BEYOND LIBERATED: DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE AND CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN
THE THEOLOGIES OF CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA AND JAMES HAL CONE

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BEYOND LIBERATED: DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE AND

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OF CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA AND JAMES HAL CONE

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Approach

Freedom from Platonism

Theological projects set forth by African Americans have historically been predisposed to addressing histories of African enslavement, racial segregation, and economic inequality.

W.E.B. Du Bois observed, “[Few] men ever worshipped freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries. […] Emancipation was the key to the promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites.”¹

Those who have participated U.S. Black theological discourse, both past and present, have wrestled with connecting the Christian faith with anti-racist and anti-poverty struggles. Recently, Black and Womanist theologians have sought to define liberation as freeing the Black Church from Platonic metaphysics in order to construct Christologies which seek to go beyond Greek philosophical categories. An example of criticism of Platonic Christianity comes from the works of Kelly Brown Douglas. In her discussion of a Womanist Christology, she noted about the Nicene/Chalcedonian Creeds:

    the Nicene/Chalcedonian formulation that appear inconsistent with Jesus as he was presented in the Gospels. For instance, this formulation establishes that Jesus is Christ by focusing on God’s act of becoming incarnate in him. In so doing, it diminishes the significance of Jesus’s actions on earth. His ministry is virtually ignored.²

    She continues. “In addition, to emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus’ metaphysical nature as that which allows him to be Christ, makes what it means to be Christ inaccessible to ordinary Christians. There becomes little reason to strive to be an example of Christ in the world, because to be Christ requires divine incarnation, which only happened to Jesus.”³ The spatial distance that is emphasized in the Greek metaphysical depiction of Christ as Plato’s Logos makes it, in

³ Ibid.
Douglas’s view, impossible for Christ followers to be Christ in the world. These are the implications of both the early Christian affinity for Platonic thinking as well as the elimination of any mention of Christ’s life according to the Gospel in the Creeds. Douglas takes aim at Platonism more specifically in her *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*. After the ‘Christian Hebrew’ apostolic church, according to Douglas, “Christianity gradually became influenced by those aspects of Greek thought that denigrated the body and fostered a profound split between the body and the spirit. This ‘spiritualistic dualism’ was primarily crafted by Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought.” Early Christianity’s fall from Hebraic thinking to Roman Stoicism and Greek Platonism led to a depreciation of other human bodies; in other words, Platonic overemphasis on divine Otherness logically fostered an antipathy for human bodily existence, and in particular, the bodies of the Othered because of hegemonic nature of dualistic philosophies. Rather than maintaining a disembodied view of God that leads to Docetism as the Nicene/Chalcedonian creeds formulate, Douglas recommends that Christians embrace human embodiment as the only way that we as human beings come to know each other because “God was distinctly revealed in human history.”

Douglas is not alone in her concern for Christianity’s historic fusion and defense of the stories of Israel and Jesus the Messiah with Platonic categories. Black Neo-Womanist New Testament scholar Michael Joseph Brown suggests that Black Christians should unplug the remaining remnants of Platonist concepts of materiality in order to construct a more emancipatory Christian ethic of the body; specifically, Brown takes aim at Clement of

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4Note: Douglas’s term.
6 Ibid., 118.
7 Note: This is Brown’s label that he places himself in. For more information, see Brown, Michael Joseph Brown, *Blackening of the Bible: The Aims of African American Biblical Scholarship*. African American religious thought and life (Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 2004).
Alexandria’s Roman Egyptian model of Christian Platonism. Brown, much like Douglas, asserts that Black Christians can exist with the cultural remnants of ancient views of human difference as it pertains to understandings of human relationships. The late Evangelical theologian Robert E. Webber also found the Alexandrians’ Christian Platonism problematic; he contends, “The Alexandrian school of thought shaped by Platonic idealism put the emphasis on the divine side [of Christology]. For them the human nature was absorbed into the divine (monophysite). Because this denied the axiom that “only that which God became is healed,” however, it was not an adequate doctrine of incarnation. It fell short of affirming the full humanity.”

Similar to Douglas, Webber affiliates Christian Platonism with a noted heresy within historic Christianity; for Douglas, its offense is Docetism while for Webber, Platonic Christologies are better connected with the Monophysitite tendencies of Orthodox Christianities in Northern Africa. In fact, historian Justo Gonzalez notes that monophysitism is historically often associated with “political and nationalist considerations” which fueled theological disputes concerning Christology and the Incarnation. By the fourth and fifth centuries C.E., Persian, Ethiopian, Syrian, and Egyptian Christianities were all associated with heretical Monophysite Christianities where God’s infinite Otherness in Christ subordinated Jesus’s finite human otherness. The subsequent marginalization of these nations paved way for future tensions in between Oriental and Occidental Christianities. Historian Philip Jenkins asserts, “Already Christianity was bitterly divided between Western (European) and Eastern (Asian and African)

11 Ibid., 262.
models. Denominations arising directly from these theological squabbles survive today, and have only barely patched up differences. This mutual hostility helps to explain why European Christians had little sympathy for or knowledge of some of the truly ancient Christian societies of the East, and why our historical view of the Eastern churches is often blinkered.”

In other words, because historically the Church in the West was affiliated with what was deemed as orthodox Christianity (read: normative), the Church in the East was labeled as heretical and consequently essentialized as everything “not-West.” Oriental Christianities, understood only in their relations to Occidental Christianities, were constructed as fundamentally less-than-Christian; thus, as Jenkins further points out, the Oriental Church’s progress in terms of missions to places such as China are rendered invalid. One could say that given the totalizing nature of Robert Webber’s commentary on Alexandrian Christianity, that he was participating in what Edward Said referred to as doctrinal Orientalism. Doctrinal Orientalism is founded upon the notion that the field of Orientalism was shaped by “patriarchal authorities, canonical texts, doxological ideas, exemplary figures, its followers, elaborators, and new authorities” as well as “strong ideas, doctrines and trends ruling the culture.” Orientalism, for Said, divides the world into a binary of East and West where there are two “entities that coexist in a state of tension produced by what is believed to be radical difference.”

In a Christian context, doctrinal Orientalism also manifests itself when Eastern Jewish and Christian metaphysics are made to be into stark contrast to Western Graeco-Roman [read: white/European] philosophy. This would make Kelly Brown Douglas’s depiction of the early

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13 Ibid., 22-23.
15 Ibid., 45.
church as more Hebraic in nature just as problematic as Webber’s analysis because of several
details; among them being that not all of the persons at Pentecost were Jewish and the Gospels
are not recorded in Hebrew, but Greek. Therefore, the recorders of the biblical narrative in the
New Testament would be at least familiar with both the Jewish stories and laws from the First
Testament as well as the Roman and Greek philosophical concepts in their environment. Unless
one wants to argue that Hellenized Jewish thinkers such as Josephus and Philo of Alexandria are
somehow less Jewish than their Hebrew-speaking and writing forebears, Christian theologians
may need to rethink utilizing the short-sighted, anti-Greek thought polemic and the calls for the
Church to manumit themselves from the remnants of the Roman and Hellenistic worlds.

The mission of this thesis is to study how differing notions of divine transcendence ¹⁶, in
the theologies of Clement of Alexandria and James Hal Cone, were read against the prevailing
cultural milieus of their historical contexts for the purpose of resisting hegemony. ¹⁷ The
doctrine ¹⁸ of God’s Otherness is capable of operating as a means to de-centering hegemonic
ideologies that buttress colonizing truth regimes. However, one must note that arguments in
favor of divine transcendence have at times been used to perpetuate tyranny; a concrete example
of this would be God in early colonial American Calvinist theology. In the late ¹⁷th century,

¹⁶ Divine transcendence in the Christian tradition is primarily rooted in the teachings of the First Testament
by the prophets who emphasized the difference between humanity and YHWH. (e.g., Numbers 23 and Isaiah 45.15)
Secondary traditional understanding of God’s otherness come to us from Plato’s The Republic. John McIntyre,
¹⁷ Hegemony as I understand it comes from Cornel West’s interpretation of Antonio Grasci’s Prison Notes.
“Class struggle is not simply the battle between capitalists and the proletariat, owners and producers in the work
situation. It also takes the form of cultural and religious conflict over which attitudes, values, and beliefs will
¹⁸ Doctrine is quite simply the teachings of historical Christianities and the subsequent interpretations of
particular doctrines such as the doctrine of Trinity, atonement, sanctification, and human fallenness. Each
generations’ understanding of doctrine is a contextual confession of the general truth statements the Church councils
and creeds have handed down to the Church (dogma). Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., “Doctrine” in The Westminster
Reverend Cotton Mather believed it was part of God’s glorious plan for the Africans to exist as possessions of the colonists. He asked, “Who can tell but that God may have sent this poor creature into my hands so that one of the elect may by my means be called and my instruction be made wise unto salvation. The glorious God will put an unspeakable glory upon me if it may be so!” Mather’s doctrine of divine transcendence (the glorious God) endorsed human ownership of other human beings. Mather’s Calvinist theology informed his views of God and the Other; Mather and other Christian enslavers of Africans in 17th century colonial North America understood God’s location in another world beyond this planet as an affirmation for the enslaved Africans’ oppressed state. Mayra Rivera contends, “Our images of the divine Other shape our constructions of human otherness. […] Theologically God’s transcendence is inseparable from theological anthropology—that is, from theological notions of what a human being is and, as a consequence, of the meaning of interhuman differences.”

