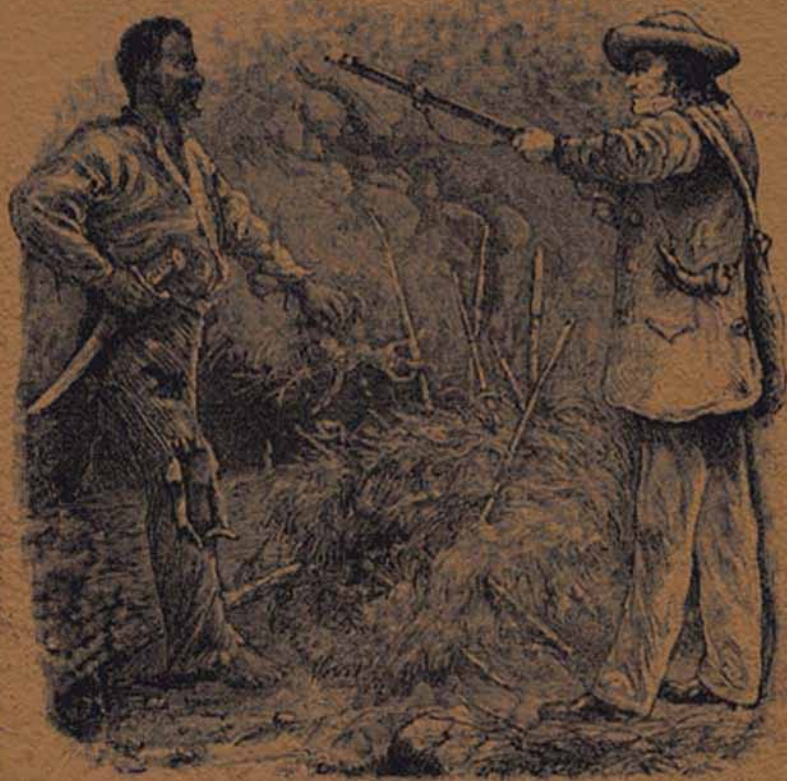


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A THEOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF NAT TURNER

CHRISTIANITY, VIOLENCE, AND THEOLOGY

KARL LAMPLEY



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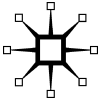
A Theological Account of Nat Turner: Christianity, Violence, and Theology
By Karl W. Lampley

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Christianity, Violence, and Theology

Karl W. Lampley

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For

My mom: Dr. Norma M. Lampley—
In honor of her tireless devotion and
encouragement throughout my life and education

My dad: Dr. Edward C. Lampley, Sr.—
In tribute to his unending guidance and
assistance throughout my years on this earth

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Preface

I first became interested in Nat Turner while at the seminary at the Claremont School of Theology. I was beginning to think of a potential doctoral dissertation and wanted to write within the field of Black theology. Turner triggered my attention and consideration because I believe his violent insurrection illustrated that theology could inspire and motivate social action and revolution. In the case of Turner, radical black theology provoked violent resistance and struggle against the institution of slavery in Virginia. As a Baptist preacher and exhorter, Turner's slave revolt occupies a revered space in the African American religious history of protest and resistance. His revolutionary actions symbolized the spirit of radicalism and defiance inhabiting black religion. In his *Confessions*, Turner provided a distinct and unique example of early nineteenth-century black theology. His theological perspectives gave rise to a holistic political theology of freedom and liberation that relied on Jesus's gospel guarantee of freedom and salvation. Ultimately, Turner's theology and understanding of God inspired him to fight against the slave-masters and oppressors to end slavery and dehumanization in the name of God.

Turner's violent quest for freedom however challenged the theological commitment to nonviolence and peace often associated with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Turner's resort to violence defied Jesus's commandment to love one's enemies and to turn the other cheek. Can Turner's liberating and revolutionary violence against slavery be reconciled to the gospel of Christ? Furthermore, can it be legitimately depicted as prophetic Christian violence that condemned and judged the institution of slavery in America? This book seeks to answer these questions. Turner's violent insurrection, based on the Christian principles of freedom and justice, inevitably forces one to confront the relationship between violence and Christianity.

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I am blessed to have had a stellar and engaging education in my formative years at esteemed institutions of higher learning. I offer my sincere appreciation and thanks to the University of Chicago, Claremont School of Theology, Harvard University, and Bishop O'Dowd High School in Oakland, California. These schools instilled in me a standard of excellence that cannot be matched. Furthermore, I have warm regards and gratitude for the church that nurtured me in Christian discipleship throughout my childhood into my adult years and first inspired me to follow the path of Christian theology, the Downs Memorial United Methodist Church in North Oakland.

Finally, I give heartfelt thanks to my parents and my siblings who gave me the thirst for knowledge and insight by providing a foundation and example of academic excellence and achievement that has followed me throughout my life. I thank my brother, Dr. E. Charles Lampley, Jr., and his family for their loving support and guidance while I gained my doctorate degree in Chicago. I also thank my sister, Margeaux Lampley-Theophile, J. D., and her family for their generosity, originality, and creativity, which has always impressed me.

This book on Nat Turner is the result of much reflection and introspection along with the inspiration and encouragement of many people. I must also acknowledge the valiant history of black freedom fighters in America and the world, who have strived for liberty, equality, self-determination, and justice for black people. Their legacy, in addition to the institutions and people that have nurtured me, have taught me to diligently follow and believe in God, to fight for dignity and acceptance, and to change the world through excellence and achievement. This work is ultimately a theological attempt at being true to these principles.

KARL W. LAMPLEY
November 2012

Introduction

What does the slave do when faced with a perpetual and inherently violent system of bondage and slavery? How does the slave speak to God in this humiliating and dehumanizing condition? What are the prayers and hopes of the slave before the true and living God? Should the slave acquiesce to the violence in the name of redemptive suffering? Or should the slave resist and subvert the slave-master in nonviolent and peaceful ways? Or should the slave rise up against the slave-master in liberating and revolutionary counterviolence? What does God tell the slave to do? Nat Turner, a black slave born on October 2, 1800, the chattel property of Benjamin Turner, claimed that God told him to violently revolt against his slave-master in the name of Christ.¹

This chapter explores the relevant issues in a theological account of Nat Turner and his revolutionary nineteenth-century slave rebellion. It frames Turner's insurrection as a uniquely Christian violence that expressly reflected his religious, spiritual, and theological viewpoints about God, the world, and humanity. It views his theology as an early and distinctly black theology emanating from radical black religion. It seeks to define violence, both the violence of the white slave-masters and the counterviolence of Turner, in order to characterize the true nature of Turner's violent insurrection. It argues that Turner's violence was not the typical Christian violence of power and prestige but rather the violence of the oppressed and humiliated. The chapter poses the following questions: How should one understand and portray the radical black theology of Nat Turner? How do Old Testament views of prophetic violence alongside Jesus's politics of violence in the New Testament illuminate Nat Turner and his violent slave revolt? Finally, how should one characterize the legacy of Nat Turner?

Nat Turner's Christian Violence

In 1831, Nat Turner exploded with prophetic and apocalyptic rage, leading a violent and bloody slave insurrection in Southampton County, Virginia.² Turner's rebellion killed at least 57 whites, men, women, and children.³ No less than 70 slaves participated in the uprising.⁴ Lasting little more than a day, Turner's insurrection was brutally repressed by local residents and vigilante militia. In retaliation for the revolt, scores of slaves were summarily executed, and Nat Turner was later hanged. Prior to his death, Turner recounted the inspiration for his revolutionary actions to white lawyer, Thomas R. Gray, later titled *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.⁵ Turner's testimony revealed that his violence was distinguished by its spiritual, religious, and theological motivations. He was a gifted Baptist preacher and exhorter admired by the slave community. Turner believed himself to be a prophet of God. He comprehended his violent mission as a Christian act of faith.⁶ In fact, Turner considered his rebellion to be directly inspired and guided by God through the Holy Spirit. Through much deliberation and discernment of the Spirit, he developed his plan for revolt and recruited other slaves to assist him. Turner's insurrection was unique because it came as a defiant and revolutionary form of Christian violence. It emerged distinctively from Turner's discrete Christian theology and understanding of God. Rather than the typical Christian violence of power and privilege, Turner's violence was the violence of the oppressed. Turner aimed to free his fellow slaves in Christian charity and fulfillment of the gospel in anticipation of Christ's return. For Turner, God had judged and condemned the institution of slavery. Therefore, God did not want blacks to be enslaved in nineteenth-century America. Turner rejected the hypocritical slaveholding Christianity of his white slave-masters. Like other black slaves, he expected an imminent and apocalyptic deliverance from slavery. God would once again invade and occupy human history by freeing blacks from bondage as the Hebrews in the Exodus. Turner's theology led him to aggressively enter into Christ's struggle for freedom and salvation through violent insurrection. He believed that violence was both justified and necessary to liberate blacks in 1831. According to Turner, God actively directed him to revolt through revelation, signs, scripture, visions, and dreams. Turner embraced the counterviolence of God against slavery and dehumanization. As Christian violence, Turner's insurrection expressly sought to advance the Kingdom principles of freedom, equality, liberation, justice, and

salvation. It was not motivated by hatred, racism, fanaticism, or evil. His revolutionary violence was the self-defense of the oppressed slave and God's counterviolence against the inherent barbarism and violence of slavery.

Black slave religion incorporated aspects of both conservative accommodation alongside radical protest and agitation. Gayraud S. Wilmore identifies a radical strain within black religion that seeks independence from white control, revalorization of the image of Africa, and maintains protest and agitation as theological prerequisites for liberation.⁷ Nat Turner represented this radical element in black religion that refused to be enslaved and oppressed without subversion and resistance. Like other prominent slave rebellions, religion played a central role in Turner's revolt. His black slave religion challenged the assumptions and understanding of conservative Evangelical white slaveholding religion. Wilmore asserts, "Nat Turner, like others whose names are buried under the debris of the citadel of American slavery, discovered that the God of the Bible demanded justice, and to know God's Son, Jesus Christ, was to be set free from every power that dehumanizes and oppresses."⁸ Turner's black slave religion condemned the institution of slavery, affirmed blacks as created in the image of God, and viewed blacks as God's special contemporary people. His black slave religion harmonized the Old Testament and the New Testament views of God. It embraced the liberating God of the Exodus and the liberating spirit of Jesus Christ. Wilmore further argues, "Turner discovered his manhood in the conception of the Christian God as one who liberates."⁹ Turner's black slave religion understood God as liberator of the poor and oppressed. For Turner, God was partial to the struggle of the weak and defenseless. Turner's insurrection was an extension of his religious devotion and radical black slave religion. His rebellion illustrated that black religion was sometimes willing to justify and legitimate revolutionary violence against oppression.

White Virginians immediately recognized the connection between religion and Nat Turner's insurrection.¹⁰ Yet, they condemned Turner as a religious fanatic and fraud guided by hatred, vengeance, racism, and diabolical evil. They rejected Turner's violence as misguided, unjust, and illegitimate. Specifically, they decried the killing of innocent women and children. They sought to distance themselves from Turner's case as an oppressed slave by vilifying and demonizing him. In their anger and consternation, white Virginians failed to truly grasp the implications of Turner's rebellion. It signaled the death of slavery in America. Turner's insurrection meant that slavery

and Christianity were fundamentally incompatible. No longer could Christian slave-masters hide behind religious and theological justifications of cruelty and brutality. Turner's revolt indicated that blacks could not be enslaved indefinitely. The impulse to rebellion and liberation had invaded the consciousness of black slave religion. Turner's prophetic violence pronounced condemnation and judgment on the institution of slavery. From thereafter, slave rebellion became a reality and concrete fear of white Virginians culminating finally in the Civil War and emancipation.

Nat Turner's radical black theology, emanating from his black slave religion, ultimately motivated and inspired his rebellion. His theology justified and legitimated revolutionary violence of the oppressed in the name of God to end slavery and dehumanization. Turner believed himself to be inspired by the same Holy Spirit who spoke to the prophets of old.¹¹ According to Turner, the Holy Spirit first told him, "Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you" (Mt 6:33).¹² Turner contended that the Spirit continued to speak to him thereafter through various means. In 1825, Turner received an apocalyptic vision of white and black spirits at war.¹³ By this vision, he was led to believe that imminent racial warfare awaited humanity. Turner claimed the Spirit later appeared to him saying, "The Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when *the first should be last and the last should be first*" (my italics) (Mt 20:16).¹⁴ These scriptural references reveal the biblical and theological motivations for Turner's violence. His insurrection was primarily seeking the Kingdom of Heaven on earth for black slaves. Turner realized that God's Kingdom could not deny material and spiritual liberation to blacks. Through violent uprising, all of God's material and spiritual blessings would follow. Furthermore, Turner's violence would necessarily upset the white power structure. The first would be last and the last would be first. In Turner's gospel, God sided with the poor and the oppressed against the powerful and the oppressors. God uplifted the slave and humbled the slave-master. Turner determined to fight alongside Christ against Satan and the kingdom of darkness to defeat the institution of slavery. His black slave religion, foundation in Old Testament prophecy, direct inspiration from God through the Holy Spirit, apocalypticism, and Evangelical religious worldview combined to revolutionize and radicalize his theology. Nat Turner's radical and revolutionary black theology would lead to open rebellion.

Turner's revolt intimately revealed the intense existential and religious longing for freedom amidst the brutal degradation and terror experienced by black slaves. Thus, his violent quest for freedom was triumphant in the eyes of many blacks. Antebellum blacks and their descendants labeled Nat Turner "a legendary black hero."¹⁵ Turner had chosen to actively fight against the inhumanity of whites and the peculiar institution. Given his social circumstances, chattel slavery in the antebellum South, Turner faced an existential, religious, and spiritual crisis. Akin to Frantz Fanon's brutal assessment of colonialism, slavery imposed "naked violence" on the slave.¹⁶ Unlike the 1960s, Turner could not appeal to the moral and practical commitments of a nonviolent, modern, civil rights movement. His violence was necessary to free himself and other slaves in the intransigent South of the 1830s. Furthermore, he did not want to run away and abandon his slave community. In defense of self and his fellow slaves, Turner embraced God's wrath and justice. Fueled by his apocalyptic faith, Nat Turner took up arms to defend his God-given right to liberty, life, and freedom.

Turner's violent insurrection necessarily raised important questions about the compatibility of violence and Christianity. Can Christian violence like that of Nat Turner ever be legitimated and justified? Is violence in the name of God consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ? Should Turner in the end be condemned for his resort to violence and brutality? In the Old Testament, violence was often depicted as the expressed will of God. God battled and subdued chaos and darkness to create the world. God destroyed humanity in a great flood. God delivered the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt through a series of violent plagues, including the death of the firstborn sons of Egypt. God commanded the Israelites to fight and kill on numerous occasions.¹⁷ God conquered the Promised Land and established the Kingdom of Israel through war and conquest, defeating Israel's enemies. God utilized prophetic violence through his prophets like Moses, Elijah, and Amos to combat slavery, apostasy, idolatry, social injustice, and unrighteousness. By Old Testament standards, Turner's violence resembled the violence of God's prophets like Moses toward slavery and oppression. Turner envisioned himself as an Old Testament prophet anticipating a New Testament Messiah at war with Satan and the kingdom of evil. Turner took up arms as a Christian prophet to join Christ in his fight for freedom and salvation. Turner's resort to prophetic violence in the name of God in order to free himself and others from the chains of slavery, however, challenged the theological

commitment to nonviolence and peace often associated with Jesus of Nazareth's gospel.

The Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7) advanced the most comprehensive ethical and theological commitments of Matthew's Jesus to his followers. In it, Jesus revealed a philosophy of love of God and love of neighbor. Rejecting even anger, Jesus implored the crowd, "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Mt 5:44–45). This philosophy of love and forgiveness toward the enemy suggested an absolute commitment to peace and nonviolence. Jesus asked his followers to turn the other cheek. Rather than resort to violence, one should peacefully endure, praying for one's persecutors and loving one's enemies. As the ultimate example of nonviolence, Jesus went to his violent death on the cross without any outright resistance to the Jewish or Roman authorities, choosing peace and forgiveness to the end (Mt 26:47–27:56; Mk 14:43–15:41; Lk 22:47–23:49; Jn 18–19:37). Luke's Jesus was recorded as saying on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Lk 23:34). For this reason, many pacifist Christians believe that Jesus categorically prohibits violence. In order to follow his theological principles and loving example, one must commit to nonviolent and peaceful action in the world. Therefore, someone like Nat Turner is considered an enemy of Jesus's gospel. Turner, in fact, embraced rather than rejected violence in his pursuit of freedom and justice. Thus, for some Christians, Turner cannot be said to be a follower of Jesus's totalizing and absolute philosophy of love.

Nonetheless, should one categorically read an unconditional and literal prohibition of all violence in every situation into Jesus's simple words of love and forgiveness?¹⁸ Should a philosophy of love prohibit violence in extreme and severely inhumane circumstances like slavery and violent oppression?¹⁹ What about violence used in self-defense?²⁰ Does Jesus ignore context and circumstance? Are there no situations in which violence is legitimate and justified?²¹ This is the ultimate test of Jesus's loving example. Should Christians accept absolutely that peace and nonviolence are the only ways of God? Given the Old Testament witness of God's violence and endorsement of human violence, how can one harmonize it with Jesus's supposedly absolutely nonviolent gospel? Nat Turner's theology in fact anticipated God's wrath and violence in pursuit of righteousness. His view of God

was avenging warrior and liberator. For Turner, God actively freed God's people from slavery through God's counterviolence, if necessary. Furthermore, can one be certain that Jesus proposed an ethical standard that should guide entire communities of people and nations or should one confine his views to personal conduct and interpersonal affairs alone? Jesus did not in fact specifically speak to the violence of oppressed peoples or the wars of the state. When an entire community or nation is enslaved, can Jesus's exhortation to love the enemy stand alone to prevent violent insurrection or revolution? In other words, should our commitments to peace and nonviolence outweigh our commitments to freedom and liberty? If violence becomes necessary for freedom, must the Christian abstain anyway? Does a philosophy of love in fact deny violence in all situations and circumstances? Should love, for example, neglect to save and defend the oppressed neighbor in need for the sake of nonviolence and peace? What is at stake is Jesus's supposedly categorical and absolute prohibition against war and violence. Would Jesus, in truth, condemn and judge the freedom fighter Nat Turner for his revolutionary violence of the oppressed?

How should Christians in turn make sense of Turner's violent slave rebellion? Should Turner be denounced and rejected as unchristian and impractical for his resort to violence and ultimate defeat? Or should Turner be praised as a Christian hero, prophet, and martyr, willing to die for his and other slaves' right to be free? To answer these questions, one must finally resolve one's theological understanding of Jesus's politics of violence in relationship to Old Testament portrayals of God and prophetic violence. Should Christians categorically refrain from violence or should Christians be led by other ultimate concerns like justice, righteousness, equality, liberation, and freedom? Of course, the danger of justifying and legitimating violence is the theological and religious justification of brutality and inhumanity. Such a revolutionary Christianity that defends and sanctifies violence risks support for violent dictators, holy wars, and individual vengeance. Nevertheless, Nat Turner's plight as an oppressed slave dramatizes the significance of the question. The slave is perpetually threatened by undeserved violence and suffering. The slave faces oblivion and annihilation each day. If violence becomes necessary to obtain freedom, do Christian commitments to nonviolence, peace, and reconciliation outweigh the slave's right to freedom? Can a Christian slave in good conscience take up arms to defend his right and that of others to life and liberty?

Defining Violence

How does one define violence? Nat Turner's philosophy depended on liberating and revolutionary violence to overthrow the slave-masters. Can one, however, distinguish Turner's Christian violence from that of others? C. A. J. Coady identifies three types of definitions for violence in philosophical, political, and sociological literature: "wide," "restricted," and "legitivist."²² In Coady's estimation, "Wide definitions, of which the most influential is that of 'structural violence,' tend to serve the interests of the political left by including within the extension of the term 'violence' a great range of social injustices and inequalities."²³ Wide definitions name multiple oppressions like slavery, racism, and white supremacy as economic, political, and social violence. Coady further argues, "Restricted definitions are typically those that concentrate upon positive interpersonal acts of force, usually involving the infliction of physical injury."²⁴ Legitivist definitions, by contrast, "incorporate a reference to an illegal or illegitimate use of force."²⁵ Restricted or legitivist interpretations do not take into account institutional, systematic, and structural violence. For the purposes of classifying Nat Turner's violence, a "wide" definition of violence best captures the system of white violence and power in which Turner's violence arose. Turner's violence ultimately emerged from within a context of violence and subjugation. Broadly speaking, Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan asserts, "Violence is that which harms."²⁶ Violence inflicts pain, suffering, and injury on persons and/or property.²⁷ According to Kirk-Duggan, violence can be "psychological, emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual; economic, religious, cultural, racial, sexual, verbal, and attitudinal."²⁸ Violence is more than physical slaughter or killing like Nat Turner. Violence can be both external and internal, affecting the mind, the emotions, and the body. For Kirk-Duggan, violence is also profoundly relational.²⁹ There are perpetrators and victims of violence, those who inflict suffering and those who experience suffering. Violence, however, need not be flagrant or glaring. Kirk-Duggan contends, "Violence can be blatant *or* subtle forms of aggression, hostility, cruelty, brutality, force, and the harsh wielding or misuse of power" (my italics).³⁰ The common thread is the infliction of harm, pain, suffering, and injury upon others. Kirk-Duggan distinguishes, however, between necessary and unnecessary violence.³¹ Some violence, Kirk-Duggan argues, is part of the natural cycle of life.³² Necessary violence is embedded into human existence and the order of nature. According to Kirk-Duggan, however,

“Unnecessary violence is that which causes harm, destroys, maims, oppresses, manipulates, and discounts the *imago Dei* [image of God] in other people.”³³ This definition moves toward a theological understanding of violence. Theologically, violence denies the *imago Dei* in others by inflicting pain, suffering, harm, and injury. All unnecessary violence then is destructive and damaging, necessarily imposing distress and anguish on victims. Biblical scholars, however, recognize the distinction between murder and killing in the Bible.³⁴ According to J. David Turner, “Killing was permitted if it was in defense of person, country, or by God’s order, but murder was never allowed in the Old Testament.”³⁵ Turner’s violence according to his own understanding should be classified as killing in self-defense by God’s order rather than murder.

Violence is not only committed by individuals or groups. Violence can be institutional, structural, or systematic. For example, Kirk-Duggan asserts, “At the level of community, violence can be systemic, where laws, rules, and legislative or bureaucratic bodies are intentional about keeping tight reins on those deemed other.”³⁶ The legal and political order can combine to limit the liberty and freedom of the marginalized citizen. Liberation theology redefines violence as institutional violence of the state, structural violence of unjust economic and social structures, and liberating violence directed against these systems.³⁷ Violence can inhabit an entire social, political, and economic system or order that denies the *imago Dei* and inflicts suffering on humanity. Kirk-Duggan contends, “Violence is any oppression, anything that violates and separates us from the truth and the sacred within ourselves, our relationship with Spirit, and community.”³⁸ Slavery in America was such a demonic structure that degraded and humiliated blacks. Nat Turner existed in a state of unnecessary violence and harm inflicted upon him. He inhabited a context of cruelty and brutality that perpetrated pain and suffering upon his black slave community. Therefore, his violence was fundamentally counterviolence and self-defense. In the terms of liberation theology, Turner’s violence was liberating violence directed against institutional and structural violence. It was the revolutionary violence of the oppressed and humiliated.

By contrast, Jacques Ellul argues that all violence is the same.³⁹ Ellul contends, “It is impossible to distinguish between justified and unjustified violence, between violence that liberates and violence that enslaves.”⁴⁰ Notwithstanding Ellul’s assertion of sameness, the Exodus account demonstrated that violence against Egypt was liberating

violence that birthed a free and independent nation. Liberating violence seeks freedom while institutional or structural violence creates enslavement. Womanist and black theologians collectively and intentionally name the oppressions of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, among others, as violence. This social, political, and economic violence and intimidation creates the environment for revolt. Helder Camara, for example, identifies three types of violence.⁴¹ Violence no. 1 is the established violence of injustices, humiliations, and restrictions.⁴² This is the violence of the state and social, political, and economic structures. Violence no. 1 attracts violence no. 2, or the revolt of the oppressed and/or youth.⁴³ Thus, institutional and structural violence leads ultimately to rebellion. When violence no. 2 resists violence no. 1, the authorities use force or violence no. 3.⁴⁴ According to Camara's scheme, the violence of slavery necessarily attracts revolt that in turn invites the repressive force of the authorities. Nat Turner's insurrection followed this pattern and was ultimately defeated by the violence of local authorities and vigilante militia. Turner's violence was the liberating violence of revolt against the fundamentally violent system of slavery and white supremacy.

According to Nat Turner, God actively directed and inspired his insurrection. In this sense, one can say that Turner's violence was God's violence. Turner viewed his violence as similar to the prophetic violence of Moses inflicting plagues against Egypt to free the Hebrew people from slavery. Prophetic violence is God's violence through the prophets against the enemies of Israel and against Israel for sins and transgressions. As a supposed prophet, Turner implemented prophetic violence against his white Christian slave-masters. Rubem A. Alves uses the term "counterviolence" to characterize God's violence against injustice and illegitimate power.⁴⁵ Alves describes God as a lion, asserting, "Thus, what looks like the violence of the lion is really the power of counter-violence, that is, power used against those who generate, support, and defend the violence of a world of masters and slaves."⁴⁶ God's counterviolence liberates the poor and oppressed from violence and oppression. Alves further contends, "Violence is power that oppresses and makes men unfree. Counter-violence is power that breaks the old which enslaves, in order to make men free. Violence is power aimed at paralysis. Counter-violence is power aimed at making man free for experimentation."⁴⁷ God's counterviolence provides humanity with freedom and life. It seeks to destroy the power of human violence and coercion. Nat Turner believed himself to be provoked by God to revolutionary action. For Turner, his liberating

and revolutionary prophetic violence was in effect God's counterviolence on behalf of the black slave community against slavery and dehumanization.

Nat Turner's violence, while bold and indiscriminate, was nonetheless distinct from terrorism. Terrorism reflects cowardice, blatant evil, and disregard for ethics. Kirk-Duggan asserts, "Terrorism or guerilla warfare is the systematic use of terror, that is, of intense fear, dread, anxiety, and violence, to effect coercion."⁴⁸ For Kirk-Duggan, terrorism seeks to intimidate and terrorize a population or a government.⁴⁹ James F. Rinehart asserts, "The tactic of the terrorist is not so much to destroy, maim, or kill, as much as it is to incite widespread panic and horror in the minds of a designated audience."⁵⁰ Terrorism is the violence of the desperate and cruel. It utilizes brutality and horror to manipulate, threaten, and coerce submission through fear and distress. By contrast, Nat Turner was fighting a legitimate war and revolution for his freedom and that of other black slaves. His acts were viewed as terrorism at the time because his white slave-masters were shocked by his open defiance. They expected blacks to accept their fate passively and submissively. The real terrorists were the slaveholding perpetrators of forced labor, broken families, rape, surrogacy, intimidation, coercion, and violence. Turner, however, was a freedom fighter whose liberating and revolutionary violence against slavery was also prophetic Christian violence condemning and judging the peculiar institution in America.

Violence also extends to language and speech.⁵¹ Violent language, hate speech, and pronouncements of apocalyptic doom also cause harm, injury, and pain, whether emotional, psychological, spiritual, or other. Violent language can intimidate, coerce, and threaten others. While violent language is not equivalent to physical violence, it nonetheless produces suffering and can limit freedom. Part of the prophetic violence of the Hebrew prophets, including Jesus of Nazareth, were his fiery words and condemnatory speech.

Black Theology and Violence

Black theology, which emerged academically in the latter half of the 1960s, combined the separatist, militant philosophy of Black Nationalism, Black Power, and the Nation of Islam with the Christian theology and religious activism of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s civil rights movement. The writings and speeches of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. dramatized these two poles of militancy

and Christian love within black theology. On the issue of violence to achieve racial freedom in America, Malcolm X embraced a confrontational stance in favor of violence for self-defense of the black community while King adopted a forceful campaign of nonviolent direct action. Both figures wanted to fight for black civil rights aggressively and deliberately but differed in their ultimate choice of strategy or moral ideals. King preferred an absolutely peaceful and nonviolent civil rights movement for both practical and theological reasons.⁵² Malcolm X sanctioned and approved the use of violence and force in the case of self-defense.⁵³ Neither suggested that violence for violence sake should be pursued in order to achieve a victory in civil rights.

During the Montgomery boycott, King underscored his philosophy of nonviolent resistance and love of enemy. He did not believe he was choosing passivity and weakness by emphasizing peaceful action.⁵⁴ Rather, he believed he was utilizing an aggressive spirituality and theological commitment.⁵⁵ Nonviolence was not meant to humiliate or “defeat” the opponent but to win friendship and understanding.⁵⁶ He foresaw that a nonviolent campaign would bring whites and blacks together. King declared, “The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation and the creation of a beloved community.”⁵⁷ His dedication to the hoped-for “beloved community” meant that violence was unacceptable as a strategy for civil rights. According to King, violence destroys community and necessarily undermines reconciliation. It produces irreparable wounds and nagging scars. King’s philosophy of love, modeled after Jesus, expressed his most basic philosophical and theological orientation. For King, nonviolence was absolutely necessary for the survival of civilization.⁵⁸ He believed in the power of redemption, promoting understanding, and redemptive goodwill for all humanity. In addition to his ethical and theological ideals, King also rejected violence for practical reasons.⁵⁹ According to King, a violent black revolution in America would be violently suppressed by a powerful white majority that could wipe out blacks. Violence, in this case, would be self-defeating and suicidal. Notwithstanding, King was also clear that violence would produce chaos of its own. King asserted, “Violence creates many more social problems than it solves.”⁶⁰ Thus, he believed violence could not achieve just outcomes without adverse circumstances. In his 1964 acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, King acknowledged that his award affirmed nonviolence as the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time.⁶¹ He supported unequivocally the need to overcome violence and oppression without resorting to violence and oppression.⁶²

Furthermore, he remarked that civilization and violence were antithetical.⁶³ Nonetheless, one should not mistake King's nonviolence for submissiveness, complacency, or fear. For King, nonviolence emerged as a powerful moral and theological force for social change.

King identified three contrasting views on violence and social change.⁶⁴ His preferred method of social change was "pure nonviolence," which he claimed required extraordinary discipline and courage in the face of adversity.⁶⁵ The second category was "violence in self-defense," which he believed was accepted philosophically by all societies.⁶⁶ The third perspective was "advocacy of violence" as a tool for advancement.⁶⁷ While accepting "violence in self-defense" as an extraordinary but acceptable circumstance, King unfairly characterized the militant yearnings of Malcolm X and the Black Power movement as the "advocacy of violence" for advancement rather than "violence in self-defense."⁶⁸ He categorically rejected calls for violence to offset white power in America. King did not believe the movement should dissolve into a violent, murderous rage. At the end of his life, he was more certain than in Montgomery that radical nonviolence provided the way to freedom for blacks. Malcolm X, however, challenged the pure nonviolence of King in favor of violence for self-defense.

Often understood to be an advocate of violence, Malcolm X should actually be considered a supporter of the right to defend oneself through any means necessary. He never advocated violence for the sake of violence but for self-defense. For example, he declared, "We are nonviolent only with nonviolent people. I'm nonviolent as long as somebody else is nonviolent—as soon as they get violent they nullify my nonviolence."⁶⁹ Malcolm X also vehemently criticized King's nonviolent civil rights movement. He argued that whites were not nonviolent but blacks, according to King, must be. Predicting a potentially bloody scene in America, he asserted, "In 1964 you'll find Negroes will strike back. There never will be nonviolence anymore, that has run out."⁷⁰ He was concerned primarily that blacks should stand up against the terror and violence inflicted upon them by whites.

Malcolm X promoted a radically different black revolution than King. He proclaimed, "You don't have a turn-the-other-cheek revolution. There's no such thing as a nonviolent revolution. The only kind of revolution that is nonviolent is the Negro revolution. The only revolution in which the goal is loving your enemy is the Negro revolution."⁷¹ Ironically, he did not see the ultimate effectiveness of nonviolence in America during the 1960s. He understood rather that

blacks, through nonviolence, became brutalized and vulnerable to the overt violent attacks of whites. Furthermore, he categorically rejected King's Christian commitment to the philosophy of love. He saw Christianity as a tool of racism and white supremacy. Malcolm X argued, "Christianity was used in America on us, on our people, not to take us to Heaven but to make us good slaves, primarily by robbing us of our right to defend ourselves in the name of Jesus."⁷² Thus, he rejected Jesus of Nazareth's dedication to loving the enemy. A violent enemy must be met with violence, according to Malcolm X. He contended, "Revolution is bloody, revolution is hostile, revolution knows no compromise, revolution overturns and destroys everything that gets in its way."⁷³ He was not willing to reject and deny violence in defense of his revolutionary commitment to black freedom and self-determination.

Malcolm X highlighted the context of the system and structure of white violence in which blacks lived. Historically, blacks have been terrorized and brutalized by whites in America. Malcolm X was reluctant to forgive and excuse this blatant violence and cruelty. He maintained, "I'm the victim of violence, and you're the victim of violence. But you've been so victimized by it that you can't recognize it for what it is today."⁷⁴ With his violent insurrection, Nat Turner struck out defiantly against the naked violence of slavery and white supremacy. Turner's revolutionary actions expressed the same rage that Malcolm X felt. How can you expect nonviolence in the face of violence? For Malcolm X, blacks could only certify and affirm their humanity by fighting to defend themselves as others. Although King suggested that Malcolm X advocated violence as an acceptable tool for advancement, it is only true that Malcolm X advocated violence for self-defense given the context of terror and violence confronting blacks. Even King suggested that such a stance of self-defense is philosophically acceptable in all societies.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, King categorically chose nonviolent direct action where Malcolm X would use force. King should be remembered as a staunch supporter of peaceful and nonviolent revolution.⁷⁶ Malcolm X should be remembered as a forceful advocate of self-defense by any means necessary. Together, King and Malcolm X illustrate the intrinsic tensions within Black theology concerning violence and revolution. Black theology has emerged and developed from the dynamic and diverse dialogue in the black community concerning freedom and black deliverance. In its development, Black theology has advocated both nonviolent and violent revolution in order to achieve freedom and justice for blacks in America.

