

GOD of the OPPRESSED

James H. Cone

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SUFFERING IN THE BIBLE

CHAPTER 8

Divine Liberation and Black Suffering

The reality of suffering and evil challenges the affirmation that God is liberating the oppressed from human captivity. If God is unlimited both in power and in goodness, as the Christian faith claims, why does God not destroy the powers of evil through the establishment of divine righteousness? If God is the One who liberated Israel from Egyptian slavery, who appeared in Jesus as the healer of the sick and the helper of the poor, and who is present today as the Holy Spirit of liberation, then why are black people still living in wretched conditions without the economic and political power to determine their historical destiny? Why does the Holy One of Israel permit white people to oppress helpless black people when the Scripture says God came in Jesus Christ to set the captives free? The persistence of suffering seems to require us to deny either the perfect goodness or the unlimited power of God. According to which view is adopted, God is either unwilling or unable to deliver the oppressed from injustice. William Jones's exploration of the question, "Is God a white racist?"¹ is a cogent example of the first alternative, while E. S. Brightman's "finite God" illustrates the second.

Black Theology, while recognizing the seriousness of the problem, cannot accept either logical alternative for solving it. It is a violation of black faith to weaken either divine love or divine power. In this respect Black Theology finds itself in company with all of the classic theologies of the Christian tradition. However, the problem is resolved differently in Black Theology, which takes the liberation of the oppressed as its starting point.

The best place to begin an examination of the problem of suffering is with the Bible. How does Scripture reconcile the suffering of the innocent and weak with its claim that "the Lord is a man of war" (Exod. 15:3 RSV) who "delivers [the poor] in the day of trouble" and "protects them and keeps them alive" (Ps. 41:1-2 NRSV)?

The Old Testament tells the story of Israel's faith in the faithfulness of God to liberate the lowly and downtrodden from the proud and the mighty. Israel's faith in the promise of God to be with the little ones in time of trouble is grounded in Yahweh having been with Israel in the Exodus-Sinai event, thereby disclosing God's mighty power and unlimited love on behalf of the helpless. Because the Exodus was the decisive event in Israel's knowledge of God, the people naturally were troubled when historical events seemed to contradict their faith in God as the Liberator of the oppressed. The more they believed that God "heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds" (Ps. 147:3 RSV), the more the suffering and the pain of the poor emerged as a problem in their religious consciousness. Since this is who the people know God to be, why then did God not always intervene to liberate these faithful servants? Why did the God of the oppressed permit the innocent to suffer?

On the one hand, Israel firmly believed that "the Lord is a great God" (Ps. 95:3 RSV), whose "steadfast love endures forever" (Ps. 136 RSV), and who is the "great King above all gods" (Ps. 95:3 RSV). On the other hand, Israel could not ignore the obvious historical contradictions inherent in faith, particularly when the wicked continued to "slay the widow and sojourner, and murder the fatherless" (Ps. 94:6 RSV). Consequently, the integrity of Israel's faith in Yahweh's faithfulness was dependent upon its asking,

O Lord, how long shall the wicked,
how long shall the wicked exult?
(Psalm 94:3 RSV)

This is not a theoretical question arising out of an intellectual concern about the content of divine justice. It is a practical question emerging out of the struggle of faith with the negative dimensions of human experience. Whatever else may be said about biblical faith, it did not

affirm divine revelation in lieu of facing the reality of human suffering. Indeed it was not the mere presence of suffering that troubled Israel's faith. "The problem in Scripture is not why suffering exists, but why it afflicts some people and not others. The problem is not the *fact* of suffering but its *distribution*. Why do the wicked prosper, while those who try to keep faith with God suffer?"²

One of the simplest and most common responses to this problem was the suggestion that suffering was distributed in exact proportion to the sins committed.³ This formula was applied both to the community in general and to the individual in particular. Suffering therefore was understood as the just punishment of God inflicted on those who had disobeyed God's will. This view is directly related to the covenant experience at Sinai wherein Israel agreed to obey Yahweh's Law and to live according to the holy ways. To be sure, there were many instances of Israel's disobedience, and Yahweh did not always administer the punishment merited by the people. But that was due to God's grace and mercy which tempered justice but did not negate it. Furthermore, the establishment of divine justice in Israel meant that those who keep the covenant will be rewarded, and those who disobey will be punished by God according to the extent of their disobedience.

Tell the innocent how fortunate they are,

for they shall eat the fruit of their labors.

Woe to the guilty! How unfortunate they are,

for what their hands have done shall be done to them.

(Isaiah 3:10-11 NRSV)

This view is the theological assumption of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomist theory of history as found in I and II Kings. It is also found in Proverbs.

The fear of the Lord prolongs life,

but the years of the wicked will be short.

(Proverbs 10:27 RSV)

Although the idea that suffering was the just punishment for sins is clearly present in the Bible, that formula was often contradicted by history. It was not difficult for the people to see that wicked persons

did not always suffer for their wrongdoings, and neither did the righteous always prosper. The opposite often occurred. That is why Jeremiah complained:

You have right on your side, Yahweh,
when I complain about you.

But I would like to debate a point of justice with you.

Why is it that the wicked live so prosperously?

Why do scoundrels enjoy peace?

(Jeremiah 12:1 JB)

And Habakkuk, who was concerned about the use of evil as an instrument of divine purpose, also questioned the justice of God.

Your eyes are too pure to behold evil,

and you cannot look on wrongdoing;

Why do you look on the treacherous,

and are silent when the wicked swallow

those more righteous than they?

(Habakkuk 1:13 NRSV)

It is important to note that neither Habakkuk nor Jeremiah received an answer to his perplexing question. Both prophets illustrate how biblical religion, on the one hand, faced squarely the reality of suffering but, on the other hand, refused to let evil count decisively against Yahweh's sovereignty. That suffering is real and thus contradicts Israel's knowledge of God is affirmed throughout biblical history. But despite suffering, biblical faith continued to insist on the sovereignty of Yahweh's justice and the divine will to establish the divine righteousness in human history. Indeed it was the strength of Israel's monotheizing faith in God's absolute sovereignty, which finally (and canonically) excluded any form of metaphysical dualism, that created the seriousness of the problem of the distribution of suffering. Since evil was under the aegis of God's sovereignty and not an independent power co-eternal with God, why then does not God establish divine righteousness here and now, by distributing rewards and punishments in accordance with the obedience and disobedience of creatures?

