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The Hands of God and the Glittering Sword: A Theological History of John Brown

Christian Chiakulas
Fort Hays State University, christianchiakulas@gmail.com

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THE HANDS OF GOD AND THE GLITTERING SWORD:
A THEOLOGICAL HISTORY
OF JOHN BROWN

A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Faculty
Of Fort Hays State University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of History

by

Christian Chiakulas

Bachelor of Arts, Liberal Studies, Arizona State University

Date 04/25/2023

Approved David S. Bonee

Major Professor

Approved [Signature]

Graduate Dean

ABSTRACT

The political praxis of American abolitionist John Brown (1800-1859) furnishes an example of practical liberation theology. This work advances an experimental historiographic model, termed *theological history*, which combines the central insights of Christian liberation theology and Marxist historical materialism to draw both historical and theological conclusions about its subject, John Brown.

The foundational work of Gustavo Gutierrez and James Cone suggests that history and praxis are central to liberation theology, and that Marxist epistemology and ontology are necessary for historical conclusions drawn from liberation theology to be valid. This work extends this contention, arguing for an even greater fusion of these traditions in both theory and practice. *Theological history* is an attempt to develop the theoretical side of this argument.

Using the method of *theological history*, this work examines the primary sources for the major activities of John Brown, the Pottawatomie Massacre and the *Provisional Constitution* drawn up in preparation for the raid on Harpers Ferry, in the context of theology and Marxist political economy. Three major historical conclusions are drawn: 1.) Brown's experiences in business, combined with his understanding of Christian scripture and theology, led him in later life to repudiate reformism, capitalism, and individuality and embrace revolution, utopian socialism, and communalism; 2.) The Pottawatomie Massacre was influenced primarily by Brown's understanding of Puritan Edwardsian theology, which led him to believe that he was acting as "the hands of God" to violently destroy the Slave Power that he believed controlled the United States; 3.) The *Provisional Constitution* and later *Declaration of Liberty of the Slave Population of America* were Brown's attempts to outline his vision for an ideal post-slavery society, including the strand of socialism mentioned above, the legal enshrinement of Brown's version of Christian morality, and a radical egalitarianism of class, race, and gender.

Attempts by detractors and later historians to cast Brown as mentally ill or insane are historically and scientifically untenable, but they reveal the role that psychiatric discourse plays

in pathologizing dissent and revolution and testify to Brown's relevance for contemporary liberation movements. His most frequently-cited diagnosis, "monomania," is in reality a psychiatric fiction that served a political rather than medical purpose. Ending on theological conclusions rather than purely historical, this paper shows that Brown's activities at Pottawatomie and Harpers Ferry demonstrate what liberation theology can look like in practice.

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PREFACE

John Brown has fascinated me since the moment I learned about the Harpers Ferry raid, which was not in history class, but when randomly surfing Wikipedia one day. A Christian abolitionist who had tried to start an insurrection against the government to destroy slavery? My own radical politics and Christian beliefs predisposed me towards him, I suppose, but as I began to learn more about the man, reading biographies by the great W.E.B. Du Bois and Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., the more of an affinity I felt with not only his most prominent actions, but with his person. There was more than just Pottawatomie and Harpers Ferry; there was evolution, theological wrestling, change. In 1834, the man was writing of using moral arguments to persuade Christian slaveowners to free their slaves; a quarter of a century later he was killing them and declaring that there was no such thing as a Christian slaveholder. His letters to his family and friends evidenced a tenderness and humble faith that was so at odds with the popular image of the wild-eyed, violent crusader I had first encountered. And his crusade *was* violent.

The scope of this work went through an expansion as I did more reading and research for it. My original intention was to simply investigate the specific religious influences on John Brown's *Provisional Constitution*, but the material as it pertained specifically to that document was more thin than I would have liked. John Brown's religious motivations and influences are well-known by this point, and it became obvious to me that I was not going to be able to say anything new or valuable by merely rehashing that.

As I worked, a possibility that I had previously anticipated using only sparingly began to grow in my mind. I knew from my prior interest in liberation theology that it gives central importance to both history and praxis, or at least the liberation theologians I had read did. John Brown's actions seemed the definition of a praxis of liberation theology: revolutionary actions taken to liberate the oppressed, based firmly on his theological beliefs. Now that he had become

history, the possibility of using liberation theology to examine him historically seemed appealing.

Actually doing this in a Master's Thesis presented some challenges. The most relevant was probably *how* to actually going about integrating a concept or discipline so far outside the purview of academic history into a work that was supposed to help me earn my degree. It is one thing to write about John Brown from the perspective of liberation theology; that is the easy part. Doing so in a way that actually contributes to our historical understanding of Brown and his life is something else. I eventually realized that I would have to set out a particular method for attempting to do so, and follow that method as closely as possible—that is what I have called *theological history* (a name I am not particularly happy with, but one that I do think encapsulates the idea fairly well). I hesitated here—it seems borderline hubristic to believe that I, a graduate student presenting my Master's thesis, should be so bold as to propose an entire novel historical methodology of my own creation—but in the end, it felt necessary to ensure the work was actual history and not just apologetics, and I do believe the results were a success.

I had prototypes to work with—my own previous book, *The Carpenter's Son*, had mixed history and theology, although it was less academic. Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her* (discussed in detail in Chapter Three), however, seemed to offer some useful starting points, especially in its near-perfect balance of history and theology. I re-read that book alongside Cone and Gutierrez, the closest people to “founding fathers” liberation theology has, and went full-speed ahead with my new idea.

Make no mistake, this *is* an ideological work, and that knowledge gave me pause many times when writing and researching. But Schussler-Fiorenza's work especially gave me reassurance that *all* historical work is ideological: “The hermeneutical discussion has underlined that a value-free, objectivistic historiography is a scholarly fiction. All interpretations of texts depend on the presuppositions, intellectual concepts, politics, or prejudices of the interpreter and historian,” she wrote.¹ I decided that I would rather be open about my politics and

¹ Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, “Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation,” in *Theological Studies* Vol. 36, No. 4 (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1975), 611.

presuppositions and do the kind of history that is useful to someone. If my work in the field of history is going to serve one side or another, then I would have it serve the oppressed in their world-historic struggle for liberation. I am not writing about liberation theology as a neutral observer; the historical aspects of this work are about John Brown, so that is where I have done my best to remain neutral to the extent that such a thing is possible. When it comes to liberation theology, I write as a believer in its central convictions about God, oppression, and liberation, and make no apologies for that. This work seeks not only to explain liberation theology, but to practice it. My hope is to lay the groundwork for future historical inquiry into revolutionary Christian movements and figures, and to push the development of liberation theology both into the past and into the future. If revolutionary Christianity and liberation theology (related but distinct concepts) are to be active forces for change, then they must both account for past experiments and chart a path to the future. John Brown, located as he is at the locus of the past and present (since the consequences of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, American slavery, and reconstruction are still felt all over the world) is a well-suited candidate to begin this process.

John Brown continues to inspire both adulation and loathing in people well over a century and a half after his death, and this work will not be the final word on his attitudes towards economic policy or land ownership or capitalism or the place of violence in Christian praxis. But I maintain that the lens used here, whether we call it *theological history* or not, is indispensable to a right understanding of Brown's motivations and the meaning of his life. His continued relevance lies partly in that the United States is still grappling with the legacies of slavery and white supremacy, to say nothing of capitalism. As long as these questions remain open, the meaning of people like John Brown will remain contested, and for those of us who wish to claim Brown, to make positive meaning out of that legacy, seeing him through his own lens, as a revolutionary Christian, is paramount. It is the only way we can truly understand the convictions that drove him to do the things that he did, and discern what kinds of actions we should (and should not) be taking in the present day to continue that legacy. Even for those

disinterested in making theological and praxical meaning out of Brown's legacy, liberation theology helps us to get inside his head, to see not just that Christian scripture and theology drove this man to change the course of American history, but to see exactly how and why. If nothing else, I believe that alone is historically valuable.

INTRODUCTION

In May of 1856 a small band of abolitionists led by John Brown traveled through eastern Kansas Territory, armed with freshly-sharpened swords. They stopped at three separate homes owned by pro-slavery settlers. At each home, they accosted men who either lived or were staying there, dragged them outside, and butchered them. The leader of this vengeful band justified himself and his brutal actions by appeal to the Christian God. "God is my judge," he later told his son Jason. "It was absolutely ncessary [sic] for the protection of others as well as ourselves."² A few years later, as he sat in a jail cell awaiting his own execution for a different crime, he added that in addition to self-defense, this bloodshed was in service to "a righteous cause."³

The Pottawatomie Massacre, as it has become known, is the most infamous event in the period of American history known as "Bleeding Kansas," the conflict over whether Kansas would enter the Union as a free or slave state. No other protagonist or antagonist of that conflict has so stirred the imaginations and anxieties of contemporaries and later generations as John Brown, who was given the epithet "The Liberator of Kansas" by his friend and biographer Franklin Sanborn. Brown is even better remembered (either fondly or scornfully) for the failed 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, which was meant to foment a large-scale slave rebellion that would topple the institution of American slavery once and for all; for this act Brown likewise justified himself by his Christian faith. Said he: "It is, in my opinion, the greatest service man can render to God."⁴

John Brown was unique, not so much for his religious beliefs (many prominent

² Typescript of draft, "Salmon Brown on Jason Brown" by Salmon Brown, MS05-0023 A-J, Boyd B. Stutler Collection, West Virginia State Archives (hereafter *BBS*).

³ David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 492.

⁴ In F.B. Sanborn, ed. *The Life and Letters of John Brown: Liberator of Kansas, and Martyr of Virginia* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891), 565. (Hereafter *LLJB*.)

abolitionists were Christians) as for a constellation of traits that combined to form what Frederick Douglass called “a man of commanding mold, towering high and alone above the millions, free from all conventional fetters, true to his own moral convictions, a ‘law unto himself’...”⁵ According to David S. Reynolds’s biography of Brown, “Undeniably, John Brown was an anomaly—he was an Abolitionist who believed in violence and who actually made war. Moreover, he was not representative of a mainstream movement, nor even of a perimeter one such as Garrisonian Abolitionism.”⁶ Even his personality was unique, inspiring confidence among his black contemporaries that other white abolitionists could never have attained; even when they thought his insurrectionary plans foolish, they could not help but be inspired by his character. “They believed in John Brown but not in his plan,” wrote W.E.B. Du Bois of the majority of black abolitionists, including Douglass himself.⁷ Brown was also unique in deed—no other white people, save for those that specifically followed Brown, were willing to resort to violence—even extreme and pre-emptive violence—in the cause of black liberation from slavery. Brown not only gave his life for liberation, but watched three of his own children die for it, and still he never wavered in his conviction that “Slavery is wrong...kill it. Destroy it—uproot it, stem, blossom, and branch; give it no quarter, exterminate it and do it now.”⁸ This uniqueness earned Brown the posthumous admiration of many in the black radical tradition, such as Malcolm X.⁹

This work is an attempt to uncover why exactly Brown was able to achieve this degree of uniqueness among white American abolitionists. It argues that liberation

5 Frederick Douglass, “Address by Frederick Douglass,” *BBS*.

6 Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 138.

7 W.E.B. Du Bois, *John Brown* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Company Publishers, 1909), 75, 213.

8 Du Bois, *John Brown*, 211.

9 el-Shabazz (Malcolm X) said in an address to the Organization of Afro-American Unity, on July 5, 1964, “If a white man wants to be your ally, what does he think of John Brown? You know what John Brown did? He went to war...So, when you want to know good white folks in history where black people are concerned, go read the history of John Brown.”

theology is the best lens through which to understand not only Brown's legacy, but even his actions and motivations during his life. To do so, this work advances a provisional method of combining history and liberation theology based on 1.) historical-critical analysis of Christian history and especially the Bible; 2.) Marxist historical materialism; and 3.) a firm commitment to the standpoint of the oppressed in history. This last point is based in liberation theology, which asserts boldly that human history *is* "a process of human liberation."¹⁰

Liberation theology is a multid denominational movement that reframes Christian praxis around the liberation of oppressed peoples. It is not merely an academic or philosophical approach using hermeneutics to argue that Christians should support liberation movements; rather, it is the practice of seeking and knowing God within liberation movements. The key is that for liberation theology to be truly liberating, it must be rooted in the concrete process of liberation and not just navel-gazing. Liberation comes first, then "theology" in the academic sense; for this work, John Brown's work to liberate American slaves serves as the starting point.

Chapter One explores the historical and biblical roots of liberation theology in oppression itself and resistance to that oppression. Chapter Two demonstrates that liberation theology is a theology of *praxis* that cannot exist apart from actual concrete movements for liberation, with special attention to the relationship between liberation theology and Marxism. Chapter Three develops the concept of *theological history*, through which John Brown, and other revolutionary Christians like him, can be used to extract and formulate concrete expressions of liberatory praxis out of the past. This will form the ideological and methodological foundation of the rest of this work.

Part Two turns to John Brown's life, deeds, and beliefs. John Brown lived from 1800 to 1859 and saw many changes in those fifty-nine years. The United States of his

¹⁰ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 2nd ed., trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (New York: Orbis, 1988), 21.

early childhood, with a seemingly-endless frontier and a president that espoused an idyllic agrarian ideal, gave way to increasing social and class conflict, a pre-industrial manufacturing economy, and of course, a brutal system of slavery that at Brown's time of death was poised to tear the country in half. John Brown evolved with the times, but it was an evolution anchored by his unwavering commitment to liberation.

Chapter Four explores John Brown's business and economic life, and the socioeconomic pressures that he felt throughout it. The evidence shows that while as a younger man Brown believed implicitly in the ideal of yeoman agrarianism, the changing economic landscape of the antebellum north left him unable to achieve his dreams and dissatisfied with wealth and capitalism in general. His attempts to show solidarity with the oppressed through this economic ideal, particularly his move to North Elba to assist black settlers there, petered out, leaving him looking for a new front on which to fight against white supremacy.

Chapter Five looks at the infamous Pottawatomie Massacre, and argues that John Brown's decisive act was in keeping with his Puritan beliefs and belief in the theology of Jonathan Edwards, and through it he transformed the "fire-and-brimstone hellfire" of Edwardsian theology into a theology of liberation.

Chapter Six examines John Brown's *Provisional Constitution*, arguing that it functioned as an attempt to elucidate Brown's ideal vision of society, one rooted in his Christian beliefs and evidencing Brown's move, at the end of his life, towards utopian socialism, egalitarianism, and communalism.

Part Three is devoted to John Brown's sanity, or lack thereof. The question of John Brown's supposed insanity is revealing for two reasons. One, the side a historian or biographer takes on the issue is almost always reflective of their political orientation towards not only slavery, but white supremacy in general, at least since the post-Reconstruction era. Secondly, the diagnosis of madness in Brown evidences the

theological and philosophical significance of his actions; that he was labeled mad by his enemies and even by many who admired him is reflective of the degree to which injustice and oppression are foundational to the society in which Brown lived, which is fundamentally the society in which later historians have interpreted him and which endures to this day. The examination of the opposing interpretations of John Brown as *lunatic* or *liberator* reveals a false dichotomy that poses a question that only liberation theology can answer. Chapter Seven tackles the lunatic side of the equation, arguing that his diagnosis of “monomania” and later attempts to understand his beliefs and actions as motivated by psychosocial pathology served the political function of delegitimizing both his goals and his methods. Chapter Eight flips the coin, arguing that the debate over Brown’s sanity confirms the central conceit of liberation theology that it is the oppressed who materially liberate themselves by acting in history, and that they do so by vanquishing their oppressors and remaking the world in their image.

Finally, a short Epilogue reflects further on Brown’s legacy, especially what it means for the future of liberation theology.

Note that in all cases where quotations were transcribed directly from primary sources, I have elected to leave spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors as they are, and have not bothered with including [sic] after all of these errors so as to not distract from readability. All such errors located within primary source quotations should be assumed to be original to the documents themselves. Primary source citations from collections such as Sanborn’s *The Life and Letters of John Brown* (abbreviated as *LLJB*) generally have already been corrected for spelling and punctuation errors by the editors of those collections.

Note also that in choosing which translations to use for Biblical citations, I had to balance considerations of readability, accuracy, and rhetorical effect. John Brown read the bible in the King James Version (KJV), but this work also uses the more accurate

Revised Standard Version (RSV) and occasionally the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition (NRSVue), when appropriate. All Biblical citations include the version abbreviation in parentheses.

PART ONE: LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND HISTORY

“God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: ‘How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Selah! Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”
-Psalm 82:1-4 (RSV)

CHAPTER ONE: TO KNOW GOD

*“Zeus, Jupiter, and Yahweh are not simply different names for the same ultimate reality. Zeus is not just another name for Yahweh, because Zeus grounds a Hellenistic internationalism that directly threatens Jewish traditionalism. Jupiter is not just another name for Yahweh, because Jupiter grounds a Roman imperialism that directly threatens Jewish traditionalism. But is this not just the chauvinistic exclusivity of one people against another (or even all others)? Is it not just a Jewish us against a pagan them? There is, I think, much more at stake than that. What is at stake is the challenge of Psalm 82, quoted above. What is at stake is the character of your God. This is what our god is like, says that psalm. What is your God like?” -John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, 585-586.*

Theology is ultimately the pursuit of knowing God. How does God want us to be?

What does God care about? What is God like?

Liberation theology answers these questions with the reality of human oppression as its starting point. Christianity is centered on the Gospel or Good News of Jesus Christ, and liberation theology insists that the essence of that Gospel is God's identification with, and promise to liberate, the oppressed.

For most of Christian history formal theology has been the purview of learned church officials, which has skewed its priorities and conclusions. In the 20th century, however, religious, political, and social factors coalesced to give impetus to the recognition that such theologies were wholly inadequate for grasping the nature of God; this development happened concurrently in different parts of the world in both Catholic and Protestant contexts.

Gustavo Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation*, first published in 1971, is the seminal text. Gutierrez, a Peruvian priest in the Dominican order, wrote of the need for theology to wrestle with the sociopolitical situation of Latin America, its place in the capitalist-imperialist world system, and the reality of oppression faced by its citizens. Liberal programs of “developmentalism” had failed to improve the lives of most people in Latin America because developmentalism did not “attack the roots of the evil [of

underdevelopment],” owing to the “international organizations closely linked to groups and governments which control the world economy. The changes encouraged were to be achieved within the formal structure of the existing institutions without challenging them.” Instead of failed notions of development and underdevelopment, Gutierrez employs tools of “scientific rationality,” notably including Marxism, to conclude that “to speak about the process of *liberation* begins to appear more appropriate and richer in human content.”¹¹ The rest of the book is spent, among other tasks, answering the question, “what relation is there between salvation and the historical process of human liberation?”¹²

Equally important to the foundations of liberation theology is the work of African-American theologian James H. Cone, especially 1970’s *A Black Theology of Liberation* and 1975’s *God of the Oppressed*. Cone gets quickly to the heart of the matter, asking not only what believers can know about God through theology, but “what we can say about the nature of God in view of...the oppressed condition of black people.”¹³ The emphasis on oppression provides the corollary to the question posed by Gutierrez; there can be no liberation without *oppression* to be liberated from.

This does not mean that oppression is some divinely-ordained condition for humans to know God through liberation. As the Puritan reverend Samuel Hopkins, who John Brown’s father Owen credited (in part) with his own anti-slavery beliefs,¹⁴ wrote, even though God’s justice and goodness are revealed in his deliverance from sin [oppression], “this does not render such [sinful] conduct in any degree the more

11 Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 17.

12 Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 29.

13 James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1970), 107.

14 Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., *Fire from the Midst of You: A Religious Life of John Brown* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 23. Owen Brown met Hopkins in the summer of 1790; Hopkins gave him a copy of a sermon by Johnathan Edwards Jr. and Owen Brown said that “From this time I was anti-slavery, as much as I be now.” John Brown was also influenced by this school of theology, about which more will be said later.

harmless or excusable, or in the least lessen the guilt and ill-desert of it.”¹⁵ Oppression, as both historical inquiry and biblical tradition tell us, is a human condition, created by humans oppressing their neighbors. Nor does it mean that liberation comes in the form of supernatural divine intervention, with the clouds parting and God descending from the heavens to personally wipe away oppression: “We can speak of liberation only when the poor themselves emerge as the primary agent of their journey.”¹⁶ Liberation cannot be found in academic arguments or theology journals, but in the movements of the oppressed for their own liberation, for “the process of liberation requires the *active participation of the oppressed*.”¹⁷

Liberation theology is self-aware. It understands “that theology always serves certain interests and therefore has to reflect and critically evaluate its primary motives and allegiance. Consequently, theology has to abandon its so-called objectivity and has to become partisan.”¹⁸ Liberation theology, whether it be the black theology of James Cone, the feminist theology of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, the Latin American theology of Gustavo Gutierrez, or any other, is partisan on behalf of the oppressed. The different forms of liberation theology mentioned (to which could be added many more) testify to a recognition of varying axes or modes of oppression, though to be truly holistic and liberatory they should be able to identify the common underpinnings of all oppression, whether it be class, gender, or race-based.

Liberation theology is also all-encompassing. God’s identification with the oppressed and promise of liberation is not merely an aspect of the Gospel, it *is* the Gospel. In a book all about parsing contradictions within the Bible, John Dominic

15 Samuel Hopkins, *Sin, thro’ divine interposition, an advantage to the universe; and yet this no excuse for sin, or encouragement to it...* (Boston: Samuel Kneeland, 1773), 33. Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;idno=N10083.0001.001> (Accessed 4/21/2023).

16 Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 108.

17 Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 67.

18 Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation,” in *Theological Studies* Vol. 36, No. 4 (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1975), 616.

Crossan wrote that, for Christians, “*The norm and criterion of the Christian Bible is the biblical Christ...Jesus is for us Christians imagined religiously and theologically as the hinge of our history, the center of our time, and the norm of our Bible.*”¹⁹ Crossan, a liberal Christian, is arguing that Christians use (or should use) the example of Christ (rooted in the historical Jesus of Nazareth) to choose among the different moral and ethical traditions represented in the Bible, specifically retributive vs restorative justice, and violence vs pacifism. While liberation theology may or may not accept the pacifist aspect of his argument, the concept itself of a “criterion” for interpreting the Bible may be redeployed here—in liberation theology, the *liberation of the oppressed* is the criterion of theology. “In fact, theology ceases to be a theology of the gospel when it fails to arise out of the community of the oppressed...the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ... is the God *of and for* those who labor and are heavy laden.”²⁰ Or, “The hermeneutical principle for an exegesis of the Scriptures is the revelation of God in Christ as the Liberator of the Oppressed from social oppression and to political struggle, wherein the poor recognize that their fight against poverty and injustice is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ.”²¹

But why is this so? On what basis do liberation theologians claim that God is with the oppressed, or that a theology not founded on liberation is no true theology? The reader has a right to ask, given the strength of the claim, especially from Cone, whose book literally begins with the declaration that “Christian theology is a theology of liberation.”²² The central claim of liberation theology can be supported both biblically and historically, with slightly different results depending on which is given primacy. We will examine both.

19 John Dominic Crossan, *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 240. Emphasis original.

20 Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 17-18. Emphasis original.

21 James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Revised Edition) (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 74-75.

22 Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 17.

On the one hand, it is absolutely trivial to find passages from every major scriptural tradition—law, prophets, writings, gospels, epistles—advocating for the poor and the downtrodden, clamoring for social and economic justice. John Brown did exactly that with the last Bible he ever owned, the one he read and marked up in his jail cell awaiting execution and then gave to John F. Blessing (a local baker who had visited him during his imprisonment) with the dedication reading in part “These leaves turned down + marked by him [John Brown, referring to himself in the third person] while in prison in Charleston, VA. But a small part of those passages which in the most positive language condemn oppression + violence are marked.”²³ Louis A. DeCaro, Jr. calls this collection of passages “John Brown’s theology of liberation.”²⁴ I will include a few of John Brown’s favorite biblical condemnations of oppression, in the King James or Authorized version that he read, in order to illustrate the extent to which justice for the oppressed is a biblical value.

Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the Land of Egypt. Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry; and my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless. -Exodus 22:21-24

This command of God to the Israelites after their liberation from Egypt, delivered through Moses, is aimed at protecting “orphans and widows,” people who, in the patriarchal society the Hebrew Bible was written in, were usually left economically destitute. Note the threat of extreme violence as punishment for mistreatment of the vulnerable, and the consequence that the oppressor’s own family would become

23 “John Brown’s Last Bible,” *John Brown Papers, 1842-1928*, Chicago Historical Society. I examined it myself on 3/10/2023.

24 DeCaro, “John Brown’s Liberation Theology,” in *John Brown Today: A Biographer’s Blog*, Sunday, May 6, 2007. <https://abolitionist-john-brown.blogspot.com/2007/05/john-browns-liberation-theology-how-and.html> Accessed 3/17/2023. I agree that this collection of passages is a key component of John Brown as a figure of liberation theology, though the present work intends to greatly expand this notion.

oppressed in that way; here we see an illustration of the Biblical concept of “an eye for an eye” (meaning, essentially, that the punishment would fit the crime) as well as the implication of reversal, where the oppressor becomes oppressed and, by implication, the oppressed is liberated because God has heard their cry.

So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power. -Ecclesiastes 4:1-2

Here the Bible clearly links oppression with earthly power in a lament that is almost nihilistic. John Brown would certainly have linked this passage with the “Slave Power” that dominated America during his life.

Here’s one from the New Testament:

Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did not do it to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. -Matthew 25:44-45

Here is perhaps the clearest and most explicit identification of Jesus with the oppressed, with “the least of these;” to feed the hungry is to feed Christ, to shelter the stranger is to shelter Christ. The passages Brown marked provide the corollary: to turn away from the oppressed is to turn away from Christ. These and other passages evidence John Brown’s antipathy towards not only slavery, but every form of oppression.

Of course, many of the passages Brown marked did deal directly with slavery:

And if thy brother, an Hebrew man, or an Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee, and serve thee six years; then in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free from thee. And when thou sendest him out free from thee, thou shalt not let him go away empty: Thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy floor, and out of thy winepress: of that wherewith the Lord thy God hath blessed thee

thou shalt give until him. And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee: therefore I command thee this thing to day. -Deuteronomy 15:12-15

The Biblical “Sabbath year” appears multiple times throughout Mosaic Law, along with the related concept of the Jubilee. The regular manumission of slaves after six years of service was probably not actually practiced in ancient times,²⁵ but it evidences a Biblical tradition that is at odds with the system of American slavery and points to God’s fundamental orientation towards the oppressed. Slaves in American society were not only forced laborers, they were stores of capital;²⁶ thus regular manumission would have been in fundamental contradiction to America’s commitment to private property. Even granted that the torah is a composite document that developed over centuries and contains multiple traditions that are often in dialogue or even at odds with each other, it is aware of the fundamental contradiction between the liberation event in Exodus and the reality of the slave system that was endemic to the Mediterranean world of antiquity. The Exodus is perhaps the single most defining event in the Hebrew Bible; it is the event by which Yahweh’s covenant with Israel is to be understood, hence the constant reminders within the Law section of the Bible that God was he that delivered his people from Egypt. “By delivering this people from Egyptian bondage and inaugurating the covenant on the basis of that historical event, God reveals that he is the God of the oppressed, involved in their history, liberating them from human bondage.”²⁷ Gutierrez takes great pains to link the liberatory act of Exodus with the creative act of Genesis, summarizing that “The God who made the cosmos from chaos is the same God who

25 See Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 307-308.

26 A.L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, “Productivity growth and the regional dynamics of Antebellum Southern development,” in Rhode, P.W., Rosenbloom, Joshua, Weiman, David (Eds.), *Economic Evolution and Revolution in Historical Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 203.

27 Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 18-19. Note that Cone’s use of the word “historical” here can be misleading; few scholars today consider the Exodus to be a historical event in the sense of having *actually happened*. Nonetheless, it was conceptualized as historical by the authors and redactors of the Bible, which is what is relevant to us.

leads Israel from alienation to liberation.”²⁸ This is why, for Cone, the basis of God’s identification with the oppressed is primarily biblical.

The biblical basis for identifying God with the oppressed will not convince anyone who does not view the Bible as a document with some measure of authority. Luckily, God’s essence as liberator can be demonstrated without appeal to the divine inspiration of the Bible. We must tread carefully, because the distinction is complex and often seems invisible; this is because a historical proof for God as God of the oppressed must still make extensive use of biblical texts. The key difference is now we are not employing them as scripture, but as historical data. Now we are examining the Bible critically, and corroborating our conclusions based on non-biblical evidence such as archaeology, sociological studies, and extrabiblical texts.

Even “God” may change here. For the biblical argument we may use any conception of God we are comfortable with, but now we are speaking of God as a sociocultural concept, not a “thing-in-itself.” We are concerned now with how those who transmitted the Christian religion to us (and Judaism before it) viewed God historically. Theological conceptions about God are best left checked at the door.

The story of Israel is a story of oppression. While the Exodus narrative is historically dubious, what is not is that the land of Palestine, where the Israelites lived, was under nearly constant threat of conquest by foreign powers, including the Egyptians, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians (and later the Greeks and Romans). The northern kingdom of Samaria (Israel) was completely destroyed in the year 721 BCE by the Assyrians, and the southern kingdom of Judah survived only by submitting to Assyrian suzerainty. These experiences of subjugation (and eventually exile to Babylon, at least for much of the priestly class) had a profound effect on the Hebrew Bible as we know it today; indeed it was during the Babylonian Exile in the late 7th to the late 6th centuries

²⁸ Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 87-89.

BCE that the earlier parts of Hebrew Bible were most likely redacted into their final forms, or close to them.²⁹

How could a God like Yahweh, who the people believed had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, who had made a covenant to protect them, who was more powerful than any other god (monotheism did not truly take hold until the Exilic period),³⁰ allow his people to be conquered so many times over? While different sectors of Israelite society solved this contradiction in different ways, the Prophetic solution is the most relevant to our purpose. The Hebrew prophets whose literature makes up the Prophets or Nevi'im section of the Hebrew Bible locate the calamities faced by the Israelites in the oppression of the poor, the orphans and the widows. Habakkuk, notably, is about Yahweh using the Chaldeans or neo-Babylonians to punish Israel for its lack of justice.³¹ Depending on how it is counted, John Brown marked off about twenty-four selections from the Prophets in his last bible, demonstrating its importance to him and to a liberation-centered view of the Bible.³²

The themes of justice and liberation and resistance to oppression are also central to the life of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, the origin point for the Jesus Christ of Christian belief. A full historical reconstruction of Jesus of Nazareth is far outside the scope of the current work, but we will go over a few relevant details.³³

29 See Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* 2nd ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997).

