



Athanasios N. Papathanasiou

## Despair and Liberation: Traveling Together Through History with the Bible\*

### Abstract

The article traces the liberating impact of Bible on human history, from the epoch of the Old Testament to the malice of social injustice today. The faith in an active God gives the struggle for justice the wider possible perspectives. The message of the Gospel, spiritual and social at the same time, meets the agony of the oppressed throughout history. The article shows how Jews, Byzantines,



Dr. Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, Editor-in-chief of the quarterly *Synaxis* (Athens), Tutor at the Hellenic Open University, Athens, Greece

---

\* Paper based on a lecture delivered in Greek at the international conference, "The Milan Edict for Religious Tolerance in 313 AD and the Need in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century for Reconciliation: The Role of the Holy Scriptures in Harmoniously Coexisting with Otherness." Sponsored by the Greek Bible Society, in collaboration with the Faculty of Theology, University of Athens, Athens, 13-14 December 2013.

Koreans, Chinese, Africans, Afro-Americans, Latin Americans, despaired people all over the world have developed interpretations where their suffering finds answers. At the end, it is argued that Liberation and Reconciliation are not two contradictive paradigms, but aspects of the same orientation: the toil against death and the hope for a brand new life.

### Keywords

Bible, injustice, suffering, protest, liberation, reconciliation, interpretation

## 1 Introduction

*I will take my stand to watch,  
and station myself on the tower,  
and look forth to see what he [God] will say to me,  
and what I will answer concerning my complaint  
(Habakkuk 2:1<sup>1</sup>).*

The Prophet Habakkuk: A representative of those with complaints, who are demanding and ready for battle. Being battle-ready transforms dormant patience into practical expectation. You are in the embrasure, in a position to act. And you expect a response in both word and deed. Because you seek a change in the flow of history.

*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,  
and thou wilt not hear?*

---

<sup>1</sup> All Scriptural quotations are from the RSV.

*Or cry to thee "Violence!"  
and thou wilt not save?  
Why dost thou make me see wrongs  
and look upon trouble? (1:1-4).*

We today, reading Habakkuk to the end, know that the answer will come. However, the complainant responds to the hours of complaints, the hours of crying, the hours of waiting perched in the embrasure with silence, with the shortage, with despair, without anything to reassure him that the silence, the shortage, and the despair will not be eternal. Moreover, the silence, shortage, and despair mean that determinism will march on unimpeded since it is determined by raw power—the vehicles of which were the Babylonians in Habakkuk’s day, and the rule of the neoliberals in our own time,

*that bitter and hasty nation,  
who march through the breadth of the earth,  
to seize habitations not their own.  
Dread and terrible are they;  
their justice and dignity proceed from themselves (1:6-7).*

In response to their being sacked, the victims and the aggrieved groan and cry. The ability to complain, to groan, and to cry is a great gift that has been bequeathed to humankind. It allows the humans to become more spacious, hungry for a decent life, and to invite others to share in this desire.

Like a mystical thread, this scream unites all human beings. The blood of Abel cried out plaintively (Gen. 4:10), the Hebrew people moaned and cried during their bondage in Egypt (Ex. 2: 23), the worker who had his wages withheld cried out (Deut. 24: 14-15; Jas. 5:4), the whole creation groans, longing for its release from decay (Rom. 8:19-22), the souls of the martyrs shout out, demanding their blood back and repeating the verse from Habakkuk “how long?” (Rev. 6:10). The cries of the black slaves in America were raised to heaven and became spirituals;

to heaven is also raised the Koreans' *han*, the cry of the unjustly tormented.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 The cry and the hope

In Edvard Munch's famous painting (1893), there is just the scream.<sup>3</sup> There is no response. It is as if he is no longer even asking the question, "how long?" It is as if he is declaring, in despair, "This is how it is going to be, forever." In contrast to Munch stands the African scorpion, which is referred to by the Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957) in his comments on the sickly German Jewish rebel, Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919):