It is in this way then, that doctrinal disputes are nearly always political since salvation, and therefore human lives are always at stake.

**Methodology**

I have decided to make use of Michel Foucault’s understanding of history as a genealogy (which he borrowed from Nietzsche), whereby I hope to shed some light on “the details and accidents” that may give reasons for the emergence of Clement’s conception of God’s

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Otherness. It is perhaps by providing some historical background concerning Clement’s environment that I may give a non-reductionist account of Christian Platonism within its Roman imperial religious context. The genealogical approach to exploring historical data presupposes that one looks at the history of ideas as political struggles whereby society deems (rightly or wrongly) one party the victor and the other party a loser whose concepts are deemed marginal. Therefore the history of ideas is not determined by a progressive approach to obtaining truths; rather, our histories come to us “in the form of war rather than that of language—relations of power, not relations of meaning. History has no ‘meaning,’ though this is not to say that it is absurd or incoherent.” Since this meaning making happens within human history, accounts of human subjects that exhibit a record for the “constitution of the subject within a historical framework.” For Foucault, it is the struggles within truth regimes that give meaning to history.

I will also argue that Clement of Alexandria, through his use of Philo of Alexandria’s Biblical exegesis, as well as incorporation of Middle Platonist philosophy into Christian tradition, and his interaction with Roman Egyptian culture, maneuvered within what postcolonial literary critic Homi Bhabha referred to as a Third Space. The Third Space represents a set of discursive conditions in which “the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity”; this concept therefore renders untenable the notion of a system of thought being “purely”

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22 Marginality understood in a doctrinally Orientalist (read: racist) context means that the presence, histories, and thinking from one cultural group (the Oriental/Eastern/colored) has yet to become a vital part of a larger cultural grouping (Occidental/Western/white) such as a nation-state or country. For more information on this notion of marginality please cf. “A Genealogy of Modern Racism” in Cornel West, Prophesy Deliverance: afro-american revolutionary Christianity. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1982, 47-65. Perhaps one of the continuing lingering effects of doctrinal Orientalism is the marginalization of Black liberation and Womanist scholars. One peer in particular informed me of a conversation she had with another seminarian who informed her that she was a heretic because James Cone’s theology (of whom she had been reading at the time) was not “orthodox.”
24 Ibid., 118. (underline emphasis mine).
Hebraic, Greek, Eastern, Western, white, Black, Oriental, or Occidental. Bhabha’s concepts of cultural hybridity and the Third Space find part of their origin from Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*. In the chapter entitled, “On National Culture,” Fanon underscores the role of the colonized intellectual in the ever fluctuating movements of cultural arts where there are fundamental transformations occurring. Given that James Cone employs Frantz Fanon as a resource in his conversation about divine Otherness and human difference in *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone’s concept of ontological blackness must be measured how consistent it is with Fanon’s belief that complex, cultural traditions are transformed during their being manipulated in political struggles.

If all religious truth claims, and therefore all Christian doctrines, are political, doing theology in the twenty-first century requires one to reflect on the theo-political struggles of the past in order to understand our present circumstances. Theological propositions do not drop from the sky and fall onto our laps by the mere fact of our chanting some magical formula or hypothesis. J. Kameron Carter suggests, “Doing theology from within crises of life and death requires that Christian theology reconceive itself as a discourse. Theological learning must be


26 The Fanonian vision of the colonized poet/creator/intellectual is the person whose existence oscillates between that of the cultures of the elites and the colonized. As a member of a colonized people group, she was initially educated by the colonial regime in order to affirm the empire’s cultural supremacy. After disaffectioning from this form of self-hatred, the colonial creator rejects the outsider relationship she has with her people by trying to write a recovery of the values of the past. In the midst of political upheaval, the she re-imagines and re-interprets the images and traditions passed down through history. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2004), 155-163.

27 27 Ibid., 163.

28 Ibid., 160. “Seeking to stick to tradition or reviving neglected traditions is not only going against history, but against one’s people. When people support an armed or even a political struggle against a merciless colonialism, tradition changes meaning.” (I underline to emphasize my point.)

reconceived as a labor of life and death, a labor tied not simply to the resurrected Christ but to the Christ who was resurrected from the dead and in whose Jewish (nonracial) flesh, Christian thought claims, all of creation lives and moves and has being (cf Acts 17:28).”

It is in this spirit of practicing Christian theology that I wish to analyze how the doctrine of God’s transcendence in theologies of Clement and Cone performed in their socio-religious environments.

Christian theology inherently begins with Christology; Christologically speaking, because Christ Jesus is the Image of God (cf Colossians 1:15) and humanity is made in the image of God (cf Genesis 9:6), divine transcendence can hardly be spoken of apart from discussions pertaining to human difference. The prevalent concern among critics of early Christian Platonism is the Platonic understanding of God’s transcendence as immateriality; therefore, Christology and sanctification are viewed as doctrines where the divinity of Christ is over accentuated and thereby rendering it impossible for human beings to follow Christ’s example. Two factors are neglected from this general analysis; first, one must come to understand that arguments for God’s transcendence are historically constitutive and anyone wishing to understand Greek philosophical preferences of Patristic theologians must take into serious consideration the unique surrounding environment that these thinkers found themselves in.

The second factor that is usually overlooked is the participatory nature of many Patristic writers’ views of redemption and salvation. In contrast to theologies which seem to advance simply admiring the words and deeds of Christ in the Gospels, the Alexandrian theologians proposed that all Christians (regardless of socio-economic status, ethnicity and gender), could actually partake in the divine nature through the obedience of the law of Christ/Word of God.

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Clement of Alexandria, in particular, did not follow the Jesus as Moral Exemplar\textsuperscript{31} model because he viewed, much like Athanasius two centuries after him, the mysterious Incarnation of the Word served the purpose where the divine became a person so that people could become divine. The Incarnation makes it possible for finite human beings to share in the infinite transcendence of the Triune God. It is important for us to comprehend Clement’s doctrine of divine Otherness in the terms of his second century C.E. Roman Egyptian historical context; likewise, we must treat James Cone’s theology appropriately within its twentieth century US American, post-World War II environment.

In first half of this thesis, I will consider Clement of Alexandria as a colonized writer in second century Roman Egypt who joined a religious and cultural struggle for the hearts, minds, and bodies of Alexandria’s citizens. Examining Clement’s and Cone’s contexts and work through a postcolonial lens is not without its problems; for example, while I am relying on Fanon’s categories, Frantz Fanon avoids any discussion of how religious thought influences the formation of a people.\textsuperscript{32} Furthermore, Clement of Alexandria is not attempting to cultivate a national political body, but a religious community in his discussions of Christology and divinization; neither does Fanon and Cone in the twentieth century share the same concepts of race, ethnicity, and culture with Clement. The ultimate concern that Clement, Cone, and Fanon do share is the quest for a new vision of human subjectivity in their respective contexts. It is the

\textsuperscript{31} The term Moral Exemplar model of Christian ethics comes from Christian realist James M. Gustafson in his \textit{Christ and the Moral Life}. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 173. Jesus has been viewed as a pattern for a universal ideal whereby we participate in events of Christ such as his miracles or crucifixion in the past but not the actual divine life in the present. I understand liberationist and Womanist theological ethics as particular forms of Christ the Moral Exemplar ethics whereby one views Christ as a model for liberation and the other, liberation and wholeness.

\textsuperscript{32} This is not to say that Frantz Fanon makes does not make any commentary pertaining to religion; on the contrary, he notes how deterministic religions are complicit in the suppression of the rights of the colonized as well as the vision of a great by-and-by as a force that sustain racist institutions. Frantz Fanon, \textit{The Wretched of the Earth} ( New York, NY: Grove Press, 2004), 7;18;232.
belief of this author that the Fanonian label of Clement and Cone as colonized creators functions as an apt category for this work.

The second half of this investigation will attend to a comparative analysis of Black Liberationist theologian James Hal Cone’s historical and theological milieu, his distinctive interpretation of God’s transcendence, as well as Cone’s articulation of Christ’s Otherness as Blackness. James Cone, as a colonized intellectual in the 20th century, sought to emancipate African American Christians from the grips of white racism especially that of white mainline Protestant religionists. In Cone’s mission to construct a new black humanity, he had to lay emphasis on God’s transcendence (Black Theology and Black Power) in order to lay the ground work for black human being, thinking, and doing (A Black Theology of Liberation). The meaning of God’s revelation in Christ Jesus represents God’s concrete involvement with the marginalized and oppressed communities of the world. This thesis seeks to explore the strengths and limitations of Cone’s methods and conclusions while evaluating the manner in which both Cone and Clement delineate YHWH’s divine Otherness through their divergent retellings of the story of Israel and the life of Jesus the Messiah.