30 See Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002).

31 Habakkuk 1:6.

32 Twelve in Isaiah, nine in Jeremiah, and three in Ezekiel (including the entirety of chapters 7 and 18). Amos is also notable for containing a great many exhortations to promote justice and liberation of the oppressed, and threats of punishment and destruction against Israel itself for not living up to this ideal, though John Brown did not mark any passages in it.

33 I have already written such a reconstruction; see Christian Chiakulas, *The Carpenter's Son: A Proletarian Reconstruction of Jesus of Nazareth* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2019). Also recommended are John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991); Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Allen Lane, 1993); Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (London: SPCK, 2011); Gerd Theissen, *The First Followers of Jesus: A Sociological Analysis of the Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1978); Stephen J.

Jesus of Nazareth was a poor Galilean laborer who founded the Jewish revival movement that would eventually morph into Christianity.³⁴ His public activity included exorcisms and healings which prophetically subverted the institution of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, as well as numerous teachings and elaborations of Jewish law. He was almost certainly baptized by John the Baptist, who was executed by Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee and client of the Roman Empire. Jesus himself would later be executed “when [Pontius] Pilate had condemned him to a cross.”³⁵ His crucifixion at the hands of the Roman authorities because of a prophetic demonstration *against* the temple during Passover signifies an inherently political death,³⁶ and a life lived in opposition to the rulers of Palestine and Rome.³⁷

Patterson, *The God of Jesus: The Historical Jesus and the Search for Meaning* (London: T&T Clark, 1998). Many of these reconstructions differ from each other on important points such as Jesus’s eschatology and orientation towards larger Jewish sects; such differences are not relevant to the present discussion. Gutierrez covers the historical Jesus in Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 130-135. Much of the scholarship he relies on is outdated; nevertheless, he recognized writing in the early 1970’s that more work needed to be done on this front, and indeed it has been done, as my previous note demonstrates; in fact I would argue that recent scholarship has only strengthened the connection between the historical Jesus and liberation theology. See Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (New York: Orbis, 1993), for a more complete reconstruction emerging out of the same milieu as Gutierrez.

34 He is described in Mark 6:3 as a τεκτόν or *tekton*, which meant a builder with wood or stone (stone is more likely in Nazareth).

35 Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:63-64. For the debate about the authenticity of this passage, see James Carleton Paget, “Some Observations on Josephus and Christianity” in *The Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 52 No. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 539-624; and Alice Whealey, *Josephus on Jesus: The Testimonium Flavianum Controversy from Late Antiquity to Modern Times* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003). I accept the scholarly consensus that the *Testimonium Flavianum* quoted here is an authentic account of Jesus of Nazareth by Josephus that contains later interpolations made by Christian scribes.

36 While the synoptic gospels portray Jesus’s arrest and execution as motivated by the Jewish authorities, this is historically untenable. Jewish authorities did not have the power to sentence people to death, and the stories show clear apologetic motivations in absolving Pilate, and therefore Rome, for Jesus’s death; this suggests a late-1st-century context. See Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 273-274 (see note 32). The event described in Matt. 21, Mark 11, Luke 19, and John 2 is usually called “the cleansing of the temple.” This is a misnomer that obfuscates the true intent of the action, which was a prophetic and metaphorical *destruction* of the temple; the scripture Jesus cites, from Jeremiah 7, refers to Yahweh destroying the original temple because of its oppression of “the alien, the orphan, and the widow.” John Brown marked a lengthy section of this chapter of Jeremiah, 7:1-9, in his last bible. See Chiakulas, *The Carpenter’s Son*, 140-141, and Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 256-258 (see note 32).

37 For the political nature of death by crucifixion, see Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

When we turn to his teachings, as recorded in the synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) and documents such as the Gospel of Thomas, the theoretical Q gospel, and the Didache, we see clear themes of liberation from oppression. Jesus said that the Gospel or good news that he proclaimed was that “the kingdom of God is at hand.”³⁸ Jesus described this kingdom as like a feast populated by “the poor and maimed and blind and lame,”³⁹ a feast where “businessmen and merchants” would be disallowed.⁴⁰ “Blessed are the poor,” Jesus said, “for yours is the kingdom of God...But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation.”⁴¹

Jesus must be situated clearly in the Hebrew prophetic tradition, a man who proclaimed justice for the poor and oppressed and predicted or symbolically threatened the center of his own religion with destruction as God’s punishment for the injustice of their rulers, as God’s coming act of liberation. The literature expounding on these themes is vast, as is that which seeks to explain how this decidedly Jewish eschatological movement changed into Christianity after its founder’s death. This is not all that can be said about the historical Jesus of Nazareth, but it is enough for now.

Historians and theologians alike often distinguish between the *Jesus of history* and the *Christ of faith*. The former was a historical man who lived in the first century CE, while the latter may have been based on him, but is also greater, a living presence in the lives of Christians who believe in him. This is often a way for these scholars to do historical reconstruction of Jesus, which necessarily involves questioning and even disproving commonly-held Christian beliefs about Jesus, without insulting or putting off Christian readers. Liberation theology rejects this distinction. “[T]here is no knowledge of Jesus Christ today that contradicts who he was yesterday, i.e., his historical appearance

38 Mark 1:15 (RSV).

39 Luke 14:21 (RSV).

40 *gThomas* 64.

41 Luke 6:20b, 24 (RSV).

in first-century Palestine.”⁴² For Cone, Jesus “was not a ‘universal’ man but a particular Jew who came to fulfill God’s will to liberate the oppressed.”⁴³ Jesus can be more than this; Cone asserts in three sections in that chapter of *God of the Oppressed* not only that *Jesus is who he was*, but also that *Jesus is who he is*, and *Jesus is who he will be*. But we need not even go that far—for our purposes, the question is answered. Historically, Jesus’s life was dedicated to the proclamation of a kingdom where the oppressed were liberated, seated at a great feast that the rich were cast out from. He was part of a long biblical-historical tradition stretching back centuries that connected God’s every action—from the act of Creation itself to the destruction of his own temple—to the liberation of the oppressed. Since Jesus Christ, who cannot be separated from the historical Jesus of Nazareth, is the criterion of the Bible and the manifestation of God in human form, God must be a God of liberation, as Jesus was a man dedicated to liberation. The Bible itself can be as errant and theologically contradictory as its most hostile and skeptical readers believe it to be, and it does not change the fundamental historical fact that Jesus was on the side of the oppressed, therefore, for Christians, God is on the side of the oppressed.

⁴² Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 106.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 109.

CHAPTER TWO: PRAXIS

“Man’s social practice alone is the criterion of truth in his cognition of the external world, for in actuality human cognition is verified only when man arrives at the results predicted, through the process of social practice...Marxist philosophy, dialectical materialism...emphasizes the dependence of theory on practice, practice being the foundation of theory which in turn serves practice.” -Mao Zedong, On Practice

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.” -Matthew 7:15-20 (RSV)

The preceding chapter laid out a case for the central conceit of liberation theology based on scripture and history. But liberation theology is not a conceit; if it be relegated to academic arguments (whether based on scripture, history, or some other methodology) then it does not liberate and therefore is not liberation theology. The last chapter was groundwork; now we lay the foundation.

How does liberation theology liberate? To answer this question, we must first dispose of an understandable but dangerous misconception: liberation theology is not a philosophy or academic theory. It may (even should) utilize philosophy and academic theology, but philosophies do not liberate. As Marx famously wrote, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”⁴⁴ Liberation

⁴⁴ Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 15. Originally written in 1845.

theology cannot be defined around some nebulous concept of mental, emotional, or spiritual liberation; liberation is a temporal action, based on “a God who intervenes in history in order to break down the structures of injustice.”⁴⁵

The concept of God “intervening in history” is easy to misread in a supernatural sense. But liberation theology is located entirely in the material world, recognizing that humans “are agents of history, responsible for our own destiny... *Worldliness*, therefore, is a must, a necessary condition for an authentic relationship between humankind and nature, among human beings themselves, and finally, between humankind and God.”⁴⁶ Or, “it is the poor who must be the protagonists of their own liberation.”⁴⁷

This has been true since the beginnings of liberation theology. It was considered such a material threat to western capitalist hegemony that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sponsored a conference in the fall of 1985 to analyze the dangers it posed. “Of particular concern is the deliberate use of liberation theology by Marxist-Leninist groups to promote revolutionary change,” they wrote, still in the throes of the Cold War.⁴⁸ Their report is only partially-declassified but still provides crucial insights about how liberation theology is viewed by its opponents, those it condemns as oppressors. Liberation theology had, at that point, “played a role in helping the Sandinistas gain power in Nicaragua and, most recently, in aiding the growth of the insurgency in the Philippines.”⁴⁹ The threat of liberation theology is rooted in its ability to combine “two powerfully symbolic forces—Marxism and Christianity.” It is “openly anti-Western” and “identifies the United States and capitalism as primarily responsible for the impoverishment of the Third World.” While the report focuses primarily on the Latin

45 Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 69.

46 Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 42.

47 Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 67.

48 United States Central Intelligence Agency. *Liberation Theology: Religion, Reform, and Revolution: A Research Paper* (Office of Global Issues, April 1986). Declassified 11/18/2011. FOIA document number CIA-RDP97R00694R000600050001-9.

49 CIA, *Liberation Theology*, v. The “insurgency in the Philippines” is ongoing to this day, and of course the Sandinistas remain in power in Nicaragua through electoral victories.

American and therefore Catholic context, it recognizes that Protestant liberation theology is also a growing force, particularly in South Africa where “black nationalism is the driving force behind the recent call for a theology of liberation by a predominantly black group of 151 clergymen and theologians...Although divisions among black communities and the lack of a central religious authority work against the establishment of Latin American-style liberation theology, we believe the church’s involvement in the movement lends greater credibility to the black cause.”⁵⁰

While no mention is made of American black theology or Cone, the recognition of black liberation theology in opposition to white supremacy and apartheid in South Africa and rooted in Protestant Christianity is the connective tissue to his work. “This is because the condition in South Africa in 1986 was similar to the conditions in the United States in 1968...it was from [Cone’s] influence rather than from Latin America that liberation theology gained enormous reputation in Africa.”⁵¹

The details of exactly how and why two parallel codifications of liberation theology arose at almost the exact same moment in time in different parts of the world, representing two separate Christian traditions, deserves its own historical investigation. Even without such an investigation, however, it should tell us that liberation theology goes much deeper than a single historical moment or academic/theoretical tradition. That is because it is rooted not in ideas, but in *praxis*. Wherever Christianity exists alongside oppression, there will be liberation theology.

One element that partially explains the formal theorization of liberation theology at this time is its complex but crucial relationship with Marxism. Much of the 20th century was dominated by ideological, economic, and military struggles between the capitalist

50 CIA, *Liberation Theology*, 7. Note that “the black cause” they are referencing is the anti-apartheid movement.

51 O.U. Kalu, “James Cone’s Legacy in Africa: Confession as political praxis in the Kairos Document,” in *Verbum et Ecclesia* 27, no. 2 (Cape Town: AOSIS Open Journals, 2006), 582, 587.

and socialist blocs, with the United States at the head of the capitalist “first world” and the USSR or Soviet Union leading the socialist “second world.” The “Third World,” which included Latin America, included those nations that were not socialist and yet were not “developed” or industrialized in the way of the Western capitalist powers. This problem of “development,” as Gutierrez notes, characterized relations between Latin America and the capitalist bloc; Latin American nations were poor because they were “underdeveloped,” but through trade with Western nations, they could become “developed” and so escape from poverty. By the 1960’s, however, the entire concept had “become the object of severe criticism due both to the deficiencies of the development policies proposed to the poor countries to lead them out of their underdevelopment and also to the lack of concrete achievements of the interested governments.”⁵² The reality was that most of Latin America functioned as imperial subjects of Western monopoly capitalism: “Its major resources were controlled by foreign capital, which was allied with the local ruling classes whose status and wealth it protected.”⁵³ The masses of Latin America were waking up to this reality.

After over a century and a half of exposure to the capitalist class process, the masses have been, if not totally, then almost completely, proletarianized... Foreign aid programs with high-sounding goals, the pronouncements of concerned clergy, development programs launched with high hopes, the example

52 Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 16. Latin America remains “underdeveloped” to this day; for a broad neoclassical economic analysis, see Diego Restuccia, “The Latin American Development Problem: An Interpretation” in *Economía*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, Spring 2013). The article reveals the limitations of neoclassical economics in its narrow scope, contemptuously dismissing industrial policies “guided by non-economic factors” (such as social good); its appeal to the economic determinism that Marxism is often tarred with (“All countries go through a process of structural transformation whereby the agricultural sector is replaced in importance by the industrial sector and later by the service sector”); and especially in its locating the roots of “underdevelopment” in a productivity gulf between Latin America and the developed world. Because productivity in neoclassical economics is largely a function of capital investment, the argument is a tautology; Latin America is underdeveloped because it is underdeveloped. One recalls Michael Parenti’s observation that “these countries aren’t underdeveloped, they’re overexploited!”

53 Charles G. Pregger-Román, “Dependence, Underdevelopment, and Imperialism in Latin America: A Reappraisal” in *Science & Society*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (New York: Guilford Press, Winter 1983/1984), 423.

of Cuba, and the ever-constant contrast between great wealth and horrible poverty, have all contributed to the rising expectations of the Latin American masses regardless of their specific class position.⁵⁴

Under such conditions, Marxism offered a compelling alternative. Pregger-Román cites “the example of Cuba” which had successfully thrown off foreign domination in 1959 and embraced Marxism-Leninism by 1965.⁵⁵ Marxist political economy also offered a baked-in historical explanation of the imperialist reality of underdevelopment in Latin America that not only recognized the continuing impact of European colonization of the Americas on Latin America, but for the entire capitalist world system: “The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production,” wrote Marx in the first volume of *Capital*.⁵⁶

Gutierrez accepted the central social-scientific insights of Marxism without committing exclusively to Marxism as an ideology or to the Soviet interpretation of it; rather, he expressed a desire to inculcate “indigenous socialist paths” which employ Marxism but are not afraid to theoretically innovate, citing Peruvian Marxist Jose Carlos Mariategui (1894-1930) as a positive example for his rigorous adherence to Marxist theory without dogmatism. Then he writes: “However—and Mariategui predicted this—only a sufficiently broad, rich, and intense revolutionary *praxis*, with the participation of people of different viewpoints, can create the conditions for fruitful theory” (emphasis added).⁵⁷

54 Pregger-Román, “Dependence, Underdevelopment, and Imperialism in Latin America,” 424-425.

55 Fidel Castro, Cuba’s head of state, also came to wholeheartedly embrace and endorse liberation theology. See CIA, *Liberation Theology*, 9.

56 Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. I* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 751. Originally published in English in 1887. Note that this excerpt is not (merely) a moral condemnation of capitalist atrocities, but describes the process of “primitive accumulation” that allowed capitalism to come into being on a worldwide scale.

57 Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 56.

The word *praxis*, the title of this chapter, is the key to understanding what liberation theology is and how it works. The suffix “-ology” in English generally implies the “study of” something, usually in an academic setting, but this is misleading in the case of liberation theology. Liberation theology recognizes, as does Marxism, that practice precedes knowledge, which then reinforces and shapes further practice. That is the meaning of *praxis*, hence why liberation theology cannot be understood merely as an argument from scripture, history, or logic.

James Cone, no less than Gutierrez, makes the connection between this truth and Marxism explicit. “The importance of Marx for our purposes is his insistence that thought has no independence from social existence...A serious encounter with Marx will make theologians confess their limitations, their inability to say anything about God which is not at the same time a statement about the social context of their own existence.”⁵⁸ Additionally, “[The oppressed] are forced by the very nature of their condition to interpret their existence in the world contrary to the value-structures of the oppressive society...This is what Karl Marx has in mind in his definition of man as *praxis*.”⁵⁹

Marxism, like liberation theology, is all-encompassing, attempting to furnish a comprehensive ontology capable of analyzing everything from culture to economics to sociology to religion to history in relation to each other. But that is not the most important similarity between the two; like liberation theology, Marxism is not Marxism unless it is rooted in *praxis*. Marx himself recognized this, as has every major Marxist revolutionary since his time. It may be possible to speak of “marxian economics” (with a lowercase m) or “marxist philosophy” in isolation, but this distinction is what separates Marxist

58 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 39.

59 Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 162. Compare the preceding two quotations with Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 19. The importance of both of these theologians independently placing so much emphasis on this aspect of Marxism in their formulations of liberation theology cannot be overstated.

revolutionaries from small-m marxian academics. Cone would liken these marxian academics who use Marxism as an analytical tool untethered from any concrete social practice to white theologians who “have confused God-talk with white-talk, and thus have failed to see that there is no real speech about God except as he is participating in the liberation of the oppressed;”⁶⁰ whose work is little more than “a bourgeois exercise in intellectual masturbation.”⁶¹ Just as there is no liberation theology without concrete participation in the material liberation of the oppressed, we can say that there is no Marxist theory without concrete Marxist practice to bring about socialist revolution. Or, to put it another way, liberation theology is to theology as Marxism is to social theory. Both may and often should confront and integrate insights from other theories, but only after these other theories are tested through the praxis of liberation.

This insight allows us to go further in reconciling Marxism and liberation theology than either Cone or Gutierrez were able, or willing, to. Both wrote in the context of a Cold War that decisively shaped both public and intellectual conceptions of what Marxism was or could be; hence both viewed Marxism as too narrowly focused on economic and class issues. It is understandable why Gutierrez would introduce without committing to Sartre’s notion that “Marxism, as the formal framework of all contemporary philosophical thought, cannot be superseded,”⁶² and Cone was not wrong that “the problem of oppression is much more complex than Marx knew.”⁶³ Yet *Marxism* is the ever-evolving science of class struggle, the historical process by which the oppressed liberate themselves; it has proven capable of integrating theories of racism, patriarchy, and all other forms of social injustice within its framework. It also has a proven track record of allying itself with liberation struggles, such as when the Communist party was the *only* group to defend

60 Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 153.

61 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 43.

62 Quoted in Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 8.

63 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 43.

the rights of Palestinians for much of the 20th century.⁶⁴ Therefore this work argues for an even greater unity between liberation theology and Marxism; they are in a sense two manifestations of the same idea, one religious and one scientific, and even that distinction need not be as rigid as is usually thought.

The association between Marxism and liberation theology is controversial, indeed being one of the primary objections raised by the Vatican to theologians like Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff. Future-pope Ratzinger warned in 1986 that “more often than not the just demands of the worker movement have led to new forms of servitude, being inspired by concepts which ignored the transcendental vocation of the human person and attributed to man a purely earthly destiny. These demands have sometimes been directed towards collectivist goals, which have then given rise to injustices just as grave as the ones which they were meant to eliminate.”⁶⁵ The latter objection is essentially the favorite tactic of the Western bourgeoisie, namely that socialist projects such as the USSR have been “totalitarian.” While this objection is certainly not irrelevant to anyone advocating Marxism in any way, and while I hesitate to leave this stone unturned in an era of the highest anti-communist sentiment since the end of the Cold War,⁶⁶ responding to every facet of the Western narrative about “actually-existing socialism” and socialist states is outside the scope of the present work. For now, let it be said that the Western narrative of communism as a “totalitarian” or anti-democratic ideology uniquely culpable for every death that occurs in countries which follow it is so shot through with

64 Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice, and only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 56.

65 Joseph Card. Ratzinger, “Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation” (Vatican: the Holy See, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, March 22, 1986). Vatican Website: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19860322_freedom-liberation_en.html Accessed 3/18/2023. The Vatican had earlier published *Libertatis Nuntius*, an explicit repudiation of liberation theology.

66 As example, see the United States House of Representatives passing a resolution (H.Con.Res.9) in February 2023 that does nothing other than denounce “the horrors of socialism,” including uncritically repeating the much-maligned “100,000,000 people killed” figure from The Black Book of Communism, during a time period in which the United States itself was experiencing massive inflation, over a million deaths from Covid-19 alone, increasing austerity and poverty, and civil unrest the likes of which it had not experienced since the 1960s.

propaganda that to dismiss Marxism on that basis alone is intellectual cowardice.⁶⁷

Ratzinger's other objection, that Marxism (and, presumably, other leftist theories which "inspired" the worker's movement) "ignored the transcendental vocation of the human person and attributed to man a purely earthly destiny" is more interesting and relevant. Ratzinger, representing the official Vatican position, writes that freedom comes not from advances in material things such as science or economics, but simply "sharing in the knowledge of God...They [the oppressed] know that they are loved by God, the same as all other people and more than all other people. They thus live in the freedom which flows from truth and love."⁶⁸ Both Cone and Gutierrez have already anticipated this position. Ratzinger is speaking of orthodoxy, "correct belief," "the truth and love revealed to men by Jesus Christ." Yet it is precisely this attitude that Gutierrez had in mind when he wrote of orthopraxis and the need to "reject the primacy and almost exclusiveness which doctrine has enjoyed in Christian life and above all to modify the emphasis, often obsessive, upon the attainment of an orthodoxy which is often nothing more than fidelity to an obsolete tradition or a debatable interpretation."⁶⁹ Ratzinger writes of sin and salvation in the context of freedom, but it is a completely internal, abstract form of freedom; positive liberty for him comes not from justice in the world, but from this banal truth supposedly revealed by Jesus Christ.⁷⁰ Sin, then, is simply rejecting this truth and placing oneself on the level of God by a "desire [for] everything and to be

67 For how communism became associated with the word "totalitarian" see Les K. Adler and Thomas G. Paterson, "Red Fascism: The Merger of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in the American Image of Totalitarianism, 1930's-1950's" in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (April 1970), pp. 1046-1064. Essentially, the word "totalitarian" served to abstract the differences between communism and Nazism during the Cold War, when the United States government found it useful and necessary to ideologically explain why its one-time ally against the Nazis (the Soviet Union) had become its primary geopolitical enemy. Adler and Paterson call the analogy between the two "crude and superficial," yet it continues to be influential, for example in the House resolution mentioned in the previous note.

68 Ratzinger, "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation."

69 Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 8.

70 It is meaningful that the vast majority of gospel citations Ratzinger employs in linking this supposed "truth" with Jesus Christ come from the gospel of John, which is by far the least connected to the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. His in-text gospel citations cite John seven times, Matthew three times, Luke once, and never Mark.

able to do everything,” which then leads to one joining the “unjust structures” of the world, “contributing to the creation of those very structures of exploitation and slavery which he claims to condemn.” In this formulation there is nothing to *do* about these unjust structures, other than simply not join them. The poor are to be freed from poverty “as completely as possible,” but how possible is this? Ratzinger does not say, but for him, Christian practice is “putting into practice of the great commandment of love;” reform of structures flows from this (but how?) The “myth of revolution” is condemned (again, because it supposedly leads to “totalitarianism”) while reform is prized, though Gutierrez has already identified the basic but key observation that reformism “perpetuates the existing system,” and further that reformist efforts had already failed in Latin America.⁷¹ Near the end Ratzinger appeals to the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) to present Jesus’s mother Mary as the “most perfect image of freedom” because she “believed.” It is deeply ironic that he includes none of what Mary actually says in her famous canticle, probably because including her declaration that God “has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty” (Lk. 1:52-53) would render his entire argument laughable. Mary is a model of Christian piety and virtue, as long as she is silent, of course; here we see a modern manifestation of what Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza calls “the historical-theological marginality of women.”⁷²

While Ratzinger is of course in dialogue with Gutierrez and other Latin American liberation theologians, his general point of view is also answered by Cone (inasmuch as his objections even apply to Cone’s theories, emerging from the Protestant tradition as they do). Ratzinger’s objections presuppose a sort of reactionary universalism, where the meaning of salvation applies equally to all people, oppressed and oppressors alike,

⁷¹ Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 31, 54.

⁷² Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1986), 43.

and thus flattens the meaning of liberation. On the contrary, Cone insists, there is no “universal God” because “God is black...God did not become a universal man but an oppressed Jew...Christ is not a man for all people; he is a man for oppressed people whose identity is made known in and through their liberation.”⁷³ Cone does not deny that salvation comes from believing in Christ; the difference is in what that means in concrete terms. “It is not something we accomplish; it is a gift...To believe is to receive the gift and utterly to reorient one’s existence on the basis of the gift. The gift is so unlike what humans expect that when it is offered and accepted, we become completely new creatures.”⁷⁴ For Ratzinger, the divine gift makes humans like God only “to the extent that he recognizes that truth and love are at the same time the principle and the purpose of his freedom” (in a completely abstract sense) whereas for Cone, “to receive his revelation is to become black with him by joining him in his work of liberation.”⁷⁵ The gift of belief has no meaning or expression outside of liberatory praxis.

The two sides have reached an impasse; the Catholic Church and white theologians assert one meaning of salvation and liberation; Gutierrez and Cone (and their followers) assert a competing one, and the process repeats. What is important is that long-established religious authorities such as the Vatican have not and likely will not accept liberation theology.⁷⁶ Even if they claim to incorporate aspects of it, remember that liberation theology is not an academic theory but *praxis*; Ratzinger’s response certainly pays enough lip service to the concept of liberation, but without active participation in the historical process of the liberation of the oppressed, it cannot be liberation theology.

The fundamental problem here that both sides occasionally dance around but

⁷³ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 156-157.

⁷⁴ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 125.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ The Vatican under Pope Francis has made some overtures towards reconciliation with Gutierrez specifically in recent years, but is still far from openly embracing liberation theology.

cannot ignore is the contradiction between *worldliness* and *otherworldliness*. Traditional Christian orthodoxy has always conceptualized salvation around otherworldliness; while in modern times the Church has made efforts to recognize *this world* “as autonomous, distinct from the Church and having its own ends,”⁷⁷ Ratzinger’s response makes it clear that the lingering primacy of the *other world* relegates liberation from oppression in this world a secondary concern at best.

Yet Marxism is fundamentally concerned with *this world* and even denies that the *other world* exists. Marx’s famous quote about religion as “the opiate of the masses” is a recognition that “truth belongs to *this world*, but is concealed by the *world beyond*...The tasks of history and philosophy are thus framed so as not simply to analyze this world instead of the ‘other world’...but to analyze this world from the perspective of *this world* (materialist perspective)...”⁷⁸

This is why liberation theology has tended to *use* Marxism, but not *adopt* Marxism. While Christopher Rowland’s claim that liberation theology “has never been greatly indebted to Marxism”⁷⁹ is dubious (it does not account for indirect influence by way of other theorists; for example, both Gutierrez and Cone make use of Sartre, who was influenced by Marxism), it is true that, in general, “liberation theologians...propose to ally themselves only with Marxism as to an instrument of the ‘analysis’ of the structures of oppression in the Third World...”⁸⁰ Leaving aside the validity of this as a defense of combining Marxism with theology (it has certainly not prevented the liberation theologians from being attacked as Marxists by their opponents), it is worth asking if this

77 Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 37.

78 Christina Petterson, “Apostles of Revolution? Marxism and Biblical Studies” in *Biblical Interpretation* Vol. 4, No. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 23. Emphasis added.

79 Christopher Rowland, “Foreword to the Second Edition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xiii.

80 Denys Turner, “Marxism, liberation theology and the way of negation” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 231-232.

need be the case. We have thus far focused our investigation of liberation theology primarily on Gutierrez and Cone, whose work dates to the late 1960's and early 1970's. I recognize that liberation theology has grown and expanded since their time, but if we take liberation theology seriously on its own terms, then we must admit that in the half-century or so since Gutierrez and Cone wrote these foundational works, liberation theology has still not exceeded them in *praxis*.

Liberation theology has paradoxically become what it cannot be: an academic debate, a philosophical-theological terrain to be argued over within the pages of books such as the *Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*. The CIA noted in 1986 that, due to a confluence of factors including ideological repression from the Vatican and the stagnation of revolutionary movements, "the more radical precepts of liberation theology have begun to lose their attraction. We expect this trend to continue."⁸¹ By 2002, Anthony Gill observed that it "did not live up to its promises," had become "primarily an intellectual movement," and, most concerning for those who believe in the promise of liberation theology, that it "seeks to mobilize people based on a commitment to a theology rather than for material gains."⁸² Argentine theologian Ivan Petrella writes that novel projects bearing the liberation theology name, such as Latina liberation theology, have a stunted conception of liberation that "makes scarcely visible either global poverty or the poverty of the vast majority of Latinas..." and exemplify a bastardization of liberation that applies only to the middle-class.⁸³ Likewise, liberation theologies developed in North America "share an inability to place real material liberation at the forefront of their task."⁸⁴ This is because they lack praxis. They fail to give "the same emphasis to the construction of historical projects that one does to the preservation of

81 CIA, *Liberation Theology*, 10.

82 Anthony Gill, "The Study of Liberation Theology: What Next?" in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (New York: Wiley, March 2002), pp. 87-89.

83 Ivan Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology: an Argument and Manifesto* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 134.

84 Petrella, *Future of Liberation Theology*, 147.

theological and identity purity;" they fail to ask the question, "what will make theology liberative to the materially poor?"⁸⁵ No wonder indeed, then, that liberation theology is thought to be dead.

It need not be this way. There *are* still Christians participating in liberation struggles around the world, such as within the National Democratic movement in the Philippines. There are historical projects of liberation unfolding in every part of the world in various stages of advancement. The God of the oppressed has not stopped acting to liberate His or Her or Their or Its (take your pick) people; what has happened is that the so-called theologians have become disconnected, ensconced in a neoliberal, late-capitalist, bourgeois consensus that, until recently, viewed Marxism (the only historical liberation project worthy of the name) with quaint contempt. Alistair Kee boldly proclaimed in 1990, "...theology of liberation is widely assumed to be too Marxist: in reality it is not Marxist enough."⁸⁶ Capitulation to the anticommunist and anti-Marxist forces of the debate around liberation theology has served only to unmoor the concept from its essence; this suggests that a reorientation (even repentance) that maintains continuity with liberation theology as described by Cone and Gutierrez (and others) while also advancing beyond them is in order.

