IV.

BIBLICAL REVELATION AND SOCIAL EXISTENCE

The social context of theology is not only evident in our language as human beings with certain political and social interests; it is also implied in the nature of divine revelation. Unlike the God of Greek philosophy who is removed from history, the God of the Bible is involved in history, and his revelation is inseparable from the social and political affairs of Israel. Theology therefore is interested speech not simply because theologians are creatures of time, but because Yahweh, the God of the Exodus and of Jesus Christ, is the Subject of its discourse. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and of Peter, James, and John is not an eternal idea, and neither is the divine an absolute ethical principle to whom people ought to appeal for knowledge of the Good. Rather, Yahweh is known and worshiped as the Lord who brought Israel out of Egypt, and who raised Jesus from the dead. He is the political God, the Protector of the poor and the Establisher of the right for those who are oppressed. To know him is to experience his acts in the concrete affairs and relationship of people, liberating the weak and the helpless from pain and humiliation. For theologians to speak of this God, they too must become interested in politics and economics, recognizing that there is no truth about Yahweh unless it is the truth of freedom as that event is revealed in the oppressed people’s struggle for justice in this world.

The Old Testament is a history book. To understand it and the divine revelation to which it witnesses, we must think of the Old Testament as the drama of God’s mighty acts in history. It tells the story of God’s acts of grace and of judgment as he calls the people of Israel into a free, liberated existence.

Historically, the story began with the Exodus. The Exodus was the decisive event in Israel’s history, because through it Yahweh revealed himself as the Savior of an oppressed people. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt; thus, their future was closed. But Yahweh “heard their groaning, and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; he saw the plight of Israel, he took heed of it” (Exod. 2:24-25 NEB). Yahweh, therefore, took Israel’s history into his own hands, and gave this people a divine future, thereby doing for Israel what she could not do for herself. “With arm outstretched and with mighty acts of judgments” (Exod. 6:6 NEB), he delivered Israel out of Egypt and across the Red Sea. And “when Israel saw the great power which the Lord had put forth against Egypt, . . . they put their faith in him,” responding with a song to the Lord:

I will sing to the Lord, for he has risen up in triumph;  
the horse and his rider he has hurled into the sea.  
Exodus 15:1 NEB

In the Exodus event, God is revealed by means of his acts on behalf of a weak and defenseless people. He is the God of power and of strength, able to destroy the enslaving power of the mighty Pharaoh.

The Lord is my refuge and my defence,  
he has shown himself my deliverer.  
Exodus 15:2 NEB
The centrality of the Exodus for Israel’s consciousness, seen first through the people’s recognition of deliverance, was further developed at Sinai, as the Exodus became the basis for Israel’s covenant with Yahweh.

You have seen with your own eyes what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you here to me. If only you will now listen to me and keep my covenant, then out of all peoples you shall become my special possession; for the whole earth is mine. You shall be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation.

Exodus 19:4-5 NEB

This passage connects the Exodus, the revelation of Yahweh through his acts (“You have seen . . . what I did”), with the covenant, which is the foundation of Yahweh’s revelation through his Word (“If only you will listen to me and keep my covenant”). The Exodus is the point of departure of Israel’s existence, the foundation of her peoplehood established at Sinai. This is the meaning of the preface to the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:2: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” Therefore, “you shall have no other god to set against me” (20:3 NEB).

The covenant is an invitation to Israel to enter into a responsible relationship with the God of the Exodus wherein he will be her God and she his “special possession.” This invitation places Israel in a situation of decision, because the covenant requires obedience to the will of Yahweh. To accept the covenant means that Israel must now live as Yahweh’s liberated people, becoming the embodiment of freedom made possible through his freeing presence. The covenant not only places upon Israel the responsibility of accepting the absolute sovereignty of Yahweh as defined in the first commandment; it also requires Israel to treat the weak in her midst as Yahweh has treated her. This is the significance of the apodictic laws in the Covenant Code:

You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Exodus 22:21; cf. 23:9 RSV

You shall not ill-treat any widow or fatherless child. If you do, be sure that I will listen if they appeal to me; My anger will be roused and I will kill you with the sword.