In the last chapter, I will put forward a few questions that could be possibly presented by Womanist theologians for Cone’s and Clement’s presuppositions concerning YHWH’s Otherness along with their views of cultural differences. Because God as Wholly Other chooses to share space with planetary creatures through the Incarnation of the Word as well as the glorious indwelling of God’s image in humankind, I will put forward a few possible contours for a U.S. Black postcolonial model of divine transcendence. It is in the hopes of opposing reductionist accounts of cultures and individual persons that a postcolonial doctrine of divine
transcendence can function as a way to undermine imperial structures and ideologies. This rough sketch may give license for Womanist and Black liberationist theologians to remain in dialogue with early Christianities and as well as the Nicene-Chalcedonian creedal formulas all the while maintaining a commitment to emancipating ourselves from racist ideologies and institutions. It is in the encounter of the Lord who comes from Beyond that humanity is confronted for the purpose of fellowship in the presence of both the divine and human Other.

Chapter 2: Clement of Alexandria on Divine Transcendence

In the concluding chapter of Zizek and Theology, Adam Kotsko chose Clement of Alexandria as an apologist most likely to be branded with the group of theologians “who supposedly ‘introduced’ the Greek philosophical concepts that it has for a long time been fashionable to blame for the failure of Christianity to live up to its promise.” Kotsko encourages his audience to take a Zizekian approach to Christian, rejection the fall narrative, and work to rearticulate the best of Clement’s doctrine, including his progressive inclusion of women as participants in the life of God “in a new language and situation.” The negation of modern doctrinal Orientalism in contemporary Christian theological circles as well as the use of a genealogical approach to an analysis of second-century Roman Egyptian religious life would

34 For many, my theological proposal may resemble that of the Radical Orthodoxy experiment. However, there are two considerable differences. First, the goal of those advocating RO wish to return the Church back to Platonist metaphysical categories, particularly that of Saint Augustine; on the contrary, I am of the impression that movements that uncritically seek to “go back to past traditions” without recognizing the malleability of cultural norms are quite misguided. Secondly, my model presupposes doing theology and the re-interpretation of doctrinal formulas as a specifically anti-racist endeavor. Proponents of Radical Orthodoxy, in my opinion, have insufficiently dealt with the implications of divine transcendence for human cultural differences. For an example of Radical Orthodox theology in the US American context, cf. James K.A. Smith, Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church. The church and postmodern culture. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006). For a critical analysis of the RO project, please cf. “Radical Transcendence?” in Mayra Rivera, The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 17-38 and J. Kameron Carter, Race A Theological Account (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 388.
35 Adam Kotsko, Zizek and Theology (T&T Clark: New York, NY, 2008), 149.
benefit the Church and the world more so than what Kotsko refers to as the “fall narrative” of Christian Platonism.

Before I begin, a quick word must be said pertaining to the textual traditions of Clement’s work. According to Johannes Quasten, the original manuscripts of Clement’s *Exhortation to the Greeks* and *The Educator* were copied by the order of Archbishop Arethas of Caesarea in Cappadocia in 914 C.E.; the texts of *The Carpets* (*Stromateis/Miscellanies*) and *How Can the Rich Be Saved?* were preserved and reproduced in the eleventh and twelfth centuries C.E., respectively. In addition, our knowledge of Clement’s interpretation of Scripture is quite limited because of the fact that some of Clement’s most important works, including an eight-volume length commentary on the First and New Testaments as well as such texts entitled *On the Pasch, Ecclesiastical Canon or Against the Judaizers, On Providence,* and *Discourses on Fasting* we are only able to know through secondary sources which cite them.

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38 According to Johannes Quasten, the literary form of the *Stromata* is very similar to similar philosophical texts with titles such as *The Banquets, The Meadows,* and *The Honeycomb* where these thinkers would answer questions at length without a planned method. For Clement, as Quasten says, *Stromata* treats the various subjects as being woven together like colors in a carpet. For the rest of this work, I shall refer to *Stromata as Carpets.* Supplementing my case for this translation is that the root word for the Greek term *stromata* is the verb *stromnumi* which is a verb meaning to spread out or furnish, possibly a room with carpets or couches, probably for guests at a meal. See Johannes Quasten, *Patrology: Volume II: The Ante-Nicene Literature after Irenaeus* (The Newman Press: Westminster, Maryland, 1950), 12 and Walter Bauer, et al. *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature: a translation and adaptation of the second revised and augmented edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 771.
Clement as Roman Egyptian Colonized Intellectual

Titus Flavius Clemens is estimated to have been born approximately in the year 150 CE. He was born and raised in Athens, Greece or Alexandria, Egypt. The city of Alexandria was culturally complex and its relationship with Rome was rather ambivalent. Alexandria was one of apparently four Greek cities in Egypt, along with Naucratis, Thebaid, and Mersa Matruh. The hazard with the use of totalizing labels such as Graeco-Roman or Roman-Greek culture in analyzing second century Alexandria is that one may look over the cultural tensions between the Hellenistic traditions and the Roman way of life. Embedded in the cultural memory of Alexandrians was the fact that “their city had been the capital of the richest and most powerful of the Hellenistic monarchies.” Hellenized Alexandrians preferred loyalty to their city and tensions between them and the Romans were further intensified the failure on the Alexandrians’ part to receive a senate as a political body and Augustus’ recognition of Judaism and the Jewish council of elders.

Alexandria was considered home by a religiously free Jewish community, native Greek-speaking Egyptians, and a Hellenistic immigrant community. Christianity in second century Alexandria was practiced by persons of culturally hybrid backgrounds due in part to bicultural marriages between Greek male immigrants and Egyptian women; in addition, Robin Lane Fox observes that Alexandrian Christians may have been financially well off as well as have received

44 Ibid., 151.
45 Ibid.
46 Jane Rowlandson, “Gender and Cultural Identity in Roman Egypt.” in *Women's Influence on Classical Civilization* (London: Routledge, 2004), 152. Note: As I noted above, Alexandria from the days of Macedonians on, attracted visitors from the Greek speaking world; the audiences of Egyptian religious pageantry under the rule of the Greek and Roman Empires were the cities literate in the Greek language.
the best education from the gymnasiums. Lane’s study brings illumination to the intended Alexandrian Christian audience of *The Educator* and *How Can The Rich Be Saved?*. Clement’s readers were concerned with “the possession of slaves” (*Educator* 2.2), the gold jewelry worn by women (*Educator* 2.212), and the concern that riches served as a stumbling block for those who wanted to follow Christ.48

Clement would have been familiar with the traditional Egyptian religions at least as an outsider who converted to the Christian faith. Clement’s travels took him to Palestine, the Near East, and Magna Graecia before he settled in the city of Alexandria.49 Egypt was under the bondage of the Persian Empire until 332 B.C.R.; Alexander the Great of Macedon arrived unopposed and liberated Egypt from Persian rule.50 The Greeks had been aware of the Egypt’s greatness, its agricultural plentitude, as well as the division between the Upper and Lower regions of Egypt according to Herodotus. For the purposes of my task, it is crucial to point out that the Macedonians continued the Egyptian pharaonic past through culturally fluid religious structures. The same had been true with the Persians; as a satrapy (province) of the Persian Empire, the Persians used the same vocabulary to describe the kings such as Xerxes while there was a cultural sensitivity to the Egyptian way of life in bureaucratic dealings and religious

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49 Ibid.

practices.\textsuperscript{51} Alexander of Macedon’s lasting legacy in Egypt was marked by the city that he named after himself: Alexandria.

The Ptomelaic dynasty succeeded the Macedonians; much like the Persians and the Macedonians before him, Ptolemy I continued to respect Egypt’s political, religious, and cultural heritage. A great influx of Greek immigrants to Alexandria, in large part due to imperial investments of its zoological gardens, Library, and Museum which became the largest metropolis east of the Mediterranean and became a leading city in the arts, sciences, and commerce to the.\textsuperscript{52} Egyptian religion was transformed by the Ptolemies’ policies; the dynasty constructed hybrid divinities such as the Greco-Egyptian god Sarapis whose cult was to retain popularity even during the Roman period. The Ptolemies invited their Egyptian subjects to worship them and their queens as divinities (consistent with the pharaonic tradition) while the wealthy landholders maintained the temples of both surviving ancient Egyptian and the new ones being built by the Ptolemaic dynasty.

