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Source: *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Summer 2019, Vol. 48, No. 4 (192), SPECIAL ISSUE: Black-Palestinian Transnational Solidarity (Summer 2019), pp. 33-51

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26873234

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Troubling Idols: Black-Palestinian Solidarity in U.S. Afro-Christian Spaces

TAUREAN J. WEBB

This article claims that insofar as they continue to omit analyses of colonialism and racialization, retellings of the biblical Exodus and of twentieth-century Black-Jewish relations—two massively significant narratives in the U.S. Black Christian imaginary—will inevitably continue to fuel the Zionist impulse that prevents much of Afro-Christianity from intentionally engaging Palestinian justice. Furthermore, the religious trope of chosenness, along with the dominant narration of the European Jewish Holocaust moment, have provided a politico-ethical basis for a unique type of dispensation that filters the two aforementioned retellings to ultimately deselect non-Jewish Palestinians from a recognizably complex humanity. The tools of the Black radical tradition, however, coupled with a reimagining of coalitional politics, carve out a radical Black Christian sensibility that is best equipped to speak to the devastations of military occupation and racist exclusion and forge life-giving relationships within the freedom struggles against them.

In February 2015, several Black Christian pastors held a news conference in response to select U.S. Congressional Black Caucus members' decision to boycott the upcoming speech of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Capitol Hill. Pastor Harvey Burnett found it "deplorable that . . . our nation's black leaders would call the Congressional Black Caucus, whose members were elected by the public, to snub our greatest ally in the war against terrorists."[1] Pastor Dexter D. Sanders called the boycott "a slap in the face to the people of Israel, and not only that, it's a slap in the face to God. And not only that, it's a slap in the face of all Bible-believing African-American people in this country."[2] Pastor Carlton Smith noted that "[American Jews] stood and marched with us in our struggle then, and we must stand with them in the face of their enemy now."[3] These proclamations typify much of U.S. Black Protestant Christian sentiment, cross-denominationally, regarding Israel: tethering the erroneous "biblical Israel/political Israel" conflation to "retellings" of racialized histories and caricatures of extremist Arab terrorism. By extension, these tropes implicate the ways in which Palestine is conjured in the Black Christian imaginary.[4]

Until now, much scholarship on Black engagement with Palestinian justice has primarily been situated within ostensibly secular or Muslim frames of analysis. A more substantive engagement with theological questions or religious institutions—most particularly the Black

Journal of Palestine Studies Vol. XLVIII, No. 4 (Summer 2019), p. 33, ISSN: 0377-919X; electronic ISSN: 1533-8614. © 2019 by the Institute for Palestine Studies. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2019.48.4.33.

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Christian church—has been sorely lacking. This article seeks to address this lacuna by contributing to a burgeoning body of contemporary Black-Palestinian solidarity scholarship and considering a critical site that is rarely discussed yet remains a major battleground for the solidarity movement—Afro-Christianity in the United States. To be clear, instead of considering *all* of Afro-Christianity/the Black church—a modifier already attempting to capture something much more heterogenous—I am using such terms to reference Black Protestant leaders, across denominations, who used national platforms to circulate ideas. I also signal new ways to imagine coalitional politics less bound with organizing around vaguely common interests and more grounded in building ethical, trusting, and sustainable relationships.

This article argues that two culturally significant mythic epochs that are conjoined in the Black Christian imaginary as utopian horizons—namely retellings of the biblical Exodus moment and of twentieth-century Black-Jewish relations[5]—continue to omit analyses of colonialism and racialization; it further contends that those omissions will inevitably fuel the Zionist impulse that prevents many Black Christians from engaging Palestine justice. However, the intellectual and activist tools offered by Black radical thought, coupled with a reimagining of coalitional politics, begin to carve out a radical Black Christian sensibility that is equipped to speak directly to the military occupation of Palestine and to forge life-giving relationships within the freedom struggles against that occupation.

To accomplish this, I map out several things: first, I survey some of the ways in which the Exodus narrative is considered in currently existing scholarship and situate my own understanding thereof—that is, a narrative in the Black Protestant lexicon that tends to elide an analysis of colonialism—within that discourse. I also consider how the twentieth-century Black-Jewish relationship circulates within and for the purposes of mainstream religious and political discourses. Second, I examine how, in their omissions of colonialism and race, these two invocations facilitate the process whereby Palestine transitions from being decentered in a Black Christian utopian vision to centralized in a dystopian one. The third section raises intersectionality as a useful analytic in the present-day U.S. Black-Palestinian movement. And the final section begins to reimagine a Black Christian engagement with justice in Palestine that reclaims the ingenuity of the Black radical tradition.

Hermeneutics of Histories

Histories are interesting, especially for those curious about their utility and function in the popular mainstream. Often, the lingering questions that attend somewhere in the periphery are most interesting: What is included within the narrative scope? What is excluded from it? And what is the utility of deploying certain "histories" over others?[6]

A moment that looms large in the Afro-Christian imaginary is the "biblical Exodus," the mythic moment in which the prophet Moses leads the Israelites, a cadre of Semitic ethno-linguistic tribes in the ancient Near East, out of Egyptian captivity. Importantly, this topic has garnered much scholarly attention from a range of ethnic and religious points of departure. Speaking from a Black idiom, Eddie S. Glaude Jr.'s *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* understands this narrative's significance as metaphorically framing Black collective consciousness around slavery, the middle passage, and racial segregation,

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as well as an emerging concept of Black nation building. For Glaude, this metaphor is distinct because of its invitation to nation building as a divinely sanctioned, moral project. In opposition to eras past, when Black religion and secular Black radicalism collaborated to envision Black nation-building's legibility as a project read *alongside* religion, Glaude's formulation understands nation building precisely *through* the precepts of Christianity.[7] Not only did much of the Black community recognize itself in the Exodus story, but eventually, according to Glaude, it came to inscribe its racial struggles within the institution of the church, formulating its citizenship aspirations as divinely sanctioned ends. "The idea of the 'black community' involved," Glaude says, "the sense of the sacred that consolidated national sentiment."[8]