Exodus 22:23-24 NEB

In the Exodus–Sinai tradition Yahweh is disclosed as the God of history, whose revelation is identical with his power to liberate the oppressed. There is no knowledge of Yahweh except through his political activity on behalf of the weak and helpless of the land. This is the significance of Yahweh’s contest with Pharaoh, the plagues against Egypt, and the “hardening” of Pharaoh’s heart. The biblical writer wishes to emphasize that Israel’s liberation came not from her own strength but solely from the power of Yahweh, who completely controls history. The same emphasis is found in the stories of divine guidance in the wilderness and of the defeat of the Amalekites. The Israelites were a weak and defenseless people—a fact that played a crucial role in her election, for Yahweh in his very nature stands against the so-called mighty in their oppression of the poor. Only Yahweh is the universal sovereign ruler.

God’s election of oppressed Israelites has unavoidable implications for the doing of theology. If God had chosen as his “holy nation” the Egyptian slave masters instead of the Israelite slaves, then a completely different kind of God would have been revealed. Thus Israel’s election cannot be separated from her servitude and liberation. Here God discloses that he is the God of history whose will is identical with the liberation of the oppressed from social and political bondage. The doing of theology, therefore, on the basis of the revelation of Yahweh, must involve the politics which takes its stand with the poor and against the rich. Indeed, theology ceases to be a theology of the Exodus–Sinai tradition when it fails to see Yahweh as unquestionably in control of history, vindicating the weak against the strong.

The Old Testament story does not end with the Exodus and the gift of the covenant. Yahweh does not withdraw from his people’s history. On the contrary, the covenant means that Yahweh’s liberating presence continues to sustain the people...
through the wilderness to the Promised Land. And when Israel failed to keep her side of the covenant by running after the gods of Canaan, Yahweh did not reject his people. His will to save and to make them free was a constituent of his being with them. God's grace could not be destroyed by Israel's disobedience.

The conflict between grace and disobedience was escalated when Israel became a monarchy, for the rulers often forgot the Exodus–Sinai experience and the function of the King in Israel, as the protector of the poor and weak. It is within this social and political context that we ought to understand the rise of prophecy. The prophets were messengers of Yahweh who gave God's Word to the people, reminding them of God's deliverance and covenant which brought the community into existence. They also proclaimed Yahweh's future activity of judgment and renewal that was about to burst into the present.

The prophets gave a large measure of their addresses to proclaiming the emptiness and tragedy of Israel's present existence. The tragedy of Israel is due to her failure to remember the Exodus–Sinai tradition. As Amos said,

> It was I who brought you up from the land of Egypt,
> I who led you in the wilderness forty years,
> to take possession of the land of the Amorites.

Amos 2:10 NEB

Because Israel often failed to live on the basis of God's saving event of the Exodus, she also failed to understand the significance of Yahweh's imminent eschatological judgment. Amos proclaimed the connection between the past and the future as they both invaded Israel's present moment.

> For you alone have I cared
> among all the nations of the world;
> therefore I will punish you
> for all your iniquities.

Amos 3:2 NEB

What was Israel's sin that aroused the anger of their Lord? The prophets were almost unanimous in their contention that Israel disobeyed the first commandment. The people failed to recognize Yahweh's sovereignty in history, and thus began to trust their own power and the power of political alliances with other nations (Isa. 31:1). But that was not all! The disobedience of the first commandment always has consequences in the social life of the community. Israel, therefore, began to oppress the weak and the poor in their own community. That was why Amos said, “the Lord has sworn by his holiness that your time is coming,” because you “grind the destitute and plunder the humble” (4:2; 8:4 NEB). Even though Yahweh “cared for you in the wilderness, in a land of burning heat, as if you were in a pasture,” you “forgot [him],” becoming “an oppressor trampling on justice, doggedly pursuing what is worthless” (Hos. 13:5-6; 5:11 NEB). Because Yahweh will not permit the triumph of evil, Israelites must be punished for their wrongdoings. Therefore, Yahweh “will be like a panther to them” and “will prowl like a leopard by the wayside.” He “will meet them like a she-bear robbed of her cubs and tear their ribs apart.” “Like a lioness” Yahweh “will devour them on the spot” and “will rip them up like a wild beast” (Hos. 13:7-8 NEB).