In a lecture on Marx, Dr. Michael Sugrue uses liberation theology as evidence of "the ghost of metaphysics, rattling its chains" within materialist Marxism.⁸⁷ He refers to Marxism's proclamation of a communist future, a state of being transcending class society and by extension all forms of oppression.

Ultimately, you're going to have to choose either or. You're going to be a naturalist or a metaphysician, it's very hard to be both. If you want the naturalism, you can keep the laws of history...that's the naturalistic [materialist] element in Marx. If you want to believe that history has a progressive tendency, is the

85 *Ibid.*

86 Alistair Kee. *Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1990), ix.

87 Michael Sugrue, "Marx and the Problem of Alienation and Ideology," *Great Minds*, Part 4, Youtube Video, 45:11, posted by Michael Sugrue, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDY5vuMW90s> . Relevant section begins at 40:20.

gradual realization of human liberation...that there is an endpoint to the process of human development, you can't do that without metaphysics. It's implicitly Hegelian...

It is on this contradictory basis, according to Dr. Sugrue, that liberation theology rests. Liberation theology indeed posits, to one degree or another, in one language or another, that history is "the gradual realization of human liberation." "History is the immanent character of liberation; it is the project of freedom," writes Cone.⁸⁸ For Gutierrez it is "the becoming of humankind as a process of human emancipation in history. It is to see humanity in search of a qualitatively different society in which it will be free from all servitude..."⁸⁹

But this conviction, it is alleged, returns us to Hegelianism, which Marx attempted to decisively rupture from. To adopt Marxism into liberation theology is to distort materialism back to idealism; on the other hand, excising the idealism distorts liberation theology into no longer fundamentally being about finding God in the historical process of liberation (indeed there *is no* historical process of liberation).

Liberation theology must solve this problem if it is to avoid the mistakes of the past. Thankfully, the problem is not so great as it seems, and the groundwork is already done; liberation theology and Marxism can be comfortably synthesized, without diminishing either, through existentialism.

The problem we are solving relates to the contradiction between opposing views of the world: materialism/idealism (Marx); naturalism/metaphysics (Sugrue); earth/heaven (Cone); temporal/spiritual or profane/sacred or natural/supernatural (Gutierrez). These different terms all describe roughly the same concepts, at least in the scope of the current discussion. But the problem is not really so great of a problem because, while Marxism *cannot* discard materialism, liberation theology *need not* contain

88 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 139.

89 Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 56.

idealism. More specifically, the central claim of liberation theology, that God is on the side of the oppressed and known through engagement in the historical praxis of liberation, need not be idealist.

The dominant attitude towards the dichotomy in the Catholic church “is to stress the unity which eliminates all dualism.”⁹⁰ Centuries of theological debate climaxed in “a fruitful return to the original thought of Thomas Aquinas...But this is still to consider it on a metaphysical, abstract, and essentialist level, involving moreover complicated and ultimately fruitless academic arguments.”⁹¹ These arguments are attempting to do the impossible, to fix human nature and the character of God through rational argumentation or analysis. Recall this chapter’s epigraph about fruit. To push past this problem, Gutierrez writes, requires “the *historical and existential* viewpoint” (emphasis original):

In reality there is no pure nature and there never has been; there is no one who is not invited to communion with the Lord, no one who is not affected by grace... This affirmation of the single vocation to salvation, beyond all distinctions, gives religious value in a completely new way to human action in history, Christian and non-Christian alike. The building of a just society has worth in terms of the Kingdom, or in more current phraseology, to participate in the process of liberation is already, in a certain sense, a salvific work.⁹²

Cone makes more extensive use of Sartre’s existentialism, particularly the concept of “forlornness.”⁹³ Forlornness stems from the recognition that neither God nor universal ethics exist as *things-in-themselves*,⁹⁴ things that can be identified apart from our own beliefs and perceptions. Forlornness means “only that God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences of this.”⁹⁵ Thus man is “condemned to make

90 Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 43.

91 Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 44.

92 Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 44, 46.

93 Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 180.

94 More will be said about this in Chapter Eight; for now just know that I am *not* using this term in a precisely Kantian manner.

95 Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism,” in Edgar E. Knoebel, ed., *Classics of Western Thought*, Vol. III, Fourth edition (Boston: Wadsworth Thomson Learning, 1988), 622.

his choices without any assurances.”⁹⁶ This seems at first like a negation of everything we have read from Cone thus far, but wait, because “He chooses his existence.”

...forlornness is especially appropriate for the oppressed. Oppression means that the society has defined truth in terms of human slavery; and liberation means the denial of that truth. The God of the society must be destroyed so that the oppressed can define existence in accordance with their liberation. In the moment of liberation, there are no universal truths; there is only the truth of liberation itself, which the oppressed themselves define in the struggle for freedom. To be forlorn is to accept the task of choosing humanity [liberation] without any certainty beyond the existing moment.⁹⁷

Or, to paraphrase Sartre himself, “Will [socialism], as such, ever come about? I know nothing about it. All I know is that I'm going to do everything in my power to bring it about.”⁹⁸

It is on this existential basis that liberation theology's central conceit, that God is at work in the historical process of liberation, can be safely integrated into a Marxist, historical materialist worldview. Liberation theology should not, *must not*, forsake the science of dialectical and historical materialism, for it is the science of liberation. In fact, if dialectical and historical materialism are essential tools for liberation of the oppressed, then liberation theology *can not* do without them, because to do so would be to subsume the actual concrete praxis of liberation in the name of theological orthodoxy, which merely returns us to the error we have already discussed that is partially at fault for liberation theology's decline and marginalization in recent decades.

Sugrue claims that liberation theology "is totally incoherent" if you accept a "naturalistic" (materialist) Marxism, but this is only correct if Marxism is discarded entirely. In fact, if Marxism is the historical praxis of liberation (and for all intents and purposes I contend that it is), then liberation theology is totally incoherent *without*

96 Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 180. Later editions of *A Black Theology of Liberation* make an effort to de-gender the language of sections like this; I have retained the original language of the edition I used for simplicity's sake.

97 Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 180.

98 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," 627. It is worth noting that Sartre would eventually distance himself from Marxism.

Marxism, materialism and all. Any apparent contradiction that would seem to render them incompatible is located entirely within belief, orthodoxy—in other words, in the realm of idealism. But if we are to be materialists, not idealists, then this *does not matter*. We can choose to be Marxists in the sense of engaging in the *praxis* of Marxism; and we can simultaneously choose to be Christians in the sense of engaging in the *praxis* of Christianity; in fact, these are identical, for both simply mean liberation of the oppressed. That is what liberation theology means. That choice becomes reality. If someone objects, saying that the ideas or beliefs of Marxism and Christianity are in conflict, our response is to restate that we are materialists, not idealists, so the seeming contradiction does not actually exist. If dialectical materialism is a science, then its truthfulness is not rooted in the purity of any individual's thoughts about it; we can simply choose to practice scientific Marxist analysis of reality while also making teleological arguments for revolution and liberation. It does not matter if these are thought to be incompatible on an ideological level, because again, we are *not* idealists. We discern the truth of the matter based on social practice, on the fruits that it bears. If it helps to materially liberate the oppressed, then it is correct.

Certainly a revolutionary or liberation theologian (I use *theologian* here to highlight the difference between praxis and academic theory) is open to “no true Scotsman”-style denunciations and dismissals from both Marxists and Christians, but to insist that someone engaged in praxis is *not* what they say they are, simply because of an idea that may or may not exist in their head, is sheer dogmatism. As Lenin once said, “We cannot refuse to recognise what actually exists; it will itself compel us to recognise it.”⁹⁹

So we must recognize both that liberation theology is stuck in the quagmire of bourgeois academia, and that simultaneously the historical process of liberation has

99 V.I. Lenin, “Report on the Party Programme,” *Eighth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), Verbatim Report*, in *Lenin's Collected Works*, 4th English Edition, Vol. 29, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), pp. 141-225. Courtesy of Marxists Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/rcp8th/03.htm>

continued on without it. Liberation theology must be made to recapture its essence as *praxis*, rather than theory alone; when theory is written, it must be based in concrete praxis, either historical or contemporary. The purpose of this work, which should hopefully be starting to come into view by now, is to see John Brown as a concrete example of praxis in liberation theology. To do this, I will introduce and develop what I call *theological history*, a way of doing history that is rooted in liberation theology. My hope is that this method (which I am giving a name and structure to, but I did not invent out of whole cloth) will give earnest academics (both historians and theologians) a useful way of writing liberation theology that is rooted in concrete praxis. However, this is no substitute for the would-be liberation theologian stepping outside the academy and actively participating in the current struggle for liberation. There is a dearth of liberation theology rooted in concrete *praxis*. There are too many tenured professors, and too few Camilo Torreses. The theological disputes discussed in this chapter will not be solved in the pages of journals or monographs, nor on the debate stage, nor even in the pulpit. They must be hammered out on the battlefield with revolutionaries waging armed struggle against despotic governments; on the streets with antifascists facing down armed reactionaries and the police that protect them; in the slums and favelas and ghettos of the world among the destitute to whom are promised the great banquet that is the kingdom of God.

CHAPTER THREE: THEOLOGICAL HISTORY

"Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told." -Habakkuk 1:5 (RSV)

This chapter posits what I call *theological history*, where a historical figure or event is analyzed, using all of the tools available to historians, with liberation theology in mind. That is to say, the historian looks at the person or event in order to determine *how* God's liberation of the oppressed is manifested in that event, or in that person's deeds. The results can then be fed back into the concrete praxis of liberation theology.

If the argument of the previous chapter is to be proven correct, then liberation theologians must be actively engaged in the historical process of liberation. But how to do this, when liberation theology has strayed so far from its roots, is stuck in the rut of liberal academia?

The most obvious answer, of course, is to simply join liberation struggles, whether that be something like the National Democratic movement in the Philippines; the struggle against police brutality in the United States; or the emerging anti-fascist response to the surge in repression of transgender people across much of the Western world. Worthy causes are all around, for wherever there is oppression, there arises the liberation struggle to negate it. This is not a matter of ideology or morality, not a matter of what causes one supports in one's own mind: "We do not simply ask 'What would Jesus do?' as if he is an ethical principle...We ask, 'What is he doing *now* in America and elsewhere to heal the sick and to liberate the prisoners?'"¹⁰⁰ When a Christian (or anyone, really) is motivated by God to participate in the historical process of liberation, they are *doing* liberation theology.

To begin with a caveat—of course the primary task of liberation theology is to join the struggle for liberation. This must be stressed because, despite extolling material

100 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 191.

political action on behalf of the oppressed and casting aspersions on academia, this work is an academic work.

So, of course, we cannot discount entirely the practice of *theorizing*, of thinking through and writing down ideas that serve to elucidate, clarify, challenge, craft, motivate, and inspire. But this work cannot be an end unto itself; nor can it substitute for material action.

That said, *theological history* is necessary to invigorate the theory that liberation theology produces by expanding the pool of experience from which to refine praxis and incorporating other academic disciplines, especially history; doing so will help it to avoid “the Scylla of being considered ephemeral, lightweight...substituting a biased kind of activism for solid theology” while the participation in real liberation struggles will likewise ward off “the Charybdis of being accused of over-intellectualising, of losing touch with the grassroots...”¹⁰¹ Liberation theology must engage with history specifically because the Christian story of liberation emerges from God’s decisive intervention in history (the Exodus) and in God’s own entry into history in the particular form of Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁰² History is the only basis by which the Christian can make “faith-statements,” such as the ultimate faith-statement of liberation theology, that God is on the side of the oppressed and for their liberation. Faith-statements,

are transcendental statements, and thus limit-statements, not directly accessible to human understanding. Calling them limit-statements does not mean that the things they talk about are meaningless, but it does mean that to have any knowledge of them, to be able to conceptualize and formulate them with a minimum of meaning, requires prior experience of historical realities...

The statement that Jesus is Christ, that he is the expression of what is truly divine and truly human, are limit-statements which, of their nature, require a process of

101 Mary Grey, “Feminist theology: a critical theology of liberation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 111.

102 Recall again that the actual historicity of the Exodus is not actually relevant, nor is whether the historical Jesus actually claimed divinity for himself—the point is that these are the symbolic and essential conceits of all of Christianity, the hinges of all other aspects of the faith.

understanding...without this prior process what is confessed in faith would not have any describable meaning. Therefore in scripture transcendental limit-statements come preceded by historical statements. For example, in the canticle of Moses, God is referred to as essentially a liberator (a limit-statement), but this profession of faith comes preceded by the fact of the liberation from Egypt...to make a meaningful limit-statement that God is a liberator, there must exist a prior phenomenon, liberation from Egypt.¹⁰³

History can be viewed holistically, as the historical process that includes the present and so favors material action in the here and now, but the purpose of this work is to demonstrate that historical knowledge of the past can also aid in the process of understanding that allows us to give meaning to the faith-statement that God is a god of liberation. This method of history also feeds into the concrete praxis of liberation theology. This may seem counterintuitive at first because it is rooted in a historical event or figure (in our case, John Brown) rather than the liberation theologian's participation in changing reality, but the Marxist theory of knowledge understands that "All knowledge originates from direct experience. But no one can directly experience everything...And what is indirectly experienced by one is nevertheless directly experienced by others."¹⁰⁴ Thus the historian here functions not as the repository of experience and praxis, but as its transmitter; the work of theological history is to use the concrete experience of events and historical figures who participated in the world-historic struggle for liberation to refine contemporary liberatory praxis. Even in this secondary function, the theological historian must have some basis in liberatory praxis, or else the whole endeavor is in question, but in the final analysis it is the *subject* of theological history whose praxis is paramount.

Theological history, it should be noted, is not the same thing as historical theology. Historical theology is academic theology and/or history that considers "how Christian doctrine developed over time;"¹⁰⁵ it is essentially the history of theology. Theological history, on the other hand, is history done through the lens of liberation

103 Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 37-38.

104 Mao Zedong, *On Practice: On the Relation Between Knowledge and Practice, Between Knowing and Doing* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1966), 6-7.

105 Ateek, *Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 12.

theology specifically. Other forms of theology might be used to do superficially similar work, but would have to sacrifice history itself in the attempt. This is because, from a theological perspective, history has no meaning other than God's presence in the historical process of liberation. Liberation theology is uniquely based in history, and so is the only theology that can be meaningfully applied to this purpose. *Theological history* is *always* liberation theology. Hence, again, why its synthesis with Marxism is necessary; Marxism recognizes scientifically what liberation theology recognizes spiritually about history. Historical materialism provides "a theoretical foundation for interpreting the world in order to change it,"¹⁰⁶ liberation theology merely identifies that work with the will of God.

Theological history is not a strictly novel idea. The Hebrew prophets practiced something like it (or, like a proto-version of it) when they interpreted historical events in light of Yahweh's commitment to liberation; consider this chapter's epigraph, from Habakkuk. The book of Habakkuk takes the historical reality of Assyrian and/or Babylonian domination and conquest, and extracts meaning from it by ascribing the historical event to Yahweh's identification with the oppressed. "Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is slacked and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous, so justice goes forth perverted," laments the prophet of the state of Judea.¹⁰⁷ Yahweh's reply, that he is "rousing the Chalde'ans," is likely part of an Exilic compositional layer that sought to explain Jerusalem's capture as punishment for its sin of injustice.¹⁰⁸ The prophet ends with a declaration of faith, recognizing "Yahweh's involvement in history,"¹⁰⁹ in which he defeated those "who came

106 Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing historical materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 19.

107 Habakkuk 1:3-4 (RSV).

108 Habakkuk, no less than any other biblical text, is a complex document with multiple compositional layers and an uncertain pedigree. See David J. Fuller, *A Discourse Analysis of Habakkuk* (Leiden: Brill, 2020) for a relatively exhaustive analysis.

109 Fuller, *Discourse Analysis of Habakkuk*, 7.

like a whirlwind to scatter me, rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret.”¹¹⁰

It must be acknowledged of course that Habakkuk is not *doing history*, much less what I call theological history, merely interpreting historical events theologically. Any Christian can do that, and even come to the superficially liberatory conclusion that the event argues that God cares about the poor. The point is merely to demonstrate that drawing theological meaning from history is a biblical tradition; to go beyond this to *theological history* requires use of the modern historian’s tools and methods.

The most obvious potential candidate for the work of theological history is, of course, the historical Jesus of Nazareth; Sobrino’s *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (1993) stands as the most notable historical reconstruction of Jesus from a liberation theologian. It was in fact during the writing of my own book on Jesus that I began thinking about how exactly the writing of history can be made a liberatory act, or at least contribute to liberatory acts. But Jesus is somewhat of an outlier as a historical figure due to the unique nature of the sources for his historical life.¹¹¹ Because studies of the historical Jesus are to a large degree distinct from other historical writing, these types of investigations, valuable as they are, are of less help constructing theological history.

The liberation theologian whose work is the closest to being proto-theological history in the sense that I am using the term is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, especially her 1983 magnum opus *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (1983). While lacking the historical materialist perspective, Fiorenza expertly combined historical-critical methods with theological reflection, specifically on the question of the oppression and marginalization of women. Feminist theology must be

110 Habakkuk 3:14 (RSV).

111 The Pauline epistles and the synoptic gospels, the two main sources for knowledge about the historical Jesus, are generally considered to be secondary sources drawing on oral histories. Additionally, the texts as we have them show evidence of successive textual redaction, requiring specialized historiographic methods to glean any reliable information from.

a theology of liberation, she argued, and as with all liberation theology, it “presupposes as well as has for its goal an emancipatory ecclesial and theological praxis.”¹¹² Just as with Cone and Gutierrez, Fiorenza’s feminist liberation theology *begins with praxis* in order to refine further praxis.¹¹³

There is still the problem of Fiorenza’s historical subject—Christian origins—having particular historiographic problems that make it tricky to extrapolate to other historical events.¹¹⁴ But these are far from insurmountable, and besides we should not expect the seeds of something called theological history to germinate anywhere but in the most decisive moments when God has revealed his/her/their/its liberatory work in history. The claim here is not that Schussler-Fiorenza’s work is what I am calling *theological history*; just that it is a precursor to my understanding of it.

We will return to *In Memory of Her* in a moment. First, I describe the general process of theological history, based primarily in Marxist theory and philosophy of knowledge.

1.) *Social investigation/class analysis (SICA)*

Marxist revolutionaries engaging in mass work usually begin with a process of social investigation and class analysis.¹¹⁵ I wish to be clear from the jump that I am

112 Fiorenza, “Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation,” 612.

113 I do not mean to claim that Fiorenza’s work is politically radical—politically she is less radical than Cone or the Latin American liberation theologians, and her work is directed more towards liberation of theology itself, and ecclesiastic structures, than the world as a whole (although as a feminist she is passionate about women’s liberation in the wider world as well). For example, she claims that feminist theology is “more radical and universal” than other forms of liberation theology, but also writes “feminist theology correctly maintains that it is not enough to include some token women in the male-dominated theological and ecclesial structures. What is necessary is the humanization of these structures themselves” (Fiorenza, “Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation,” 617, 615.) What we are interested in here, however, is her historical-theological methods, not her politics or the scope of her project.

114 For a brief explanation of the methodological problems presented by the history of earliest Christianity, see the introduction to Chapter Two in James D.G. Dunn and Scot McKnight, eds., *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 87-89.

115 For the paradigmatic example of Marxist class analysis, see Mao Zedong, “Analysis of the

adapting the process of SICA for an academic setting, not mechanistically transferring it whole-cloth. In practical mass work, SICA allows revolutionaries to determine who among the masses is most receptive to their organizational efforts and who they are likely to encounter hostility from; it is also crucial for defining and forming a clear strategy towards “the problem we would like to address or solve.”¹¹⁶

SICA specifies *class* because in the materialist conception of history, “the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle.”¹¹⁷ However, SICA is broadly “the investigation of the conditions of society,” and thus takes into account factors such as culture, material conditions such as geography, and other social contradictions such as racism and sexism, particular political conditions, and historical context.

The implication for doing history is that historical analysis and reconstruction should begin with a thorough investigation of the social and material conditions affecting the person or event being studied. John Dominic Crossan calls this the “matrix” of a given historical text or idea; it is “the background you cannot skip, the context you cannot avoid,” the situation of history “within its own time and place.”¹¹⁸ Schussler-Fiorenza does extensive SICA (not under that name, of course) in her elucidation of “The Jesus Movement as Renewal Movement Within Judaism.” Extensive background information and analysis is given for not only the Jesus movement, but the Qumran community/Essenes, John the Baptist, the Zealots, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Greeks and Romans, the political situation of 1st-century Palestine, the development of Classes in Chinese Society,” *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung, Vol. I* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), pp. 13-21.

116 The three functions of mass work are 1.) to form “organs of democratic political power” that will eventually function as dual power (Lenin); 2.) to win support among the masses of the population for popular rebellion or people’s war (Mao); and 3.) to establish broad support for the formation of a Communist Party. See Communist Party of the Philippines, “Mass Work.” *The Mass Line*. Undated, mid-1990’s. <https://www.massline.info/Philippines/masswork.htm> Accessed 3/16/2023.

117 This is the very first sentence of *The Communist Manifesto*; consult whatever edition of that book you like.

118 Crossan, *How to Read the Bible*, 236.

the biblical canon, etc, all as it relates to her central historical theme of the early Jesus movement as a Jewish renewal movement, but also her theological theme of feminist praxis and liberation in opposition to patriarchal theology and tradition. She most directly engages in “social investigation and *class* analysis” in the discussion of the frequent Gospel theme of “tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes;”¹¹⁹ tax collectors and prostitutes are both specifically defined by their relationships to their society’s mode of production and distribution. Modern people are generally familiar with what prostitution is, and it was not so different in antiquity; women who were excluded from the patriarchal marriage system they depended on for subsistence in an agrarian slave economy and were thus forced into the “dishonorable” profession that nonetheless is “an essential function of patriarchy.”¹²⁰ Tax collectors had a particular role in the 1st-century Roman empire that is obscure to modern readers; Schussler-Fiorenza explores their exact class position and why they were viewed by many Jews as ritually impure as well as “often hated as agents of Rome’s colonial power.”¹²¹ After investigating the historical-material conditions of these categories of people,¹²² Schussler-Fiorenza connects them with the liberatory praxis of the Jesus movement through textual analysis, and then to the later androcentric church tradition that her work seeks to counter. This is far from the entirety of her historical analysis of the Jesus movement; nor is it the only example of what I would call historical *SICA* in this part of her work as there are many other class and

119 Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 127-130.

120 Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 127. For a historical materialist view of prostitution as an inherent feature of class society, especially in antiquity, see Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, originally published 1884, trans. Alick West (London: Penguin Classics, 2010), 97-98: “With the rise of the inequality of property...wage labour appears sporadically side by side with slave labour, and at the same time, as its necessary correlate, the professional prostitution of free women...[which] continues the old sexual freedom—to the advantage of the men. Actually, not merely tolerated but gaily practised by the ruling classes particularly, it is condemned in words. In reality this condemnation never falls on the men concerned, but only on the women; they are despised and outcast in order that the unconditional supremacy of men over the female sex may be once more proclaimed as a fundamental law of society.”

121 Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 128.

122 “Sinner” is a much more abstract category than the former two, but she does expound on it to the degree that is possible (it includes the former two categories as well as others).

social dynamics to consider relevant to the Jesus movement. As an example, however, it demonstrates how social investigation and class analysis are required for authentic and historically sound conclusions about the distant past.¹²³

SICA comes first because, to quote Mao, “When you have not probed into a problem, into the present facts and its past history, and know nothing of its essentials, whatever you say about it will undoubtedly be nonsense.”¹²⁴ Like many of Mao’s statements, the first-glance obviousness of this one masks a deeper truth: there *is* meaning to the work that we do; it is *not* nonsense, provided that we have done our investigation.

So the first step in theological history is to conduct class analysis and social investigation on the time period we are reconstructing, as is relevant to the event or person in question. For John Brown, this will include taking a look at Brown’s own class position in his professions as a tanner, wool merchant, and farmer; as well as the general class composition of the antebellum United States. Since SICA also includes *social* investigation, this is the time to examine social factors such as general attitudes towards race, gender, and religion. With that foundation in place, we then move to...

2.) *Practice*

This is the stage most recognizable to the historian. This is where we sketch out a narrative of the historical event, or the relevant deeds of the person, using primary and secondary sources. For Schussler-Fiorenza, this takes the form of uncovering the concrete practice of the Jesus movement using the particular methods of historical

¹²³ The conclusion drawn from this work is that the Jesus movement was primarily constituted by “the scum of Palestinian society...the last who have become first, the starving who have become satisfied...And many of these were women.” Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 130.

¹²⁴ Mao Zedong, *Oppose Book Worship*, May 1930. Courtesy of Marxists Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-6/mswv6_11.htm

analysis best-suited to that subject. Particular focus is given to the Jesus movement's practice of "table-sharing" to model the *basileia* or kingdom of God; the theological meaning of this action is expressed in the parable of the *Great Banquet* found in Luke 14:16-24.¹²⁵ The social investigation and class analysis that she has already done on the Essenes and Pharisees is employed to contrast their practice of commensality with the Jesus movement's; thus the Jesus movement's use to "proclaim the *basileia* of God as future and present, eschatological vision and experiential reality" becomes apparent.¹²⁶

Since in our case we are not doing biography but rather *theological history*, we will keep the focus primarily on John Brown's abolitionist activities, including other events and controversies from his life as is relevant. Practice comes at this stage because, in liberation theology as well as dialectical materialism, action precedes thought, the material precedes the ideal, practice precedes theory. Only by knowing what John Brown *did* can we have any hope of understanding what he *thought*.

3.) *Theory*

Liberation theology is based around *praxis*, but liberation theologians have tended to overuse the word in such a way as to mystify its real meaning. Gutierrez and Cone often use it to stress action, participation in the historical struggle for liberation. This is good, but to identify praxis only with action misses the key point which differentiates it from *practice*. Praxis is not only concrete action to liberate the oppressed, but concrete action that is rooted in theory, drawn from past practice; praxis then produces new experiences which dialectically shape and refine it into the future. So the third step is to examine the ideas and theory behind the historical subject; for a

¹²⁵Cf. Matt. 22:2-14; *Thomas* 64. See also my own analysis in Chiakulas, *The Carpenter's Son*, pp. 100-101, which fundamentally concurs with Schussler-Fiorenza's.

¹²⁶ Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 120.

movement, this might be its most prominent spokespeople or formal theorists. For an individual such as John Brown this entails an examination of what they claimed to believe, either in public or private; the significance they gave to their own work; and the ideological influences on them that can be historically identified and either demonstrated or legitimately supposed based on at least some historical evidence. The ideas they claimed to hold must be evaluated in terms of their actions; this is why theory comes after practice. John Brown might have written what he thought of slave owners or border ruffians in a letter or diary, but this must be interpreted in the light of the Pottawatomie Massacre. Often a person's thoughts, especially those written and passed down for later consumption by historians, biographers, or even friends and descendants, serve as post-hoc ideological justifications for actions.

Fiorenza demonstrates this principle in beginning with action when moving on from the Jesus movement to the post-Easter activities of early or proto-Christianity, detailed in the appropriately-titled Acts of the Apostles. "...very soon after the execution and resurrection of Jesus the community of so-called Hellenists gathered alongside the Aramaic-speaking community of Jerusalem."¹²⁷ Historical information on this period of Christian history is exceptionally scarce, but Schussler-Fiorenza makes the most of what she has to work with, making a strong case that women were prominently involved at this stage of the movement, especially in the practice of "missionary partners" which "allowed for the equality of women and men in missionary work."¹²⁸ These concrete *actions* are necessary to prepare the way for an analysis of what the early Christian community and later Church tradition *thought* about women in Christianity; how they treated early women Christian leaders like Priscilla, Phoebe, Junia, or the possibly-fictional Thecla in apocryphal documents like the 2nd-century *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, which both "contains reminiscences of the power and authority of women missionaries at

127 Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 162.

128 Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 169. See also Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 334-35.

the beginning of the Christian movement” but also through redaction minimizes and eventually subordinates the historical woman Priscilla.¹²⁹ The complex and contested meaning of this document is clarified by the foreknowledge of women’s active role in leadership in early Christianity which Schussler-Fiorenza has already established; this foreknowledge allows us to discern the disputed role of women in early Christianity reflected in the text and the process of subordination.

A final note: we must be careful to avoid mechanical or deterministic thinking in this step of the process. While the material or base generally dominates the ideological or superstructure, the ideological does have the power to shape the material in turn; this is the meaning of dialectics. So at this stage actions can also be re-evaluated in terms of ideas; if a seeming contradiction in what someone thought or said cannot be resolved in favor of their actions, then perhaps the reverse will offer insights. In the case listed above, the battle being waged in the text of *Acts of Paul and Thecla* on the ideological plane might also be seen to reflect that the status of women in the early Christian movement, even when it was high, was not viewed as total or essential; i.e., if within a century it was already an ideological battleground then it was likely also contested to a degree in the first generations of the Christian movement.

4.) *Theology*

This is the stage at which we draw our theological-historical conclusions; that is, the stage when history begins transforming into theology. It has to come last, after our investigation of history, because theology, like all ideas, comes from “definite practice... real charity, action, and commitment to the service of others. Theology is reflection, a critical attitude. Theology *follows*, it is the second step.”¹³⁰ Here we examine the

129 Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 174-175.

130 Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 9. Note the Roman Catholic use of the word *charity*, which

results of our historical investigation in order to merge the deeds and thoughts of our subject into *praxis*; then we ask ourselves: how was the God that liberation theology posits at work here? What about this praxis is applicable to the current struggle for liberation?

The process of separating the universal from the particular is not easy and can only be tested in concrete practice. In some cases, the historical record provides concrete practice—Harper’s Ferry was an attempt by John Brown to implement his own revolutionary ideals and thus can serve as praxis. More will obviously be said about this when we come to our own theological-historical analysis of Brown, but by analyzing what worked in that example—if anything—we can attempt to identify what factors made it work, and which of these factors are still relevant today.