The people's failure to reconcile divine justice with human suffering in the present led some to attempt reconciliation by an appeal to the future. Habakkuk suggests this solution:

For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
it speaks of the end and does not lie.
If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay.
Look at the proud!

Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.
(Habakkuk 2:3-4 NRSV)

The emphasis of facing the enigmas of history in faith, confident that God will make things clear in the future, is also implied in Jeremiah when he says, "the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (31:31 RSV). While Jeremiah and Habakkuk held on to belief in God's sovereignty in the context of injustice and suffering, looking forward to the inauguration of God's future establishment of divine righteousness, others before and after them insisted on the classical explanation, suggesting that the divine punishment of the wicked is only temporarily delayed.

Better is a little that the righteous has
than the abundance of many wicked.
For the arms of the wicked shall be broken;
but the Lord upholds the righteous.
(Psalm 37:16-17 RSV;
cf Proverbs 24:19f.)

But the application of the Deuteronomic ethic of election to the case of individual suffering in Diaspora could not stand up against the facts of history, even with the appeal to future historical happenings. The wicked did not always get their punishment before death and neither did the righteous get their reward, as Psalm 37 in a simplistic application of the Deuteronomic formula insists. The basic Deuteronomic answer, thus applied, did not explain the problem of suffering, and its inadequacy was brought to a head in Job and Ecclesiastes. The latter not

only rejects the Deuteronomic success formula as affirmed by the sages of the book of Proverbs, it says clearly that the problem of suffering is insoluble, completely beyond any rational or religious explanation.

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
(Ecclesiastes 1:2 NRSV)

With this affirmation, the central theme of Ecclesiastes is set in unambiguous opposition to the classical explanation of human suffering. The Teacher does not deny God's existence or sovereignty, for "who can make straight what he has made crooked?" (7:13). Ecclesiastes merely contends that God is completely transcendent and thus God's ways are hidden from human wisdom. Therefore the Teacher concludes that as far as human understanding goes:

The same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As to the good, so are the sinners. . . . The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds which are caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them. (Ecclesiastes 9:2; 11-12 NRSV)

Job, while not embracing the skeptical and sometimes cynical attitude of Ecclesiastes, also wrestles with the problem of suffering, as that problem is directly related to human fellowship with God. Job is described as "blameless and upright, one who feared God, and turned away from evil" (1:1 RSV). According to the wise men's retribution dogma, his prosperity and good health were true indicators of his righteousness. But suddenly the situation changed, and Job lost everything he had: wealth, family, and good health. While the Job of the Prologue keeps the faith, the Job of the poetic sections becomes extremely defiant, cursing the day of his birth and insisting that he has done nothing to merit the punishment inflicted on him. He challenges God to a debate in order that his integrity might be vindicated. Job

wrestles with suffering, not as a metaphysical problem but as a practical problem related to the life of faith. Like Ecclesiastes, this book is concerned with suffering insofar as it usurps life's meaning as defined by human fellowship with God. Because Job's friends accepted the dogma of retribution as the rule for measuring human fellowship with God, Job protested that their God was unjust.

Far be it from me to say that you are right;
till I die I will not put away my integrity from me.
I hold fast to my righteousness, and will not let it go;
my heart does not reproach me for any of my days.
(Job 27:5-6 RSV)

Job concludes with an audacious challenge: "Let the Almighty answer me!" (31:35).

The Almighty answers, but not according to Job's definition of the problem of suffering. God transposes the issue to another level, emphasizing divine power and knowledge in contrast to human weakness and ignorance.

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
(Job 38:4 RSV)

After God's challenging confrontation, reminding Job of his ignorance, Job repents. Job's repentance is not due to his acceptance of his punishment as just when understood in the light of the retribution dogma. His contrition is due to his recognition that God's revelation transcends human comprehension. God cannot be defined by human logic. Consequently "prosperity and adversity *have no necessary connection* with goodness and wickedness."⁴ Thus Job says:

I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. . . .
I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees thee;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.
(Job 42:3, 5-6 RSV)

In addition to the idea that God's revelation cannot be limited to the dogma of retribution, the book of Job suggests two additional responses to human suffering. First, the Prologue suggests that Job's suffering was a test of his faith (1:6-12), a theme also found in Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:1-19). Second, the Epilogue touches on the theme that suffering can be redemptive (42:10), a theme that is dominant in Second Isaiah. "By his suffering shall my servant justify many, taking their faults on himself" (Isa. 53:11 JB).

Second Isaiah's contention that suffering can be redemptive was a new departure in biblical theodicy and requires further examination. The historical setting is Israel's exile in Babylon. Here Israel faced the most severe test of its faith. As the people whom Yahweh chose, liberating them from Egyptian slavery and thereby bestowing upon them a sense of peoplehood, the people of Israel found it difficult to reconcile their faith in God as Savior and Liberator with their existence as exiles in a foreign land. To be sure, the people realized that they had sinned and thus their exile was partly justifiable in view of the orthodox dogma of retribution. Had not the prophets warned Israel to repent or suffer exile? But how was Yahweh justified in using the works of evil persons to accomplish God's purpose? And if we grant that the answer to the previous question lies in God's inscrutable will, the justice of God still has to face the fact that Babylon was pitiless in her oppression of Israel, and thus "showed them no mercy" (47:6 RSV).

When the poor and needy seek water,
and there is none,
and their tongue is parched with thirst . . .
(Isaiah 41:17 RSV)

Why did Israel receive "double for all her sins" (Isa. 40:2 RSV)? It is not surprising that many Israelites concluded that Yahweh was either impotent (Isa. 40:28) or had cast them off. "My way is hid from the Lord," said Israel, "and my right is disregarded by my God" (Isa. 40:27 RSV). "The Lord has forsaken me, [and] my Lord has forgotten me" (Isa. 49:14 RSV).

In the context of despair and hopelessness, Second Isaiah emerges on the scene to proclaim that Israel's servitude is over, because Yahweh, the Creator and Redeemer of humankind, still loves the people. How

absurd it is to think that Yahweh, the God of the poor, has forgotten about God's people in Babylon. And how ridiculous it is to think that Yahweh, the everlasting God, has grown faint and weary. God's power is unlimited and God's love knows no bounds for those who are weak and helpless. Then the prophet moves beyond the simple moral coherence of the dogma of retribution and introduces the idea of the Suffering Servant. Israel's suffering must be understood in the light of the purpose and sovereignty of God wherein old Israel became a new being, God's servant for the redemption of the nations.