According to Amos and Hosea, Israel will be punished because the people do not “practice loyalty and justice” (Hos. 12:6 NEB), but rather “have turned into venom the process of the law and justice itself into poison” (Amos 6:12 NEB). They “buy the poor for silver and the destitute for a pair of shoes.” The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: I will never forget any of their doings.”

> Shall not the earth shake for this?
> Shall not all who live on it grieve?
> All earth shall surge and seethe like the Nile
> and subside like the river of Egypt.

Shall I not bring Israel up from Egypt,
the Philistines from Captor, the Aramaeans from Kir?
Behold, I, the Lord God,
have my eyes on this sinful kingdom,
and I will wipe it off the face of the earth.

Amos 8:6-8; 9:7-8 NEB
We may shudder at the anger of Yahweh as voiced in the prophecy of Amos and say that the latter lacks the tender mercy found in Hosea. Nevertheless God’s mercy can never invalidate his will for justice. There is no divine grace in the Old Testament (or in the New Testament) that is bestowed on oppressors at the expense of the suffering of the poor. The theme of justice and Yahweh’s special concern for the poor and the widows have a central place in Israelite prophecy. Thus Jeremiah:

> For among my people there are wicked men,. Their houses are full of fraud, as a cage is full of birds. They grow rich and grand, bloated and rancorous; their thoughts are all of evil, and they refuse to do justice, the claims of the orphan they do not put right nor do they grant justice to the poor.

**Jeremiah 5:26-28 NEB**

And Micah:

> God has told you what is good; and what is it that the Lord asks of you? Only to act justly, to love loyalty, to walk wisely before your God.

**Micah 6:8 NEB**

The emphasis upon justice for the poor is present even in a prophet like Isaiah of Jerusalem, for whom David’s reign, rather than the Exodus, is the significant act of deliverance. According to Isaiah, “Yahweh bound himself by a covenant oath to David, promising to preserve the Davidic line to spare the Davidic kingdom ‘for the sake of my servant David’. . . . (Isa. 37:35; see II Sam. 7).”1 Isaiah thus represents what scholars designate as the David-Zion tradition. Yet Isaiah, in perfect solidarity with the prophets of the Mosaic tradition, proclaimed that Yahweh is the God of justice who sides with the weak against the strong.

> Put away the evil of your deeds, away out of my sight. Cease to do evil and learn to do right, pursue justice and champion the oppressed; give the orphan his rights, plead the widows’ cause.

**Isaiah 1:16-17 NEB**

In Israel, only Yahweh is King:

> For the Lord our judge, the Lord our law-giver, the Lord our king—he himself will save us.

**Isaiah 33:22 NEB**

The function of the human king in Israel is to be Yahweh’s servant, executing justice in his name. “The King is God’s son . . . He is commissioned to rule by God himself, he governs with perfect justice and wisdom, he is the great benefactor and shepherd of his people. . . .”2 As Yahweh’s son by adoption (Ps. 2:7), the king is enthroned to “rescue the needy from their rich oppressors, the distressed who have no protector.”

> May he have pity on the needy and the poor, deliver the poor from death; may he redeem them from oppression and violence and may their blood be precious in his eyes.

**Ps. 72:12-14 NEB**

The poor are Yahweh’s own, his special possession. These are the people the divine has called into being for freedom. Therefore as the sovereign King of Israel whose existence is dependent upon God’s saving power, Yahweh judges Israel in the light of their treatment of the poor. The indictment is severe.