Notwithstanding these two divergent perspectives, contemporary Black theology has also tended to normatively embrace the nonviolence of King over and against the violent threats of Malcolm X and Black Power, along with the militant violence of those like Nat Turner. King's nonviolent way is viewed as the true expression of the gospel and Jesus's absolute philosophy of love. King is seen as the genuine champion of social justice and righteousness. Yet, Nat Turner also offered a compelling reading of the Bible. Turner had his own revealed understanding of God's Kingdom. Turner's inspired black theology rejected enslavement and oppression through prophetic violence and God's counterviolence. Fundamentally, Turner embraced the same vision of black liberty and equality as King. He believed in a future age of peace and freedom for black humanity. Both King and Turner came to the same conclusion that they must resist the present powers forcefully and aggressively in the name of God. Ultimately, they differed, however, in their choice of means to deliverance. King categorically rejected violence while Nat Turner adopted liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence. Each one was a product of his times. In the 1960s, violence was impractical and King supplied the necessary theology for a nonviolent and peaceful movement. In 1831, Nat Turner embraced the only real path of blacks to freedom and emancipation, war and rebellion. Each illustrated that God's ways in history are diverse and past knowing. Each generation of black Americans denied freedom and justice must determine on their own if resistance requires nonviolence or violence. For his historical era and context of slavery, Nat Turner was the paradigmatic example of the violent black Christian revolutionary.

The Theology of Nat Turner

How should one characterize the theology of Nat Turner? Turner's defiant and radical black theology was directly responsible for his liberating and revolutionary violence. He developed a theology of violent resistance through his Evangelical black slave religion, foundation in Old Testament prophecy, apocalypticism, and direct inspiration from God through the Holy Spirit. From Evangelical religion, Turner adopted a lifestyle of religious discipline and devotion. Turner had been raised by a religious family and a religious slave-master.⁷⁷ Learning of Christianity from an early age, he believed himself to be a prophet of God destined for some special purpose.⁷⁸ In anticipation of his calling, Turner gave himself to religious piety, self-discipline,

fasting, prayer, meditation, and withdrawal.⁷⁹ He became a Baptist preacher and exhorter admired by the slave community. His religious commitments were evident in his life and apparent to the community, both white and black.⁸⁰ Turner self-consciously maintained an austere and self-restrained way of life.⁸¹ His religious devotion, vocation, and calling from God helped determine the roots of his revolutionary theology.

Turner's black slave religion argued that God was a liberator of slaves, according to the Exodus. Black slaves expected an imminent deliverance from slavery through God's intervention in history. Turner believed his insurrection would fulfill God's promise of freedom and salvation. God would fight for blacks. The foundation of Turner's theology came through Old Testament prophecy and faith. As a supposed prophet, Turner believed himself to be inspired by the Holy Spirit who spoke to the Hebrew prophets of old.⁸² Like Moses, Turner determined to lead the people to freedom. Turner's theology harmonized the Christ of the gospels with the warring and jealous God of the Old Testament. Christ had died to set humanity free from sin and slavery and now sat at the right hand of God awaiting the destruction of his enemies. Turner saw himself entering into Christ's struggle for freedom and salvation against the kingdom of darkness. Christ, too, for Turner, was a liberator who willed blacks to be free. Turner's apocalypticism arose from his vision of white and black spirits at war.⁸³ Turner expected imminent and apocalyptic racial war in anticipation of the return of Christ. Turner saw to it that he would initiate this racial warfare through violent rebellion.

Unlike Apostle Paul, Turner's apocalypticism did not lead to conservatism on social issues. Paul understood that Christ's return would finally bring fulfillment of social justice and Kingdom ideals. Therefore, Paul maintained his conservative attitudes about gender, slavery, and revolt until the return of Christ became a reality. Paul remained content to spread the gospel without agitating for political and social justice. Christ did not come in his lifetime so Paul is remembered by some for his conservative politics. Turner, however, embraced revolutionary action to make God's Kingdom come on earth. Turner wanted society to embody the ideals of the Kingdom. Turner's apocalypticism led him to adopt radical social views and violent rebellion. His apocalypticism inspired revolution rather than conservatism. Turner's direct inspiration from God confirmed him in the view that he was a prophet destined for some special purpose.⁸⁴ In the form of signs, revelation, scripture, dreams, and visions, Turner

became overcome by the Holy Spirit.⁸⁵ He believed the Holy Spirit guided and directed his revolt. This direct inspiration from God animated Turner's theology and spiritual understanding.

Constructing the theology of Nat Turner from his own personal account, life story, Evangelical black slave religion, and other sources gives evidence as to the theological worldview behind his violent insurrection. His uniquely Christian theology made his rebellion a specific form of Christian violence. Turner was ostensibly seeking the Kingdom of Heaven on earth for black slaves. He was pursuing a new order in which the first shall be last and the last shall be first (Mt 20:16).⁸⁶ Turner sought to enter into the struggles of Christ for freedom from sin and slavery. Nat Turner's radical black theology justified and legitimated liberating and revolutionary violence to achieve freedom for blacks in America. His theology expressly condemned the institution of slavery, affirmed God's love for black people, and anticipated the return of Christ and Day of Judgment.

The Legacy of Nat Turner

History can remember Nat Turner as a martyred prophet and hero, as a religious fanatic and violent extremist guided by rage and delusion, or as some other type of transitional historical figure. If one rejects violence categorically or specifically in the case of the slave, then Turner was unjustly murderous and vengeful. White Virginians of 1831 were shocked and horrified by the brutality and ferociousness of the revolt with its indiscriminate killing of women and children.⁸⁷ The viciousness and ruthlessness of Turner's short-lived insurrection continues to repulse and offend some, leading them to condemn Turner for inhumanity and evil. Christian pacifists must also categorically condemn and denounce Turner's resort to violence. Those who reject slavery, racism, and white supremacy, however, may sympathize with Turner's violent rebellion. For many blacks, Nat Turner is respected and admired for his religious conviction and violent resolve against slavery and dehumanization. Turner was seeking the freedom of all black slaves through his violent revolt. As such, he holds a sacred space in the African American religious history of protest and resistance. Many antebellum blacks and their descendants credit Turner for the "First War" against slavery with the US Civil War being the second.⁸⁸ Stephen B. Oates asserts that Turner "became a martyred soldier of slave liberation who broke his chains and murdered whites because slavery had murdered Negroes."⁸⁹ For some, Nat Turner

represented the human spirit striving against tyranny and oppression for freedom, liberty, equality, and justice. As with the patriots of the American Revolution, Turner fought for his inalienable right to freedom, life, and liberty. Oates further argues, “At last, too intelligent and frustrated to remain somebody’s property, aroused to a biblical rage by his own religious fantasies and the emotional revivalism of the time, Nat rose up against the slave system like a furious biblical prophet, thundering that Jehovah had appointed him an instrument of divine vengeance to free his people and punish guilty whites.”⁹⁰ Turner’s prophetic violence condemned the institution of slavery and judged white America. It confirmed that the gospel offered tangible material and spiritual freedom. God’s abundant life was meant for all of God’s children. Turner’s rebellion foreshadowed the violence of the US Civil War proving that violence and bloodshed was necessary to deliver blacks from slavery in America. Turner’s existential crisis as an oppressed slave, combined with his religious discipline, prayer, withdrawal, meditation, and fasting, and together with a radical theology and revolutionary worldview, fueled his resort to open rebellion. Turner embodied the slave who refuses to be enslaved and rises up against his slave-masters in the name of God. The violent brutality and viciousness of his insurrection reflected the ruthless nature of his enemy and the inherent violence and cruelty of the institution of slavery in America.

Confessions convey Nat Turner’s last impressions before his execution including his religious, spiritual, and theological motivations for rebellion.⁹¹ Some critics have questioned the authenticity of *Confessions*.⁹² They argue that Gray was a slaveholder with motives for money and fame.⁹³ Critics claim that Gray contributed to the “white myth about Nat as a ghoulish maniac, driven to insurrection by his religious phobias and fixations, and so a freak, an aberration whose likes would never appear in the South again.”⁹⁴ These critics classify *Confessions* as white propaganda to assuage fear.⁹⁵ Yet, within *Confessions* is revealed an authentic and reliable spirituality and theological worldview that directly led Turner to revolt.⁹⁶ Nat Turner’s theology encompassed his Evangelical black slave religion, his personal religious devotion and self-discipline, direct inspiration from God in the form of signs, visions, dreams, revelation, and scripture, in addition to belief in his calling and vocation as preacher and prophet. His radical black theology legitimated and justified liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence against slavery and dehumanization in the name of God’s apocalyptic counterviolence.

Turner's resort to violent revolution was the Christian violence of the poor and the oppressed against injustice and inhumanity.

Nat Turner remains a complicated and obscure but revolutionary figure in American history. Oates contends, "Nat Turner was a complex and paradoxical man, a victim of a violent system who in the end struck back with retributive violence."⁹⁷ Turner could not accept quietly his existential, spiritual, and theological crisis as a religious and educated yet poor, black, male slave. His radical black slave religion affirmed the freedom and equality of blacks in the image of God. His rich spirituality embraced communion and fellowship with the Holy Spirit through study, scripture, fasting, prayer, meditation, and withdrawal. His dynamic theology condemned slavery and legitimated revolutionary violence. His rebellion came from apocalyptic hope in the providence and justice of God in human history. Furthermore, Turner radicalized his black Christianity. According to Dale W. Brown, "Radicalism implies a fundamental departure from or challenge to the status quo."⁹⁸ Turner's black Christianity thoroughly rejected and criticized white slaveholding Christianity. Turner confronted and defied the existing order of slavery and bondage. Brown further asserts that radical signifies the root of something or that which is original, fundamental, and inherent.⁹⁹ Turner's rebellion embraced foundational Kingdom principles of freedom, liberation, equality, justice, and salvation. His theological perspective affirmed freedom as the essence of the gospel and anticipated a new order of liberty and justice for blacks. His insurrection proclaimed the essential character of God as liberator. Turner's liberating and revolutionary violence revealed and affirmed the need for a Christian theology of just revolution or just rebellion to supplement traditional Christian just war thinking and to account for both the justice and inhumanity of his rebellion. Turner's revolt exemplified a just cause with right intention entered into by a legitimate revolutionary authority, the community of black slaves. His insurrection represented a long history of Christian violence to advance the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Unlike the traditional Christian violence of powerful elites and institutions, however, Nat Turner's rebellion uniquely brought to life the liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence of the oppressed and the humiliated. As a revelation of the wrath of God against wickedness and unrighteousness, Turner's insurrection invoked and entreated God's apocalyptic counterviolence against slavery and dehumanization.

A Portrait of Nat Turner

Theological reflection is representative of the social location and historical context of the theologian. As such, theology is not objective, universal language but rather contextual and particularistic speech about God, the world, and humanity. The self-identity and assumptions of the theologian as socially, historically, and culturally situated necessarily influence the character of the theology. Notwithstanding, Euro-American and European theologies have tried historically to claim objectivity and universality while black theology and other liberation theologies have exposed their Eurocentric tendencies and worldview. Theology inevitably exists in a certain place and time. It emanates from the historical circumstances of the age. Theology is also undeniably political. It reflects the aims and aspirations of political beings who struggle against concrete social facts. It is likewise personal. Theology comes from the private recesses in the body, soul, and spirit. Similarly, Nat Turner's early black theology originated from his social condition, historical environment, and personal convictions of his heart. Turner was a revolutionary manifestation of his age in the antebellum South.

To understand Nat Turner as theologian and religious activist, one must first decipher his social location and historical context. Who was Nat Turner? How did he reflect his time, place, and circumstance? How did he inhabit his cultural, linguistic, and historical world? In the case of Turner, however, historical reconstruction from primary and secondary sources is "notoriously obscure and difficult to interpret."¹ There are limited sources of impartial and credible information about Turner. Kenneth S. Greenberg, for instance, argues, "Both his position as a slave and his position as a man who threatened the core values and institutional structures of the

antebellum South have made him a difficult figure for historians to reconstruct.”² Greenberg is particularly concerned that one cannot know the name, face, and body of Turner with any real certainty. For example, Greenberg asserts, “We do not know the name of Nat Turner. We do not know what he looked like. We cannot find his body.”³ Notwithstanding imperfect and incomplete documentation and evidence about Turner, it is nevertheless possible to produce a historical portrait of Nat Turner that informed his theology and theological worldview. Most importantly, Turner left his own personal account of his religious, spiritual, and theological insights and motivations in his *Confessions*.⁴ Here, Turner revealed his private faith, personal spirituality, and exclusive convictions of his heart.

This chapter as a portrait of Nat Turner seeks to present the social location of Turner and the historical context surrounding his ultimate act of rebellion. It illustrates that Turner’s social location as a religious and educated yet poor black male slave, combined with his historical context in the violent and intractable South of the 1830s, provided the foundation to produce a radical and revolutionary theology. It argues that revolutionary theology rather than economic decline or personal vengeance determined the necessity of revolt. It shows that Turner’s spirituality conjoined with his material condition as slave to radicalize his black slave Christianity. The chapter also explores the white Virginian reaction to Turner’s violence and the further entrenchment of divisions in white and black religion. Overall, it presents the foundation upon which Turner built his theological vision and revolutionary actions. It considers Nat Turner as radical theologian and revolutionary religious activist.

Social Location

The most enduring fact about Nat Turner’s social location was that he was a slave. On October 2, 1800, Nat or Nathaniel Turner was born in Southampton County, Virginia, the chattel property of Benjamin Turner.⁵ Nathaniel in Hebrew means “the gift of God.”⁶ Upon the death of Benjamin Turner in 1810, Nat became the property of Benjamin’s younger brother, Samuel Turner.⁷ Samuel Turner died in 1822, and Nat was sold to Thomas Moore.⁸ In 1830, the widow of Thomas Moore and mother of apprentice Putnam Moore, Nat’s legal owner, married Joseph Travis and Nat became the property of the Travis household.⁹ Nat Turner’s repeated transfer from one owner to the next indicated the insecurity of a black slave’s position. One’s

family could easily be disrupted and family members sold or separated. Turner's wife and children, for instance, were enslaved on another farm.¹⁰ Nat Turner's slave revolt would begin with indiscriminate slaughter of all whites at the Travis residence. Thus, Turner's initial rage was directed at Joseph Travis, his de facto owner, and Travis's family, including young Putnam Moore, Nat's legal owner. To begin the rebellion at the Travis residence amounted to a sociopolitical statement against slave-owners and the institution of slavery. Hark, one of Turner's trusted coconspirators, was the 31-year-old slave also of Joseph Travis.¹¹ David F. Allmendinger, Jr. asserts that "Hark had assembled Turner's initial followers at Cabin Pond, less than a mile north of the Travis house, on Sunday and remained with the rebels until he was shot from his horse on Tuesday morning."¹² Hark, like Turner, acted out directly against his slave-owner. Nonetheless, Turner's rebellion did not emerge from harsh or cruel treatment from Joseph Travis. Greenberg maintains, "It was not instigated by motives of revenge or sudden anger, but the results of long deliberation, and a settled purpose of mind."¹³ Turner was not guided by sheer hatred of whites or a desire for vengeance. Turner himself stated, "Since the commencement of 1830, I had been living with Mr. Joseph Travis, who was a kind master, and placed the greatest confidence in me; in fact, I had no cause to complain of his treatment to me."¹⁴ Rather than a reaction to blatant cruelty, Turner rejected the very idea of slave-owners and the institution of slavery. For Turner, blacks were not meant to be enslaved in America. Therefore, Turner sought to free himself and all black slaves from the despair and degradation inherent to the condition of bondage.

Two physical descriptions of Nat Turner emerge from the historical record. On September 17, 1831, Governor John Floyd of Virginia issued a "Proclamation of a reward for the capture of Nat Turner" in which Floyd described Turner as "between 30 & 35 years old, 5 feet 6 or 8 inches high, weighs between 150 and 160 lbs, rather bright complexion, but not a mulatto—broad shouldered—large flat nose—large eyes—broad flat feet—rather knock-kneed—walks brisk and active—hair on the top of the head very thin—no beard except on the upper lip, and the tip of the chin—a scar on one of his temples—also one on the back of his neck—a large knob on one of the bones of his right arm near the wrist produced by a blow."¹⁵ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, writing in 1889, depicted Turner as "a short, stout, powerfully built person, of dark mulatto complexion, and strongly marked African features, but with a face full of expression and resolution."¹⁶ Higginson claimed

“dark mulatto complexion” for Turner, whereas Governor Floyd described “rather bright complexion, but not a mulatto.”

From what is known about Nat Turner’s parents, Turner was African American and not a mulatto. Turner’s mother, “Nancy,” was imported directly from Africa in 1799 and purchased by Methodist slave-owner Benjamin Turner.¹⁷ She gave birth to Nat the following year. Circumstantial evidence reveals that Turner’s father ran away before 1810.¹⁸ In “The Aftermath of Nat Turner’s Insurrection,” printed by *The Journal of Negro History* in 1920, John W. Cromwell reports that Turner’s father, “a native of Africa,” ran away from slavery and eventually immigrated to Liberia.¹⁹ The author of “The Negro in Virginia,” produced by the Writer’s Program of the Works Project Administration (WPA) in 1940, asserts that Turner’s mother “had tried to kill the newborn babe rather than have it grow up a slave.”²⁰ According to these accounts, each parent profoundly rejected slavery for Nat in their own way. Turner’s father represented the paradigm of escape from slavery and return to Africa. His mother carried with her the conviction that from birth Nat was not meant to be a slave. While mythology may certainly play a role in these characterizations of Turner’s parentage, they suggest that rejection of slavery was a foundational part of Turner’s heritage. Turner, himself, would be faced with his own questions of running away or returning to incite open rebellion. In approximately 1821, Turner ran away and eventually returned after 30 days.²¹ Turner explained that he returned to slavery at the prompting of the Holy Spirit.²² According to Turner, the Spirit had instructed him to consider spiritual things rather than earthly things and to seek first the Kingdom of Heaven.²³ Since he could not escape slavery by running away, Turner confronted it directly. In Turner’s estimation, the Kingdom of Heaven judged and condemned slavery. At the prompting of the Spirit, Turner would lead a fierce rebellion to destroy it.

By all accounts, Nat Turner was an exceptional and gifted man. Greenberg asserts, “All his life Nat Turner presented himself and was accepted by the black community as a man apart, a man with extraordinary abilities, destined for some special purpose.”²⁴ Turner experienced extreme ease at acquiring reading and writing with no formal recollection of learning the alphabet.²⁵ One day, he spontaneously began spelling the names of different objects to the astonishment of his family.²⁶ Learning and knowledge would motivate Turner throughout his life. Greenberg further argues, “As a young man, Nat Turner simultaneously devoted himself to the mastery of

sacred and secular knowledge—demonstrating spontaneously an ability to read, experimenting with the manufacture of paper and gunpowder, and cultivating an austere lifestyle of religious devotion, fasting, and prayer.”²⁷ Turner’s religious discipline and dedication emerged from his religious surroundings and upbringing. His original owner, Benjamin Turner, was a Methodist who attended church and invited other religious people to his home for prayer and fellowship.²⁸ F. Roy Johnson contends that Turner’s mother “was taught to read and write and given Christian instruction along with the other slaves.”²⁹ According to Johnson, she became deeply religious.³⁰ Turner was also emotionally attached to his “very religious” grandmother.³¹ She taught him the prayers she learned from the master and mistress.³² Through the encouragement of his parents, Turner believed at an early age that he was destined to be a prophet with a special calling from God.³³ Recounting his devout lifestyle, Turner stated, “Having soon discovered to be great, I must appear so, and therefore studiously avoided mixing in society, and wrapped myself in mystery, devoting my time to fasting and prayer.”³⁴ Turner contended that both whites and blacks noticed “the austerity of [his] life and manners” and “uncommon intelligence” remarking that he had too much sense to be a slave.³⁵ Members of the black slave community displayed confidence in his superior judgment and opinions.³⁶ Turner asserted that he gained influence with others not through conjuring and tricks but through the genuine communion of the Spirit and revelation of God.³⁷ Herbert Aptheker maintains, “He was a religious leader, often conducting services of a Baptist nature and exhorting his fellow workers.”³⁸ This religious devotion, vocation, and calling as preacher and prophet would serve as a catalyst to his insurrection. Surrounded by white Christian slave-masters and personally devoted to his own religious faith, Turner faced the inevitable question of the compatibility of slavery and Christianity. Turner witnessed firsthand the hypocrisy of white antebellum religion. In response, Turner developed an early black theology diametrically opposed to the position of his white slave-masters. Nat Turner’s religious, spiritual, and theological affirmations and assertions would guide his revolutionary actions.

Southampton County, Virginia

In 1831, Southampton County was a tidewater county located in the southeastern corner of Virginia in the “Black Belt,” 600 square miles

between Sussex County and the North Carolina border, 150 miles south of Washington, DC.³⁹ The county contained several tiny villages and the economy was exclusively agricultural.⁴⁰ The 1830 census reported 175 as the population of the largest town in Southampton and county seat, Jerusalem.⁴¹ Ironically, Nat Turner would lead a religious revolt aimed at seizing the town of Jerusalem. Southampton County was isolated from major population centers with Norfolk 80 miles east and the capital Richmond 80 miles northwest.⁴² Crops moved to market by boat.⁴³ In 1830, Southampton County was second in the state in potato and rice production.⁴⁴ Henry Irving Tragle concludes that relative prosperity existed in Southampton County in 1831 rather than the economic depression cited by some historians.⁴⁵ Greenberg, however, argues that Southampton County in 1831 was isolated and economically stagnant, and while not in serious crisis, it lagged behind other parts of the state.⁴⁶ So it appears that while Southampton was a prosperous part of the state's economy, it was becoming less so in 1831. It is nonetheless clear, however, that economic depression does not explain Nat Turner's insurrection. Turner never suggested that he was unduly impoverished or neglected. Economic decline in the region did not overwhelmingly cripple blacks and incite them to rebellion. Notwithstanding, Turner's economic condition was intimately tied to his enslavement as a black person. As a slave, he was the poorest of the poor and the least of these. He did not own his own self. Both his race and his impoverished class combined to limit him. Because of his blackness, he became a slave, and because of his position as a slave, he was poor. Ultimately, it was his black religion in union with his social location as poor black slave that undergirded his theology and his insurrection. Turner gave voice to the theological perspective of the defiant and militant poor black male slave.

According to Greenberg, "Southampton County in 1831 was a forested landscape, swampy in places, and dotted with relatively small farms."⁴⁷ Tragle asserts that due to the type of agricultural in the county it was not feasible or profitable to have large numbers of slaves.⁴⁸ Tragle further argues that few owned more than 25 slaves.⁴⁹ Greenberg contends that one-third of white families owned no slaves.⁵⁰ In addition, the vast majority of slave-masters owned fewer than ten slaves with only 13 percent owning twenty or more slaves.⁵¹ The county average was ten or eleven slaves per slave-owning family.⁵² Only 15 men owned 50 slaves or more.⁵³ Furthermore, there were only three large plantations of 145–179 black slaves resembling

the Old South elite.⁵⁴ While Southampton was not filled with vast plantations, Greenberg reports that the black population nonetheless significantly outnumbered the whites.⁵⁵ The census of 1830 reported 6,573 whites and 7,756 black slaves with 1,745 free blacks, an unusually high number for Virginia according to Greenberg.⁵⁶ All in all, blacks, slave and free, amounted to 60 percent of the population of Southampton County in 1831.⁵⁷ This concentration of blacks no doubt intensified the revolutionary potential of the population.

In 1900, William Sidney Drewry in retrospect concluded, "The condition of slavery in Virginia was not such as to arouse insurrection among the slaves."⁵⁸ Drewry alluded to an affectionate master-slave relationship between the "superior" race and the "inferior" race in Virginia.⁵⁹ For Drewry, the association reflected "much confidence and mutual intercourse between master and slave."⁶⁰ According to Drewry, "Not one insurrection was due to cruel treatment or inbred desire for freedom."⁶¹ Rather, Nat Turner and others like him acted out of "superstition, religious fanaticism, and love of plunder and pillage."⁶² Drewry also argued that Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831 was a "noble, industrious, and liberty-loving population, well typifying the best Southern character."⁶³ In addition, Drewry depicted Virginia in 1831 as "comparative quiet and prosperity."⁶⁴ For Drewry, Southampton was a picture of progressiveness with roads constructed and lands cleared.⁶⁵ According to Drewry, slaves were happy and well cared for, advancing in "intelligence, morals, and manners."⁶⁶ Furthermore, Drewry lauded, "Never in the history of slavery, however, was there less danger to owners, more contentment among the slaves themselves, fewer runaways, and greater advantages, social, financial, and political, gained from this institution."⁶⁷ Drewry reported that prior to 1831 *only* three blacks had been executed and four transported for crimes in Southampton County.⁶⁸ Therefore, in Drewry's estimation, Nat Turner was a violent aberration and anomaly who did not reflect the state of slavery in Virginia in 1831.

Drewry ultimately blamed the hostilities associated with Nat Turner on the respect given by the Virginian society to the month of August and the sanctity of the Sabbath.⁶⁹ By August, the cultivation of corn, cotton, and tobacco was completed.⁷⁰ According to Drewry, August was treated as a month of jubilee, with reduced labor, and a time of worship and camp meetings.⁷¹ Drewry asserted, "The servants had a freedom almost equal to their owners."⁷² Saturday and Sunday were treated as leisure days.⁷³ In fact, "No master could force a slave to work on the Sabbath" according to Drewry.⁷⁴ Drewry

further argued, “Such a Saturday and Sunday were the 20th and 21st of August, 1831,”⁷⁵ the final days of planning for Nat Turner and his accomplices. Drewry finally blamed the insurrection on lax treatment combined with the religious fanaticism of Turner amidst an otherwise congenial master-slave environment in the midst of economic and social prosperity. According to Drewry, rebellion was not necessitated by any cruelty associated with the institution of slavery in Virginia or mandated by an innate desire for freedom.⁷⁶ From this perspective, slavery in Virginia was benign and Nat Turner a superstitious fanatic.

Drewry’s historical account is filled with an apologia for antebellum white Southern society. Drewry wanted to demonstrate the viciousness and apparent insanity of Nat Turner in contrast to the congeniality of slavery in Virginia. Even Turner seems to suggest that his state of slavery was nonthreatening. Notwithstanding, to characterize all slavery in Virginia as benign and benevolent defies substantiation. Certainly, the conditions for rebellion were improved by respect for the Sabbath. Saturday and Sunday before the rebellion, Nat Turner met with coconspirators. But, this was not his original plan. Initially, he aimed to strike on the Fourth of July. In the end, Drewry clearly underestimates the yearning of the human spirit for freedom and self-determination and the gospel’s demand for liberation. Therefore, it is more likely that the revolutionary nature of black slave religion in Virginia laid the foundations for revolt. Religious instruction of slaves rather than compassionate and slack treatment or respect for the Sabbath was more responsible for inciting Turner’s uprising. Teaching slaves that they have dignity and worth before God does not necessarily pacify or subdue them. Rather, it makes some, like Turner, to assert and affirm that dignity through resistance and subversion. Black slaves in America rebelled in many diverse ways. They did not all accept their condition passively or submissively. What makes Turner unique is his adoption of liberating and revolutionary violence along with the well-founded and particularistic religious, spiritual, and theological motivations for his revolutionary actions.

The Southampton Insurrection

After what Nat Turner described as his first sign from God to prepare for imminent rebellion, the solar eclipse of February 12, 1831, Nat relayed his plot to four other slaves: Henry, Hark, Nelson, and Sam.⁷⁷ Turner first intended to strike on July 4, 1831, but due to illness and

incomplete plans, he postponed the insurrection until receiving a second sign from God.⁷⁸ The second sign came on August 13, 1831, in the form of a greenish blue-colored sun.⁷⁹ On Saturday, August 20, 1831, Turner met with Henry and Hark to arrange a gathering of all conspirators the following day.⁸⁰ On Sunday morning, August 21, 1831, Henry, Hark, Nelson, and Sam gathered on the banks of Cabin Pond with two new initiates, Will and Jack, over a pig and apple brandy.⁸¹ Hark and Will were Methodist exhorters or lay preachers.⁸² Turner joined them at three o'clock in the afternoon.⁸³ In the early morning hours of Monday, August 22, 1831, Nat Turner and his band of slaves initiated their violent revolt. Greenberg argues, "Seven conspirators, initially armed with a variety of farm implements, attacked Turner's home farm, the Joseph Travis residence, and killed all the white inhabitants in their sleep."⁸⁴ Greenberg further asserts, "During the next 24 hours, the rebels moved from farm to farm, killing every white man, woman, and child they encountered; gathering horses, guns, and recruits; and ultimately generating consequences that touched the entire nation and that continue to influence American race relations to the present day."⁸⁵ Aptheker maintains, "Within twenty-four hours approximately seventy slaves were actively aiding in the rebellion."⁸⁶ Thomas Wentworth Higginson contends, "When the number of adherents had increased to fifty or sixty, Nat Turner judged it time to strike at the county seat, Jerusalem."⁸⁷ Turner and his men were met by local militia. Allmendinger argues, "On the afternoon of [Monday], 22 August, Nat Turner's men fought their first skirmish with white volunteers in Parker's field."⁸⁸ Lasting little more than a day, Nat Turner's insurrection was brutally repressed by local residents and white vigilante militia units. By the morning of Tuesday, August 23, 1831, at least 57 whites had been killed: men, women, and children.⁸⁹ The white militia response was swift and treacherous. Higginson reports, "Men were tortured to death, burned, maimed, and subjected to nameless atrocities."⁹⁰ Charles F. Irons maintains that more than one hundred blacks were slaughtered in the aftermath of the insurrection.⁹¹

Nat Turner eluded capture for more than two months. On October 30, 1831, Turner was captured without incident.⁹² From November 1 to November 3, 1831, he conveyed his story to a white lawyer, Thomas R. Gray.⁹³ Gray would go on to release *The Confessions of Nat Turner* based on these interviews. Approximately 40,000 to 50,000 copies were sold with at least two reprintings.⁹⁴ On November 5, 1831, Turner was tried and sentenced to execution.⁹⁵ He was hanged in Jerusalem,

Southampton County, Virginia, on November 11, 1831. Fifty-three blacks were arrested and tried due to the insurrection; twenty-one were acquitted, twelve transported out of state, and twenty hanged.⁹⁶ At least four free black men—Arnold Artis, Thomas Hathcock, Exum Artist, and Isham Turner—were implicated in the rebellion.⁹⁷ In addition, there were also slave trials in several other counties in Virginia and North Carolina with 20 to 30 executions.⁹⁸ Most of the black deaths however came as unrecorded summary executions by local residents and militia.⁹⁹ Turner's resort to open rebellion initiated a sharp, vicious, and violent response by local whites. This white vigilante violence demonstrated the naked violence and context of white power undergirding the institution of slavery.

Historical Context

What is the historical context of Nat Turner and his slave rebellion? The immediate historical circumstances were in slavery in Southampton County, Virginia, in the early nineteenth century of the antebellum South. Greenberg proposes several alternatives for putting Turner into historical context. One view places Turner within the context of other slave rebellions and acts of resistance in North America. For example, Greenberg asserts, "The Nat Turner insurrection was among the largest slave rebellions in United States history."¹⁰⁰ This perspective assigns the significance of the revolt to its size and importance in the American story. A second view applies a comparative framework with respect to slave and peasant revolts in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Russia. According to Greenberg, for instance, "Although the [Nat Turner] insurrection was among the largest United States slave revolts, it was quite small compared with much larger revolts common in Latin America and the Caribbean."¹⁰¹ Greenberg further argues, "In this context, the Nat Turner rebellion, along with all United States rebellions, becomes greatly diminished in size and revolutionary significance."¹⁰² Eugene D. Genovese, for example, identifies the difference between slave revolts in the American South and those in the Caribbean or Latin America.¹⁰³ According to Genovese, revolts in the Caribbean and Latin America came about due to economic distress, hunger, drought, and political crisis.¹⁰⁴ In addition, Brazil and the Caribbean incorporated large concentrations of slaves on plantations and estates. They included a higher ratio of blacks to whites and slave to free.¹⁰⁵ Genovese further asserts, "In the United States half the slaves lived on farms, not plantations, and another quarter lived

on plantations of fifty or less.”¹⁰⁶ Therefore, according to Genovese, the conditions for slave insurrection were less favorable in the United States.¹⁰⁷ This particular perspective underestimates the revolutionary implications of Turner’s comparatively small revolt. Turner’s rebellion rocked the South and foreshadowed the US Civil War. Officials in Virginia, in particular, became fearful of further slave resistance, enacting legislation to prevent black religious gatherings and religious instruction for slaves. A third view places Nat Turner within the general context of acts of slave resistance. Greenberg contends, “In this context, all slave rebellions become unusual, ephemeral events.”¹⁰⁸ This perspective argues, “Nat Turner’s rebellion may have been noteworthy, but it was only a minor part of the larger story of black resistance to slavery.”¹⁰⁹ It emphasizes that while a significant number followed Nat Turner many more resisted in other nonviolent ways. To this interpretation, Turner simply represented one act in a deep line of African American resistance. This standpoint diminishes the primary significance of Turner as a theological reflection of black religion and black radicalism. Turner’s insurrection signified a glaring deficiency in white Southern religion. Religion that justified dehumanization and enslavement could not be the gospel of Jesus Christ. Turner’s violent struggle represented the spiritual will of an entire people. A final view recognizes the importance of religion to Turner’s revolutionary actions. It places Nat Turner within the context of the African American religious tradition of protest and resistance. This viewpoint acknowledges the interrelationship between protest and accommodation in black religion. Turner’s rebellion represented the resistance strain in black religion of radicalism and protest. This perspective reveals that Turner acted from his firm religious faith and robust theological imagination.