Although there has been much scholarly debate about the identity of the servant in Second Isaiah,⁵ there are several passages where the servant is explicitly identified with Israel.

And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."
(Isaiah 49:3 RSV)

But you Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
The offspring of Abraham, my friend.
(Isaiah 41:8 RSV)

Because Israel as a new being is Yahweh's servant, its mission is to "bring forth justice to the nations" (Isa. 42:1 RSV) by enduring the transgressions and sins of others (Isa. 53). The sins of others are placed upon Israel when it remains faithful to Yahweh, even though evil persons inflict pain and suffering upon it. Israel's mission is to be Yahweh's people in the world by expressing the liberating presence of God among the nations. This act is the *vicarious* suffering of the innocent for the guilty. This is the meaning of Israel's double portion which it received from Yahweh's hand: expiation for its own sins, and transformation into a new being for the sake of others.

Two questions arise from this analysis of Israel's suffering: (1) Why should Israel suffer for others? and (2) What makes Israel's suffering redemptive? The answer to the first question is found in the meaning of divine election. To be chosen by Yahweh involves service, and thus the responsibility to participate in God's will to establish justice in the world. To share in Yahweh's inauguration of divine righteousness involves the willingness to suffer in the struggle of freedom. Election

therefore is not a privileged status that is given to favorite people. It is a call to serve, to suffer with God in the divine realization of justice in the world. And Yahweh's justice is not only for Israel but for all who hurt and inflict hurt in the world. For the oppressed, justice is the rescue from hurt; and for the oppressors it is the removal of the power to hurt others—even against their will—so that justice can be realized for all.

When viewed in the context of Yahweh's sovereignty and purpose, Israel's exile experience is not merely the fulfillment of the dogma of retribution. It is also the time when Israel receives a new vocation equal in importance to that of the Exodus, a higher vision of its calling as God's people. To be Yahweh's servant not only means that God will strengthen and help you and "will uphold you with my victorious right hand" (Isa. 41:10 RSV); it also means that Israel suffers with Yahweh in the divine establishment of justice in the land. There is no divine election without the call to suffer for justice.

But how can Israel's suffering become redemptive for others? Israel's suffering is redemptive, because it is suffering with and for its Lord who is always identified with the little ones in agony. Therefore, it is God who makes human suffering redemptive! For Yahweh takes on the pain of the widow and orphans and transforms slavery into freedom. This is what a later Isaiah meant when he said:

In all their affliction he was afflicted. . . .
In his love and in his pity he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.
(Isaiah 63:9 RSV)

As Yahweh's Suffering Servant, Israel becomes God's visible presence in the world, enduring suffering for the freedom of humanity. Israel's suffering is redemptive because Yahweh is present with it, bearing the pain of sin so that liberation will become a reality among all people.

Second Isaiah's description of Israel as Yahweh's Suffering Servant influenced Jesus' understanding of his ministry as presented in the synoptic Gospels and John. Mark opens his Gospel with a quotation from Second Isaiah, and says that John's preaching is the fulfillment of that prophecy (see Mark 1:1-3 and Isa. 40:3). Matthew and Luke refashion the same passage with their own distinctive approaches (Matt. 3:1-3; Luke 3:1-6). A unique and dramatic use of Isaiah 40:3 is

also found in John 1:19-23. The heavenly voice, which combines Isaiah 42:1 and Psalm 2:7, not only occurs at Jesus' baptism⁶ (Luke 3:21f.; Matt. 3:16f.; Mark 1:9f.) but also near the close of his ministry at the transfiguration (see Mark 9:7; Matt. 17:5; Luke 9:35). A reference is also made to the Suffering Servant theme in the important Q saying, the reply of Jesus to John (Luke 7:22; Matt. 11:5) and Jesus' direct reading from Isaiah 61 is found in Luke 4:18f. All these passages point to Jesus' acceptance of the role as the expected Messiah and his reinterpretation of messiahship in the light of the Suffering Servant of Second Isaiah. And in Mark 10:45, Jesus' identification of himself with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 is made with unmistakable clarity: "For the Son of man . . . came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." The passion predictions⁷ make a similar point, as well as the Fourth Gospel's reference to Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29, 36; cf. Isa. 53:4f., 7, 11). Though Paul does not call Jesus the Servant of the Lord, his saying that "Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the Scriptures*" (1 Cor. 15:3 RSV) has virtually the same meaning. Other echoes identifying Jesus with the Suffering Servant are found elsewhere in the New Testament.⁸ "It is thus fair to say," writes Millar Burrows, "that from Acts on the identification of Jesus with the Suffering Servant of the Lord is constant in the New Testament and there is no compelling reason to doubt that Jesus himself originated the idea."⁹

But the theological question is, What does Jesus' acceptance of the role of the Suffering Servant of the Lord have to do with human suffering? The answer to this question is the crux of the biblical view of suffering. The approach to suffering is not derived from the philosophical definition of the problem of evil (If God is all-powerful and all-loving, why is there evil?), although the philosophical statement of the problem is relevant to the Bible, since philosophy emerges out of the culture to which the gospel seeks to speak. The weight of the biblical view of suffering is not on the *origin* of evil but on what God in Christ has done about evil. According to the New Testament, God became human in Jesus Christ, and defeated decisively the power of sin, death, and Satan, thereby bestowing upon us the freedom to struggle against suffering which destroys humanity. This is the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. During Jesus' life, God became the Suffering Servant in Israel's place, and thus took upon the divine-self human pain.

He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
(Isaiah 53:3 NRSV)

On the cross, God's identity with the suffering of the world was complete. This event was the actualization of Second Isaiah's prophecy.

Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed.
(Isaiah 53:4-5 RSV)

In this context, Jesus' death was a sacrifice: "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth" (Isa. 53:7 RSV). Thus the reality and the depth of God's presence in human suffering is revealed not only in Jesus' active struggle against suffering during his ministry but especially in his death on the cross. The cross of Jesus reveals the extent of God's involvement in the suffering of the weak. God is not merely sympathetic with the social pain of the poor but becomes totally identified with them in their agony and pain. The pain of the oppressed is God's pain, for God takes their suffering as God's own, thereby freeing them from its ultimate control of their lives. The oppressed do not have to worry about suffering because its power over their lives was defeated by God. God in Christ became the Suffering Servant and thus took the humiliation and suffering of the oppressed into God's own history. This divine event that happened on the cross liberated the oppressed to fight against suffering while not being determined by it.