> The Lord comes forward to argue his case and stands to judge his people.
The Lord opens the indictment
against the elders of his people and their officers:
They have ravaged the vineyard,
and the spoils of the poor are in your houses.
Is it nothing to you that you crush my people
and grind the faces of the poor?
Isaiah 3:13-15 NEB

It is a fact: in almost every scene of the Old Testament drama
of salvation, the poor are defended against the rich, the weak
against the strong. Yahweh is the God of the oppressed whose
revelation is identical with their liberation from bondage. Even
in the wisdom literature, where the sages seem to be unaware
of Israel’s saving history, God’s concern for the poor is nonethe­
less emphasized.

He who is generous to the poor lends to the Lord.
Proverbs 19:17 NEB

He who oppresses the poor insults his Maker;
he who is generous to the needy honours him.
Prov. 14:13 NEB

Like Moses and the prophets, the wise man is concerned for the
orphan:

Do not move the ancient boundary-stone
or encroach on the land of orphans:
they have a powerful guardian
who will take their cause against you.
Proverbs 23:10-11 NEB

If theological speech is based on the traditions of the Old Testa­
ment, then it must heed their unanimous testimony to Yah­
weh’s commitment to justice for the poor and the weak. Accord­
ingly it cannot avoid taking sides in politics, and the side that
theology must take is disclosed in the side that Yahweh has
already taken. Any other side, whether it be with the oppressors
or the side of neutrality (which is nothing but a camouflaged
identification with the rulers), is unbiblical. If theology does not
side with the poor, then it cannot speak for Yahweh who is the
God of the poor.

As the Old Testament story continues, we see that the people
of Israel did not listen to the voice of prophecy. Thus they went
into exile—the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. and the Southern
Kingdom of Judah in 597 B.C. and 587 B.C. The experience of
exile was a shattering event for Israel. “They believed that
Yahweh had manifested his lordship in Palestine; but could he
be worshipped in a strange land where other gods seemed to
be in control?”

By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept
when we remembered Zion.
There on the willow-trees
we hung up our harps,
for there those who carried us off
demanded music and singing,
and our captors called on us to be merry:
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”
How could we sing the Lord’s song
in a foreign land?
Psalm 137 NEB

In the midst of Israel’s despair, prophecy began to strike a new
note. Jeremiah began to speak of the new covenant (31:31-34)
and Ezekiel of a new heart and a new spirit (36:26). And then
there was the voice of the unknown prophet who began by pro­
claiming:

Comfort, comfort my people;
—it is the voice of your God;
speak tenderly to Jerusalem
and tell her this,
that she has fulfilled her term of bondage,
and that her penalty is paid; she has received at the Lord’s hand double measure for all her sins.

Isaiah 40:1-2 NEB

Again Yahweh revealed himself as the deliverer of weak and defenseless Israel. This was Israel’s second Exodus, and like the first it was due exclusively to the power of Yahweh overwhelming those who asserted their power against his people.

On the people’s return to their homeland there was the rebuilding of the Temple and the rededication of the community to the obedience of the Law. But Israel’s story logically does not end with the Old Testament. If Yahweh is to keep his promise to bring freedom, then the Old Testament cannot be the end of Yahweh’s drama with Israel. The Old Testament pushes beyond itself to an expected future event which Christians say happened in Jesus Christ.


Christians believe that the Old Testament story of salvation is continued in the New Testament. Indeed, they affirm that the New Testament is the witness to the fulfillment of God’s drama of salvation begun with Israel’s liberation from Egypt. This view is expressed in the New Testament itself: “Do not suppose that I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets,” says the Matthean Jesus. “I did not come to abolish it, but to complete” (5:17 NEB). Without exception, the New Testament writers believe that the God present in Jesus is none other than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and that through the divine act in the man from Nazareth something radically new has happened. On the one hand, Jesus is the continuation of the Law and the prophets; but on the other, he is the inauguration of a completely new age, and his words and deeds are signs of its imminent coming.