*Rosa Luxemburg's cry tears at our guts: "Help!". The air changed, breathing in a heavy spring, full of brimstone. Who screamed? We, the aggrieved people, are screaming! And then silence; we forget, either out of laziness, habit, or fear. But, behold, again the cry tears at our guts. Because it is not abrasive, it is not far away, it is not coming toward us, such that we can escape it. Rather, this cry lies within our heart and screams.*

*This moment we are living through is cruel and unmerciful. We no longer turn our gaze toward heaven, seeking help. Heaven and earth, we know, are one. Let the mind be creator of heaven and earth; it took full responsibility for salvation or damnation. Our mind is like the 'Little*

---

<sup>2</sup> See, respectively, James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York <sup>2</sup>1991, and D. Bannon, "Unique Korean Cultural Concepts in Interpersonal Relations," *Translation Journal* 12.1 (2008), <http://www.bokorlang.com/journal/%2043korean.htm> (9 Jan. 2017).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/munch/> (9 Jan. 2017).

*Scorpion' of a certain African tradition, which, if she knew it, Rosa Luxemburg would have surely loved.*

*"The little scorpion said, 'I, the little scorpion, will never invoke the name of God. I, the little scorpion, when I want to do something, I will do it with my tail!'"<sup>4</sup>*

Kazantzakis' cry is so powerful! Yet, with all its charm, it is shockingly poor! It is sad because, even though he sees the human being as a relational being (i.e., as a being that operates within the context of a single "we"), he ultimately shrinks from it, since he wants humans to be autonomous and self-referential. Pain is strictly an individual experience, dangerously individual. It has the human being turned in on itself, unless the pain becomes compassion. Compassion brings me out from myself and inserts me into the space of the other. On this point, I tend to agree with Kazantzakis, but after that, our thought parts ways. If bringing the human being out from itself is valuable - if in other words, solidarity is valuable (as Luxemburg would clearly agree) - then it is simply misery to not let this opening up become infinite, that is an affair of God himself.

Throughout the Scriptures, human being is coming out from itself, and its cry is portrayed as part of an unimaginable dialogue that discourages despair. In the Psalms, where the complaints of the suffering righteous abound, God is seen as the One who does not forget "the cry of the afflicted" (Ps. 9:12). And further on appears another kind of lament. Not the groan of the wronged, but of the one united in solidarity, suffering pain along with the afflicted. "The Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). The cry for justice is an issue far greater than that of Munch or the scorpion's

---

<sup>4</sup> Nikos Kazantzakis, "Rosa Luxemburg's Scream," in: Rosa Luxemburg, *Socialism and Democracy: Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy* (trans. Dimitris Phaseas), Athens: Korontzis, n.d., pp. 32-33 [in Greek; here translated from the Greek].

sting, which will die along with the scorpion. It needs to become a groan and a “loud voice” (Matt. 27:46) of God.

In a stark antinomy, the Biblical God is both helper and needy, both warlord and suffering servant, a lamb slain from the foundation of the world while also victorious (Rev. 13:8 and 17:14, 1Pet. 2:19-20). Moreover, he asks the believer likewise to empathize, to be a companion and a comrade. The backbone of Christianity, wrote Basil the Great, is the imitation of Christ “according to the extent of His Incarnation.”<sup>5</sup>

“According to the extent of His Incarnation” means that it is not enough to sit by and observe the injustice and absurdity of life, or take it up as a subject of cheap conversation. It means adopting someone else's pain, fighting injustice and absurdity in your flesh. Responding to the cries of the wronged entails following a difficult path, that of responsibility and action within history.

### **3 Liberating the message, liberating the life**

However, the moneychangers also act within history; they occupy the temple, and they plunder the Scriptures. Our task, therefore, is the Scriptures' liberation, the reading that reveals the living God, the liberator of the temple. “How many interpret the Scriptures,” Symeon the New Theologian marveled, “while totally ignoring Him Who speaks in the Scriptures!”<sup>6</sup> And this ignorance produces an anti-gospel.