Caesar Augustus earned the honor of taking on the image of pharaoh after he entered Alexandria in August 1\textsuperscript{st}, 30 BCE. Rome administrated Egypt by assigning a prefect to reside in Alexandria who was directly accountable to Caesar.\textsuperscript{53} Alexandria became the seat of administration while the Roman Emperor functioned as the Ptomelaic divine king who ruled through a prefect.\textsuperscript{54} Alexandrian religious life continued to flourish regardless of whether the colonial power over the city was the Greeks, the Persians, or the Romans. The audiences of Egyptian religious pageantry under the rule of the Greek and Roman Empires were the cities

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 12.  
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 14.  
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 16.  
\textsuperscript{54} Hägg., \textit{Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism}, 16.
literate in the Greek language.\textsuperscript{55} Citizens from these cities were invited to come to Alexandria for usually a month to enjoy these processions, sacrifices, athletic and musical contests and games. Egyptian religious cults spread throughout the Roman Empire, and in particular, the cult of Isis which had hymns written in Greek for this mystery cult that promised healing, fertility, and eternal life in the beyond.\textsuperscript{56} The shrines for Isis, as well as the figurines of the goddess and her priestesses, represented the power of fertility for the general populace. The figurines and iconography were dedicated at the temple as families placed these on domestic altars in their homes.\textsuperscript{57}

\textit{Divine Otherness contra Roman Egypt}

Clement of Alexandria challenged Alexandrian religionists to reject the Greco-Egyptian religions and convert to Christianity. “Custom strangles a person; it turns one away from truth; it leads one away from life; it is a snare, an abyss, a pit, a devouring devil.”\textsuperscript{58} Clement disapproved of the display of domestic altars and figurines, which were in his view, earthen images “far away from the truth.”\textsuperscript{59} All of the ceremonies and sacraments were of no use because the non-Christian Egyptians in Alexandria were living in ignorance. Because Clement was familiar with the involvement of priestesses in sacred rites in Alexandria, he presented an alternative religious vision to subvert imperial religious practices of his contemporaries. The “daughters of God, the beautiful lambs” assemble together and participate in the Christian rites.\textsuperscript{60} Clement of Alexandria makes a play on words here; the Greek word amnades (lambs) perhaps critiques the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 140.
\textsuperscript{58} Clement, \textit{Exhortation}, 12.1
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 10.79
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 12.93.
\end{flushleft}
Maenads, or female worshippers of Dionysus as a form of mimicry. The Christian maidens are part of a ‘somber’ and ‘righteous company’ that worships Christ Jesus who calls all human beings of all nationalities into fellowship with the Triune God.

Clement drew a sharp distinction between Greco-Egyptian religious festivals and Christian sacrament because the Christian God transcended Pax Romana and its pantheon and required a repudiation of many Roman imperial customs that were adhered to in Alexandria. Simultaneously Clement undermines the exclusive nature of the bestowal of Roman citizenship by arguing for the universal nature of the Good News. As an Alexandrian, he would have been familiar with ancient Roman conceptions of citizenship; citizenship was granted only to non-Latins on the conditional basis that included civil service for Rome from its subjects. Alexandria, without the availability of a senate as mentioned above, had fewer means for its citizens to serve Rome; Alexandrians had limited access to obtain citizenship.

Clement of Alexandria saw a direct correlation between the worship of divinity that was captivated by Roman imperial traditions and restricted rights of the Alexandrians. For example, in the seventh book of The Carpets, Clement argues that “God is not circumscribed in place, nor made in the form of any creature, so neither is he of like passions, nor lacks he anything after the

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61 As we continue to understand the history of ideas as a form of human warfare, the postcolonial notion of mimicry works much like military reconnaissance operations. Homi Bhabha observes, “mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers” (86-87). For more, see Homi Bhabha’s “Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse” in Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 2006).

62 Clement of Alexandria, Eshoration to the Greeks, 12.93.

63 Simon Davis, Racial-Relations in Ancient Egypt, 135: 140-144. Rome, in this context, is viewed widely as the world-states and therefore its goal was to form world-citizens. From the Roman imperial perspective, the world had been united under the auspices of Pax Romana.
manner of created things, so as from hunger to desire sacrifices for food." God’s Otherness in Clement’s theology meant that God’s was completely unlike the divinities of the Roman and Greek Egyptian pantheons in Alexandria. Christians, then, owed their allegiance to a King other than the Roman emperor; specifically, Christ, as Lord of all is the saving activity of the Father almighty who delivers salvation to “Greeks and to barbarians [non-Greeks]” as well as “the faithful and elect [.]” The subversive manner in which Clement’s uses the title of Father to describe God acts as a commentary on Roman imperial paternalism. Warren Carter notes that Father was a common designation for the emperor of Rome who was called “The Father of the Fatherland and Father of the Country.” The Roman emperor, as father, developed a benefactor-client relationship with the people, by funding public works such as the construction of temples and water aqueducts. Clement, on the other hand, made the claim that in spite of the disenfranchised state of the Alexandrians under Rome, they could still achieve full citizenship in “their fatherland in heaven.”

As I have mentioned before, the Greek and Roman rulers took on the trappings of pharaoh, who, in the mind of the Egyptian people, was a god. The gods and goddesses which were propagated in Alexandrian Egypt were imminent, readily accessible, and greatly identified with the benevolent Roman Empire; therefore, any theologian or philosopher who wished to offer an unconventional theology worldview in this context had to begin with a deity who existed beyond the religious spaces and boundaries set by the Romans. Clement of Alexandria’s view of divine otherness drew upon the teachings of Jewish Middle Platonist theologian Philo of

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65 Ibid., 7.1.6.
Alexandria as a resource.\textsuperscript{68} There are different forms of Platonism that synthesized with other philosophies and religious perspectives such as Aristotelianism and Judaism. It is therefore necessary to understand Alexandrian Middle Platonism in its religiously pluralistic Roman-Egyptian context. Although I have in the sections above primarily used the cult of Isis as a concrete example of religious life in Upper Egypt, particularly Alexandria, there are many gods in the Greco-Roman Egyptian pantheon. Each divinity had a special relationship with the Roman Empire, the general populace of Egyptian cities and villages, as well as the priests and priestess. The middle Platonist god cannot be identified with any created thing or person. It is also pertinent to our conversation that one notes Middle Platonism’s appropriation of Stoicism, with its emphasis on the Logos as the soul of the world. Immaterial and transcendent ideas proceed from God and the Logos in Philonic theology.\textsuperscript{69} The peculiar Middle Platonism in Clement’s day advanced that notion that God was not bound to any category, including nationality and gender. Given the Roman imperial context in which Clement lived, it would seem to be that Middle Platonists were political threats because they challenged the existing political theologies of their era.

Middle Platonist philosophical theologies posited that god is an intellect that supersedes nature; god does not have any genes, species and remains incorporeal.\textsuperscript{70} The synthesis of Christian theology, biblical tradition, and Middle Platonism was made possible because of the constructive works of the Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria. Clement argues in book two of his \textit{The Carpets}, “All the doctrines I have been discussing seem to have been handed down to

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\textsuperscript{68} For a more extensive study on Clement’s use of Philo of Alexandria’s biblical exegesis, see Anniewies Van Den Hoek, \textit{Clement of Alexandria and His use of Philo in the Stromateis: An Early Christian reshaping of a Jewish Model.} (New York: E.J. Brill, 1988).

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{70} Richard M. Berchman, \textit{From Philo to Origen: Middle Platonism in Transition} (Brown Judaic studies, no. 69. Chico, Calif: Scholars Press, 1984), 28.
\end{flushright}
the Greeks by the towering figure of Moses.”

Truth is not to be understood as a marketplace of ideas where ideologues best each other in a competition to win over their audiences; rather, while “there is only one way of truth, but different paths from different places join it, just like tributaries flowing into a perennial river.”

According to Clement, Moses and Plato both affirmed the spacelessness and timelessness of God. Clement’s God “is beyond space and time and anything belonging to created beings. He is contained by nothing. He is not subject to limit or division. […] He has nothing to do with space.”

Robert M. Berchman suggests that with Clement, one could confuse Christianity with Hellenism and Middle Platonism. However, that is just a misguided characterization; from Clement’s own writings, one can discern that Clement of Alexandria did not embrace everything that Plato had to say. Clement of Alexandria taught that Moses’s doctrine was superior to Plato’s and other Greek philosophers. In other words, the story of Israel took precedent over the Middle Platonism; Clement’s teaching on divine Otherness began with YHWH in the Jewish Scriptures who is the same transcendent divine Parent in the New Testament and Christian doctrine.

Chapter 3: Clement of Alexandria on the Incarnation

Clement’s Christ as the Incarnate Logos

Clement’s view of God’s transcendence had significant implications for his Christology. Therefore, he needed to reformulate and expand upon Middle Platonist understandings of divine immanence in the universe. Ideas are first constituted and have their place in the divine intellect.

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71 Clement of Alexandria. *The Carpets*, 2.5.20
72 Clement of Alexandria. *Carpets*, 1.29.1
73 Clement of Alexandria. *Carpets*, 2.4.3
75 Clement of Alexandria, *Carpets*, 1.165
according to Philo; transcendent immaterial ideas come from the mind of God and in the Logos, immaterial ideals are discovered within the world. Philo interpreted Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22 and the Wisdom of Solomon 9:9 as the Logos, which acts as the intelligent principle of God assisting God at the time of creation. Since the transcendent One cannot operate in the world directly, the Logos works on behalf of the One as a regulative power. The Logos spreads throughout the universe, giving form to created material. Philo refers to the Logos as the God’s first-born who is “the commander of the universe” and carrier of God’s immaterial authority. It must be noted, however, that not every Middle Platonist saw a need for a mediating figure in creation. Pagan Middle Platonists such as Alcinous considered the Logos to be a second divinity as a world-soul while Numenious called it a “second god” moving pre-existent matter into harmony. Clement, as a Christian theologian, would choose to apply Philo’s arguments and the Jewish Middle Platonist interpretation of the Wisdom tradition specifically to Jesus Christ.