The Gospels according to Matthew and Luke begin the Jesus story with his birth in Bethlehem. Although most New Testament scholars rightly question the historicity of the two apparently independent accounts, both sources (often designated “M” and “L”) nonetheless reflect accurately the character of the early Church’s memory of the historical Jesus. Continuing the Exodus–Sinai and David–Zion traditions in which there is a special connection between divine revelation and the poor, the early Church remembered Jesus’ historical person as exemplifying the same character. That character, they concluded, must have been present in his birth. This is the significance of the birth stories in Matthew and Luke, the Son of God Christology in Mark, and the Fourth Gospel’s contention that “When all things began, the Word already was” (1:1 NEB). The four Gospels intend to express divine purpose; and the content of the purpose is disclosed clearly in the Magnificat:

His name is Holy;
his mercy sure from generation to generation
toward those who fear him;
the deeds his own right arm has done disclose his might:
the arrogant of heart and mind he has put to rout,
he has brought down monarchs from their thrones,
but the humble have been lifted high.
The hungry he has satisfied with good things,
the rich sent empty away.

Luke 1:49-53 NEB

From the outset, the Gospels wish to convey that the Jesus story is not simply a story about a good man who met an unfortunate fate. Rather, in Jesus God is at work, telling his story and disclosing the divine plan of salvation.

The first historical reference to Jesus is his baptism by John the Baptist. Whatever may be said about the messianic consciousness of Jesus at this stage in his ministry, it seems clear from the evidence of the synoptic Gospels that something happened
between Jesus and God wherein the former became aware of a special calling. The clue to the meaning of his divine election is found in "the Spirit . . . descending upon him" (Mark 1:10 NEB; cf. Matt. 3:16f.; Luke 3:21f.) and the much discussed proclamation: "Thou art my Son, my Beloved; on thee my favour rests" (Mark 1:11 NEB; cf. Matt. 3:17; Luke 3:22). The saying about the descent of the Spirit suggests Jesus' awareness of the prophetic character of his vocation as well as the presence of something entirely new in his person. This new thing was Jesus' recognition that the dawn of the time of salvation, inaugurated by the return of the Spirit, was inseparable from his person and also that this new age was identical with the liberation of the poor and the afflicted. Apparently Jesus in his own eyes was not merely a prophetic messenger like John the Baptist, who, proclaiming the advent of the coming age, stood between the old age and the new. 5 Rather, through his words and deeds he became the inaugurator of the Kingdom, which is bound up with his person as disclosed in his identification with the poor.

The proclamation (Mark 1:11; Matt. 3:17; Luke 3:22) following the baptism supports the contention that Jesus saw a connection between his person and the dawning of the Kingdom. This proclamation is reminiscent of Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1, and it suggests Jesus' awareness of a kingship role in the context of servanthood.

"You are my son," he said;
"This day I become your father."

Psalm 2:7 NEB

Here is my servant, whom I upheld,
my chosen one in whom I delight,
I have bestowed my spirit upon him,
and he will make justice shine on the nations.

Isaiah 42:1 NEB

If we take this echo of Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1 as a clue to Jesus' self-understanding at baptism, then his subsequent words and deeds also become clearer. Psalm 2:7, a coronation hymn, emphasizes his role as King, who is God's representative to bring justice to the nation. Here the political note emerges in Jesus' consciousness. Isaiah 42:1 refers to the Servant of Yahweh, who brings justice by his own suffering. Jesus' synthesis of these two themes produced a new messianic image. Servanthood provides the context for exercising kingship or lordship. The King is a Servant who suffers on behalf of the people. He takes their pain and affliction upon himself, thereby redeeming them from oppression and for freedom. Here, then, we have the key to Jesus' understanding of his mission: Lordship and Servanthood together, that is, the establishment of justice through suffering.

This same theme is connected with the temptation story which follows (Luke 4:1f.; Matt. 4:1f.; cf. also Mark 1:12-13). The chief point in this narrative is not so much Jesus' rejection of the role of a "political," revolutionary messiahship (as defined by the Zealots), though that may be partly involved. Most New Testament interpreters are so quick to make that point that they miss the heart of the matter, 6 namely, Jesus' rejection of any role that would separate him from the poor. This story affirms that Jesus rejected such roles as wonder worker or political king, because they would separate him from the suffering of the poor, the very people he had come to liberate.

The theme of God's liberation of the poor is continued in the story of Jesus' reading in the Nazareth synagogue from the book of Isaiah.