In Memory of Her, which we have only used small pieces of in this example, concludes by returning to the concept of *ekklesia* (developed throughout the book but especially in the last chapter) and connecting it with one of the key insights of the historical analysis—that “to embrace the gospel means to enter into a movement;” the movement through which God “feed[s] the hungry, heal[s] the sick, liberate[s] the oppressed...announce[s] the inbreaking of God’s new world and humanity here and now.”¹³¹ The marginalization of women runs counter to not only the ideals of this movement but its concrete practice in “the gathering of God’s people around the table, eating together a meal...proclaiming the gospel as God’s alternative vision for everyone...”¹³² The book is ultimately not a mere academic argument from history or scripture that the Roman Catholic church is patriarchal and must embrace feminism; although it is that, it is also something much more theologically radical: it is a historical explication of the liberatory praxis of God in human history as manifested through the is more specific than the common understanding of “donating to charity” or other such reformist actions.

131 Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 345.

132 *Ibid.*

Jesus movement, and the story of how that praxis was suppressed by human oppressors. The practical arguments for why it would be best for everyone if sexism and patriarchy were eradicated from the Christian Church are almost beside the point; the point is that God has already made it known to the Christian community how they should approach this question. Again, this is what our God is like. What is *your* God like?

In the case of John Brown, the theological-historical evidence shows that John Brown's primary examples of liberatory praxis lay in his commitment to and identification with the oppressed; and his embrace of *any means necessary*, including violence, in the struggle for liberation. These themes will be developed through theological-historical analysis in later chapters, using the process outlined here. *In Memory of Her*, it must be repeated, is nothing more than a proto-example of what I mean by theological history. This work does not mean to associate Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza with any understanding of liberation theology that she does not ascribe to (to say nothing of Marxism). Her book does not even use the exact method outlined here—her examples of what this method calls social investigation/class analysis are scattered throughout the book, popping in and out when they become relevant; she does not always place practice before theory in every example; etc. This is all okay—the method sketched out here is a starting point, a guideline, not a scientific procedure. Historical materialism is the scientific aspect of this process, but like the natural scientist using meteorological, geological, physical, and chemical data to establish the reality of anthropogenic climate change before making a moral and ethical appeal to action against it, science is only a part of this process. If science could change the world on its own, then liberation theology would not be necessary and Marxism would be enough.

But it was not Marxism, or any science, which drove John Brown to devote his life to the liberation of the oppressed. It was faith—faith that God was a God of liberation. All of the preceding theological groundwork becomes concrete in the liberatory actions of

John Brown at Pottawatomie and Harpers Ferry. It is time now to turn to John Brown.

PART TWO: THE CRIMES OF THIS GUILTY LAND

“For wicked men are found among my people; they lurk like fowlers lying in wait. They set a trap; they catch men. Like a basket full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no bounds in deeds of wickedness; they judge not with justice the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things? says the Lord, and shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this? An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land.” -Jeremiah 5:26-

30 (RSV)

CHAPTER FOUR: THE LAND

“The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me.” Leviticus 25:23 (RSV)

John Brown was never as well-off as his father Owen would come to be, but, at least until going to Kansas, he always maintained a semblance of financial independence and owned his own land, even through a series of failed business ventures. His class position was that of the rural petty bourgeoisie/artisan producer, which has important bearings on his praxis as an abolitionist. This was the class that drove the vast political and economic changes of the 19th century, from industrialization to abolition to the Republican Party. Unlike Europe’s enclosed commons, America’s vast frontier of land for the taking ensured that “in America small landed property was the material basis for social individualism, theoretical equality, civil rights and popular rule.”¹³³

Brown’s father Owen (1771-1856) was one of eleven children, and *his* father’s death in 1776 during the American war of independence left the family poor.¹³⁴ By 1791, however, they had financially recovered along with the nation at large,¹³⁵ and by the time of John’s birth (May 1800) Owen was relatively successful. When John Brown was five years old, Owen moved his family to Hudson, Ohio, then part of Portage County (now Summit). Owen became a relatively successful businessman, speculating on land and operating a tannery that John would eventually work in. Aside from working in his father’s and eventually his own tannery, John Brown would, before becoming a full-time

133 Willie Gorman, “Agrarian Struggles in the United States” in *New Internationalist*, Vol. XI, No. 5 (August 1945), 140.

134 “Owen Brown’s Autobiography,” in *LLJB*, pp. 4-11.

135 Gavin Wright, “Slavery and the Rise of the Nineteenth-Century American Economy” in *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Spring 2022), 130.

revolutionary abolitionist and living off the patronage of other abolitionists, make his living variously as a shepherd, surveyor, a wool merchant, a farmer, a horse breeder, a postmaster, and a financial speculator; his levels of success varied but in general his business ventures tended to fail either spectacularly (as in his financial speculation, which crashed horribly after the Panic of 1837 and left him severely in debt) or slowly (as in his work with Simon Perkins as a middleman between wool growers like himself and the merchants that bought their products). By the time he decided to go to Kansas, John Brown and his family were operating a not-particularly-prosperous farmstead in North Elba, New York. Aside from some periodic time spent in Springfield, Massachusetts while working in the aforementioned wool trade, most of Brown's home life was spent in and around small frontier, rural towns such as Hudson, Ohio and New Richmond, Pennsylvania; or in rural areas like North Elba. This chapter serves as both the beginning of our social investigation and class analysis of John Brown's world, and as a self-contained experiment in theological history itself. In the main we will be exploring the political economy and economic conditions of the agrarian petty bourgeoisie in antebellum America, as well as their ideological underpinnings. From there we move to how John Brown manifested the agrarian ideal in practice, and why it failed (both in his life and nationally). Finally we will draw some theological reflections that bear on land and liberation.

John Brown belonged entirely to the 19th century, being born in the year 1800 and growing up along with the new nation of the United States. John Adams was the president when he was born, but was soon replaced by Thomas Jefferson, the nation's third president. Jefferson gives his name to a concept that is often called "Jeffersonian agrarianism," a loose set of beliefs that conceptualize the ideal American citizenry as being composed primarily of independent and virtuous farmer-owners, who he called "the chosen people of God" in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. While Jefferson's own

views on the subject were more complex than history sometimes remembers, John Brown's economic life serves as a poignant case study in how this agrarian idealism was essentially powerless against the actual material conditions of the 19th-century United States. The interconnectedness of the artisan farmer and craftsman with the slave economy of the south, the commercial hubs of the east, and the nascent but encroaching industrialization of American manufacturing, meant that agrarianism, Jeffersonian or otherwise, was doomed to fail.

The political economy of the 19th-century United States was a fascinating and unique blend of this yeoman agrarianism with pre-industrial capitalism and, of course, the semi-feudal pseudo-capitalism of the southern slave and plantation economy. The independent farmer-producer envisioned in the Jeffersonian ideal was not only a farmer producing cash crops or even food crops, but an independent homesteader; it could also include small artisan craftsmen such as tanners (a profession both John and Owen Brown engaged in), carpenters, shepherds, and smiths. The United States lacked a direct feudal past to complicate land ownership, and with constant westward expansion throughout the 19th century (entailing of course the extirpation of indigenous peoples) there was enough land to sustain a relatively stable class of homesteaders and yeoman farmer-producers. But the mere existence of this class masks long-term macroeconomic trends that in a sense polluted the Jeffersonian ideal of self-sufficiency and a wide distribution of land. Commercialization and the proto-industrialization of industry (an expanding division of labor), especially in New England, exerted pressures on the agrarian sector of the economy, with its frontier homesteads and artisan producers. The "separation of manufacturing from extracting industry, of manufacture from agriculture, transforms agriculture itself into an industry, into a *commodity*-producing branch of economy... This specialization of *commercial* (and capitalist) agriculture manifests itself

in all capitalist countries...”¹³⁶

Some economic and population data helps to quantify the changes that were occurring during the 19th century.¹³⁷ Census reports, especially from the early decades of that century, are often missing economic data, but there is enough to illustrate the point. For example, the 1810 census, taken when John Brown was ten years old and living in Ohio, reported only 10,000 pounds of cotton and wool together “spun in mills” throughout the state; the actual number is almost certainly higher because data was only collected from two counties. The 1840 census has much more complete and detailed data and shows nearly 3.7 million pounds of wool alone. We can compare the totals of the two counties that did report in 1810—Hamilton and Ross, both further west than Portage/Summit, where the Browns lived during this period—to extrapolate a very rough estimate of the actual total increase.

County	Cotton/Wool (lbs) 1810	Wool (lbs) 1840	% Increase
Hamilton	7,500	31,393	418.6
Ross	2,500	57,252	2,290
Total	10,000	88,645	886.5

Table 1: Hamilton/Ross Counties Cotton/Wool Production, 1810-1840

Note that the 1810 census combined cotton and wool into one figure, so our work is not yet done. Luckily, the 1810 census did separate wool and cotton in the separate category of *family goods* produced (side note: the fact that goods produced by families was a category in 1810, but not in 1840, is by itself telling of the dramatic increase in importance of the proto-industrial manufacturing sector and relative diminishment of the

136 V.I. Lenin, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia: The Process of the Formation of a Home Market For Large-Scale Industry* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), 12-13. Originally published 1899.

137 The following data is taken from US Census Bureau records, available online at https://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/decennial_census_records/census_records_2.html.

importance of small-scale family production). The ratio of cotton to wool between the counties is very similar, 1.59 for Hamilton vs. 1.56 for Ross; lacking a clear alternative we shall apply these ratios to the totals from manufacturing. Here is the table again with cotton factored out.

County	Wool (lbs) 1810	Wool (lbs) 1840	% Increase
Hamilton	2,896	31,393	1,084
Ross	977	57,252	5,860
Total	3,873	88,645	2,289

Table 2: Hamilton/Ross Counties Wool Production, 1810-1840

Extrapolating these figures statewide is more challenging. Cotton was a relatively uncommon crop for Ohio, only reliably growing in southern counties (an early history of Ohio mentions cotton being common in Lawrence County, which is near to Ross);¹³⁸ hence the statewide ratio of family goods produced actually being 0.6 (56,072 yards of cotton to 93,074 yards of wool). Compounding the problem is that Ohio cotton diminished over this time period as southern cotton dramatically increased production. To account for this, I propose to normalize the numbers for Hamilton and Ross to the statewide ratio of cotton to wool, which returns the following numbers:

County	Wool (lbs) 1810 <i>(Normalized to state levels)</i>	Wool (lbs) 1840	% Increase
Hamilton	4,500	31,393	697.6
Ross	1,500	57,252	3,817
Total	6,000	88,645	1,477

Table 3: Hamilton/Ross Counties Wool Production, 1810-1840, Normalized

The admittedly-incomplete data suggests an increase in wool production in the

138 Caleb Atwater, *History of the State of Ohio, Natural and Civil* (Cincinnati: Glezen and Shepard, 1839), 89.

state of Ohio of 1,477% between 1810 and 1840. The 1850 census reveals statewide wool production of nearly 8.1 million pounds;¹³⁹ a further 219% increase over a single decade.

Wool is used here as our paradigmatic example because of John Brown's heavy involvement with the wool industry; the particular rates of increase vary between commodities, but the theme of rapid, exponential increases in commodity production is ubiquitous in the economic data. While the United States was still decades off from a true industrial revolution, its genesis could already be felt; John Brown's attempt to reform the wool industry, and its failure, is characteristic of a proto-industrial political economy. The effect of this boom in manufacturing is that capital penetrated and eventually overtook the agrarian and artisan economies, rendering the yeoman ideal impossible in practice, whether we are considering artisans or farmers. "...the technical 'lessons' of manufacturing fed back into agriculture, changing the nature of agricultural production and agricultural life...Despite our abundance of land, agriculture as a way of life had become diminutive relative to manufacturing. Moreover, it became necessary for the farmer to employ mechanization, modes of transportation, and the financial institutions at his disposal in order to participate fully in the process of capitalization or face the possibility of economic ruin."¹⁴⁰

The platonic form of the yeoman producer, whether agrarian or artisan, corresponds roughly with the notion of a Chayanovian "middle-peasant."¹⁴¹ This is an idealized notion of a section of the European peasantry based on the work of 20th-century Russian agrarian theorist Alexander Chayanov. This idea sees the basic unit of

139 The economic data for 1850 did not include state totals, so I added up all of the county data, rounding to the nearest thousand, to arrive at 8,086,000 pounds.

140 Lisi Krall, "Thomas Jefferson's Agrarian Vision and the Changing Nature of Property" in *Journal of Economic Issues*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Mar. 2002), 145.

141 For the concept of the Chayanovian "middle peasant," see Sharon Lea Mattila, "Jesus and the 'Middle Peasants'? Problematizing a Social-Scientific Concept" in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 2010), pp. 291-313.

production in a society as small family homestead, an “organizational type of producing machine...[it] has a certain area of land available to it, has its own means of production, and is sometimes obliged to expend some of its labor force on nonagricultural crafts and trades.”¹⁴² Against Chayanov (who was later executed by Stalin’s government), Vladimir Lenin and the “agrarian Marxists” who followed in his theoretical footsteps recognized that Chayanov’s idealized vision of the peasantry only corresponded to what they called the “middle peasants;” they perceived that in reality there existed great diversity among the peasantry in their overall levels of wealth and in how they participated in the greater economy of their society.

Of course, we are talking about the United States, which lacked a direct feudal past. But the comparison is more apt than it seems at first glance; in aggregate the American agricultural sector for much of the 19th century closely resembled the European peasantry.¹⁴³ Like the peasants Lenin analyzed in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (quoted above), American agricultural productivity was low compared to other sectors, yet comprised a disproportionate percentage of the labor force. According to Harley Knick,

At any particular time, the productivity of labour in American agriculture was a declining function of its labour force...Family control of the ‘means of production’ encouraged labour to remain on the farm until the earnings per family member of the farm fell below the wage in the non-farm sector. This dissipated the farm’s rent and drove the marginal product per worker in agriculture below that in the non-agricultural sectors. As the farm sector became less important, less potential income was dissipated and national income increased.¹⁴⁴

This had less to do with any weakness in the productivity of American farmers and more to do with the relative *strength* of its manufacturing productivity; by the dawn of

142 Alexander Chayanov, “Peasant Farm Organization,” quoted in Mattila, “Jesus and the Middle Peasants,” 294.

143 Harley Knick, “Growth Theory and Industrial Revolutions in Britain and America” in *The Canadian Journal of Economics* Vol. 36, No. 4 (Nov. 2003), 823-824.

144 Knick, “Growth Theory,” 823.

the American industrial revolution in 1870, “American manufacturing industries had already achieved labour productivity levels nearly twice those of their British counterparts.”¹⁴⁵ That was a result of the dramatic increase in labor productivity seen throughout the 19th century.

So while the material realities shared at least some similarities that make comparison viable, the Jeffersonian version of the yeoman farmer was not conceptualized as a “peasant,” middle- or otherwise. The key points of ideological similarity are the yeoman/peasant as the basic economic unit of society, and their relative self-sufficiency compared to serfs and wage-workers. To facilitate the growth of this class, Jefferson helped spearhead the Land Ordinance of 1785, which among other things made buying and selling land easier; he also helped to develop methods of land surveying that John Brown undoubtedly used in his work as a surveyor. Jefferson was not simple-minded or provincial; he understood the need for manufacturing (especially after the War of 1812) and especially of commerce and trade. He believed in capitalism and economic liberalism.¹⁴⁶

The problem was that political economy shows that Jefferson’s vision was doomed from the start. “Small landed property presupposes that the overwhelming majority of the population is rural, and that not social, but isolated labor predominates; and that, therefore, under such conditions wealth and development of reproduction, both of its material and spiritual prerequisites, are out of the question...”¹⁴⁷ By the time the United States was being built, it was too late for this vision to be realized under the laws of capitalism; primitive accumulation had long since taken place and pre-industrial capitalism, financialization, and international commerce were incipient but still powerful forces; for an example of the latter, United States imports from the U.K. went from \$289

145 *Ibid.*

146 Krall, “Thomas Jefferson’s Agrarian Vision,” 140.

147 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3, 813.

million worth of goods in the 1820s to a whopping \$474 million in the 1830s, concurrently with the U.K. importing more and more American cotton for use in their textile factories.¹⁴⁸ Industrial capitalism was on the horizon. “Jefferson’s vision was rooted in a world of petty commodity production...The benefits of the increased productivity, brought about by hard work on the land, would be apparent in an individual’s capacity to trade that person’s surplus for access to use values. But a dramatic increase in output [such as we saw with Ohio’s wool industry!] and a world where use value would become subordinate to exchange value were alien to Jefferson.”¹⁴⁹

Yet they need not have been, as the process that would kill the Jeffersonian ideal in America had indeed already been underway in Britain for decades. It was not the result of the industrial revolution, as Krall theorizes, but the *agricultural* revolution, which had “supplied...the town industries with a mass of proletarians entirely unconnected with the corporate guilds.”¹⁵⁰ In both Britain and America, “Consumer demand grew, even in the face of contrary real wage trends,”¹⁵¹ (real wages were stagnant, but this is notable because there was an enormous population boom during this time; without the population boom wages almost certainly would have risen); “In England, but in fact through much of Northwestern Europe and Colonial America, a broad range of households made decisions that increased *both* the supply of marketed commodities *and* labor and the demand for goods offered in the marketplace. This combination of changes in household behavior constituted an ‘industrious revolution’ [which]...preceded and prepared the way for the Industrial Revolution.”¹⁵² The resultant “industrious” boom in manufacturing (still, at this stage, proto-industrial) unleashed a wave of capital upon

148 Norman Sydney Buck, *The Development of the Organisation of Anglo-American Trade, 1800-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925), 2.

149 Krall, “Thomas Jefferson’s Agrarian Vision,” 144.

150 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 745.

151 Jan De Vries, “The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution” in *The Journal of Economic History* Vol. 54, No. 2 (Jun., 1994), 255.

152 *Ibid.*

the agricultural sector and created new markets for goods. This changed the economic reality of the former peasants:

Formerly, the peasant family produced the means of subsistence and the raw materials, which they themselves, for the most part, consumed. These raw materials and means of subsistence have now become commodities; the large farmer sells them, he finds his market in manufacturers. Yarn, linen, coarse woollen stuffs—things whose raw materials had been within the reach of every peasant family, had been spun and woven by it for its own use—were now transformed into articles of manufacture, to which the country districts at once served for markets. The many scattered customers, whom stray artisans until now had found in the numerous small producers working on their own account, concentrate themselves now into one great market provided for by industrial capital.¹⁵³

If we replace “peasant” with “yeoman,” it becomes apparent that this same process took place in the antebellum United States. Caleb Atwater’s history of Ohio, mentioned above, illustrates the process well when it states that “Our people prefer buying their cloths from the east, to making them here, and they are right. The production of the articles of food...for the hungry laborers of the east, best suits our present condition.”¹⁵⁴

We need look no further than John Brown’s involvement in the wool industry with partner Simon Perkins, where he attempted in vain to struggle against the economic forces under consideration. Brown attempted to organize wool-growers into a producer’s union of sorts in order to gain better dealings with the wool merchants, those “many scattered customers” now concentrated into a “great market provided for by industrial capital.” “The idea of the Association was, that all their wool should go there, be graded, sold, and each to share proportionally in the price, according to quality, fineness, cleanliness, etc.”¹⁵⁵ The market was too complex and the wool merchants too powerful in

153 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 747-748.

154 Atwater, *History of the State of Ohio*, 89.

155 Letter of E.C. Leonard to F.B. Sanborn, in *LLJB*, 65.

relation to the growers, able to fix the buying process in order to maximize their own profit and minimize the growers'. The wool merchants "would buy wool before it was graded, pay for it at the price of a low grade, and then sort it so as to bring themselves a large profit."¹⁵⁶ Brown's program, admirable though it was, failed due to a mix of stubbornness and not understanding or being willing to engage with the capitalistic nature of the market. "Uncle Brown was no *trader*," E.C. Leonard said, though "he was a scrupulously honest and upright man...Brown was in a position to make a fortune, and a regular-bred merchant would have done so."¹⁵⁷ But Brown was not a regular-bred merchant. His sense of justice and fairness ran up against the realities of the capitalist economy.

The only apparent danger to the prosperity of the western wool-growers was the *increasing power of the manufacturers*...No sooner did John Brown grasp the details of the wool business than he began to work out plans of amelioration. And he conceived of this amelioration not as measured simply in personal wealth. To him business was a philanthropy. We have not even to-day reached this idea, but, urged on by the Socialists, we are faintly perceiving it. Brown proposed nothing Quixotic or unpractical, but he did propose a more equitable distribution of the returns of the whole wool business between the producers of the raw material and the manufacturers.

...Here was a man doing what every one knew was for the best interests of a great industry...His methods were absolutely honest, his technical knowledge was unsurpassed and his organization efficient. Yet a combination of manufacturers forced him out of business in a few months. Why? The ordinary answer of current business ethics would be that John Brown was unable to "corner" the wool market against the manufacturers. But this he never tried to do. Such a policy of financial free-booting never occurred to him, and he would have repelled it indignantly if it had...He was offering worthy goods at a fair price and making a just return for them...well-organized industrial highwaymen could hold up the wool farmer and make him hand over some of his earnings. But John Brown knew, as did, indeed, the manufacturing gentlemen of the road that the farmers were getting only moderate returns. It was the millmen who made fortunes.

...to offer no opposition to organized economic aggression is to depend on the simple justice of your cause in an industrial world that recognizes no justice. It

156 LLJB, 64.

157 LLJB, 65.

means industrial death and that is what it meant to John Brown.¹⁵⁸

John Brown believed in the independent yeoman producer; for most of his life, he was one. But this ideal ran up against a slowly-industrializing world that concentrated power in the hands of those with capital, the industrialists and proto-industrialists who “recognized no higher moral law than money-making.”¹⁵⁹ Brown was not willing to play their game. Writing to his father from Springfield in 1849, while working for Perkins and Brown, he commented “We have in this part of the country the strongest proofs that the great majority have made gold their *hope*, their *only hope*. I think that almost every product of industry will soon become high, from the fact alone that such a vast number of those who have hitherto been producers will cease to be so, and hereafter, for a time at least, be only *consumers*.”¹⁶⁰ Uneducated though he was in economics, much less political economy, he saw the very process we are describing with his very eyes.

This had happened earlier, when he had attempted to engage in land speculation in the town of Franklin Mills, Ohio around the year 1837. Believing that Franklin Mills would be a boom town due to the Pennsylvania and Ohio Canal (which would eventually be re-routed), Brown purchased vast tracts of land in and around it through capital loans.¹⁶¹ Thorstein Veblen once described such investments thusly: “The purpose of country-town real estate, as of farm real estate in a less extreme degree, is to realise on it. This is the common bond of community interest which binds and animates the business community of the country town. In this enterprise there is concerted action and a spirit of solidarity, as well as a running business of mutual manoeuvring [sic] to get the better of one another.”¹⁶² But John Brown had no interest in getting the better of his

158 Du Bois, *John Brown*, 61, 63-65.

159 Du Bois, *John Brown*, 65.

160 In *LLJB*, 25. Emphasis original.

161 DeCaro, *Fire from the Midst*, 97.

162 Thorstein Veblen, *Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times: The Case of America* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1923), 144.

neighbors; virtually everyone who knew him personally testified to his selfless character. He bought the land to develop it for everyone's benefit; John Jr. testified that when his lands were repossessed, they had been transformed, "now covered by valuable residences and shops."¹⁶³ A combination of bad luck and bad business acumen (financing such large purchases on credit) killed Brown's short-lived career as a land speculator, probably for the better.

Rampant land speculation, again, was a sign of the increasing capital penetration which continually transformed the independent yeoman farmer/producer into either a capitalist or a worker himself. This was a unique time in America, where "The course of land speculation...did not depend chiefly on the well born, the great speculators, the 'land monopolists.' The public domain was largely bought up by a less pecunious group—an immensely larger one."¹⁶⁴ While president Andrew Jackson's financial policies sparked the panic of 1837 which killed John Brown's land speculation endeavor,¹⁶⁵ it was a blip in the radar for the overall boom in land speculation, which continued throughout the 19th century. Yet this drive to speculate, to buy land with no intention of using it, went contrary to the Jeffersonian ideal in which the right to land came from the expenditure of one's own labor upon it;¹⁶⁶ it went even more contrary to John Brown's own ideal of land ownership, as we shall soon see. John Brown was not a political economist, and by all accounts his literary interests were in history and theology, not economics. His participation in land speculation, and as a would-be middleman in the wool market, were evidence not of a capitalistic desire to maximize profits, but misguided and ignorant attempts to live a life of self-sufficiency and productiveness shaped by the economic realities of the world he lived in. Just as his father Owen

163 John Brown, Jr., to Franklin Sanborn, in *LLJB*, 55.

164 Stanley Lebergott, "The Demand for Land: The United States, 1820-1860" in *The Journal of Economic History* Vol. 45, No. 2 (Jun. 1985), 195.

165 *Ibid.*, 205.

166 Krall, "Thomas Jefferson's Agrarian Vision," 134-135.

lamented the driving out of his Indian neighbors from Ohio without realizing that his own actions as a settler contributed to that process,¹⁶⁷ John Brown participated in the very economic forces that rendered his economic aspirations impossible, while others like him “tried to fetter and limit the growing productive forces of [America]. They could not succeed.”¹⁶⁸ Brown’s misfortune in business endeavors would lead him to repudiate capital itself later in life, as he told his son John Jr.: “I started out in life with the idea that nothing could be done without capital, and that a poor man must use his credit and borrow...The practical effect of this false doctrine has been to keep me like a toad under a harrow most of my business life. Running into debt includes so much of evil that I hope all my children will shun it as they would a pestilence.”¹⁶⁹

John Brown’s true attitude towards self-sufficiency and agrarianism is most fully demonstrated in the circumstances surrounding his move to North Elba. He bought the land from fellow abolitionist Gerrit Smith, who had purchased large amounts of land in upstate New York specifically for the purpose of distributing to poor black people. The idea was noble, but the land was rough and arid and woody; Smith “knew very well when he made his princely offer that those who might accept it would need all the encouragement and direction they could receive...”¹⁷⁰ and this was where John Brown came in. Brown was enthusiastic about the project, and offered to move his family there in order to share his knowledge and experience homesteading with his black neighbors. According to his daughter Ruth, most of the black settlers there “had lived in cities, and were unused to the hardships and privations they must necessarily undergo in making homes in that wild mountain region.”¹⁷¹ Brown himself fell in love with the land, writing often to encourage his grown children to join them there; to John Jr. he wrote “The more

167 “Owen Brown’s Autobiography,” in *LLJB*, 8.

168 Gorman, “Agrarian Struggles in the United States,” 141.

169 In *LLJB*, 88.

170 *LLJB*, 96.

171 In *LLJB*, 101.

I reflect on all the consequences likely to follow, the more I am disposed to encourage you to come here;” and again in a later letter that no place “offers so many inducements to me, or any of my family...I would wish that when you make a move that you go in that direction.”¹⁷²

Self-sufficiency is usually thought to be key to the idea of yeoman or Jeffersonian agrarianism, but was it for John Brown? This would be deeply ironic, for never in John Brown’s life could he be said to have been self-sufficient, at least not if understood in individualistic or isolationist terms. He relied on credit, on loans from friends, and especially during the height of his abolitionist crusade on alms from supporters for his means of subsistence and that of his family. In fact, against the platonic ideal of individualistic isolationism that is often associated with Jeffersonian-style agrarianism, he embodied a communitarian idealism in his domestic and economic life, one which points to the underlying source of his beliefs about land and economy and community. Ohio experienced a drought in 1854, while Brown was living and working there, and many of Brown’s neighbors suffered extreme hardship. Brown wrote to the rest of his family in North Elba that “We shall probably have some corn, while others, to a great extent, will have none. Of garden vegetables we have more than twenty poor families have in many cases. Of fruit we shall have a comfortable supply, if our less favored neighbors do not take it all from us. We ought to be willing to divide.”¹⁷³ Brown simply assumed that his excess produce belonged equally to his less fortunate neighbors as to himself. Daughter Ruth tells of an episode from her childhood in Hudson when “an old man, leading an old white ox, came to our house one rainy afternoon, asking for something to eat and to stay over night.”¹⁷⁴ John and the older children were away, and Ruth’s mother and the young children were afraid of the man, for “he acted so strangely, did not talk much, but looked

172 In *LLJB*, 105-106.

173 In *LLJB*, 158.

174 In *LLJB*, 94.

down all the time, and talked strangely when he said anything.”¹⁷⁵ They fed him, but sent him on his way towards the nearest tavern. When John Brown later heard of this event, he was despondent, saying “Oh, dear! no doubt he had no money, and they turned him off at the tavern, and he could get no place to stay, and was obliged to travel all night in the rain.” John Brown believed sincerely that to be virtuous, like the biblical character Job, entailed caring for “the poor that cry and those that have none to help them.”¹⁷⁶ R.H. Dana, Jr., who in 1849 became lost traveling through the Adirondacks with a group of campers, wrote an account of being taken in by the Browns; they were complete strangers, yet the Browns took them in, fed and sheltered them, even dined with them (recall the discussion from Part One about commensality and the kingdom of God). When Dana and his company attempted to leave a generous tip for the Browns as thanks, daughter Ruth refused. “We found her inflexible. She would receive the bare cost of what we had taken, if we wished it, but nothing for attentions, or house-room, or as a gratuity...It was plain this family acted on a principle in the smallest matters. They knew pretty well the cost price of the food they gave; and if the traveller preferred to pay, they would receive that, but nothing more.”¹⁷⁷ John Brown, and the family he raised, were communitarians through and through, and their view of land and production reflected this. John Brown’s vision of agrarian homesteading, or yeoman artisanship, was based not in Jeffersonian agrarianism, but like every aspect of his beliefs, in his Christian faith.

It would be misleading to imply that Jefferson and his ideas exerted *no* influence (either direct or indirect) on Brown; he grew up in the first half of the 19th century, after all, and Jefferson cast a long shadow. The largest piece of direct evidence of

175 *Ibid.*

176 “John Brown to Mary Ann Brown,” 11/08/1859, *BBS*. Online version at <https://archive.wvculture.org/history/wvmemory/jbdetail.aspx?Type=Text&Id=99>. This is a paraphrase of Job 29:12.