The resurrection ignites joy and excitement because it is the sign of God's victory over suffering on the cross. The oppressed are set free to struggle politically against the imposed injustice of rulers. The Suffering Servant was raised from the dead, and this means that God is

now present not only with Israel but with all who fight for the realization of humanity. Without the resurrection, Jesus was just a good man who suffered like other oppressed people. There is no reason to believe that God was with Jesus and thus defeated suffering unless Jesus transcended death and is alive and present in the struggle of freedom. But if he is alive and present with God, then we have every reason to believe that we too will be raised from the dead and will be given the eternal freedom of communion with God. A foretaste of that freedom is already breaking into our present history and that is why the oppressed can struggle for freedom in this world. The freedom to struggle against suffering is the eschatological gift of a new humanity derived from Jesus' resurrection. For without this gift of new humanity, the oppressed would have no grounds for struggling against suffering. They would be defined by the limits of history. The resurrection, therefore, is God breaking into history and liberating the oppressed from their present suffering, thereby opening up humanity to a divine realization beyond history. That is why Paul says: "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain . . ." (1 Cor. 15:14 RSV). For his resurrection is the foundation of our freedom. "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1 RSV).

Jesus' life, death, and resurrection render the orthodox law of retribution inadequate as an explanation of human suffering. God is not an even-handed Judge who inflicts punishment according to the crime. Rather, God is the Loving Father of Jesus, the crucified and risen One, who suffers on our behalf. The legalistic structure of the orthodox formula, therefore, fails to deal with the complexity of divine involvement in suffering and the divine call of freedom to the oppressed in their situation of injustice. The divine involvement in suffering, radically revealed in Jesus' cross, counts decisively against any suggestion that God is indifferent to human pain. Whatever else may be said about the philosophical difficulties that the problem of evil poses, whether in the traditional definition of classical philosophy or in Albert Camus's humanism or even in the black humanism of William Jones and Anthony Pinn, faith arising out of the cross and resurrection of Jesus renders their questions ("Is God evil?" or "Is God a white racist?") absurd from the biblical point of view. The absurdity of the question is derived from the fact that its origin ignores the very foundation of biblical faith itself, that is, God becoming the Suffering Servant in Christ in order that we might be liberated from injustice and pain.

However, the biblical view that God suffers for us and has defeated the powers of evil decisively in the cross and resurrection of Jesus does not mean that suffering no longer exists. The New Testament is clear that though the decisive victory has been won on the cross and through the resurrection of Jesus, the war against evil and suffering is still going on. The final victory will take place with the Second Coming of Christ. In the meantime, Christians are called to suffer with God in the fight against evil in the present age. This view gives us a new perspective on suffering. The oppressed are called to fight against suffering by becoming God's suffering servants in the world. This vocation is not a passive endurance of injustice but, rather, a political and social praxis of liberation in the world, relieving the suffering of the little ones and proclaiming that God has freed them to struggle for the fulfillment of humanity. Suffering therefore is reinterpreted in the light of Jesus' cross and resurrection and of our call to become liberated sufferers with God. There is joy in our suffering insofar as we have to suffer for freedom. There is joy not only because we know that God has defeated evil but also because God is present with us in our fight against suffering and will come again fully to consummate the freedom already given in Jesus Christ. Therefore when suffering is inflicted upon the oppressed, it is evil and we must struggle against it. But when suffering arises out of the struggle against suffering, as in the fight against injustice, we accept it as a constituent of our calling and thus voluntarily suffer, because there is no freedom independent of the fight for justice.

SUFFERING IN THE WESTERN THEOLOGICAL TRADITION

Regarding the definition of the problem of suffering, it is unfortunate that most of the exponents of the Western theological tradition have not paid sufficient attention to the biblical view.¹⁰ Although the Bible makes the divine liberation of the oppressed its starting point in the analysis of the problem of suffering, the classical theological tradition generally and Euro-American theology in particular have usually taken their clue from the speculations of Greek philosophy or from a naive orthodox providential claim that "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28 KJV). Both alternatives have contributed to a political conservatism that locates the resolution of the

problem of suffering either in the logical structure of the rational mind or in the interior depths of the human heart, and thereby negates the praxis of freedom against the structures of injustice and oppression.

When theology defines the problem of suffering within the context of philosophical discourse, it inevitably locates the Christian approach to suffering in the wrong place. In philosophy, human suffering is an aspect of the problem of evil. Thus the crux of the problem is: How do we *rationaly* reconcile a God unlimited both in power and in goodness with the presence of evil, moral and natural? Epicurus (341–270 B.C.) was probably the first to state the theoretical implications of this dilemma.

God either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? or why does He not remove them.¹¹

Whatever else may be said about this philosophical definition of the problem of evil, the political action against evil is not built into it. Thus the problem is basically theoretical and not practical. Here then is one of the essential differences between the Bible and Greek philosophy. The latter tends to be more concerned about the theoretical formulation of the problem and less concerned about its practical elimination. The Bible is the exact reverse. Its emphasis is on what God has done in Jesus' cross and resurrection to destroy the powers of evil and give the oppressed the freedom to struggle against humiliation and suffering. The Bible has little or no interest in rational explanations regarding the origins of evil. That evil exists is taken for granted. The focus is on what God has done, is doing, and will do to defeat the principalities and powers of evil. Thus God's past and present acts of liberation bestow upon the oppressed the freedom to fight against their slavery and oppression.

Because Western theology has been influenced too much by philosophy and too little by the Bible in its analysis of the problem of suffering, it has often contributed to the religious justification of unjust

structures that oppress the poor. That is why theologians spend more time discussing metaphysical speculations about the origin of evil than showing what the oppressed must do in order to eliminate the social and political structures that create evil. By focusing on metaphysics, theologians make the problem of evil a matter of intellectual theory and more often than not end up suggesting solutions that have nothing to do with the liberation of the poor from bondage.