The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me,
he has sent me to announce good news to the poor,
to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind;
to let the broken victims go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.


After the reading, Jesus commented, "Today in your very hearing this text has come true," thus tying the promised deliverance to his own mission.

The theme appears again when John the Baptist sent his
disciples to Jesus to ask of him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we expect another?” And Jesus replied: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: how the blind recover their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the poor are hearing the good news . . .” (Luke 7:22f. NEB; cf. Matt. 11:5f.). This reply echoes Isaiah 61:1-2 (the passage read at Nazareth) in combination with Isaiah 35:ff. and 29:18f., which depict the day of salvation. 7

Then shall blind men's eyes be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped, Then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb shout aloud; for water springs up in the wilderness, and torrents flow in dry land. The mirage becomes a pool, the thirsty land bubbling springs.

Isaiah 35:5f. NEB

On that day deaf men shall hear when a book is read, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of impenetrable darkness. The lowly shall once again rejoice in the Lord, and the poorest of men exult in the Holy One of Israel. The ruthless shall be no more, the arrogant shall cease to be; those who are quick to see mischief, those who charge others with a sin or lay traps for him who brings the wrongdoer into court or by falsehood deny justice to the righteous—all these shall be exterminated.

Isaiah 29:18-21 NEB

The reply to John’s disciples, like the saying in the Nazareth synagogue, shows that Jesus understood his person and work as the inauguration of the new age, which is identical with freedom for the oppressed and health for the sick. Accordingly any understanding of the Kingdom in Jesus’ teachings that fails to make the poor and their liberation its point of departure is a contradiction of Jesus’ presence.

Jesus’ conquest of Satan and the demons also carries out the theme of the liberation of the poor. “If it is by the finger of God that I drive out the devils, then be sure that the kingdom of God has already come upon you” (Luke 11:20 NEB). Jesus’ power to exorcise demons is the sine qua non of the appearance of the Kingdom, because freedom for the oppressed can come about only by overcoming the forces of evil. Jesus saw this victory already in hand after his disciples returned from the mission of the Seventy: “I watched how Satan fell, like lightning, out of the sky” (Luke 10:18 NEB).

The reference to Satan and demons is not simply an outmoded first-century world-view. The issue is much more complex than that. Bultmann and his program of demythologization notwithstanding, the offense of the gospel is and ought to be located precisely at the point where our confidence in modern knowledge encounters the New Testament message, namely, in Jesus’ liberating exorcisms. Unlike the fundamentalists I am not contending that the biblical cosmology ought to replace contemporary science in college classrooms. Rather, I intend to make the theological point that the “scandal” (skandalon, stumbling block) is no different for us today than for the people who encountered Jesus in the first century. It is that the exorcisms disclose that God in Jesus has brought liberation to the poor and the wretched of the land, and that liberation is none other than the overthrow of everything that is against the fulfillment of their humanity. The scandal is that the gospel means liberation, that this liberation comes to the poor, and that it gives them the strength and the courage to break the conditions of servitude. This is what the Incarnation means. God in Christ comes to the weak and the helpless, and becomes one with them, taking their condition of oppression as his own and thus transforming their slave-existence into a liberated existence.

To locate the scandal of the Jesus story at the point of God’s liberation of the poor and in opposition to Rudolf Bultmann’s emphasis on human self-understanding means that the gospel
comes not only as a gift but that the acceptance of the gift of freedom transforms our perception of our social and political existence. The New Testament gospel of liberation turns our priority system upside down and demands that we fight for the freedom of those in captivity. This message of liberation cannot appeal to those who profit from the imprisonment of others but only to slaves who strive against unauthorized power. The gospel of liberation is bad news to all oppressors, because they have defined their “freedom” in terms of the slavery of others. Only the poor and the wretched who have been victims of evil and injustice can understand what Jesus meant when he said: “Come to me, all whose work is hard, whose load is heavy; and I will give you relief. Bend your neck to my yoke, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble-hearted; and your souls will find relief. For my yoke is good to bear, my load is light” (Matt. 11:28-30 NEB).