Though important, Glaude's intervention inadequately engages the voices of Black women and queer folks—voices that must be engaged to responsibly lay claim to the expanse of the Exodus' reach. Black lesbian feminist scholar Rev. Irene Monroe argues that "in carving a racial essentialist or black nationalist identity with the Exodus narrative, African Americans have done it at the expense of leaving their bodies and sexualities behind."[9] Further, insofar as Monroe considers the Exodus an iconic "framer of a black world order," she also recognizes the limitations of its deployment through what she calls "the endangered black male" perspective, wherein Moses becomes the heteronormative linchpin of a tale that has valorized Black messianic male leadership within the historic Black church.[10] Escape from such limitations, for Monroe, only comes when framing the Exodus as a type of "coming out" story, specifically using such language, and articulating that nuanced gender and sexuality representations have colored Black experience since the earliest days of African presence in the Americas.

This *stealing away* from bondage to freedom has been paramount to the U.S.-based African American freedom struggle since the "peculiar institution" (chattel enslavement) began. And it has lasted, as few others have, through every major historical epoch of Black history. In his text, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, Eugene Genovese gives voice to this meaning making:

> The slaves did not draw a sharp line between [Jesus and Moses] but merged them into the image of a single deliverer, at once this-worldly and otherworldly. Colonel Higginson said that their heads held a jumble of Jewish biblical history and that they associated Moses with all the great historical events, including the most recent. . . . The image of Moses, the this-worldly leader of his people out of bondage, and Jesus, the otherworldly Redeemer, blended into a pervasive theme of deliverance.[11]

The Exodus motif, more than a mere story, was a rhetorical device used to contextualize, inspire, instruct, and sustain many Black Christians over their long path toward equality. In a May 1956 sermon commemorating the second anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Martin Luther King Jr. invoked the trope to which he would return time and again: "Many years ago," King noted, "the Negro was thrown into the Egypt of segregation . . . the closed Red Sea always stood before him with discouraging dimensions. There were always those Pharaohs with hardened hearts, who, despite the cries of many a Moses, refused to let these people go."[12] He went on to name the 1954 victory as a moment in which the "forces of justice marched through to the other side."[13] In King's retelling, Black folks were God's chosen people, racial oppression was their Egypt, and a utopian horizon of racial integration was their Promised Land. The Exodus provided

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great meaning about religious logics (God leading God's people into the Promised Land) and political efficacy (the State of Israel now established, many Black Americans appreciated this sovereignty as a manifestation of Jewish self-determination, extending from the Exodus).

But the narrative elides the analysis of colonialism necessary to make it a truly liberatory paradigm—one that could have more strongly established Black Christians as allies of international liberationist movements. To be clear, the Black Protestant leadership with national platforms in the mid-twentieth century United States, King included, generally did not intend to align with global liberationist efforts if that alignment compromised their domestic accommodationist position (something that remains true today). Regarding King in particular, this argument might seem to run counter to his outspokenness against the Vietnam War. Certainly, for many years of his professional career, King espoused a global consciousness, linking anti-colonial struggles to the domestic Black freedom movement. Justice in Palestine-Israel, however, challenged him in ways that other ethical dilemmas simply did not—and precisely because speaking against Israeli violence would put him in a precarious political position.

After King and his wife, Coretta, took a brief trip to the West Bank and East Jerusalem in 1959—being made thoroughly aware of the extent of Palestinian suffering—King knew he needed to walk a tightrope between maintaining integrity as a peace advocate, on the one hand, and not alienating his Jewish support base, on the other. Federal Bureau of Investigation records point to several calls between King and his close aide, Stanley Levison, during the 1960s. In an 8 June 1967 call between King, Levison, an adviser named Harry Wachtel, and King's executive assistant, Andrew Young, King worried that a recent *New York Times* statement supporting Israel, which he signed, "contradicted his policy of non-violence."[14] In another call just three days later—the day after the ceasefire that ended the 1967 war in which Israel seized the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights—"King [was] concerned over the smug attitude of Israel since her victory."[15] Going forward, his advisors recommended, King should keep his public remarks about the region general. Consistent with this counsel, as Michael R. Fischbach notes, King pursued a two-pronged approach: first, he always advocated Israel's right to exist; and second, he advocated the importance of peaceful, democratic solutions to relieve Arab-Israeli tensions.[16] Stated plainly, King's explicit public pronouncements were about Israeli human rights via Israel's right to exist and the utility of democracy as a curious proxy to ensure the respect of Palestinian dignity.[17] This posturing largely had to do with King protecting his integrity as a moral authority and also the domestic cachet of his integrationist agenda.

Oftentimes, the Exodus is framed as instructional to communities under siege hoping to win entrance into a "promised" place. However, entry into promised places never comes without conquest and the displacement of the communities that already inhabit them. Insofar as the Exodus has operated as a rhetorical device—albeit a very meaningful one—it has also justified tangibly experienced dispossessions of communities. Michael Prior's text, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique*, says:

> If people were not deprived of engagement with the second half of the Exodus paradigm, they would not escape morally unscathed from their communal encounter with the whole biblical paradigm. . . . Combining the Exodus from Egypt with the Eisodus into the land of the

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> Canaanites . . . as the narrative requires, the biblical paradigm would more appropriately justify the behavior of *conquistadores*. . . .
>
> Without the spur of entering into the land of promise, the Israelites of the narrative would have languished in the desert, and would certainly have preferred reverting to the more tolerable life in Egypt. It is the entrance (Eisodus) into the land of milk and honey which is presented as keeping their hope alive.[18]