Philo of Alexandria’s Logos was a light that provided a vision of the mind. Philo understood God’s appearance to Abraham in Genesis 17 as the pure divine radiance elucidating knowledge upon the logos within Abram. Spiritual knowledge is a gift from God in Philonic theology. Taking his precedent from Philo, Clement argues that Christ as Logos is the true light (reminiscent of the Prologue of the Gospel of John) in which human beings “shake off sleep and then are wide awake interiorly” as the Holy Spirit is sent from heaven to give Christians “the power to see eternal light.”

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77 Berchmann, *Middle Platonism*, 46.
78 Ibid., 65.
81 Ibid., 114.
82 Clement of Alexandria, *The Educator*, 1.6.28
cultivator” of all truths from the foundation of the world; Epicureanism, Platonism, Stoicism, and Aristotelian worldviews can be considered philosophies only in regards to what they teach correctly, for Clement could not “call divine, likenesses made from human calculations.”  

Christ as God’s Word and Wisdom for Clement represented the pinnacle of the true philosophy and this philosophy was made available to everyone throughout creation; God uses the Logos to pursue humankind, being ever-present in our lives, “touching us with a power that is observant, beneficent, and educative.”  

Clement of Alexandria’s Logos Christology allowed for him to support the human sciences, philosophy, and natural theology while distinctly maintaining a Christian doctrine of God’s transcendence. According to Clement’s theology, it is in the Word made flesh that the One literally embraces all of creation.

\[\text{Christian Perfection as Gnosis}\]

The mysterious Incarnation of the Word had a particular purpose for Clement of Alexandria; in contrast to Middle Platonists and Stoics who asserted that the goal of humanity was to life in accordance to (imitating) the Logos while shunning the notion that we become a part of the One, Clement articulated his doctrine of theosis whereby Christians could gradually received a united bond with the Trinity by the power of the Son.  

The believer can move towards existence in the Infinite because the Infinite made Godself finite; the Incarnation of Christ for Clement has no beginning or end and is therefore a matter of God choosing to limit God in se.  

\[\text{83 \footnote{Clement of Alexandria, The Carpets, 1.7. 37.}\text{ 84 \footnote{Ibid. , 2.5. 1-5.}\text{ 85 \footnote{Clement’s view of theosis is expressed in the quote, “the Word of God speaks, having become man, in order that such as you may learn from man how it is even possible for man to become a god” Clement of Alexandria, Exhortation., 1.8.4. The Incarnation of the Logos makes theosis possible.}\text{ 86 \footnote{Choufrine, Gnosis, Theophany. Theosis, 180.}\text{ 87 \footnote{Hägg, Christian Apophaticism, 194-197.} }}\]
therefore evidence of a person’s assimilating oneself to God would be a disinterested ascetic who
aspired to heavenly things beyond this life. In *The Educator*, Clement suggests that the Word of
God is “entirely free from human passion; that is why He alone is sinless. Yet, we must strive, to
the best of our ability, to be as sinless as we can. […] The highest perfection, of course, is never
to sin in any least way; but this can be said of God alone.”88 The Christian reaching for
perfection has mystical communion with God without the aid of rituals, loves impartially both
one’s neighbor and one’s enemy, and desires the knowledge of God above all.

While it is easy to accuse Clement of docetism, as Henny Fiska Hägg (just like Robert
Webber), does for claiming that Christ did not need to eat or drink, one must understand Christ’s
singularity in the work of the highest perfection. Christ alone achieved the full human
participation in the Otherness of God in his life because of his divinity; the believer can only
hope to, as Clement says, be as perfect as we possibly can. Human difference remains even as
persons are going through the process of divinization. For Clement, the God of Israel teaches the
church by way of the Logos for “we have been educated in a course which is really holy by
God’s Son. The Greeks do not develop their souls in the same way at all; their process of
learning is different.”89 Christians are involved in the life of the Educator as well as share in
God’s Wisdom but they do not become the Educator.

The title Clement used to refer to Christians who were being perfected was “Gnostic.”
Clement’s use of the term “Gnostic” has been the topic of much debate. Walt Bauer in
*Orthodoxy and Christian Heresy in Earliest Christianity* described Egyptian Christianity as
essentially Gnostic in nature because of the activities of Gnostic teachers such as Basilides and

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88 Clement of Alexandria, *The Educator*, 1.2.4.
89 Clement of Alexandria, *The Carpets*, 1.98.4
Valentinus.\textsuperscript{90} Clement, however, rejects the doctrines taught by these heretical Gnosticism of these two thinkers in his \textit{The Carpets} books three and seven. Clement changed the meaning of Gnostic to define it as someone redeemed in Christ.\textsuperscript{91} In \textit{How Can the Rich be Saved?}, Clement provides his audience the example of Mary Magdalene as a follower of Christ who practiced perfect love; just as the Son ordered the rich man to sell all of his possessions, so did Mary obey Christ, giving up the concerns of this world in order to listen to the Teacher.\textsuperscript{92} True gnosis (knowledge) is found in obeying Christ the Wisdom and Word of God. When one fails to recognize the hybrid nature of Alexandrian culture and Christianity, totalizing statements will lead us into ignoring the complexity of Clement’s doctrines of divine transcendence and Incarnation.

If Clement’s teaching God’s transcendence undermined the popular temple religions of Roman Egypt, it was his doctrine of Incarnation and deification which subverted Caesar’s and Pharaoh’s claim to divinity; in other words, Clement’s concept of theosis democratized these traditions by making divinization available to all persons, whether male or female. On the question of who can achieve perfection in Christ, Clement answers in his \textit{The Educator}: “Let us recognize, too, that both men and women practice the same sort of virtue. Surely, if there is but one God for both, then there is but one Educator for both.”\textsuperscript{93} Women could become Christian Gnostics through acts of justice and self-control, as could men; these were worked out differently because of the distinctions between the genders from Clement’s perspective. Clement recommended that rather than wearing expensive jewelry and clothes, women should wear the holy ornament of generous giving of their possessions, for whoever gives to the beggars gives to

\textsuperscript{90} Hägg, \textit{Christian Apophaticism}, 42. Bauer represents heretofore yet another example of Christian scholars preserving doctrinal Orientalism in their interpretations of Christian history.

\textsuperscript{91} Choufrine, \textit{Gnosis, Theophany, and Theosis}, 18.


\textsuperscript{93} Clement of Alexandria, \textit{The Educator}, 1.10.
God according to Proverbs. Since Christ, as High Priest, officiates as the leader for the Christian Gnostic in Clement’s view, no one person (even the Emperor of Pax Romana) could claim a monopoly on divinity.

When one reflects on the historical context of Clement of Alexandria and his theology, several questions must be put forth. First, given that Clement is writing for an audience that is generally wealthy (both Christian and non-Christian, does not God have anything to say to the poor? If Christ is without passion, does that mean Christ remains apathetic to the lives of the oppressed? While persons strive for impartiality for the sake of fairness, there are some forms of impartiality that come at the expense of the marginalized. Those who would claim to have universal truth without any bias would erase the particularities and limitations of their perspective at the expense of the marginalized, the wretched of the earth.

And secondly, does not his notion of Christian Gnosticism imply that the only way that a Christian can become perfect is by meditating on subjects that are otherworldly?; would that not mean that Christian theology, as a practice, would elevate the abandoning of social interaction with others, and thereby allowing a believer to flee away from the presence of those suffering in the here and now? One could suggest that the theology supporting the monastic movements in Egypt drew from Clement of Alexandria’s teachings on theosis and divine Otherness. An Alexandrian Christian who took Clement’s teaching to an extreme, would be as the saying goes, so heavenly minded that they could not be of any earthly good. Churches, monasteries, nor seminaries should be seen as venues to escape the crises of life and death; they should be...

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94 Ibid., 2.129
95 In a way, one could say, by his doctrine of divinization, that Clement makes room for a Fanonian rejection of “the herder of the people,” Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 127.
96 Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 37 “For the colonized subject, objectivity is always directed against him.”
institutions where Christians confront suffering and human indignity. If the voices of the humiliated are excluded from doctrines of divine Otherness and the Incarnation, it seems as if Clement’s teaching of theosis and theological ethics could be seen as more of an advancement of assimilation97 to the values of the affluent rather than an assimilation into the Holy Trinity.