It is evident from a clear historical portrait of Nat Turner that his historical context places him within the tradition of African American religious resistance to slavery, racism, and white supremacy. Black religion in the antebellum South fueled efforts on the part of the black slave community to transcend and combat their condition of bondage. That resistance took the form of nonviolent protest and subversion, as well as violent insurrection. Two other significant slave rebellions in US history were led by preacher Gabriel Prosser in Richmond, Virginia, in 1800 and preacher Denmark Vesey in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1822.¹¹⁰ Like Turner, religion fueled the defiant rage of these black religious leaders. Notwithstanding, Nat Turner’s insurrection was also unique and exceptional. His rebellion emerged from

a distinct theology that individualizes Turner as a potential black theologian. Ultimately, there is no monolithic black religion or black religious experience; in fact, some approved more of submission and accommodation rather than resistance and protest. Turner, for his part, believed in revolutionary action. As a Baptist preacher and exhorter ostensibly visited by the Spirit of God, Turner acted to fulfill what he believed to be God's will. His theological worldview rejected slavery as the proper condition for blacks. As an extreme form of religious expression, violent insurrection, like the existence of slavery itself, challenged one's commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Can violence and Christianity be compatible? Nat Turner's theology insisted that it must be.

The religious context of white Southern Evangelicalism in the 1830s reflected the emergence and development of plantation missions and the Evangelical slaveholding ethic.¹¹¹ These missions sharply contradicted Turner and other slaves' political and religious views of slavery. Southern Evangelicals aimed to Christianize the institution of slavery by giving new ethical Christian duties and responsibilities to both slaves and slave-masters. Donald G. Mathews describes three aspects of the Southern plantation mission: (1) a "mission to society" in which Evangelicals sought to transform Southern society, (2) a "mission to masters" in which Evangelicals tried to instill benevolent traits among slaveholders, and (3) a "mission to slaves" in which Evangelicals strove to change the habits and lifestyles of black slaves.¹¹² In total, the plantation missions sought to transform a supposedly heathen slave population and to influence the ethics of the slave-master. Mathews further asserts that Southern Evangelicalism viewed slaveholding favorably, as neither immoral nor a sin.¹¹³ It was considered a civil institution governed by politics and not the church.¹¹⁴ According to white Southern Evangelicals, God had sanctioned slavery in the Old Testament and had recognized its existence and enforced its obligations in the New Testament.¹¹⁵ Northern abolitionists condemned the plantation missions as a plot to solidify and perfect slavery.¹¹⁶ While plantation missions never captured dominance over white religion in the South, they reflected the dichotomy between Turner's view of slavery and that of white Southern Evangelicalism in 1831. White Southern Evangelical religion sought to maintain slavery as a Christian institution while Turner moved to defeat it as the work of Satan and the kingdom of darkness.

Within the African American religious tradition of protest and resistance is included the nonviolent black revolution of Dr. Martin

Luther King, Jr. alongside the violent black revolution of Nat Turner. While it is important to compare the nonviolent direct action of the 1960s civil rights movement to the contrasting deliberate and purposeful violence of Turner's rebellion, it is also misleading. The Turner insurrection arose from the conditions of nineteenth-century slave communities in Virginia. Furthermore, Turner's radical theology emanated from black slave religion. Turner's rebellion reflected the black state of bondage and slavery in 1831. The 1960s, by contrast, were a strikingly different time in American history. In the case of Nat Turner, it can be argued that violence was necessary and inevitable to break the stranglehold of the peculiar institution. The bloody US Civil War, brother killing brother, illustrated the entrenched, intractable white Southern consciousness on black slavery. The South was unwilling to give up its slaves without a fight. Turner's revolutionary actions simply anticipated this impending and necessarily violent struggle. Of course, Harriet Tubman (1820–1913 CE), a black female slave, chose a different path to freedom. She was able to help many blacks to escape from slavery nonviolently. Nonetheless, her actions never threatened to destroy the core values of the institution of slavery. Turner, by contrast, aimed to defeat the slaveholders through a violent black revolution. King also led a wide-scale black revolution against racism and injustice. Yet, his philosophy and theology rejected violence as unchristian and impractical. The conditions for violent revolt in the 1960s were clearly unfavorable. One could not realistically win a violent war of resistance against powerful whites. It would have been suicidal and self-defeating. Careful analysis of Nat Turner further separates him from the events of the 1960s. Turner's theology emerged uniquely from a condition of bondage and slavery. King, however, combatted "Jim Crow" and second-class citizenship, forms of violence and subjugation committed against blacks, but not equivalent to the brutality of the institution of slavery. Turner was specifically rejecting bondage and inhumanity through prophetic violence and God's counterviolence against slavery and dehumanization. Turner's violence reflected the immediate social, political, economic, and religious conditions of 1831. His violence was necessary, justified, and legitimate in the historical context of 1831. In the 1960s, King was able to utilize a peaceful form of rebellion and to implement a nonviolent and peaceable theology. Turner, however, was compelled by the inherent violence and injustice of slavery in 1831 to respond with liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence.

White Virginian Reaction

White Virginians were horrified by the viciousness and limited successes of the Southampton Insurrection. Immediately, they attacked the character of Nat Turner as leader of the revolt and Baptist preacher. Randolph Ferguson Scully asserts, “The main way in which white Virginians sought to defuse the multiple challenges of the Turner rebellion was to focus on the figure of Nat Turner as a religious fanatic.”¹¹⁷ They discredited the uprising as delusion, superstition, fanaticism, and hatred. They maligned Turner’s integrity, religiosity, and credibility. Scully further argues that by embracing these false characterizations, “For some white commentators, these qualities marked the revolt as destructive, criminal, and mindless rather than revolutionary or transformative.”¹¹⁸ In addition, Scully contends, “The white shapers of public opinion thus employed a series of images and associations that collectively served to mark the rebels as inhuman or as a particularly degraded species of humanity.”¹¹⁹ These misleading deflections masked the effectiveness of Turner’s insurrection at shaking white illusions. Scully argues, “Beyond Turner’s specific prophetic motivations, the rebels’ violent campaign represented a powerful ideological assault on the ideals of white Virginians.”¹²⁰ Specifically, Turner’s indiscriminate violence against white men, women, and children represented a direct attack on the white Virginian family. According to Scully, “The family was the crucial ideological unit of southern society.”¹²¹ Therefore, Scully concludes, “In the minds of white observers, then, the horror of the revolt was wrapped up in its assault on and disruption of white families.”¹²² The patriarchal Southern family was the cornerstone of Southern patriarchal society and essential to its way of life. Turner’s blatant lack of regard for the white family symbolized a direct ideological strike at Southern roots. Furthermore, white Virginians passionately rejected the horrific violence of Nat Turner. According to Scully, “White observers emphasized the violence of the revolt, as well as what they viewed as its illegitimacy and cowardice, by highlighting the fact that most of the white victims of the uprising were women and children.”¹²³ For Scully, this revolutionary violence against the white Virginian family reveals the hidden effectiveness of Turner’s revolt. For example, Scully contends, “The gendered and familial nature of the rebellion’s violence constituted, intentionally or not, a wide-ranging attack on the ideal of white mastery and provoked an equally wide-ranging reaction by whites intent on shoring up that ideal.”¹²⁴ Thus, Nat Turner’s rebellion may be considered a failure, but its effectiveness

as a revolutionary offensive against white Virginian foundations still stands. Turner forced white Virginians to question their hold on the institution of slavery. The Virginia legislature responded with laws prohibiting education of slaves and free blacks, restricting the right of assembly and other civil rights, and requiring the presence of white ministers at black religious gatherings.

Another significant outcome of Turner's rebellion, according to Scully, was the strengthening of division between white Baptists and black Baptists, white religion and black religion. Scully asserts, "The Southampton revolt shook Baptists and other evangelicals in southeastern Virginia with particular force."¹²⁵ It disrupted and traumatized local communities of black and white.¹²⁶ It exposed fundamental tensions in religious and ecclesiastical culture.¹²⁷ According to Scully, "White Baptists in the region faced considerable criticism from other white commentators on the revolt."¹²⁸ These commentators blamed Baptists and other Evangelicals for promoting rebelliousness and inappropriate ideas of equality and justice among the slaves.¹²⁹ Scully contends that as a response to this white anxiety, "White Baptists clearly took pains to distance themselves from the rebellion and from their black co-religionists."¹³⁰ Scully further argues that as white Baptists began to abandon blacks, the separation between black from white and the intensification of white male control of church government was strengthened.¹³¹ Furthermore, Scully maintains, "Thus, the long-term effect of the Turner rebellion on Baptist communities was to make more explicit and concrete racial practices that had been implicit or evolving in the period before the uprising."¹³² For Scully, the Southampton Insurrection helped shape "the persistent division between white and black religion in southeastern Virginia and across the South."¹³³ As a religious expression, political statement, and ideological onslaught, Nat Turner's revolt necessarily widened divisions between whites and blacks in the South. It furthered the divide between white and black religion. Turner's black slave religion and radical black theology violently asserted the incompatibility of slavery and Christianity.

Conclusion

Nat Turner's social location was that of an educated and religious, poor black male slave on a small farm in Virginia. His education, religious calling and vocation, and personal self-confidence and discipline privileged his experience as a slave. Notwithstanding, all of

the psychological, emotional, physical, spiritual, and social distresses associated with slavery and bondage can be ascribed to Nat Turner. Facing an existential, religious, and spiritual crisis, Turner did not own the labor of his body nor have self-determination. As property, Turner had no ownership of the self, necessarily disrupting his relationship to God and the community. Furthermore, Turner was a victim of white violence and oppression. Blacks faced terror, forced enslavement, rape, surrogacy, intimidation, and dehumanization in America. Thus, Turner was thwarted and inhibited by negative and violent social forces beyond his control. As a slave, Turner represented the poorest of the poor and the least of these for which Jesus died on the cross. Turner's theology emerged from this place of suffering and death. It arose from the community of the poor and oppressed, black slaves. It gave voice to the existential longings of marginalized and subjugated black people.

Turner's historical context was Southampton County, Virginia, in the early nineteenth century. Southampton's economy was relatively prosperous but potentially declining by 1831. On average, slaveholders owned ten to eleven slaves held on small farms rather than large estates or plantations. Blacks, free and slave, dramatically outnumbered whites. Yet, the conditions were not favorable for a widespread rebellion. According to Drewry's generous account, there was no system of cruel treatment or abuse toward slaves in Virginia.¹³⁴ One is to believe that a mutually satisfying, congenial master-slave relationship existed. At any rate, Nat Turner did not complain of harsh treatment but rather commended his owner. His insurrection arose from the inherent violence of slavery and the deep-seated yearnings of the human spirit for freedom. In 1831, Southerners were not yet willing to give up on the institution of slavery. White Southerners viewed slavery as the natural condition of blacks. Nevertheless, they worshipped with blacks in order to keep an eye on their slaves. As a result, Turner came out of a multiracial Christian community of both blacks and whites. In fact, in his own words, Nat Turner was baptized by the Spirit alongside a white man, Etheldred T. Brantley.¹³⁵ Turner retained the Evangelical religious instruction from his family and white slave-master. He reflected both white and black Southern Evangelicalism in his religious worldview.

Notwithstanding, the tensions between white religion and black religion were ultimately exposed by Turner's rebellion. Black religion gives rise to a holistic theology of liberation and freedom that acknowledges the dignity of the black person created in the image

of God. White triumphalistic religion exalts white culture and civilization while denigrating nonwhite humans and societies. It legitimates slavery, discrimination, violence, and injustice in the name of the white God. Its theology is antiblack in conception. Nat Turner faced such a debased white religion in Virginia. In his religious context, he confronted and defied the white Southern Evangelical attempt to Christianize, justify, and legitimate the institution of slavery. In response, Turner adopted a new radical black theology to empower himself and his people.

Turner's theology, emerging from his social location, black Baptist religion, and historical age of protest and resistance to slavery was both transformative and revolutionary. His theology represented the voice of the militant black Christian slave. His theological perspective radicalized black religion in pursuit of tangible material and spiritual freedom and justice. Furthermore, his theology clearly rejected slavery and oppression. The implications of Turner's thought were a new age of freedom and peace for blacks in America. Turner's ultimate concern was total freedom and liberation from white oppression and violence. His historical context in the intractable antebellum South determined his resort to violence and revolutionary praxis. Nat Turner was the slave who refused to be destroyed by his captors. He accepted God's call to freedom and surrendered his life in pursuit of God's justice.

Nat Turner was a legendary hero and martyr in the minds of many black people. Turner did what many hoped they could do that was to fight and die if necessary. Turner represented the innate desire for freedom and self-determination. He embodied the noble pursuit of liberty and equality. Even the most cynical student of history can empathize with Turner's plight. For much less, American patriots launched a bloody and lengthy revolution against Great Britain. Notwithstanding, Turner's uniqueness was not his existential longings for freedom but his religious devotion and theology. Turner's perceived relationship with the Spirit of God revealed to him God's will for his life. According to Turner, God actively led him to rebel. Turner's religious, spiritual, and theological understanding guided his revolutionary actions. Thus, Nat Turner falls within the context of the tradition of African American religious resistance to slavery, racism, and white supremacy. Turner's theology revealed a radical strain of black religion that rejects slavery and dehumanization in totality. The question for black Christians is whether Jesus Christ can also empathize with Nat Turner's insurrection. Does Jesus condemn

Turner for his resort to violent insurrection? Or does Jesus enter into the suffering of the slave and liberate the slave from bondage through any means necessary? Did the Spirit of Christ guide Nat Turner to rebel, or did Turner misperceive the inspiration from God? Turner's theology empowered him to answer these questions for himself. Even at the end, Turner did not doubt his special calling before God and faith in God's will and purpose. For Turner, God became his hero leading him to prophetically fight for freedom. God heard his cry in bondage, and Turner believed God moved to deliver him.

If theology ultimately emanates from one's social condition and historical context, then Nat Turner and his violent slave rebellion illustrates that poverty, slavery, and dehumanization in the human world will inevitably lead to potentially violent theological and religious attacks on the status quo and existing orders of bondage and subjugation. Turner's religious devotion, vocation, and calling before God signaled to him the utter depravity and injustice of his condition as a slave. Religion affirmed his faith that he was created in the image of God with inalienable rights to dignity and self-determination. Religion did not pacify him but rather inspired a deep faith in his own integrity and that of other black slaves. Furthermore, his giftedness, facility with language, and personal charisma before whites and blacks alike alerted him to the essential absurdity of the institution of slavery. The inherent violence of slavery in America and the intractable, intransigent white Southern consciousness on black bondage meant that Turner was moved to a necessary state of militant violence and war to achieve black freedom. Nat Turner reveals to us today that religion and theology has the potential to inspire violence and combative self-defense when the poor and oppressed are violently denied the rights to life. Theology enables humanity to speak about the human condition in relationship to God's Kingdom and perfect justice. When violence is used to suppress human dignity, it becomes altogether possible that counterviolence will be championed to correct those wrongs. Religion and theology then becomes the catalyst to violent insurrection and rebellion. Turner's theology uniquely demonstrated and affirmed the existential, religious, and spiritual longings of the enslaved black masses. It embraced violence as the theological solution to injustice and humiliation. Turner's theology illustrated that radical black religion was willing to forcefully and aggressively fight to restore black dignity and freedom and to overcome the social condition of black bondage and white oppression in nineteenth-century America.

The Theology of Nat Turner

In 1964, Joseph R. Washington, Jr. asserted that black Christianity was divorced from the longstanding Christian tradition with no proper theological foundation, absence of critical reflection, and disregard of the theology and mission of the universal church.¹ According to Washington, black religion lacked a credible theology that tied it to the collective Christian tradition of faith and belief. Since 1964, black religious scholars and preachers have reacted to Washington's claims by constructing a contemporary Black Theology that illuminates black experience in light of the Word of God. Washington further argues that black Christianity was permeated by black folk religion that overwhelmingly emphasized freedom and equality.² For Washington, the slave songs of freedom are a key feature of this folk or black religion.³ Washington concludes that the "uniqueness of black religion is the racial bond which seeks to risk its life for the elusive but ultimate goal of freedom and equality by means of protest and action."⁴ Absent from theological foundation, black religion for Washington relies on this racial bond of freedom and agitation. Washington in addition asserts that one cannot create a black Christian faith.⁵ He concludes that separatism and segregation do not have a place in Christianity. For Washington, black religion has lost its connection to the original and unifying theology of the Christian church. Washington, however, glaringly undervalues the uniqueness and distinctiveness of black religion as an expression of Christian theology and faith. Black theologians and scholars since Washington have illustrated that black religion relies on a rich theological foundation consistent with Christian principles. Black religion incorporates theological insights from Evangelical Protestantism, black slave religion, black folk religion, African religion, and other disparate

sources. Since Washington, scholars of black religion have uncovered the profound theological imaginations of black people and the theological implications of freedom and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Nat Turner's revolutionary theology was only one radical example of Christian theology's impact on black religion.

This chapter aims to construct the theology of Nat Turner in order to expose the theological underpinnings of his revolt. Constructing the theology of Turner and his violent slave insurrection serves to illuminate the spirit of resistance and radicalism inhabiting black religion. Turner's theology concretely represented the militant black slave's appropriation of the gospel and its guarantee of freedom. Turner's revolutionary theology contributes to black theology, other liberation theologies, and theologies of revolution concerning the significance and relevance of black slave religion, prophetic faith, and inspiration of the Spirit, scripture, apocalypticism, freedom, liberation, and violence. Turner's theological commitment to revolutionary and apocalyptic violence can serve to inform other radical views regarding the liberating violence of the oppressed and Christianity. Turner proved that theology can motivate social action and necessarily inhabits the core Christianity of African Americans. An investigation of Turner's theology furthers the study of slave resistance and its relationship to black religion and theology. Turner's theology gave voice to the slave who acts in the name of God to improve his or her circumstances through violence and rebellion.

Nat Turner cannot be said to be a systematic theologian with a consistent and coherent theological worldview. His theology was fragmented, mystical, and guided by his understanding of his personal relationship with and experience of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, his vision of God and his own Christian commitments, as well as his peculiar theological perspectives, make him an important figure to consider theologically. His theology was a revealed theology coming in the last days. It was also prophetic theology concerning the Kingdom of Heaven. In addition, his theology led to practical though revolutionary action or praxis, so it was for Turner a lived theology. Turner's theology was embodied through his radical and devout though violent example. Turner expected his faith in God's deliverance to grow into a mighty and apocalyptic movement of God's freedom. Turner's theology was constructed on his deep foundation of religious devotion and discipline, his openness to spirituality and the spiritual realm, his scriptural motivations, and his direct experience of God.

Nat Turner's *Confessions* reveal him facing death at the end of a lifelong struggle to understand and fulfill his God-given purpose and destiny. He was resolute and definitive about his motivations for revolt in the confession. From an early age, Turner believed he would serve some great purpose for God. He pursued God throughout his life to find his calling and vocation. He adopted religious discipline and ascetic practices of prayer, meditation, fasting, and withdrawal in search of God's Kingdom. At the end, Turner realized that he couldn't let go of his childhood longing and commitment to God. Even while "in this dungeon, helpless and forsaken as I am," Turner maintained his faith in his special purpose and his devotion to God.⁶ In describing Turner's resoluteness at the end, James A. Noel asserts, "When asked by Gray if subsequent events—namely, his capture-caused him to doubt the veracity of that revelation Turner answered, 'Was not Christ crucified?'"⁷ Thus, Turner identified his plight with that of the suffering Christ. Doubt and fear did not enter into Turner's conscience at the end. He believed that God was with him always. His supposed failure and defeat did not sway him from faith and belief in God. Lack of visible success did not determine his understanding of the rebellion or God's deliverance. God remained his champion. Nat Turner was granted a willing martyr and professed prophet.

One indisputable fact about Nat Turner's insurrection was its religious, spiritual, and theological motivation.⁸ Charles F. Irons asserts, "Contemporary newspaper accounts suggest that most white and black Virginians immediately recognized the religious dimension of the Southampton Insurrection."⁹ Nonetheless, local newspapers reviled Turner as a religious fanatic and fraud guided by hatred and unjustified quest for vengeance.¹⁰ On August 29, 1831, the Constitutional Whig of Richmond, Virginia, reported that Turner had "no ulterior purpose" but was "stimulated exclusively by fanatical revenge, and perhaps misled by some hallucination of his imagined spirit of prophecy."¹¹ Notwithstanding this cynical characterization, Turner's insurrection did, in fact, emerge from legitimate religious, spiritual, and theological roots. In *Confessions*, Turner recounted the prophetic spiritual world of dreams, revelation, signs, scripture, and direct inspiration from God that guided him to rebel. Irons maintains, "In the words that Gray transcribed, Turner depicted the uprising as an act of faith."¹² In fact, Turner conceived of his violent mission as God's will. His religious family and upbringing, ascetic lifestyle of strict religious discipline through withdrawal, meditation, fasting, and prayer, along with his role as Baptist preacher and exhorter, accentuated the

significance of religion and theology for his rebellious actions. As a religious leader of his black slave community, Turner articulated a new revolutionary hope. This violent hope arose from his peculiar theological understanding and relationship with the Spirit of God. The theology of Nat Turner directed him to act out in violence as an Old Testament prophet anticipating a New Testament apocalyptic return of Christ and decisive war between white and black. In Turner's theological imagination, "the last will be first and the first will be last" (Mt 20:16).¹³ The oppressed will overcome the oppressors. For Turner, God offered deliverance to the least of these.

The sources for constructing the theology of Nat Turner include *Confessions*, black slave religion, black folk religion, Southern Protestant Evangelicalism, Virginia Baptist culture, black theology, and strains of liberation theology evident in nineteenth-century black religion. Turner's *Confessions* essentially articulate his own distinct spiritual and theological experiences and understanding. His Baptist slave religion provides insight into his overall theological worldview and religious convictions. Turner's theology illustrated that themes of deliverance, liberation, and freedom were operating in the development of early black religion and theology. Gayraud S. Wilmore asserts that the liberation tradition is the most important and characteristic perspective of black faith since 1800.¹⁴ By focusing on liberation of blacks from slavery, Turner's theology foreshadowed liberation theology and its commitment to the total liberation of the poor and oppressed.

Black Slave Religion

Slavery in the Western Hemisphere was intimately linked to white religion and theology. Albert J. Raboteau contends, "From the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade in the fifteenth century, European Christians claimed that the conversion of slaves to Christianity justified the enslavement of Africans."¹⁵ Thus, early slaveholders legitimated slavery as a means to spread the gospel to the heathen of Africa. Colonial slave-masters, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, resisted conversion, baptism, and religious instruction of their slaves.¹⁶ Colonists suspected that the egalitarian impulses of Christianity would ultimately challenge and disrupt the institution of slavery. Raboteau further asserts, "In spite of missionary efforts to convince them that Christianity was no threat to the slave system, slaveowners from the colonial period on down to the Civil War

remained suspicious of slave religion as a two-edged sword.”¹⁷ Black slave religion did, in fact, display a dual propensity for resistance and accommodation.¹⁸ Furthermore, Raboteau argues, “In the slave society of the antebellum South, as in most societies, the Christian religion both supported and undermined the status quo.”¹⁹ Conversion to Christianity had the potential to either domesticate or revolutionize black slaves. Turner’s rebellious Christianity, for his part, was explosive and revolutionary.

Blacks in America began to adopt Christianity in recognizable numbers during the First Great Awakening of the eighteenth century. Raboteau maintains, “Slaves were first converted in large numbers in the wake of the religious revivals that periodically swept parts of the colonies beginning in the 1740s.”²⁰ During the end of the eighteenth and into the early nineteenth centuries, white Southern Protestant Evangelicals actively recruited blacks into Christianity through revivals and camp meetings. Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians comprised Southern Evangelicalism.²¹ The Baptists, firstly, and the Methodists, secondarily, were most successful at converting blacks. Turner’s Baptist slave religion developed from elements of this white Southern Evangelicalism along with black folk religion, commonsense wisdom, black reinterpretations of Christianity, and aspects of African religion. Turner’s black slave religion did not completely duplicate its white counterpart. Donald G. Matthews asserts that black and white Southern Evangelicalism were interconnected but nonetheless distinct.²² Black Evangelicalism included a radical reinterpretation of white Christianity. Slaves rejected the hypocritical slaveholding Christianity of their slave-masters.²³ Milton C. Sernett, for example, argues, “Black criticism of the hypocrisy of Southern white religion is a prominent theme in the slave narratives.”²⁴ Because the material and spiritual lives of black slaves differed greatly from their white slave-masters, black slave religion emerged from a unique foundation apart from white Christianity. Slaves were able to identify personally and communally with the suffering and crucifixion of Christ. They fashioned black slave religion to incorporate their African culture and innate longing for freedom.

By 1830, there were at most 140,000 blacks in Evangelical churches compared to the 2 million blacks without formal affiliation.²⁵ Nevertheless, Christianity would prove to be a dominant feature of nineteenth-century slave culture and community. Raboteau asserts, “One of the most durable and adaptable constituents of the slave’s culture, linking African past with American present, was his religion.”²⁶

This black slave religion did not completely abandon its African roots and beginnings in favor of assimilation. Wilmore asserts that early spiritual leaders among blacks were representatives of the traditional religions of Africa.²⁷ According to Wilmore, essential ingredients of pre-Civil War black Christianity included the “creative residuum of the African religions.”²⁸ Significantly, this African influence failed to make a sharp distinction between the sacred and the secular. Wilmore contends that “African religions know nothing of a rigid demarcation between the natural and supernatural.”²⁹ As a result, God and religion enter into all aspects of the life of the individual and community. Such an understanding injects the politics of God into the circumstances and conditions of daily life. Black slaves expected God to intervene in their lives. They embraced the immediacy and nearness of God’s presence and providence in history.

The Evangelical emphasis on personal guilt and the need for a radical decision on conversion greatly influenced black slave religion.³⁰ Conversion was the foundation of Evangelical thought concerning the relationship between God and humanity.³¹ Evangelicals stressed the conversion experience of “conviction, repentance, and regeneration.”³² For Evangelicals, conversion should lead to a life of sanctification and personal holiness.³³ Black Evangelicals also embraced the centrality of the conversion experience. But, in contrast to whites, blacks displayed boisterous and ecstatic forms of conversion depicting a pronounced psychological and spiritual transformation through Christ.³⁴ According to Mathews, this rapturous conversion event resembled the vitality of African religion.³⁵ Mathews further contends that conversion mirrored the possession of devout spirits in African religion.³⁶ Thus, the Evangelical emphasis on conversion tied black slave religion to its African foundations. Both black and white Evangelicals considered the conversion experience as central to the Christian religion and process of salvation.

Raboteau maintains that the clearest continuity between African and African American religion was “the style of performance in ritual action.”³⁷ Black slave religion was known for its emphasis on rhythmic preaching, singing, drumming, moving, and dancing.³⁸ Sylvia R. Frey asserts, “The performance of religious ritual was the chief means by which African-Americans expressed their communal feelings.”³⁹ For James H. Cone, black music “tells us about the divine Spirit that moves people toward unity and self-determination.”⁴⁰ Within black religious performance and music was found communal hopes and aspirations about the divine and its relationship to black

people. In addition, Cone asserts that “the divine liberation of the oppressed from slavery is the central theological concept in the black spirituals.”⁴¹ Through music and ritual performance, blacks acted out their need for deliverance and salvation. Thus, for black Evangelicals, the essence of the Christian life was liturgy in the form of exuberant praise and worship.⁴² Furthermore, Raboteau contends, “In the hand-clapping, footstomping, headshaking fervor of the plantation praisehouse, the slaves, in prayer, sermon, and song, fit Christianity to their own peculiar experience and in the process resisted, even transcended the dehumanizing bonds of slavery.”⁴³ Therefore, black slave religion developed as a life-affirming and high-spirited gospel of hope.⁴⁴

According to W. E. B. DuBois, “three things characterized this religion of the slave—the Preacher, the Music and the Frenzy.”⁴⁵ For DuBois, the slave preacher occupied a preeminent role in the life of black religion and community. DuBois declares, “The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil.”⁴⁶ For DuBois, the preacher engaged the black slave population through leadership, speech, politics, and intrigue.⁴⁷ Therefore, the preacher was central to the worldview of many groups of blacks. As a Baptist preacher and exhorter, Turner occupied this role of religious and communal significance. William Sidney Drewry maintains, “As early as 1825 Nat Turner was preaching, and he astounded the slaves by his strange utterances and deeds.”⁴⁸ Wrapped in mystery and religious inspiration, Turner confounded his counterparts, black and white. Through his religion, he was able to influence the slaves around him. Turner offered a theological framework that challenged their condition of slavery. This theology of Nat Turner would lead to open rebellion.

While many slaves and slave preachers were illiterate, black slave religion was nonetheless biblically based. The spirituals, for instance, expressed Bible characters, themes, and lessons throughout.⁴⁹ Black preachers conveyed the significance of the biblical narratives for true appreciation of Christianity. The centrality of the Exodus account most clearly revealed the theology of black slave religion. Raboteau asserts, “The story of Exodus contradicted the claim made by white Christians that God intended Africans to be slaves.”⁵⁰ Black slave religion identified blacks with the children of Israel in bondage in Egypt. For blacks in America, the Exodus revealed God’s intention to liberate them from slavery. By appropriating the Exodus story, black slave religion formed blacks into a historical community with a common

purpose and destiny.⁵¹ Despite their suffering, many blacks saw themselves as chosen people.

The Exodus story deeply affected black slave religion's eschatological hopes. According to Katherine L. Dvorak, black Christianity adopted a "concrete, immediate eschatological vision profoundly rooted in biblical traditions."⁵² From the biblical account, blacks gained hope in imminent liberation. This profound connection to the Exodus is reflective of Nat Turner's violent quest for freedom. He foresaw that God would end slavery and took prophetic action to fulfill it. Turner's biblical theology revealed a God who liberates from slavery and oppression.⁵³ According to Turner, God was the catalyst of his violent rebellion. He believed that God actively works for liberation and freedom in history.

As one views the theology of Nat Turner, one must be mindful of this foundation on Southern Evangelicalism and black slave religion. Turner's own ascetic and devout Christianity inherited the strict disciplined lifestyle of white Southern Evangelicalism. For white Southern Evangelicals, order and discipline defined the Christian life while private morality, alongside compassionate fellowship and community, guided the individual.⁵⁴ White Southern Evangelicals adopted a firm commitment to personal holiness.⁵⁵ Sanctification and self-discipline were expected to follow justification before God and conversion to Christ.⁵⁶ In response to this white Southern Evangelical foundation, Nat Turner self-consciously maintained an austere and self-disciplined way of life. His religious devotion and enthusiasm was meant to separate and purify himself before God. It became a critical component of Turner's pursuit of discernment and enlightenment. He wanted to be holy as God is holy. Turner, however, did not expect others to adopt the same religious discipline and asceticism. He did not look down on his fellow slaves. His austerity and self-restraint was meant to mark him as special and chosen. Like other Evangelicals, Turner chose an ascetic outlook that sought to glorify God through religious devotion, self-discipline, meditation, fasting, prayer, and withdrawal.

Both the exuberance of black slave religion and its eschatological hopes in liberation on earth are also elements of Turner's theology. For Turner, ecstasy and rapture are realized in prophetic violence and active agitation for freedom. Religious enthusiasm and vibrant spirituality become praxis or practical social action. Some critics of black slave religion argue that it was otherworldly, escapist, and compensatory.⁵⁷ In certain respects, black slave reliance on Christian

eschatology of heaven and the hereafter supports this claim of otherworldliness.⁵⁸ Black slaves imagined vindication and justice in another life. This otherworldly focus allowed blacks to survive and endure racial injustice with patience and longsuffering. Notwithstanding, Nat Turner illustrated that this-worldly concerns also inhabited black slave religion. Dwight N. Hopkins asserts, “Indeed, much of slave religion focuses on emancipation in the here and now.”⁵⁹ Black slave religion was eminently concerned with the present, concrete condition of black slaves. Fundamentally, Nat Turner advanced a political theology of violence based on God’s offer of freedom. This political orientation emerged from the African view that all of life is sacred. Since there is no distinction within the universe that limits God from upsetting and invading human conditions, Turner’s Christianity was concerned with the material as well as the spiritual aspects of life. Turner valued theologically the totalizing political, social, and material liberation and freedom of black slaves.

Ultimately, the root of Nat Turner’s theology was its total and absolute commitment to freedom at all costs. Unlike white Southern Evangelicalism, Turner did not only seek freedom from sin but earthly freedom from bondage. Cone argues, “Slave religion was permeated with the affirmation of freedom from bondage and freedom-in-bondage.”⁶⁰ This emphasis on freedom is the paramount value within black religion. Wilmore traces this reverence for freedom to Africa: “[Thus], the indispensable condition for life and human fulfillment in the religious and philosophical tradition of Africa was freedom—the untrammled, unconditional freedom to *be*, to exist, and to express the power of being, fully and creatively, for the sheer joy and profound meaning of *Muntu*, man in the genderless sense of basic humanity.”⁶¹ Through this African lens, African Americans accepted Christianity as a religion of freedom.⁶² For blacks, Christianity supported and uplifted their quest for liberation and human fulfillment. They interpreted Christianity in ways that promoted both spiritual and material freedom in this present life. According to Hopkins, “The theology of slave religion also drew on the universal nature of the Divine Being.”⁶³ God was no respecter of persons. Black slaves embraced Christianity’s implicit equality and dignity of persons regardless of race or social condition.⁶⁴ Christianity gave them hope that God would one day restore them to freedom as in the biblical Exodus.

Black slave religion was both protest and accommodation. Slaves learned to live within their estate with patience and dignity. Some looked backward to the African past. Others imagined liberation

in this life in America. Some worshiped the Christian God. Others maintained connections to African traditional religions. For many, African sensibilities combined with New World Christian values. Not all Christian slaves however embraced the radicalism and violence of Nat Turner. Turner was guided to the revolutionary side of Christianity. His black slave religion focused on this-worldly promises of freedom. He chose protest and violent agitation as demands of the Christian faith. Turner's Christianity placed God on the side of the poor and oppressed black slaves rather than the white slave-masters and oppressors. Turner was compelled by his black slave religion to violently fight against slavery and to incite a fierce rebellion. He converted the exuberant praise and ritual performance of black slave religion into deliberate action and praxis in pursuit of God's will. His joy and religious enthusiasm became doing the will of God on earth. Turner's theology ultimately valued freedom and liberation above patience, accommodation, and nonviolence. As a slave preacher and devout Christian, he embraced a new life in Christ and personal relationship with the Holy Spirit. According to Turner, the Holy Spirit actively guided him to violent insurrection.