As Prior points out, it is not the transition *out of bondage* that establishes hope; it is instead the transition *into the Promised Land* that makes joy complete. In a way, this point is taken up in dialogue between the Jewish and Palestinian scholars Michael Walzer and Edward Said. Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution* posits the Exodus as a blueprint for revolutionary politics that has undergirded political activity in the West because of its centrality in the Jewish and Christian lexicons. For Walzer, the Exodus was the first articulation of revolutionary politics: this linear movement from oppression to liberation, social contract, resolution, and finally, an end that is utterly new, yet intimated from the beginning.[19] To Said, Walzer's account of the Exodus belies historical fact and deploys the rhetoric of contemporary liberationist movements to read backwards onto the Old Testament, highlighting certain aspects of that narrative and minimizing (very violent) others. "The most troubling," Said notes, "is of course the injunction laid on the Jews by God to exterminate their opponents." He continues, "[Walzer] cuts out from consideration of all of the material in Numbers and Leviticus (extensions of Exodus) in which we find Yahweh urging revoltingly detailed punishments for offenders against His Law."[20]

An important counterpoint here is that for some, the hope of the Exodus is not necessarily the promise of coming into newness, but the fact that God sustained the manumitted captives in the wilderness, after leaving Egypt, for decades. For the oppressed, the Exodus is also about God's faithfulness during the journey. That notwithstanding, a hallmark of Black Christian religious experience is to recast a negative situation into some hopeful resolution, which is to say that many times when this God of the journey is invoked, the capstone ultimately turns back toward the promise for something greater, a territory inhabited or enlarged.

Coming from the theological womanist tradition—an intellectual movement that inflects Black feminism and secular womanism, theologically—Kelly Brown Douglas suggests the importance of recognizing that different traditions interpret the Exodus story differently; whereas for Black Christianity, the linchpin is belief in a God of freedom, for others, this same text is a story of annihilation.[21] Pioneering Christian womanist scholar Delores Williams helpfully suggests that Black scholars and leaders should take care to frame the Exodus as a holistic series of moments, rather than a singular event, so that Black communities will understand "the awful models of God projected when the community and theologians use the Bible so that only Israel's or the Hebrews' understanding of God becomes normative."[22] Williams adds that insofar as Black theology seeks to take seriously its own bias against Black women, it must "assume an additional hermeneutical posture—one that allows [it] to become conscious of what has been made invisible in the text and to see that their work is in collusion with this 'invisibilization' of Black women's experience."[23]

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Still, many Afro-Christians continue to impose the Exodus, metaphorically, on the Black freedom struggle, and/or interpret it literally, to conflate the "ancient Israelites" with contemporary Israeli Jews physically having the right to inhabit a place that God has allegedly promised.[24] In this way, many Afro-Christian Protestant communities are profoundly Zionist, as highlighted in our opening scene. My own interpretation of the Exodus stands within a cadre of scholars who recognize its value for Black Christian self-identification and freedom making, and also recognize the ways in which failure to come to terms with the holistic story compromises the integrity of that freedom making. Understanding the elisions sheds light on the meaning making that undergirds much Black Christian aversion, or at best, skepticism, toward Palestine justice movement building.

Although Black deployment of the Exodus narrative certainly predates the modern civil rights era, it helped establish affinity with another plotline within the movement: the unwavering march of U.S. Jews alongside Black Americans for civil rights. The 25 November 1970 edition of the daily bulletin of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) covered an address Rev. Ralph Abernathy—then-president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—had given the previous day at Toronto's Holy Blossom Temple. Per JTA coverage, "During the early years of the American civil rights movement, he said, Jews and blacks had been close allies and that relationship continued today despite those detractors who would turn the two groups against each other. . . . 'Blacks should not forget that Jews are our closest allies,' concluded Reverend Abernathy."[25] In significant ways, this rhetoric reverberates deeply in the present. Israeli ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer exemplified this in a Sunday speech that he offered at the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia—the iconic church pastored by several generations of King men, including Dr. King—in the wake of the 13 November 2015 Paris attacks. The seemingly coordinated attacks, for which the international jihadist group Daesh (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant [ISIL]) claimed responsibility, killed upwards of one hundred people. Dermer opened his speech saying, "In the shadow of the heinous attacks in Paris, we meet in a church that taught the world the meaning of the words 'we shall overcome.'"[26] He then went on to note, "I can think of few places more appropriate to stand in solidarity with the victims of terror and to tell all those fanatics who want us to live in fear: We shall overcome. We shall overcome. We shall overcome."[27]

Dermer followed with a stirring address, invoking biblical prophets and Christian teachings, culminating with, "It's not surprising that Jews felt at home in the civil rights movement." And then again, "Jews shared in the triumphs. They locked arms with Dr. King to cross a bridge in Selma and stood with him by the feet of Lincoln."[28] Here, Dermer's rhetorical move links the two cultural groups in the recent past, while the following tethers their more distant pasts: "Like African Americans," the ambassador went on, "the seminal event in the life of the Jewish people was our journey from bondage to freedom . . . but just as slavery is not the sum total of the oppression and injustice faced by African Americans, the Holocaust is not the sum total of the oppression and injustice faced by the Jewish people."[29]

While certain individual U.S. Jews and Jewish collectives indeed joined the Black struggle in important ways—traveling from near and far to march alongside Black activists, advocating Black rights, inviting certain Black leaders to speak in their synagogues, or financially contributing to Black organizations—it is also the case that many of these Black-Jewish relationships did not have the depth or longevity that presently invoked retellings, including Dermer's own, suggest.