177 R.H. Dana, “How We Met John Brown” in *The Atlantic Monthly* Vol. 28, No. 165 (July, 1871), 7.

Jeffersonian influence is Brown's *Declaration of Liberty*,¹⁷⁸ modeled explicitly after the American Declaration of Independence, which was of course authored by Jefferson.¹⁷⁹ Yet even here the influence of Jefferson appears almost incidental; Brown's *differences* with Jefferson are more revealing than the similarities.

The Declaration of Independence does not deal with land other than a reference to the king of Britain having "rais[ed] the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands" in the context of attempting to limit the growth of the population in the colonies by making it difficult for new people to immigrate there.¹⁸⁰ John Brown's Declaration of Liberty, on the other hand, goes much further; after repeating the Declaration of Independence's proclamation of "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" as "inalienable rights," Brown links these inalienable rights with land: "That Nature hath freely given to all Men, a full Supply of Air, Water, & Land; for their sustenance, & mutual happiness, That No Man has any right to deprive his fellow Man, of these Inherent rights, except in punishment of Crime."¹⁸¹ The elevation of land ownership to an "inherent right" of all people (except those guilty of crimes), and its identification as a necessity to make "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" a material reality are far more radical than Jefferson's view of agrarian ownership. That is because John Brown's view of land ownership came primarily not from Jefferson, but from the Bible. For Jefferson, drawing on John Locke and other classical liberal theorists, it is industrious (not industrial) labor which "bestows a right to property which overrides less industrious uses" (such as hunting or gathering; thus Jefferson could justify stealing land from indigenous

178 More will be said about John Brown's *Declaration of Liberty* in a later chapter.

179 It also quotes a famous line from Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, "Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just."

180 Declaration of Independence, available at <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

181 John Brown and Owen Brown, *Declaration of Liberty by the Representatives of the Slave Population of the United States of America*, July 4, 1859. Text available at <http://digitalhistory.hsp.org/pafm/doc/declaration-liberty-representatives-slave-population-united-states-america-july-4-1859>. Note that the version hosted on the University of Houston's digitalhistory.uh.edu skips over this section. Make of that what you will.

Americans).¹⁸² This is the philosophical basis of the agrarian yeoman producer, agricultural or artisan, in Jeffersonian terms.

John Brown's *Declaration of Liberty* makes it abundantly clear that he saw Jefferson's hypocrisy as plain as day. He may have taken some indirect or even direct influence from Jefferson, but he was no Jeffersonian. Brown conceived of property rights and obligations along entirely different lines; all people had the *right* to land in order to support themselves and to be members of a *community*: "We hold this truth to be self evident; That it is the highest Privilege, & Plain Duty of Man; to strive in evry reasonable way, to promote the Happiness, Mental, Moral, & Physical elevation of his fellow Man."¹⁸³ This belief reflects the Biblical view of land ownership and the community of Israel as God's liberated people.

The twenty-fifth chapter of the book of Leviticus contains God's commandment to the Israelites to practice the Jubilee Year. The key section is Leviticus 25:8-18, a section which John Brown marked in his last Bible. That he did this, even though it does not only or even primarily deal with slavery, signifies both its great importance to him and his deep understanding of its connection to oppression and liberation (see Chapter One). Every fiftieth year,¹⁸⁴ the Israelites were to sound a trumpet, "and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubilee unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family...Ye shall not therefore oppress one another; but thou shalt fear thy God:for I am the Lord your God. Wherefore ye shall do my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them; and ye shall dwell in the land in safety."¹⁸⁵ Just a few short verses later is this chapter's epigraph, which no matter how you cut it is simply incompatible with the liberal

182 Krall, "Thomas Jefferson's Agrarian Vision," 134-136.

183 *Declaration of Liberty*.

184 There has been scholarly debate in the past over how exactly the Jubilee year was counted, in a paradigmatic example of academics missing the point. The Jubilee Year was in all likelihood never actually practiced; what is relevant is what it *means* theologically.

185 Leviticus 25:10, 17-18 (KJV)

notion of land ownership championed by Jefferson, where land is easily transferable “from the government to individual, and from individual to individual.”¹⁸⁶ The practicability of the Jubilee Year aside, in the ancient agrarian society it came from, land was the primary means of production for the vast majority of society. It was not only a privilege granted by God, but specifically connected to his great act of liberation; another line John Brown highlighted reminds the Israelites that “I am the Lord your God, which brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God.”¹⁸⁷ The buying up, the enclosing of lands, the creation of landless and so dependent and oppressed classes of people, was an affront to the God who liberated the Israelites from Egypt. John Brown believed this wholeheartedly, and for him, all human beings besides oppressors were his neighbors and potential members of the community, the *kingdom*, of God. The people of Israel in this section of Leviticus

are not only the specific audience to whom the discourse of H [the Holiness Code, which contains this part of Leviticus] is addressed—they also constitute as it were the domain where its objectives are to be realized. In all its different parts H contains a vision for the people, which decisively colours the notion of peoplehood. This vision is anchored in what YHWH has done for the Israelites in the past when he led them out of Egypt...¹⁸⁸

Recall James Cone, who writes that “The Exodus was the decisive event in Israel’s history, because through it Yahweh was revealed as the Savior of an oppressed people.”¹⁸⁹

The Holiness Code, which contains the jubilee tradition in Leviticus 25:8-18, was redacted into its current form by the Priestly, or *P*, tradition in the Torah, during the

186 Krall, “Thomas Jefferson’s Agrarian Vision,” 137-138.

187 Leviticus 25:38 (KJV). Brown marked 25:37-47, which specifies the duties of the Israelites on the land to lend to their neighbors without usury and take in and shelter strangers without profit, both values that manifested themselves in Brown’s life, as we have seen above.

188 Jan Joosten, *People and Land in the Holiness Code: An Exegetical Study of the Ideational Framework of the Law in Leviticus 17-26* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 93. Joosten also notes on this page that in the entire Holiness Code (Lev. 17-26) Yahweh reminds the Israelites of the Exodus event eight times.

189 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 158.

Babylonian Exile.¹⁹⁰ The Exile “created serious theological problems for Israel because of the events accompanying it—the destruction of the temple...*the loss of the land*, the apparent invalidation of the Sinai covenant... These events called into question the generally accepted proposition that life is orderly and that people can live effectively within a comprehensible world.”¹⁹¹ As Robert S. Kawashima writes, “...the Priestly legist understood slavery and the loss of ancestral land as instances of socioeconomic pollution, since in both cases an Israelite is removed from his proper place in society, namely, from family and land.”¹⁹²

Land ownership in H is not merely an economic function, but a symbol of the covenant with Yahweh, a reminder of his decisive act of liberation in history, and proof of belonging within the Israelite community. The Jubilee year demonstrates that

the Israelite brother is consistently viewed as a land-owner, even though he may have lost his land and his personal freedom. The purpose of the entire section on the Jubilee is that even if he has become enslaved, he will eventually go free and recover his property... Whereas Deuteronomy accentuates the independent value of personal freedom, the conception of H is that without land no man is entirely free, since he will not be able to support himself.¹⁹³

Kawashima correctly notes that the Priestly tradition generally considers “purity and pollution” to rest “on a well-defined spatial order” where each family and tribe “has its proper place in the land,” and that the material realities of exile, slavery, and land appropriation were therefore signs of corruption and impurity.¹⁹⁴ Therefore the Jubilee ideologically could serve as a reoccurring ritual of purification, similar to the Day of Atonement described in Leviticus 16 (not part of the Holiness Code). Yet we have

190 Jeffrey A. Fager, *Land Tenure and the Biblical Jubilee: A Moral World View* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1987), pp. 84-106; also Joosten, *People and Land*, 24.

191 Jeffrey A. Fager, *Land Tenure and the Biblical Jubilee: Uncovering Hebrew Ethics Through the Sociology of Knowledge* (Sheffield: JSOT PRes, 1993), 42.

192 Robert S. Kawashima, “The Jubilee Year and the Return of Cosmic Purity” in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* Vol. 65, No. 3 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 2003), 372.

193 Joosten, *People and Land*, 159.

194 Kawashima, “The Jubilee Year,” 379.

already seen another response to the seeming contradiction between God's promise to protect Israel and their material reality, one that takes seriously God's character as a God of the oppressed. While entering into Yahweh's covenant "brings important advantages to the Israelites; it also comports one key requirement: the Israelites are to keep his commandments."¹⁹⁵ These commandments include sheltering strangers, not practicing usury, supporting neighbors when they fall into poverty (recall John Brown's 1854 letter about supporting his poorer neighbors with his own harvest in a time of drought), and perhaps most importantly, ensuring that all had their own means of subsistence, their own land. The jubilee existed *for* the agrarian producers of ancient Israelite society, who were always at risk of losing their means of production to "the large holdings of wealthy creditors, creating a class of landless peasants dependent on the hiring practices of the wealthy for their survival. The jubilee proposes a system that opposed such a route toward debt and the accumulation of land by a small number of people...[rooted] in the prophetic movement of protest against institutions of power...in the Mosaic tradition of liberation from oppressive monarchy."¹⁹⁶

Such a system of regular, reoccurring land redistribution is obviously incompatible with any form of capitalism, just as it was impractical in ancient Israelite society and thus probably never put into practice. But as an ideal it has served crucial theological functions throughout history, including for John Brown, for whom it formed the basis of his understanding of land and community, *especially* towards the end of his life when his opinions of credit and capital had turned negative. Brown conceptualized community relations along the lines of God's revolutionary covenant with the people he had liberated from slavery, and the communitarian commandments that were the requirement of living on the land. These ideas, which developed in John Brown throughout his life, led him to attempt radical solidarity *with* the oppressed through the

195 Joosten, *People and Land*, 100.

196 Fager, *Land Tenure and the Biblical Jubilee: Uncovering Hebrew Ethics*, 85.

praxis of living among the escaped slaves and impoverished black families in the Adirondacks. This was a flawed and imperfect praxis,¹⁹⁷ and would ultimately not serve Brown's liberatory aspirations well as most of the black families who settled there ended up leaving within a few years.¹⁹⁸ But it emerged from genuinely revolutionary notions of distributism and equality, rooted in God's liberation of the oppressed and standing in ideological opposition to the liberal, capitalist notions that dominated society at large.

A modern understanding of political economy cautions against attempting to resurrect the yeoman ideal as the basis of any sort of socioeconomic transformations in modern times. Yet there is still much to learn here. What this chapter establishes is John Brown's class position as a member of the yeoman petty bourgeoisie, a class which was inherently in contradiction with the macroeconomic trends of the antebellum United States; this contradiction explains some of John Brown's business decisions and failures, and renders explicable his increasing radicalization towards the end of his life. Theologically, it is clear that John Brown as a *white man*, that is, a member of the oppressor nation, had to conceive of himself as fundamentally *in community* with the oppressed in order to demonstrate any real liberatory praxis; this he did through his insightful and well-reasoned understanding of the revolutionary character of God's covenant with ancient Israel, an oppressed people, and his recognition that that covenant was still in force with the oppressed in his time. John Brown knew nothing of the "Holiness Code" or the "Priestly source," but he did not need to. These tools can be invaluable, but as Brown wrote to John F. Blessing in his last Bible, "There is no commentary in the world so good in order to a right understanding of this blessed book

197 That it not be left unsaid here, two immediate criticisms of Brown's stunted attempt at liberatory praxis in moving to the Adirondacks in solidarity with black settlers are 1.) its essentially utopian or reformist character in not actually challenging oppression directly; and more importantly 2.) the inherently problematic notion of building a communitarian, distributionist community in a settler-colonial country from which the indigenous peoples had been exterminated or driven out.

198 DeCaro, *Fire from the Midst of You*, 187.

as an honest childlike and teachable spirit.”¹⁹⁹

It was not long after the Browns came to the Adirondacks that John Brown found himself being called away, west, where a storm was brewing that would have decisive results for the fate of him, and for America. Whether the realization that his attempts to live out the covenantal agrarian ideal in the Adirondacks or elsewhere were futile played a role in Brown’s increasing radicalization against slavery is hard to tell, but the chronology certainly suggests it. In 1855, John Brown headed for Kansas, and the militant antislavery crusader that history remembers was finally born.

199 “John Brown’s Last Bible,” *John Brown Papers, 1842-1928*, Chicago Historical Society.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE HANDS OF GOD

“Christ has no body but yours

No hands, no feet on earth but yours...

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,

Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.” -Anonymous, attributed to

Teresa of Ávila

*“If any of us are hereafter to be tried in Kansas; I would much rather it should be with
irons in, rather than upon, our hands.”* -John Brown to John Brown, Jr., April 15, 1857

(BBS)

In his lifetime, John Brown earned the nickname “Osawatomie Brown” for his attempted heroic defense of Osawatomie, Kansas against a slaver band led by John Reid in August of 1856. His sons Owen, Frederick, and Salmon had gone to Osawatomie with their families in 1854 to participate in the Free State cause, through which they hoped to secure Kansas’s entry to the Union. John Jr. and Jason soon joined them, and our John Brown came near the end of 1855. The Browns played a decisive role in the conflict known as “Bleeding Kansas,” with Frederick giving his life for the Free State cause, and John Brown participating in numerous battles and clashes. The most controversial of these, and the one this chapter deals with, is the Pottawatomie Massacre.

1856 would prove a bloody year for Kansas. The Browns had begun it feeling optimistic; a hard winter had quieted hostilities for some time, and John Brown wrote to

his family in North Elba in February that “It is likely that when the snow goes off such high Water will prevail as will render it difficult for Missouri to invade the territory so that God by his elements may protect Kansas for some time yet.”²⁰⁰ This would not be the case. Free State elections had been held in January, but the federal government led by Franklin Pierce refused to recognize them and sent troops to “restore order” and arrest Free State men. Congressman Charles Sumner, a vocal opponent of slavery, was beaten nearly to death in the halls of Congress by Preston Brooks. Most immediate for the Browns, a slaver posse of around 700 men surrounded the city of Lawrence, a Free State hub, in order to shut down the Free State Hotel; they ended up destroying much of the city in what became known as “The Sack of Lawrence.” Lawrence had narrowly avoided this fate just six months before, in the Wakarusa War, which John Brown had been present for; the Free State leaders had agreed to terms with the slave forces, despite an impassioned plea from John Brown for them to stand up for themselves.²⁰¹ Brown, his sons, and some militiamen who followed them had gone to Lawrence’s defense this time, but arrived too late. It was in this immediate context that Pottawatomie occurred.

While John Brown’s involvement in the massacre, and most of the details of the killings, are no longer in doubt, for some time this was not the case. Journalist and later congressman William A. Phillips wrote a history of Bleeding Kansas, sympathetic to the Free State cause, in 1856 which chronicles Brown’s victory at the Battle of Black Jack as well as a few other notable events, such as John Jr.’s capture²⁰² and the fiery speech John Sr. gave during the Wakarusa War exhorting the Free Soilers to militancy and denouncing compromise with the Border Ruffians (mentioned above). It is likely the

200 John Brown, “Letter to his Family,” February 6, 1856, *John Brown Papers, 1842-1928*, Chicago Historical Society.

201 William A. Phillips, *The Conquest of Kansas by Missouri and her Allies* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, 1856), 222.

202 Phillips, *The Conquest of Kansas*, 332-333.

earliest historical account of John Brown. However, though it mentions Brown numerous times, at this point the massacre was still “wrapped in profound mystery,” and Phillips can only list the perpetrators as “a party of seven or eight guerrillas, not young men, but stern, determined men,” though elsewhere he mentions that “Whether with reason or not, I cannot say,” John Brown was “regarded as a participator, if not leader, in the Potawattomie [sic] affair.”²⁰³ Though Phillips decries “Terrible stories...distorted and misrepresented by those whose interest it is to misrepresent them” about the massacre, he himself gets many details wrong, such as reporting that all five casualties were taken from a single house and his contention that “The frightful stories about mutilation were unfounded.”²⁰⁴ He can be forgiven these errors, writing as he was before many details of the massacre were known. However, he furnishes a very early apologetic for the massacre that would be echoed by many later biographers and historians who were clearly uncomfortable with the level of violence while recognizing to one degree or another that it was not completely unjustifiable. The massacre was “one of those cases at which enlightened humanity will shudder, even though it cannot forget the fearful list of outrages that provoked it, and the state of insecurity which existed when pro-slavery men were permitted to run riot in murder and robbery...Viewing it in this, its true light, we still shudder, but attach the blame to the corrupt government and perverted official authority, where it belongs.”²⁰⁵

This assessment of Pottawatomie is echoed by even Brown’s most sympathetic biographers. Louis A. DeCaro Jr. gives great attention to the crimes and violence committed by the slave forces, and also argues “John Brown facilitated the deadly venture but should neither be credited nor blamed as if the bloody work was his private accomplishment...Rather than presuming to ask if John Brown could justify committing

203 Phillips, *The Conquest of Kansas*, 332.

204 *Ibid.*

205 *Ibid.*

such an evil, unwarranted act, perhaps a fundamentally different question is needed to frame the Pottawatomie killings. *What kind of circumstances* would drive exceptionally moral and religious people like the Browns to such desperate measures?"²⁰⁶ David S. Reynolds writes that while "the Pottawatomie affair was indeed a crime...it was what today would be called a war crime committed against proslavery settlers by a man who saw slavery itself as an unprovoked war of one race against another."²⁰⁷ Neither of them are wrong on the bare facts, but these moderated judgments (and others, many with outlooks much more negative) take for *granted* that Pottawatomie can only be understood and not justified, that their readers should recoil instinctively from it, that evaluation of it must turn only or primarily on its immediate context. The victims must have posed an imminent threat, or at least have been so *particularly* evil that their executions can be forgiven, if not condoned. DeCaro tells of how victims Wilkinson, Doyle, and [intended victim Henry] Sherman had "[begun] to move throughout the free-state neighborhood issuing threats" such as "leave in five days or be killed."²⁰⁸ Reynolds has more stories like these, and also notes that acts of slaver violence committed in recent months such as Free State reverend Pardee Butler being tarred and cottoned "added fuel to John Brown's desire for retaliatory vengeance."²⁰⁹

To be clear, neither Reynolds nor DeCaro are wrong to give this background or to explore its role in Brown's immediate motivations. But they ultimately do little more than echo public debates around Pottawatomie that have been taking place since shortly after the massacre became known. A sensationalist article by a reverend David N. Utter, published in *The North American Review* in November of 1883, gave the characteristically negative interpretation of events, portraying Brown as a duplicitous and self-aggrandizing murderer who was primarily to blame for the destruction of

206 DeCaro, *Fire from the Midst*, 234, 236. Emphasis original.

207 Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 8.

208 DeCaro, *Fire from the Midst*, 232.

209 Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 155.

Osawatamie in addition to the murders he actually committed at Pottawatomie.²¹⁰ John Jr. wrote in an 1883 letter to Franklin B. Sanborn that Utter's article was "so unjust in that it withholds from view the causes or background which led to the killing of those men at Potowatomie [sic]."²¹¹ Utter's article is indeed full of historical distortions that should not go unanswered; for example, he claims that "The real hero of Black Jack was Captain Shore," when Brown's own recollection of events (in which Captain Shore still comes out looking brave, if a little foolhardy) is confirmed by William A. Phillips's contemporary account: Captain Shore's company was routed (though Shore himself stayed to fight under Brown), and it was John Brown (with help from a well-timed feint by son Frederick) who led the Free State forces to victory.²¹² Utter admits that he is interpreting Black Jack, Osawatamie, and Brown's other Kansas exploits in light of the Pottawatomie massacre, which he disapproves of; Pottawatomie, Utter says, "ought not to be forgotten, overlooked, nor forgiven." John Jr.'s official published reply, in the *Cleveland Leader* on November 29, 1883, does exactly what his earlier letter to Sanborn promised, defending his father by giving the same kind of immediate context to the massacre (the character of the "victims," the crimes of the slave forces, etc.) that modern biographers like Reynolds do.

But these types of defenses of Pottawatomie cede ground that John Brown would not have and did not. Pottawatomie was not, or at least was not *merely*, the desperate action of a man pushed to the brink. Nor was it an act of passion, done in the heat of some moment; Brown had originally planned to do it a day earlier, but was stalled by an initially-uncooperative James Townsley, who drove their wagon. But then what was it? Pure history can only tell us what happened—John Brown and his sons, and Henry Thompson and James Townsley, abducted and executed five members of the

210 David N. Utter, "John Brown of Osawatamie," 1883, *BBS*.

211 John Brown, Jr., "John Brown, Jr., to Frank B. Sanborn," 1883 October 26. *BBS*.

212 Phillips, *The Conquest of Kansas*, 339-341. Brown's own account can be found in *LLJB*, 238-239, in a June 1856 letter to his family in North Elba.

slaver force in Kansas on the night of May 24th, 1856. They did this, by their own admission, to strike a blow against their enemies and defend their allies. But we are not doing pure history here, and liberation theology, combined with an understanding of John Brown's Christianity, can tell us more. Pottawatomie was the decisive moment when John Brown embraced open warfare and revolutionary violence in his crusade to destroy slavery. He had long since consecrated his life to the destruction of slavery, but here things changed—now he would destroy slavery *by any means necessary*.

John Jr., who parted ways with his father and brothers just before the bloody affair, would later confirm this more holistic view of Pottawatomie. "It has never been asserted by me, nor by any one else who comprehended the situation at that time, that the killing of those men at Pottawatomie was wholly on account of the emergency in that neighborhood. That blow was struck for Kansas and the slave; and he who attempts to limit its object to a mere settlement of accounts with a few proslavery desperadoes on that creek, shows himself incapable of rendering a just judgment in the case."²¹³ Those men died not just because they were issuing threats, or because Allen Wilkinson allegedly abused his wife, or because the Sherman brothers were aggressive, violent, racist louts, or because John Brown wanted revenge for the sacking of Lawrence and caning of Sumner. *They died because they fought for slavery*. John Brown's immediate motivations are only a part of the story—how he came to justify and reflect on Pottawatomie after the fact in many ways defines his legacy as a violent abolitionist and informed his plans for Harper's Ferry and beyond.

In conversation with friend E.A. Coleman and his wife shortly after Pottawatomie, John Brown, after admitting his involvement, told Coleman's wife "I think [God] has used me as an instrument to kill men; and if I live, I think he will use me as an instrument to kill a good many more."²¹⁴ John Brown had accepted the fact that he was fighting a holy

213 In *LLJB*, 250.

214 In *LLJB*, 259.

war. He did not *declare* holy war; in his mind, God had declared it. From this point on, Captain John Brown saw himself primarily not as an abolitionist, but as a warrior, “a soldier in the army of the Lord” as in the lyrics to “John Brown’s Body.” John Brown “long foresaw the deadly conflict with the slave-power, which culminated in the Civil War, and was eager to begin it, that it might be the sooner over. He knew—what few others could then believe—that slavery must perish in blood...”²¹⁵ Son Jason reported that upon seeing the destruction of Osawatimie later that summer, his father declared, “God sees it! There will be no more real peace in this country till the slavery question is settled.”²¹⁶ It was not just the circumstances of Bleeding Kansas that made Brown’s crusade a holy war, but *the entire system of slavery itself*, a system which polluted the entire country in the same way that the sins of injustice polluted the land of Israel in the Hebrew Bible.

By the 1850s, many Northern Republicans and abolitionists believed that the South was ruled by what they called “The Slave Power” and that this power exerted disproportionate control over the entire country; this “conspiratorial ‘Slave Power’...had seized control of the federal government and was attempting to pervert the Constitution for its own purposes.”²¹⁷ John Brown believed in this Slave Power, but for him it was more than just a conspiratorial political force, just as slavery itself was more than an economic system or set of productive relations; they had become the “principalities... powers...rulers of the darkness of this world...spiritual wickedness in high places” described by pseudo-Paul in the epistle to the Ephesians.²¹⁸ A few months before, he had written to his wife Mary that in light of growing atrocities against Free Staters and Franklin Pierce sending federal troops to Leavenworth, “we may soon again be called upon to ‘buckle on our Armor,’”²¹⁹ which is almost certainly a reference to the very next

215 *LLJB*, 268.

216 Jason Brown, “Letter to the Lawrence (Kansas) Journal,” Feb. 8, 1880. *BBS*.

217 Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 9.

218 Ephesians 6:12 (RSV).

219 “Letter from John Brown in Osawatimie to his family in North Elba, Feb 1, 1856,” by John

verse of Ephesians (“Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God...”) Shortly thereafter, in April, he wrote again, and this time directly mentioned the Slave Power: “For One I have no desire (all things considered) to have the Slave power cease from its acts of aggression. ‘Their foot shall slide in due time.’”²²⁰ Here he quotes Deuteronomy 32:35, which he had marked in his last Bible not with ink, but by turning down the page corner in a dog-ear (the largest dog-ear in the entire Bible, I noted even before understanding its significance to this letter). The verse in full reads, in Brown’s favored King James Version: “To me belongeth vengeance and recompense; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste.” The “they” referred to here in the song of Moses is the nation of Israel, who are being punished for their idolatry, just as John Brown believed God would now punish America for the sin and idolatry of slavery, and the entire economic system built around it.²²¹

This evidence shows that John Brown understood the Slave Power in religious terms, and himself as a Christian warrior in the army of the God of liberation. The Slave Power corrupted not just the South but the entire nation; writing from Kansas near the end of his life Brown decried the double-standard that reigned throughout the land whereby the eleven victims of the brutal Marais de Cygnes Massacre (five were killed) had aroused little national consternation, while Brown’s own raid into Missouri which had liberated eleven slaves and killed just a single white man had “[stirred Hell from beneath].”²²² Brown condemned not only the slavers, but also “conservative Free-State, and doughface men, and Administration tools...” An 1855 letter, written to his family in

Brown, *John Brown Papers*, Kansas Historical Society.

220 “Letter from John Brown in Osawatimie to his family in North Elba, April 7, 1856,” by John Brown, *John Brown Papers*, Kansas Historical Society.

221 For the relationship between slavery and capitalism, see Sven Beckert. *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).

222 Typeset of “Old Brown’s Parallels,” John Brown, *BBS*. Originally published in *New York Semi-Weekly Tribune*, Jan. 28, 1859.

North Elba from Ohio, reads:

I believe there is ten times the suffering amongst the poor in this State that ever existed before; and I fear it will be very extreme before another harvest can afford relief. Should God send famine, pestilence, and war upon this guilty hypocritical nation to destroy it, we need not be surprised. Never before did a people so mock and despise him. There seems to be no sign of repentance amongst us.²²³

Note that Brown foresees God sending famine, pestilence, and war upon “this guilty hypocritical nation,” not just the South; moreover, Brown wrote this letter after noticing “ten times the suffering amongst the poor” in Ohio, *a free state*.

Deuteronomy 32:35, which Brown explicitly connected with the Slave Power, is also the central verse of scripture in what is likely the most famous sermon in all of English Protestantism, Jonathan Edwards's *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (1741). It is more than likely that John Brown was familiar with the sermon, as John Jr. remembered his father owning “ponderous volumes of Jonathan Edwards’s sermons.”²²⁴ Edwards stressed that God alone was all that stood between men and nations and Hell, and that indeed they would fall to Hell when God decided so. “There is no want of Power in God to cast wicked Men into Hell at any Moment. Mens Hands can’t be strong when God rises up: The strongest have no Power to resist him, nor can any deliver out of his Hands.”²²⁵ The Slave Power that in Brown’s mind (and the minds of many Northerners) so dominated America was nothing compared with the power of God, who had marked it for death, and Brown believed that he was God’s hand. Friend James Hanway, who first disapproved but later changed his mind about Pottawatomie, recalled “Captain Brown

223 “Letter to his Family from Ohio, Jan. 1855” by John Brown, *John Brown Papers, 1842-1928*, Chicago Historical Society.

224 In *LLJB*, 93.

225 Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. A Sermon Preached at Enfield, July 8th, 1741*. Reiner Smolinski, ed. *Electronic Texts in American Studies*, Libraries at University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 5.

firmly believed that he was an instrument in the hands of Providence to smite the slave-power...The question with him was the proper time to strike the blow. He thought the hour had come, and the Pottawatomie tragedy was the result."²²⁶ The reverend Samuel Hopkins, mentioned all the way back in Chapter One as a definite influence on Owen Brown and probable influence on John Brown, had elaborated on Edwardsian theology; when human beings sin against their neighbors (which is how John Brown understood oppression), according to Hopkins and other Puritan theologians of this school, God opposes them not through supernatural intervention but through "the interposition of some wise and able Friend,' a person who will truly further God's design and reverse the effects of the sinner's misdeeds."²²⁷ This is how John Brown saw his work, including his most violent deeds. He believed, like the black Puritan theologian Lemuel Haynes (who was a follower of Hopkins and Edwards) did, that "God...has appointed [people] as instruments, by which he will accomplish his designs...indeed, without the exertions of men, it is impossible that they should take place."²²⁸ Haynes connects this with God's actions in history to liberate the oppressed in the Exodus, from God's revelation to Abraham that his descendants would go into Egypt, to the birth of Moses, to the eventual ten plagues, and beyond.²²⁹ What John Brown did at Pottawatomie, and later at Harpers Ferry, is take the Puritan theology of Johnathan Edwards and his successors such as Samuel Hopkins and Lemuel Haynes, and *turn it into liberation theology*. This was a violent, fire-and-brimstone theology that to modern viewers appears antiquated and authoritarian, but in the hands of John Brown, acting as the hands of the God of the oppressed, it became a theology of liberation. John Brown wrote once to a Quaker

226 In *LLJB*, 251.

227 John Saillant, "Slavery and Divine Providence in New England Calvinism: The New Divinity and a Black Protest, 1775-1805" in *The New England Quarterly* Vol. 68, No. 4 (Dec. 1995), 587. Saillant is quoting Hopkins, *Sin, thro' divine*, 33.

228 Lemuel Haynes, *Black Preacher to White America: The Collected Writings of Lemuel Haynes, 1774-1833*, ed. Richard Newman (New York: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1990), 95.