Nat Turner's black slave religion was decidedly not otherworldly, escapist, or compensatory. Turner imagined vindication and justice in this present life. His appropriation of the gospel envisioned God's imminent deliverance in America. He foresaw material freedom from bondage alongside spiritual liberty and transformation. Turner diligently sought biblical wisdom and spiritual understanding of God's will for his life. According to Turner, God revealed to him the incompatibility of slavery and the Kingdom of Heaven. Since God was no respecter of persons, Turner believed God would free blacks in America just as God had freed the Israelites. Turner reflected a radicalized black Christianity seeking freedom and salvation through violent struggle and resistance.

Prophetic Faith

The uniqueness of Nat Turner's theological outlook was the belief that Turner, himself, was a prophet called by God. As early as three or four years of age, Turner is remembered to have prophetically recounted a story prior to his birth, confirmed by his mother, that greatly astonished many.⁶⁵ From that moment forward, Turner's family and friends strengthened him in the belief that he was a prophet intended for some great purpose.⁶⁶ Other signs accompanied his emergence as a prophet.

His parents for example identified certain marks on his head and breast.⁶⁷ Additionally, Turner notes the facility with which he learned to read and write and could not recollect ever learning the alphabet.⁶⁸ Furthermore, Turner enjoyed the confidence of other blacks in his judgment and opinions.⁶⁹ Both blacks and whites remarked that Turner had too much sense to be a slave.⁷⁰ These childhood and adult experiences and affirmations led Turner to actively seek God. After attending certain religious meetings, Turner became fixated on the scripture saying, "Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you" (Mt 6:33).⁷¹ After much reflection and prayer on the passage, Turner recounts that the Spirit of God spoke to him the same verse.⁷² After praying and meditating for two years constantly, Turner claimed he received the same revelation again which confirmed to him the belief that he was destined for some great purpose.⁷³ Turner believed that the Spirit continued to speak to him and reveal the will of God for his life. This direct inspiration from God convinced him that he must be a prophet. Furthermore, this unwavering conviction would dominate Turner's life and experience of God. Turner identified the Spirit who spoke to him as the Spirit who spoke to the prophets in former days of old.⁷⁴ Thus, his religious experience related him to the Old Testament Hebrew prophets. Therefore, Turner's theology began with a foundation in Old Testament prophecy and prophetic faith. Just as the prophets guided Israel, Turner believed that God leads the black community with contemporary prophets of its own. Nat Turner related to himself as a modern day prophet in the vein of Moses.

According to Turner's theology, God continues to speak to humanity through specially called prophets like himself. God is active through the Spirit in guiding Christians. Religious and spiritual leadership is guaranteed by God. Some Christians, however, believe that prophecy and direct inspiration of God as described by Turner ended with the early apostolic age. For these Christians, the Spirit no longer speaks to humanity through ecstatic prophets since Jesus Christ is the definitive and conclusive revelation of God. By contrast, Turner argued that God spoke directly to him and initiated his mission. For Turner, God sanctioned and directed his rebellion through signs and wonders. Turner's belief in prophetic visions and dreams can be traced to black folk religion. Mathews contends, "[One] aspect of black folk religion, and one which impressed some whites as a peculiar sensitivity to God, was the persistent report by black believers of visions and dreams in which the spirit world impinged upon the historical."⁷⁵ Turner's reliance on his own spiritual revelations fits within this black folk theology that

concluded that God speaks through prophetic and revelatory dreams and visions to God's people. Turner's recognition of himself as a prophet is critical to his actions. The prophet cannot refuse the will of God. Modeled after an Old Testament prophet, Turner defied the political and religious structure of his day by exposing and combating social injustice through his violent rebellion. Turner spoke as the prophets. He communicated to black slaves and others through his revolutionary actions along with his prophetic voice.

Such an enduring faith in the prophet can be disturbing to the enlightened modern sensibility. Belief in direct prophecy may be denied as superstitious and/or demonic. Foretelling of the future seems unrealistic and primitive. Furthermore, one cannot hold the prophet to the Enlightenment standard of reason. The prophet's revelations cannot be logically and scientifically confirmed. In addition, the prophet's legitimacy comes from a higher power. While ultimately in defense of the entire community's relationship with God, the prophet can appear to stand alone as an individual expressing a threat to the community as sanctioned by God. The prophet, in fact, demands unique standing that can only come from God. Therefore, the prophet is powerful and uplifted. Nat Turner received this special acceptance from his fellow slaves. He responded by discipline, aloofness, and withdrawal. Turner vigorously cultivated and nurtured his specialness and chosen place before God. According to modern understanding, it may seem appropriate to discount Turner's theology and professed prophethood. According to skeptics, Turner's false and imagined sense of prophecy deluded his theological understanding. Nevertheless, the truth is that many Christians believe that modern day prophets have appeared throughout the Christian history following the apostles. Many exalt the nonviolent social action espoused by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gandhi as prophetic and religiously inspired while rejecting the violence of Nat Turner as evil and demonic. For many Christians, the Spirit continues to guide and teach the church and the people of God through prophetic utterance and revelation. Therefore, it is just as reasonable to conclude that Turner was, in fact, one of these contemporary prophets guided by divine inspiration. For Turner, God's judgment was upon slavery. Turner's life and actions tell us that God's Kingdom unequivocally rejects slavery and dehumanization. According to Turner, God empowered him to utilize even violent means to destroy it.

To construct an adequate theology of Nat Turner, one must first assign to Turner this divine calling or vocation as the prophet of

God. Turner's violence then is viewed as prophetic violence akin to the Hebrew prophets. Even at the end, Turner had enduring faith that he was indeed a prophet who stood before God. He believed that the Spirit of God had communicated to him through signs and wonders. For Turner, his theology came from revelation. While this controversial claim of special revelation nevertheless lends theological credibility to his insurrection, his theological worldview alone reflected a legitimate portrait of radical black religion. Other black Christians besides Turner concluded themselves that God did not will slavery for blacks. Some accepted violence as the legitimate solution. Notwithstanding, one must entertain the idea that the Spirit of God did, in fact, speak to Turner. At the least, one must accept that Turner was honest about his religious and theological convictions and their relationship to his rebellion. If Turner directs his own insurrection through human aspirations and understandings apart from God's actual guidance, then he would nonetheless be clear about his own spiritual worldview and theology that motivates him. Constructing this theology of Nat Turner identifies the religious framework and perspectives that gave rise to the rebellion. One of the foundations of Turner's theology is belief in prophecy, prophets, and the prophetic faith of the Old Testament. For Turner, God speaks to God's people through prophets and prophecies through the Spirit to enlighten the people of God's will. Through the prophet, God guides and judges the community. God fulfills God's promises and covenants with Israel and God's people. For Turner, God acts directly in human history to bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth.

Nat Turner's reliance on Old Testament prophecy did not however compromise his Christian commitment to Jesus Christ. Turner believed that he was entering into the work of his Savior through rebellion. Remembering the Old Testament as a true revelation of God and the Father of Jesus Christ balanced the black slave's understanding of the gospel. Blacks rejected the Marcionite heresy that God and the Father of Jesus Christ was not the God of the Old Testament. The Old Testament revealed God as a jealous, warring, liberating God of wrath and righteousness. Jesus, too, in certain ways, embodied the warlike wrath and justice of God. Turner's faith in Old Testament principles united the Jesus of the New Testament with the God of the Exodus in the Old Testament. Turner's revelation of Jesus was that of a warring Messiah against Satan and the kingdom of darkness who had laid his burden down on the cross. Turner took up Christ's mantle and fought against sin and evil in the name of God.

Inspiration of God

Direct religious inspiration from God is what Nat Turner claimed to have experienced throughout his life. His earliest revelation came when he claimed the Spirit spoke to him saying: “Seek ye the Kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you” (Mt 6:33).⁷⁶ This revelation indicates that the ultimate aim of Turner’s rebellion was to seek the Kingdom of Heaven for himself and black slaves. By seeking the Kingdom, Turner’s spiritual and material needs would be fulfilled by God. Shortly following the revelation, Turner ran away into the woods and remained there for 30 days.⁷⁷ By the prompting of the Spirit, he returned to slavery because he claimed the Spirit told him that he was mindful of earthly things and not the things of the Kingdom of Heaven.⁷⁸ Rather than run away, Turner says, the Spirit invited him to return and contemplate the Kingdom and its ultimate consequences for the slave community. In Turner’s theology, slavery is done away within the Kingdom of Heaven. Nevertheless, the apocalyptic confrontation with sin and evil must still come on earth. Turner, himself, must fight the Serpent and strive for the Kingdom to bring it to fruition. Only then will his spiritual and material needs and those of his black slave community be satisfied and fulfilled.

In 1825, Turner received an apocalyptic vision of whites and blacks at arms.⁷⁹ He described the vision stating: “I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams—and I heard a voice saying, ‘Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bare it.’”⁸⁰ So, Turner was convinced that a dramatic battle over slavery would transpire in his lifetime. He would be a part of it. This apocalypticism of Turner was a crucial component of his theology. Turner’s sense of an inevitable, impending battle between white and black guided him to actively pursue such a violent encounter in the name of God. In response to this vision, Turner withdrew from his fellow slaves more often and sought to serve the Spirit more fully.⁸¹ According to Turner, the Spirit continued to appear to him and to guide his exploration of science and the environment.⁸² Turner declared that the Spirit “appeared to me, and reminded me of the things it had already shown me, and that it would then reveal to me the knowledge of the elements, the revolution of the planets, the operations of tides, and changes of the seasons.”⁸³ Shortly afterward, Turner discovered drops of blood on corn and found on the leaves in the woods “hieroglyphic characters, and

numbers, with the forms of men in different attitudes, portrayed in blood, and representing the figures I had seen before in the heavens.”⁸⁴ With this experience, Turner believed that the Spirit had fully revealed itself to him.⁸⁵ For Turner, the blood on the corn symbolized Christ’s blood as it returned to earth in the form of dew.⁸⁶ By these revelations, Turner understood that “the Savior was about to lay down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and the great day of judgment was at hand.”⁸⁷ This great Day of Judgment would finally unleash Christ’s justice upon the earth. For Turner, God’s righteousness would violently upset the institution of slavery.

Turner later reported these revelations to a white man, Etheldred T. Brantley, who received the news enthusiastically.⁸⁸ According to Turner, the Spirit prompted them both to be baptized spontaneously as the Lord.⁸⁹ Prevented by local whites from being baptized in the church, Turner and Brantley were baptized together by the Spirit as they went down in the water before a crowd of revilers.⁹⁰ Turner and Brantley rejoiced greatly and gave thanks to God.⁹¹ This surprising interracial encounter illustrated that Turner was not ultimately motivated by sheer hatred of whites. Turner realized that the Kingdom of Heaven could come to both whites and blacks alike. Nonetheless, the impending judgment on slavery could not be avoided. For Turner, God would level the playing field between white slave-masters and black slaves.

Turner asserted that he heard a loud noise in the heavens on May 12, 1828, and claimed the Spirit appeared to him saying, “The Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the *first should be last and the last should be first*” (my italics) (Mt 20:16).⁹² Signs in the heavens would alert Turner when to commence his “great work.”⁹³ Until that time, Turner should conceal his intentions.⁹⁴ Implicit in this message was the equalizing force of the Spirit. The oppressor shall be last and the oppressed shall be first. The slave shall be uplifted and the slave-master humbled. Turner’s revelation tied his impending battle with slavery to the spiritual warfare between Jesus and Satan. For Turner, Jesus’s work is done on the cross. Satan is defeated. Upon resurrection, Jesus is exalted as the Christ to the right hand of God. Now, Turner must take up the fight and fulfill Christ’s victory on earth. Turner asserted that the Spirit instructed him to “slay my enemies with their own weapons” on the appearance of a sign in the heavens.⁹⁵ The Day of Judgment was at hand.

Turner's theology emphasized the centrality of the Spirit in guiding and teaching humanity of God's will. In Turner's theological imagination, the Spirit communicates to God's people through signs, wonders, scripture, visions, and dreams. The Spirit is experienced through immediacy, nearness, and personal relationship. Turner's reliance on inspired spiritual experiences resembled the spiritual ecstasies found in Acts and the early church. Christopher Rowland asserts, "The importance of visions and the access to the heavenly mysteries recurs throughout the Pauline corpus as the basis of authority of Paul and of the theological message which he communicates."⁹⁶ Likewise, Turner's spirituality confirmed to himself and others that he was destined for some special purpose. For Turner, the Spirit acts as a roadmap to the will of God. The Spirit first guided him to the Kingdom of Heaven and away from his earthly reality of enslavement.⁹⁷ As Jesus instructed his disciples, Turner is also taught to seek first the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt 6:33). The Spirit then showed him an apocalyptic vision of racial warfare.⁹⁸ Through the Spirit, Turner was gradually guided toward rebellion and fulfillment of this apocalyptic encounter. By signs in the heavens interpreted by Turner, the Spirit directed the commencement of Turner's insurrection.⁹⁹ For Turner, inspiration of the Spirit was central to the relationship between God and humanity. He envisioned that direct knowledge of God's will through the Spirit was possible. One should follow this guidance and direction in order to fulfill God's will for one's life. Nat Turner accepted the call of God and thereby undertook a holy mission. He justified his revolt as the direct inspiration of the Spirit of God.

Turner's reliance on the Holy Spirit for inspiration was consistent with the witness of the early church. The Holy Spirit was the promise of God after Jesus's resurrection to empower Christ's church. John's Jesus declared that the Holy Spirit would guide the believer into all truth and declare the things that are Christ's (Jn 16:13–14). When the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the Day of Pentecost, God's power was unleashed on the earth (Acts 2:1–4). From that day forward, the Holy Spirit manifested to the church through powerful signs and wonders. Throughout this age of grace, the enduring relationship between God and the believer has been preserved by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit inspires God's people and gives spiritual gifts to the church (1 Cor 12:7–11). Turner's theology acknowledged the privileged place of the Holy Spirit in making God's will to be known. As a result, Turner sought to cultivate an intimate relationship with God's Spirit. The primary criticism of Turner was

that his understanding of God was an imagined spirit of prophecy. According to critics, Turner was mistaken and the Holy Spirit could not have directed him to rebel violently. Despite objections to Turner's claims, Nat Turner's theology suggested that the Holy Spirit would guide the believer into the knowledge of God's will for his/her life. In Turner's estimation, the Holy Spirit had indeed encouraged him to violently revolt. Thus, Turner's view of the Spirit was radical and revolutionary. Nat Turner understood the Spirit's call as violent and apocalyptic.

Apocalypticism

Nat Turner's revolutionary apocalypticism related to Jewish and Christian apocalyptic visions in the Old and New Testaments. Apocalyptic comes from the Greek word *apokalyptein* meaning "uncover, reveal."¹⁰⁰ T. F. Glasson identifies two kinds of apocalypses: those that unveil the unseen world and the secrets of heaven and hell and those that disclose the future of the world.¹⁰¹ Turner's apocalypse was the latter, depicting an approaching cataclysmic war over slavery followed by a new era of freedom and equality. Walter Schmithals asserts that apocalypticism "consists of a dualism of two antagonistically joined ages and the conviction that the turn of the age is imminent."¹⁰² Apocalypse signals transition to a new era birthed through struggle and crisis. According to Bernard McGinn, the typical pattern of apocalypticism includes: (1) divinely predetermined totality of history, (2) pessimism about the present and conviction of imminent crisis, and (3) belief in judgment of evil and triumph and vindication of the good.¹⁰³ Apocalypticism uplifts God's eternal predetermined plan of history in which an imminent crisis gives way to judgment and the triumph of a new history. According to McGinn, "The apocalyptic view of history is structured according to a divinely-predetermined pattern of crisis, judgment, and vindication."¹⁰⁴ In the new era, life is vindicated in a transformative way. Paul D. Hanson argues that in the Old Testament the basic structure of the apocalyptic writings include revelation by God given through a mediator, like the Spirit, to a seer or prophet concerning future events.¹⁰⁵ The prophet or seer receives the revelation of the apocalypse. According to Hanson, "One of the recurrent themes of the apocalyptic writings of the Bible is the deadly struggle being waged between the powers of good and evil and the threat thereby posed for all humans."¹⁰⁶ Judgment of evil and struggle against sin gives way to a new era of good and righteousness. These

patterns of crisis, judgment, and vindication result in the birth of a new age that decisively destroys the problems of the present moment.

Turner's apocalyptic understanding conforms to these views of biblical apocalypticism. Turner advanced a distinct portrait of the future of the world. He foresaw an epic battle between good and evil, slavery and freedom. Turner saw a vision of white and black spirits engaged in battle.¹⁰⁷ These spirits indicated to Turner that racial warfare would soon come to earth. For Turner, God maintained an eternal will and purpose for the world and humanity. Slavery for Africans was antithetical to God's universal reign. With the witness of Jesus of Nazareth, God proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. Turner sought the fulfillment of this Kingdom on earth. Turner's apocalypse pitted blacks against white Southern society. He demonized slavery as the work of Satan. God's judgment at the return of Christ would come to condemn the institution. In the end, blacks would be vindicated and evil would be defeated in the name of Jesus. Turner envisioned a future order of freedom, liberation, and peace for blacks. In Turner's estimation, the reality of the apocalyptic vision confirmed God's providence and lordship over whites and blacks alike. In fact, René Girard concludes that "the Apocalypse does not announce the end of the world; it creates hope."¹⁰⁸ Turner's apocalyptic hope gave him faith and belief in God's justice and righteousness in history.

Jesus, himself, professed an apocalyptic gospel. His ministry began with the apocalyptically determined message of John the Baptist.¹⁰⁹ John came preaching: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Mt 3:1–2) The Baptist announced a baptism of repentance before the coming Day of the Lord and restoration of the kingdom to Israel. At the advent of his ministry, Matthew's Jesus subsequently takes up this message also declaring: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 4:17). Schmithals asserts that, as does John the Baptist, "Jesus proclaimed the coming kingdom of God in the spirit of apocalypticism."¹¹⁰ Jesus's allusions to the coming "Son of Man" most notably expressed his apocalyptic expectations. In the mysterious figure of Son of man, Jesus revealed the future course of the world and the end of the ages.¹¹¹ Upon Jesus's resurrection, the Son of man would be exalted to the heavens on the right hand of the power of God (Lk 22:69). Luke's Jesus declared that at the end of the world: "they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory" (Lk 21:27). According to Matthew's Jesus, "The Son of Man will send out His angels, and

they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Mt 13:41–42). The Son of man brings the fulfillment of God’s salvation, “for the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works” (Mt 16:27).

Early Christianity was built on the foundation of Jesus’s apocalyptic vision. McGinn asserts, “The earliest believers in Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah interpreted his life, death, and their hopes for his return in the light of contemporary Jewish apocalypticism.”¹¹² The early church continued Jesus’s apocalyptic legacy with expectations of his imminent return as Christ. Glasson argues, “The spirit of apocalyptic expectancy which existed in Judaism at this period (as evidenced for instance by John the Baptist) was carried over into the Church.”¹¹³ The resurrected Jesus was viewed by the church as the firstfruits of a general resurrection at the end of time.¹¹⁴ The Book of Revelation further illustrates the significance of apocalypticism to the early believers. In Revelation, John’s apocalypse, Jesus takes on superhuman proportions as one like the Son of man (Rev 1:9–20). In John’s vision, the risen Christ is a mighty warrior fighting to defeat Satan’s armies at the end of the ages:

Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. (Rev 19:11–16)

Following the Great War between Jesus and Satan’s armies (Rev 19:19–21), John envisions a Great White Throne Judgment at the end of time (Rev 20:11–14). All of humanity, including the dead, is made to answer before God for their works. The good are separated from the evil. Finally, all things are made new through a new heaven and a new earth ushering in an age of peace and God’s Kingdom on earth (Rev 21:1). This apocalypticism in Revelation and vision of the

coming reign of God is another example that early Christians had real apocalyptic expectations of the future. Grounded in Jesus's worldview, early Christianity anticipated an imminent upheaval of earthly conditions by God.

This apocalypticism of Jesus and the early church did not immediately lead to active agitation for better political, social, economic, or religious conditions in the Roman Empire. Many critics of Paul, for example, decry his conservatism, patriarchalism, and pro-slavery attitudes despite his faith in the coming Christ. Apocalypticism, however, should give rise to tangible hopes in social restructuring brought on by the Kingdom of Heaven. Stephen L. Cook contends, "The apocalyptic vision of the reign of God largely defines salvation in social and political terms rather than in individualistic and spiritual terms."¹¹⁵ According to Cook, fulfillment of God's reign will mean real transformation of "human government, economics, culture, and society."¹¹⁶ The universal reign of God is linked to the equality and dignity of all persons. In Matthew 25, Jesus describes the social justice of the Son of man. The Kingdom is preserved for those who act out in righteousness by feeding, clothing, assisting, and visiting the downtrodden and dispossessed (Mt 25:31–46). However, God rejects cruelty and indifference. For Jesus, the Kingdom symbolizes true righteousness and uplifting of the poor and oppressed. Adela Yarbro Collins asserts, "Similarly, the New Testament Book of Revelation expresses conflict between Christian and Roman social structures, cultural values, and ideology."¹¹⁷ The competing claims of the Kingdom of God and temporal Roman imperial power are exposed in Revelation. God's reign will ultimately mean transformation of the Roman Empire. Therefore, apocalypticism relativizes all earthly kingdoms in favor of God's predetermined plan and purpose for humanity. It raises social and political expectations of justice and equality. In Nat Turner, it leads to active opposition of evil and dehumanizing conditions.

Some Christians reject the apocalypticism of Jesus as inauthentic. According to these Christians, the apocalypticism of Jesus reflected a dead and traditional worldview of evil spirits and demonic forces. In their estimation, the Son of man was a myth. They deny the imminence of Christ's return and the apocalyptic spiritual warfare of Christ and the devil. Yet, Jesus's apocalypticism was central to his teaching. It reflected his understanding of the historical moment. He saw God engaged in a holy struggle against Satan and the kingdom of darkness. Likewise, his earthly ministry was engaged in spiritual warfare against evil. Jesus saw the imminent dawning of the Kingdom of God

and envisioned a new era of peace and salvation. God's predetermined plan and purpose for the world and humanity was coming to pass. As a prophet, Jesus used his apocalyptic outlook to prophesy about the end of the world and the coming of the Son of man. In Jesus's understanding, the Son of man would come as a Judge to send some to hell and others to eternal life. Jesus prophesied of wars, natural disasters, and famines to come before this final consummation.

Nat Turner's apocalypticism also embraced the violent apocalypticism of the Son of man. The war Turner envisioned was racial warfare, white and black spirits engaged in battle. Turner believed in the imminent return of Christ and the Day of Judgment, which enlivened his revolutionary efforts. Anticipating an age of freedom and peace beyond war, Turner took up arms to join Christ in the earthly struggle against Satan and the kingdom of darkness. He anticipated the violent judgment of God against the institution of slavery. Turner's apocalypticism ultimately led him to actively pursue social, economic, and political justice through violent insurrection and rebellion.

Violence

The distinguishing mark of Nat Turner's theology was its religious, spiritual, and theological justification and legitimation of liberating and revolutionary violence to end slavery and dehumanization in the name of God. Facing an inherently violent system of black bondage within a context of white power and oppression, Turner's resort to violence was essentially counterviolence. It was liberating violence aimed at the destruction of violent social forces and institutions. Turner acted out in self-defense against the brutality and violence of slavery as a system. His violence was neither arbitrary nor capricious. It was existentially, religiously, spiritually, and theologically motivated by real social facts and powers erected against him and black humanity. Turner's violence in turn was prophetic violence because it expressly condemned white supremacy and the institution of slavery while judging and indicting white America for its complicity in cruelty and inhumanity. As a supposed prophet of God, Nat Turner conveyed in word and deed God's condemnation and judgment of slavery, idolatry, and social injustice through his liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence.

Central to Nat Turner's theology, revolutionary apocalyptic violence was justified and legitimated by God's will and the coming Kingdom of Heaven. Turner's vision of white spirits and black spirits engaged in

battle meant that racial warfare was imminent.¹¹⁸ As divinely inspired prophet, Turner hoped to be the catalyst of such interracial conflict. According to Turner, the Spirit directed him to “slay my enemies with their own weapons.”¹¹⁹ As a result, Turner’s insurrection was both brutal and vicious.¹²⁰ It terrorized and killed all whites in its way, including women and children. Turner had planned to gain strength by initially killing all whites and then gradually beginning to spare women and children.¹²¹ Turner, at least, admitted to a concerned conscience about indiscriminate violence. Nonetheless, the violent cruelty and brutality of the slave insurrection must be taken into account. Does God’s Kingdom come with such fierceness and inhumanity? In fact, the Israelites guided by Joshua destroyed everything in Jericho in like manner—men and women, young and old; oxen, sheep, and donkey at the Lord’s command in beginning the conquest of the Promised Land (Joshua 6:21). By God’s instruction, the Israelites continued to follow such a pattern of all-consuming holy war throughout their victories. Nat Turner invoked this same spirit of Old Testament holy war in his violent insurrection. Turner’s commitment to revolutionary violence in the name of God in particular suggested that God defends the poor and oppressed. God is partial to the struggles of the least of these. Turner believed that God was on the side of black slaves guiding their resort to violence. In God’s Kingdom, slavery was nonexistent. To bring that Kingdom to earth would necessitate a violent confrontation with the kingdom of darkness as in Revelation. For Nat Turner, the Kingdom of Heaven comes through crisis, disruption, and violence.

From a Christian perspective, Jacques Ellul contends that violence can never be justified or legitimated, religiously or otherwise.¹²² Ellul articulates five laws of violence that pervert its effectiveness and usefulness. Ellul’s first law of violence is “continuity.”¹²³ Once resorted to, violence becomes used continuously. This law suggests that Turner’s recourse to racial violence will perpetually dominate future race relations. According to Ellul, the second law of violence is “reciprocity.”¹²⁴ Ellul contends, “Violence creates violence, begets and procreates violence.”¹²⁵ Thus, Turner’s insurrection will motivate white rage and lead to an escalation of violence. The third law of violence for Ellul is “sameness.”¹²⁶ Ellul makes no distinction between justified and unjustified violence. There is no liberating or enslaving violence. Therefore, for Ellul, Turner’s violence is equal to the violence of his slave-masters. Ellul asserts a fourth law of violence that violence begets violence and nothing else.¹²⁷ This law means that Turner’s violence cannot bring about a peaceful Kingdom on earth but

rather more violence. Ellul's fifth law asserts that violence seeks justification and legitimation.¹²⁸ Therefore, Turner seeks God in order to sanctify and rationalize his own human violence. According to Ellul, "violence can never realize a noble aim, can never create liberty or justice."¹²⁹ Violence then is categorically dehumanizing and destructive. For Ellul, "violence will never establish a just society."¹³⁰ So, violence inevitably perverts the path to justice. Therefore, in Ellul's framework, Nat Turner can never be justified in his Christian violence. His resort to violence will predictably fail him.

While representing a certain Christian perspective, Ellul's characterizations of violence are exaggerated and misleading. The truth is that violence in history has, in fact, created just and noble outcomes. The American Revolution is an example of an honorable violent uprising against injustice and tyranny. It brought liberty, human rights, and self-government to the American colonies.¹³¹ In the case of the American Revolution, liberating and revolutionary violence birthed a free nation and ended imperial domination. Similarly, the US Civil War with its fierce and vicious violence ended slavery and preserved the Union. Violence liberated blacks and consolidated the nation. These two cases demonstrate that violent revolution and principled civil war have each created justice and liberty in American history. Ellul unfairly characterizes all violence as the same whereas violence that liberates from slavery does not equal the violence that enslaves and dehumanizes. From his own Christian perspective, Nat Turner believed that racial justice would only come through armed confrontation. The brutal reality of the US Civil War also symbolized that slavery in America could only end through violence and war. Intransigent slave-owners and intractable slaveholding Southern society prevented a peaceful and nonviolent outcome. Turner's violence however sought freedom and justice for black slaves. It fought for the coming Kingdom of Heaven. In spite of Ellul's condemnatory assessment of violence, Turner's Christian violence aimed to end slavery and dehumanization, a noble and liberating proposition. Turner's theology legitimated and justified revolutionary violence in the name of the present and coming Kingdom of Heaven.

Black Theology

Black Theology seeks to illuminate black experience in light of the Word of God. Coming out of the oppressed community, Black Theology expresses the multiplicity and plurality of the theological

hopes and beliefs of black people. The experience of slavery, white oppression, and racial injustice has defined the historical existence of blacks in America. Dehumanizing and disheartening forces have shaped the communal lives of African Americans since 1619. In some respects, then, Black Theology is based on the collective black experience of suffering and oppression. This makes Black Theology peculiarly sensitive to the crucifixion and torment of Christ. Black slaves, for instance, identified personally and communally with Jesus on the cross. Notwithstanding, black humanity has also asserted itself against demoralization and despair through survival and resistance strategies. Blacks have affirmed their beings in spite of their adverse circumstances. They have produced vibrant culture and enduring institutions. Black religion has strengthened the community through both protest and accommodation. These demonstrations and affirmations of strength and hope are also integral to Black Theology. Nat Turner's theology was an early black theology that illustrated the themes of deliverance and liberation inhabiting foundational black religion. Turner, for his part, reflected the epitome of militant black resistance against oppression. Turner violently asserted his personal dignity and autonomy. His theology illustrated that black Christianity could be both radical and revolutionary in its pursuit of freedom.

Considering Nat Turner's theology in relationship to contemporary Black Theology exposes the consistent themes in black Christianity that have captivated African Americans since slavery and emancipation. Turner's theology foreshadowed the development of militant Black Theology. Elements of Turner's theology express the conclusions of Cone's contemporary Black Theology. According to Cone, "Christian theology is a theology of liberation."¹³² Likewise, Nat Turner's theology was devoted to the complete liberation of black slaves. It emerged from the perspective of the oppressed black slave community. For Cone, as well as Turner, "The God of the oppressed is a God of revolution who breaks the chains of slavery."¹³³ Cone argues that God is partial to the suffering of the poor and oppressed. According to Cone, "In Christ, God enters human affairs and takes sides with the oppressed."¹³⁴ God favors the cause of oppressed blacks just as Jesus championed the salvation of the humiliated. Cone further asserts, "In the New Testament, Jesus is not for *all*, but for the oppressed, the poor and unwanted of society, and against oppressors."¹³⁵ Christ comes to bring deliverance to the captives (Lk 4:18). This divine partiality is also evident in Turner's theology. Turner believed that God would come to the rescue of blacks in the midst of white domination. Through the

Spirit, Turner concluded that God was directing an apocalyptic war against slavery. According to both Cone and Turner, God hears the cries of blacks in bondage in America and moves to assist them.

Cone further asserts that Black Power is Christ's central message to twentieth-century America.¹³⁶ According to Cone, Black Power means "complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary."¹³⁷ This decidedly militant philosophy inhabits Cone's contemporary Black Theology. For Cone, Christianity is a religion of resistance. Cone declares, "Christianity has to do with fighting with God against the evils of life."¹³⁸ Turner's theology, like Black Power, seeks total emancipation from white control. Turner envisioned that blacks needed to overcome whites to gain their freedom. Furthermore, Black Power affirms the dignity and humanity of black persons. It inspires, according to Cone, "inward affirmation of the essential worth of blackness."¹³⁹ In the same way, Nat Turner's actions upheld the sacredness and sanctity of black life and its right to live in freedom. For Cone, the willingness to die for human dignity lies at the heart of Christianity.¹⁴⁰ After all, Christ deliberately died for the sins of the world. Furthermore, Cone proclaims that "if the slave should choose to risk death rather than submit to the humiliating orders of the master, then that is his right."¹⁴¹ Nat Turner was the slave whose Christian religion forced him to reject enslavement. He was prepared to fight and die for his right to be free.

Cone's Black Theology incorporates existential considerations into its analysis of black life. Commenting on Paul Tillich's theology, Cone asserts, "The courage to be, then, is the courage to affirm one's being by striking out at the dehumanizing forces which threaten being."¹⁴² Nat Turner's rebellion, for example, violently rejected the institution of slavery. Cone articulates the "existential absurdity" confronted by blacks in America who face an inconsistency between what should be and what is.¹⁴³ Black theology gives voice to these existential longings of black people that inhabits their religion. Nat Turner expressed these black hopes in concrete material terms. His God was unwilling to let him live in poverty and enslavement. Ultimately, Nat Turner truly symbolized "the courage to be." He took deliberate and violent action against a world of evil, satanic forces. He asserted his human dignity and affirmed his right to live in freedom and self-determination.

Cone's understanding of the Holy Spirit also helps to illuminate the role of the Spirit in Nat Turner's life. According to Cone, "The Holy Spirit is the power of God at work in the world effecting in the

life of his people his intended purposes.”¹⁴⁴ For Cone, the Holy Spirit continues the work of God for which Christ died.¹⁴⁵ Turner’s view of the Spirit’s command to rebel comes as an indictment against white oppression and the institution of slavery. The Holy Spirit breaks the power of racism and injustice, an extension of the work of the liberating Christ. According to Cone, the Holy Spirit embodies “the personal activity of God’s will” in the life of the believer.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, for Cone, “The working of God’s Spirit in the life of the believer means an involvement in the world where men are suffering.”¹⁴⁷ The Holy Spirit empowers the believer to fight against death and suffering according to God’s will. In addition, Cone believes a man can be possessed by the Spirit. According to Cone, “To be possessed by God’s Spirit means that the believer is willing to be obedient unto death, becoming the means through whom God makes his will known and the vehicle of the activity of God himself.”¹⁴⁸ In his confession, Nat Turner describes a situation in which he was overcome by the Holy Spirit. Turner was convinced that his insurrection revealed the will of God for the black community. God did not will slavery and bondage for black humanity. Turner became the instrument of God’s wrath and righteousness. His rebellion also foreshadowed the bloody US Civil War. Cone’s view of the Holy Spirit implicates God in Turner’s battle. The Holy Spirit enlisted Nat Turner to do the will of God in the world and to prophesy the end of slavery.