Chapter 4: James Cone on Divine Transcendence

The question has to be asked, “Has there ever been a Christian theological project that has made itself relevant to the experiences of the oppressed?” The theological model of Black Liberation has been one such attempt by African American scholars located in the United States. U.S. Black theology, as a discipline, is the history of religious discourses that have searched for the plurivalent meanings of God-talk in the lives of African-Americans as well as the African American community’s responses to the divine.98 For US Black Christian theologians, Black Theology is examined through either Christo-centric lenses or, at the very least, God-talk and society are examined through re-definitions of traditional Christian categories such as

97 In terms of cultural studies, African American history, and postcolonial theory, the term assimilation receives much scrutiny for those members of the oppressed who would “sell out” in order to appease the oppressor. In African American history, assimilationist responses to racism have sought to embrace the concept that “the universal must wipe clean all particulars, that cosmopolitan society erases all provincialities.” I will take up this approach further in my discussion of James Cone below. For more, please see. Cornel West, Prophesy Deliverance: afro-american revolutionary Christianity (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1982), 78-80.

98 In this tentative definition of what I believe US Black Theology is, I have tried to include the religious ideas of African Americans going back to the early days of colonial America in the eighteenth century. While there is an immense difference between doing Black theology as a professional vocation within the academy and being a US Black theologian in church and society, it is my impression that everyone, regardless of age, race, nationality, gender, and socio-economic status, does theology. The plurality of the African American religious experiences must be recognized because each Black religious tradition is heterogeneous in nature and subject to transformation. By religious discourse, I mean “the controlling metaphors, notions, categories, and norms” as well as practices that form the theological undertakings of African-American communities. For texts that deal with the discursive nature of religion and race, cf. . Cornel West, Prophesy Deliverance: afro-american revolutionary Christianity. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1982) and David Theo Goldberg, Racist Culture.: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).
Incarnation, the Fall, and soteriology. I have chosen to investigate a Black theologian who can be described as the former, as a Christo-centric Black Theologian: James Hal Cone.

Cone’s theology must be understood as one of the first systematic theological responses to white racism in the United States. A transcendent God who is Wholly Other is situated at the base of his theological project; God in Cone’s worldview is completely different from the God purported by racist societies. The following sections below will set forth a genealogical interpretation of James Cone’s circumstances from which his theology of divine transcendence was birthed. In addition, I will include a comparison and contrast of Cone’s and Clement’s comprehensions of the story of Moses and Israel as well as the life of Christ; it is in their retellings of these narratives that Clement’s and Cone’s distinct views of divine transcendence can be underscored.

Cone as US American Colonized Intellectual

If racial oppression necessitates a theological response, Black Liberation theologians have usually conjectured freedom from oppression as well as freedom for the marginalized as a rejoinder. US Black Liberation theologians from the Christian tradition have attempted to make the life of Jesus the Messiah the subject of theology while making his works relevant to the experiences of oppressed people group. James Cone claims, “Indeed our survival and liberation depend upon our recognition of the truth when it is spoken and lived by the people. […]"

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99 This half of the investigation will focus on the former, with James Hal Cone serving as an example of a Black theologian who is Christo-centric. For a case of the latter, cf., Monica Coleman, Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008).
Therefore to speak the truth we black theologians must set forth the authentic experience of blackness.”

He continues,

We cannot criticize the early Church Fathers for their failure to address the critical questions of our contemporary situation. They are accountable only for dealing with the historical issues in their time as they relate to Jesus’ presence among them. On the other hand, there are common elements in the human experience that enable us to evaluate past interpreters of the faith. Since oppression of the weak by the powerful is one of those elements, we can put the critical question to Athanasius, Augustine, or Luther: What has the gospel of Jesus, as witnessed in Scripture, to do with the humiliated and the abused? If they fail to ask that question or only made it secondary in their interpretation of the gospel, then it is our task to make clear how their approach to the gospel differs from Scripture. This creates the possibility of distinguishing valid theology from heresy […]

Cone argues that Black theologians depend on Scripture and the Black experience as resources for liberation. This is not to say that Cone completely rejects Patristic theology, but that he is calling for us to re-assess their theological teachings in light of the plights of the subjugated. The suggested posture of this theology, then, from the beginning is listening to the voices of persons who experience being Othered in society. The measuring rod of what should be deemed as orthodox and as heresy, for Cone, is therefore, not customary belief systems, the church or the canon; rather Christian theology should be judged by its implications for the needy. A contextual reading of James Hal Cone must understand that he was born on August 5th, 1938 in racially-segregated Bearden, Arkansas. Growing up in the Negro church (the African American church after Reconstruction and before the Civil Rights movement), Cone learned about a good and just God every Sunday at Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal church.

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100 James H. Cone, God of the Oppressed (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 30
101 Ibid. , 32
At the same time, James Cone and his brother Cecil would question God’s goodness if there existed the evils of racism personified in the Jane and Jim Crow structure of Bearden, AR.  

Cone’s inquiries would lead him to study theology and earn his PhD by writing a dissertation on Karl Barth’s anthropology. After struggling with the questions like, “What did the theologies of Karl Barth and Paul Tillich have to do with Black Americans fighting segregation?,” as well as after reflecting on the lives of Malcolm X and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Cone began to develop the religious discourse we now know as the Black Liberation model. Black Liberationist theological discourses need to be investigated within the larger framework of the US American history of social Christianities (both from white and black religious communities). Politically engaged Christian theologies are not new innovations that appeared without any context. This genealogical approach will include the hostile responses to twentieth century social Christianities in the United States as well as the particularities that differentiate the Social Gospel movement prior to the First World War and the post-Shoah context from which liberation theologies emerged.

I mentioned above in the opening chapter that generally speaking, early seventeenth and eighteenth century colonial American Christianity was typically Calvinist. By Calvinist, I mean that the religious doctrine of the first churches on North American shores had a Puritan heritage. Gary Dorrien argues that progressive Christianity grew out of the Congregationalist rejection of the Calvinist doctrines of total depravity and double predestination. The enslaved Africans

103 Ibid. . 119.
104 Ibid. , 119.
encounter with revivalist Christianity was ambiguous at best. On the one hand, the events that took place during the Second Great Awakening laid the foundation for the African American Christian traditions. On the other hand, however, theologians such as Jonathan Edwards owned enslaved Africans and defended the institution of slavery. Calvinist theology was not essentially pro-slavery; there were many persons from the Reformed theological tradition who believed that the sovereignty of God triumphed over the wickedness of humanity. One such person was John Brown, a man who James Cone believed, hated evil and did not tolerate it anywhere.

Many of the white progressive Christians in the nineteenth century also worked in opposition to African enslavement. Unitarian and social activist William Channing once wrote, “There is one object here which always depresses me, […] It is slavery. […] Language cannot express my detestation of it. Master and slave! Nature never made such a distinction, or established such a relation.” After the Civil War and the Reconstruction Era in the latter half of the nineteenth century a new form of progressive white liberal Christianity surfaced. A new theological movement led by Baptist preacher/professor Walter Rauschenbusch called the Social Gospel movement. Rauschenbusch condemned early twentieth century modern society for its superficial nature, having all glitz and glam on the outside, but underneath, it ignored the plights of the miserable. For Rauschenbusch, the core message of the Gospel was social revolution and that the purpose of the church was to transform society. Rauschenbusch also argued that the early church had too otherworldly of a theology to be of any help in the world;

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110 Ibid. , 89.
the Church had become too captivated by Hellenism.\textsuperscript{111} The Jesus of the Social Gospel movement was not a liberal, modern reconstruction in the eyes of the Social Gospellers; he was a Jewish prophet who preached against Roman imperial domination.\textsuperscript{112}

Social Christianity’s general popularity ended in 1918, at the end of World War I. There was a philosophical backlash against its idealism and internationalist desire to spread democracy around the world. While Social Gospellers such as Rauschenbausch and Scudder proclaimed justice for the poor, they never did address the race problem: racial segregation, economic inequality, and the lynchings suffered by African Americans in the first two decades of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{113} African American leaders in the Negro church were left to fend for themselves against all odds. Brave church mothers such as Nannie Burroughs of Philadelphia, Ida B. Wells-Barnett of Chicago, and Virginia Broughton of Nashville fought for education equality, worked in cooperation with white women church groups, and protested lynching; they took stances on issues in which Rauschenbausch was hesitant to speak on.\textsuperscript{114} The Social Gospel movement received its final death nell from none other than one of its former adherents in the mid-twentieth century: Reinhold Niebuhr.

\textit{Divine Otherness contra the Great Society}

Niebuhr “theorized the transcendence of God’s mode of being over the contingent, temporal, transient, and fallen being of all creatures.”\textsuperscript{115} He, along with Paul Tillich, were towers in American (white) liberal theological circles in the 1950s and 1960s. The two World

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 101.
\item \textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 99.
\item \textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 145-146.
\item \textsuperscript{114} Albert Raboteau, \textit{Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 74-76.
\item \textsuperscript{115} Dorrien \textit{The Making Volume 2}, 436.
\end{itemize}
Wars were evidence enough that liberal idealism could not save the world. In Reinhold Niebuhr’s works, James Cone found a resource to combat racism: “Some of Reinhold Neibuhr’s early writings may have been an exception, especially his Moral Man and Immoral Society. But for the most part, theological discourse in this country has been nothing but a participation in the structures of political oppression under the disguise of freedom and democracy.” Cone also shows a deep appreciation for Niebuhr’s anthropology, rebuking liberal ideals and the notion that humanity could ever transcend finite existence. However, because James Cone also realized that Niebuhr represented the status quo, he advised theological educational institutions to replace “courses dealing with the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr or Rudolf Bultmann with the theology of Henry Garnet and other black revolutionaries.”