229 *Ibid.*

sympathizer that “You know that Christ once armed Peter. So also in my case I think he put a sword into my hand...God will surely attend to his own cause in the best possible way and time, and he will not forget the work of his own hands.”²³⁰ Jonathan Edwards’s famous sermon contains the lines: “The wrath of God burns against them...The glittering Sword is whet, and held over them, and the Pit hath opened her Mouth under them.”²³¹ To indulge in theological-historical speculation, we might wonder if John Brown thought of those words as the swords were held over the “victims” of Pottawatomie.

The manner in which these crimes were committed is, of course, the source of much of the discomfort with them, both among Brown’s biographers and even some of his family (Jason Brown in particular, although he later “told an interviewer that if he had understood more of his father’s purpose, he would have put a sharper edge on the swords”).²³² If the men had been killed in battle, such as those that Brown and his men killed in clashes like Osawatomie and Black Jack, very few would cast moral aspersions on those who fired the shots or swung the swords. “War is murder—in one of its aspects it is deliberate and repeated murder; and yet the patriot warrior who goes to battle in behalf of his country is not arraigned for murder, but honored as a hero,” wrote Sanborn.²³³ One may or may not accept this justification, and Brown himself may have employed it when justifying himself to others. But such arguments are almost beside the point. They are, to quote James Cone, “white people’s analysis of violence and non-violence...White people have a distorted conception of the meaning of violence. They like to think of violence as breaking the laws of their society, but that is a narrow and racist understanding of reality. There is a more deadly form of violence, and it is

230 In *LLJB*, 583.

231 Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, 7.

232 DeCaro, *Fire from the Midst of You*, 235.

233 *LLJB*, 267. Sanborn was attempting to cast Pottawatomie in this light, though if it were so simple, then he (and David S. Reynolds a century and a half later) would not need to so forcefully argue this claim.

camouflaged in such slogans as 'law and order...'”²³⁴ John Brown recognized this, writing to Frederick Douglass from Akron in 1854 of “the extreme wickedness of persons who use their influence to bring law and order...Who are the men that are undermining our truly republican and democratic institutions at their very foundations? I forgot to head my remarks 'Law and Order.'”²³⁵ John Brown and James Cone knew that America is a fundamentally, intrinsically, inherently violent society; slavery *is violence*, white supremacy *is violence*. Those crying for pacifism in a violent society are like the unfaithful Israelites in the book of Jeremiah who "cry 'peace, peace,' when there is no peace.”²³⁶

In any case, these murders were not indiscriminate and Brown was demonstrably *not* bloodthirsty, for he spared multiple victims, and their independent accounts demonstrate this. James Harris, who was there when William Sherman was taken, testifies that Brown and his band interrogated the men who were staying there one-by-one, and told him, “If I would answer no to all the questions which they had asked me, they would let me loose.”²³⁷ The questions involved whether Harris had taken arms against Free State men in the past, whether he had participated in the burning of Lawrence, etc. Obviously, they were satisfied and let him live, although presumably anyone could have lied; had Brown simply wanted to kill, then his letting James Harris off is inexplicable. Another witness, Allen Wilkinson’s wife, testified that her husband was asked before being taken if he was “a Northern armist,” which she took to mean “that my husband was opposed to the Northern or Free-Soil party.”²³⁸ A third witness, Jerome Glanville, was released unharmed because he was “determined to be only a traveller

234 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 199-200. Note that the primary pro-slavery political party in Kansas during the period was called the “Law and Order Party.”

235 In Louis Ruchames, ed: *A John Brown Reader: The Story of John Brown in his Own Words...* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1959), 84-85.

236 Jeremiah 6:14. Brown quoted this verse in a letter to John Jr. in August 1853, held in the Boyd B. Stutler collection in the West Virginia Archives.

237 In *LLJB*, 266.

238 *LLJB.*, 267.

[sic].” Even at the Doyle’s, where Brown’s company killed three men, Brown spared the sixteen-year-old John Doyle at the pleading of his mother. The manner in which these men were first interrogated, and then killed or spared based on their *actions* against the Free State cause (notwithstanding those that Brown and his company knew firsthand to be guilty, like the Doyles, who had been slave-catchers before coming to Kansas), suggests that Brown’s intent was to stage something like a divine *trial* for them, and was even willing to take them at their word in their defense. Of course, these trials held by the moonlight shining from the blades of the executioner’s swords were nothing like what Americans consider to be democratic and fair trials, but that was never their intent. John Brown believed that the laws of God were higher than the laws of human beings; and anyway, those laws had proven themselves incapable or unwilling of providing justice as John Brown understood it. “I acknowledge no master in human form,” Brown would later tell Clement Vallandigham after being captured at Harper’s Ferry. This realization, or conviction, or inspiration, would lead him onward from Kansas and towards insurrection and revolution. He was off to “Trouble Israel from another quarter.”²³⁹

239 Quoted in Boyd B. Stutler, “John Brown’s Constitution,” 4, *BBS*. This is probably a reference to Esther 4:14.

CHAPTER SIX: TO GOVERN OUR ACTIONS

“The Revolution is the means of obtaining a government that will feed the hungry, clothe the naked, teach the uneducated, perform works of charity, love their neighbors not only in a transitory and occasional way...For this reason the Revolution is not only permissible but obligatory for Christians who see in it the one effective and complete way to create love for all.” -Camillo Torres Restrepo

John Brown spent the remainder of his life after Bleeding Kansas planning, raising funds for, and then executing his doomed raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia. The historical narrative of what occurred before, during, and after the botched raid is as complete as it is likely to get, barring some miraculous new documentary evidence surfacing. This chapter instead focuses on the theoretical foundations John Brown built during these years for what was to be his decisive blow against slavery and oppression, his *Declaration of Liberty by the Representatives of the Slave Population of the United States of America* and his *Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States*. Based in part, obviously, on the United States Declaration of Independence and Constitution, these documents serve as John Brown’s most complete and lasting manifestos of revolutionary organizing and liberation theology. In studying their contents, comparing them with the documents they were meant to extend or supercede, and analyzing them in light of John Brown’s praxis (both prior, as in Kansas or throughout his pre-revolutionary days, or after, as in Harpers Ferry) we will be able to finally comprehend the whole of Brown’s contributions to the world-historical process of human liberation from bondage. This chapter focuses on the *Provisional Constitution*, because it was written first. In it we see John Brown’s attempt at statecraft, in which he applied his passion for justice and liberation, and his intuitive but deep understanding of

the Bible, to sketch out his vision of what a society modeled on revolutionary Christian principles might look like. Through reading it in this context, the radical ideological developments John Brown was going through in the last years of his life become obvious. “There can be no question that what Brown saw and did in Kansas gave a new tone” to the plan for destroying slavery he had been iterating on, in practice or in his mind, for much of his adult life.²⁴⁰ His *practical* experience in Kansas helped him to refine the *theory* that gives form to the *Provisional Constitution*, which John Brown would then attempt to synthesize into *praxis*, with fateful results, at Harpers Ferry.

The *Provisional Constitution* was written primarily by John Brown himself at the home of Frederick Douglass in Rochester, New York, in early 1858, though he had no doubt been brainstorming it for some time before then. Douglass amusingly recalled that the drafting and re-drafting of the Constitution occupied Brown’s “whole time and thought...It was the first thing in the morning and last thing at night, till I confess it began to be something of a bore to me.”²⁴¹ At this point, John Brown’s plan was to set up small guerilla stations or forts in the Allegheny mountains from which small bands of men could liberate slaves, escape from government or militia forces, and swell their numbers slowly through the slaves that joined them. Douglass writes that Brown would “Once in a while” mention the idea of equipping this band by seizing the armory at Harpers Ferry, but that Douglass did not consider that even Brown thought this was a serious idea. Sanborn corroborates this view, writing that though Brown spoke of Harpers Ferry to him, he put it “as a question, rather, without expressing his own purpose.”²⁴² The *Provisional Constitution* was to be the governing document for the members of this expedition, and any territory they came to control; John Brown called a convention of many of his black acquaintances in Chatham, Canada, in May 1858 to ratify the

240 LLJB, 421.

241 Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, From 1817 to 1882, Written by Himself* (Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske Co., 1892), 276.

242 LLJB, 450.

constitution in preparation for the raid and insurrection it was meant to spark. It would be nearly a year and a half before the raid actually took place; this delay was due to a confluence of factors including betrayal by Hugh Forbes, a mercenary Brown had hired to train his men. The *Provisional Constitution* should be read with the knowledge that it was intended to be put into practice soon.

The *Provisional Constitution* was voted on and ratified by a convention of forty-six men (emphasis on *men*) in Chatham, Canada; the majority of these men were black, and many were escaped slaves. Osborne P. Anderson, the convention's secretary, included the minutes from this meeting in *A Voice from Harpers Ferry*, published at the dawn of the Civil War in 1861. The minutes are light on details, the most notable of which is that every single article of the constitution was adopted unanimously, save one: Article XLVI (46). More will be said about Article 46 shortly; first, it will behoove us to examine the contents of the Provisional Constitution as it was primarily intended to be read and used, as a *constitution*.

Even a cursory reading gives no doubt that the *Provisional Constitution* is meant for a society at war. It declares immediately that slavery "is none other than a most barbarous, unprovoked, and unjustifiable war" of oppressors against the oppressed, which justifies the setting out of a new constitution for the oppressed to protect and govern themselves.²⁴³ Unlike the United States, the *Provisional Constitution* sets the Commander-in-chief as a dedicated position, distinct from the President and appointed by the executive, judicial, and legislative branches together.²⁴⁴ The Commander-in-chief is stated to have the duty of taking over for the Secretary of War "in case of arrest, or of any inability to serve," showing Brown's awareness of the illegality of what they would be

243 John Brown, "Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States," 1858; Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94. Online Version, <https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/provisional-constitution-and-ordinances-for-the-people-of-the-united-states-written-by-john-brown>

244 *Ibid.*

doing.²⁴⁵ Article 35 prohibits the “needless waste” of “any useful property or article,” important for a guerilla organization surviving with little in the way of supply lines and outside aid. Articles 43 and 44 are an interesting pair; 43 encourages “all persons known to be of good character...who are connected with this organization, whether male or female” to “carry arms openly.” Article 44, on the other hand, strongly prohibits the carrying of *concealed* weapons, except in certain circumstances. What makes this especially interesting is that eight years earlier, in response to the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act, John Brown had helped form a self-defense organization called the League of Gileadites in Springfield, Massachusetts; here Brown recommended the opposite, that all members carry *concealed* weapons.²⁴⁶ The move from concealed to open carrying of weapons perfectly illustrates the material difference between self-defense and open warfare.

In its governmental functions, the *Provisional Constitution* is much more democratic than the U.S. government at the time, and in some respects even to this day. The Supreme Court is elected directly (Article 5) and can be impeached by input from all members of government rather than a bicameral legislative branch (Article 15); this probably stems from Brown’s antipathy towards the U.S. Supreme Court after the 1857 *Dred Scott* decision which found that the U.S. Constitution did not consider black people to be citizens; Brown mentions it also in the Preamble to the *Provisional Constitution* (“the Oppressed People, who, by a recent decision of the Supreme Court are declared to have no rights which the White Man is bound to respect,”) and in the *Declaration of Liberty*. Furthermore, Congress is unicameral, with only a House of Representatives of between five and ten members (Article 3). In the 19th-century the House of

245 John Brown, “Provisional Constitution,” Article IX.

246 Brown’s “Words of Advice” for the League of Gileadites also did specify men, not men and women (though its registrar of members included four women). See William Wells Brown, “John Brown and the Fugitive Slave Law” in *The Independent*, March 10, 1870; Cliff McCarthy, “League of Gileadites” in *Freedom Stories of the Pioneer Valley*, <https://freedomstoriespv.wordpress.com/league-of-gileadites/>; LLJB, 124-126.

Representatives was the legislative branch that was directly elected (senators were elected by state legislatures); this almost certainly suggests that Brown viewed the Senate of his time as undemocratic.

But the Provisional Constitution's radical democracy goes even further. Nowhere are membership, voting rights, or rights to hold office reserved for only men; what this means is that had Harpers Ferry succeeded and this organization come to govern any actual territory, it would have been the first democracy in the world to have universal suffrage. In fact, one of the few moments where the *Provisional Constitution* does make a distinction based on sex is in Article 32, entitled "Crimes," which specifies that "Persons convicted of the forcible violation of any female prisoner shall be put to death." This is the only crime elucidated in this section (other sections do deal with larceny, desertion, etc.).

It must be mentioned here that this aspect of the *Provisional Constitution* draws attention to one of John Brown's indisputable moral failings and hypocrisies—his attitudes towards women. For as radical as the *Provisional Constitution* is on paper in its equal treatment of women, Brown's own conduct in that regard leaves much to be desired. When an unnamed member of the Chatham convention suggested inviting women to join the organization that the *Provisional Constitution* was written to govern, "Brown strenuously opposed this, and warned the members not to intimate, even to their wives, what was done."²⁴⁷ His daughters Anne and Martha²⁴⁸ were trusted enough to live at the Kennedy Farm with the raiders while they prepared for the attack, cooking and cleaning and playing look-out, but not to join in the actual organization. Women could be members of the League of Gileadites, but their role was "to give instant notice to all other members of any attack upon the rights of our people," not to fight themselves.²⁴⁹ The

247 James Cleland Hamilton, "John Brown in Canada: A Monograph," in *Canadian Magazine*, (Dec., 1894), 14.

248 Martha was his son Oliver's wife.

249 *LLJB*, 127.

exception that proves the rule was Harriet Tubman, the famous escaped slave and abolitionist warrior, who Brown met in 1858; Brown and Tubman were both equally impressed with each other, and Brown welcomed her help, but in a letter to John Jr. Brown repeatedly referred to Tubman using male pronouns. “He [Harriet] is the most of a man, naturally, that I ever met with.”²⁵⁰ This kind of attitude is startlingly regressive from a man so progressive on racial equality, who considered himself “naturally fond of females,”²⁵¹ as he stated in his autobiography written to Henry Stearns. That for all of his progressive and radical beliefs John Brown could not overcome his male chauvinism is an unfortunate stain on an otherwise-commendable legacy.²⁵²

Other aspects of the *Provisional Constitution* which testify to how John Brown’s strident Christianity manifested itself in contradictory ways are the “moral” proscriptions it contains of things such as “profane swearing,” “filthy conversation,” and “unlawful intercourse of the sexes” in Article 40. David S. Reynolds lightheartedly mocks this section for its disdain for “free speech and civil liberties,”²⁵³ which is fair enough, but the forbidding of “intoxication or quarreling” at least can be understood in the context of a military government fighting a guerilla war against a much larger force. The *Provisional Constitution* also enshrines “The marriage relation” and the Sabbath day of rest, on which government-sponsored schools and churches were to provide “moral and religious instruction and improvement, relief of the suffering, instruction of the young and ignorant, and the encouragement of personal cleanliness.”²⁵⁴ While very few people living in the modern day, much less the types of people interested in Brown because of liberation

250 In *LLJB*, 452.

251 In *LLJB*, 14.

252 For a recent scientific investigation of the masculinization of black women specifically that sheds some light on Brown’s indefensible attitude towards Harriet Tubman, see Coles, S.M. and Pasek, J., “Intersectional invisibility revisited: How group prototypes lead to the erasure and exclusion of Black women,” in *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (2020), pp. 314-324.

253 Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 253.

254 John Brown, “Provisional Constitution,” Article XLII.

theology, would be interested in living in a society so shot through with Brown's unique brand of Christianity, in their context, these regulations make sense. Brown's patriarchal values, while deserving of criticism, enshrined in him a biblical view of marriage that was not unreasonable or uncommon in the society he grew up in, where unmarried women and orphaned children were often left destitute with few economic opportunities and no social safety net absent a patriarch to provide for them. This is why God, throughout the Hebrew Bible, very frequently condemns the oppression of "orphans and widows" in passages that John Brown marked in his last Bible such as Deuteronomy 10:18, Exodus 22:22, and Job 31:16-17. The marriage rules are also not particularly extreme, only stating that the marriage relation "shall be at all times respected, and families kept together, as far as possible; and broken families encouraged to reunite." One aspect of slavery that was frequently condemned for its particular heinousness was how it tore families apart; black Puritan theologian Lemuel Haynes, in an attempt at moral suasion to white Americans, asked "Should one of their Dearest *Children* Be snatch'd from them, in a Clandestine manner, and carried to *Africa*, or some other forreign Land, to be under the most abject Slavery for Life, among a strang people? would it not imibtter all your Domestic Comforts? would he not Be Ever upon your mind? nay, Doth not nature Even recoil at the reflection?"²⁵⁵ John Brown's entire hatred of slavery first began when, as a child, he was confronted with "the wretched, hopeless condition of fatherless and motherless slave children, sometimes raising the question, 'Is God their Father?'"²⁵⁶ No doubt the devastating loss of his own mother at the age of eight played a role. It is in these contexts that the *Provisional Constitution's* attitude towards marriage and families must be understood; they are Biblical, centered on justice, and deeply rooted in John Brown's powerful empathy for orphans.

Possibly even more troubling to modern sensibilities, and certainly more radical,

²⁵⁵ Haynes, *Black preacher to white America*, 22.

²⁵⁶ In *LLJB*, 116.

is how the *Provisional Constitution* treats property. The *Provisional Constitution* shows very little respect, if any, for private property;²⁵⁷ Article 28 specifies that “All captured or confiscated property and all property the product of the labor of those belonging to this organization and their families, shall be held as the property of the whole, equally, without distinction...” Robert L. Tsai sees parts of the *Provisional Constitution* as efforts “to recapture a limited government more suitable to a pastoral society,”²⁵⁸ which is certainly harmonious with our analysis of Brown’s attitudes towards land and property in Chapter Four, but Tsai (whose excellent work on the *Provisional Constitution* we will engage more with shortly) gives too little attention to the Christian influences on the document. We have already seen how, since his days as a failed businessman and would-be yeoman, John Brown’s beliefs were becoming more and more radical, including his beliefs about business and capital. John Brown was more than likely trying to emulate the earliest disciples of Jesus who, as described in chapters 2 and 4 of Acts, “had everything in common.”²⁵⁹ Utopian Christian communities sprang up all over America in the 19th century, many of them taking these verses in Acts to mean that communal ownership of property was a Christian imperative; indeed, the first ever utopian Christian community founded in America (by a Dutch Mennonite named Pieter Cornelius Plockhoy van Zierikzee) in 1663 in Delaware was also the first European colony to ban slavery from its inception.²⁶⁰ John Brown had never been an ardent

257 It must of course be noted whenever this subject comes up in any context that private property is not the same thing as personal property.

258 Robert L. Tsai, “John Brown’s Constitution” in *Boston College Law Review* Vol. 41, No. 1 (Newton: Boston College Law School, Jan. 2010), 157.

259 Acts 4:32b (RSV); see also Acts 2:44.

260 Durnbaugh, “Communitarian Societies in Colonial America,” in Donald E. Pitzer, ed., *America’s Communal Utopias* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 15-17. This book is a wealth of information on all the various utopian Christian communes and semi-communes founded in America throughout its history. In fact, it was my own 2017 visit to Bishop Hill, Illinois, which was founded as the Bishop Hill Colony in 1846 by a Swedish preacher and prophet named Eric Janson and which operated for some time as a commune, that first led me to wonder about the connections (if any) between the growth of Christian utopianism and the property laws in the *Provisional Constitution*. While direct evidence is scarce, I believe that if nothing else Brown’s evolving views on property were rooted in the same Christian impulses that motivated many Christian utopians. The eleventh chapter of *America’s Communal Utopias* is

believer in private property, writing to his father in 1848 that “To get a little property together to leave, as the world have done, is really a low mark to be firing at through life;”²⁶¹ and again in 1849, from Springfield (quoted earlier, but repeated here), “We have in this part of the country the strongest proofs that the great majority have made gold their *hope*, their *only hope*.”²⁶² No doubt John Brown’s ideas about “property” were conditioned by slavery; one’s supposed inalienable right to property and the government’s role in protecting that right was one of the primary means, both political and ideological, by which the Slave Power defended itself from abolitionists. “We have now laws more efficient to protect slave-property than any State in the Union. These laws have just taken effect (Sept. 1, 1855), and have already silenced Abolitionists,” wrote a Missouri slaver who fought against the Free State cause in Bleeding Kansas.²⁶³ The Provisional Constitution understands the importance of *personal* property, promising in Article 33 to protect the individual property of anyone willing to free their slaves and demonstrate that they were friendly towards the insurrectionists. Yet all other property was fair game for seizure and placement into the common purse. For private property (i.e., capital) the Provisional Constitution has no use; slaves were the primary form of capital in the South, and we have already seen that John Brown had come to reject the idea of land as capital by this point. *Personal* property of friendly actors was to be not only respected but actively defended, but only for outsiders—within Brown’s prefigurative community, all property was held in common. This evolution in Brown’s thought can be seen clearly by comparing the common property of the *Provisional Constitution* with the divided property of the earlier *Bylaws of the Free-State regular Volunteers of Kansas*, an organizational charter for a small militia Brown led in Kansas. The *Bylaws* included the caveat that captured property was to be divided equally, “except that no person shall be

devoted to the Bishop Hill Colony.

261 *LLJB*, 24.

262 *LLJB*, 25.

263 *LLJB.*, 176.

entitled to any dividend from property taken before he entered the service.”²⁶⁴ The *Provisional Constitution* makes no such exception; here property is not divided among everyone individually, but *held in common*, just as in Acts.

That the Provisional Constitution specifies “property the product of the labor of those belonging to this organization” is to be held in common is meaningful. It is in direct contradiction with the pre-capitalist yeoman ideal, which as mentioned in Chapter Four sees the right to land embedded within the product of one’s own labor; one’s right to land is earned by the labor one puts into cultivating it. Capitalist property relations, where the owner of property extracts the surplus value from the workers who put their labor into the property, are what made the yeoman ideal increasingly untenable throughout the 19th century. But the society outlined in the *Provisional Constitution* knows nothing of capitalist property relations. In John Brown’s idealized revolutionary Christian society the property is owned communally and therefore *so is the labor*. Article 39, *All must labor*, specifies that all people belonging to the organization “shall be held as under obligation to labor in some way for the general good.” As the common property regulations were based in Acts 2 and 4, the work requirement has a Christian origin in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, which reads “For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: If any one will not work, let him not eat.”²⁶⁵ While in modern times this verse is often weaponized against welfare recipients, John Brown would have associated it historically with John Smith and the Jamestown settlement, where it was used to emphasize to the new settlers that they were coming to a land of hard work, where their survival would depend on concerted, coordinated labor. One reason the *Provisional Constitution* is such a radical and fascinating document is because it moves beyond this; here, the labor requirement *follows from* the common property requirement, because it *must*. John

264 In Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown, 1800-1859, A Biography Fifty Years Later* (London: Constable, 1910), 663.

265 2 Thessalonians 3:10, RSV.

Brown understood from the Bible what Vladimir Lenin understood from Marx:

...in the first phase of Communist society (generally called Socialism) “bourgeois right” is *not* abolished in its entirety, but only in part, only in proportion to the economic transformation so far attained...”Bourgeois right” recognizes them as the private property of separate individuals. Socialism converts them into common property. To that extent, and to that extent alone, does “bourgeois right” disappear...

...”He who does not work, shall not eat” –this Socialist principle is *already* realized.²⁶⁶

This, of course, does not mean that John Brown was a Marxist; in fact the attitudes of the early American Marxists towards slavery would have disgusted him.²⁶⁷ What it *does* mean is that his attitudes towards property and labor were, at the end of his life, moving towards a fundamentally socialist orientation, based entirely on his liberatory understanding of Christianity. Had the *Provisional Constitution* been enacted as written over any sizable amount of territory and population, it would have been a socialist society.²⁶⁸

We have already seen that John Brown was adept at intuitive understandings of Scripture that historical-critical methods would confirm long after his death (see Chapter Four), so for completion’s sake, a brief critical analysis of the passage from 2 Thessalonians will confirm this reading. First, Paul or pseudo-Paul,²⁶⁹ the author of the epistle, says that the people he is reprimanding for eating without working are περιεργαζομένους (*periergazomenous*), a unique compound verb that literally means something like “getting around doing work.” Paul contrasts them with himself as a

266 V.I. Lenin, *State and Revolution* (Mansfield Centre: Martino, 2011), 78. Originally published in 1917.

267 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (London: Routledge, 2017), 19-20. Originally published 1935.

268 It should also be noted that Richard Realf, one of the signatories of the Provisional Constitution, was a Chartist, an early British left-wing labor movement. See Hamilton, *Brown in Canada*, 9.

269 2 Thessalonians is probably the most heavily disputed among the Pauline literature in terms of authorship, but we will set aside that debate for now and just assume that the author is Paul.

positive example, he is one who “did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor...worked night and day...This was *not because we do not have that right* but in order to give you an example to imitate.”²⁷⁰ Paul is describing people who clearly do not *have* to work, but saying that they should anyway, as he did; his apostolic authority gave him the right to be supported by the Christian community (a remnant from when the Jesus movement was comprised of wandering preachers supported by settled householders), but in a world where the apostolic vision of common property described in Acts was, if nothing else, an ideal to strive for, it would not do for *anyone*, even Paul, to not labor. When we turn to 1 Corinthians (which was certainly written by the historical Paul) we see another historical example of early Christians eating undeservedly:

When you come together [for the Lord’s Supper], I hear that there are divisions among you...When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you proceeds to eat your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have households to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?²⁷¹

Recall the analysis from Chapter Three, which uses Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza’s work, about the importance of communal eating in the early Jesus movement, and what is going on here is abundantly clear. The people doing the eating without earning it *are rich people*. This is why Lenin, an atheist, cited this verse; in Socialism all are made to work because in capitalism the bourgeoisie do *not* work. The work requirement in the *Provisional Constitution* is an expression of John Brown’s evolving and radicalizing views on labor, land, and property; Article 22 serves to confirm this when it states that the sentence for all non-capital *crimes* is to be “hard labor on the public works, roads, etc.” Recall from Brown’s *Declaration of Liberty* (written after the *Provisional Constitution*) that Brown believed only through *crime* (granting the right to a

270 2 Thessalonians 3:8-9, emphasis added. (NRSVue)

271 1 Corinthians 11:18-22

fair trial) could one lose their inherent human right to land; this same concept applies to labor because John Brown had come to recognize that one's *labor* belongs inherently to them, and in an ideal society, to the common wealth, not to a capitalist or slave owner.

After his would-be slave rebellion was put down, with some of his men dead and John Brown himself lying bleeding in the armory at Harpers Ferry, he began to be questioned by some “distinguished gentlemen” and heckled by the people of Harpers Ferry.²⁷² When an unnamed heckler shouted that Brown was fanatical, Brown replied that “‘Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad,’ and you are mad.”²⁷³

Brown might very well have read that quote in an 1854 book called *Daniel, A Model for Young Men* by Southern Presbyterian minister William Anderson Scott. Scott, a slave owner, would not have been someone John Brown looked up to, but he would have agreed with at least this passage, which Scott wrote in his commentary on Daniel shortly after the “heathen proverb” Brown quoted to the bystander:

There are two great reasons why righteousness *exalteth a nation*, and why society cannot cohere without religion. These are, first, that when a due regard to God is lost sight of in the institutions of a nation, or in the administration of its affairs, a jarring inevitability ensues between the laws and doings of that nation and the universe, of which it is a part. This want of harmony—this want of conformity to the order of God’s government—must result in disaster. And as the government of God cannot be subverted, every government opposed to the divine must in time fall. A second reason is, that all constitutions and laws not in harmony with the universe are unsuited to the people placed under them; and consequently, discontent, restiveness, and insurrection will inevitably arise, sooner or later.²⁷⁴

It is impossible to say for certain that Scott’s book is where John Brown heard the “heathen proverb,”²⁷⁵ but it is likely for two reasons. The first is that Scott’s wording of it

272 LLJB, 562.

273 LLJB., 569.

274 William Anderson Scott, *Daniel, A Model For Young Men* (New York: R. Charter & Brothers, 1854), 249-250. Emphasis original.

275 A plausible alternative would be Benjamin Franklin’s essay *On Civil War*, which mentions guerilla warfare, but Franklin quotes it in Latin and uses the singular “God” not “gods.” Brown was reported to enjoy reading classical literature such as Josephus and Plutarch, so he could feasibly

is very close to Brown's. The second is the passage quoted above. "Righteousness exalteth a nation," which Scott emphasized, comes from the King James Version of Proverbs 14:34. While Brown would not mark this exact verse in his final Bible,²⁷⁶ he had made interesting use of it before in an 1857 paper called "Old Brown's Farewell." A draft of this paper is found in Sanborn, *Life and Letters of John Brown*, 508, but I examined a copy in Brown's own hand held by the Chicago Historical Society, and it is that version that is quoted here, Brown's spelling errors and all. Brown, frustrated by what he perceived as a lack of support for his abolitionist crusade, wrote of leaving the northeast

with a feeling of deepest sadness, that after having exhausted his own small means; and with his family and his brave men: suffered hunger, cold, nakedness...sickness, wounds, imprisonment, cruel treatment, and others death...that after all this, in order to sustain a cause; (which every citizen of this "Glorious Republic;" is under equal moral obligation to do: and for the neglect of which; he will be held accountable to God in which every man, woman, and child of the entire human family has a deep and awful interest: that when no wages are asked or expected: he cannot secure (amidst all the wealth, luxury, and extravagance; of this "Heaven exalted" people) even the necessary supplies of the common soldier.²⁷⁷

"'Heaven exalted' people" is almost certainly a reference to the same verse, Proverbs 14:34, that Scott emphasized in his diatribe about the destruction of nations.²⁷⁸ Reading the original letter, rather than the printing in Sanborn, also shows the extent of Brown's antipathy towards his own country at this point in his life—both "glorious republic" and "Heaven exalted" are set in quotes and written in an affectation that marks them as clearly sarcastic, even contemptuous. (The word "glorious" was added later in superscript, as if he had written Republic neutrally and then come back in a worse mood have encountered it in its original form in *Antigone*, though this seems even less likely.