Not all black theologians agree with Cone’s more militant approach to Black Theology. J. Deotis Roberts, for instance, labels Cone’s Black Theology as narrow and one-sided with respect to liberation.¹⁴⁹ According to Roberts, both liberation and reconciliation must be considered as the twin poles of Black Theology.¹⁵⁰ Therefore, liberation should not be pursued exclusively without a careful assessment of possibilities for reconciliation between equals in Christ. For Roberts, “Christ liberates, but he also reconciles us to God and to each other.”¹⁵¹ Roberts envisions peaceful reconciliation between whites and blacks in America. He argues that Cone, by contrast, is indifferent to whites.¹⁵² Furthermore, Roberts categorically rejects the violence of Nat Turner as inconsistent with the Christian ethic.¹⁵³ He labels Turner “the prophet of revenge, hate, and revolt.”¹⁵⁴ In Robert’s estimation, Turner’s violence destroys the possibility of reconciliation. While certainly more sympathetic to violence than Roberts, Cone does not exclude the significance of reconciliation. Nevertheless, Cone is convinced that reconciliation on white racist terms is impossible.¹⁵⁵ For Cone, true reconciliation can only come

after full emancipation of all blacks and fulfillment of the independence and autonomy of the entire black community.¹⁵⁶ Both Cone and Roberts agree that liberation is a first step, but Roberts is adamant that Cone undervalues the role of reconciliation. In the short term, Roberts is correct that violence prevents reconciliation and perhaps begets violence from whites in retaliation. In the long run, however, violence does not necessarily prevent reconciliation. The Americans and the British are today allies despite the bloody Revolutionary War. The South and the North continue to heal wounds up to the present after the US Civil War. Therefore, reconciliation over time is possible in spite of bloodshed. Nevertheless, Roberts makes an important contribution to Black Theology by making it accountable to the twin poles of reconciliation and liberation. Blacks and whites must learn to live together in brotherhood and sisterhood in America. This outcome, however, will emerge in multiple ways. Nat Turner's theology suggested the inevitability and necessity of violence in 1831.

Liberation Theology

Nat Turner's theology at its root was liberation theology. Turner promoted the total liberation of all black slaves through violent insurrection. Contemporary liberation theology is based on a biblical interpretation of history. The Exodus narrative reveals to liberation theologians that God is a God of the poor and oppressed. God moves within history to save the downtrodden from slavery and poverty. In the New Testament, Jesus furthers this liberation motif. In his initial proclamation concerning his divine mission, Luke's Jesus asserts that he has come to liberate the captives, to preach the gospel to the poor, and to set at liberty the oppressed (Lk 4:18–19). For liberation theology, liberation is the central message of Christ's gospel. Nat Turner also adopts this liberationist perspective.

Liberation theology promotes the need for economic, social, and political liberation of the poor and oppressed.¹⁵⁷ The theology of liberation actively opposes the enslaving and dehumanizing forces in history and society. For liberation theology, liberation is both a divine historical process and the message of the gospel. In short, God redeems and acts in history on behalf of the poor. Gustavo Gutiérrez asserts, "He is a God who takes sides with the poor and liberates them from slavery and oppression."¹⁵⁸ For the theology of liberation, the meaning of God's activity in history is liberation and justice.¹⁵⁹ Gutiérrez further argues, "The struggle for a just society is in its own right very

much a part of salvation history.”¹⁶⁰ On the basis of Luke 4:18–19, liberation theologians conclude that Jesus came, primarily, to bring the good news of liberation to the poor. This liberation advanced by Jesus is concrete and all-encompassing. Gutiérrez for instance contends, “For Jesus, then, liberation is total liberation.”¹⁶¹ Jesus offers full human fulfillment and human flourishing. Gutiérrez asserts that Christ’s “redemptive work embraces all the dimensions of existence and brings them to their fullness.”¹⁶² Similarly, Nat Turner’s theology is a totalizing gospel. It seeks complete emancipation for blacks from white supremacy through a violent, apocalyptic encounter. It offers blacks a new life of freedom in Christ. It pursues spiritual, as well as, material liberation for blacks. Like Turner’s theology, Gutiérrez maintains that “the theology of liberation is rooted in a revolutionary militancy.”¹⁶³ Both theologies are unwilling to compromise on the question of human dignity and liberation. Yet, liberation theologians, though clear on the need for liberation, are divided on the legitimacy of the use of revolutionary violence for liberation and freedom.

Gutiérrez defines theology as “critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word.”¹⁶⁴ The centrality of praxis in liberation theology means that theology considers what humanity should *do* in history. What are the prescriptions of the gospel? The theology of liberation adopts a Kingdom perspective in favor of active participation in the struggles of the oppressed.¹⁶⁵ Liberation theology argues that believers should work with God on behalf of the liberation of the poor. For the theology of liberation, God works in and through the oppressed community to bring about justice. For Gutiérrez, “The process of liberation requires the active participation of the oppressed.”¹⁶⁶ Nat Turner reflects this intersection between praxis and the gospel. Jesus’s gospel necessarily inspires Turner to social action. Turner’s theology aims to join God at work in the world. Through the Spirit, Turner seeks to fulfill the Kingdom of Heaven. He enlists the aid and assistance of the oppressed community of black slaves. Based on his revelation of God and revolutionary understanding of Christianity, Turner violently pursued the freedom granted by Christ for the liberation of all black slaves.

Some Christians adopt the liberating message of the gospel while also claiming that liberation pertains to sin and alienation alone. These Christians believe Christ offered spiritual liberation that transcends one’s earthly circumstances. They reject liberation from material conditions of oppression and poverty. They claim that Christians whether slave or free receive the same blessings of God. Yet, the

promises of God do not include slavery and dehumanization. Christ came to liberate from sin, yes, but also from oppression, poverty, and enslavement. The Kingdom of Heaven condemns and judges these things. Nat Turner appropriated these promises for himself and other black slaves. His understanding of liberation was total and complete, the vanquishing of one's enemies and a new era of peace and freedom. Like the theology of liberation, Turner envisioned God as deliverer and liberator.

The Theology of Nat Turner

Nat Turner's theology was a political black theology of liberation from slavery through revolutionary counterviolence. It was political theology in that it advocated for ethical principles of the Kingdom of Heaven to overcome the social and political inequalities of black slaves. It was black theology because it advanced the cause of total emancipation from white supremacy. It was liberation theology because it struggled on behalf of the poor and oppressed for freedom and justice in this life. It was also prophetic theology because it promoted the values of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the aims of salvation. Nat Turner assumed that his violence was divinely inspired and the measured will of God. Therefore, for Turner, it was eminently just and legitimately furthered the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. His theology petitioned and summoned God's apocalyptic counterviolence against injustice and inhumanity.

Nat Turner's theology depended on a particular and distinct conception of God. First, Turner's God was the God of the Old and New Testaments. This God is a God of revelation. This is the God who spoke to Moses and led the Exodus from Egypt. This is also the God who brings the Kingdom of Heaven through Jesus of Nazareth. Turner believed this biblical God communicated to him through the Spirit. According to Turner's apocalyptic expectations, God is provident in human history. The world transpires according to the predetermined eternal plan and purpose of God. Yet, God is also engaged in a spiritual war with Satan and the forces of darkness and evil. Satan works to destroy and enslave God's children and is responsible for Christ's crucifixion. God destroys the works of Satan and liberates God's children from sin and evil. For Turner, God is a liberating God partial to the plight of the poor and oppressed. God works actively in history to bring the Kingdom of Heaven on earth and to defeat dehumanizing and demoralizing powers among humanity. According to Turner,

God is also a God of justice. God hears the cries of the oppressed black slaves and moves to defend them. Most importantly, God is a God of revolution who defeats slavery and wickedness. Nat Turner was willing to trust in the revolutionary potential of this Christian God. His God is not a passive or inactive God. Through Turner, his God initiates violent revolution to bring about justice and liberation. Thus, Turner's God is also avenging and violent.

But, is this the same God of love revealed by Jesus Christ? In developing a conception of God for Black Theology, Cone argues convincingly that God's love must be considered in relationship to God's righteousness and wrath.¹⁶⁷ The Old and New Testaments each reveal in their own way a God of both love and righteousness. In the Old Testament, God destroys the idolatrous enemies of Israel and threatens the nation of Israel with exile and warfare in the name of God's love for Israel and God's divine righteousness. God's righteousness will not permit idolatry, social injustice, and destruction of the poor in the nation of Israel. Furthermore, God's righteousness seeks destruction of Israel's enemies. Jesus's apocalypticism further illustrates that both righteousness and love inhabit the God of the Bible. The Kingdom coming, along with the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, is the quintessential proof of God's love for humanity. Yet, Matthew's Jesus also suggests that the Son of man will come as an avenger on the Day of Judgment to establish justice and peace among the nations (Mt 25:31–46). The wicked and unrighteous will be separated from the Kingdom. According to Jesus, only the righteous will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. Like Cone, Nat Turner's theology holds these two perspectives of love and wrath in balance. Turner is convinced of God's love and protection for the black slave. Turner is not, however, overcome by racism or hatred of whites. He recognizes God's providence over the white community as well. Notwithstanding, for Turner, God's wrath and righteousness consumes white oppression and frees the black slave. Thus, Turner's God exhibits divine partiality. God works on behalf of the poor and oppressed against oppressors and the powerful. Turner is able to maintain his faith in an Old Testament avenging God alongside a New Testament God of love for the poor and oppressed.

Nat Turner's theology was decidedly not a prescription for peace and goodwill. Rather, Turner's apocalypse anticipated racial warfare and violent judgment before the final coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. The theology of Nat Turner prioritized Kingdom principles of freedom, equality, liberation, justice, and righteousness above demands for nonviolence, peace, and reconciliation. Turner's theology

embodied the existential, religious, spiritual, and theological demand for freedom among black people. He was willing to employ violence toward that end by joining his own liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence to the divine apocalyptic counterviolence of God. Turner brought life to his theology through revolutionary praxis and prophetic social action. In Turner's violent slave revolt, one finds the theological implications of radical black slave religion.

Christians today can learn from the theology of Nat Turner. Turner envisioned Christianity as a religion of freedom and resistance toward evil. In anticipation of the return of Christ, Turner determined to pursue God's justice on earth and to initiate the Kingdom of Heaven through struggle and agitation. Turner embraced religious devotion and self-discipline in his quest to know God's will for his life and to commune with the Holy Spirit. He actively sought God through his inner contemplative life and spirituality. There, Turner found the God of the Exodus and the liberating Father of Jesus Christ. Turner believed that God was still speaking in the world through prophets and the Spirit of God. He was convinced that God could and would transform his social and political context of poverty, enslavement, and oppression. Turner's theology arose from his effort to understand and confront his condition of bondage and subjugation in Virginia in the early nineteenth century. Ultimately, he believed that God wanted more for him and other blacks than his historical context suggested. His historical age in the violent antebellum South inspired resistance and subversion on the part of black slaves. Turner's Christianity asserted that God would invade history and upset the balances in order to grant freedom and self-determination to God's black children. In his mind and musings with God, Turner was free; yet, in his body, he was a slave. Christianity supplied for Turner the bridge to make his body, mind, and spirit free and to overcome his earthly circumstances. Unlike white Southern Evangelical Christianity, Turner's black Christianity guaranteed material as well as spiritual freedom from bondage. This radical black Christianity ultimately motivated Turner's violent quest for earthly freedom. Turner's theology and understanding of God guided him to actively challenge and resist the powers and principalities of his day through violent rebellion and struggle. His theology justified and legitimated liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence of the oppressed and humiliated in the name of God to end slavery and dehumanization in America.

Prophetic Violence and the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, violence is often depicted as the expressed will of God. God's violence is repeatedly and unmistakably associated with God's salvation and deliverance. In the first creation account, the Spirit of God battles and subdues the chaotic darkness, formlessness, and void of the earth (Gen 1:2). Within the birthing of the universe, chaos is violently ordered and liberated by God. At significant times in the Old Testament, God is also revealed as a warring and jealous God. God's violence destroys the earth and almost all of humanity with a great flood (Gen 7). God delivers the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt through a series of violent plagues, including the death of the firstborn sons of Egypt (Exodus). God violently conquers the Promised Land for the Israelites through all-consuming holy war (Joshua). God establishes the Kingdom of Israel through war and conquest (1 Samuel). God utilizes the violence of the Assyrians and Babylonians to cripple and embarrass Israel, forcing her into exile. With these violent acts, the Old Testament reveals that God's violence is necessary, legitimate, and justified in the salvation history of Israel. Violence saves the people from slavery, idolatry, and unrighteousness while also inviting repentance and faith. Salvation becomes bound up with violence toward the enemies of God and repentance in response to the threat of violence from God. In certain circumstances, God elicits the violence or violent threats of God's prophets to affect God's will in Israel and the world. This prophetic violence in the Old Testament mirrors the liberating and revolutionary violence of Nat Turner toward slavery and dehumanization.

In recounting his confession, Nat Turner remarked that one would have to go back to the days of his infancy and before his birth to

discover the real motivations for his revolutionary actions.¹ From an early age, he and others envisioned him as a prophet in the mold of the Old Testament Hebrew prophets meant for some great and special purpose.² His visions, revelations, and perceived direct inspiration from God through the Holy Spirit later confirmed him in this view.³ Turner identified the Spirit who he claims spoke and appeared to him as the Spirit who spoke to the prophets in former days.⁴ This assertion connected Turner to the collective tradition of Hebrew prophets in the Old Testament. Given his black slave religion's focus on the Exodus as the prime liberating narrative in the Old Testament, it stands to reason that Moses was the paradigmatic prophet for Turner. Moses delivered the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt, and Turner aimed to free blacks from slavery in America. Can Turner's claim to prophethood and special revelation, however, be substantiated?

This chapter investigates Nat Turner's claim to prophethood by comparing his liberating and revolutionary violence against slavery and dehumanization to the prophetic violence of three Hebrew prophets: Moses, Elijah, and Amos. It argues that prophetic violence in the Old Testament threatened the enemies of God's children with God's violence and also challenged Israel with the prospect of God's violence for its own unfaithfulness and unrighteousness. Through the prophetic violence of Moses, Elijah, and Amos in the Old Testament, God condemns slavery, apostasy, idolatry, social injustice, and corruption. God judges and condemns the nations for their wickedness and unrighteousness. Moses represents the liberating violence of God against enslavement and cruelty. Elijah illustrates the violence of God toward idolatry and apostasy. Amos reveals the violence of God toward Israel for sin and social injustice. Both Moses and Elijah appear in the New Testament at Jesus's transfiguration (Mt 17:3; Mk 9:4; Lk 9:30). They are the paradigmatic prophets of the Old Testament representing the Law and the prophets, respectively. Amos is the first written prophet in Israel. He represents the social criticism and preaching of righteousness associated with the eighth-century prophets. What these accounts reveal is that Nat Turner resembled the attributes of the Old Testament prophets in his actions and character. The chapter asserts that Turner's liberating and revolutionary violence paralleled the prophetic violence of these prophets in tangible ways. His violence was neither arbitrary nor capricious. According to Turner, it was the measured will of God. Turner may not have been the delusional and diabolical personality invented by white Virginians. Turner's violence resurrected God's violence toward slavery, idolatry,

and social injustice in the Old Testament. It anticipated the prophetic violence of God's imminent Kingdom. While Turner's prophethood cannot be proven, his revolutionary violence nonetheless displayed prophetic elements.

The existence of modern day prophets like Nat Turner is a lasting hope of the church. Paul names prophecy as an enduring gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:10). According to Ephesians, Jesus gave some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers for the equipping of the church (Eph 4:11–12). Some Christians, nonetheless, believe that prophets and prophecy ended with the apostolic age. Jesus Christ is seen as the final and definitive revelation of God. Notwithstanding, Lindsay B. Longacre argues, "The Bible nowhere indicates that the line of prophets has been exhausted or completed."⁵ Everywhere, the word of God continues to inspire contemporary men and women to prophesy with the same conviction and authority of the biblical prophets for righteousness, love, and justice. Loring W. Batten asserts, "Prophets are needed in every age."⁶ Nat Turner's prophetic theology, for his times, critiqued and rejected the peculiar institution of American slavery as inhumane and unjust. The case of Nat Turner, however, most clearly brings to the forefront the issue of prophetic violence. According to Mary Mills, "prophetic violence produces an image of the deity as a violent being."⁷ The prophet predicts and fulfills the violence of God. But, does any Hebrew prophet actually carry out the violence of God against his enemies like Turner? In fact, prophetic violence in the Old Testament both proclaims and enacts God's violence toward the enemies of Israel, as well as God's violence and judgment on Israel itself. In various ways, the prophets of Israel actively pursue the violence of God concerning Israel's freedom and also threaten judgment and desolation to punish Israel for sins, transgressions, and social injustice. Does this biblical prophetic violence, however, resemble the revolutionary violence of Nat Turner? Like the Old Testament prophets, Turner sought to destroy the enemies of God's black children and to punish white America for their idolatry, unrighteousness, and terror.

Nat Turner claimed the legitimacy of his prophetic violence against slavery and the enemies of black people by appealing to God's will. Turner argued that the Spirit of God had directed his actions. Outside the scope of the Old Testament, appeals to the Spirit in favor of prophetic violence seem unwarranted and absurd. How can Turner ever justify his claim to prophethood and right to carry out the violent justice of God? Turner's theology supplied the answer for him. God's

prophetic violence against slavery in the Old Testament illustrated to Turner God's intention to destroy slavery on earth. Jesus's life, death, and resurrection meant for Turner that God's freedom was available to black people. Turner believed that God would defeat his enemies in the name of God's will and Christ's work on earth. Understanding Turner's insurrection in the light of prophetic violence in the Old Testament sharpens our view of the relationship between violence and Christianity. Violence against slavery, injustice, idolatry, immorality, and wickedness is a part of the history and testaments of God.

Old Testament Prophets

Curt Kuhl asserts the uniqueness of Israelite prophets and prophecy, "unparalleled among any other people or in any other literature."⁸ This distinctiveness of the Hebrew prophet determined his significance in Israelite society. Robert R. Wilson contends that the Israelite prophets served as intermediaries between the human and divine worlds.⁹ The prophet bridged the divide between Yahweh and the people. Herbert L. Willett argues, "Israel was a prophet nation. It was chosen to be the messenger of God to the world."¹⁰ Therefore, prophecy developed in Israel based on its communal connection to the revelation of the universal God. Batten also identifies prophecy as a dominant and distinctive element in Israel's religion.¹¹ Thus, the role and place of the prophet in Israel's culture and society was prominent. According to Klaus Koch, "the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament contains fifteen prophetic writings," covering the period of pre-Christian Israel from c. 750–500 BCE.¹² Prophet comes from the Greek word *prophetes* meaning "out-speaker" not "foreteller" with a suggestion of "speaking on behalf of someone else."¹³ Therefore, according to Joseph Blenkinsopp, the Hebrew prophet was an out-speaker or "spokesman" for Yahweh.¹⁴ In fact, the prophet speaks God's words.¹⁵ Prophecy includes both proclamation (forth-telling) and prediction (foretelling).¹⁶ Yet, the primary function of the Hebrew prophets was not foretelling.¹⁷ Willett argues that prediction was "a part of the function of a prophet, but only incidental to his real purpose as a preacher of righteousness."¹⁸ John F. A. Sawyer asserts, "Prophets are first and foremost 'proclaimers.'"¹⁹ They proclaim the word of God and occasionally predict the future when it impinges on the present. Thus, prophets are meant to enlighten the people to God's will and purpose in history. Yet, J. M. Powis Smith contends that prophets are not primarily interested in individuals.²⁰ Rather, Smith asserts, "The centre of the prophet's interest was always

the welfare of the nation.”²¹ The prophet was God’s ambassador to Israel. Yahweh sent the prophet to declare God’s message to the Hebrew people and the nation of Israel. In this capacity, the prophet speaks to all the people. Abraham J. Heschel argues, “The prophet may be regarded as the first universal man in history; he is concerned with, and addresses himself to, all men.”²² The prophet’s universality made his message directly relevant to each member of the Hebrew community. Batten contends, “Hence the prophet was a statesman, a sociologist, a political economist, as well as a theologian and a moralist: hence that broad interest of the prophet in all the affairs of men.”²³ Batten further describes the Hebrew prophet as a man of knowledge.²⁴ With the knowledge of God’s will for the holistic salvation of Israel, the Old Testament prophets interested themselves in imparting that knowledge to others. Given their deep devotion to the nation, the prophet at times interceded on behalf of the people with God.

Despite their commitment to the collectivity, the Hebrew prophets displayed an intense individualism and aloofness brought on by their spiritual and religious experiences. Willett asserts that the prophet was specially chosen by God.²⁵ In addition, Yahweh’s Spirit possessed the prophet. According to John D. W. Watts, however, possession by God did not destroy the individual prophet’s distinctive personality and attributes.²⁶ His intimate and personal relationship with Yahweh distinguished the prophet from other men. Blenkinsopp argues, “The messenger spoke for God because he had spoken with God. His nature was open to the impress of the divine Spirit; and out of that life which he lived with God he spoke to the men of his day.”²⁷ Because of his unique connection to God, the prophet determined to do and to say the will of God despite the consequences. Sometimes this put him at odds with the community along with the religious, economic, and political leaders of Israel. Heschel contends, “The prophets consistently singled out the leaders, the kings, the princes, the false prophets, and the priests as the ones responsible for the sins of the community.”²⁸ The prophet’s personal faith in God and rugged individualism sustained him against their opposition. The Old Testament prophets were motivated by their life with God, unique understanding of Yahweh, and direct relationship with God’s Spirit. The Holy Spirit inspired their passionate devotion. Furthermore, Willett contends, “They were men who wrought and spake as they were impelled by the Holy Spirit.”²⁹ Smith reveals the prophet’s vivid consciousness of God, his daily experience of communion with God, and his firm grip on the unseen.³⁰ This illumination often manifested

itself in odd behavior, strange visions, ecstatic experiences, and eccentric conduct.³¹ Blenkinsopp maintains that the language of the prophet could be violent and dislocated at times.³² Sawyer contends that miracle-working was also an integral part of the phenomenon of prophecy.³³ The prophet's entire existence was overcome by his vocation before God. Smith asserts, "No portion of a prophet's life was exempt from service in behalf of the prophet's purpose."³⁴ This all-consuming calling of the prophet separated and differentiated him. The prophet could not refuse this inspiration from God. Rather, the prophet embraced his destiny as God's agent and spokesman.

Walter Brueggemann asserts that the prophetic imagination entailed the formation of an alternative consciousness to the dominant royal consciousness.³⁵ The Old Testament prophets challenged the prevailing thinking and structures of their day. Sawyer argues that the Hebrew prophets were rooted in the religious, political, and educational heart of Israelite society.³⁶ They confronted the very center of Israel's culture and social institutions. Sawyer further contends that justice (Hebrew *mishpat*) was a prominent demand of the prophet.³⁷ The prophet held the religious, political, and economic leaders accountable to God's standard of justice and righteousness. Additionally, Sawyer maintains that materialism and idolatry were major concerns of the prophet.³⁸ Moreover, the prophet condemned the pride, boasting, and arrogance of humanity. Heschel maintains, "The prophets repudiated the work as well as the power of man as an object of supreme adoration."³⁹ Prophets relativized earthly kingdoms in favor of the divine realm. Megan McKenna asserts, "The prophet is a truth-teller, using the power of God to shatter the silence that surrounds injustice."⁴⁰ To that end, the Hebrew prophets condemned the unjust power structures and thought patterns in Israel. McKenna further argues, "The message begins with denouncing of systems of power, greed, arrogance, violence, and hate, and it follows with announcing hope and life for the victims of our sin, evil, and injustice."⁴¹ Here, the prophet reveals the compassion and partiality of God's righteousness. Additionally, McKenna contends, "The prophet takes sides, as does God, with the victims, those who know injustice and unnecessary pain, directed by and intended by one group, often religious people, against another."⁴² Therefore, the Old Testament prophets reveal God as the God of the poor and oppressed. Because of the prophet's unique role of social criticism and judgment, animosity toward Israel's leaders, and grim predictions of the future, the prophet suffered significantly at the hands of society. Hans Walter Wolff asserts, "As far as we can see,

no true prophet gets by without great difficulties.”⁴³ The prophet paid a high personal price for his discipleship and devotion to God. For example, Longacre identifies one of the marks of the prophet as being “misunderstood, opposed, neglected, and apparently defeated.”⁴⁴ This suffering and abuse helped the prophet to identify with the plight of the victims of society. As an extension of the prophet’s own sorrow and grief, the Old Testament prophets championed the cause of the poor and the oppressed against the powerful and elite. Yet, the Hebrew prophet was nevertheless rejected and ostracized by the leaders and the people alike.

The Old Testament prophet represented the revolutionary consciousness of God that defined his era. Willett asserts, “The message of the prophet was closely related to the age in which he lived and to the people with whom he associated.”⁴⁵ The Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets specifically to each generation. The Hebrew prophets reveal that Yahweh is the Lord of history who responds to the cries of God’s people. Heschel maintains, “The central message of the prophets is the insistence that *the human situation can be understood only in conjunction with the divine situation.*”⁴⁶ The prophets reminded the people of Yahweh’s covenant and demands of righteousness. They directed Israel to God’s will rather than human will. The prophets concluded that God has the answer to the real problems in human society. Koch contends, “The prophets assume that the world has an underlying meaning which goes beyond normal perception; yet they cling obstinately to a resolute this-worldliness.”⁴⁷ They reveal that God speaks to the material, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of life in this world. Heschel further argues, “The prophets preached justice and celebrated God’s eternal love, but they also proclaimed the danger of man’s presumption, the scandal of idolatry and human ruthlessness, and above all the seriousness of divine wrath.”⁴⁸ Each generation learned the requirements of God’s justice and righteousness. The Old Testament prophets reveal a God of both love and wrath. God’s kingdom is both violent and peaceful. God liberates from violence through God’s own violence. The threat of punishment and condemnation is utilized to invite repentance and to deter the fulfillment of sin. Yet, the Hebrew prophets also embrace Yahweh as the God of love. God frees the people, organizes the nation, and leads them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Yahweh’s covenant with Israel provides stability and sustenance. The Old Testament prophets reveal God’s steadfast leadership and compassion. Yahweh speaks freely to God’s people through the prophets of Israel.

In certain tangible ways, Nat Turner resembled the Old Testament Hebrew prophets. His call to God's service as a prophet ostensibly came at an early age and was recognized by his family and black community.⁴⁹ His parents found certain identifiable marks on Nat's head and chest, which indicated to them his calling to some higher purpose.⁵⁰ Turner would later become the man of knowledge described by Batten as characteristic of the prophet.⁵¹ His spontaneous reading ability, scientific experimentation with paper and gunpowder, and pursuit of sacred and secular knowledge distinguished him as particularly receptive to God's Spirit.⁵² Turner believed that his knowledge of the elements, the revolution of the planets, the operation of the tides, and changes of the seasons was revealed to him by the Spirit.⁵³ His religious devotion and commitment to fasting, prayer, meditation, and withdrawal prepared him for the indwelling of Christ.⁵⁴ Like the Hebrew prophets, Nat Turner was a man ostensibly overcome by the Holy Spirit. He claims the first message spoken to him by the Holy Spirit was "Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you."⁵⁵ Turner identified the Spirit as the same Spirit who spoke to the Old Testament prophets.⁵⁶ Through continual prayer, Turner became uniquely sensitive to the prompting of the Spirit. In Turner's life, God's Spirit manifested itself through visions, signs, revelation, dreams, and scriptural messages. Turner wondered at these miracles and prayed for discernment and guidance.⁵⁷ Deep introspection and openness to the Spirit convinced Turner that he was indeed a prophet and should commit himself to God's will. Turner was persuaded that God was guiding him to lead a revolution against slavery in America. As the Old Testament prophets, Turner set himself against the dominant social institutions and religious perspectives of his day. Turner revealed a revolutionary and radical black slave religion opposed to cruelty and inhumanity. As a slave preacher, Turner occupied a significant and revered role in the black community. He acted as God's ambassador to the black nation. Turner recruited members of the slave community with his unwavering theology and commitment to freedom. As a prophet, Turner predicted a cataclysmic and apocalyptic racial war over slavery in the near future.⁵⁸ Turner would do his part to usher in that violent encounter.

Sawyer asserts that the main criterion for determining true prophecy is fulfillment.⁵⁹ From one perspective, Nat Turner's rebellion failed in terms of ending slavery in 1831. The violence was abrupt and swiftly repelled by local militia. Many blacks were terrorized and killed. Judged by the limited standard of military success, Turner's faith was

disproven. God did not destroy slavery and free blacks at that very moment. Yet, Turner's impact on white Virginians and the South cannot be underestimated. Turner's rebellion revealed the inherent inconsistency of slavery and godliness. Turner's insurrection condemned the institution of slavery and judged America. One of the marks of the prophet was his misunderstood message and apparent failure. Turner's supposed defeat however also meant that his words, theology, and prophecy would in fact become known through Thomas R. Gray. Turner's testimony revealed a radical black religion opposed to slavery and injustice. While his fight ended in execution, Nat Turner died as a martyr in pursuit of his God-given right to freedom and self-determination. His theology assured the black slave that God delivers from both bondage and sin. Turner would rather die and go home to God than live out his life as a slave. His prophetic faith and theological worldview predicted the apocalyptic violence of the US Civil War. Black soldiers in the Union army would, in fact, fight against the white spirits of slavery in the South as Turner predicted. Turner's theology revealed that God's violence was necessary, legitimate, and justified in ending black slavery in America. Severely inhumane and unjust social conditions must sometimes be overcome by God's counterviolence. Humans like Turner join as cocreators in God's fight against unrighteousness. As a prophet, Nat Turner unleashed the apocalyptic violence of God against the enemies of God's people. He decisively conveyed God's prophetic will for black freedom and justice. Turner's prophetic violence condemned and judged the institution of slavery in nineteenth-century America.

Moses

Moses was the first great prophet of the Hebrew people and responsible by his leadership for giving them a common destiny and purpose as a special chosen community governed by the law of Yahweh, the true and living God. In many ways, Moses sets the foundation on what it means to be a prophet. His leadership was comprehensive, holistic, just, and righteous as an extension of God's will for the Hebrew people. Hosea speaks of Moses saying, "By a prophet the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt, and by a prophet he was preserved" (Hos 12:14). The prophet is the vessel through which God's will is enacted for a certain situation and people. Moses fulfills this role of Yahweh's prophet to the Hebrew nation, guiding them in all things pertaining to God. Moses is also known as the lawgiver because he

directly receives the statutes, judgments, laws, and commandments of God from Yahweh on Mount Sinai. Through obedience to the Law of God, Moses forms the community into a covenant people. Moses also acts as intercessor for the people when God's anger is kindled against them (Num 14:19). Moses's great Exodus reveals Yahweh as the God of liberation and deliverance. God heard the cries of the Hebrew people in bondage in Egypt and moved mightily to free them and to make them God's special people. Yahweh is the God of the poor and oppressed while also being the one universal God above all earthly kingdoms. Moses developed an intimate relationship with God by acting as the mediator between God and the Hebrew nation. The book of Exodus proclaims, "So the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex 33:11). Further, God promised Moses, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex 33:14). Moses's intimacy with God distinguished him from the people. Moses stood in the gap between God and Israel. Though Moses was a sinner like the people, God forgave Moses his frailties and insecurities and entered into fellowship with him. Yahweh appeared to Moses and used him to liberate God's people, organize them into a community, and lead them to the Promised Land. By his own disobedience, however, Moses was prevented by God from entering the Promised Land. The book of Deuteronomy claims Moses to have died in the land of Moab, outside the Promised Land, and God is said to have buried Moses there in a hidden grave (Deut 34:5-6). Thus, Moses died a friend of God. Moses's leadership as a prophet and as a man of God was critical to Israel's emergence, liberation, self-identity, and covenant relationship with Yahweh.

Moses was born in bondage a Hebrew of the house of Levi under the decree by Pharaoh Rameses II that all Hebrew male children born should die (Exod 1:22-2:2). Pharaoh Rameses II of the nineteenth dynasty reigned for 67 years (1290-1224 BCE).⁶⁰ The pharaoh's daughter saved the child from the threat of death, took the Hebrew child as her own son, and named him Moses (Exod 2:5-10). Rather than receiving a slave education, Moses was therefore brought up in the Egyptian court with education in Egyptian customs, history, ideas, and gods. To his surprise, he found that this privileged Egyptian upbringing was built upon the enslavement of his own Hebrew people. Moses then killed an Egyptian in compassion for his Hebrew brethren and eventually fled to Midian (Exod 2:11-15). While in Midian, Moses married Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian (Exod 2:21). The two sons of Moses were Gershom, for "I have been

a stranger in a foreign land,” and Eliezer, for “the God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh” (Exod 18:3–4). Moses was later called by God in the form of a miraculous burning bush and God bid him go to the pharaoh and deliver God’s people with God’s power (Exod 3–4). Moses defeated pharaoh, the son of Rameses II, and delivered the people through the power of God and the rod of the Lord.

Moses best typifies the role of prophetic violence in the deliverance of God’s people from slavery and bondage. Pharaoh’s heart was dark and haughty. He would not release the Hebrew people under any circumstances. Thus, God’s violence was necessary to bend him to God’s will. As the prophet, Moses directed the violence of God against the enemies of God’s people. Commanded by God, Moses initiated ten violent plagues in Egypt. The water of the Nile was turned to blood (Exod 7:14–25); frogs multiplied and invaded (Exod 8:1–15); lice infested (Exod 8:16–19); gadflies swarmed (Exod 8:20–32); livestock died (Exod 9:1–7); boils broke out on man and beast (Exod 9:8–12); hail fell (Exod 9:13–35); locusts swarmed (Exod 10:1–20); darkness fell (Exod 10:21–29); and finally, most decisively, the firstborn sons of Egypt were killed by God (Exod 11–12:30). Just as Rameses II had ordered the death of the male Hebrew children, including Moses, God made a sacrifice of the firstborn sons of Egypt, and pharaoh reluctantly released the Hebrews. In a sudden fury, pharaoh later pursued the children of Israel who passed through the Red Sea on dry ground while pharaoh and his chariots and horsemen were drowned (Exod 14:5–31). These prophetic acts of violence serve to demonstrate the power of God against the enemies of God’s people. The Old Testament lifts up this dramatic Exodus in perpetual remembrance to God’s glory. Slavery was a violent institution and God utilized counterviolence to confound and destroy Egypt and its ruler. In the wilderness, God also delivered the Amalekites into the hand of the children of Israel under Moses’s leadership (Exod 17:8–16). Moses’s prophetic violence against slavery in Egypt illustrates the intimate relationship between salvation and violence. God breaks the back of the enemy in order to free God’s children. Salvation comes through counterviolence against the kingdom of evil. God’s violence helped to establish and consecrate Israel as an earthly kingdom. Furthermore, violence against the enemies of Israel was part of the covenant promise of Yahweh. Thus, the children of Israel were saved by God’s violence against Egypt through Moses as prophet.