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Historically, there was a vehemently drawn fault line between several Black organizations (particularly as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee [SNCC] turned more stridently toward its own internationalism) and their liberal Jewish allies, sparked by SNCC publishing its August 1967 newsletter condemning the Israeli imperialist violence of the 1967 war and the Zionist project more broadly.[30]

Furthermore, much of the relationship between Black Americans and American Jews during the civil rights heyday had significantly to do with the two groups' respective and related experiences with anti-Black racism and anti-Semitism, and with their residential proximity. In U.S. urban centers, Blacks and Jews lived in close proximity, making coalitional optics much easier to embody. When suburbanization hit the United States with force in the 1950s and 1960s, American Jews were, many times, the first to evacuate these cities in ways that many Black Americans could not.[31] This flight, and its ripple effects, was profoundly racialized. In a 1967 *New York Times* essay titled "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," James Baldwin articulates how he, and other poor Blacks living in Harlem, related to Jewish immigrants, paying keen attention to the reality of anti-Black racism many Jews imbibed as a part of their Americanization process. He notes:

> It is bitter to watch the Jewish storekeeper locking up his store for the night, and going home. Going, with *your* money in his pocket, to a clean neighborhood, miles from you, which you will not be allowed to enter. Nor can it help the relationship because most Negroes and most Jews when part of this money is donated to civil rights. . . . this money can be looked on as conscience money merely, as money given to keep the Negro happy in his place, and out of white neighborhoods.[32]

Baldwin is signaling a U.S. cultural phenomenon that allowed Jewish immigrants, among others, access to white American racial identity in ways that had been previously inaccessible. The trade-off was their relinquishing parts of their ethno-cultural specificity—language, custom, garments, accent, and so forth—and taking up the mantle of Americanness vis-à-vis racial whiteness. In her text *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America*, Karen Brodkin discusses her family's journey through the mid-century United States. "Although my parents' Jewishness was formed in a community context organized to cope with the times when Jews weren't white," Brodkin notes, "most of my childhood coincided with America's philo-Semitic 1950s . . . where Jews were a wonderful kind of white folks."[33] She goes on to say, "We lived where Jews had not been allowed to live a few generations earlier, and we interacted easily with people whose families had been white for a very long time. So while my parents taught me their Jewishness-as-not-quite-white, they also wanted their family to adjust to Jews' new postwar, racially white place."[34]

For Black folks seeking to cozy into the promises of the "American dream," eliding the ways in which race making and class mobility—particularly through the process by which Jews were granted access into whiteness—created a power imbalance, maintaining the mirage of such a tight-knit relationship made sense. But Baldwin and others, who made no mistake about the relationship, recognized the ways in which U.S. Jews constituted an important base for the U.S. white supremacist power structure. Although his *Times* essay reveals that Baldwin might not have fully grasped the pervasiveness of White Protestant racism against Jews, his identifying the subtleties of Jewish anti-Black racism is insightful. And as SNCC discovered, Palestinian rights was the

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premier topic looming in the background, ever threatening to dismember the Black-Jewish coalition, because of the immediacy with which it brought questions of settler colonialism and Jewish anti-Arab racism to the fore.

Culturally significant group histories are always invoked *for* the political present and deployed so that they might gesture toward some imagined future(s). Offering what he calls "anticolonial stories," David Scott notes that these are often cast as romance, a characteristic narrative form that has unique storytelling potential. "Anticolonial stories about past, present and future," Scott writes, "have tended to be narratives of overcoming, often narratives of vindication . . . to tell stories of salvation and redemption. They have largely depended upon a certain (utopian) horizon toward which the emancipationist history is imagined to be moving."[35] For Scott, then, what is called into question—and what we must likewise question—is the matter of "futures." In other words, since the problem of narrating histories is inextricably bound with the limitations of selecting *certain* histories at the expense of others to be deployed in the present, in order to gesture toward some utopian future, we must question the usability of the futures that these narrations call forth.

While I certainly would not consider the Exodus and Black-Jewish narrations anti-colonial, Scott's romance analytic is useful as we interrogate the integrity and feasibility of utopian vision casting. At its best, the future to which King and other civil rights architects aspired envisioned a horizon of equitable power distribution between racial groups and believed in the promises of the democratic project; ultimately, however, the vision offered Black folks little more than second-class citizenship and was strikingly similar to the assimilationist, utopian future to which Black-Jewish coalitional logics aspired. But insofar as the racially utopian, multicultural horizons of the mid-century were unviable then, those same horizons are likely even more so now. Because analyses of race, racism, and colonialism are left out of the retellings of these mythic histories (and to the degree that they *are* taken up vis-à-vis Blackness and the Black freedom struggle, they are decentered), so too is a fundamental geopolitical dilemma that rests at the core of these narratives silenced: Palestine.

From Margin to Center: Palestine in Black Christian Utopian and Dystopian Imaginations

Decentered in the Black Christian utopian imagination, Palestine is thus centered in a dystopian one. But merely claiming that this decentering/centering happens through the management of race and colonialism does not account for *how* the process happens or why it is so ingrained in the Black Christian ethos. I consider two phenomena that together offer a theory of *how* and *why* Palestine comes to be moved, in the Black Christian imagination, from the unspoken periphery of a utopian vision to the center of one that must now be disavowed: the idea of "chosenness" and the European Jewish Holocaust[36] as a tactic of racial control.

Bypassing the realities of colonialism that the Exodus invokes allows us also to bypass the Eisodus (this *coming into*) as an act of colonial violence—a violence that is passable only because of this new promised place for God's people. "Chosenness," then, helps centralize anti-Palestine sentiment within the Black Christian imagination insofar as non-Jews (Palestinian Arabs being the ultimate antithesis) are sloppily coded as Muslim and therefore codified as "un-chosen."