Referring to the fact that, over the course of history, the Apostle Paul's writings have been used for the metaphysical justification of slavery and subjugation, the Indian theologian Mukti Barton notes with painful bluntness: “I believe that

---

<sup>5</sup> Basil the Great, *Longer Rules* XLIII, PG 31, 1028B.

<sup>6</sup> Symeon the New Theologian, *Homily 15*, SC 129, 452.

certain passages from the epistles have been and are still turned into weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>7</sup>

On the other side of the ocean, the narrative of Howard Thurman, an African-American Baptist pastor, a descendant of slaves and a parapet of human rights in the United States, has become a classic. Thurman wrote:

*During much of my boyhood I was cared for by my grandmother, who was born a slave [...]. My regular chore was to do all of the reading for my grandmother—she could neither read nor write. Two or three times a week I read the Bible aloud to her. I was deeply impressed by the fact that she was most particular about the choice of Scripture. For instance, I might read many of the more devotional Psalms, some of Isaiah, the Gospels again and again. But the Pauline epistles never—except, at long intervals, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. My curiosity knew no bounds, but we did not question her about anything.*

*[After many years, and with] a feeling a great temerity I asked her why it was that she would not let me read any of the Pauline letters. What she told me I shall never forget. ‘During the days of slavery,’ she said, ‘the master’s minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves [...]. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: “Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters..., as unto Christ.” Then he would go on to show how it was God’s will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I*

---

<sup>7</sup> Mukti Barton, “Was Paul an Arch-Advocate of Slavery or a Liberator?”, *Black Theology, Slavery, and Contemporary Christianity* (ed. Anthony G. Reddie), Ashgate, Farnham & Burlington, 2010, p. 50.

*ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.*<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, through multiple paths, significant movements within the black communities were able to reconcile with Philemon and Paul. The hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of survival read the texts in question in a liberating perspective; they saw Paul chip away at slavery in a different, non-violent way; and they turned the spotlight on the aggrieved in the biblical narratives, such as Hagar. Indeed, they shined that light not only on oppressed communities as monolithic groups, but also on those members of their communities (such as women) who were oppressed.<sup>9</sup>

However, it is not only a matter of interpretation. It is also matter—in modern terminology—of the critical edition of Scripture. I remind you of how John Chrysostom condemned a forgery, with special implications for social injustice. In the Old Testament, God, speaking through the Prophet Haggai, declares: “The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of Hosts” (2:8). Chrysostom tells us that some had amended this sentence, adding: “... and I give them [gold and silver] to whomever I [God] want,” seeking apparently to legitimize plutocracy metaphysically.

Chrysostom acutely denounced this addition as the work of the devil. It is inconceivable, he said, for some to believe that it is God’s will for corrupt people to line their pockets by seizing the

---

<sup>8</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Beacon Press, Boston 1976, pp. 30-31.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed approach to the interpretation of the Pauline letters by both supporters and opponents of slavery in America, see my study: “Paul, a Controversial Figure in the Debates about Slavery and Liberation in Modern Times,” *Pavleia: Commemorative Volume for the 20th Anniversary of the Establishment by Metropolitan Panteleimon of Veria, Naoussa, and Campania of the Events Celebrating the Holy and Glorious Apostle Paul*, Veria: Holy Metropolis of Veria, Naoussa, and Campania, 2014, pp. 433-456 [in Greek].



homes of widows, wronging orphans, and oppressing the lower classes when such actions render them unworthy even to see the sun and draw breath.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4 Hope all over the world

In 1989, Lamin Sanneh published his now classic book *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Sanneh shifted researchers' attention from the work of the missionaries to the work of the beneficiaries of the missionaries' work. He pointed out that Bible translations had triggered forces that the missionaries had not foreseen, and frequently did not desire. What emerged, then, were responses to colonialism and visions of liberation inspired by the Bible. Harvey Cox commented that Sanneh's book "is the most important book *Orbis* has published since [Gutierrez's] *Theology of Liberation*."<sup>11</sup>

Let us look, for example, at the responses generated among the Dalits of India, those 180 million souls on the margins of society, outside any caste. The Dalits heard Christ speak in a voice often different from that of the colonial preachers. Nevertheless, their perspectives were divided, on the one hand, between a Christ who suffered like the Dalits, but promised posthumous vindication, and, on the other hand, a Christ who suffered but called for the transformation of history.