This is especially true of John Hick's analysis of the problem of evil. He accepts the classical definition of the problem: "If God is perfectly good, He must want to abolish all evil; if He is unlimitedly powerful, He must be able to abolish all evil: but evil exists. Therefore either God is not perfectly good or He is not unlimitedly powerful."¹² With this definition as his starting point, Hick proceeds to outline two classical approaches to the problem of evil in the Christian tradition: the Augustinian and the Irenaean. He summarizes their difference as follows:

There is . . . to be found in Irenaeus the outline of an approach to the problem of evil which stands in important respects in contrast to the Augustinian type of theodicy. Instead of the doctrine that man was created finitely perfect and then incomprehensibly destroyed his own perfection and plunged into sin and misery, Irenaeus suggests that man was created as an imperfect, immature creature who was to undergo moral development and growth and finally be brought to the perfection intended for him by his Maker. Instead of the fall of Adam being presented, as in the Augustinian tradition, as an utterly malignant and catastrophic event, completely disrupting God's plan, Irenaeus pictures it as something that occurred in the childhood of race, an understandable lapse due to weakness and immaturity rather than an adult crime full of malice and pregnant with perpetual guilt. And instead of the Augustinian view of life's trials as a divine punishment for Adam's sin, Irenaeus sees our world of mingled good and evil as a divinely appointed environment for man's development towards the perfection that represents the fulfillment of God's good purpose for him.¹³

From a theological point of view, however, the differences between the two theories are not so significant as the similarities. Due to the influence of Greek philosophy, both are focused on the origin

of evil rather than on the political structures that make for human suffering. The difference therefore between Irenaeus and Augustine does not lie in their political analysis of suffering. While Irenaeus stressed the biblical emphasis that Christ's work was primarily a victory over sin, death, and Satan, he failed to draw out the political significance of this theme. Augustine's analysis of suffering was unquestionably dependent on Neo-Platonism, a factor that surely de-emphasized the place of the Bible in his thinking. Thus he defined evil as the privation of the good, and not as a power independent of the human will. Although Irenaeus and Augustine differ in many respects, neither has much to say about God's empowerment of the oppressed to fight against injustice.

The same is true of theologians of Western Christianity who were influenced by them. Even John Hick, who seemed to be aware of the limitations of theoretical analyses of evil,¹⁴ fails to add anything that would be relevant to the liberation of the oppressed. While I do not discount the value of the intellect in analyzing the problem of evil, Hick's analysis might have taken a different turn had he taken more seriously the distinction that Gabriel Marcel makes between the spectator and the victim.

In reflecting upon evil, I tend almost inevitably, to regard it as a disorder which I view from outside and of which I seek to discover the causes or secret aims. Why is it that the "mechanism" functions so defectively? Or is the defect merely apparent and due to a real defect in my vision? In this case the defect is in myself, yet it remains objective to my thought, which discovers it and observes it. But evil which is only stated or observed is no longer evil which is suffered: in fact, it ceases to be evil. In reality, I can only grasp it as evil in the measure in which it *touches* me—that is to say, in the measure in which I am *involved*, as one is involved in a lawsuit. Being "involved" is the fundamental fact; I cannot leave it out of account except by an unjustifiable fiction, for in doing so, I proceed as though I were God, and a God who is an onlooker at that.¹⁵

It is hard not to conclude that the main reason theologians have said little that can be used in the struggle of the oppressed is due to the fact that they have been only spectators and not victims of suffering.

A similar criticism must be directed against the religious orthodox approach. It, like the philosophical approach, has too often been a spectator's viewpoint, contributing to the oppression of the poor by justifying the unjust status quo. One of the typical representatives of this approach is Emil Brunner. The key to his view of divine providence and thus the problem of theodicy, is found in his interpretation of Romans 8:28.

In the presence of the Cross we cease to talk about "unjust" suffering. On the contrary, as we look at the Crucified all suffering gains a positive significance. "To those who love God all things work together for good"—we know this as those who have perceived that the sufferings of Christ were for the good of the world. Now we may unite our sufferings with the sufferings of the Crucified; as those who are united with Him in faith we may conceive them as suffering with Christ, even when from the moral point of view our sufferings are well deserved. For us suffering loses its negative character; it becomes fruitful, as God's means of discipline, by means of which, in paternal severity, He draws us to Himself. This is the greatest transformation possible in the sphere of human experience. Without taking away the sting of suffering, without fostering a desire for suffering, suffering becomes a positive instead of a negative principle.

Finally, there is yet another result: "I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us" [Rom. 8:18]. The believer looks beyond his suffering to the final goal which it must serve; compared with the promised glory, his suffering does not count. Suffering becomes the way to eternal life. Here, then, the theodicy problem is not solved *intellectually*, but by a real redemption, it is overcome. This does not mean that what is terrible becomes less terrible; terrible as it is, it is conquered by Him who permits us to bear this suffering, in order to purify us, and thus to prepare us for that life which no longer contains suffering. The real solution of the problem of theodicy is redemption.¹⁶

The difficulty with Brunner's antiphilosophical approach is not located in what he says but in what he fails to say, thereby negating the central meaning of biblical revelation which he intends to affirm. He

rightly makes divine revelation the starting point of his analysis of the problem of suffering and also correctly concludes that redemption is the answer to that problem. But his analysis of biblical revelation and its meaning for the victim of suffering radically distorts God's self-disclosure in that he leaves out the divine will to liberate the oppressed from social and political bondage. According to the Bible, the cross and resurrection of Jesus are God's decisive acts against injustice, against the humiliation and suffering of the little ones. Indeed, it is because God is disclosed as the Oppressed One in Jesus that the oppressed now know that their suffering is not only wrong but has been overcome. This *new* knowledge of God in Jesus grants the oppressed the freedom of fighting against the political structures of servitude which make for pain and suffering. Brunner seemed to have overlooked entirely God's gift of freedom to the oppressed for the struggle against injustice. He did not pay sufficient attention to the fact that God's election involves the responsibility to struggle with God in the fight for justice. In this regard, theologians would do well to listen carefully to Ernst Käsemann's comment: "Every word, every deed, every demonstration is a denial of our Lord and ourselves, unless we test them from the point of view of whether they are opium of the people, or can be regarded and abused as such."¹⁷ I contend that it is only in the struggle of an oppressed community for justice that problems of suffering and its relation to the gospel can be properly analyzed. For it is only in the fight for justice that God is encountered; and it is from this divine encounter in struggle that the oppressed also know that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18 RSV). But without struggle, this vision of a new heaven becomes a sedative that makes the victims of injustice content with servitude. Without struggle, the negative suffering inflicted by oppressors becomes positive and thus leads to passivity and submission. Without struggle, the idea of redemption becomes a human creation of oppressors designed to numb the pain and forestall challenges to the structures of injustice. Why is it that Brunner and many other contemporary Euro-American theologians have not recognized this danger? Why is it that white theologians in America have interpreted God's relation to black suffering in such a manner that the divine empowerment of the oppressed to fight actively against the evils of racism is absent from their analyses? Can this be due to anything else than the fact that the social existence of the oppressors

inevitably distorts the biblical message? Only the oppressed can receive liberating visions in wretched places. Only those whose thinking emerges in the context of the struggle against injustice can see God's freedom breaking into unfree conditions and thus granting power to the powerless to fight here and now for the freedom they know to be theirs in Jesus' cross and resurrection.

