

Liberating Deconstructions: The Messianic in James Cone and Jacques Derrida

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A messianic promise, even if it was not fulfilled, at least in the form in which it was uttered, even if it rushed headlong toward an ontological content, will have imprinted an inaugural and unique mark in history.

—Jacques Derrida

Liberation theology is its own messianic promise. It expresses a hope for the future rooted in the present oppression and suffering of fleshly creatures. The future, then, is not simply something one can speculate about in regards to liberation theology, abstracted from the future it has always already been speaking of, that is, the future it has always already been working toward: the future is immanent to liberation itself. Such messianic promises have for a while now been uttered through Christs of many forms, faces, skin colors, sexual orientations, and heritages. The proliferation of Christs has kept the future open to many oppressed people who have certainly imprinted their inaugural and unique marks on history. And yet, these Christs have never attained to total presence, and their promise of total liberation has remained deferred, thus giving credence to those who point to the failure of liberation theology because liberation has not yet happened.¹

This paper will place the liberation theology of James Cone in conversation with Jacques Derrida's philosophy of Deconstruction to argue that the lack of a fully present messiah (and therefore a fully present liberation) is not a failure, but rather, the very condition of the future of liberation theology. In announcing my conversation partners, I have already opened myself to a risk. The story often goes like this: Liberation theology provides the stable identity with which oppressed people construct the appropriate messiah; this messiah, in turn, gives oppressed people the hope to fight against oppression. Deconstruction then undoes these identities, deconstructs them, unsettles the foundation upon which oppressed people depend. The importance of such debates cannot be denied, just as the nuances of these arguments are beyond the confines of this paper. A repetitive tracing of differences and incongruities, however, not only reinforces an always predict-

1 William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist: A Preamble to Black Theology*, (Boston: Beacon Press: 1998).

able binary between the two methods—often leading to an obtuse dismissal of deconstruction philosophy by seminary students wholly solidified in their justice commitments—it also elides the re-constructive potential immanent to a tracing of certain elective affinities. Tracing these affinities in the interest of a strategic affiliation is the goal of this paper.

A central theme throughout Derrida's later writings is that of the future. He relates this future to an always unknowable *to come*—what he calls “the messianic.” The messianic, in turn, is centrally tied to his continual concern for justice. The late Derrida explains, surprisingly, that justice is NON-deconstructable, in fact asserting that justice is the very impetus for any deconstruction.² He writes, “[Justice] is what gives deconstruction its movement, that is, constantly to suspect, to criticize the given determinations of culture, of institutions, of legal systems, not in order to destroy them, or simply cancel them, but to be just to with justice, to respect this relation to the other as justice.”³ The relation to the other as justice forms for Derrida a “universal,” thus his often-repeated phrase *tout autre est tout autre*—translated ambiguously as *every other is every other, every other is utterly other, every other is every bit other, every other is wholly other*. The radical hospitality of *tout autre est tout autre* seeks to perform a discourse in which rigid identities, communities, etc, would always reflect on the difference within themselves as a way of not closing themselves to any other.⁴ This continual deconstruction creates an openness in which the other is already anticipated in advance—the other is always to come, always coming. Justice is thus integrally related to the experience of waiting for the other, of waiting for a justice that is not yet fully present. He writes: “As soon as you address the other, as soon as you are open to the future, as soon as you have a temporal experience of waiting for the future, of waiting for someone to come: that is the condition of experience. Someone is to come, is *now* to come. Justice and peace will have to do with this coming of the other . . .”⁵

For Derrida, this waiting is the messianic: a universal structure directly tied to a concern for justice.⁶ But drawing on Walter Benjamin's notion of a “weak messianic force,” Derrida makes a distinction between the messianic and messianism. Messianisms—be they religious or secular, announce or determine the exact figure of the Messiah. But if the messiah were actually to arrive, if the future were actually to come, were actually to be determined, then it would no longer be the messianic, for the messianic is always “to come.” As Derrida says: “As soon as you reduce the messianic structure to messianism, then you are reducing the universality and this has important political consequences. Then you are accredi-

2 Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority.’” In Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, (New York: Routledge, 2002).

3 Jacques Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida” in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, John Caputo, ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 18.

4 See Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992).

5 Derrida, “Roundtable,” 22.

6 On the Messianic as Universal see, Derrida, “Roundtable,” 21-24. For a fuller elaboration see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1993), 211-214.

ing one tradition among others and a notion of an elected people, of a given literal language, a given fundamentalism.”⁷ In other words, as soon as you announce the messiah, you instantly determine it, closing out the other whose messianic experience detracts from your messianism.