The gospel will always be an offense to the rich and the powerful, because it is the death of their riches and power. That was why the man from the ruling class could not follow Jesus. The price was too high: “Sell everything you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; and come, follow me” (Luke 18:22 NEB). This man was incapable of separating himself from his commitment to his possessions. There were others who could not follow Jesus because they had priorities higher than the gospel of liberation for the poor. There was the person who wanted to bury his father and another who wanted to say goodbye to the people at home (Luke 9:59f.). They, like the five foolish girls in the parable of Matthew 25:1f., did not recognize the urgency of the hour nor the priority inherent in the acceptance of the coming kingdom. Jesus expressed the claim of the Kingdom in radical terms: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even his own life, he cannot be a disciple of mine” (Luke 14:26 NEB).

Because most biblical scholars are the descendants of the advantaged class, it is to be expected that they would minimize Jesus’ gospel of liberation for the poor by interpreting poverty as a spiritual condition unrelated to social and political phenomena. But a careful reading of the New Testament shows that the poor of whom Jesus spoke were not primarily (if at all) those who are spiritually poor as suggested in Matthew 5:3. Rather, as the Lucan tradition shows, these people are “those who are really poor, . . . those who are really hungry, who really weep and are persecuted.” The poor are the oppressed and the afflicted, those who cannot defend themselves against the powerful. They are the least and the last, the hungry and the thirsty, the unclothed and the strangers, the sick and the captives. It is for these little ones that the gospel is preached and for whom liberation has come in the words and deeds of Jesus.

It is important to point out that Jesus does not promise to include the poor in the Kingdom along with others who may be rich and learned. His promise is that the Kingdom belongs to the poor alone. This is the significance of his baptism with and life among the poor, and his contention that he “did not come to invite virtuous people, but sinners” (Mark 2:17 NEB). The first beatitude has the same emphasis: “How blest are you who are in need; the kingdom of God is yours” (Luke 6:20 NEB). Another dimension of the same theme is stressed in Luke 10:21 (cf. Matt. 11:25 NEB): “I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and wise and revealing them to the simple.” In the words of Joachim Jeremias, “God does not give his revelation to learned theologians, but to the uneducated . . . ; he opens the basileia (kingdom) to children (Mark 10:14) and to those who can say ‘Abba’ like a child (Matthew 10:3).” God’s kingdom is for the bad characters, the outcasts, and the weak, but not for the self-designated righteous people. “Publicans and prostitutes will enter the basileia of God, and not you” (Matt. 21:31). Here the gospel, by the very definition of its liberating character, excludes those who stand outside the social existence of the poor.

The centrality of the New Testament emphasis on God’s liberation of the poor is the key to its continuity and discontinuity with the Old Testament message. The continuity is obvious: just as the Mosaic and David–Zion traditions, the prophetic and the wisdom literature focus on the divine right of the poor to be free, Jesus also defines himself as the helper and the healer of the
oppressed. “Never despise one of these little ones; I tell you, they have their guardian angels in heaven, who look continually on the face of my heavenly Father” (Matt. 18:10 NEB). It was Jesus’ love for the poor that caused “crowds [to] flock to him, bringing with them the lame, blind, dumb, and crippled, and many other sufferers; they threw them down at his feet, and he healed them” (Matt. 15:30 NEB). Jesus’ life was a historical demonstration that the God of Israel wills salvation for the weak and the helpless. God hates injustice and will not tolerate the humiliation of the outcasts.

If Jesus’ life with the poor reveals that the continuity between the Old and New Testaments is found in the divine will to liberate the oppressed from sociopolitical slavery, what then is the discontinuity? Or, more appropriately, in what sense does the New Testament witness take us beyond the Old and fulfill it? The new element is this: the divine freedom revealed in Jesus, as that freedom is disclosed in the cross and resurrection, is more than the freedom made possible in history. While God’s freedom for the poor is not less than the liberation of slaves from bondage (Exodus), yet it is more than that historical freedom. And it is this more which separates the Exodus from the Incarnation, the Old Testament view of the Savior as the Victor in battle and the New Testament view of the Savior as the One who “give[s] up his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45 NEB). While both stress the historical freedom of the unfree, the latter transcends history and affirms a freedom not dependent on sociopolitical limitations.