SUFFERING IN THE BLACK RELIGIOUS TRADITION

In contrast to the spectator approach of the Western theological tradition, the black religious perspective on suffering was created in the context of the human struggle against slavery and segregation. Whether we speak of the spirituals or the blues, the prayers and sermons of black preachers or the folkloric tales of Br'er Rabbit and High John the Conqueror, black reflections about suffering have not been removed from life but *involved* in life, that is, the struggle to affirm humanity despite the dehumanizing conditions of slavery and segregation. Therefore, to understand the dynamic movement of black thought in relation to black suffering as black people attempted to make sense out of black life, it is necessary to keep in mind the social and political existence from which black thinking emerged. Black religious thought represents the theological response of an African people to their situation of servitude in North America.

On the one hand, the Bible says that the God of Jesus Christ is the Liberator of the oppressed from social and political bondage. Black people therefore concluded that just as God had delivered Moses and the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, Daniel from the lion's den, and the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace, God will also deliver black people from American slavery.

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel,
deliver Daniel,

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, An' why not every man.

But on the other hand, the continued existence of slavery and oppression seemed to contradict God's will and power to deliver black people from the power of white people. The more black people believed that "God is a God, God don't never change," the more difficult it was for them to reconcile their religious faith with their

bondage. Black suffering was not so much a conflict in rational theory as a contradiction in black life. What is the meaning of black existence, and how do we reconcile black servitude and oppression with the biblical claim that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1 RSV)?

For some black people, slavery was clear evidence that God either does not exist or that God's existence is irrelevant to black suffering. If black people are to be liberated from white tyranny, it will be black people themselves, and not God, who will do the liberating. This perspective is found in the slave seculars and blues, in the work of black poets and novelists from the Harlem Renaissance to the 1970s, and in black power and the black humanist philosophy of William Jones and Anthony Pina.

The slave seculars actually ridiculed the religious perspective of the spirituals. As Sterling Brown reports, some black slaves sang: "I don't want to ride no golden chariot; I don't want no golden crown; I want to stay down here and be, just as I am without one plea."

One father, who is in heaven,
White man owe me eleven and pay me seven,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
And if I hadn't took that, I wouldn't had none.¹⁸

The blues, on the other hand, do not make many direct criticisms of the black religious faith. Yet they are clearly indifferent toward God and thus represent an attempt to create meaning out of life without reference to Jesus Christ. They are an expression of black people's recognition of the absurdity of black life in a white world, which regards blackness as nonbeing.

They say we are the Lawd's children,
I don't say that ain't true,
They say we are the Lawd's children,
I don't say that ain't true,
But if we are the same like each other,
ooh, well, well, why do they treat me like they do?

Because the Christian answer to that question was not satisfactory to many black poets and novelists of the twentieth century, they concluded that the God of Jesus Christ was an opiate for black people.

As early as 1906, in response to the slaughter of black people in Atlanta, W.E.B. Du Bois made his protest against the silence of God.

Done at Atlanta, in the Day of Death, 1906.

O Silent God, though Whose voice afar in mist and mystery hath left our ears an-hungered in these fearful days. . . .

Bewildered we are . . . mad with madness of a mobbed and mocked and murdered people; straining at the armposts of Thy Throne, we raise our shackled hands and charge Thee, God, by the bones of our stolen fathers, by the tears of our dead mothers, by the blood of Thy crucified Christ: *What meaneth this?* Tell us the Plan; give us the Sign!

Sit no longer blind, Lord God, deaf to our prayer and dumb to our dumb suffering. Surely Thou too art not white, O Lord, a pale, bloodless, heartless thing?¹⁹

By 1933 Langston Hughes had concluded not only that an appeal like Du Bois's was pointless but that the entire history of black religion, particularly as characterized in the "sorrow songs," had contributed to black people's passivity and submission in the context of slavery and oppression.

Bitter was the day
When . . .
. . . only in the sorrow songs
Relief was found—
Yet no relief,
But merely humble life and silent death
Eased by a Name
That hypnotized the pain away—
O, precious Name of Jesus in that day!

That day is past.

I know full well now
Jesus could not die for me—
That only my own hands,
Dark as the earth,
Can make my earth-dark body free.²⁰

Some writers like Hughes and Richard Wright experimented with communism. But finding that white racism was not limited to white preachers and capitalists, they rejected the communist philosophy. However, the agony and depth of black suffering remained within their consciousness, and they expressed its contradiction with literary imagination. Without the reality of black suffering and its contradiction of life's meaning, Richard Wright would not have created *Bigger Thomas*²¹ and neither would James Baldwin have felt the need to "Go Tell it on the Mountain" and to warn white America about the "Fire Next Time."²² The fire about which he wrote erupted in Watts, Detroit, and Newark; its political implications were set forth in Willie Rick's cry of "black power" in the summer of 1966. The poetic significance of black power was articulated by LeRoi Jones (Imamu Baraka), Don Lee (Haki R. Madhubuti), and Nikki Giovanni. These events and persons represented black people's revolutionary declaration that they will be free from white oppression "by any means necessary." The Christian faith came under severe attack because most black intellectuals viewed it as the white man's religion, used as an ideological justification of black passivity in the context of oppression. Although not written in the height of the black power revolution, William Jones's book *Is God a White Racist?* is a fitting climax to the black power mood. Using philosophical rather than political categories, Jones examines the claim of black Christians that God is involved in liberating black people. He contends that no evidence supports this claim, in particular that no "exaltation-liberation" event has taken place in black history to vindicate the black Christian faith in Christ the Liberator.²³ Therefore the work of liberation is left in the hands of black people alone.