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Similarly, taking race and colonialism seriously in Black-Jewish relations would invite critical analysis of how the European Jewish Holocaust functions rhetorically to control the parameters of racialized theological categories (good and evil, legitimate and illegitimate suffering—that is, suffering worthy of recognition) and also to shape the discursive troping of what the post-World War II Western world understood genocide and terrorism to be, thus centralizing Palestine in the Afro-Christian dystopia.

U.S. chattel slavery remains one of the most systematically heinous happenings of human history and one from which myriad "afterlives" continue to reverberate: massively disproportionate wealth gaps, widening health disparities between racial groups, and public education outcomes that gesture back to postbellum social caste. These are a few of many. During enslavement, there was no domain of Black life into which white authority could not intervene. Afro-Christian religion, then, served as counterculture, existing as a space of respite and instruction on how to resist white supremacy. Religion was never uncomplicated, however, and it was certainly deployed as a tool of coercion by the slave South through the white slaveholding class and Black bonds- and freed-persons alike. But its liberative utilities are a historical reality that cannot be denied.

An important meaning-making vehicle within this Afro-Christian counterculture was the idea of "chosenness"—that there is a *people*, beloved and *chosen* by God to complete "God's purpose." In Christian scripture, Paul—famed for internationalizing Christianity, ensuring its intellectual coherence, and "universalizing" personal salvation—popularized the Christian notion of (God's) selection (or election). In effect, it is not the goodwill or ill will of persons that leads to God's choosing them for special purposes; instead, God "chooses" them long before they were born. One of the most revered examples of this election is Paul's imagining a moment occurring in Genesis, the first text of the Tanakh/Hebrew Bible/Christian Old Testament. Paul notes:

> It is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. . . . Not only that, but Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.[37]

Paul intended to establish a more egalitarian path toward soul salvation, one that would be available to more than any one bloodline. Abraham covenanted with God. Abraham then begot Isaac (who also covenanted with God). Isaac, with wife Rebekah, begot two sons—the elder, Esau, and his younger brother, Jacob. Typically, in patrilineal society, birthright was available to the eldest son. But Paul notes that in this case, the younger son, Jacob, is the one whom God loved. Importantly, God "loving" one and "hating" the other has less to do with God's personal feelings and more with God *choosing* to bless one man's descendants and reject the other's. Thus, we meet a God who identifies *a chosen*, very much at the expense of an unchosen. And since Jacob's name was later changed, the scripture notes, to "Israel," believers have extrapolated this to mean that Jacob's descendants must be the present-day Jewish inhabitants of Israel and/or that the concept of chosenness/unchosenness ought to be imposed both metaphorically and literally. This commitment of the Christian faith

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considers anything perceived as questioning the divinely ordained coming into the "Promised Land" (read: Israel) by God's "chosen people" (read: Israeli Jews) as an affront to Christian values. Justice in Palestine becomes antithetical to God's plan.

Like the Exodus narration's elision of colonialism, the narration of Black-Jewish relations in the United States tends to elide the ways in which racial caste and power imbalances undergirded coalitional relationships. As accusations of SNCC's anti-Semitism—in response to the organization's 1967 newsletter—established, Palestine looms in the background; but re-narrating the moment retrospectively reveals the European Jewish Holocaust as an important ethical filter through which Palestine is moved to the center of the Black Christian dystopian imaginary, effectively casting it as this "enemy" against which Israeli Jews now stand face-to-face, as our Black pastors signaled in the opening vignette.

It is instructive to consider the European Jewish Holocaust narration as a tactic of racial control—that is, a filter for both phenotypical and theological sites of race making. Simply stated, the exceptionalizing lore of the European Jewish Holocaust moment functions as one of the eminent tools of race making in modern history, particularly in its control of how other histories are permitted to narrate. In this, I follow Michael Rothberg's caution that "memory competition does exist and sometimes overrides other possibilities for thinking about the relation between different histories."[38] While it is the case that the Holocaust narration's reach does span across the global political economy, Palestinian history and memory are the most closely implicated. Returning again to Said, he notes that "for years and years an assiduous campaign to maintain a frozen version of Israel's heroic narrative of repatriation and justice obliterated any possibility of a Palestinian narrative."[39] He continues, "So strong was the story of Jewish independence and reemergence after the Holocaust that it became virtually impossible to ask the question, Liberation and independence from whom?"[40] And also, undoubtedly, "for whom?" Recognizing the high affective and historiographical stakes of my own claim that the Holocaust narrative moment functions as a tactic of racial control, I must note that this article decidedly does not argue that the specifically targeted Nazi genocide against European Jewry never happened or was somehow justified in happening. Instead, I attempt to remain keenly aware of the ways in which histories of violence, gesturing back to Scott, have a way—in their perpetual reinvocation—of reinscribing the type of violent interruption that they claim to push against.

Human rights language gained unrivaled traction in the twentieth century. And the post–World War II milieu that mobilized the global political economy around human rights was structured both in and by racialized logics. Nowhere was this point crystalized more aptly than in the Francophone poet Aimé Césaire's 1950 classic, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (translated into English as *Discourse on Colonialism* in 1972). Césaire boldly highlights that the reason the European Jewish Holocaust carried such massive weight as *the* looming moral outrage of the twentieth century was because Europeans were actively massacring other Europeans. The fact of the matter, for Césaire, was that entire racial-ethnic groups of color—particularly, but not exclusively, Africans—had been massacred for centuries prior.[41] But Black bodies, to the global gaze, were not valuable enough to merit such attention.

To frame the European Jewish Holocaust narration as a tool of racialization, one must foreground an understanding of race in governmentality and colonialism. Barnor Hesse notes,

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"What race/modernity studies have so far neglected, conceptually if not historically, is the formative signifier of *Europeanness*, as a defining logic of race in the process of *colonially* constituting itself and its designations of *non-Europeanness*, materially, discursively, and extra-corporeally."[42] For Hesse, it is this quest to make and mark Europeanness and non-Europeanness that constitutes race making.