276 He *did* mark Proverbs 14:20-22 and 14:31.

277 "Old Brown's Farewell; to the Plymouth Rocks, Bunker Hill Monuments, Charter Oaks, and Uncle Thoms Cabins," by John Brown, April 1857. *John Brown Papers, 1842-1928*, Chicago Historical Society. Alternate version available in *LLJB*, 508-509.

278 The word "nation" in the Bible is more synonymous with the singular noun "people" than the modern concept of the "nation-state." Brown's letters show that he frequently paraphrased when quoting from the Bible.

to change it to the sarcastic “Glorious Republic.”) In New England Brown was confronted with the “wealth, luxury, and extravagance” (which are the things Scott links to spiritual rot in this section of *Daniel, A Model for Young Men*) of capitalist America, and its indifference towards his cause. This suggests that Brown had likely read Scott’s book, but unlike Scott, who thought indeed that America was exalted, Brown saw this idea as a mockery. He agreed with Scott that “every government opposed to the divine must in time fall” and that “all constitutions and laws not in harmony with the universe are unsuited to the people placed under them; and consequently, discontent, restiveness, and insurrection will inevitably arise.”²⁷⁹ But John Brown had come to believe that “The only firm basis upon which governments may be permanently established [is] where the citizens are devoted to the greatest good of their Fellow Men, the more humble, benighted, and oppressed they are, so much more sympathy and earnest effort for their relief is demanded.”²⁸⁰ The difference between Scott and Brown was that the proslavery Scott had an oppressor’s understanding of the divine, and John Brown had the oppressed’s. Scott thought the U.S. Constitution was in harmony with the universe because it protects²⁸¹ slavery and white supremacy; Brown decided to write a new constitution from the point of view of the oppressed, because he knew that the viewpoint of the oppressed is the viewpoint of God. Proslavery Scott trembled at the thought of insurrection; John Brown would *bring* insurrection.

The question that must now be asked is, how serious was the Provisional Constitution? Did John Brown really think he and his small band could effectively govern territory, free slaves, and fight a guerilla war? Or was the *Provisional Constitution* merely an exercise, an excuse to explore through writing and theorizing the kind of society John Brown wished he could live in but knew would never be reality?

279 Scott, *Daniel, A Model For Young Men*, 250.

280 John Brown, *Declaration of Liberty*.

281 My use of the present tense here is very intentional.

Robert L. Tsai has argued persuasively that the Provisional Constitution should be seen as an example of “fringe constitutionalism” and Brown characterized as a “radical statesman.”²⁸² This is all supported by the prior analysis, though we might amend it to “radical *Christian* statesman.” What this means is that Brown wanted to “advocate or employ extralegal tactics in the pursuit of socially transformative goals,” while simultaneously maintaining “a potential claim to democratic legitimacy [through] a steadfast refusal to renounce [his] membership in the polity.”²⁸³ To understand the motive and purpose of this tactic, we must look at the most controversial article of the Provisional Constitution, Article 46: “These articles not for the overthrow of government.” It reads:

The foregoing articles shall not be construed so as in any way to encourage the overthrow of any State government, or of the general government of the United States, and look to no dissolution of the Union, but simply to amendment and repeal. And our flag shall be the same that our fathers fought under in the Revolution.

The flag, specifically, had come up in earlier deliberations; the Canadian J.M. Jones recalled that many of the Canadian black members of the convention, who had become English citizens, “would never think of fighting under the hated ‘Stars and Stripe.’”²⁸⁴ John Brown, for better or for worse, overruled them. When it came time to adopt the constitution, the only member of the convention to vote against Article 46 was G.J. Reynolds, who had motioned to strike it.

Article 46 is preposterous on its face, and when Brown and his raiders were captured, fooled nobody. Their indictment for insurrection and treason accused them of “for the purpose, end, and aim of overthrowing and abolishing the Constitution and laws of said Commonwealth [Virginia], and establishing in the place thereof, another and

282 Tsai, “John Brown’s Constitution,” 156.

283 *Ibid.*

284 Hamilton, *Brown in Canada*, 14.

different government, and constitution and laws hostile thereto.”²⁸⁵ If Boyd B. Stutler was correct that John Brown thought Article 46 would act as a “sheet anchor” which would “nullify any charge of treason laid against him,” he was sorely mistaken.²⁸⁶ But it is unlikely that John Brown was that stupid, or deluded, and nor were the men who signed it. Signatory Charles W. Moffett remembered that “When we formed that government at the Chatham Convention, some then said, ‘Why, this is treason, and the first man who puts his name to it commits treason against his government...But when they got ready to sign every man was anxious to have his name at the head. Mine went seventh.”²⁸⁷ They knew that it was treason, and they were eager to commit treason.

So despite the *Provisional Constitution* stating that it was not intended to serve as a declaration of revolution, nobody actually involved had any such illusions. That article *must* have served some ideological or symbolic purpose. Robert Tsai is too quick, however, to conclude that through it John Brown “demanded a group commitment to work within the American tradition of creative ‘amendment and repeal’ rather than to levy a general war against the United States or pro-slavery states.”²⁸⁸ Tsai himself dismisses with prejudice the notion that John Brown was insane (which we will deal with more in the next section), and only a very deluded person would think that attacking a federal arsenal did not constitute “war against the United States,” or that launching such a war would be conducive to the goal of “amendment and repeal.” Brown himself modeled his final attempt at Tsai’s “fringe constitutionalism” on the Declaration of Independence, which was made in the context of revolution and war, and Brown’s version states that rulers who “cruelly oppress their faithful Laboring Citizens, have within themselves the Germ, of their own certain and fearful *overthrow*.”²⁸⁹ We simply *cannot* take Article 46 at

285 Robert M. De Witt, ed., *The Life, Trial, and Execution of Captain John Brown* (New York: Robert M. De Witt, 1859), 59.

286 Stutler, “John Brown’s Constitution,” 6, in *BBS*.

287 Quoted in Stutler, “John Brown’s Constitution,” 7, in *BBS*.

288 Tsai, “John Brown’s Constitution,” 165.

289 John Brown, *Declaration of Liberty*. Emphasis added.

face value.

One possible explanation is that John Brown intended for the raid to fail, as it did, and for its failure to provoke exactly the national reaction that it did, which ultimately led to the Civil War and the total abolition of slavery. John Brown's month-and-a-half long stay in prison, from where he gave interviews, answered letters, and captured international attention for his beliefs, undoubtedly helped turn public opinion in the North more against slavery than it had been up to that point, and forced the South to reckon with the tide turning against them.²⁹⁰ But this ascribes to Brown a prescience that borders on the supernatural; he could not have known that he would survive the raid, nor that he would have so many weeks before being executed with which to propagandize. He certainly made the most of those weeks, giving stirring speeches in court that threw the moral questions at stake around slavery (as well as others that to this day remain unanswered) into sharp relief.

Had I interfered in the manner which I admit, and which I admit has been fairly proved...had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends, –either father, mother, brother, sister, wife, or children, or any of that class, –and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been alright; and every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment.²⁹¹

Here is perhaps the most complete and well-developed political statement of John Brown's life—devastating to the powerful, class-conscious, in total solidarity with the oppressed, cutting to the root of not just American slavery but all oppression. It was statements like these that made literary greats like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau and Victor Hugo take up their pens in defense of not only the man, but

²⁹⁰ The impact of Harpers Ferry on public opinion and its contribution to the eventual abolition of slavery are well-documented and beyond the scope of the present work, although it will be discussed incidentally in the next section. See Chapters 14-15 of Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, pp. 334-401 for an exhaustive account of these weeks.

²⁹¹ In *LLJB*, 584.

his aim and his methods. So while Harpers Ferry failed to foment a slave rebellion or create an egalitarian revolutionary society in the mountains, it ultimately succeeded in helping to liberate the oppressed. It was, like the Exodus, a decisive moment in the history of God's liberation of the oppressed.

But historically, we cannot ascribe superhuman prescience to John Brown, nor idiocy, nor lunacy. Luck, perhaps, and the skill to make the most of a bad situation.

The existence of Article 46, however, tells us just a little bit more. John Brown did not plan for his raid on Harpers Ferry to fail, but he knew that it might. James Monroe Jones, one of the signatories of the *Provisional Constitution*, later confessed his belief that John Brown had “intended to sacrifice himself and a few of his followers for the purpose of arousing the people of the North from the stupor they were in on this subject.”²⁹² A more parsimonious explanation is simply that John Brown hoped that his plan would succeed, but knew that it might not, and made preparations for both outcomes. The *Provisional Constitution* was John Brown's attempt to sketch out the kind of society he believed accorded with his revolutionary Christian values, and paradoxically was *also* his post-hoc proof that he was not a maniac or a revolutionary for the rest of the country to so easily discount. If Harpers Ferry succeeded, then Article 46 would have been superseded or rendered obsolete (the government *would* have been overthrown); if the raid failed, then John Brown could point to the *Provisional Constitution* and especially Article 46 as proof that he was not un-American, that he was not an anarchist, and that his actions were founded on Christian values. There is of course some truth to this reading—Brown's beliefs and actions *were* deeply rooted in his Christianity. But Article 46, and statements like it, were more practical than ideological, just as was the same agreement among the League of Gileadites, who agreed “we will ever be true to the flag of our beloved country, always acting under it.”²⁹³ John Brown put

292 In Hamilton, *Brown in Canada*, 14.

293 LLJB, 126.

this there not because of an undying and unthinking loyalty to the United States, especially not the United States government, which he believed had been overtaken by a spiritually evil power and which he went to war with; he did it because the League of Gileadites was as much a propagandistic statement to white America as it was a self-defense league: “Nothing so charms the American people as personal bravery,” he wrote as an opening.²⁹⁴ Nor did he have any illusions about the American political system, the North, or American political parties, no matter how antislavery they *seemed*. “I have but little ‘trust in princes’ myself,” he wrote to John Jr. of Washington politicians in 1858, as the plan to attack Harpers Ferry was taking shape.²⁹⁵ Earlier, in the 1854 letter to Frederick Douglass mentioned in Chapter Five, he had excoriated the “malignant spirits—such fiends clothed in human form...men who, neglecting honorable and useful labor to seek office and electioneer, have come to be a majority in our national Legislature...who fill the offices of Chief Magistrate...who fill the offices of judge, justices, commissioners, etc...marshalls, sheriffs, constables and policemen...”²⁹⁶ “He disliked the do-nothing policy of the Abolitionists,” recalled W.F.M. Army, but even moreso the ascendant Republican Party which was “of no account, for they were opposed to carrying the war into Africa; they were opposed to meddling with slavery in the States where it existed. He said his doctrine was to free the slaves by the sword.”²⁹⁷ James Redpath, after confirming that Brown “despised” the Republican Party, writes that Brown “was too earnest a man, and too devout a Christian, to rest satisfied with the only action against slavery consistent with one’s duty as a citizen, according to the usual Republican interpretation of the Federal Constitution...Where the Republicans said, Halt; John Brown shouted, Forward! to the rescue!”²⁹⁸ Finally, the Provisional Constitution

294 *LLJB.*, 124.

295 *LLJB.*, 451.

296 In Ruchames, *A John Brown Reader*, 84.

297 In Ruchames, *A John Brown Reader*, 421

298 Quoted in Gary Alan Fine, “John Brown’s Body: Elites, Heroic Embodiment, and the Legitimation of Political Violence” in *Social Problems* Vol. 46, No. 2 (May 1999), 239.

evidences greater ambitions than merely freeing the slaves around Harpers Ferry: Article 36 foresees operations in both slave *and* free states. Recall Brown's 1855 letter to his family mentioned in Chapter Five, where the suffering of the poor in Ohio, a free state, was cited as evidence that God would send "famin [sic], pestilence, and war" upon the nation "to destroy it."²⁹⁹

History has shown that Brown's contingency plan *worked*. "Significantly the attack on the federal arsenal was not interpreted as an attack on the federal government, but as an attack on the institution of slavery and on the South."³⁰⁰ Brown had snatched victory from the jaws of defeat, and he stood ready to face his fate with head held high. He had been prepared for this possibility. "Did not my Master Jesus Christ come down from Heaven and sacrifice Himself upon the altar for the salvation of the race, and should I, a worm, not worthy to crawl under his feet, refuse to sacrifice myself?" he said to J.M. Jones during the drafting of the *Provisional Constitution*.³⁰¹ As long as he had life, John Brown was comfortable acting as the hand of God, fighting and killing for liberation. He also knew that if he was to die, his death must also serve that same purpose. He knew that "although the radical's ultimate vision of political community might not be achieved, he or she may succeed in advancing the timetable for political debate, decisively reframing the human and legal stakes, or empowering mainstream constitutional actors."³⁰²

John Brown's recognition that both failure and success were possible at Harpers Ferry, and that he should prepare for both, confirms that he *changed* throughout his life. It is sometimes difficult to write a history of what someone believed, because peoples'

299 "Letter to his Family from Ohio, Jan. 1855" by John Brown, *John Brown Papers, 1842-1928*, Chicago Historical Society.

300 Fine, "John Brown's Body," 243.

301 In Hamilton, *Brown in Canada*, 15.

302 Tsai, "John Brown's Constitution," 176.

beliefs change. The John Brown who married Dianthe Lusk was not the same John Brown who became a wool merchant; the John Brown who used to beat his children bloody for lying was not the same John Brown who mournfully warned his daughter Ruth not to parent that way; the John Brown who saw his calling in helping freed slaves settle the Adirondacks was not the same John Brown who launched the invasion of Harpers Ferry. There were consistencies, of course—the most important being his deep and abiding longing to help liberate the oppressed in the name of God. That throughline is what changed John Brown from a humble tanner to one of the greatest saints of liberation theology that has ever lived. It is what changed him from a boy who “*habitually expected to succeed* in his undertakings”³⁰³ to a man who took the time to plan for how his failure might be put to good purpose. It is why the last words he ever wrote were,

I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood. I had, as I now think vainly, flattered myself that without very much bloodshed it might be done.³⁰⁴

303 In *LLJB*, 16.

304 “Last Note” by John Brown, *John Brown Papers, 1842-1928*, Chicago Historical Society.

PART THREE: LUNATIC OR LIBERATOR?

“Hence an abyss yawns in the middle of confinement; a void which isolates madness, denounces it for being irreducible, unbearable to reason; madness now appears with what distinguishes it from all these confined forms as well. The presence of the mad appears as an injustice; but for others...Madness was individualized, strangely twinned with crime, at least linked with it by a proximity which had not yet been called into question. In this confinement drained of a part of its content, these two figures—madness, crime—subsist alone...” -Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 228

CHAPTER SEVEN: LUNATIC

“The salvation of our world lies in the hands of the maladjusted. I call upon you to be maladjusted, maladjusted as the prophet Amos who in the midst of the tragic inequalities of injustice in his day cried out in words that echoes across the generations: ‘Let judgment run down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.’” -Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

John Brown entered the pages of history even before his death. The raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia) so inflamed the United States that people were writing about him as he sat in his jail cell awaiting the noose, but he had drawn attention even before then for his deeds in Kansas. Two books dealing with Bleeding Kansas and heavily referencing Brown were published in 1856, when the conflict was still fresh. Sara T. L. Robinson’s³⁰⁵ *Kansas: its interior and exterior life; including a full view of its settlement, political history, social life, climate, soil, productions, scenery, etc.* (what a title!) mentions Brown in passing several times, including accounts of the battles of Osawatimie³⁰⁶ (where Brown earned the nickname “Osawatimie Brown”) and Black Jack,³⁰⁷ and the capture of John Brown Jr. by the slave forces.³⁰⁸ The other is one which we have already encountered, William A. Phillips’s *The Conquest of Kansas*. These are likely the earliest published historical accounts of John Brown. Both books are generally sympathetic to the Free State cause, which Brown fought for, and relatively neutral

³⁰⁵ Robinson’s husband Charles, who would later become the first governor of Kansas, fought on the Free State side. Sanborn writes that he “had as many minds about the Pottawatomie affair as his Democratic friends used to have about slavery itself.” *LLJB*, 269.

³⁰⁶ Sara T.L. Robinson, *Kansas; Its Interior and Exterior Life. Including A Full View of Its Settlement, Political History, Social Life, Climate, Soil, Productions, Scenery, Etc.* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols and Company, 1856), 331-332.

³⁰⁷ Robinson, *Kansas*, 276.

³⁰⁸ Robinson, *Kansas*, 304-305.

towards him.

Phillips's account is notable for its prescience in describing Brown as a man whom "the world generally would pronounce [as] a 'fanatic.'"³⁰⁹ The world would indeed do so after Harper's Ferry, and this *lunatic* interpretation of Brown's character and motivations would be the dominant one among mainstream biographers and historians beginning in the post-reconstruction/Jim Crow era and throughout much of the 20th century. James W. Loewen summarizes the situation within American school textbooks thusly: "From 1890 to about 1970, John Brown was insane. Before 1890 he was perfectly sane, and after 1970 he regained his sanity. Since Brown himself did not change after his death, his sanity provides an inadvertent index of the level of white racism in our society."³¹⁰ This picture is overly simplistic (as we shall soon see, Brown was regarded as insane by many before 1890) but it does reflect the truth of the overall academic consensus on Brown's character among mainstream white academia from the late 19th to the late 20th century,³¹¹ and furthermore is not wrong in attributing these attitudes to the dynamics of racism (although an "index of the level of white racism in our society" is probably too reductive). While black historians such as W.E.B. Du Bois never bought into the "lunatic thesis," many white ones did. "The generation of Civil War historians known as the revisionists accepted the negative view of Brown...In this reading John Brown was the most fanatical of the fanatics, the craziest of the crazy," writes David S. Reynolds.³¹² Only after the Civil Rights Movement did this conception slowly begin to change, with the authors of the two most recent important biographies of Brown, Reynolds and Louis DeCaro Jr., both repudiating it.³¹³

Despite this, the lunatic Brown endures in popular media such as *The Good Lord*

309 Robinson, *Kansas*, 304-305..

310 James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 173.

311 Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 8.

312 Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 138.

313 Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 8, and DeCaro, *Fire From the Midst*, 6.

Bird, starring Ethan Hawke in an overall positive portrayal of Brown that nonetheless perpetuates the idea of him as a shouting, crazy-eyed madman who makes the people around him uncomfortable. Brown the lunatic is also still taken for granted among many if not most political conservatives. While liberal-minded academics like Reynolds and DeCaro have done an admirable job countering these simplistic and ideologically-motivated portrayals, the early appearance of Brown as “fanatic,” from someone sympathetic to him, is meaningful when considering John Brown’s position within the dynamic between oppressor and oppressed.

If William A. Phillips qualified his description of Brown’s fanaticism by appeal to “the world,” then the Rev. Leonard Bacon, writing a few years later as Brown sat in his jail cell awaiting the noose, was much more direct. While the lunatic thesis would eventually come to dominate the attitudes of Southerners towards Brown, in the immediate aftermath of Harper’s Ferry many Northern and even nominally antislavery public figures concurred. Bacon, an antislavery moderate, condemned Brown’s actions and damned him to insanity while simultaneously decrying the conditions that he believed led to them; Brown was “one whom oppression had maddened.”³¹⁴ While Bacon perpetuates the Southern lie (either wittingly or not) that no slaves joined Brown and his men at Harper’s Ferry, he nonetheless names him “a hero...born of a heroic as well as saintly line.”³¹⁵ His insanity is attributed to the unjust system of slavery; he was “a peaceful and loyal citizen till his long meditation on ‘the oppressions that are done under the sun’ had crazed his brain.”³¹⁶

Here we see what Charles J.G. Griffin terms the “Brown as Pawn” view of Brown’s supposed madness.³¹⁷ Griffin conceptualizes a tripartite lunatic thesis, John

314 Leonard Bacon, *Established in Righteousness. A Discourse to the First Church and Society in New Haven, On a Day of Public Thanksgiving, November 24th, 1859* (New Haven: Peck, White and Peck, 1859), 17.

315 *Ibid.*

316 *Ibid.*

317 J.G. Griffin, “John Brown’s ‘Madness’” in *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Fall

Brown as “Pariah,” “Pawn,” or “Prophet.” In the “Pawn” explanation, Brown was indeed insane, but was made so by external factors. Among more abolitionist-inclined observers, these factors were likely to be the inherent injustice of slavery and dysfunction of American politics surrounding the issue; others identified the loss of his son Frederick during Bleeding Kansas (as well as other abuses suffered) as the breaking point. Still others (mainly Southerners) blamed supposedly-hysterical abolitionist propaganda. Whichever side of the issue one fell on, the effect was still to make the conversation about guilt and blame for Brown’s actions, rather than the unjust structures Brown was taking action *against*.

We can safely ignore interpretations centering around the “discourse” of southern Fire-Eaters or northern abolitionists as sources for Brown’s supposed “madness;” Brown had come to view most abolitionists with contempt for their “doughfaced” pacifism, and our encounter with liberation theology should inoculate us against taking seriously accusations of madness or insanity from slave owners and their defenders. The claims about his being driven mad by Kansas are at least worth briefly considering, because unlike the former explanations they are rooted in actual material reality. Americans in the 19th century believed that insanity “originated when some inherent flaw or weakness within an individual’s mental character was subjected to severe stress,”³¹⁸ and so looked for a particularly stressful breaking point; to those unacquainted with the details, this would have made sense. But nothing that occurred during Bleeding Kansas could have been such a breaking point; it was not widely known at the time, but the Pottawatomie Massacre, arguably more extreme and violent than Harper’s Ferry, had occurred before the death of Frederick and in immediate response to a non-personal event, the sacking of Lawrence. If John Brown was insane, he was insane before Bleeding Kansas.

The “Pariah” interpretation is essentially an inversion of “Pawn,” giving primacy to

2009), pp. 369-388.

318 This and the next three quotations are from Griffin, “John Brown’s ‘Madness,’” pp. 375-377.

the “subject’s weakened mental constitution” over the “stressful environment.” Brown was insane because of some combination of “heredity, perhaps, and certainly of his own delusions of grandeur.” A 1975 article by Bertram Wyatt-Brown entitled *John Brown, Weathermen, and the Psychology of Antinomian Violence* attempts to psychoanalyze Brown along these lines in order to understand what drove him to “antinomian” violence; it is perfectly illustrative of the problems with the “Pariah” interpretation of Brown. Wyatt-Brown was no psychologist or psychiatrist, so as a psychoanalysis, the article is of little value; however he *was* a historian, which makes the article’s failures as a work of history all the more disappointing. Wyatt-Brown gets off to a rocky start by defining “antinomian” as someone “who places his faith in personal intuition and consciousness of his own body, not in the ordinary structures, practices, institutions, and aims of the society around him,”³¹⁹ which is fine on its own, but he mentions that he is using it “in a theological as well as psychoanalytic sense” based on his primary source, Nathan Adler. This is probably an attempt to link these ideas with John Brown’s explicitly religious motivations; Wyatt-Brown is attempting to psychologically link Brown with the Weathermen, who completely lacked religious motivations. By casting “antinomianism” in both religious and secular terms, the distinction between Brown and the Weathermen is easier to blur. The problem is that this is *not* what “antinomianism” means in theological terms. Antinomianism has a specific meaning in Christian theology that relates to sin, salvation, and the distinction between faith and works; it refers to the belief that not only are Christians justified by faith alone, but that therefore individual sins don’t prevent salvation. On its face it’s obvious that John Brown would have repudiated such a view, and indeed it was a controversy *within his own denomination* in the 17th century; the antinomians were heavily rebuked and some Protestant denominations consider antinomianism to be a heresy. Wyatt-Brown either knows nothing of this important

319 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “John Brown, Weathermen, and the Psychology of Antinomian Violence” in *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* Vol. 58, No. 4 (Winter 1975), 420.

distinction, or chooses to ignore it to obfuscate his real purpose, which is essentially a character assassination of John Brown under the guise of “psychoanalytic history.”

First, he adapts a “tripartite ‘pride system’” from Karen Horney, an actual psychologist, but without explaining how or why it should apply to the concept of antinomians, then admits that “Variations within the typology may be enormous.”³²⁰ Worse, his actual history of John Brown is riddled with errors, not only relying on outdated, pro-Southern histories like the one written by Stephen B. Oates in 1970, but also mangling basic facts and making conjectures that are downright defamatory. His bias emerges when he describes the “chief problems” of the antebellum era as “not matters of economic existence” (what exactly he thinks slavery is, if not a “matter of economic existence,” is unclear); and again when he describes the victims of Pottawatomie as “supposedly proslavery.”³²¹ He also has clear disdain for the “crudely unenlightened Calvinism” of Brown and his father, engaging in a bit of Whiggish chronological snobbery by writing that Brown’s religious beliefs had “retrogressed theologically to the old tenets of Edwardsean hellfire and brimstone” as if theology is a straight line one moves either forward or backwards along.³²² These suspicious ideological positions aside, Wyatt-Brown locates Brown’s alleged madness in the fact that he was “personally unhappy.”³²³ He applies his eminent psychoanalytical skills (which he presumably attained in his free time while studying history) to the short biography John Brown wrote to the young Henry Stearns, found in Sanborn’s *The Life and Letters of John Brown*, pp. 12-17. Wyatt-Brown describes the account as “oddly

320 Wyatt-Brown, “John Brown, Weathermen,” 421.

321 Wyatt-Brown, “John Brown, Weathermen,” 430. There is no historical doubt whatsoever that each one of the victims of Pottawatomie was proslavery. Including the qualifier “supposedly” here is historical malpractice.

322 Wyatt-Brown, “John Brown, Weathermen,” 429. It is worth pondering that Brown’s supposed theological “conservatism” led him to progressive and even revolutionary politics (at least towards slavery) while the (according to Wyatt-Brown) “more benign, humanized, and sentimental” God of the liberal Puritans led them into constant “doughfaced” compromise with slavery. One wonders what James Cone would think of Wyatt-Brown’s characterization here.

323 Wyatt-Brown, “John Brown, Weathermen,” 426.

disturbing” because Brown shares some early anecdotes about personal loss and grief, such as when a small yellow marble given to him by a Native American friend went missing and he cried over it (he was six years old).³²⁴ The loss of his mother supposedly inculcated a “rage” in Brown (this is simply asserted without evidence; Wyatt-Brown is relying on the reader’s foreknowledge that Brown would later have rage about slavery to make this plausible) but slips up by including the marble story *after* the death of Brown’s mother and beginning it with the words “about this time” even though it happened two years before Brown’s mother died and several paragraphs (an entire page) after where it occurs in Sanborn’s book, which Wyatt-Brown is using. There is no good historical reason to put the events in this sequence other than to make the endearing marble story seem darker than it is by associating it with Brown’s mother.

It gets much, much worse. Wyatt-Brown assures his readers that the death of Brown’s mother “left him with an unarticulated sense of guilt: somehow the young John had done something evil to cause the untimely woe.”³²⁵ Nowhere does Brown say anything like this, and Wyatt-Brown does not include any evidence to back it up. Then, since “mommy issues” aren’t enough, he takes aim at Brown’s father Owen, writing that “one may speculate that Owen Brown offered him little reassurance.” Why one is supposed to speculate this is not made clear. Wyatt-Brown continues that “As one might suspect, John Brown never developed a close relationship with his father,” then admits that father-son affection was generally uncommon in Brown’s era, but then continues (again, without evidence) that “the distance of affections in this case was *very likely* extreme.”³²⁶ Why was this “very likely?” We are not told, but if one does what Wyatt-

Brown clearly did not do and actually reads *The Life and Letters of John Brown* one

324 I can report that when I was around that age, I lost a small piece of costume jewelry given to me by my great-grandmother and also cried over it. Brown recognizes that the situation is funny in retrospect, but notes that his “earthly treasures were few and small.” Perhaps Wyatt-Brown simply never had any experience of being materially poor; it would explain his disdain for supposedly-antinomian leftists like John Brown and the Weathermen.

325 Wyatt-Brown, “John Brown, Weathermen,” 427.

326 Wyatt-Brown, “John Brown, Weathermen,” 428.

would encounter numerous affectionate and sincere letters between John and Owen, and recollections like John Jr.'s that "My grandfather, Owen Brown...had no son for whom he entertained more sincere regard than for his son John," which was confirmed by John Sr.'s sister Marian;³²⁷ or daughter Ruth's memory of her father's "peculiar tenderness and devotion to his father. In cold weather he always tucked the bedclothes around grandfather, when he went to bed, and would get up in the night to ask him if he slept warm, –always seeming so kind and loving to him that his example was beautiful to see."³²⁸

Even when describing events that are clearly disturbing, Wyatt-Brown cannot help himself but to distort and embellish. When relating John Brown's physical abuse of his children (which he thought of as "discipline," as did most parents at the time and as many parents still do, but which John Brown realized later in life was wrong³²⁹) he tells the story of when John Brown Sr. instructed John Jr. to whip *him* for the son's misdeeds, in order to teach John Jr. a lesson about atonement. This is obviously a disturbing episode, but Wyatt-Brown adds the detail, which is found nowhere in John Jr.'s account, that John Sr. expected so many lashes from his son that John Jr. "would scarcely have survived the beating" if he had taken all of them.³³⁰ He curiously *leaves out* one of the most traumatic events of Brown's childhood (and one of the ones that Brown himself says was traumatic), which was Brown witnessing a slave owner who treated him very well as a guest abusing a slave boy his age.³³¹

There are more examples, such as when Wyatt-Brown implies that John Brown went to Kansas as "one last effort to make good" on his business aspirations, when in reality Brown went solely to fight for the Free State cause;³³² or when Wyatt-Brown writes

327 *LLJB*, 26.

328 *LLJB*, 94.

329 See *LLJB*, 37-38, 61.

330 Wyatt-Brown, "John Brown, Weathermen," 430.

331 *LLJB*, 14-15.

