

WHAT SHALL WE OVERCOME? GETTING ATTICUS OUT OF EGYPT

RACISM, THE IMBALANCE OF POWER, AND THE RESPONSE OF THE PROPHETIC VOICE

An Updated Commentary by John W. Bennison, Rel.D

With the continued racial strife tearing at the fabric of our social order, this is an updated and revised commentary of an earlier essay written in March of this year.

*“For these are the words of the Lord to me:
Go, set a watchman to report what he sees.”*

Isaiah, 21:6 (NEB)



PREFACE

I'm writing these comments at a particular moment in time. And yet, unlike a week-old newspaper, the themes and issues have a persistently endless quality about them that just won't seem to go away.

It has scarcely been a month since a young white supremacist shot and killed a pastor and eight other black participants in a bible study in a Charleston church. As part of the response – and after heated debate in the South Carolina state legislature – the battle flag of a confederacy that was defeated 150 years ago over the question of slavery was ceremoniously removed from capital grounds and placed in a “southern heritage” museum.

And now, just this last week, the prequel to Harper Lee's classic American novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, was released. *Go Set a Watchman* has sparked yet another heated debate; this time over the now-tarnished fictional character, Atticus Finch.

No longer depicted as the heroic father defending an innocent black man against endemic racial prejudice, while setting a just and principled example for all, the protagonist is instead characterized as a typical white southerner; defending and justifying his views of one race being inferior to another. In ... *Watchman*, Atticus Finch complains about the meddling lawyers from the NAACP, justifies his membership in the Ku Klux Klan as a way of understanding the way things just are, and explains to Jean Louise Finch (aka Scout) why his “Jeffersonian view” of the necessity of an educated electorate is reason enough the “underdeveloped Negro” should not be allowed to vote.

It was only a few months ago that our nation's first black president participated in the 50th anniversary of the landmark civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, by standing on a bridge named after a Confederate general and reputed early Grand Dragon of the KKK, Edmund W. Pettus.

In recent years, we seem to have witnessed a resurgence of racial strife; as if the recurrent curse of our American story has been indelibly etched into our national character. Names and phrases like Trayvon hoodies, Ferguson, and “I can't breathe” have become the catalyst for a protest chant, “Black Lives Matter.” Hands raised high overhead are no longer accompanied with shouts of “Hallelujah,” but rather, “Don't shoot.”

Equipping law enforcement personnel with body cams will only be able to record whatever transpires, after the fact. Meanwhile, political forces work to dismantle, disempower, disenfranchise and discourage voting rights among certain segments of the citizenry in our democratic society. One citizen, one vote, one voice is a constitutional principle that seems challenged and tested, once again.

It took a half-century to elapse after those two marches from Selma, Alabama in 1965, for a docu-drama retelling that story received an Oscar nomination; with the anthem, *Glory*, winning Best Original Song at this year's Academy Awards:

*One day, when the glory comes
It will be ours, it will be ours
Oh, one day, when the war is won
We will be sure, we will be here sure
Oh, glory, glory, glory.*

One fine, glorious day it shall come, the singer sings, just as both the ancient prophets and the prophets of our own age once proclaimed. It understandably leaves us wondering when that day will come?

But it is not just a matter of *when* we shall overcome, but the ever-present *what*? And in the naming of the *what*, we might also ask where is the echo of the prophet's voice in all of this? In the context of an ancient prophetic tradition, who is the watchman who has been set upon the parapet to declare what we collectively clearly see all around us, and yet find our predicament impossible to change?

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NAMING THE WHAT

The short answer to the question of *what* we hope we shall one day overcome is the endemic racism that persists in America. In civic society – as in the biblical story – there is the letter of the law, and the spirit of the law's intention. Civil rights can be the law of the land, and still miss the mark when it comes to the heart of the matter.

So the longer and more difficult answer to what we must overcome lies in a penchant for power of one human being over another that results in the kind of inequity that surpasses the simple cry for moral justice. The repeated historical reality is that such a precarious imbalance of power eventually descends into such disequilibrium that it becomes untenable and unsustainable.

It is also the same dynamic that can find expression in tribal, racial or ethnic conflicts, warring factions between nation states, gross economic disparity and the "prosperity" gap, and even radical extremism that usurps religious traditions to construct aberrant belief systems and consequent behavior.