Black humanism from the slave seculars to William Jones represents an appealing tradition. However, not all blacks accepted this perspective. Although many blacks rejected the claims of Christianity, they did not reject religion. Some substituted Allah for Yahweh, Mohammed for Jesus, Islam for Christianity. The most visible group of this persuasion is the Nation of Islam, often called the Black Muslims. In response to white people's oppression of blacks, they concluded that "the white man is the devil" whose destruction is inevitable at the hands of Allah. The Black Muslims expound an ideology that equates blackness with good and whiteness with evil, thereby fostering the belief that black people can be completely self-determining despite white oppression.

Another tradition in black history and culture is blacks who believed that black suffering would be eliminated through political activity alone. They did not directly deny the validity of religion but merely interpreted it as a matter of the soul and heart and not so much as a leverage in political change. Here are included Frederick Douglass, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Congress of Racial Equality, and many of the past and present black officials at various levels of government. These persons believe that the constitution is the only foundation for black liberation. The struggle of freedom must be fought and won at the ballot box and through the legal structures of the state and federal government.

But the vast majority of blacks are Christians who believe that God is relevant to black life in a white society. Therefore, unlike the already mentioned perspectives on black suffering, black Christians are faced with an unavoidable paradox: How do we explain our faith in God as the Liberator of the oppressed when black people have been oppressed for more than three centuries in North America? The importance of this question cannot be overstated, and black theologians ought to be grateful to William Jones for having brought this problem to our attention so sharply.

Of course we are not the first black Christians to recognize the significance of this problem. Bishop Daniel Payne of the A.M.E. Church (elected 1852) agonized deeply over the problem of black suffering.

I began to question the existence of the Almighty, and to say, if indeed there is a God, does he deal justly? Is he a just God? Is he a holy Being? If so, why does he permit a handful of dying men thus to oppress us? . . . Thus I began to question the Divine government, and to murmur at the administration of his providence. And could I do otherwise, while slavery's cruelties were pressing and grinding my soul in the dust, and robbing me and my people of these privileges which it was hugging to its breast, and giving thousands to perpetuate the blessing which was tearing away from us?²⁴

Other black preachers had similar problems and they demanded that God give an accounting of the divine behavior in the world. Nathaniel Paul asked:

Tell me, ye mighty waters, why did ye sustain the ponderous load of misery? Or speak, ye winds, and say why it was that ye executed your office to waft them onward to the still more dismal state; and ye proud waves, why did you refuse to lend your aid and to have overwhelmed them with our billows? . . . And, oh thou immaculate God, be not angry with us, while we come into this thy sanctuary, and make the bold inquiry in this thy holy temple, why it was that thou didst look on with the calm indifference of an unconcerned spectator, when thy holy law was violated, thy divine authority despised and a portion of thine own creatures reduced to a state of mere vassalage and misery.²⁵

What answers did blacks give to such questions? Some attempted to penetrate the mystery of black slavery and divine liberation by appealing to divine providence. These persons included Paul Coffee, Daniel Coker, Alexander Crummell, and Edward Blyden. Generally, they sought to explain the mystery of black servitude in North America with the idea that God willed the enslavement of Africans in America so that the American blacks could return to their native land and thus lift "the veil of darkness from their less fortunate brethren and [open] up the continent of Africa to modern political, economic, and religious development."²⁶ According to Blyden, God has spoken providentially to black people:

First, by suffering them to be brought here and placed in circumstances where they could receive a training fitting them for the work of civilizing and evangelizing the land whence they were torn, and by preserving them under the severest trials and afflictions. Secondly, by allowing them, not withholding all the services they have rendered to this country, to be treated as strangers and aliens, so as to cause them to have anguish of spirit, as was the case of the Jews in Egypt, and to make them long for some refuge from their social and civil deprivations. Thirdly, by bearing a portion of them across the tempestuous seas back to Africa, by preserving them through the process of acclimation, and by establishing them in the land, despite the attempts of misguided men to drive them away. Fourthly, by keeping their fatherland in reserve for them in their absence.²⁷

Although we certainly can appreciate Blyden and others who attempted to explain black slavery through an appeal to divine providence, that explanation is inadequate today. Daniel Payne and Nathaniel Paul approached the problem in a way that is more useful. Payne's answer was grounded in his confidence that God would vindicate the sufferings of black people, appealing to the mystery of God's ways of acting in the world.

But then there came in my mind those solemn words: "with God one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. Trust in him, and he will bring slavery and all its outrages to an end." These words from the spirit world acted on my troubled soul like water on a burning fire, and my aching heart was soothed and relieved from its burden of woes.²⁸

Nathaniel Paul's answer was similar to Payne's. It focused on God's righteousness and will to be God and to establish justice according to divinely holy ways.

Hark! while he answers from on high: hear Him proclaiming from the skies—Be still, and know that I am God! Clouds and darkness are round about me; yet righteousness and judgment are the habitation of my throne. I do my will and pleasure in the heavens above, and in the earth beneath; it is my sovereign prerogative to bring good out of evil, and cause the wrath of man to praise me, and the remainder of that wrath I will restrain.²⁹

Although we may not fully accept these answers for our approach to the problem of suffering today, yet we cannot deny that their authors faced the problem and its extreme contradictions. They did not ignore history or encourage black passivity during slavery. Payne's stand against slavery began as early as 1839 when he said:

I am opposed to slavery, not because it enslaves the black man, but because it enslaves *man*. And were all the slaveholders in this land men of color, and the slaves white men, I would be as thorough and uncompromising an abolitionist as I now am; for whatever and when ever I may see a being in the form of a man, enslaved by his fellowman, without respect to his complexion, I

shall lift my voice to plead his cause, against all the claims of his proud oppressor; and I shall do it not merely from the sympathy which man feels towards suffering man, but because *God, the living God*, whom I dare not disobey, has commanded me to open my mouth for the dumb, and to plead the cause of the oppressed.³⁰

This same attitude was expressed by Nathaniel Paul who believed that the abolition of slavery in New York (1827) was a sign of God's liberating activity on behalf of black slaves. To be sure, we may not agree with his conclusion or with the similar contentions of David Walker, Henry Highland Garnet and other black Christians during slavery. But no careful student of black history can say that their views on black religion and suffering led to inactivity, particularly when the black Church and its ministers were the most visible activists against slavery. The same would be true of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, both of whom were active against slavery *because* they were believers in the God of Jesus Christ. This faith was the ground of their struggle against suffering, enabling Tubman to liberate more than three hundred slaves from bondage. Thus whatever else may be said about the truth claims of black religion, faith in Jesus Christ did not inevitably lead to black passivity.