---

<sup>10</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Jeremiah* 10, 23, PG 56, 158. [For an English translation, see St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Old Testament, Vol. 2: Homilies on Isaiah and Jeremiah*, Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007, p. 12.]. See also Athanasios (Thanasis) N. Papathanasiou, "Liberation Perspectives in Patristic Thought. An Orthodox Approach", *Hellenic Open University. Scientific Review of Post-Graduate Program "Studies in Orthodox Theology"* 2 (2011), pp. 419-438.

<sup>11</sup> On the back cover of Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989.

In the latter, the historical Jesus was seen as a manual laborer, i.e., as a member of a class which, in the Roman world, was less privileged even than farmers. Christ thus became manifest not only as a voice for the oppressed but as a voice of the oppressed themselves, who, unlike the Jewish aristocracy and the clergy, did not become partners with the oppressors.<sup>12</sup>

Another example is that of the Kikuyu of Kenya and the Christological perspectives that were opened to them with the translation of the New Testament into their own language in 1926. Although a translation into Swahili was available in 1909, the translation into their language highlighted the term *muigwithania*, which means “one who reconciles,” “one who unifies the divided,” and not *njumbe*, which in Swahili means simply “the messenger.” The *muigwithania* corresponded to the depiction in the Epistle to the Hebrews of Jesus as a mediator, whose blood is superior to the blood of Abel (12:24).

Being farmers, like Abel, the Kikuyu experienced something new and liberating: the emergence of their identity, linked now however with something universal,<sup>13</sup> i.e., with something that could finally crack the dominating system of African tribalism. This link (i.e., the incorporation of the individual into an ecumenical perspective) concerns a vital issue of global importance. What was at stake, in countless cases, was the acceptance of the Bible as a book of universal truths. Its universality was not affected when the Bible itself was rejected, but only when it was accepted as a book that concerns only

---

<sup>12</sup> Anderson H. M. Jeremiah, “Exploring New Facets of Dalit Christology: Critical Interaction with J. D. Crossan’s Portrayal of the Historical Jesus,” *Dalit Theology in the Twentieth-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways* (ed. Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala, Philip Vinod Peacock), New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 153-155.

<sup>13</sup> John Lonsdale, “Kikuyu Christianities: A History of Intimate Diversity,” *Christianity and the African Imagination; Essays in Honour of Andrian Hastings* (ed. David Maxwell with Ingrid Lawrie), Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 2002, p. 173.

Mediterranean culture and expresses truths only valid in the Mediterranean, Judeo-Greco-Roman context.<sup>14</sup>

The universality of the biblical imperative of love is liberating precisely because it can embrace any partiality, and at the same time judge it, i.e., illuminate within each context the forces which promote humanity, or conversely, detract from it. It is telling how, in a critique of his native culture, which he loved, the Chinese theologian John-Sheng Song denounced traditional Asian's culture tendency to idolize power and its brutality. The gospel, said Song—agreeing with Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Jon Sobrino of El Salvador, Aloysius Pieris of Sri Lanka, and Engelbert Mvengof Cameroon—, not only liberates the oppressed but also the oppressors themselves from the violence which they use to remain in power.<sup>15</sup> Such concern for all people is, I would say, one of Biblical liberation's differences between revenge and blind revolutionary violence! Similarly, faith in the living God, and the faithful's struggle to listen for His movement in history, keeps history free, i.e., creatively open to the future and to longing for the Kingdom, contrary to any form of totalitarianism (religious or secular) that wants to subdue history, setting its own goals, according to its whims.