"Race" should not be reduced to phenotype. Opposed to both a phenotypical definition of race or a relegation of race to "race thinking"/social construction, understandings of race as *the* mechanism of the process of colonial worldmaking reveal the ways in which practices of dividing humanity function as *doing* race. And this *doing* becomes efficiently codified in several sites, such as land/geopolitics, the human body, and theology; but these are just that—sites of race making, no single one more privileged than another. On this point, Hesse claims that the process of racialization congeals in "a series of onto-colonial taxonomies of land, climate, history, bodies, customs, language," and theologies—"all of which become sedimented metonymically, metaphorically, and normatively as *the assembled attributions of 'race.'*"[43] In his text, *African American Religions, 1500–2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom*, Sylvester Johnson notes that "Hesse demonstrates that racialization is a *governing* formation—it is a process that has structured the *political rule* of Europeans over non-Europeans . . . Hesse is distinctive for explaining race so succinctly as a system of governing through the colonial relation of power."[44]

Viewed through this lens, it is feasible to recognize the European Jewish Holocaust narration(s) as helping shape the taxonomies of mass-scale human suffering, global evil, and, effectively, the storytelling of other ethnocultural histories. To Césaire's point, this shaping work was always demarcating Europeanness and non-Europeanness by virtue of marking what sorts of other human sufferings were foreclosed in the consideration of global "terror" or "genocide." Palestinians, curiously, epitomize that to whom access to these claims [of "terror" or "genocide" survivors] is aggressively barred. A poignant example is the 2016 backlash against the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), from its U.S. Jewish allies, in response to its policy platform's explicit critique of Israel as a genocidal and apartheid state. From the platform's section on reallocating U.S. military expenditures:

> The US justifies and advances the global war on terror via its alliance with Israel and is complicit in the genocide taking place against the Palestinian people. The US requires Israel to use 75 percent of all the military aid it receives to buy US-made arms. . . . The results of this policy are twofold: it not only diverts much needed funding from domestic education and social programs, but it makes US citizens complicit in the abuses committed by the Israeli government. Israel is an apartheid state with over 50 laws on the books that sanction discrimination against the Palestinian people.[45]

Jewish response was swift and scathing. One response notes: "Acting with respect for the movement as a whole also means not ignoring the factually wrong and grossly insensitive nature of the Israel section of the Platform—characterizing Israel as 'an apartheid state' committing 'genocide' against the Palestinian people, and fully embracing the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement without a word about Israel's legitimate right to security or even sovereignty alongside an independent Palestine."[46] This excerpt retrieves a common Jewish critique of the M4BL platform: the inexcusability of using language of "apartheid" and especially "genocide." The language struck such an affective chord in U.S. Jewish circles because of the presumption that no other group of people

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should have access to the terms, and certainly not Palestinians. These narrations define the parameters of what sorts of bodies have legitimate claims to their analytic categories; and in making these determinations, it is governing bodies, making race.

Theologically, narrations of Adolf Hitler's eugenicist project created a crisis of the Christian faith. Christians did not know how to reconcile an omniscient, omnipresent, omnibenevolent God with "allowing" such profound human evil. Also, Christians were now forced to wrestle with their tradition's anti-Jewish commitments and historical acts that participated in "establishing the path that led to Auschwitz," to quote Darrell Fasching.[47] This is especially poignant for supersessionist Christians—believers who claim that the "new covenant" with Jesus supersedes anything prior, thus making Christians, not Jews, God's chosen.

As the post-Holocaust theological crisis snowballed, parts of the Christian tradition began to retract. The 1965 Vatican II document, *Nostra Aetate*, was pioneering. The document communicated that God never revokes God's promises; and therefore, "the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures."[48] Since Vatican II, several official church statements, Catholic and Protestant, have followed. One of the most notable articulates, "In Christ the Church shares in Israel's election without superseding it."[49] For many Black Christians, this type of theological maneuvering tends to track back to caricaturing bodies: instead of the distinction between Israel and Palestine, the distinction is interpreted as between "God's chosen" and Muslims—again participating in the process of colonial worldmaking.

Intersectionality and Renewed Solidarity among the Globally Oppressed

Many in the U.S. racial justice movement understand the 2012 Florida vigilante killing of Black teen Trayvon Martin as the genesis of the moment into which the 2014 Missouri police killing of Michael Brown Jr. fully thrust U.S. communities of color: one that brought them face to face, on a national level, with the reality of the deployment of unmitigated violence against Black and Brown bodies with impunity. These moments are not unique in quality or scale, or in devastating impact on community; nor is extrajudicial violence against bodies of color in the United States some novel phenomenon of the twenty-first century. Nor are African American bodies the only people of color affected by such violence. Instead, these violences, and others like them, put the realities of Black and Brown life under a national microscope in a different way. One collective response has been the rerallying around the utility of activism as a tool of social change.

We have now returned to what Kimberlé Crenshaw popularized as "intersectionality" or intersectional analysis. Notwithstanding the ways in which the term has been appropriated to mean something very different from Crenshaw's original intent—now often representing little more than coalition—intersectionality was originally coined as an analytic to identify how the interrogation of *certain* oppressions actually come to *bury* other oppressions. Specifically, for Crenshaw, the ways in which the Western legal antidiscrimination framework highlights "gender oppression" and "racial oppression" so as to centralize the experiences of *white* women and Black *men*, effectively eliding the uniqueness of Black women's gendered and racialized experience. According to Crenshaw, "Black women are regarded as either too much like women or Blacks

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and the compounded nature of their experience is absorbed into the collective experiences of either group or as too different, in which case Black women's Blackness or femaleness sometimes have placed their needs and perspectives at the margin of the feminist and Black liberationist agendas."[50] Intersectionality's call, then, must not only engage the work of excavating perpetually buried voices, but also interrogate the framework within which those voices are silenced or not acknowledged.