332 Wyatt-Brown, "John Brown, Weathermen," 430.

that “Never did [John Brown] learn to bear the yoke of authority” (he successfully led companies of men into battle and convinced dozens of them to follow him to war and insurrection, this claim is patently absurd).³³³ We shall stop here, however, as the point is well-made. So much time has been spent on Wyatt-Brown’s (frankly embarrassing) “psychological-historical” sketch of John Brown because it exemplifies all of the problems with the lunatic thesis. It simply cannot be supported on *any* grounds other than Brown’s hatred of and war against slavery. There is nothing in his personal life or biography that lends itself to such an interpretation, which is why historians such as Wyatt-Brown have to resort to ludicrous distortions to make it seem plausible. Wyatt-Brown’s ultimate purpose is to understand the place of “antinomian violence” in society, but his unclear methodology, leaps of logic, misuse of psychological and theological terms, and *atrocious* use of history makes it obvious that in its *most charitable* interpretation this paper serves only to, as Griffin explains it, “minimize the scope and significance of Brown’s actions—his was a private tragedy played out, unfortunately, on a public stage. But it held no larger significance for society.”³³⁴ The “Pariah” interpretation, in addition to its ideological nefariousness, is historically untenable.

Despite the differences in the amount of sympathy they tend to engender towards the subject, the “Pawn” and “Pariah” interpretations do serve essentially the same function: they “[render] problematic any critique of the civic sphere raised by the actions of the accused. One can, after all, negotiate with a rational adversary, but there is no negotiating with a monomaniac who, by definition, compromises with no one.”³³⁵

Monomania is the contemporary diagnosis usually thrust upon John Brown whenever one is given beyond vague terms like “insanity” or “madness.” “It is not strange that these wrongs kindled in him a thirst for revenge amounting to monomania,”

333 Wyatt-Brown, “John Brown, Weathermen,” 428.

334 Griffin, “John Brown’s ‘Madness,’” 383. To clarify, Griffin is not talking about Wyatt-Brown specifically but explaining the impact of the view that Wyatt-Brown advances.

335 Griffin, “John Brown’s ‘Madness,’” 376.

proclaimed the *Albany Evening Journal* about Brown's experiences in Kansas (which, remember, do not account for the Pottawatomie Massacre).³³⁶ Monomania as a concept originated in France and had a vogue of several decades, including the time of John Brown's public activities, before its "virtual disappearance several decades later" [around 1870]. The "technical medical sense in which it was first used, was very close to the popular meaning it would soon acquire...a single pathological preoccupation in an otherwise sound mind."³³⁷ Monomania was a perfect (informal) diagnosis for John Brown. Unlike figures such as Nat Turner or Harriet Tubman, Brown never claimed to experience visions or altered states of consciousness that people today would pigeonhole as symptoms of schizophrenia.³³⁸ He was in all of his communications coherent, present, and well-spoken, even after being beaten half to death at Harper's Ferry. His abolitionist activities and religious convictions were the *only* basis on which to judge him insane, and it was not only his enemies who thought so: "From his manner and from his conversation at this time [c. 1857], I had no doubt that he had become insane upon the subject of Slavery, and gave him to understand this was my opinion of him!" wrote his own brother Jeremiah.³³⁹ Monomania explained perfectly how Brown could *seem* so sane in mannerisms, in intelligence, in composure, and in the view of most who knew him, yet still *be* insane.

Yet a decade after John Brown's death, monomania had all but disappeared as a formal diagnosis in France, where it originated, collapsing under the weight of numerous contradictions and its incompatibility with other psychiatric theories that had been

336 "The Trouble at Harper's Ferry," in *Albany Evening Journal*, 19 October 1859. Online version accessed 3/16/2023.

<https://web.viu.ca/davies/H131/editorial.AlbanyEveningJournal.Oct19.1859.htm>

337 Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 155-156.

338 I must be clear that I do not believe that either of these things are evidence that Turner or Tubman were "mad" or "insane" in any way, either.

339 James Redpath, *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 175.

incorporated into French law.³⁴⁰ It wasn't long before the term would fall out of common parlance as well. Monomania was "a professional 'utopian' ideology, an aggressively hyperbolic claim made for the emergent specialty of psychiatry by its practitioners and addressed primarily to the outside world."³⁴¹ Its common-use definition may have fit John Brown, but only because it was a post-hoc condition that was formulated to describe people like him. It tells us nothing about who he was or how his brain worked, only how the society he lived in saw him.

The "Pariah" interpretation of Brown's madness served a second function, related to but distinct from the first: "by isolating and diminishing the credibility of the accused, it underscores the apparent rationality of the public sphere as it is. For the *unreasonableness* of one's opponents doubtless bolsters one's own claims to *reasonableness*."³⁴²

This is the crux of the matter—19th-century psychiatry can hardly be considered to have been "scientific" in any meaningful way.³⁴³ The labeling of someone as mentally ill served another purpose—social control and reinforcement of the status quo, specifically of slavery. This was established practice by the decade of Brown's revolutionary activity—in 1850, a "physician" named Samuel Cartwright "discovered" a mental disorder he called drapetomania, which was the root cause of runaway slaves.³⁴⁴ American slavery was justified by appeal to a supposed natural racial hierarchy with whites above blacks, but slaves who ran away or rebelled challenged the notion of their natural subservience; drapetomania solved this "problem" for the slavers and their apologists by pathologizing it. So too with John Brown; white people are not *supposed* to

340 Goldstein, *Console and Classify*, 176-177.

341 Goldstein, *Console and Classify*, 196.

342 Griffin, "John Brown's 'Madness,'" 376.

343 Bonnie Burstow, *Psychiatry and the Business of Madness: An Ethical and Epistemological Accounting* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 37.

344 Bruce M.Z. Cohen, *Psychiatric Hegemony: A Marxist Theory of Mental Illness* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 174.

be willing to shed blood, or die, for black liberation. It goes against the natural order.
Only madness could explain such aberrant behavior.

CHAPTER EIGHT: LIBERATOR

“Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad, and you are mad.” -John Brown to a heckler after his capture at Harper’s Ferry, October 19, 1859.

“At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever; for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation” -Daniel 4:34 (RSV)

The liberal or non-revolutionary solution to the contradiction identified in the previous chapter is to simply assert the opposite—John Brown was *not* insane. But Griffin’s tripartite classification suggests another possibility, held in dialectical tension with that represented by the “Pariah” and the “Pawn,” two sides of the same coin. The third interpretation, “Prophet,” suggests that sanity and insanity are relative concepts; to be sane by the standards of one society is to be insane by the standards of another, and vice-versa. To be mad “as the world reckoned such things” was in fact an indictment of the world; it was to experience the “mania (*enthousiasmos*) of the prophet.”³⁴⁵

It is not enough to say that *slavery was mad*, therefore *John Brown was sane*. While this formulation might have great rhetorical utility, it tells us nothing we don’t already know, unless we import preconceived notions of “madness” into the discussion. In this case madness becomes nothing more than an arbitrary insult, leveled with equal legitimacy by either side of the conflict. (No, *you’re* insane!) But the madness of the

³⁴⁵ Griffin, “John Brown’s ‘Madness,’” 380.

“Prophet” implies some utility of madness, some greater (perhaps even divine) purpose.

To understand this, we must understand madness, or, more precisely, *mental illness*. What purpose did the appellation *insane* serve for John Brown’s enemies? What can it tell us about Brown’s legacy? What even *is* it?

Famed child psychiatrist Leon Eisenberg began a 1987 lecture on mental illness with the provocative question, “To what extent are mental disorders things-in-themselves; that is, entities determined by their intrinsic nature?”³⁴⁶ We might ask, first, what is a *thing-in-itself*? While entire philosophical monographs could be written exploring that question—and indeed they have—we are *materialists*, at least for our theological history of John Brown. “All materialists assert the *knowability* of things-in-themselves,” writes Lenin in the second chapter of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.³⁴⁷ A thing-in-itself is something that exists in concrete form; it can not only be perceived, but identified, quantified and qualified, and would exist even if there were no humans to perceive it.

To illustrate this, we will begin with physical disease. *E. coli* is a thing-in-itself; the escherichia coli bacteria is a living organism that has physical characteristics and can be observed, it can be *known*. Without humans to observe and classify it, it would still exist; the linguistic abstraction that occurs when I type the letters *E. coli* would not, but the bacterium they represent still would.

Modern medical science (most science, in fact) is based firmly in philosophical materialism, whether it is aware of it or not. Leon Eisenberg (who was philosophically aware) explained “the connecting principles of nature” using astronomy as an example and building on an argument first made by Adam Smith.³⁴⁸ Scientific theories are

346 Leon Eisenberg, “The social construction of mental illness,” in *Psychological Medicine* Vol. 18 (July 1988), 1.

347 V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works* Vol. 14 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 104. Originally written in 1908. Emphasis added.

348 Eisenberg, “The social construction of mental illness,” 2.

developed for humans to make sense of and easier study natural phenomena;

Thus the Royal Society of Astronomy laid careful plans to study the total solar eclipse of 1919 which provided a rare opportunity to test a proposition derived from the general theory of relativity. The astronomical observations yielded data compatible with the interpretation that rays of light from distant stars had been deflected by the sun's gravitational field, just as had been predicted. In responding to those findings, the President of the Royal Society, Sir J.J. Thomson, heralded Einstein's theory as 'one of the greatest achievements in the human history of thought.' *There was no reason then, nor is there any reason now, for supposing that the physical properties of sun, stars or light had been altered by the theories of field and force constructed to account for them.*³⁴⁹

This is exactly the materialist outlook. Lenin describes it in exactly the same way: "Yesterday we did not know that coal tar contains alizarin. Today we have learned that it does. The question is, did coal tar contain alizarin yesterday? Of course it did. To doubt it would be to make a mockery of modern science."³⁵⁰

To return to monomania and drapetomania for a moment—today we recognize that there are no such things. The question is, were there such things as monomania and drapetomania yesterday? Both Lenin and Eisenberg would reply, of course not!

Take monomania, a form of madness which had a "special relevance" to the nineteenth century. "It corresponded to—indeed, it magnified and even caricatured—a salient mind-set and behavioral pattern of early bourgeois society, with its new possibilities for 'self-making': a single-mindedness and goal directedness...it belonged to a particular moment in the development of the psychiatric profession."³⁵¹ Drapetomania, likewise, is a "condition" that only makes sense in the context of American slavery. Just as the theory of relativity was constructed by humans to account for "the physical properties of sun, stars, [and] light" but did not change those properties, monomania and drapetomania were constructed to account for certain behaviors that 19th-century

349 *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

350 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 14, 102.

351 Goldstein, *Console and Classify*, 161-162, 196.

society deemed aberrant. Drapetomania and monomania were not *things-in-themselves*; the slave who longed for freedom and the violent white abolitionist John Brown *were*.

The objection may arise that, of course, psychiatry has come a long way since the 19th century. Monomania may not be a real diagnosis, but schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, narcissistic personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, etc., etc., are.

But this is kicking the can down a road that leads nowhere. The state of psychiatric medicine is little closer to being able to identify the alizarin in the coal tar than it was in the 19th century. More effective? Probably. More knowledgeable? Yes. More humane? *Absolutely*. But fundamentally not different in its social construction.

As to effectiveness, schizophrenia is a good example. Studies consistently show that outcomes for patients diagnosed with schizophrenia are better in *developing* countries without the modern medical and psychiatric infrastructure of the “developed” world; commenting on the research of Nancy Waxler in Sri Lanka, Eisenberg notes that traditional medicine there tends to view mental illness as stemming from supernatural causes, and thus

not intrinsic to the patient; once appropriate ritual exorcises the demons, the patient is restored to his or her former self. This is in contrast to the Western view of schizophrenia as a chronic biological disorder and of the recovered patient as being ‘in remission’ rather than ‘cured.’ Thus, belief creates the expectation of complete restoration of the status quo in the one culture and of persisting impairment in the other...Her second point stresses differences in family response and mode of treatment in the two worlds. Whereas the individual, at least until recently, has been the unit of treatment in the West, the family is the unit in the traditional world. The appearance of illness in the patient demands a response from family and kinship group to an event which threatens its integrity. Healer and family join in solidifying kinship obligations and in redefining group boundaries. With social tensions diminished, it is contended, there is no further ‘need’ for the deviant behavior, and social expectations press the patient towards normality.³⁵²

352 Eisenberg, “The social construction of mental illness,” 4-5. For a fascinating study of the mechanisms through which traditional healers are successful at treating mental illness, see Arthur Kleinman and Lilia H. Sung, “Why Do Indigenous Practitioners Successfully Heal?” in *Social Science and Medicine* 13B (1979), pp. 7–26.

It is not the purpose of this work to suggest that any mental illnesses that modern people struggle with are “not real” or that psychiatry is unnecessary. But what psychiatric research makes abundantly clear is that mental illness has a *social* component; classification of certain types of behavior into specific diagnoses serves a social function, and the ways in which those patterns of behavior are classified and treated has dialectical effects on how they manifest. We might point out that *nearsightedness* is a disability, no less than being a paraplegic is; the reason that people who wear glasses do not usually call themselves *disabled* is that eyeglasses are (relatively) affordable and non-impactful on the way most people go about their daily lives, while wheelchairs are expensive, cumbersome, and require consideration and adaptation from able-bodied people. Just as with mental illness, the material and ideological environment we live in conditions our experience of living with illness and disease, and our perceptions of other people who live with them.

“Psychological terminologies used in diagnosis are not representative of reality, instead they make distinctions of a ‘reality,’ which as a consequence of the prevalent scientific method appear as ‘truth’ and therefore paradoxically affect the actions of those being diagnosed,” writes Joseph J. McCann.³⁵³ It is the same argument made by Eisenberg. That “prevalent scientific method” McCann refers to is based on *mechanical materialism*, which accepts the material basis of reality that we have been using throughout this entire work and especially this chapter, but is an incomplete materialism because it lacks *dialectics*. Dialectical materialism recognizes the fundamental process of change at work in all things, it knows that not only is the universe made of matter, but that this matter is always in motion. Likewise in the political, the economic, and the philosophical terrains; ideas and social constructions are not static, they are changing, and they give rise to their opposites.

353 Joseph J. McCann, “Is mental illness socially constructed?” in *Journal of Applied Psychology and Social Science* Vol. 2, No. 1 (2016), 3.

The society John Brown lived in considered him to be insane, and not just the slave-owners. Again, from the Northern, moderate abolitionist reverend Leonard Bacon, in November 1859 as Brown rotted in jail: “John Brown made the ‘error’ of “making war against an existing and established government...His error was that in his love of justice, and in his pity for the wronged, he became an armed insurgent against a government which, even if you affirm that it is no better than the government of Nero, is nevertheless a government in fact—an ‘existing power’ –and therefore, according to the Apostolic definition a ‘power ordained of God.’”³⁵⁴ This is the essence of the madness claim—by attacking a “lawful” institution, no matter how evil it might be, John Brown had become “non-compliant with societal norms.”³⁵⁵

But it would not always be so. John Brown, in his last weeks of life, convinced people that in actuality, societal norms were non-compliant with God, with justice, with *right*. In his response to the heckler who called him fanatical, quoted in this chapter’s epigraph, John Brown was not making a psychological diagnosis of the random Harpers Ferry resident—he was declaring that in reality, it was *slavery* that was mad. The famous “heathen proverb” he quoted, which he probably got from W.A. Scott’s book on the book of Daniel (see Chapter Six), links this madness to the coming destruction of the slave system and the nation built atop its edifice, the destruction that John Brown as the hands of God had tried to work. Lying there, his head bloody, his body bruised, suffering from at least one stab wound, Brown knew exactly what he was saying because he had been thinking it for a long time. It is not *history* that has changed the perception of John Brown from a madman to a voice of reason in a mad society; Brown did that himself. Gary Alan Fine notes that the process of changing the pariah into a prophet requires the intercession of “those with economic, political, social and/or cultural capital”(such as Emerson and Thoreau,) and the delegitimization of the pariah/prophet’s opponents

354 Bacon, *Established in Righteousness*, 10-11.

355 McCann, “Is mental illness socially constructed?” 3.

(which the South did to themselves when they seceded).³⁵⁶ Politics are always dialectical, as Robert Tsai notes;³⁵⁷ first it was the North that cast Brown as a madman, and the South that insisted he was sane so that they could make an example of him, and then, as people began to wake up to the madness of slave society, the perception shifted. In the act of liberation, madness becomes reason and reason becomes madness, and salvation is possible. John Brown once set out to write a sermon on Isaiah 1:18, “Come, let us reason together.”³⁵⁸ He also marked this verse (and those around it) in his last Bible.

Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil;
Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.
Come now, let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.³⁵⁹

In his sermon notes, Brown wrote that “It would seem that the bare contemplation were of itself sufficient to awaken in us the most powerful ‘hungering, and thirsting after righteousness.’ But alas...” It was *not* through reason or contemplation alone that people found salvation, but through the act of loving like God loves, which means action on behalf of the oppressed:

We may reasonably conclude that a God of infinite wisdom would delight in the *exercise* of that wisdom; that a being possessed of infinite power would sometimes *exert that power*; and we all know that he has done this *from what our own eyes have seen*, in instances innumerable. The fact that this law requires of us no more, and nothing less; affords at one, and the same time, the most convincing proof of its divine authenticity while it unfolds to our darkened

356 Fine, “John Brown’s Body,” 244.

357 Tsai, “John Brown’s Constitution,” 176.

358 His undated notes for this sermon are in *BBS* and available in text form on the West Virginia Memory Project. I could not find any evidence of whether or not Brown actually completed or delivered this sermon.

359 Isaiah 1:16-18 (KJV).

minds. Three cardinal traits in the character of the true God, viz justice, mercy, and love...³⁶⁰

Knowledge of God, that is, knowledge of God's deliverance of the oppressed, comes not from contemplation or reading, but from *action*. Humans are called to be like God, and liberation theology teaches that God has performed the *act* of liberation in human history; therefore the only way to be like God, to know God, is to liberate the oppressed. "We must participate in God's revolutionary activity in the world by changing the political, economic, and social structures so that the distinctions between rich and poor, oppressed and oppressors, are no longer a reality among people."³⁶¹ This is what it means for "reason" to be restored, for the dialectic of madness and reason to reach climactic synthesis in the destruction of the oppressive social order. Nebuchadnezzar's eyes rise to heaven and he proclaims that God's dominion of justice and liberation is everlasting, that the struggle for liberation "endures from generation to generation."³⁶²

John Brown was confident that because of his actions on behalf of the oppressed, his death would not be in vain. "Say to my poor boys never to grieve for one moment in my account; and should many of you live to see the time when you will not blush to own your relation to Old John Brown, it will not be more strange than many things that have happened," he wrote from prison to his brother Jeremiah (the one who believed him to be insane).³⁶³ He believed, and in this as in so many other things he was right, that he had cemented his place in the history of liberation.

Mainstream American society was *white* society, and it was a mad society that had "mocked" and "despised" the God that John Brown believed in. John Brown consciously set himself in opposition to it. He saw "no signs of repentance amongst

360 John Brown, "Notes for a Sermon," undated, *BBS*.

361 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 218.

362 Daniel 4:34 (RSV).

363 In *LLJB*, 588.

us”³⁶⁴ and resolved himself to repent, a process that could only end in his death, whether on the gallows in Charleston, Virginia, or the mountains of the Alleghenies. “The person who repents is the one who sells all and redefines his or her life in commitment to the Kingdom of God. That is why, in the Bible and the black religious experience, repentance is connected with *death*.”³⁶⁵ One way or another, John Brown had resolved himself to “mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments.”³⁶⁶

Writing to his family in the weeks before his death, John Brown did his best to comfort them. He was assured of the rightness of his actions, which history has borne out. He *knew*, as only the oppressed themselves can know, that God’s promise of liberation would not be broken. To his beloved family, their “affectionate husband and father” wrote “I cannot remember a night so dark as to have hindered the coming day, nor a storm so furious or dreadful as to prevent the return of warm sunshine and a cloudless sky.”³⁶⁷ Another way of putting this might be, “the kingdom of God is at hand.”

364 “Letter to his Family from Ohio” by John Brown, Jan. 1855, *John Brown Papers, 1842-1928*, Chicago Historical Society.

365 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 221.

366 His final speech in court, November 2nd, 1859. In *LLJB*, 585.

367 In *LLJB*, 587.

EPILOGUE: THE JOHN BROWN MANIFESTO

“Speaking at an anti slavery convention in Salem, Ohio, I expressed the apprehension that slavery could only be destroyed by bloodshed, when I was suddenly and sharply interrupted by my good old friend, Sojourner Truth, with the question, ‘Frederick, is God dead?’ ‘No,’ I answered, ‘and because God is not dead slavery can only end in blood.’”

-Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 240.

While waiting to strike the blow at Harpers Ferry, John Brown and his son Owen drew up their *Declaration of Liberty*, which has been mentioned in Chapters 4 and 6. This document serves a more obviously ideological function than the *Provisional Constitution*, being concerned with the morality and theology behind Brown’s actions rather than organizational bylaws and procedures. Both documents are fundamentally in dialogue and tension with the American founding documents they are modeled after, though they were written in reverse order. Dated July 4th, 1859, *A Declaration of Liberty by the Representatives of the Slave Population of the United States of America* stands as the last long-form ideological document John Brown would write. It is the capstone to a lifetime spent fighting oppression in whichever way seemed best to him at the time, as he prepared for the most revolutionary act yet. Taken together, the *Provisional Constitution* and the *Declaration of Liberty* stand as the closest thing we have in text form to a “John Brown manifesto.”

The most important line, in my reading, is one that comes near the beginning. It is self-evident, Brown says, “That it is the highest Privilege, and Plain Duty of Man, to strive in evry reasonable way, to promote the Happiness, Mental, Moral, and Physical elevation of his fellow Man. And that People, or Clanish Oppressors; who wickedly violate this sacred principle...Will bring upon themselves that certain and fearful

retribution, which is the Natural, and *Necessary* penalty of evil Doing.”³⁶⁸ This statement is important for both its negative and positive aspects. First, it fundamentally recognizes society as reciprocal, communitarian, and altruistic. It is the self-evident duty of all people to live *for* each other. Second, and equally important, is that it is not only natural but *necessary* to serve retribution to the oppressors who violate this principle. Perhaps no other quote so well encapsulates who John Brown was and what he believed; in this statement John Brown proves liberation theology correct when it asserts “The gospel [good news] of liberation is *bad news* to all oppressors, because they have defined their ‘freedom’ in terms of the slavery of others.”³⁶⁹

But John Brown’s manifesto lies ultimately not in words or beliefs, but in deeds. Words can help us understand him now that he is gone, but all they do is point us towards his legacy. To truly arrive there, we must take *action*, as he did.

James Cone wrote that for white people to truly be in solidarity with the oppressed, they must undergo a process of “conversion wherein they die to whiteness and are reborn anew in order to struggle *against* white oppression and *for* the liberation of the oppressed,” but that it is “the black community that decides both the *authenticity* of white conversion and also the part these converts will play in the black struggle for freedom.”³⁷⁰

It is not for any historian, much less a white historian, to make that judgment of John Brown or anybody. David S. Reynolds includes a long list of important black figures from Frederick Douglass to W.E.B. Du Bois to Eldridge Cleaver to Malcolm X who singled Brown out as the rare white person deserving of commendations for his role in black liberation.³⁷¹ The only other white American who earns such consistent praise from the black radical tradition is Marilyn Buck, who spent her life in prison to help Assata

368 John Brown, *Declaration of Liberty*. The word “necessary” is underlined in the original text.

369 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 71. Emphasis original.

370 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 222.

371 Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 490-504.

Shakur escape to Cuba. Reynolds's list need not be repeated, but I will include one quote that Reynolds also includes, because it cuts to the heart of the matter:

There was in John Brown a complete identification with the oppressed. It was his child that a slaveowner was selling; his sister who was being whipped in the field; his wife who was being raped in the gin house. It was not happening to Negroes; it was happening to him. Thus it was said that he could not bear to hear the word slave spoken. At the sound of the word, his body vibrated like the strings of a sensitive violin. John Brown was a Negro, and it was in this aspect that he suffered.³⁷²

Any individual may or may not agree with Bennett's assessment of John Brown's legacy. But what cannot be denied is that John Brown *strove* for this kind of recommendation from black people. He was incontrovertibly a flawed man. His views on women were hypocritical; he was unwilling to break completely from the patriotic trappings of the slave country he declared war on (regardless of any practical motivations he had for that unwillingness); he learned too late how to be a gentle parent; he often led when he should have followed; he presumed that everyone around him should be just as willing to die for liberation as he was. On that last point, perhaps, he was right.

But in his praxis John Brown tried, with his entire heart and soul, to do as Cone said white people must do in order to receive "God's gift of blackness through the oppressed of the land." Among his favorite scriptures was Hebrews 13:3, "Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them." This was the maxim by which John Brown lived his life, and died his death.³⁷³ He knew that "God's justification is God's righteous and total identification with black existence, becoming one with it and revealing that the wrong committed against God's people will not be tolerated."³⁷⁴ John Brown did not, would not tolerate it.

372 Lerone Bennet, Jr. Quoted in Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 504.

373 He explicitly said this in his final court appearance; see *LLJB*, 585.

374 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 215.

It is up to individual black people to make their own judgments about whether John Brown has earned his place among the oppressed. He was confident about his place in it, and so am I. For Christians today, especially Christians who are white but care, as John Brown did, about liberation of the oppressed (and in a white supremacist society that means black people), John Brown is a historical example of what liberation theology looks like.

This work has tried to take Cone's question, "What is [Christ] doing *now* in America and elsewhere to heal the sick and to liberate the prisoners?"³⁷⁵ and apply it to the past. What was God doing in the mid-19th century to liberate the oppressed? John Brown believed, and history has proven him correct, that just as "Christ once armed Peter...So also in my case I think he put a sword in my hand."³⁷⁶

What I have here called *theological history* combines Marxist historical materialism with liberation theology to arrive at what I hope is a useful method of analysis for understanding *how* and *why* John Brown took up the sword, and went to the noose, in the name of liberation. Much more work needs to be done to make liberation theology a real, deliberate fighting force, but the results of this study clearly confirm liberation theology's central claims about history, that God's plan for the liberation of humankind from slavery, oppression, exploitation, and hatred is at work in the history of liberation struggles from Exodus to John Brown and beyond.

As to Brown himself, this study has found that John Brown consistently moved in more radical and humanitarian directions throughout his life. His experiences of the American manufacturing and agrarian expansions that took place throughout his life gave him an antipathy towards wealth, business, and capital that pushed him in the direction of socialism, even if he never fully arrived. His wholehearted commitment to the oppressed led him to reject moderate, compromising political solutions like those

375 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 191.

376 In *LLJB*, 583.

advanced by the vast majority of the abolitionist movement and the Republican Party of his day and embrace revolutionary violence, which was not inconsistent with his Christian principles but flowed naturally from them. At the end of his life he was thinking about the abolition of slavery not as an isolated political program, but also engaging in constitutionalism based on his increasingly radical political and religious beliefs. And finally, the charge of insanity, which was leveled by his ostensible allies and family during his lifetime, but then became the purview of his enemies after his death, is proof that John Brown, or someone like him, was necessary to break the mad grip of slavery on American society.

Theological conclusions and implications have been made throughout this work, and more would only belabor the point. To quote Brown again, "There is no commentary in the world so good in order to a right understanding...as an honest childlike and teachable spirit."³⁷⁷

To conclude, I wish to return for a moment to Bertram Wyatt-Brown's odious paper on John Brown and the Weathermen, discussed thoroughly in Chapter Seven. Though I am confident that I have excoriated it enough, there is one more false assertion Wyatt-Brown makes that is worth addressing. This false assertion does not deal directly with John Brown, but in a way, it has *everything* to do with John Brown.

Wyatt-Brown writes of an eclectic California group that wrote a manifesto called "Armed/Love."³⁷⁸ The false assertion Wyatt-Brown makes is that "It was a paradoxical title" and that the two "entities" are "incompatible." But they are not. "Hate" is the opposite of love, and John Brown hated nothing and nobody but oppression and oppressors, which is simply to say that, in true dialectical fashion, he *loved* the oppressed. The idea that "arms" (weapons) and "love" are paradoxical and incompatible

377 This was quoted earlier, but as a reminder, it was the note John Brown scribbled to John F. Blessing in his last Bible.

378 Wyatt-Brown, "John Brown, Weathermen," 425.

is among the most pernicious of liberal society, for it does nothing but “[equate] the *unjust violence* of the oppressors (who maintain this despicable system) with the *just violence* of the oppressed;”³⁷⁹ and obscure the reality that “no one can be nonviolent in an unjust society.”³⁸⁰ It is nothing but a way for defenders of the status quo to “cry ‘peace, peace’ when there is no peace.”

Thomas Sankara once observed that “No altar, no belief, no holy book...has ever been able to reconcile the rich and the poor, the exploiter and the exploited. And if Jesus himself had to take the whip to chase them from his temple, it is indeed because that is the only language they hear.”³⁸¹ Yahweh hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that his hosts would follow the liberated Israelite slaves into the sea, in order that the God of the oppressed could bring the waters crashing down upon the oppressors, because that is the only language they hear. He did this because of his love for the oppressed. Che Guevara said “All revolutionaries are motivated by great feelings of love,” and he was correct.³⁸² Armed/Love, weapons/worship, violence/devotion, war/liberation. The oppressed masses know that these are not opposites, but integral to each other. They go together. They went together when John Brown and his “nineteen men so true” “frightened old Virginia till she trembled through and through,” and they went together the night he took up that glittering sword in the name of liberation. Oppressed people of all faiths, races, genders, and nationalities know in their hearts that indeed,

“The stars above in Heaven now are looking kindly down, on the grave of old John Brown.”

379 Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 64.

380 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 201.

381 Thomas Sankara, “Against those who exploit and oppress us—here and in France,” speech given November 17, 1986 in Michael Prairie, ed., *Thomas Sankara Speaks: The Burkina Faso Revolution 1983-87*, 2nd ed. (Liverpool: Pathfinder Press, 2007), 331-332.

382 Che Guevara, “Socialism and man in Cuba” in Aleida March, *The Che Reader* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2003). Courtesy of Marxists Internet Archive; online version available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1965/03/man-socialism.htm>.

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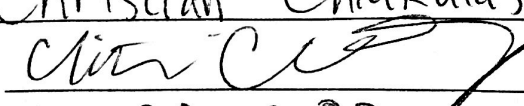
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