WHEN SCRIPTURE CONDONES SLAVERY

In the Christian faith tradition, the authentic letters of Paul have been used to both condemn and defend slavery. There are the familiar lines in Galatians 3 about faith superseding that which had previously guided right behavior; namely, the law (of Moses). Such faith that expresses itself through "oneness in Christ" not only fulfills the law, but ameliorates all previous distinctions between gender, tribe or race, or positions of dominance or subservience. "There is no longer Jew or Greek,

there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female,” Paul writes, “for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28)

But then there’s the shortest Pauline epistle, the *Letter to Philemon*. The traditional interpretation to the story relates how a runaway slave named Onesimus has somehow shown up in Rome, where Paul is imprisoned. Onesimus is being sent back to his owner, Philemon; who himself is a relatively well-to-do leader of an early Christian house church. So the story is about two masters swapping one slave. But the backstory and deeper meaning is about reconciliation and restoration of human relationships.

“ ... that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. ... So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.” (1:16-17)

Some scholars now question whether Onesimus was actually an indentured servant to Philemon; just as Paul refers to himself as a “prisoner” not of Rome, but of Christ; with his own subjugation to the gospel.

In point of fact, a runaway slave in 1st century Asia Minor would have found no refuge anywhere, nor had any future apart from his master. Those who might credit Paul with being a staunch abolitionist and a man ahead of his time might do well to remember he was still very much a part of an ancient world distinctly different than our own. As David Galston, Academic Director of the Westar Institute, puts it:

“It is easy to make the historical Paul sound congenial to today's world. He resisted slavery, he promoted equality, and he had little sympathy for wealthy folk who exploited poor folk. Still, we must be careful not to make Paul too congenial by forgetting that he was still a person of the first century. His solutions to world problems were still "otherworldly" solutions. Paul consequently is an example of both the *promise* of Christianity (with his emphasis on equality) and the *problem* of Christianity (with his emphasis on apocalyptic solutions to world problems).”

The promise and problem of traditional Christianity are not dissimilar to the promised ideals of our democratic society that falls short awaiting it’s own fulfillment. Fifty years ago the hymn of the civil rights movement was *We Shall Overcome ... someday*.

THE PROBLEM OF WHEN

*People get ready, there's a train a-comin'
You don't need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'
Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord.*

Singer/songwriter, Curtis Mayfield, 1965

A predominant theme in traditional Black spirituals is the hope things will be better in a *next* life. And that hope somehow makes suffering through the adversities of this life more bearable. Think of the many traditional folk tunes, such as *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* (“*comin' for to carry me home*”), or even more contemporary songs like *People Get Ready*, a song written by Curtis Mayfield and originally released by *The Impressions* the very *same* year as the Selma march.

The biblical story of exodus and deliverance from bondage to freedom in a promised land is a promise yet to be fully realized; except by “faith,” according to Paul. Likewise, there’s Jesus’ repeated depictions of the “reign of God” that is “at hand,” and yet to come. It can be viewed as either a continuation of that ancient, prophetic *future* hope; as well as a call to usher in the kingdom

here and now. This dichotomy seems to be borne out, time and again. The Edmund Pettus Bridge was once a pivotal “crossing over” moment in our society. Now old men and women who once dreamt dreams and visions wonder if today’s youth will take up that same struggle all over again.

In 1965, a friend of mine was a 30-year old Episcopal priest from Southern California and vicar of a small mission congregation. He was part of a delegation of clergy chosen to participate in the conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery march. “We went to love the hell out of Alabama,” he said.

When he arrived in Montgomery he decided to first attend a church service that Thursday morning. “The massive nave of the red brick church was marked by stained glass windows,” Fred recalls. “And in one window were the words ‘He suffered and died for all people without respect to origin, race or color.’”

“Here,” my friend said, “I found in stained glass my real reason for being in Montgomery. And I couldn’t help but wonder at the weakness of Christianity.” Fifty years later, he wonders how we ever could have ended up back at the same bridge in the Selma that should have led us so much, much further than we’ve come. “The march goes on,” he’s conclude, “and it seems it always will.”