Particularly within the Black-Palestine solidarity movement, raising again a variation on Crenshaw's question—namely, what specific voices and experiences do we continue to bury, regardless of our justice pursuit claims?—leads to an excavation of Palestinian experiences that are too often glossed over in conversations of Black-Jewish alliance. Looking through Crenshaw's lens exposes the mechanics of Palestine's movement from periphery to center. In effect, Crenshaw's intersectionality helps the solidarity movement expose the ruse of Black-Jewish coalition—rhetorically built upon a *shared* history of prior racial discrimination and violence—by invalidating the claim that such a coalition could never be built upon racialized violence perpetuated by either or both victimized groups against others. Intersectionality exposes the ways in which Palestine is buried in the fray.

Unfortunately, our political present mistakenly understands coalition and intersectionality as synonymous and as ends in themselves. In the Black-Palestinian solidarity movement, part of correcting this misread of Crenshaw must mean recognizing the heterogeneity within categories that we often presume to be monolithic, such as "Black" and "Palestinian," and organizing our activism around how this heterogeneity inflects injustice differently. For instance, in what ways, if any, are trans and otherwise non-heteronormative Black and Palestinian persons disproportionately implicated by supremacist violence? This is one question of many that expose which lives are marginalized even within justice spaces. In her article "The Rules of Forced Engagement: Race, Gender, and the Culture of Fear among Arab Immigrants in San Francisco Post-9/11," Nadine Naber offers a tangible example of what she identifies as "the intersecting axes of oppression through which anti-Arab racism is structured."[51] Naber recounts two separate scenes in which research participants noted an Arab woman and an Arab girl being publicly and derogatorily chided as "Osama bin Laden's wife" and "Osama's daughter."[52] In the former instance, the added threat, "Come here, I want to rape you," was hurled at the Arab woman research participant.[53] Of these scenes, Naber notes that "hegemonic discourses represented the act or gesture of veiling in particular to [sic] parameters of identification that transformed them into daughters or sisters of terrorists in general, or Osama or Saddam in particular, thus reproducing discourses on Arab women's passivity vis-à-vis Arab male violence and misogyny."[54] Part of what these moments reveal is the unavoidable fact that persons occupy various, and oftentimes disproportionate, positions of vulnerability. Failure to ask the types of questions that expose that disproportionality makes it easier to default to the tokenizing superficiality of cross-struggle justice movement building and ignore the ways in which oppression is not homogenous.

Part of the subterfuge of multiculturalism is that tokenizing becomes passable so long as the optics of diversity are satisfied. And herein lies the danger in the swelling "interfaith" movement that attempts to understand Christian-Jewish joint work *as necessarily* anti-racist solidarity. It is

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within this opening that Christian Right and American Jewish faith communities have launched very targeted campaigns to enlist Black American support for Israel.

In 2001, Christians United for Israel (CUFI)—the largest non-Jewish, pro-Israel advocacy organization in the United States—heightened its intervention among Black churches with several "Gatherings of Solidarity with the State of Israel," spearheaded by then-CUFI African American Outreach Coordinator and Black Christian pastor Rev. Michael A. Stevens. In an interview with *The Forward*—a monthly publication geared towards a Jewish American readership—Stevens noted that "the biblical argument is our first and strongest motivation for supporting Israel, but the next motivation should be the joint history."[55] The mission, Stevens said, "is to remind the African-American community about its pro-Zionist core belief, which stems from God's biblical promise to bless those who bless Israel," signaling both the chosenness promise and the Black-Jewish joint struggle myths.[56]

CUFI's founder, Pastor John Hagee, is widely reputed for his evangelical Zionist zeal and incendiary apocalypticism.[57] Working concurrently and collaboratively with CUFI, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC)—the most powerful pro-Israel lobby on Capitol Hill—has also understood the import of bringing on board Afro-Christian communities. AIPAC boasts of Black pastors having traveled to Israel with its charitable affiliate, the American Israel Education Foundation, who then go on to become "important voices in the growing African American pro-Israel community."[58] Also, there is a well-documented history of AIPAC intervention on the campuses of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, institutions that often have strong pipelines into Christian ministry and Black politics. AIPAC identifies student leaders, invites them on funded trips to Capitol Hill, introduces them to national politicians, puts them through pro-Israel "Middle East policy" seminars, and sends them back to their campuses.[59] The logic is this: Black Americans, particularly Black Christians, are able to buffer Israel against critiques of being an apartheid state, and since, presumably, they know firsthand how segregation, discrimination, and apartheid look and feel, they can defend Israel, identifying that it is none of these things. Amid these tactics, the Black-Palestine solidarity movement must continue to carve out deep theory and activism around sustainable and mutually self-determined relationship building.

Black Religion, Black Radicalism

The prophetic Black Church should be understood as a strand within the Afro-Christian Protestant tradition that self-identifies within the ideological tradition of the Hebrew prophets, critiquing social caste as a fundamental commitment of the faith, including both an interpretation of Jesus-as-revolutionary within the Roman Empire and a present-day analysis of race and class. Walter Brueggemann notes the prophet's work as "nothing less than an assault on the consciousness of the empire, aimed at nothing less than the dismantling of the empire both in its social practices and in its mythic pretensions."[60] Importantly, Brueggemann's prophetic imagination is as much about hope and the hopeful promise of newness that arise from the dismantling as it is anything else.[61]

The present political landscape makes it difficult to "critique the State of Israel without eliciting counter-critiques of anti-Semitism. But it is precisely the love for all . . . creation—not the desired

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destruction of a segment of it—that motivates the prophetic Black claim against illegally and militarily occupying, displacing, and devastating entire racial-ethnic groups labeled 'other.'"[62] Two Black Christian leaders who unapologetically advocate Black-Palestine anti-oppression solidarity are the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.—the Chicago pastor persecuted for his critique of U.S. imperial violence—and the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference (SDPC), a predominantly African American faith-based justice NGO.