Nat Turner's prophetic violence came in the same context of slavery and dehumanization as Moses. Both Turner and Moses came out of a privileged and educated background within the backdrop of bondage and cruelty. Their prophetic imagination challenged the dominant structures and thinking of their day. In both cases, God initiated the deliverance of God's people through prophetic violence. Moses's Exodus like Turner's insurrection was meant to liberate the poorest and most oppressed of God's children, the slave, from degradation. Moses's encounter with Egypt was a supernatural and spiritual demonstration of God's power of violence whereas Turner utilized the physical weaponry of his enemy to initiate a war he claimed to have seen in the Spirit. Turner linked his conflict to the righteous return and war of Christ. Both Moses and Turner concluded that God was on the side of the poor and oppressed slave against Egypt and white America. This partiality of God manifests itself in preference and liberation for the least of these. Prophetic violence, in this case, is liberating and salvific, destroying evil and giving freedom to the people. These depictions of God are realistic characterizations of the difficulties of human deliverance given the fall of humanity and the prevalence of human sin. Earthly kingdoms are filled with war and violence. The sword defends national boundaries and maintains peace and order. For God to move in human history to sustain and deliver God's people, violence against human kingdoms by God may be necessary to bring about just outcomes. Both Moses and Turner revealed a revolutionary consciousness that seeks and trusts in God's freedom and liberation at all cost.

Elijah

Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, was the most mysterious, charismatic, abrupt, and gifted prophet of the Old Testament. Elijah is remembered as "a glorious champion of truth and righteousness."⁶¹ Tishbite when translated means converter.⁶² Gilead reflected the rough and jagged character of Elijah. Gilead was a "wild, rugged, in many parts picturesque country, lying east of the Jordan—the 'rocky' region, as the word implies, with its deep ravines and water-courses, its sheepfolds and herds of cattle, in contradistinction to Bashan, 'the level or fertile land.'"⁶³ Elijah possessed a thorough individuality and personal charisma even as he served the living God.⁶⁴ Firmness and boldness distinguished Elijah throughout.⁶⁵ Sudden and dramatic, Elijah first appeared to King

Ahab and defiantly proclaimed, “As the Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word” (1 Kgs 17:1). This drought initiated Elijah into a prophetic struggle against the national apostasy and idolatry of Ahab and Israel. Elijah literally means “My God the Lord” or “Jehovah is my God.”⁶⁶ His name itself stands in opposition to the prevailing idolatry and sinfulness of his day.⁶⁷ It symbolizes his intimate relationship with the Lord God of Israel. Signifying his biblical importance, Elijah appears with Moses at Jesus’s transfiguration as the representatives of the Law and the prophets (Mt 17:3; Mk 9:4; Lk 9:30). Together, Moses and Elijah are the paradigmatic prophets of the Old Testament. Malachi predicted, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse” (Mal 4:5–6). Jews expected the reappearance of Elijah immediately prior to the coming of the deliverer as part of the messianic hope.⁶⁸ Jesus suggested that John the Baptist had indeed come in the spirit of Elijah to prepare the Lord’s way (Mt 17:11–13; Mk 9:12–13). Therefore, John the Baptist was the Elijah to come. This does not however preclude the actual appearance of Elijah himself at the end of time before the great Day of the Lord. Furthermore, Elijah like Enoch is one who never physically dies (Gen 5:24; 2 Kgs 2:11). A chariot of fire with horses of fire appeared before Elijah and Elisha, parted them, and ascended Elijah to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kgs 2:11). Elijah’s end is as sudden as his emergence on the scene. He is described as the “Melchizedek” of the prophets, “without father, without mother, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, abiding a prophet continually.”⁶⁹ His boyhood and youth, including his schooling and upbringing, was unknown.⁷⁰ His most dramatic moment was his defeat and slaughter of the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:20–40).

King Ahab and his idolatrous Sidonian wife Jezebel were most responsible for catapulting Israel into a state of national apostasy, false worship, and rejection of the Lord God of Israel. Ahab ascended the throne in 871 BCE, and he reigned until 852 BCE.⁷¹ Ahab introduced Baal and Ashtarothe, the Sidonian divinities, into worship.⁷² Baal was the male deity representing the sun and the generative powers of nature.⁷³ Ashtarothe or Astarte was the female deity representing the moon and the receptive powers of nature.⁷⁴ Baal worship amounted to the worship of strength and power of nature rather than

the Creator.⁷⁵ Baalists deified nature and gave Baal lordship over the elements.⁷⁶ Israel's worship of Baal violated the first commandment to have no other gods besides the Lord. The image of Baal in stone and Ashtaroth in wood violated the second commandment prohibiting graven images.⁷⁷ For these violations of the Law of God, the Bible condemns Ahab and Jezebel. Concerning Ahab's wickedness, the book of 1 Kings declares:

Now Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him. And it came to pass, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took as wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians; and he went and served Baal and worshiped him. Then he set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. And Ahab made a wooden image. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him. (1 Kgs 16:30–33)

Elijah was a self-assured, intensely individual, forceful prophet who God raised up to triumph over this idolatry and sinfulness of Ahab and Israel. Elijah acted to preserve the covenant by directly challenging the worship of Baal and Ashtaroth.

Elijah's greatest triumph and moment of prophetic violence was his defeat of the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:20–40). Elijah was the only prophet of the Lord God of Israel left when Elijah bid Ahab to assemble all of Israel, with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Ashtaroth who eat at Jezebel's table, on Mount Carmel. Elijah mocked and ridiculed the prophets of Baal by demonstrating God's power through a burnt sacrifice in which fire from God fell and consumed the sacrifice (1 Kgs 18:38). The people immediately repented and returned to God (1 Kgs 18:39). In the name of God's justice, Elijah executed the prophets of Baal at the Brook Kishon (1 Kgs 18:40). This act of prophetic violence, like the death of the Egyptian firstborn sons, served to establish God's sovereignty and power in the earth. Through Elijah, God unequivocally condemned idolatry and wickedness in Israel. The death of the prophets of Baal was an inevitable consequence of their attempt to turn the people against God in favor of temporal things and elements. Thus, Elijah executed the false prophets of his day in the name of a righteous Lord God of Israel. This prophetic violence, like that of Moses, distinguished Elijah as a prophet and symbolized the seriousness of national apostasy and idolatry before God.

Nat Turner's theology revealed a theological imagination in sharp contradiction to white slaveholding Southern Evangelicalism. Turner believed that God had condemned slavery and dehumanization in the Old Testament. For Turner, God's destiny for blacks was freedom and liberation in Christ. Turner's insurrection sought to do God's will on earth through liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence against the institution of slavery in America. Like Elijah, Turner initiated the fire of God to confound his enemy. Violent rebellion and resistance became Turner's fire from God in pursuit of justice and freedom. Furthermore, Turner's revolt emerged from internal contradictions between black religion and white religion in Virginia in 1831. Turner's theology exposed the glaring hypocrisies of white slaveholding Christianity as false prophets and immoral teachers. Slavery perpetuated the worship of money, power, and influence even as it sacrificed black men, women, and children to degradation and dehumanization. Slavery at its root was idolatrous, venerating greed and white power rather than preserving and sanctifying human life. Turner's prophetic violence like Elijah's rejected and condemned idolatry and apostasy in white America. It denounced the professed Christianity of slave-masters and oppressors. Turner's resort to violence was likewise just as indignant, dramatic, and abrupt as Elijah's massacre of the prophets of Baal. Elijah and Turner's prophetic violence came from an intense commitment to the Lord God and God's plan of salvation. Both Elijah and Moses reveal in the Old Testament that God is opposed to slavery, apostasy or false worship, and idolatry. Nat Turner's prophetic violence made the same claim by directly attacking those who perpetrate slavery and dehumanization in the name of white power, white religion, and white greed.

Amos

Amos identified himself as a shepherd and tender of sycamore trees in Tekoa during the time of Uzziah, king of Judah (781–747 BCE) and Jeroboam II, son of Joash, king of Israel (781–745 BCE) (1:1; 7:14).⁷⁸ Tekoa was a village 5.6 miles southwest of Bethlehem.⁷⁹ Amos lived in a time of social, financial, and political prosperity.⁸⁰ The Lord called Amos saying, "Go, prophesy to My people Israel" (7:15). Amos depicted God as a roaring lion who inspires fear (3:8). Therefore, Amos concluded he *must* prophesy due to the imposing presence and character of God. Amos, the first written prophet, came as a preacher of righteousness and social justice to Israel and the nations.

Amos reveals God as the universal Lord over all the earth and Lord of history.⁸¹ Amos judged and condemned Damascus, “because they have threshed Gilead with implements of iron” (1:3), Gaza, “because they took captive the whole captivity to deliver them up to Edom” (1:6), Tyre, “because they delivered up the whole captivity to Edom, and did not remember the covenant of brotherhood” (1:9), Edom, “because he pursued his brother with the sword, and cast off all pity” (1:11), Ammon, “because they ripped open the women with child in Gilead, that they might enlarge their territory” (1:13), Moab, “because he burned the bones of the king of Edom to lime” (2:1), as well as Judah, “because they have despised the law of the Lord, and have not kept His commandments” (2:4), and Israel, “because they sell the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals” (2:6). Amos also condemned the house of Jeroboam II, king of Israel (7:9). Amos measured the guilt of Israel on the basis of injustice and unrighteousness.⁸² Amos thoroughly criticized Israel for oppression of the poor (2:6; 4:1; 5:11–12), sexual immorality (2:7), violence and robbery (3:10), social injustice (5:7; 5:12; 6:12), unrighteousness (5:7; 6:12), corruption (5:12), and rejection of the prophets and Nazarites (2:11–12). Amos declared that Yahweh despised Israel’s feast days, sacred assemblies, burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, and hypocritical worship in contrast to social justice (5:21–24). Amos proclaimed, “But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream” (5:24). Amos pronounced doom and destruction on Israel by announcing, “Therefore thus says the Lord God: ‘An adversary shall be all around the land; He shall sap your strength from you, and your palaces shall be plundered’” (3:11). Amos revealed that God would raise up a nation against Israel (6:14). According to Amos, Israel would be led away captive from its own land (7:11). In these verses, Amos alluded to the rising Assyrian threat. Wolff asserts, “Amos is the first one to announce a message of Yahweh’s judgment over all Israel, a message of which there are examples neither in the clan wisdom of ancient Israel nor in the older central cultic proclamation.”⁸³ Longacre identifies Amos as the first prophet to reveal ethical righteousness as central to God’s character.⁸⁴ God will not permit unrighteousness and oppression in Israel. Arvid S. Kapelrud argues, “The preaching of Amos makes it completely clear that Yahweh is here seen as the destroyer of his own people.”⁸⁵ God’s violence, in the form of an adversary, the Assyrians, is directed against Israel by the word of God through Amos for their sins and transgressions. Kapelrud further asserts, “The sternness of Yahweh is underlined

again and again in the preaching of Amos.”⁸⁶ Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, forbids Amos to prophesy against Jeroboam II and Israel at Bethel (7:12–13). Bethel was the king’s residence and national sanctuary (7:13). In response to Amaziah’s complaint, Amos condemns him, saying, “Your wife shall be a harlot in the city; your sons and daughters shall fall by the sword; your land shall be divided by survey line; you shall die in a defiled land; and Israel shall surely be led away captive from his own land” (7:17). Yet, Amos did not proclaim total and complete annihilation and destruction of Israel. Amos left room for the eventual restoration of Israel. The word of God according to Amos declared, “I will bring back the captives of My people Israel; they shall build the waste cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them; they shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them. I will plant them in their land, and no longer shall they be pulled up from the land I have given them” (9:11–15). Amos, like other Old Testament prophets, believed that a remnant of Israel would be preserved to God.

These prophetic violent threats of Amos represented God’s violence and judgment against Israel, God’s own people, for immorality and wickedness. Nat Turner’s violence can be viewed in a similar fashion. Turner’s violence can be said to represent God’s judgment and condemnation of white America for slavery, idolatry, and social injustice. If the United States were ever a Christian nation, its brutality against blacks destroyed its Christian witness. In the book of Amos, the nations are condemned for war and violence, slavery and the slave trade, crimes against women, irreverence, and social immorality (1:3–2:16). The same judgment extends to the supposedly Christian America. The US Civil War, then, in keeping with Turner’s theology, was a fully realized judgment demonstrating that God’s violence was necessary in delivering blacks from slavery in America. The cultural chaos, family disruptions, and bloody battles of the US Civil War may have served as punishment and condemnation for the enslavement of blacks. In Turner’s theology, the white Christian slave-master was judged and condemned. God desired to free blacks from their captors just as God wanted to purge Israel of social, political, and economic injustice and oppression. Turner, for his part, acknowledged the Christianity of white America while dismissing its sincerity and genuineness. God’s violence came to reveal the hypocrisy and illegitimacy of white slaveholding Christianity. Through Nat Turner’s prophetic violence, God demanded the end of slavery and dehumanization in America.

Conclusion

The Old Testament makes it clear that violence was never categorically against God's will and plan for the salvation of Israel. At times, God utilized both supernatural and human violence to achieve God's ends and to save Israel. This violence, however, was not just directed against the enemies of Israel. It came against Israel as well. The Old Testament reveals violence and wrath as part of God's eternal character. God is love that includes righteousness and justice. Judgment and condemnation await the workers of iniquity. God is also revealed in the Old Testament as the Lord of the earth and Lord of history. God punished and condemned the nations just as God reprimanded Israel for her sins and transgressions. God entered human affairs and created peace and freedom through violence and war. God demanded repentance, obedience, and faith through fear. While God's ultimate purpose is peace and love, the Old Testament reveals that due to sin and fallen humanity, God must sometimes resort to violence, whether spiritual or physical. In combating murderous humanity, God sometimes subdues the enemy with divine counterviolence. In the Old Testament, God also proclaimed and performed violence through the Hebrew prophets. This prophetic violence was typified by Moses's liberating violence against Egypt, Elijah's execution of the idolatrous prophets of Baal, and Amos's threats of Assyrian violence for Israel's social injustice and unrighteousness.

By leading an insurrection against slavery in the name of God, Nat Turner embraced prophetic violence as condemnation and judgment for white slaveholding America. Turner envisioned himself as one of the Hebrew prophets challenging sin, injustice, and wickedness in the nation. He imagined himself to be like Moses, a liberator of the people. Longacre identifies three characteristics of the prophet: (1) conviction of a true vision of God's will, (2) concern for his people, and (3) truth of message recognized in later times.⁸⁷ Turner's theology incorporated a clear vision of racial warfare followed by a period of peace and freedom. His theology bridged the Old Testament demand for righteousness with the New Testament hope awaiting the imminent return of Christ. Christ had laid down his burdens on the cross, and therefore Turner believed he should pick up the mantle and fight for God's kingdom in the here and now. Thus, Turner adopted the prophetic violence of the Old Testament alongside the expectancy of Christ's salvation and freedom for black slaves. Turner's concern was chiefly for the holistic liberation of all black slaves. His hope for his

people is reflected in his early black theology. The truth of Nat Turner's message could only be realized in America through bloody Civil War. That God condemned US slavery and dehumanization was made clear through much trial and tribulation. Turner's vindication would ultimately come with emancipation and the justness of Lincoln's violent cause to preserve the Union. Turner's black slave religion unequivocally affirmed the image of God in black humanity. This radical perspective embraced material and spiritual freedom for blacks. Turner made the commitment total and complete. He chose prophetic violence to establish God's judgment and power on earth. As a prophet to the black nation, Nat Turner offered God's love and deliverance to the people. Just as God had liberated the Israelites, Turner proclaimed that God would free blacks through war and violence.

In this age of terrorism and religious violence, Nat Turner is a complicated figure to comprehend. While his intentions may be good, his claim to prophethood and justified killing in God's name cannot be supported by tangible proof. One cannot enter into and adopt the faith and spiritual visions of Turner. His particularistic experience of God like any prophet remains foreign to us. The religious, spiritual, and theological affirmations of Turner make him strange and repugnant to some. Therefore, nothing legitimately seems to separate him from the religious terrorist or white supremacist who uses violence and intimidation to achieve his ends. White Virginians, for instance, vilified Turner as a religious fanatic and criminal. They rejected Turner's violence as illegitimate and diabolical. Nonetheless, Turner's theology was the key to his prophetic violence. Turner believed that God was on his side due to his religious, spiritual, and theological understanding. Turner's violence was aimed at the spiritual and physical enemy of God's people. For Turner, blacks were never meant to be slaves. Furthermore, Christ came to set the people free from oppression and sin. Therefore, to let his people live in slavery offended Nat Turner and his revelation of God. Turner's prophetic violence was not haphazard, arbitrary, or capricious. He did not pursue violence for violence sake. His violence did not emanate from hatred, racism, arrogance, or pride. It was liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence aimed to destroy sin and evil. The character of Nat Turner's violence was not the same as the terrorist's or racist's whose principles are suspect because they are guided by hate and pride. Turner embraced positive affirmations of God's goodness rather than arrogance and hypocrisy. To condemn a black slave who strikes out against his slave-master as a terrorist is to deny the covenant of life. Each human is endowed by

God with freedom. An enslaved people have the right to rise up in the name of the God who created them. The sacredness and sanctity of life demand resistance to evil and depravity.

Turner's violent insurrection was unique and distinctive; therefore it is also unwarranted to suggest that Turner's liberating and revolutionary violence was in fact equivalent to or the exact same as the prophetic violence of Moses, Elijah, and Amos. Each example of prophetic violence emanated from its own specific historical context and individual particularity of the prophet. Moses's violence against slavery, Elijah's violence against idolatry, and Amos's violent predictions of doom and exile due to social injustice and unrighteousness are each distinct and exceptional illustrations of prophetic violence reflective of the times in which the prophet lived. Yet, in their own way, each act demonstrated and embodied the prophetic character and nature of specific acts of violence or violent language. Metaphorically and symbolically, Turner's prophetic violence does in fact resemble the violence of these prophets as a revolutionary manifestation of God's judgment and condemnation of slavery, idolatry, and social injustice. Ultimately, Turner's prophetic violence must be considered in relationship to Jesus's politics of violence in the New Testament to be considered fully Christian. How does Jesus reconcile God's violence in the Old Testament with his own interpretation of violence in the New Testament? Jesus's understanding of violence alongside the Old Testament witness of prophetic violence furthers a theological account of Nat Turner's insurrection. In the end, Jesus Christ is the mark of Christianity's self-understanding of God and theological considerations of violence. The next chapter will explore whether Jesus as prophet and Christ would in fact judge and condemn the liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence of Nat Turner.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ and Violence

That Nat Turner's conception of Jesus as Savior and Christ underlay his revolutionary commitment to violence and liberation meant that he viewed Jesus and the gospel of Jesus as sympathetic and supportive of his violent rebellion. Turner's revelation of Christ began with scripture and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The first scripture Turner appealed to in his confession was: "Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you" (Mt 6:33). Matthew's Jesus spoke these words to his disciples during the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus exhorted them to not worry about their lives and basic necessities because of God's benevolence and providence. Turner associated Jesus with the Kingdom of Heaven where Turner was instructed to search and seek for his salvation, freedom, life, and personal needs. James A. Noel identifies Turner's biblical hermeneutic as it is revealed in his confession.¹ Noel asserts that Turner's hermeneutic is neither premodern nor postmodern, neither literal nor historical-critical.² Rather, Turner's hermeneutic was experiential and allegorical. Scripture for Turner interpreted itself through life and the Spirit. Noel argues: "For Turner biblical passages were enigmatic signs whose interpretation required additional signs—e.g., the hieroglyphs inscribed in blood on leaves in the woods—which both interpreted the ones preceding them and required yet additional signs in a progression which reached its ultimate culmination in his embodiment of these sign's eschatology."³

As Noel accurately contends, the meaning of Mt 6:33 would be gradually revealed to Turner through further signs and experiences of God's Spirit. Noel maintains that Turner used his bizarre visions to

interpret the passage.⁴ Noel further asserts, “In the progression of his visions is a gradual clarification of an interpretive code for interpreting the passage he was attending to.”⁵ This code, according to Noel, assumed the form of apocalyptic imagery and constituted a vivid eschatology.⁶ For Noel, “Turner’s biblical exegesis links hermeneutics to the eschatological implications of signs and codes.”⁷ These signs and codes would point to open rebellion for Turner. He would interpret the passage to mean that he should actively seek the Kingdom of Heaven on earth for black slaves through violent revolt. Thus, according to Noel, Turner’s revelation and interpretation of Mt 6:33 came as a progressive disclosure of the Spirit through additional signs and visions. First, Turner became interested in Mt 6:33 as scripture, reflecting and praying for insight on the subject.⁸ Then, he claims the Spirit spoke to him the same passage while he was at prayer one day.⁹ Through an apocalyptic vision of racial warfare and a supernatural experience of drops of blood, Turner was gradually guided by the Spirit toward the spiritual meaning of Mt 6:33 for his life.¹⁰ Turner read and interpreted scripture through the lens of his continued experience of God’s Spirit that he applied allegorically to his life and revolutionary mission. For Noel, Turner came to embody the eschatology of his revelatory signs and codes.¹¹ The drops of blood that Turner claimed he found on the corn and the leaves in the woods symbolized to him Christ’s blood.¹² As Christ’s blood had been shed on earth and ascended to heaven, it was now returning to earth again in the form of dew, which meant to Turner that “the Savior was about to lay down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and the great day of judgment was at hand.”¹³ It is clear that Turner viewed Jesus not only as Savior and Christ but also as Judge and Avenger. His apocalyptic outlook anticipated an imminent Day of Judgment and Return of Christ who had laid down his burden for human sin on the cross. Turner apparently held to the traditional Christian view that Jesus had died to set humanity free from sin, had ascended to the right hand of God the Father in heaven, and would soon return to execute judgment on the earth.

The second reference Turner made to scripture and Christ in his confession was his claim that the Holy Spirit appeared to him on May 12, 1828, and declared, “The Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the *first should be last and the last should be first*” (my italics) (Mt 20:16).¹⁴ Turner evidently viewed Jesus at war with Satan

or the Serpent. According to Turner, the Spirit instructed him to join the fight against the Serpent and the kingdom of evil.¹⁵ Matthew's Jesus asserted the equality of all laborers in God's vineyard with these words: "So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few are chosen" (Mt 20:16). Jesus's testimony suggested that radical equality in the Kingdom of Heaven would ultimately level the current system of power and privilege, free and slave, oppressors and oppressed. This came as a further revelation of the Kingdom of Heaven for Turner. Turner would hold on to this implicit indictment of inequality and injustice. For Turner, Christ was a liberator like the God of the Exodus. Turner wanted to fight alongside this warring Christ to liberate all black slaves. Turner appropriated a Jesus committed to freedom, equality, justice, and liberty. Turner claimed the Holy Spirit revealed to him the true meaning of Mt 6:33 through signs, visions, wonders, revelation, scripture, and direct inspiration. Furthermore, the scripture became a revelation of Christ and his relationship to the Kingdom of Heaven. Turner ultimately fought in the name of Christ for the material and spiritual reality of God's Kingdom in the lives and future of black slaves.

Like Nat Turner's theology and high Christology, Christian theology must in some way come to terms with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. He is the key to understanding the foundational theological principles of Christianity. Whether articulating the way to salvation espoused by Jesus or characterizing his eternal relationship to the Godhead, Christianity is built upon its religious, spiritual, and theological witness to Jesus Christ. To his disciples, Jesus declared, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Mt 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23). At its root, Christian theology also seeks to follow the example of Jesus Christ. So, what would Jesus say to the freedom fighter Nat Turner? Christian pacifists argue that Jesus categorically denounces violence and armed confrontation of the enemy in the name of his philosophy of love of God and love of neighbor, even the dreaded enemy. Some like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. see within Jesus a commitment to nonviolent resistance and political agitation. Others like S. G. F. Brandon assert that Jesus was sympathetic to violence and revolution due to his revolutionary context and supportive relationship to the Zealots.¹⁶ What is Jesus's politics of violence? Is violence ever permissible or justifiable for Jesus? How do his life, death, and resurrection speak to his philosophy of violent rebellion? How would Jesus make sense of Nat Turner's insurrection?

This chapter seeks to answer these questions by developing a revolutionary portrait of Jesus and his expressed and implied politics of violence. It argues that the traditional meek and mild, pacifist Jesus is inadequate to describe Jesus's view of and relationship to violence. It asserts that Jesus's revolutionary context in first-century Palestine, alongside the political, social, and economic implications of the Kingdom of God with Jesus as Messiah, combined with Jesus's overt and subtle forms of violence, violent language, apocalypticism, and pronouncements of condemnation, woe, and judgment complicate and complexify the conception of a seemingly pacifist Jesus who would condemn Nat Turner outright. It maintains that Jesus condemned violence in interpersonal relationships and private affairs but did not condemn war and violence absolutely and categorically. Rather, Jesus failed to assess and evaluate the wars of the state and the violence of the oppressed. The chapter contends that a careful reading of the theological implications of Jesus and his politics of violence, with his endorsement of apocalyptic confrontation with evil, finally prevents one from condemning Nat Turner, his radical black theology, and his violent insurrection unequivocally and unconditionally according to Jesus of Nazareth's gospel.

The Pacifist Jesus

From its inception, and throughout the first three centuries of the early church, professed Christians believed faithfully in emulating a pacifist Jesus who rejected violence categorically and absolutely in favor of the imminent coming of the peaceful and just Kingdom of God. Christian martyrs suffered and died violent deaths in sacrifice to God. Most Christians during this period also opposed Christian participation in military service.¹⁷ Modern Christian pacifists further this early Christian commitment to a gospel of peace and nonviolence. The Brethren, Mennonites, and Quakers have long argued for pacifism and nonresistance following the example of Jesus.¹⁸ "Pacifists believe that war is not justifiable,"¹⁹ based primarily on the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. This absolutist and literalistic perspective shuns the use of violence even for self-defense in the minds of some pacifists. While an extremist position (and potentially revolutionary), the biblical evidence for such a pacifist Christ is nonetheless strong. After all, the four gospels all depict Jesus going to his death by Roman crucifixion without resisting or lashing out violently (Mt 26:47–27:56; Mk 14:43–15:41; Lk 22:47–23:49; Jn 18:1–19:36). He

did not call on the forces of Heaven to protect him. In Gethsemane, during his arrest, Matthew's Jesus rebuked his disciple who wielded a sword saying, "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Mt 26:52). This condemnation of violence leads some to proclaim that Jesus triumphantly chose nonviolence to the end. He neither attacked the Jewish authorities nor condemned Pontius Pilate. Of his arrest and subsequent suffering, Matthew's Jesus proclaimed, "But all this was done that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled" (Mt 26:56). He saw his nonviolent surrender to be ordained of God. If Jesus's death by crucifixion was, in fact, the eternal plan of salvation, then it is not altogether clear that Jesus demanded the same absolute obedience to nonviolence for all of humanity in all situations. Jesus did not necessarily demand the same selflessness in the case of the oppressed slave. Most importantly, however, Jesus's tragic death was one of peace, love, and forgiveness. Luke records the crucified Jesus to have said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Lk 23:34). Even to the last breath, Jesus embraced forgiving love. He died a willing martyr as the initiator of the Kingdom of God.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus proclaimed, blessed be the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness sake (Mt 5:1–12). This is the foundation for a peaceful and righteous community. These blessed are the victims of injustice and oppression who suffer for the Kingdom of God. These are the ones who strive for justice, righteousness, and peace. Jesus characterized the Kingdom of Heaven as a peace-loving community seeking reconciliation and validation from God. The gospel of Luke records a more pointed set of Beatitudes. Blessed, specifically, are the poor, you who hunger now and you who weep now (Lk 6:20–23). In Luke, Jesus pronounced woe on the rich, those who are full and those who laugh now (Lk 6:24–25). Here, Jesus embraced a clear partiality between rich and poor in the Kingdom of Heaven. His gospel upset the economic, political, and social marginalization of the poor. Those on the underside of social relations were uplifted. The Beatitudes demonstrated that Jesus was on the side of the poor and oppressed. He was concerned about the downtrodden, humiliated, and abused. For Jesus, the Kingdom provided healing, renewal, and restoration to the suffering. He actively pursued the path to love, peace, and reconciliation. Daniel A. Dombrowski concludes, "Put quite simply, for Jesus the meek and the peacemakers

are blessed (Matt. 5:1–12; Luke 6:17–49), not the violent, vengeful, or warmakers.”²⁰ Jesus uplifted the path to peace while rejecting violence and oppression. The Beatitudes stressed the significance of the merciful and the victims of society. Jesus upheld the meek as the correct example of humility and righteousness. Peacemaking, mercy, and love represented for Jesus the goals of the Kingdom of God.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus advanced a clearly pacifist ethic of nonviolence and love. He seemed at times to amend and overthrow the violent, vengeful aspects of the Old Testament Law of God. Matthew’s Jesus proclaimed, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also” (Mt 5:38–39). Then Matthew’s Jesus declared, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Mt 5:43–44). Marcus J. Borg asserts that the admonition to love the enemy would have been understood as a command to eschew the path of armed resistance against Rome.²¹ In this philosophy of love of enemy, Jesus articulated an almost intimate and personal forgiveness in the form of prayer and blessing. Jesus did not aim to destroy the enemy but rather to reconcile. Matthew’s Jesus further proclaimed, “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (Mt 6:14). The Golden Rule came from Jesus as a summation of this pacifist ethic. Matthew’s Jesus stated, “Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Mt 7:12). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also articulated a philosophy of *agape* (spiritual) love. Describing the principle commandments of God, Jesus declared, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Mt 22:37–40; Mk 12:29–31; Lk 10:27). Love of God and love of neighbor became Jesus’s philosophy of human relations. In Jesus’s estimation, the neighbor included the enemy, indeed all of humanity. Therefore, Jesus clearly embraced pacifism, nonviolence, and love in the Beatitudes and Sermon on the Mount.

Tod Lindberg also identifies a radical pacifism to Jesus’s politically oriented teaching.²² Lindberg argues, “The Jesusian teaching is that freedom and dignity lie within and can never be obliterated by

another.”²³ To resort to violence is therefore to undermine one’s own humanity. Even enslaved, this view asserts that Nat Turner should choose the dignified path of nonviolence and peace. Lindberg further asserts that turning the other cheek is not a passive form of resistance but assertive of one’s inherent dignity.²⁴ For Lindberg, “To strike and kill someone as an enemy really is to obliterate all earthly possibilities of the relations of equality in freedom one takes as the touchstone of one’s political and social arrangements.”²⁵ Thus, for Lindberg, violence necessarily obliterates community. Jesus also seemed to suggest that violence, anger, and hatred destroy the individual and prevent forgiveness and reconciliation with God and the neighbor. According to Lindberg, “Jesus counsels forgiveness, reconciliation, self-correction, turning the other cheek, mercy, peacemaking”²⁶ This pacifist interpretation of Jesus dominated early Christianity.

Noted scholar S. G. F. Brandon has challenged this pacifist view of Christ in favor of a more radical Jesus sympathetic to the political nationalist aspirations of Israel and the revolutionary violence of the Zealots.²⁷ Brandon argues that the gospel of Mark was produced to meet the needs of the Christian community in Rome after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple.²⁸ According to Brandon, Mark aims to reassure Christians of the loyalty of Jesus to Rome.²⁹ Brandon further argues that Mark suppresses the real cause of the crucifixion, the charge of sedition against Jesus by the Romans.³⁰ According to Oscar Cullman, “Jesus suffered the Roman death penalty, crucifixion, and the inscription, the ‘titulus,’ above the cross named as his crime the Zealotist attempt of having strived for kingly rule in Israel, a country still administered by the Romans.”³¹ For Brandon, the Romans are also primarily responsible for Jesus’s death. Mark’s gospel, however, shifts blame to the Jewish community and Sanhedrin. Therefore, Brandon believes that Mark characterized Jesus as pacifist for his own political reasons. Brandon goes on to say that Matthew was led to develop this Markan thesis of Roman innocence into the pacifist Christ against all armed resistance.³² Furthermore, Brandon asserts that Luke also emphasizes the pacifist Christ for other reasons.³³ The gospel of John likewise portrays Jesus as not seeking an earthly kingdom.³⁴ To Pilate, John’s Jesus declared, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here” (Jn 18:36). According to Brandon, the authors of Matthew, Luke, and John each elaborated on the Markan thesis and formulated a nonthreatening Christ divorced from Jewish

national politics and resistance to Rome. Brandon's thesis of the gospel writers' complicity in constructing a pacifist Christ to appease Rome however cannot be proven or otherwise substantiated. It would require a major reconstruction and reinterpretation of Jesus's gospel since the pacifist teaching is arguably central to Jesus's philosophy. Rather than a Markan political statement, it is more likely that pacifism, nonviolence, peace, and love reflected the true teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. On the surface at least, Jesus seemed to have advanced a strictly pacifist gospel. Violence was rejected in favor of his philosophy of love of God and love of neighbor, including the enemy. Christian pacifists, following this literal and absolute commitment to nonviolence, ostensibly practiced by Jesus, would condemn Nat Turner for his reliance on violent insurrection. In their view, Jesus's politics of violence prevented war while only pursuing peace, love, and reconciliation.