The cross and the resurrection of Jesus stand at the center of the New Testament story, without which nothing is revealed that was not already known in the Old Testament. In the light of Jesus’ death and resurrection, his earthly life achieves a radical significance not otherwise possible. The cross—resurrection events mean that we now know that Jesus’ ministry with the poor and the wretched was God himself effecting his will to liberate the oppressed. The Jesus story is the poor person’s story, because God in Christ becomes poor and weak in order that the oppressed might become liberated from poverty and powerlessness. God becomes the victim in their place and thus transforms the condition of slavery into the battleground for the struggle of freedom. This is what Christ’s resurrection means. The oppressed are freed for struggle, for battle in the pursuit of humanity.

Jesus was not simply a nice fellow who happened to like the poor. Rather his actions have their origin in God’s eternal being. They represent a new vision of divine freedom, climaxed with the cross and the resurrection, wherein God breaks into history for the liberation of slaves from societal oppression. Jesus’ actions represent God’s will not to let his creation be destroyed by non-creative powers. The cross and the resurrection show that the freedom promised is now fully available in Jesus Christ. This is the essence of the New Testament story without which Christian theology is impossible.

**Christian Theology and the Biblical Story**

If, as suggested above, Christian theology exists only as its language arises out of an encounter with the biblical story, what then is the meaning of this encounter? Since the Bible consists of many traditions woven together, how does a theologian use the Bible as a source for the expression of truth without being arbitrary in selecting some traditions while ignoring others? Some critics have accused Black Theology of just that: a decided bias toward the Mosaic tradition in contrast to the David–Zion tradition, toward the Old Testament in relation to the New, and toward the prophets with little reference to the sages of Israel. These critics have a right to ask what is the hermeneutical principle of selection involved here, and how is its validity tested. What is valid and invalid hermeneutics, and how is one distinguishable from the other?

Black Theology’s answer to the question of hermeneutics can be stated briefly: *The hermeneutical principle for an exegesis of the Scriptures is the revelation of God in Christ as the Liberator of the oppressed from social oppression and to political struggle, wherein the poor recognize that their fight against poverty and injustice is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel
of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ the Liberator, the helper and the healer of the wounded, is the point of departure for valid exegesis of the Scriptures from a Christian perspective. Any starting point that ignores God in Christ as the Liberator of the oppressed or that makes salvation as liberation secondary is ipso facto invalid and thus heretical. The test of the validity of this starting point, although dialectically related to black cultural experience, is not found in the particularity of the oppressed culture alone. It is found in the One who freely granted us freedom when we were doomed to slavery. In God's revelation in Scripture we come to the recognition that the divine liberation of the oppressed is not determined by our perceptions but by the God of the Exodus, the prophets, and Jesus Christ who calls the oppressed into a liberated existence. Divine revelation alone is the test of the validity of this starting point. And if it can be shown that God as witnessed in the Scriptures is not the Liberator of the oppressed, then Black Theology would have either to drop the "Christian" designation or to choose another starting point.

The biblical emphasis on the social and the political character of God's revelation in history for the weak and the helpless has important implications for the task of theology today. (1) There can be no Christian theology that is not social and political. If theology is to speak about the God of Jesus who reveals himself in the struggle of the oppressed for freedom, then theology must also become political, speaking for the God of the poor and the oppressed.

(2) The biblical emphasis on God's continuing act of liberation in the present and future means that theology cannot merely repeat what the Bible says or what is found in a particular theological tradition. Theology must be prophetic, recognizing the relativity of human speech, but also that God can use human speech at a particular time for the proclamation of his Word to the suffering poor. As theologians, therefore, we must take the risk to be prophetic by doing theology in the light of those who are helpless and voiceless in the society.

(3) Theology cannot ignore the tradition. While the tradition is not the gospel, it is the bearer of an interpretation of the gospel at a particular point in time. By studying the tradition, we not