Reminiscent of the SNCC internationalist tradition of the twentieth century, both Wright and SDPC have been forthright about their sustained commitment to ending Zionist occupation. In the wake of the May 2018 deadly Israeli violence that attended the seventieth anniversary of the Nakba, the SDPC newsletter said:

> [SDPC] stands with our Palestinian partners in the region, in the aftermath of the violence in Gaza that killed upwards of 61 of our Palestinian sisters and brothers. . . . We are asking you to be a vocal reminder of the UN Resolution 63/30 of 2009 that stresses that any actions taken by Israel, the occupying power, to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration on the Holy City of Jerusalem are illegal. We are asking you to use your voice in line with Dr. King's proclamation that an injustice anywhere is a threat to just[ice] everywhere, and that silence is compliance. Finally, family, we are asking you to use your voice because the oppression felt between African-descended and Palestinian-descended communities, over generations, intertwines at various intersections of marginalization and there is strength in our unity.[63]

While SDPC's and Wright's analyses here and elsewhere—that Israeli Zionism is an imperial project of dislocation and devastation—are pioneering and instructive, they can be further built upon and systematized.

The Black prophetic tradition is invoking Black radical thought. Signaled by the SDPC's attempt to carve out a type of transnational "strength in our unity," in effect, they are situating Black American communities *and* race contexts in a continuum of global struggle. To these points, Russell Rickford notes two evolutions of Malcolm X's burgeoning internationalism—an important signpost of Black radicalism. For one, Malcolm "labored to discredit the notion that Africans and African Americans were strangers. The propagation of this myth, he explained, was part of a 'gigantic design' to impede Black transnational cooperation. African Americans were rediscovering ties of affinity with their 'Motherland.'"[64] Rickford goes on to note that a linchpin of Malcolm's new argument was indeed that "no domestic 'race problem' existed. There was only the global crisis of white supremacy. [And] confronting that crisis meant exposing the mechanisms of empire."[65] These points, together, aptly answer the common Black American and Black Christian questioning of the relevance of non-U.S. sociopolitics to domestic concerns.

Furthermore, Afro-Christian communities are prime candidates for sustainable coalitional relationships, as AIPAC understands, but they must be invested in re-imagining coalitional politics. This is to say that the prophetic Black Christian imagination has already begun to think critically about retrieving solidarity politics. For instance, a sustainable commitment to Crenshaw's gender-based intersectionality would expose and begin to undo the heteronormative paternalism that both mainstream *and* prophetic U.S. Afro-Christianity have imbibed since the earliest days of Black Church inculcation of white supremacist thought.

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The reimagining of coalitional politics must be rooted in a deep awareness of each party's interests, goals, and subject positions within the relationship. Too often, the primary motivation for coalition is the appearance of diversity. Identifying interests and goals streamlines access to three critical questions: Is a coalitional relationship, in this case, possible? Does a coalitional relationship make sense? If so, what, for my potential partner, does it mean for me to stand in solidarity? These questions flow from clarity on interests and goals; and recognition of subject position helps partners situate the operative representations of power.

* * *

The Exodus, albeit fundamental for Black American freedom pursuits and collective consciousness building, fails as an authentically liberating paradigm so long as it refuses to account for the in-built dispossession of an entire people. Furthermore, as this narrative continues to serve as a shared one for Black-Jewish coalitional work, such work tends to be romanticized in a way that elides analysis of its own complicity in white supremacist infrastructure. Each of these two sites of meaning making were, and continue to be, filtered through and anchored in the politico-ethical frameworks of the European Jewish Holocaust narration and the Judeo-Christian trope of chosenness, together providing a unique type of dispensation that effectively places the Palestinian Arab outside the register of recognizable humanity in much of Afro-Christian Protestant national rhetoric.

In the end, Afro-Christianity must wrestle, among other things, with the matter of false idols. Stated differently, the realities of dispossession, militarized policing, assaults on places of worship, and disproportionate wartime-like violence made quotidian—indeed, realities of military occupation that are eerily similar to the realities of Black experience in the United States—committed against Palestinians and other persons of color inside all of Palestine, including Israel proper, by the Israeli government, is a critical battleground on which Black U.S. Christians could evaluate and further exercise their faith commitments. Recognition of the ways in which tightly-held cultural narratives no longer serve liberationist aspirations is necessary, even if those narratives are our golden calves.

A question that still remains, in this case, and in every case of potential solidarity work, is "does a coalitional relationship make sense, if it is even possible in the first place?" Part of what it means to authentically grapple with cross-movement solidarity work is acknowledging the fact that, sometimes, coalitions do not make sense: agendas do not converge, or the self-determination of a community is best anchored in insular spaces, for instance. A seduction of the present era of intersectionality cooptation is that working collaboratively is always the sexy thing to do. But in moments when such working is built upon optics and fallow or short-term relationships, partners tend to enter into coalitional spaces not ready to stand in solidarity, taking seriously the mutually legitimate truth of each party. Instead, they tend to enter ready to impose.

My hope is that the urgency of such a moment is not lost. We are still in the tailwind of a post-World War II global human rights moment in which the European Jewish Holocaust and formation of the State of Israel were pillars—taken as sacred, even for the nonreligious. Peeling back the layers of these narratives (and the narratives that they implicated in the United States), ones in which African- and Arab-descended folks held a complicated place in this bastion of rights rhetoric, threatens to expose the latent racism that lies just beneath the veneer. But peel the layers back we must.

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