The messianic structure is the universal structure of experience. It is the waiting for a future that you know will come though you do not know how, in what shape, in what way that which comes is determined or what it will determine. Derrida writes: “The messianic, including its revolutionary forms (and the messianic is always revolutionary, it has to be), would be the urgency, imminence but, irreducible paradox, a waiting without a horizon of expectation.”⁸ The messiah is that which we wait for, that which we hope for, despite the fact that that we know it will never come. It is the im-possible possibility of any future. The im-possible, exceeds the bounds of possibility, not as its polar opposite, but as the desire to overcome what is too apparently foreseeable. If something is immediately possible, it is not worth doing, and it is not messianic. Derrida explains: “The critique belongs to the movement of an experience open to the absolute future of what is coming, that is to say, a necessarily indeterminate, abstract, desert-like experience that is confided, exposed, given up to its waiting for that and for the event.”⁹ If the messiah were to come, its full presence would negate any messianic characteristic. “If one could count on what is coming, hope would be but the calculation of a program.”¹⁰ Messianism thus gives rise to a two-fold danger. On the one hand, by naming the messiah it determines the future and closes that future to any other outside of that messianic determination. Justice and hope become calculable, related to a program, a law, and a foreseeable outcome. On the other hand, messianism deconstructs itself—if the messiah were to actually arrive, it would cease to have a messianic characteristic, the characteristic of the *to come*.

The messianic structure is thus sharply distinguished from the messianisms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—what Derrida calls the “determinate figures and forms of the Messiah.” This sharp distinction, however, does not entail a total separation. Derrida is clear, the conditions for the notion of the messianic are found within the religious frameworks of the messianisms. This causes a conundrum for Derrida, something he cannot decide upon. As a universal experience, Derrida posits that the religions of the book might be “but specific examples of this general structure of messianicity.” If this is the case then the general structure of messianicity is the “groundless ground” where there have been “revelations, a history in which one calls Judaism or Christianity and so on.” On the other hand, it could also be the case that “these events of revelation, the biblical traditions . . . have been absolute events, irreducible events which have unveiled this messianicity.”¹¹ Such that “we would not know what messianicity is without messianism, without these events which were Abraham, Moses, and Jesus Christ and

7 Jacques Derrida, “Roundtable,” 23.

8 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 211.

9 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 112.

10 Ibid., 212.

11 Derrida, “Roundtable,” 23.

so on. In that case singular events would have unveiled or revealed these universal possibilities, and it is only on that condition that we can describe messianicity.¹²

Now, the question we must ask is: where does liberation fit into this general structure of messianicity? How has it expressed this general structure? Might it be the case that liberation theologies (really we should never say liberation theology in the singular), through their proliferations of Christ, are each expressions of singular revelatory events of this general structure? As theologians—liberationist, or deconstructive in the spirit of liberation—perhaps we will always want to affirm the validity of these singular revelatory events.¹³ Yet in doing that, we run no small risk of allowing the messianicity to congeal into a messianism. Christian liberation theology itself is already in a double-bind given that its messianic hope faces the challenge of the future past of a Christ already come—which inasmuch as it renders the messianic event already past, or likewise promises a foreseeable return that is for ever being deferred—this surely sets up the danger of any messianic theology becoming quickly passé.

James Cone's liberation theology reveals the fruits of such a risk. Cone resolutely opts for a given and determined messianism. But a close reading reveals that despite this determinism, he stays true to the general structure of the messianic. In Cone's most recent book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, he explains that black people who lived in the shadow of the lynching tree found their messianic hope through identification with Jesus and his suffering on the cross. For many black people in the south, there were always violent reminders that the future was not open for them. In the face of this violence, hope was found in the redemptive suffering of Jesus as a way to affirm their humanity and hope for liberation. Cone writes: "The resurrection of Jesus is God giving people meaning beyond history, when such violence as slavery and lynching seemed *to close off any future*."¹⁴ Their faith in Jesus allowed them to affirm that, "the final word about black life is not death on a lynching tree; but redemption in the cross—a miraculously transformed life found in the God of the gallows."¹⁵ Yet, Cone is clear, this messianic meaning makes no sense if material liberation is transcended: "It is also an immanent reality," writes Cone, "a powerful liberating presence among the poor right *now* in their midst." This interplay of the now with the past of the resurrection allowed black people to keep the future open "no matter what trouble they encountered [and keep] on believing and hoping that a 'change is gonna come.'"¹⁶

Cone states clearly that the messiah that will bring liberation is Jesus Christ. The essence of the gospel is the message of liberation because "God not only fights

12 Derrida, "Roundtable" 24.

13 In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida states that Deconstruction, though it is not Marxism, arises out of a spirit of Marxism. I do not think it is a far stretch to make the analogy that those who do theology by using deconstruction do so "in the spirit of liberation theology." In other words: Marxism is to philosophy what Liberation Theology is to theology.

