & 19<sup>th</sup> century sources and able to read critically, backwards in time, he utilized his new position to change the conversation away from America's nobility to America's hostility to blacks.

The rise of Black studies in the curriculum of the 60s, later called African American studies, led to further

investigations into the Negro's past in American life. Now, separated from the ethic of Jesus' love, the search for truth was (mis)guided by people with bad intentions; having ideas of shaming white people into an apology for past corruptions. In this way, another set of youth arose who are suspicious of white people. An aura of fear, bitterness or rank hatred is currently settling in again.

## CONCLUSION

Raising awareness of one's history, particularly, the history of the blacks since theirs is so disturbing, is not evil in and of itself. However, any encouragement of resentment towards people of different color is never helpful to the cause of blacks as a whole or liberationists and their movement. Our historically black colleges are useful tools when integrating historical truth with current trends in history. For blacks, and others who choose to learn in these institutions, a preserved past can be fully disseminated through up and coming young adult scholars. But if these institutions are under the governance of today's liberationist then a real possibility exists for the fomenting of an even greater racial divide in America.

*Two additional notes:* Archaeologist, Edwin Yamauchi has written extensively on the subject of Africa and the Bible and he concludes that the Ethiopian Eunuch and Simon of Cyrene were, more than likely, not black. There is very little substantive information offered up to the reader(s) to cause him or them to subscribe to his thesis and his conclusions are disputed of course. I prefer to view him as a writer with copious background notes possessing a remarkable ability for seeing 'the unconfirmable' in the inconclusive.

On the other hand, Semitist, E. Ullendorff, in his 1967 Schweich lectures of the British Academy, has produced a beautiful book on Ethiopia and the Bible and his conclusions are the result of a more consistent evidentiary method. Lecturing on sound historical grounds and working directly from Semitic MSS, he offers judgments that are traceable to the evidences before him.

Darrell Sutton, Biblicist & Pastor