STANDING UP WITH A STRONG VOICE

Randy is a participant in the progressive Christian faith community I lead. He works with the developmentally disabled in a local community program. One of his clients is an African American named Dwayne, who gets around by a walker and wheelchair. He has a speech impediment, and is often difficult to understand unless one listens closely. But Dwayne is also an advocate for the disabled.

Dwayne was part of a group which earlier this year Randy took to see the film, *Selma*. Afterward, when asked what Martin Luther King Jr. meant to him, Dwayne said, " Standing up with a strong voice."

Speaking with a strong voice is the role of a watchman – in Isaiah’s ancient image – who will plainly speak to what he clearly sees. In the prophetic tradition, that might well be one who stumbles in their speech; but whose tongue is set on fire to foretell that future time when the mute might shout with joy (Is.35:5).

But the prophet is also the one who – at the risk of our displeasure – comes to expose secrets of our hearts. Who will risk life and limb once more, to speak to what we are called to overcome, once and for all?

GETTING ATTICUS OUT OF EGYPT

In her book, *Set Them Free: The Other Side of Exodus*, author Laurel A. Dykstra writes in “Section Two: Egypt as Empire,”

The Pan African Healing Foundation, an organization of Africans in Britain, points out that liberal people of privilege, church people, and white people lack credibility with the oppressed because, “when you carry a past without acknowledging it, everything you take on in the future is cast in doubt.” They raise the question, “Are people of privilege capable of change?” There is an old African American proverb that says, “it is easier to take the people out of Egypt than to get Egypt out of the people.” It refers to the responsibilities of freedom. But for people of privilege, for whom Egypt and empire have offered not only security and comfort but everything we have known, leaving Egypt and ridding ourselves of Egyptian ways and habits will be slow and hard. Acknowledging our role in empire is a first step in the long slow journey out of it.

I readily thought of the prophetic truth of this “egyptian” maxim as I watched a recent news report; where southern whites who were sons and descendants of the brave soldiers who fought and died in our Civil War spoke with tears streaming down their faces about what the confederate flag meant to them. At first, I wondered if they would ever change?

But as a white, liberal person of relative privilege, I also then wondered what I might do to effect the change that is so clearly lacking; as all we stand upon the parapets, look and see what is happening, over and over again?

So I also thought about the only other novel Harper Lee ever wrote, and one we all can finally read. Not about the Atticus Finch we’ve all loved and admired for so many years in *Mockingbird*. The Atticus Finch we have yet to find in (fictional) Maycomb, Georgia, or the very real places like Ferguson, Philly or Charleston. But the one who is now portrayed as a stubbornly entrenched racial bigot that can still be found anywhere.

As the story goes, the manuscript for *Watchman* was written first, and submitted to the publisher, Harper-Collins. The editor was not overly impressed by the story of a young adult at odds with the prejudices of her white southern father. But he was intrigued by the flashbacks to the childhood of the narrator, Scout Finch. A re-write was suggested, and in the process, the fictional character of Atticus Finch was changed, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* was the result.

So lastly, I’m thinking of the old Atticus, and that lingering possibility of a new Atticus that the novelist has already imagined for us so long ago. The two characters, both named Atticus, make me think of that other old story about the two other men with those strange names, Onesimus and Philemon. It is as if they are almost one and the same. One was as enslaved to the old ways as the other. And both had the possibility to look and see something new and liberating for them both.

The deeper message and backstory to both *Mockingbird* and that old tale in Paul’s *Letter to Philemon* is about a broken relationship between men who ought to be considered “brothers.” Like racism itself, the heritage of indentured servitude is and remains only a symptomatic example of a human domination system that always results in inequity, injustice, discord and estrangement.

An appeal for reconciliation and restoration is the underlying point to both these stories. But furthermore, both stories lay that moral obligation at the feet of the one who must stoop down in an act of disempowerment; in order to establish a new order and balance of power to what has been an imbalance.

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It is then that a curse such as the one repeatedly borne by our own history can become a blessing, when it transcends the mere enforcement of civil rights in favor of the common good of right relationships.

As the old Appalachian folk tune once sung in shape notes puts such a hope,

*Watchman, tell me does the morning off fair Zion’s glory dawn?
Have the signs that mark his coming yet upon they pathway shone?
Pilgrim rise, and look around thee; light is breaking in the skies.
Break the bond of doubt that bound thee! Morning dawns! Arise! Arise!*