14 James Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 26.

15 Ibid., 23.

16 Ibid., 20, 155.

for the [helpless and weak] but takes their humiliated condition upon the divine person and thereby breaks open a new future for the poor, different from their past and present miseries."¹⁷ Through what Cone calls a dialectic of past, present, and future, he further asserts that "Jesus is found in the possibility of human liberation through blackness. Jesus is the black Christ!" Thus Cone empathically asserts a determined messianism with a named Christ. Deconstruction and those influenced by it will always resist such a strongly determined messiah, even if they resist it in the spirit of liberation. But we also must see that though Cone may in fact be insisting on a messianism with an onto-theological ground, he is doing so from the standpoint of a particular historical-cultural *experience* that would disavow any deconstruction in the name of a perceived yet misunderstood Platonic *ousiology*.¹⁸ As he writes: "Blackness' as a Christological title may not be appropriate in the distant future or even in every human context in our present."¹⁹ Might we have here, then, a messianism that is never fully closed, a messianism that itself remains open to the messianic *to come*? Cone has always insisted that his theology cannot be understood unless the singular, unique, and particular context of his writing is fully apprehended. That is, as but one of many singular events revealing the universal messianic possibility.

Turning now to Cone's specific understanding of the Black Christ, we can further see how he is never far from the general structure of the messianic even within his determinacy. Within his dialectic of past, present, and future, the black Christ is both present and absent, that is, present and also *to come*. And it is this presence and absence that leaves the future open to an announced yet *undetermined* event. He writes of God's word: "It is here and not here, revealed and hidden at the same time."²⁰ Present in relation to the suffering currently being experienced, yet absent in that very experience as well, leaving the future open to a messiah, to a change—for the messianic is always revolutionary—*always to come*. This interplay of presence and absence, of here and *to come*, reveals, I think, an important affinity between liberation theology and deconstruction. An affinity I will reveal with a long quote from Derrida. He retells a story: "The Messiah was at the gates of Rome unrecognized, dressed in rags. But one man who recognized that this was the Messiah went up to him, 'When will you come?'" . . . "This means," Derrida then explains, "that there is some inadequation between the now and now. He is coming now; the messianic does not wait. This is a way of waiting for the future, right now. The responsibilities that are assigned to us by the messianic structure are responsibilities for here and now. The Messiah is not some

17 James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1975), 128.

18 Ibid., 125.

19 Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 156.

20 Derrida, "Roundtable," 24. The full version of this story as originally told by Maurice Blanchot can be found in Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, (New York: Verso, 2005) 46 fn 14.

future present; it is immanent and it is this immanence that I am describing under the messianic structure.”²¹

As we have already seen, Cone similarly insists on the immanent nature of the messianic hope. He writes: “To hope in Jesus is to see the vision of his coming presence, and thus one is required by hope itself to live as if the vision is already realized in the present.”²² In Cone’s Christology, Jesus is understood as the “coming one who will establish justice among people.” The coming however, happens in the present—Jesus IS coming. Thus the messianic hope and promise comes to be defined not by waiting, but by and through actual resistance. Again, he explains; “Jesus is who he is as his *isness* is known in his present activity with the oppressed in the struggle for freedom.” This is an ontological ground indeed, but it is also not reducible to any abstract being. Present as a form of resistance, but hoped for as a justice to come, Jesus is the symbol of a messianicity that “held black people together mentally as they struggled physically *to make real the future in the present*.”²³ This messianic hope did not wait passively for its always already present messiah *to come*.

And neither will we, neither *are* we. This paper has attempted to show one way in which liberation theology and deconstruction can supplement each other as two disciplines for which the expressed primary goal is justice. Tensions and differences will certainly arise if more studies like this are undertaken, but these tensions will only proliferate negatively if they are not. The founding texts and ideas of liberation theology need not be written off by a postmodern academy where essentialisms and identity politics cease to be sexy, for they would only be written off at the peril of our radical politics. But neither can those true to liberation theology continue to proliferate essentialisms—even in the name of “strategy”—as that might be to our peril as well. When these differences are traced and these essentialisms and messianisms are deconstructed with an eye toward a new construction—for deconstruction is not and never has been about destruction—then new possibilities and interpretations will open, carrying liberation theology’s inaugural mark into the future. That is to say that the liberation theology of the future may not be signified by the name of liberation theology—its languages, its metaphors, its starting places may be altogether different. And yet, just as Derrida has said that deconstruction is not Marxism, but rather a radicalization in the spirit of Marxism, so too might we say that any theology that utilizes deconstruction will be a radicalization in the spirit of liberation theology.

In one of the most beautiful and telling moments of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone writes: “Though we are not fully free and the dream not fully realized, yet, *we are not what we used to be and we are not what we will be*.”²⁴ This carefully worded sentence redoubles the messianic hope and structure. Its many negatives point to a non-objectifiable past and thereby affirm a non-objectifiable future. What we will be is still coming, is always *to come*. This *to come* can only be affirmed through a negation of what we are—to name it would only betray it.

21 James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1975), 119.

22 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 120.

23 Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 92.

24 *Ibid.*, 92.

All these promised messiahs of liberation theology have not fully arrived. Deconstruction tells us that they never quite will, that they can’t without being unfaithful to their messianicity. Waiting now, as we are, without a horizon of expectation is far from a dismissal of liberation theology, but the very condition of its undisclosed future.