While it is clear that Jesus's words and deeds emphasized nonviolence, it is less clear if Jesus meant for his philosophy of love to govern his disciples in interpersonal relationships and private affairs or to also rule over the legitimacy of rebellions of the oppressed and wars of the state. It is one thing to prescribe nonviolence in personal matters and quite another to forbid just revolution or just war. Colin Morris argues that the absolute love ethic of Jesus is beyond fulfillment in history.³⁵ According to Morris, the absolutism of Jesus's moral teaching places an unrealistic burden on humanity.³⁶ Violence is an inevitable part of human culture. Certainly, it must and should be reduced. Nevertheless, Christian pacifists want one to believe that Jesus categorically prohibited violent struggles for human evolution, liberation, freedom, and justice. Therefore, Christian pacifists must conclude that the founding principle of Jesus's gospel is nonviolence and peace. They must assume that Jesus's commitment to pacifism overrides any commitment to defending the powerless neighbor or oneself through violence. But, what can such an absolute pacifist say to Nat Turner? "Remain an oppressed slave and be denied freedom in the name of love of enemy!" Or, what would such a pacifist Jesus say to an enslaved people? "Serve your conquerors well!" This is an unrealistic portrait of Jesus. Jesus was in fact a revolutionary figure, apocalyptic prophet, and proclaimer of the Kingdom of God. His gospel was a revolutionary gospel of freedom and justice. Kingdom principles of freedom, equality, justice, liberty, and righteousness are equally significant and compelling as ideals of nonviolence, forgiveness, love, and peace. Defending the violently oppressed neighbor in the name of God also demonstrates commitment to Jesus's gospel.

The Revolutionary Context of Jesus

While an absolutist and literalist interpretation of Jesus would categorically proclaim a pacifist Christ, other factors about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus reveal his attributes and teachings that present a more radical and revolutionary portrait of him than the traditional meek and mild characterization. Jesus was a complicated figure. His defiance, confrontations, and righteous indignation are also a part of the gospel record. His violent language, apocalypticism, and predictions of destruction are directed against the community of Israel and the contemporaries of his day. Jesus's gospel was forceful and revolutionary. Matthew's Jesus proclaimed, "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword" (Mt 10:34). For Jesus, the gospel produces division and confrontation. It generates conflict and disagreement. The Christianity that Jesus unleashed was both peaceful and violent at its root. The gospel of salvation, in fact, centers on the violent death and suffering of Jesus and its implications for redemption. Jesus's revolutionary context qualifies the pacifist view of him. The first-century Palestine that Jesus inhabited was ripe for revolutionary transformation and upheaval.

Brandon argues that Jesus emerged from within a historical context of conflict and confrontation between the Jews and the Romans.³⁷ By all accounts, Roman occupation created traumatic suffering for the Jews.³⁸ R. David Kaylor contends, "Social, political, and economic circumstances within Israel worsened under Roman rule."³⁹ According to Brandon, hostility to the Romans pervaded Jewish society.⁴⁰ Borg also identifies conflict as the context within which Jesus speaks and acts.⁴¹ According to Borg, "Conflict was endemic in first-century Palestine."⁴² Borg, like Brandon, notes rampant conflict with Rome among the Jews. Borg argues, "Not surprisingly, Jewish conflict with the colonial power was widespread and utilized a variety of means, ranging from the dispatch of official delegations, to non-violent protests, to guerrilla warfare, culminating in the tragic war of liberation of 66–70 C.E."⁴³ For Borg, resistance to Rome transcended party and cut across geography, sectarian allegiances, and social classes.⁴⁴ Kaylor describes Roman Palestine during Jesus's times as a "state of social conflict and crisis."⁴⁵ Kaylor further asserts, "The revolution was a political one against Roman rule, but it was also a social one against those within the Jewish population who exploited the relationship with Rome for their own economic and political advantage."⁴⁶ Internal divisions and class allegiances among the Jews

were exacerbated by Roman rule. Jesus came from a colonized and oppressed people as a result of Roman occupation. The Jews had to come to terms with growing political nationalist aspirations and the reality of Roman oppression. This revolutionary context necessarily influenced Jesus's life, teaching, and crucifixion.

Jewish poverty and economic unrest resulted from the Roman encroachment.⁴⁷ Jews faced a system of double taxation, Roman and Jewish. In addition to the great burden of assessments from Rome, Edward W. Bauman contends, "The Jews were heavily taxed for support of their national religion, paying tithes of their crops and making countless offerings for such things as first-born children, animals, the poor, the Temple, synagogues, priests, and rabbis."⁴⁸ According to Bauman, "The revolutionary tension caused by this economic unrest was without doubt one of the decisive factors in shaping the lives of the people in Jesus' world."⁴⁹ In addition, Bauman suggests that Jews discussed revolution in their daily speech during Jesus's lifetime.⁵⁰ Many expected the messianic hope and restoration of Israel. For Bauman, Jesus only becomes intelligible when set against this background of mounting revolutionary turmoil.⁵¹

For Brandon, the emergence of the Zealots illustrates the revolutionary potential of Jesus's historical period. In the year 6 CE, Judea and Samaria were placed under direct Roman rule.⁵² During the same year, Augustus ordered a census and, in direct response to the implied slavery to Rome, the Zealots were founded as a violent resistance movement by Judas of Galilee and Saddok, a Pharisee.⁵³ The Zealots were the avowed freedom fighters of Israel against the foreign imperial colonizer Rome. Zealots is derived from the Greek word *zelos* (zeal) meaning "the zealous ones," "the determined ones," and "the involved ones," implying an element of fanaticism.⁵⁴ Brandon asserts that Zealotism was essentially religious in its inspiration and purpose.⁵⁵ The Zealots were zealous for the Jewish Law and were expecting the messianic hope and imminent dawning of the Kingdom of God.⁵⁶ In the *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus claims the Zealots "associated themselves in general with the doctrine of the Pharisees" and "they had an invincible love of liberty, for they held God to be their only lord and master."⁵⁷ Rome was therefore an avowed enemy. Josephus identifies the Zealots as one of four philosophical sects among the Jews, including the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes.⁵⁸ The gospels reference all but the Essenes. Josephus calls the Zealots dangerous fanatics and "brigands" in his *Jewish War*, blaming them for the disaster of the Jewish War in 70 CE.⁵⁹ Founded during Jesus's childhood, Brandon

contends that Jesus would have been familiar with the aims and aspirations of the Zealots.⁶⁰ Brandon identifies Zealotism as a popular movement embodying the religious and social consciousness of the “people of the land.”⁶¹ According to Brandon, “The Zealots stood in true succession to the Yahwist prophets of old.”⁶² Like the Hebrew prophets, they were zealous of the God of Israel. Many Zealot freedom fighters were crucified like Jesus as traitors of Rome. Brandon asserts, “The cross was the symbol of Zealot sacrifice before it was transformed into the sign of Christian salvation.”⁶³ Brandon further maintains that Jesus shared Zealot sympathy for the poor and hostility to the rich.⁶⁴ Jesus and the Zealots both proclaimed the Kingdom of God was at hand.⁶⁵ Therefore, Brandon infers a bond of sympathy between Jesus and his followers and the Zealot cause.⁶⁶ While never overtly hostile toward Rome, Jesus never condemned or criticized the Zealots either in the gospel accounts. One of his disciples, in fact, was Simon the Zealot (Lk 6:15).⁶⁷

Within this revolutionary context of conflict and confrontation with Rome and internal crisis among the Jews, it is not clear that Jesus categorically condemns violence and war forever. He cannot simply ignore the reality of Roman oppression and Jewish poverty indefinitely. He was also deeply familiar with the revolutionary consciousness of the Jewish people and their messianic hopes for deliverance. Coming of the Kingdom must in some real sense mean that people will be saved from poverty and oppression. Jesus’s revolutionary gospel must somehow resolve and transform the state of bondage and dehumanization facing his people. Jesus’s literal word to his disciples was to reject violence and rebellion while his inner sympathies may have lied secretly with the freedom fighters of Israel. While certainly not a Zealot, the revolutionary implications of Jesus’s gospel aligned him with the Zealot hope of freedom and liberty before God. As the initiator of the Kingdom of God, Jesus and his gospel must respond truthfully and sincerely to the revolutionary context of crisis and conflict in first-century Palestine.

The Political Jesus

Many Christians believe that Jesus did not engage in politics or encourage political, social, and economic transformation in the world. For these Christians, Jesus’s gospel is exclusively a spiritual one that transcends earthly kingdoms and realities. In their eyes, the liberation offered by Jesus is spiritual emancipation and freedom from sin. One’s spirit is

freed and reconciled to God. This view relies on a dualism between the spiritual and the material. In their estimation, spiritual freedom does not guarantee material freedom from bondage and oppression. This type of theology mirrors the Christianity that endorsed black slavery in America, the hypocritical slave-holding Christianity rejected by Nat Turner. This Christianity believed one could be physically a slave but spiritually free. Spiritual freedom from sin and alienation therefore transcended one's material condition and earthly circumstances. While Jesus did not engage overtly in politics, Christians who deny a political Jesus overlook the explicitly political aspects of Jesus's teaching and gospel of freedom. The theological implications of Jesus's teaching inspire political, social, and economic justice on earth. Jesus's Kingdom of God is a progressive revolution that transforms human life and society. It necessarily topples earthly kingdoms. It is both spiritual and political by nature. The spiritual does in fact impinge upon the material. The Kingdom of God brings social, political, and economic transformation and renewal. Therefore, the spiritual necessarily changes and affects the material condition of bondage and oppression. A slave is not truly free until the slave becomes physically free. The supposed dualism between the spiritual and the material undermines a proper understanding of the politics of Jesus.

In his initial proclamation of his earthly mission to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth on the Sabbath, Luke's Jesus declared: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Lk 4:18–19)

Liberation theologians find within this announcement a dedication to liberation of the poor and oppressed. This is a decidedly political commitment of Jesus. In fact, Obery M. Hendricks, Jr. argues that Jesus was a political revolutionary.⁶⁸ For Hendricks, the gospel is undeniably political.⁶⁹ According to Hendricks, Jesus's message demands political, social, and economic changes in colonized Israel, including the removal of unjust social and political structures.⁷⁰ Hendricks further asserts that Jesus aimed to bring "economic, political, and social justice to his people."⁷¹ For Hendricks, the practice of justice is found throughout the Law, prophets, and psalms.⁷² Hendricks asserts that biblical justice seeks "the establishment or restoration of fair, equitable, and harmonious relationships in society."⁷³ Jesus's Kingdom of God promised to establish such justice on earth as in heaven. In

Mt 25:31–46, Jesus articulated the only test of true righteousness as the relief of the victims and oppressed of society.⁷⁴ For Hendricks, the politics of Jesus begin with his Jewishness.⁷⁵ According to Hendricks, the root foundation of Judaism and Judeo-Christian faith is the liberation event of the Exodus.⁷⁶ Hendricks maintains that this emphasis on liberation also includes the tradition of the judges of Israel as freedom fighters against foreign oppression.⁷⁷ According to Hendricks, Jesus embodied the bold social critique of oppression and injustice advanced by the prophets of old.⁷⁸ For Hendricks, Jesus was a revolutionary political prophet and liberator.

Similarly, Kaylor advances a political interpretation of Jesus. Kaylor asserts, “But I do believe that Jesus preached and taught a message that was thoroughly political, a message that demanded a social or political revolution.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, Kaylor rejects the supposed opposition between the spiritual and the political within Jesus: “Such a dichotomy between social-political life and spiritual life contradicts the Israelite view that God gave their people their life together as a covenant people, and that their community life expressed or denied their covenant with God.”⁸⁰ Jesus confronted the covenant community with new expectations of justice, mercy, righteousness, and love. According to Kaylor, “Jesus’ words and actions called for radical social and political change.”⁸¹ In addition, Kaylor argues, “The issues of poverty, justice, and peace occupy central places in his teachings and in his ministry.”⁸² Jesus directed his gospel to the downtrodden and oppressed. He advocated for the reality of the Kingdom of God to transform their social and political circumstances. Kaylor further argues, “Jesus addressed the poor, the hungry, the discouraged, and the persecuted with the message that God is on their side, supporting them in their struggle, and that God’s just will focuses on their relief.”⁸³ Jesus’s gospel provided a forceful critique of Jewish poverty and Roman oppression. It offered hope and change. In addition, Kaylor asserts, “Jesus advocated the cause of the poor and powerless against the wealthy and powerful elites that governed under Roman rule.”⁸⁴ Jesus announced the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven at hand (Mt 4:17; Mk 1:15). Kaylor contends, “His vision of a covenant society based on norms derived from Israel’s social, economic, political, and religious traditions would radically change the conditions of Roman-ruled Palestine.”⁸⁵ The Kingdom of Heaven would upset the status quo and establish divine rule in the earthly realm. According to Kaylor, “Jesus’ ethic represents a radical revisioning of society.”⁸⁶ Even if one maintains that Jesus avoided politics in his life, it is clear that his gospel message nevertheless had

political implications of justice and peace. As a prophet, Jesus furthered the social criticism, practiced by the Old Testament prophets, of poverty, injustice, idolatry, and unrighteousness.

It is important to recognize the political nature of Jesus's teaching and message. Jesus meant to challenge the situation of injustice, poverty, and unrighteousness in Israel. He acted to alleviate the suffering of the people under temple complicity with Rome. Even his healing miracles sought to break the chain of demonic evil and oppression. Such a political Jesus challenges the passive, meek and mild, traditional interpretation of him. In fact, Jesus actively confronted both political structures and social arrangements with his overtly political message and teachings. The Lord's Prayer calls for the Kingdom of God to come on earth as in heaven, relativizing all earthly kingdoms, and implicitly rejecting Roman imperial authority and rule.⁸⁷ Arising from a revolutionary Jewish context of crisis and confrontation, Jesus was familiar with the political aims and aspirations of his people. He was aware of Jewish poverty and Roman oppression. Bart D. Ehrman asserts, "As a first-century Jew, Jesus lived when many Jews expected God to intervene once and for all for his people, to overthrow the forces of evil that had gained ascendancy in the world and to bring in his good Kingdom on earth."⁸⁸ Jesus fulfilled these political messianic hopes by proclaiming the imminent Kingdom of God. His revolutionary gospel challenged the scribes and Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, priests and chief priests, Jewish community, and Rome. As a political liberator of the poor and oppressed, Jesus brought justice to earth. Upsetting the hierarchical relationship between rich and poor, Jesus consoled the powerless and weak. As a prophet, Jesus demanded social justice and religious sincerity. Jesus's gospel promoted social, political, and economic change and transformation in Israel and the Roman Empire.

First-century Jews expected a warlike political-nationalistic Messiah from the Davidic line who would defeat Israel's enemies, including Rome, and restore the kingdom to Israel. Traditional Christianity, however, asserts that Jesus reinterpreted his role as Messiah to conform to Isaiah's Suffering Servant. Throughout the gospels, Jesus predicted his crucifixion, suffering, and death as critical to God's plan of salvation. He assumed the role of a suffering rather than conquering Messiah. According to Kaylor, "No interpreter from H.S. Reimarus to S.G.F. Brandon has been able to convince the scholarly world that Jesus was a political messianic figure."⁸⁹ Kaylor further asserts, "The dominant religious and theological view has been that Jesus regarded himself as Messiah but reinterpreted Messiah in purely spiritual and

nonpolitical terms.”⁹⁰ Like the rejection of a political Jesus, however, this view is narrow and one-sided. Jesus comes as both the suffering servant and the political Messiah. Certainly, Jesus does not establish an earthly kingdom in first-century Palestine. Yet, his spiritual Kingdom nevertheless affects the political realm. Those who deny a political Messiah ignore the political implications of the coming Kingdom, Jesus’s apocalyptic expectations of judgment and salvation, and the revolutionary nature of Jesus’s role as liberator, Christ, and Messiah. The politics of the Kingdom establish political, social, and economic justice on earth. Jesus was the catalyst and originator of that justice. As the Son of man, Jesus’s apocalypticism revealed him as the political, avenging, and violent Messiah of the book of Revelation (Rev 19:11–16). As Christ, he came as liberator of the poor and oppressed, and initiator of the Kingdom of God, and he remains a political Messiah until the final consummation.

All four gospels recount Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem proclaiming and confirming his role as Messiah (Mt 21:1–11; Mk 11:1–11; Lk 19:28–40; Jn 12:12–19). Brandon argues the triumphal entry is an assertion of a political messiahship and challenge to both Jews and Rome.⁹¹ Matthew and John record the event as a fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, which declares: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Before a multitude of Jews in Jerusalem for the Passover, Jesus victoriously accomplished his messianic entrance on a colt. Many spread their clothes and leafy branches before him. The crowd in Mark’s gospel exclaimed, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” (Mk 11:9–10). Each gospel account affirms that the people, his followers, and Jesus understand him to be the Messiah. Kaylor asserts, “The narratives all reflect the early church’s understanding of the event as the decisive coming of the Messiah to Israel, Israel’s rejection of the Messiah (sealing Israel’s tragic fate), and setting in motion the forces that will bring Jesus to his death.”⁹² With Jesus, the Kingdom comes and fulfills God’s plan and purpose for the world. While he does not offer the immediate restoration of Israel’s earthly kingdom, Jesus proposed a new allegiance to the political, social, and economic claims of the Kingdom of God. His apocalyptic expectations confirmed that he saw himself as the political Messiah of Israel who offers freedom, liberation, and salvation to humanity.

The Revolutionary Jesus

Revolution is sudden, abrupt fundamental change and transformation in political, social, economic, and/or religious structures that propels the community progressively forward in history and awakens a new consciousness. Revolution upsets the status quo, embraces the future, and rejects the stagnant. P. L. Geschiere and H. G. Schulte Nordholt assert, “In every revolution there is a consciousness of an unbearable yoke which must be thrown off.”⁹³ Liberation, liberty, and freedom underlay all just revolutions. Wilfried Daim argues, “To ‘obey God rather than men’—this is the foundation of every revolution the thrust of which is in the direction of the evolution of mankind.”⁹⁴ In this respect, Jesus was a revolutionist. He pledged complete allegiance and obedience to the Kingdom of God and even to death. From the beginning, he proclaimed the imminent arrival of God’s Kingdom and the need for repentance (Mt 4:17; Mk 1:15). The Kingdom of God symbolized God’s purpose and plan in history and the world. Anthonie Van Den Doel asserts, “God’s activity in the world is geared at humanization, liberation, and justice.”⁹⁵ The Kingdom of God promised a progressive revolution in human affairs toward equality and freedom. Faithful commitment to God’s Kingdom defined Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. The Kingdom of God necessarily relativizes all earthly kingdoms and imposes its higher principles of justice, mercy, and love upon the world. Luke’s Jesus proclaimed, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches” (Lk 13:18–19). He also declared, “To what shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened” (Lk 13:20–21). Luke’s Jesus foresaw that the Kingdom of God will grow, increase, and inevitably challenge the existing order of social and political evil. Jürgen Moltmann contends that “the all-embracing vision of God must be linked with the economic liberation of man from hunger, with the political freeing of man from oppression by other men, and with the human emancipation of man from racial humiliation.”⁹⁶ The Kingdom of God brings political, social, and economic justice and righteousness to earth.

Since Jesus ultimately rejected violent insurrection against Rome, unlike the Zealots, it is assumed that he was not revolutionary. However, Jesus realized his willing death was the catalyst for God’s

Kingdom to decisively defeat the kingdom of darkness. In this case, God's Kingdom would not come through armed rebellion or violence against Rome. For Matthew's Jesus, his death would fulfill the scriptures and the Kingdom would come through one eternal sacrifice (Mt 26:54). Notwithstanding his rejection of armed conflict, Jesus was deeply revolutionary. Throughout his life and ministry, he vociferously challenged the religious and political leaders of Israel. He understood that the Kingdom of God would overthrow the current circumstances in Israel and the world. Dickey concludes that Jesus initiated a revolutionary Kingdom to overcome the rule of the high priests and Rome.⁹⁷ Dickey asserts, "The point is Jesus predicted the downfall of Jerusalem and Rome, and the substitution in their place of a new order of society which He called the 'Kingdom of God.'"⁹⁸ In addition, Dickey emphasizes the social and political implications of the Kingdom.⁹⁹ Jesus intended for a revolutionary new consciousness and relationship to God's Kingdom in Israel. He expected a new era of freedom and justice. The revolutionary fervor with which Jesus preached indicated the radical significance of the moment. Jesus was willing to die for humanity and the Kingdom of God. He believed the Kingdom of God would bring renewal and restoration. His ultimate sacrifice of crucifixion and death was therefore truly revolutionary. Furthermore, he passed on a revolutionary Christianity to his followers and disciples.

A revolutionary image of Jesus contributes to a radical and revolutionary Christianity. Luke's Jesus proclaimed his fundamental allegiance to the captives and the oppressed (Lk 4:18–19). This partiality of the Kingdom of God challenged the rich, the powerful, and the elite. Jesus came in fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures, but he offered a new interpretation of the Law of God. For Jesus, the Kingdom of God superseded legalism and strict observance of the Law.¹⁰⁰ He subverted the Sabbath, fellowshipped with sinners and tax collectors, declined for his disciples to fast, ate with unwashed hands, and challenged the oral law of the Pharisees. In addition to challenging the Pharisees and Sadducees, he openly defied the chief priests and elders. Jesus advanced a commitment to nonviolence and peace in interpersonal relationships. His philosophy of love of God and love of neighbor overturned Israel's resentment of the Samaritans and Gentiles. Unlike common gender discrimination, he included women into intimate aspects of his ministry and fellowship. He forgave sinners. Therefore, Jesus was a truly revolutionary figure. He was willing to fight and die for the Kingdom of God.

Christianity still needs such a revolutionary Messiah. For too long, Christianity has been complicit in slavery, empire, colonialism, and unjust war. A new revolutionary interpretation of Jesus condemns this hypocrisy and systematic violence in favor of the fruits of freedom, justice, and liberation. As the announcer of the Kingdom of God, Jesus promoted equality, liberation, freedom, and peace in relationship to God and others. His life, death, and resurrection were meant to change the world and to advance these revolutionary principles of salvation.

Jesus's Violence

Few commentators have examined the violence and violent language of Jesus to undermine his supposedly absolutely nonviolent gospel. George Aichele, however, identifies the “mysterious or fantastical” violence of Jesus against the kingdom of evil.¹⁰¹ Aichele asserts, “In the story of Mark, the character named Jesus is the man of violence.”¹⁰² Jesus’s actions and behavior in Mark and the other gospels is fraught with violence. Aichele further argues that “violence in relation to the kingdom appears in both the words and deeds of Jesus.”¹⁰³ This mythic or spiritual violence of Jesus is directed against Satan and the kingdom of darkness. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus declared, “And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force” (Mt 11:12). For Aichele, in Mark’s gospel, Jesus comes as an “aggressor” with counterviolence against Satan’s kingdom.¹⁰⁴ Speaking of Satan in the gospel of Mark, Jesus proclaimed, “No one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. And then he will plunder his house” (Mk 3:27). Jesus is the one who binds the strong man Satan through exorcism and acts of healing. According to Aichele, Jesus casts out and rebukes demons in an “apocalyptic confrontation,” signaling the dawning of the Kingdom of God.¹⁰⁵ Jesus’s ministry was dominated by spiritual warfare with evil and darkness. This overt spiritual violence of Jesus is seldom critiqued because it is viewed as supernatural or fantastical. The modern sensibility rejects the reality of demonic forces and supernatural evil. Nevertheless, Jesus inhabited a worldview in which angels and demons influenced earthly outcomes. Stephen Charles Mott maintains, “In the time of Jesus, violence and oppression led people to see underlying the lawless deeds of humanity a structure of evil, personified by fallen angels.”¹⁰⁶ For Jesus, the spiritual warfare in the heavens

threatened human affairs. In order for the Kingdom of God to come, Jesus believed he must counteract the reality of demonic spirits who oppress the spiritually sick. Jesus did not take a passive role in defeating the kingdom of evil. He aggressively performed exorcisms and actively combatted darkness through his life and ministry. Michel Desjardins asserts, "Jesus' powers of exorcism anticipate the wrath of God that will soon descend on the Romans" (Mk 5:1–13).¹⁰⁷ The mythic struggle between God and Satan provides the cosmic backdrop for Jesus's violent acts of healing and restoration. In the words of Gregory A. Boyd, "He was revolting against, and in principle overthrowing, the kingdom of darkness by manifesting and establishing the Kingdom of God."¹⁰⁸ Jesus's victory over demonic forces was also symbolic of his struggle against poverty and oppression. Hendricks asserts, "Jesus' triumph over the unclean spirit in Mark 5:1–13 teaches that, when properly used, the power of Jesus' Gospel can liberate societies from the grip of oppression and the multiple pathologies that oppression causes."¹⁰⁹ For Hendricks, the passage is an indictment of "Legion" or the Roman military and its oppression of Israelite society. In these acts of exorcism and healing, Jesus saw himself as a spiritual warrior. For Aichele, Jesus violently encountered Satan's kingdom of evil.¹¹⁰

Cullmann asserts that the key to Jesus's relationship to revolution is his attitude toward the contemporary situations and movements of first-century Palestine.¹¹¹ Cullmann argues that Jesus rejected the principle movements of his time, including the revolutionary Zealots, in favor of steadfast devotion to the Kingdom of God.¹¹² In fact, Aichele maintains that Jesus violently provoked and confronted his contemporaries. According to Aichele, "Each of the synoptic gospels portrays Jesus as a violent man, one who contests violently with others (Pharisees and scribes, his own followers, the crowds, and perhaps even the Romans)."¹¹³ Aichele further contends, "Jesus fights with these others over his own role and identity, over the meaning of scripture, and also over the kingdom of God."¹¹⁴ Desjardins notes an "angry, self-righteous tone" from Jesus and throughout the New Testament.¹¹⁵ Desjardins further asserts, "Throughout the New Testament Jesus and his followers can be found accepting, condoning, and even inciting violence."¹¹⁶ In fact, Desjardins maintains, "Occasionally Jesus' followers carried weapons while they traveled."¹¹⁷ For Desjardins, "The interactive model presented by Jesus especially is one of confrontation based on the belief that he is superior."¹¹⁸ As the bearer of the ultimate truth, Jesus maintained a sometimes condescending and

vitriolic messianic consciousness. This violent, aggressive side of Jesus animated his revolutionary nature.

Jesus's primary opponent in first-century Palestine was the scribes and Pharisees. Of the scribes, Jesus warned, "Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts, who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation" (Lk 20:46–47). The Pharisees were a lay movement in "sharp opposition to the secularized priestly aristocracy."¹¹⁹ They were zealous for the Law of God. The Pharisees envisioned the Law applied to all aspects of public and private life.¹²⁰ The Pharisaic "programme [was] the rigorous and uncompromising keeping of the Torah in all spheres and situations of daily life."¹²¹ The Pharisees were recognized for developing the traditional or oral law.¹²² This oral law interpreted the Law of God for daily living. Matthew's Jesus charged the Pharisees with nullifying the Law of God based on their human traditions and interpretations (Mt 15:3–6).¹²³ Dickey contends, "With withering scorn He pointed out their insincerity, their love of recognition, [and] their perverted zeal."¹²⁴ Jesus attacked their selfishness and hypocrisy.¹²⁵ In response, the Pharisees plotted with the Herodians to destroy Mark's Jesus (Mk 3:6). Bauman identifies five points of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees: (1) forgiveness of sins by Jesus (Mk 2:1–12), (2) Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners (Mt 9:11; Mk 2:13–17), (3) fasting (Mt 9:14; Mk 2:18–22; Lk 5:33), (4) disciples plucking corn on the Sabbath (Mt 12:2; Mk 2:23–28; Lk 6:2), and (5) healing on the Sabbath (Mt 12:10; Mk 3:1–6; Lk 6:7).¹²⁶ A sixth conflict concerned the washing of hands according to the tradition of the elders (Mt 15:1–2).

Jesus utilized violent language and threats of apocalyptic violence against his Pharisaic opponents. Matthew's Jesus labeled the Pharisees an evil "Brood of vipers!" (Mt 12:34) In Matthew 23, Jesus condemned and pronounced woe on the scribes and Pharisees:

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves. (Mt 23:13–15)

Jesus denied them access to the Kingdom of Heaven and rejected them as sons of the kingdom of darkness. He further denounced the Pharisees and scribes, saying:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. (Mt 23:23–28)

Thus, Jesus forcefully criticized their insincerity and inward evil. Matthew's Jesus violently rebuked them, exclaiming, "Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?" (Mt 23:33). The gospel of John portrays an even more bitter confrontation between Jesus and the Jews who reject and seek to kill him. In his understanding of cosmic good and evil, Jesus judged that these Jews were aligned with the kingdom of darkness. To these Jews, Jesus proclaimed, "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it" (Jn 8:44). Jesus spoke to his opponents throughout the synoptic gospels and the gospel of John with this same defiant, indignant, confrontational tone. Anchored in his battle against Satan and the kingdom of evil, Jesus condemned those who rejected him. Luke's Jesus also pronounced oracles of judgment and doom upon Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum:

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades. He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me. (Lk 10:13–16)

Jesus pitted himself against his entire generation calling it “evil” (Lk 11:29), “faithless and perverse” (Lk 9:41), and a “wicked and adulterous” age (Mt 16:4). According to Marius Rieser, “With this address, clearly negative in tone, he comprehends the whole nation of his contemporaries, all of Israel, as a unified opponent.”¹²⁷ Luke’s Jesus challenged the multitude saying, “Hypocrites! You can discern the face of the sky and of the earth, but how is it you do not discern this time?” (Lk 12:56). Matthew’s Jesus threatened the chief priests and the Pharisees, declaring, “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder” (Mt 21:43–44). Even with his most intimate disciples, Jesus was abrupt and dismissive at times. To his frightened disciples facing a tempest, Matthew’s Jesus stated, “Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?” (Mt 8:26). Jesus also aggressively rebuked Peter, saying, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men” (Mt 16:23; Mk 8:33). Jesus could not tolerate anyone or anything that deterred him from his mission. To his disciples, in anticipation of the Christianity that followed him, Mark’s Jesus declared, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mk 16:15–16). Jesus’s gospel promised both salvation to some and damnation to others.

Jesus therefore saw himself in conflict and confrontation with the kingdom of Satan as well as his contemporaries. He actively engaged in spiritual warfare. Through exorcism and healing, he violently confronted darkness, rebuking and casting out demons. Those who rejected Jesus and his gospel were cursed while those who received him were blessed. Jesus condemned his generation as wicked and evil. He pronounced doom on impenitent cities and the rich. He displayed impatience and irritation with his disciples and followers. Furthermore, he often adopted a self-righteous and defiant tone with his opponents. In addition, he was estranged from his hometown of Nazareth and his family. Jesus was a man apart, the “man of violence” identified by Aichele in the gospels.¹²⁸ Emerging from within a revolutionary context, Jesus violently and aggressively sought a revolution in religious, political, and social life.

Further violent speech came from Jesus’s apocalyptic vision of the Son of man and his predictions of the destruction of the temple. Jesus saw the Son of man as a cosmic Judge and Avenger who violently

fulfills the judgment of God at the end of time. Jesus predicted, "Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory" (Mk 13:26; Lk 21:27). Warning his disciples, Matthew's Jesus asserted, "The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 13:41–42). According to Matthew's Jesus, the appearance of the Son of man will be swift: "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be" (Mt 24:27). Under questioning by the high priest if he was the Christ, Jesus proclaimed, "It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mt 26:64; Mk 14:62). The high priest understood Jesus to be claiming to be the Christ. In response, the high priest tore his clothes and pronounced death on Jesus (Mt 26:65–66; Mk 14:63–64). In Matthew 25, Jesus described the Son of man separating the righteous and unrighteous at the end of time, sending some to eternal life and others to eternal damnation (Mt 25:31–46). Jesus spoke this violent apocalypticism against his opponents, including the chief priests and elders. The Son of man would come to destroy the hypocrites, faithless, and unrighteous who reject the salvation of Jesus. The Kingdom would be given to a new community of believers outside Israel. To add to the insult, Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple, the center of Israel's religious, political, and social life (Mt 24:1–2; Mk 13:1–2).

In what some scholars regard as Jesus's most overtly violent political act, all four gospels record the cleansing of the temple (Mt 21:12–13; Mk 11:15–18; Lk 19:45–46; Jn 2:13–15). Unlike the synoptics, the gospel of John places the cleansing at the beginning of Jesus's ministry. It emerges as an initial act of defiance against the Jewish elite. In contrast, the synoptics all record the scene during the last days of Jesus in Jerusalem. Here, his violent cleansing comes as a final political statement against the Sadducees, the temple, and priestly aristocracy. The temple was not only a religious center but was also the governing institution of Israel and the center of Israel's political life and power.¹²⁹ According to Kaylor, "The Gospels associate the Sadducees with the Temple, the priesthood, and the Sanhedrin."¹³⁰ Dickey maintains, "Josephus states the Sadducees were rich aristocrats, who constituted the minority of the nation and exercised official authority only by concessions to the policies of the Pharisees."¹³¹ Dickey further asserts, "They rejected the oral law, denied the existence of Fate, of

immortality, and of rewards and punishments in another world.”¹³² Furthermore, the Sadducees denied the resurrection and the existence of angel and spirit.¹³³ Like the Pharisees, Jesus defended the doctrine of immortality, the resurrection, and the existence of angels and demons.¹³⁴ During his cleansing of the temple, Jesus decisively condemned the Sadducees and priests for their complicity with Rome and weight of burdens placed on the Jewish people. In the most violent account, the gospel of John, Jesus brandished a “whip of cords,” driving the moneychangers and animals out of the temple and overturning the tables (Jn 2:13–15). Cullmann asserts, “In cleansing the temple he undoubtedly attacked an important component of the sacrificial system, and certainly defied the priesthood by doing it.”¹³⁵ By challenging the priesthood, Jesus confronted the governors of Israel. For Hendricks, Jesus’s protest was a repudiation of the temple and the exploitation and abuse practiced by its priestly leaders.¹³⁶ Hendricks argues, “In no uncertain terms Jesus condemns the priests’ greater love of wealth than of holiness.”¹³⁷ Brandon also sees the cleansing as a “radical challenge to the authority of the sacerdotal aristocracy, and it was also a truly revolutionary act.”¹³⁸ Ben F. Meyer asserts, “To disrupt temple operations and to do so at the head of a crowd of messianic-minded pilgrims come to Jerusalem for Passover, was to perform an explosive act.”¹³⁹ Rather than simply a demonstration, Meyer states, “It was at once a demonstration, a prophetic critique, a fulfillment event, and a sign of the future.”¹⁴⁰ Kaylor contends, “In attacking the Temple establishment, Jesus challenged the very center of the system that signified the covenant traditions but neglected the social and economic consequences of those traditions.”¹⁴¹ Jesus’s revolutionary act symbolized his violent criticism of the religious and political leaders of Israel. As a political and contentious prophet, Jesus rejected his contemporaries and judged Israel. Shortly after cleansing the temple, Jesus spoke the parable of the wicked vinedressers (Mt 21:33–44; Mk 12:1–11; Lk 20:9–18) against the chief priests, scribes, and elders. In it, Jesus expressed anger at the vinedressers of Israel who have abused and beaten God’s servants, the prophets. In a final act of violence, they have killed God’s son. Jesus concluded that God will destroy the vinedressers of Israel and give the vineyard to others. Through this parable, Jesus condemned the leaders of Israel to God’s destruction and judgment. The parable further revealed Jesus’s apocalyptic consciousness about the Kingdom of God.