Why was James Cone advocating such a change in the curriculum at seminaries? He envisioned a society that transcended the racist community that he found himself in. Cone lamented, “Theology here is largely an intellectual game unrelated to the issues of life and death. It is impossible to respond creatively and prophetically to the life-situational problems of society without identifying with the poor blacks in America but have themselves contributed to the system which enslaves black people.” The God of Black theology had to be considered Wholly Other than the God of white racism which remained apathetic to the impact of racism on Black people’s lives. Divine transcendence for Cone is not about God being beyond or above the world; “rather, transcendence refers to human purpose as defined by the infinite in the struggle for liberation. For blacks, this means that their humanity is not defined by sociological

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117 Ibid., 92.
118 Cone Black Theology and Black Power, 131.
119 Ibid., 85.
reports and scientific studies. There is a transcendent value in blackness that makes us all human and to which blacks must appeal as ultimate. Human dignity transcends human calculation.”

Revelation, in both Karth Barth and James Cone’s theology, distinguishes God from humanity as well as the rest of creation. For this reason, James Cone understands Karl Barth’s doctrine of God’s Otherness as a radical theo-political weapon (if we are speaking of doctrine as a means of resisting hegemony) against the Third Reich. Cone ponders, “Americans have generally agreed that Barth’s rejection of natural theology was a mistake. Is that because American theologians still see a close relationship between the structures of this society and Christianity? As long as there is no absolute difference between God and man, it is possible to view America as the ‘land of the free and home of the brave’ despite the oppression of blacks.”

Cone says that revelation means “we are not free to say anything we please about God. Although scripture is not the only source that helps us to recognize divine activity in the world, it cannot be ignored if we intend to speak of the Holy One of Israel.” At this point, I believe that it is appropriate to discuss Cone’s and Clement of Alexandria’s re-tellings of the story of Israel, particularly as it relates to Moses and YHWH. For Cone, YHWH’s identity as the divine Other is located in God’s character and partial love for the oppressed. Cone’s says, “By choosing Israel, the oppressed people among the nations, God reveals that his concern is not for the strong but for the weak, not for the enslaver but for the slave, not for the whites but for blacks.” The Exodus event is “the most significant revelatory act” in the First Testament because it

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120 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 77-78.
121 Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 87. (again, my underlining to emphasize the statement).
122 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 60. (my underlining to stress that Christian doctrines of divine otherness start with YHWH, the divinity revealed in the First Testament.)
123 Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 64.
“demonstrated God’s purpose” for humanity and that YHWH was sovereign over human history. God’s righteousness, that which distinguishes the divine from the human, is found in YHWH’s saving activity in history, as God reminds Israel on Mount Sinai. The prophetic tradition in the line of Moses and Martin Luther King, Jr. is characterized, then, by an unwavering confidence in God’s magnificent justice. In another instance, Cone describes slavery insurrectionist Nat Turner as a Moses figure as well.

Clement uses Philo of Alexandria’s The Life of Moses to discuss the superiority of Moses’s philosophy over that of the Greeks. Clement also bestows upon Moses titles other than prophet. He makes Moses, along with YHWH, the central figures in the story of Israel. In The Carpets Book I, Moses is called a “legislator, organizer, general, statesman, philosopher.” The titles that Clement gives to Moses are to be understood in relation to the Logos; Moses’s actions and law forshadow the coming of Christ, who is both the Law and the Law-giver. The story of God saving the Israelites from the Egyptian chariots, in Clement’s view, is an example of Moses’s military wisdom; Clement alleges that Miltiades of Athens copied Moses’s strategy in order to defeat the Persians. Finally, Moses is a personal friend of YHWH and received God loves when he cried out to the “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob.”

The story of Israel for Cone exemplifies YHWH’s Otherness in God’s solidarity with the oppressed. Clement’s Christo-centric take on the life of Moses and story of Israel gives us more of an idea about his view of the Logos in the First Testament, where YHWH as the transcendent

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124 Ibid.
125 Ibid., 44.
127 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 127.
128 Clement of Alexandria, The Carpets, 1.158.1.
129 Ibid., 1.161 & 162.
130 Ibid., 2.20.2.
One interacts with creation in human history by sending the Logos, which is for Clement, the Law who is also the one true legislator. Due to Clement’s Logos Christology, the events of Moses’s receiving of the Law as well as Christ’s fulfilling of the Law are accentuated. Cone, on the other hand, prioritizes the content of the Law that requires Israel to do justice to the widow, the resident alien, and the orphan.

Chapter 5: James Cone on the Incarnation

Cone’s Black Liberationist Christology

The mission of the Incarnation in Black Liberationist Christology is that “God became man in Jesus Christ that the poor might have the gospel preached to them; that the poor might have the kingdom of God (Luke 6:20); that those who hunger might be satisfied; that those who weep might laugh”\textsuperscript{131} The work of Christ manumits human beings from alienating faiths such as racism and economic inequality so that humankind can wage war against satanic forces.\textsuperscript{132} Christ sets free both the oppressed as well as those responsible for their oppression, and gives free men the burden of liberty to fight for freedom. Because God chose Christ Jesus as the Oppressed One, God has also chosen black people in a white racist society. “Thinking of Christ as nonblack in the twentieth century is as theologically impossible as thinking of him as non-Jewish in the first century. God’s Word in Christ not only fulfills his purposes for man through his elected people, but also inaugurates a new age in which all oppressed people become his

\textsuperscript{131} Cone, \textit{Black Theology and Black Power}, 45.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 39.
people.”¹³³ Christ in Black Liberationist Christology is only known through black oppression for suffering is the lens in which blacks encounter God.¹³⁴

The beginning and end of James Hal Cone’s theology is Jesus Christ. The task of the Black Liberation theologian, according to Cone, is to relate the Good News to Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and Gabriel Prosser.¹³⁵ The Messiah in Black Liberation theology is revealed as the Oppressed One who is born in poverty because of “the Holy One’s concern for the lonely and downtrodden.”¹³⁶ The temptation of Jesus is his rejection of oppressive, self-glorifying power, while in his ministry, Jesus exclusively fellowships with the helpless and the sinners. At the cross, Christ conquers death in protest. The blackness of Christ as a theological symbol means that he has chosen to take up the cause of the oppressed; at the Incarnation, God discloses what blackness is, that divinity and humanity should reside in liberation from oppression.¹³⁷

There are a few significant differences in the doctrines of Incarnation in Clement’s and Cone’s theology. Cone’s teaching seems to suggest that the Incarnation was a once and for all event in the past as modification in how God operates. As mentioned above, Clement believed that the Incarnation was an eternal event with neither beginning or end; therefore, it is a divine mystery rather than a form of disclosure. Both Clement and Cone do interpret the Incarnation as an occurrence in history whereby the Lord limits Godself by becoming a servant. Although neither theologian uses this terminology, Clement and Cone are articulating the Christian

¹³³ Ibid., 69.
¹³⁴ Ibid., 120.
¹³⁵ Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 110.
¹³⁶ Ibid., 114.
¹³⁷ Ibid., 121.
teaching of divine kenosis whereby God goes through humiliation in order to save humanity.\textsuperscript{138} The Wholly Other creates negative space within Godself to make room for human other.

\textit{Christian Blackness as Divinization}

Just as Clement of Alexandria suffers much scrutiny for his use of the term “Gnostic” in his writings to describe Christians aspiring towards perfection, so too does James Hal Cone receive much criticism for his theological reconstruction of blackness\textsuperscript{139}. Blackness in Black Liberation Theology is not a race or ethnicity; blackness is a predisposition of the human heart, mind, body and soul towards wherever the disenfranchised and wounded of the world are.\textsuperscript{140} So whenever Cone is discussing either the blackness of God, Christ, or the Church, he is talking, for the most part, about a condition. “The blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition God’s own condition.”\textsuperscript{141} While Cone admits that there is no perfect guide for perceiving God’s activity in the world, Cone is certain that God is always on the side of the oppressed.\textsuperscript{142} Being black and a theologian in the United States means one thing: “to be black is to be committed to destroying everything this country loves and adores. Creativity and passion are possible when one stands where the black person stands, the one who has visions of the future because the present is unbearable. And the black person will cling to that future as a

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\textsuperscript{139}It is beyond the purview of this thesis to add to the commentary about Cone’s notion of blackness. My concern here is not Cone’s philosophical ground or his views on race; rather, my interest is the functionality of blackness as it relates to divine and interhuman transcendence. For extensive studies on ontological blackness cf. Victor Anderson. \textit{Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay in African American Religious and Cultural Criticism}. (New York: Continuum, 1999) as well as “Theologizing Race: James H. Cone, Liberation, and the Theological Meaning of Blackness” in J. Kameron Carter. \textit{Race: A Theological Account}. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
\textsuperscript{140} Cone. \textit{Black Theology and Black Power}, 151.
\textsuperscript{141} Cone. \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}, 63.
\textsuperscript{142} \textit{Ibid.}, 7;12.
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means of passionately rejecting the present.” 143 The black person is everything that the white society is not; by virtue of being a member of the ranks of the marginalized, black persons are most readily partaking in transcendence.