Furthermore, when Payne and Paul appeal to God's mystery and sovereignty, they offer a valuable clue, though not a full answer, to the problem of black suffering. The ethos derived from this appeal has enabled countless people to survive and to give an account of their faith in the face of horrendous assault. Black humanism cannot do as well. Nevertheless, William Jones is right! There is no historical evidence that can prove conclusively that the God of Jesus is actually liberating black people from oppression. Thus he asks: Where is the decisive event of liberation in the experience of black people?

In responding to Jones, Christian theologians have to admit that their logic is not the same as other forms of rational discourse. The coming of God in Jesus breaks open history and thereby creates an experience of truth-encounter that makes us talk in ways often not understandable to those who have not had the experience. This statement is not meant to exclude my theological perspective from philosophical criticism. Rather, it is an honest attempt to give an account of black faith in the social context of a world that seems to contradict it. There is the experience of suffering in the world, and no amount of theological argument can explain away the pain of our suffering in a white racist

society. But in the experience of the cross and resurrection, we know not only that black suffering is wrong but that it has been overcome in Jesus Christ. This faith in Jesus' victory over suffering is a once-for-all event of liberation. No matter what happens to us in this world, God has already given us a perspective on humanity that cannot be taken away with guns and bullets. Therefore, to William Jones's question, What is the decisive event of liberation? we respond: the event of Jesus Christ! He is our Alpha and Omega, the one who died on the cross and was resurrected that we might be free to struggle for the affirmation of black humanity. I know that this answer will not satisfy Jones or others who view black humanity from another vantage point than Jesus Christ. But for many blacks during slavery and its aftermath, Jesus was not a clever theological device to escape difficulties inherent in suffering. He was the One who lived with them *in* suffering and thereby gave them the courage and strength to "hold out to the end."

The idea that Jesus made blacks passive is simply a misreading of the black religious experience. He was God's *active* presence in their lives, helping them to know that they were not created for bondage but for freedom. Therefore, through sermon, prayer, and song black people expressed visions of freedom in a situation of servitude. When everything else in their experience said that they were nobodies, Jesus entered their experience as a friend and a helper of the weak and the helpless. His presence in the black experience was the decisive liberating event which bestowed dignity upon them. His presence enabled blacks to believe that they were on the "Lord's journey" despite the historical evidence that said otherwise. That is why blacks could sing and shout about freedom. They believed that God had not left them alone in suffering. To be sure, they could not rationally explain why they were slaves or why God permitted them to suffer so much. The meaning of black suffering remains a part of the mystery of God's will. But the presence of Jesus in their social existence did reveal that God was at work liberating them from bondage.

On the one hand, the faith of black people as disclosed in their sermons, songs and prayers, revealed that they faced the reality of black suffering. Faith in Jesus did not cancel out the pain of slavery.

Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down,

Oh, yes, Lord!

Sometimes I'm almost to the ground,

Oh, yes, Lord!

But on the other hand, Jesus' presence in the experience of suffering liberated black people from being dependent upon the historical limitation of servitude for a definition of their humanity. Thus they began to project this new knowledge of themselves with future, apocalyptic imagination. They began to sing and preach about a "home in glory" where they would "sit at the welcome table." Heaven thus was not so much an opiate as it was a revolutionary judgment that black people made about American society on the basis of Jesus' presence in their lives. It was the "age to come" that had broken into the present age, giving black people a vision of freedom that enabled them to struggle now for the liberation of the little ones. It was this vision that enabled black preachers from Henry Highland Garnet to Martin Luther King, Jr., to struggle for freedom in the social context of oppression. King spoke of the vision in terms of the "mountain top" that enabled him to take the course of freedom even though he knew that it would lead to his death. But suffering that arises in the context of the struggle for freedom is liberating. It is liberating because it is a sign of Jesus' presence in our midst. Black people, therefore, as God's Suffering Servant, are called to suffer with and for God in the liberation of humanity. This suffering to which we have been called is not a passive endurance of white people's insults, but rather, a way of fighting for our freedom.

Thus the real question is whether those who inflict suffering are the true definers of humanity. I contend that it is the opposite. Humanity's meaning is found in the oppressed people's fight for freedom, for in the fight for liberation God joins them and grants them the vision to see beyond the present to the future. Faith thus is God's gift to those in trouble. It bestows meaning in a meaningless situation, enabling the oppressed to believe that there is One greater than the power of the oppressors.

To summarize Black Theology's perspective on suffering, we can say it is based on Scripture and the black Christian experience which claim that the God of Jesus is the Liberator of the oppressed from oppression. Although the continued existence of black suffering offers a serious challenge to the biblical and black faith, it does not negate it. The reason is found in Jesus Christ who is God's decisive Word of liberation in our experience that makes it possible to struggle for freedom because we know that God is struggling too.

CHAPTER 9

Liberation and the Christian Ethic

The black struggle for liberation involves a total break with the white past, "the overturning of relationships, the transformation of life and then a reconstruction."¹ Theologically, this means that black people are prepared to live according to God's eschatological future as defined by the reality of Christ's presence in the social existence of oppressed people struggling for historical liberation. This perspective informs black people's view of suffering and enables them to know that white people do not have the last word on black existence.

Because black liberation means a radical break with the existing political and social structures and a redefinition of black life along the lines of black power and self-determination, it is to be expected that white theologians and assorted moralists will ask questions about methods and means. Theologically and philosophically, they want to know whether revolutionary violence can be justified as an appropriate means for the attainment of black liberation. If Black Theology is Christian theology, how does it reconcile violence with Jesus' command to turn the other cheek and to go the second mile (Matt. 5:39)? Is it not true that violence is a negation of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

These are favorite *white* questions, and it is significant that they are almost always addressed to the oppressed and almost never to the oppressors. This fact alone provides the clue to the motive behind the questions. White people are not really concerned about violence in all cases but only when they are the victims. As long as blacks are beaten and shot, they are strangely silent, as if they are unaware of the inhumanity committed against the black community. Why didn't we hear from the so-called nonviolent Christians when black people