---

<sup>14</sup> See Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, "The Last Enemy to be Abolished is...Christ? Fr. Georges Florovsky's 'Christian Hellenism' and Mission," *Theologia* 81.4 (2010), pp. 313-336 [in Greek].

<sup>15</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979, pp. 220-221, 257-259. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Beatitudes, Homily 5*, PG 44, 1260A-B. For the others, see Jon Sobrino, *The Eye of the Needle: No Salvation Outside the Poor: A Utopian-Prophetic Essay*, London: Darton/Longman/Todd, 2008, p. 52. Related is the peculiar violence demanded by the Christian life (i.e., the practical and arduous differentiation from the selfish and inhumane logic of this world). See, for example, Sotirios Despotis, "The Violence of the Kingdom in Mt. 11:12-13," *Academic Yearbook of the Theological School of the University of Athens* 37 (2002), pp. 657-671 [in Greek].

## 5 Liberation and Reconciliation

Within the ecumenical movement, from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century reconciliation has emerged as the new “paradigm” for Christian’s mission and witness. Moreover, the acceptance of diversity has come to be an essential condition of Christian existence. These are valuable contributions, and there is no need for me to extol them further. However, it is precisely because they are valuable that we must be especially careful about warping them into a vapid pacifism, convenient to the hegemonic elites who want the world to stay as it is. Reconciliation cannot be understood as the opposite of liberation, i.e., as the paradigm that replaces the paradigm of liberation!<sup>16</sup> Instead, reconciliation means (or should mean) what liberation means. Both mean stopping the determinism of this world, breaking the vicious cycle of retaliation, and sounding an end to rule by the most powerful. The interruption of naturalistic determinism signals the possibility of a new beginning.

The combination of liberation and reconciliation participates in God’s creativity; it signifies, in other words, no longer continuing, inexorably and deterministically, the old ways, but rather participation in the process of making everything new. Reconciliation, therefore, includes, by definition, an act of liberation, a rupture with the past: “breaking down the dividing wall” (Eph. 2:14). Preserving, through pacifism, the dividing

---

<sup>16</sup> For more on the concerns, see, indicatively, “Reconciliation as a New Paradigm of Mission,” *Come, Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile! Report of the WCC Conference on World Mission and Evangelism*, Athens, Greece, May 2005 (ed. Jacques Matthey), Geneva: WCC Publications, 2008, pp. 213-219. See also my article, “Journey to the Center of Gravity. Christian Mission One Century after Edinburgh 1910”, *2010 Boston. The Changing Contours of World Mission and Christianity* (eds. Todd M. Johnson, Rodney L. Petersen, Gina A. Bellofatto, Travis L. Myers), Pickwick Publications, Oregon 2012, pp. 67-83.

walls is nothing short of collaboration with the old system, the acceptance of its hatreds; it stands, therefore, against reconciliation! Praise for a vague and generalized “otherness” is, simply put, not enough. Respect for otherness demands that one kind of otherness not be accepted, and that is called *hatred of otherness*.

## 6 Conclusion

We cannot tell which of those who claim that they are disciples of Christ are truly his disciples. I think we can, however, tell how his true disciples behave. Christ’s disciples are constantly faced with the question that was posed by Christ himself: Are they looking for one who prophesizes a new world that has already begun to dawn, or are they looking for “those who wear soft raiment [who] are in kings’ houses” (Matt. 11:8)? The disciples of Christ do not condemn violence from wherever it may come but emulate the violence of those who take the kingdom by force (Matt. 11:12). They do not cut off Malchus’ ear, but neither do they take the whip from Christ’s hands. Christ’s disciples do not turn against heterodoxy, but rather against injustice. Christ’s disciples do not remove the disjunctive “or” that lies between serving God *or* Mammon. Finally, Christ’s disciples would never write a post-modern “Christ is Risen” which couples reconciliation with death.