The blackness of Jesus has to be considered in our readings of the New Testament in Black Liberation theology. 144 Jesus’s importance as a theological symbol hinges upon his presence today that is at work with the oppressed. Cone’s goal in Black Theology and Black Power was to articulate a position where Christ was present, working among the subjugated fulfilling the promise to always to be with us, even in the form of the late 1960’s Black Power movement. 145 The “redeemed black man,” as a “new creature,” is accepted as a black self and as a creature of God. 146 Conversion to blackness looks like people recognizing the events happening around them, such as the black revolution, as the kingdom of God. 147 The reign of God is an event reserved for blacks that has to do with the quality of one’s existence in which a person realizes that persons are more important than property.” 148 The Body of Christ is marked by its participation in the historical processes of liberation which are initiated by God. 149 The presence of Jesus is holy because Jesus is black, since black is a symbol of God’s presence in history on behalf of the oppressed human being. The Church joins Christ in Christ’s holiness by suffering in behalf of the cause of justice for the poor. 150 The concrete evidence that the Church is involved in the life of God is the fact that it accepts its call to suffer. 151

143 Ibid., 20.
144 Ibid., 120.
145 Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 48.
146 Ibid., 53.
147 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 125.
148 Ibid., 124.
149 Ibid., 130.
150 Ibid., 69.
151 Ibid., 65.
Divinization in the theology of Clement of Alexandria means that an individual escapes through meditation so that her mental faculties are dwelling in a realm beyond the boundaries of this world. Personal separation and isolation from the world are the basis for Clement’s doctrine of theosis. It is about achieving mystical experiences in the presence of God without neighbor or ritual. James Cone’s doctrine of theological blackness means a confrontation with the world and an engagement society. Cone speaks of both individual persons and ecclesial structures suffering and participating in the life of Christ in his struggle to defeat evil in today’s world. In living in solidarity with the oppressed, the Church and the individual are assimilated into the Image of God.

James Cone’s Black Liberation theology is not without its problems. As the first theological project that systematically construed of a divinity that was both completely other and anti-racist in an racist society, Cone’s experiment falls short of overcoming the doctrinal Orientalism, i.e., the racial binaries are in place. My problem with Cone’s Black liberation theology is that the ethical implications of fully following Cone’s diagnosis is to adopt what J. Kameron Carter calls an “ontology of separateness.” I see the root of the problem in Cone’s doctrine of election, where God’s transcendence is redefined as YHWH taking up the condition of the oppressed for the purpose of being only in their presence. If God’s election of Israel means that God loves the enslaved but not the enslaver, how can God be love? This is the reasoning behind Cone’s call for black people to withdraw from American society and form their own culture apart from their neighbors and their enemies. The danger that underlies Cone’s redefinition of God’s Otherness is that Black liberation theologians risk encapsulating the divine

153 Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 64.
154 Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 18.
in our cultural milieu without having to search for God’s presence elsewhere, and thus re-inscribing the very hegemony Cone was protesting.

The other problem with Cone’s approach is that like Clement of Alexandria is often accused of, Cone’s theology sounds more like a full collaboration of Christian revelation and a philosophy foreign to Scripture: in Clement’s case, it was Middle Platonism and for Cone, it is the US American ideal of self-determination. Self-determination, as a concept rooted in particular concepts of the self and the Other, means the entry and affirmation of modernity with its racial binaries as we present ourselves as the masters of our own fates.\(^{155}\) The thought that one individual can exist without the other is at the heart of oppressive societies where persons exist in Thou-It relationships. The Other, in relation to the self in these societies, is often viewed as an object to overcome rather than a person to exist in dialogue with. To the extent that Black Liberation theologians reproduce the false myth of self-determination, we fail to combat the racism that we want to overcome.

**Chapter 6: Conclusion**

*A Womanist Critique of Clement and Cone*

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that theologies of divine and human Otherness are mutually linked. Clement’s and Cone’s theologies of transcendence have potential repercussions for theological anthropologies as well as human ethic responses. The challenge of Womanist God-talk problematizes some of the theological positions held by James Hal Cone and Clement of Alexandria. For starters, there are a number of issues in Cone’s and Clement’s understandings of Moses and the story of Israel that are left to be desired. Moses is given the office of general by Clement, and so logically, every general is charged with an army to maintain and an enemy to

conquer. Clement, because of his narrow focus on Moses’s role in the Exodus narrative, avoids discussion of the movement of Moses’s army (the Israelites in the wilderness) or the nations that Israel goes to battle with. Instead, Clement concentrates on an allegorical interpretation of the drowning of the Egyptians. James Cone’s narrative understanding of the Exodus/Sinai event gives us much difficulty as well. Cone’s version of Israel’s story depicts YHWH as having a unique and exclusive relationship with Israel for that makes God look like a jealous, controlling husband. “The righteousness of God means that he will protect her [Israel] from the ungodly menacing of other nations.”

The exclusive male-centered nature of Cone’s and Clement’s interpretation of the Exodus story circumvents any discussion concerning the fate of the Canaanites, the Egyptians, or the people of Jericho. Womanist theologian Delores Williams recommends that rather than viewing the Exodus as an event, religious communities should read it as a wholistic story. Cone’s understanding of the Exodus/Sinai event is directly related to his view of the self and Other; the Other (whites) are overcome in his Black Liberation model so it is unnecessary to deal with the elements in Scripture which contradict his metanarrative of liberation. Clement overlooks the experiences of these people groups because all that matters to him in his interpretation of the life of Moses is the appearance of the Logos; the Logos, and therefore the One who sends it, does not have any one to be concerned with except for Moses. Clement of Alexandria’s telling of Israel’s story excludes the women who hid Moses as well as Miriam whom the prophets call a prophetess and a leader (cf. Exodus 15: 20 & Micah 6:4).

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156 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 44.
Lastly, one must ask Clement of Alexandria, “Are the fruits of assimilation universal?” In other words, are the ethical recommendations for those who desire spiritual perfection that Clement gives in his *The Carpets* and *The Educator* universally applicable? For example, Clement suggested that rather than wearing expensive jewelry and clothes, women should wear the holy ornament of generous giving of their possessions, for whoever gives to the beggars gives to God according to Proverbs. Earrings are not necessary because they prevent women from hearing the Word of God. Yet, we live in a day and age where popular male athletes and celebrities wear earrings as well. One would hope that if Clement were living today, that he would give the same advice to both men and women.

In a similar fashion, one must ask James Cone, given the multiple locations of human identity (race, gender, class, religious, etc), whether or not all conversions to blackness yield essentially the same result: a person who revolts against society and separates themselves apart from the larger community? Are there not some contexts where disengagements from social relationships are warranted such as situations in domestic violence? There is more than one option in the struggle for liberation because liberation changes meaning in various contexts. In an environment where domestic abuse is happening, liberation cannot be, as James Cone argues, a matter of suffering servitude. While I am sure that Cone would agree that liberation takes on many faces, reducing liberationist ethics to solely a theological ethics of the Crucifixion events needs to be reassessed in light of human differences.

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To conclude this thesis, I would like to offer a possible general outline for a postcolonial covenantal doctrine of transcendence. By covenantal, I mean a Christian theology of Israel where the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds shed light on the mystery of the YHWH’s Otherness. It depends on a dialogical framework with Christ at the center, who both as Creator and creature stands on both sides of the covenant (as the God of Promise as well as the recipient of the promise). This view would be analogous to Clement of Alexandria’s insight into the covenantal nature of God. On the interpretation of Genesis 17:4, “Moses clearly means the Lord when he speaks of a covenant, saying, ‘Look, I am my covenant at your side.’ He had said ‘covenant earlier, adding that he should not search for it in writing. The covenant is the originator of the universe, who establishes its orderly disposition, and is called God because of its good order.”

We must come to understand the Triune God’s transcendence in light of the mystery of the Incarnation expressed in the Nicene-Chalcedonian creeds within the theological frameworks recorded in the First Testament. God, who is fundamentally covenantal, lives in special and distinct relationships with all of creation. Christians live under a covenant which starts with the promise of Abraham which is then fulfilled by the Seed of Abraham (cf. Galatians 3:16). In the Incarnation of the Word and Wisdom of God, human beings are confronted in awe with both the mysteries of God’s being and human being. It is by assimilating into the transcendence of Christ’s divinity and humanity that the Church must interrogate essentialist commentaries concerning race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status.

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