The violent language and the physical and spiritual violence of Jesus undermine the traditional meek and mild image of Jesus and

contradict the absolute pacifist interpretation of him. Jesus was a revolutionary figure in the gospels. He emerged from a context of social and political crisis amidst Jewish poverty and Roman oppression. His coming was critical and essential to the fulfillment of God's salvation on earth. He was the proclaimer and initiator of the Kingdom of God, apocalyptic prophet and teacher, exorcist, and radical healer. He actively pursued his mission of liberation and justice for the poor and oppressed. He aggressively confronted and belittled the scribes and Pharisees along with rejecting the Sadducees, chief priests, and elders. He criticized the multitude and disparaged his disciples. He battled the kingdom of darkness and bound demonic spirits. He violently cleansed the temple. He pronounced God's judgment on the temple and Israel. He proclaimed himself to be Christ (Mt 26:64; Mk 14:62; Lk 22:69–70). In these confrontations, Jesus showed himself in concord with the revolutionary character of the times. He was also a freedom fighter like the Zealots. Both fought for the Kingdom of God. Yet, ultimately, Jesus rejected all of his contemporaries, including the Zealots, while nevertheless maintaining the Zealot militancy for the Kingdom. As a prophet, Jesus was content to aggressively and forcefully defeat the kingdom of evil and to bring the Kingdom of God to earth. Thus, Jesus's supposedly absolute commitment to nonviolence is compromised. Jesus must be viewed as a hostile and potentially violent opponent of Satan and evil. As elsewhere in the New Testament, at times Jesus fulfilled the assumption that violence and conflict can be necessary and useful to effect positive change.¹⁴²

The Theological Problem

Two competing interpretations of Jesus emerge from the theological discourse. Traditionally, Jesus is viewed as the meek and mild pacifist. He is the suffering servant. He is nonpolitical, otherworldly, and spiritual. His kingdom is not of this world. He is a wise sage who heals and teaches peacefully. He does not threaten but is threatened by others. He seeks inward transformation of the heart toward God and neighbor. The Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount are taken to confirm his absolute commitment to pacifism and nonviolence. His death on the cross becomes the symbol for nonviolent resistance of evil. In this view, Jesus's ultimate commitment to peace characterizes his understanding of the coming Kingdom of God. God's Kingdom means forgiveness, peace, reconciliation, and love. Nonviolence is seen as the crowning principle of Jesus's gospel. Jesus's image is

molded to conform to a strictly pacifist outlook. This interpretation of Jesus subordinates his principles of justice to his commitment to nonviolence and peaceful reconciliation.

A second interpretation paints a more radical and revolutionary portrait of Jesus. Jesus emerged from within a context of revolutionary resistance toward Rome and internal crisis and confrontation among the Jews. His life, death, and resurrection speak to this historical context. He was sympathetic to the plight of his people in respect to Rome. He engaged in the contentious dialogue of the religious and political leaders of his day. He came as a real person who was affected by resentment, frustration, and conflict. He aggressively challenged his contemporaries and predicted apocalyptic violence and condemnation. He strove against the kingdom of evil and promoted economic, social, and political change in Israel. He was a political revolutionary.¹⁴³ With righteous indignation and social criticism, this Jesus was a political Messiah who offered justice and righteousness, alongside peace and love. He acknowledged the wrath of God toward oppression and injustice. He was a liberator of the poor and oppressed. For this Jesus, his ultimate commitment was liberty, freedom, and justice. Material freedom was guaranteed in addition to spiritual liberation from sin and evil. Such a political Jesus inspires a progressive revolution in human affairs ushered in by the Kingdom of God. This interpretation of Jesus views him as Christ, liberator, and Messiah.

Nat Turner's dilemma as an oppressed slave symbolized the contradiction between these two interpretations of Jesus. A pacifist Jesus categorically condemns and denounces Nat Turner for his violence and wrath. With an absolute commitment to nonviolence, a pacifist Jesus does not account for Nat Turner's historical context or social condition. Rather, this Jesus applies an unconditional and legalistic standard of peace and love even when faced with violence and oppression. Violence is deemed to be always wrong in every situation. This is an extremist and unsympathetic Jesus. By contrast, Nat Turner's political Messiah condemns and judges slavery and dehumanization in the name of God. He defends the powerless and the abused. He comes to alleviate suffering and brutality. If he leaves Turner and black humanity as slaves, Jesus denies blacks all of the political and theological implications of the Kingdom of Heaven. God's Kingdom no longer stands for freedom and righteousness in relationship to God and neighbor. It no longer means justice and empowerment. As a slave, the grip of oppression and violence cannot be overcome without God's deliverance and salvation. Spiritual liberation alone cannot

overthrow material bondage and captivity. An absolute commitment to nonviolence denies Nat Turner his right to be free and to enjoy the fruits of the Kingdom. When violence becomes necessary to ensure gospel imperatives, a pacifist Jesus cannot respond effectively and adequately. He becomes anti-Kingdom in favor of perpetual slavery and degradation. He makes nonviolence the primary imperative and subordinates the rest of the gospel to it. This is why Nat Turner's theology was revolutionary. It concluded that violence on behalf of the Kingdom of Heaven may be necessary, legitimate, and justified in the history of humanity. Turner's theological vision of God and Christ invited liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence to end dehumanization and violent oppression. Like Jesus's mysterious Son of man, Nat Turner embraced apocalyptic violence in favor of the coming Kingdom of God.

Conclusion

Determining Jesus's politics of violence depends on an interpretation of Jesus in relationship to his historical context and circumstance. Consideration of context challenges the literal and absolute, pacifist view of Jesus. One cannot ignore the revolutionary turmoil in Israel during Jesus's life. One cannot overlook the significance of Roman oppression and heavy taxation of the Jews. One cannot discount the contentious relationship between the Sadducees and the Pharisees or the complicity of the priesthood in Roman rule. One cannot disregard the role of the revolutionary Zealots or pay no attention to other messianic movements of the period. Jesus's gospel responded to these revolutionary times. He emerged from within this revolutionary context as an apocalyptic prophet. In Jesus's view, God was moving now to right the social, political, economic, and religious wrongs in Israel. The revolutionary ethos of the moment confirmed for Jesus the radical and revolutionary nature of the coming Kingdom of God. Luke's Jesus criticized the hypocrisy of the crowds for not recognizing the significance of the times (Lk 12:56). Yet, the times called for revolutionary change and transformation. Consideration of Jesus's context of conflict and crisis makes the traditional, meek and mild, pacifist image of Jesus seem impotent and inaccurate. Jesus's gospel, in fact, directly and aggressively responded to the reality of poverty, corruption, violence, and oppression in Israel. Kaylor asserts, "The Beatitudes form a revolutionary messianic proclamation of the reversal coming when God's righteous rule will eliminate the oppressive

social conditions.”¹⁴⁴ Jesus also admitted that violence was associated with the coming of God’s Kingdom and justice. He predicted warfare, the destruction of the temple, and apocalyptic violence. The whole context of Jesus’s life pointed beyond a strictly pacifist Jesus to a righteous, defiant, and radical Jesus sympathetic to the plight of the humiliated and not averse to confrontation. Jesus’s supposed absolute nonviolence is compromised by a more radical and revolutionary interpretation of him.

According to Brandon, the most certain fact about Jesus was his crucifixion by the Romans as a political rebel against Roman rule in Judea.¹⁴⁵ The four gospels all recount Jesus’s false accusation of sedition by the Jewish authorities and his condemnation and execution by Pontius Pilate.¹⁴⁶ Cullman contends, “Jesus was condemned by Pilate as a political rebel, as a Zealot.”¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, Brandon asserts, “Crucifixion was a Roman punishment, and, as the records of Josephus show, hundreds of Jewish patriots suffered the penalty during the period A.D. 6–70.”¹⁴⁸ Thus, the imperial violence of Rome against the Jews was complicit in Jesus’s murder. This fact has theological significance. Jesus’s crucifixion brought judgment and condemnation on Rome and imperialism. The Kingdom of God reigns over the brutality, inhumanity, and violence of the Roman Empire. Nowhere in the gospels does Jesus utter or act out anti-Roman sentiments.¹⁴⁹ Nonetheless, his chosen path of justice put him in a collision course with Rome. By challenging the religious and political authorities of Israel, who were directly empowered by Roman rule, Jesus inevitably came against Rome. The threat of social unrest in Judea would have worried the Romans. Pontius Pilate responded to the implied threat from Jesus with the fate of many Jewish freedom fighters. He crucified him as “The King of the Jews” (Mt 27:37; Mk 15:26; Lk 23:38; Jn 19:19). Though not a Zealot, Jesus died the death of one. This political execution implicated Rome in the war against God’s Kingdom. The crucifixion of Jesus condemned Roman imperialism, oppression, and violence. This is the theological implication of Roman complicity in his execution.

Messianic expectations and revolutionary hopes captivated first-century Jews. Confrontation with Rome and internal divisions in Israel alerted expectant Jews that God would soon intervene. Jesus followed closely upon the messianic movement of John the Baptist. Meyer argues, “The beginning of Jesus’ public career is inextricably bound up with the public career of John the Baptist.”¹⁵⁰ John proclaimed a baptism in Israel for the remission of sins in anticipation

of God's reign. He predicted the imminent dawning of the Kingdom of God and the resulting judgment to come. He revealed the Messiah as the judge of the world.¹⁵¹ In John's gospel, he identified Jesus as the Son of God (Jn 1:34). Of Jesus, John the Baptist declared, "His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Mt 3:12; Lk 3:17). This apocalyptic expectation of judgment permeated both Jesus's and John the Baptist's words and actions. Notwithstanding, Jesus's personal messianic consciousness made him distinct from John, and much bolder.¹⁵² In his primary role as preacher and prophet, Matthew's Jesus, like John, announced the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt 4:17). After John was imprisoned, Mark's Jesus came to Galilee and declared, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15). The Kingdom meant salvation for those who repented but destruction and ruin to those who refused.¹⁵³ According to Jesus, the Kingdom of God brings judgment and tribulation on Israel and the world. It signals apocalyptic violence and wrath from God. An accurate assessment of Jesus and the Kingdom of God must account for this apocalypticism of John the Baptist and Jesus. Not only does the gospel bring judgment on Rome and imperialism, but it also judges the nation of Israel and the kingdoms of the world. The Kingdom of God overthrows Roman oppression, relativizes earthly kingdoms, and condemns Israel's internal injustice, legalism, hypocrisy, and inhumanity. God's reign ushers in a new era of accountability, reconciliation, and salvation.

Jesus enjoyed a freedom in relationship to strict observance of the Law that offended the Pharisees. Cullmann asserts that Jesus's freedom with respect to the Law was revolutionary.¹⁵⁴ He was not bound by the rigid standard of human traditions and interpretations of the Pharisees. Yet, Jesus never intended to overthrow the Law of God but only to make it realizable in practice. Matthew's Jesus proclaimed, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17). For most Christians, Jesus is remembered as a flawless keeper of the Law and sinless. Yet, his conflict with the Pharisees came precisely from his reinterpretation of keeping the Law. According to Nacpil, "The Law is the foundation of Jewish life and society, of Jewish religion and culture, of Jewish hope and destiny, and so of Jewish identity and self-consciousness."¹⁵⁵ By challenging Pharisaic interpretations of the Law, Jesus was revolutionizing Jewish consciousness. He saw the Law as subordinate to the Kingdom

of Heaven. His gospel, thus, supersedes the Law.¹⁵⁶ Nacpil contends, “Jesus mercilessly exposed the superficiality of Pharisaic piety by demonstrating that true obedience to the Law is not by strictly observing the letter of the Law but by achieving its purpose.”¹⁵⁷ Therefore, Jesus rejected literalism, legalism, and hypocrisy. Borg contends, “As a prophet, he aggressively and provocatively challenged the corporate direction of his people: violating the taboos of table fellowship, subverting the Sabbath, criticizing his nation’s traditions regarding the Temple, he reversed the expectations of the future held by his contemporaries.”¹⁵⁸ Jesus did not equate the Kingdom of God with Israel.¹⁵⁹ He envisioned a Kingdom more inclusive than the holy, separated nation of Israel.¹⁶⁰ He extended the universality of the gospel to the Samaritans (Jn 4:1–42) and, by implication, to the other Gentiles. To establish a strict law of nonviolence in all circumstances violates the flexibility of Jesus’s understanding of the Law. In effect, such severity imposes a rigid new law of conformity. Yet, Jesus’s gospel maintained that achieving equality and justice is more desirable than strict, literalistic, and legalistic standards of observance.

To condemn violence absolutely does not fulfill the Law and prophets but rather amends and overthrows the Old Testament view of God and God’s violence. In the Old Testament, “God commanded to fight and kill.”¹⁶¹ In addition, God honored and influenced the violence of military leaders, Jewish freedom fighters, judges, kings, and prophets.¹⁶² Christian pacifists suggest that Jesus rejected this historical violence of God in favor of strict nonviolence. Yet, Jesus’s predictions of judgment and apocalyptic violence confirmed that he did not have a completely pacifist view of God and the Kingdom of God. God’s righteousness and wrath stood equally beside God’s love and mercy in Jesus’s understanding. Perhaps, Jesus believed that human violence not initiated by God was illegitimate and unethical. At any rate, Jesus’s gospel did not condemn violence and revolution categorically and absolutely. It rejected interpersonal violence that is vengeful and hateful. One is not to destroy one’s own personal enemies. Notwithstanding, Jesus’s gospel did not denounce the apocalyptic violence of the Kingdom of God. As an act of political violence, the cleansing of the temple illustrated Jesus’s willingness to manifest the violence of God’s Kingdom. Jesus’s war with Satan and the kingdom of darkness meant that Jesus must apply God’s counterviolence to evil. His violent exorcisms, triumphal entry into Jerusalem as the Messiah, political violence against the temple, and willing death on the cross exalted Jesus as the conqueror of Satan’s kingdom.

The traditional, nonpolitical, and otherworldly interpretation of Jesus is inadequate to describe his politics of violence. Jesus actively challenged religious, political, and economic structures in Israel, seeking also to influence the consciousness of the people. His gospel challenged the legalism and hypocrisy of the Pharisees. It criticized the Sadducees for rejecting the resurrection, eternal life, and belief in angels and demons. It resisted the armed violence of the Zealots. It condemned the complicity of the priesthood in Roman rule and oppression. It judged the rich and the unequal system of poverty and taxation. It extended the gospel beyond Israel. Jesus also defied the chief priests and elders by proclaiming himself to be Christ (Mt 26:64; Mk 14:62; Lk 22:70). John T. Pawlikowski concludes that the "New Testament in its present form definitely portrays Jesus as a political activist who directly challenged the political power of the Temple priesthood."¹⁶³ By confronting local religious and political authorities, Jesus implicitly threatened Rome, which led to his crucifixion and death. Reliance on a nonpolitical Jesus obscures this gospel record. Jesus, in fact, became overtly political when he talked about the end times and apocalyptic violence. In Matthew 25, he ensured that the real test of righteousness will be assistance to the poor and oppressed (Mt 25:31–46). Thus, Jesus's gospel was expressly political. The Kingdom of God symbolizes social, economic, and political justice in the earth. It provides both spiritual and material liberation, self-determination, and freedom before God. As a prophet, Jesus forcefully advanced this politically oriented gospel critical of social injustice, oppression, and poverty in Israel and the world.

Unlike the strictly pacifist view, Jesus's politics of violence only condemned violence in interpersonal relationships and private affairs. It did not speak to the violence of the oppressed or the wars of the state. Individual acts of violence and rage were prohibited by Jesus in the name of his philosophy of love of God and love of neighbor. However, Jesus did not categorically denounce and condemn war and rebellion. Jesus did not reject God's counterviolence against institutional and systemic violence and repression. Jesus, in fact, embraced his own role as spiritual warrior against the kingdom of darkness. He aggressively, with recognizable outbursts of hostility and conflict, challenged the leaders and structures of his day. His example was decidedly not one of nonresistance. Jesus's violent language and violent actions condemned Israel to judgment and separation. His threats of apocalyptic violence and destruction of the temple illustrated the violence associated with the Kingdom of God. Jesus's gospel uncovered the intimate

relationship between violence and salvation. Violence is a part of the Kingdom's coming. Jesus did not absolutely and categorically amend the Old Testament and prohibit war and violence in every situation and context. Apocalyptic violence in pursuit of God's Kingdom is in fact predicted by Jesus. Nat Turner's liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence was an apocalyptic racial confrontation seeking the Kingdom of Heaven on earth and its gospel of freedom for black slaves. According to Jesus's witness, violence and rebellion in favor of the Kingdom of God may be necessary, justifiable, and legitimate in the salvation history of humanity.

This chapter has intended to complicate and challenge the traditional view of Jesus as meek and mild pacifist. Given his revolutionary context, political teachings and sociopolitical implications of his gospel; supernatural violence against the kingdom of darkness; violent language; apocalypticism; violent cleansing of the temple and prediction of its destruction; pronouncements of woe, condemnation, and judgment; triumphal entry into Jerusalem; and role as Messiah, it appears that Jesus was a more radical and revolutionary figure than mainstream interpretations have argued. While Jesus condemned violence in interpersonal relationships and private affairs, he did not condemn war and rebellion absolutely and categorically. Therefore, to impose a rigid legal standard of the prohibition of all violence in every situation and circumstance violates Jesus's own condemnation of legalism, literalism, and hypocrisy. Jesus apparently believed that violence and war was inevitable in human affairs until the end. To prohibit all Christians from engaging in the wars of the state and the rebellions of the oppressed would abdicate Christian responsibility to work in the world against evil for God's Kingdom and to defend the poor and oppressed neighbor. From this perspective, it is difficult to claim that Jesus would judge and outright condemn Nat Turner as unchristian and unjust for his liberating and revolutionary violence. In Turner's belief, he sought the same Kingdom of Heaven and its ideals of freedom, equality, liberation, justice, and salvation for which Jesus as Savior, Christ, and Judge died on the cross.

Conclusion

Nat Turner's slave insurrection emanated from his radical black theology and rebellious black religion. His social location as a religious, educated, and gifted yet poor, black, male slave, combined with his historical age in the intractable and inherently violent state of slavery in Virginia of 1831, determined the starting place for his revolutionary theology and violent rebellion. Turner recognized the glaring inconsistency between his personal attributes and worth before God and his actual place in front of white society. Ironically, both whites and blacks recognized his uncommon intelligence and austere manner suggesting to him that he had too much sense to be a slave.¹ Turner's unique sensibility and giftedness cried out against the injustice of slavery. Turner acutely experienced what James H. Cone calls "existential absurdity."² According to Cone, existential absurdity concerns the blatant contradiction between what is and what ought to be for blacks, between blacks' view of themselves as created in the image of God and America's description of black humanity as things and property.³ Turner's spiritual gifts and privileged background made the existential absurdity of his marginalization and enslavement that much more pronounced. Turner did not use his giftedness and privilege to separate himself from other slaves, however, but rather directed his calling and his vocation toward the holistic salvation and freedom of all black slaves. He identified deeply with his black slave community. Turner would channel his existential crisis over slavery into his faith in God and religious observance. He maintained his faith in the promises of God in spite of his social condition as an oppressed slave. He would put his trust in the God of the Exodus who delivered the Hebrews from bondage in Egypt. His religious devotion and self-discipline was meant to honor God and to represent himself well before his fellow slaves. He willed mutually for his intimate and direct relationship with God. He expected and hoped for God's deliverance and salvation. Turner's Christian violence was unique because

it came as prophetic violence against white supremacy and the institution of slavery.

Was Nat Turner a prophet? In some respects, one cannot know if God, in fact, actually chose Turner as prophet and revealed God's truth to him. Turner's claim to special revelation or prophetic position before God cannot be substantiated or proven. Yet, Turner's theological voice and revolutionary actions undeniably displayed prophetic elements. He equated God's Kingdom with the absence of dehumanization and slavery. He imagined a future age of peace and freedom for blacks. His prophetic violence unequivocally condemned slavery and oppression in nineteenth-century America. Furthermore, the violent rebellion revealed a revolutionary and radical black religion that affirmed blacks as created in the image of God and named them as God's special contemporary people. It declared that God was a liberator of the poor and oppressed. It proclaimed that God broke the chains of slavery and delivered the weak and defenseless. It announced that Christ died for freedom and liberation. It pronounced that revolutionary and liberating apocalyptic violence was necessary, legitimate, and justified to free blacks in America. Turner's theology was truly prophetic because it came as the voice of the enslaved black masses yearning for freedom and self-determination. Turner rejected white slaveholding Christianity as the demonic work of Satan. Whether Nat Turner was a prophet or not, his violent insurrection made prophetic claims about the Kingdom of Heaven. In Nat Turner, one finds a prophetic critique of nineteenth-century white Southern slaveholding Christianity and American complicity in the peculiar institution. Violence for Turner was deemed necessary to break the stranglehold of the inherent violence of slavery. Turner represented the existential, religious, spiritual, and theological demand for freedom found so prominently in black religion. His insurrection came as a revelation of the wrath and condemnation of God against the enslavement and degradation of black people.

This chapter frames Nat Turner's insurrection as a revelation of the wrath of God against slavery and dehumanization. It reexplores the theology of Turner and the theological conclusions of his violent rebellion. In addition, it reexamines Jesus's politics of violence as they relate to Turner. Ultimately, it advances a constructive theological statement that seeks to move Christianity toward a theology of just revolution or just rebellion to account for Turner's liberating and revolutionary violence as a just cause with right intention practiced by a legitimate revolutionary authority. Turner's killing of innocent

women and children and the implied invocation of holy war cannot, however, be justified and legitimated in the modern era of revolution. A movement toward just revolution or just rebellion reasserts Christianity's intimate relationship with the victims and the disinherited. It reconfigures Christian theology to uphold and affirm the legitimate and justified violence of the oppressed like that of Nat Turner against slavery and dehumanization in the name of God.

The Wrath of God

According to R. V. G. Tasker, biblical evidence from the Old and New Testaments reveals a God of wrath as well as a God of love.⁴ Tasker asserts that there is no incompatibility between these two enduring attributes.⁵ The God of the Bible is a God of love who demands righteousness and justice from humanity, especially God's chosen people. God's wrath and violence aims to establish justice and to destroy evil and unrighteousness. Furthermore, there are tangible and detrimental spiritual and theological consequences for human sin. The wages of sin are spiritual and physical death (Rom 6:23). God's wrath necessarily abides on the sinner. Sin, therefore, alienates and separates humanity from God. For Tasker, fallen human nature as a result of sin renders humanity deserving of God's wrath.⁶ That wrath is first revealed in the Garden of Eden. Tasker contends, "The pronouncement of the sentence of death upon Adam, the cursing of the earth for his sake, and the banishment of Adam and Eve from the earthly paradise are all manifestations in word and deed of the divine wrath; and, it is important to notice, they are recognized as such by other writers of Scripture."⁷ Rather than receiving absolute and total forgiveness and love from God, Adam and Eve face divine wrath and condemnation in the midst of God's love. Ultimately, this beginning of separation and estrangement from God will be overcome through God's love and forgiveness in the person of Jesus Christ. Yet, God's forgiveness in traditional Christian theology is conditional and dependent upon one's acceptance of Christ and his salvation. God's wrath remains a potential reality for the unrepentant. Tasker identifies the Flood as the most significant example of divine wrath in the pre-Christian era.⁸ God's love saves a small remnant, and God's wrath destroys the vast majority of humanity. There is no parallel for Tasker in the Bible to the Flood's wrath except the Last Judgment separating the saved from the damned.⁹ God's wrath nonetheless is omnipresent with God's people throughout the Old Testament. God's wrath

and violence freed the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, conquered the heathen Promised Land, and established the Kingdom of Israel, declaring God's name and victory unto the ends of the earth. God's wrath and judgment also came upon Israel. God utilized the violence of the Assyrians and Babylonians to punish Israel, sending her into exile, for sin and transgressions. Tasker further argues, "The love of God does not eliminate His wrath, but it prevents Him from giving *full* expression to it in His dealings with Israel."¹⁰ God's love restores, reconciles, and justifies Israel throughout her trials. God does not abandon God's remnant. Yet, God's wrath continually threatens the peace of Israel. In the Old Testament, God is clearly revealed as a God of both love and wrath.

The New Testament furthers the revelation of love and wrath as eternal characteristics of God. According to Paul, both Jews and Gentiles are under the wrath of God.¹¹ In the Epistle to the Romans, Paul asserts: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom 1:18). For Paul, the gospel introduces both salvation and damnation. Humanity needs a Savior as a consequence of God's wrath and righteous indignation toward human sin. Paul acknowledged that God's wrath abided upon all of humanity, Jew and Gentile alike. Jesus was also clear about the reality of God's wrath and apocalyptic violence. Tasker contends, "In Jesus the loving purposes of God, set forth in the Old Testament, come finally to fulfillment; but not, let us notice, by any abandonment of the reality of His wrath or by any refusal to display it."¹² Jesus demonstrated in word and deeds his intimate relationship with God's wrath. Jesus pronounced condemnation on his opponents and enemies in Israel. He proclaimed woe on impenitent cities. He predicted the destruction of the temple. He openly defied the religious and political leaders. With righteous indignation, Jesus violently cleansed the temple. His triumphal entry into Jerusalem declared him Messiah. Jesus's predictions of apocalyptic violence between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness further his revelation of the wrath of God. Tasker asserts that the revelation of God's wrath was part of the prophetic and priestly ministry of Jesus.¹³ This revelation came initially with John the Baptist's warning of the wrath and judgment to come and the need for repentance that Jesus further developed.¹⁴ Jesus's expressions of defiance and prophetic denunciation of his opponents were, according to Tasker, additional revelations of the wrath of God.¹⁵ Certain parables of Jesus also reveal the wrath of God.¹⁶ The parable of the wicked

vinedressers, for example, found in all three synoptic gospels, suggests that God's wrath and violence will come upon Israel for rejecting and killing God's Son (Mt 21:33–44; Mk 12:1–11; Lk 20:9–18). God will come and destroy the original vinedressers and give the vineyard to others. Herein, Jesus is depicted as the chief cornerstone rejected by the builders of Israel. Rather than simply proclaiming a new revelation of a Father God of total and complete love, Jesus maintained the Old Testament revelation of a dual nature of love and wrath. Thus, God's judgment and wrath were a part of Jesus's theological worldview. According to Anthony Tyrrell Hanson, "The Cross was a manifestation not only of the love, but also of the wrath of God."¹⁷ God's righteous indignation and wrath against sin was symbolized by the violent and brutal death of Christ even as the sins of humanity were overlooked by God in love. Christ became the innocent scapegoat put to death for human sin. Therefore, God's wrath and judgment against sin should not be discounted. The cross illustrated that sin must be redeemed according to the dictates of a holy and righteous God. For Hanson, the New Testament doctrine of the wrath of God finds its climax in Revelation.¹⁸ Hanson asserts, "The concept of the wrath of God is more prominent in the Book of Revelation than in any other part of the New Testament."¹⁹ Revelation 6:15–17 speaks of the great day of the wrath of the Lamb.²⁰ Hanson argues that the wrath described here is not purely eschatological but a historical process.²¹ Hanson further contends, "So the 'wrath of the Lamb' is here the working out in history of the consequences of the rejection and crucifixion of the Messiah."²² Hanson opens the way to seeing God's wrath prominently in history as a continual process of condemnation and judgment. For Hanson, the wrath is both realized and eschatological.²³ Hanson, however, argues that the New Testament, in particular Paul's writings, also reveals the essentially impersonal nature of God's wrath.²⁴ Hanson highlights human responsibility for sin and the consequent wrath from God.²⁵ In addition, Hanson notes that God is never described as angry in the New Testament.²⁶ For Hanson, "The wrath of God is wholly impersonal and does not describe an attitude of God but a condition of men."²⁷ Additionally, Hanson contends that the wrath of God is not an emotion to ascribe to God.²⁸ Rather, God's wrath is built into the order of the universe. Sin does not go unpunished. In this respect, the New Testament revelation of the wrath of God reinterprets the image of the warring and jealous God of the Old Testament. The great heresy of Marcion in the second century CE argued that the God and Father of Jesus Christ was a God

of love who was not the God of wrath found in the Old Testament.²⁹ Yet, God is in fact a God of both love and wrath. The biblical account demonstrates that God's love is primary but that sin and injustice invite the wrath and violence of God. Tasker maintains, "To manifest anger effectively against the pride which constitutes human sin is still, and must always be the sole prerogative of Almighty God, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ."³⁰ Jesus showed humanity not only a loving Father but also a righteous and holy God of wrath. The Old and New Testaments are harmonious on their conception of a dual nature of love and wrath in God.

In the mind of Nat Turner, his insurrection came as a revelation of the wrath of God against slavery and dehumanization. For Turner, God had instructed him to "slay my enemies with their own weapons."³¹ Turner believed God had directed him to fight on behalf of Christ against Satan and the kingdom of darkness.³² Turner understood that God's wrath and violence was revealed against his slave-masters. As a devout Baptist preacher and potential prophet, Turner took this prompting of the Spirit to a final and bloody conclusion. While Turner was misperceived as fanatical and delusional by white Virginians in 1831, his understanding of the wrath of God was consistent with the biblical account. God's wrath throughout human history levels sin and injustice. God judges and condemns the nations. The Book of Revelation depicts a final consummation in which sin and evil are defeated and thrown in the lake of fire and brimstone. Turner supposed that his "great work"³³ would end slavery and free blacks. God would deliver blacks through violence and rebellion. God's wrath and righteous judgment would consume Turner's enemies. Turner, however, did not seek his own or God's vengeance but rather God's justice and wrath against slavery and dehumanization.

The Theology of Nat Turner

Nat Turner's theology proved that theological and critical reflection inhabited early black Christianity and motivated resistance to oppressive social circumstances and unequal power structures. Revelation from God through appropriation of the Christian gospel empowered and strengthened black humanity to endure and challenge slavery. Theology helped to articulate their hopes and aspirations as a people. Motivating protest and accommodation, theology defined one's relationship to God, the universe, and the community. Theology gave voice to the slave's material condition in relationship to God. That

Nat Turner's rebellion was tied to a distinct and radical black theology enables one to dissect Turner's theological worldview. Then one can evaluate the legitimacy and justice of the insurrection based on its theological perspective. The theology of the slave rebel is therefore uplifted for critical analysis. Turner believed himself to be a prophet doing God's will. His theology made particular claims about the Kingdom of Heaven. The theological implications of Turner's thought were the condemnation of slavery and dehumanization, the justification and legitimation of liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence of the oppressed, the gospel guarantee of material and spiritual freedom, and the affirmation of blacks as common people created in the image of God. He believed in imminent racial warfare, the impending return of Christ and Day of Judgment, and hoped in a future era of peace and freedom for blacks. Turner believed he must enter physically into Christ's struggle against the Serpent through open rebellion. His theology harmonized the Old Testament God of the Exodus who freed the Hebrew slaves and the New Testament God and Father of Jesus Christ who liberates the poor and oppressed.

Nat Turner's theology emerged from an integration of the white Southern Protestant Evangelicalism of his slave-masters and his own black slave religion. Conversion was central to both black slave religion and Evangelicalism. *Confessions* can be read as Turner's conversion narrative and accounting of his faith. From an early age, he believed in God and that he would play a special purpose in God's Kingdom on earth. As an adult, Turner claimed the Holy Spirit spoke to him and revealed to him through continual prayer and discernment that he was indeed ordained for a great purpose before God.³⁴ He asserted that the Holy Spirit continued to confirm him in the belief as several years rolled round.³⁵ Turner recounted how the Holy Spirit communicated with him through revelation, signs, dreams, visions, and scripture. He claimed the Spirit of God baptized him literally alongside a white man into a violent and apocalyptic hope of rebellion.³⁶ Turner is a convert to a radical Christianity that legitimated and justified violence against slavery in the name of God. Turner's experience of the Spirit paralleled the encounters of other black slaves. Black slaves displayed ecstatic, boisterous conversion episodes in contrast to the staid, sober conversion narratives of white Evangelicals. This religious enthusiasm and animation of blacks was further developed in the ritual style of performance in black slave religion. Black slave religion was energetic and jubilant while black preaching and music was rhythmic and rapturous. Turner redirected the passion of black

slave religion into deliberate and revolutionary praxis through violent resistance and agitation. He affirmed the covenant of life by fighting for the freedom of his fellow slaves and himself. In addition, Turner's theology incorporated the self-disciplined commitment to personal holiness and sanctification adopted by white Southern Evangelicalism. Through an ascetic outlook of fasting, prayer, meditation, and withdrawal, Turner sought to demonstrate his devotion and dedication to God before the slave community. Turner made a self-conscious effort to seek God and to pursue his purpose before the Almighty.

Turner's black slave religion reaffirmed and retained aspects of African religion including the lack of sharp distinction or demarcation between the secular and the sacred, the natural and the supernatural. For black slaves, the immediacy and nearness of God invaded all aspects of life. The politics of God were injected into every sphere of existence. Black slaves expected God to intervene in everyday life. Black slave religion was also biblically based as evidenced by the prominence of biblical themes in the spirituals. The chief narrative defining blacks as common people with a communal destiny was the Exodus account. From this narrative, black slaves viewed God as a liberator who would come to free blacks from slavery in America as God had freed the Hebrews. Since God was no respecter of persons, God would free Africans just as Jews. By hearing the Exodus story, black slaves gained faith and hope in imminent deliverance. They embraced eschatological hopes in freedom from bondage on earth. Turner trusted that God would deliver blacks from slavery in the present revolutionary moment. He chose to become the catalyst of God's apocalyptic salvation. While some argue that slave religion was otherworldly, escapist, and compensatory, Nat Turner's black slave religion was this-worldly focused on freedom and liberation in this life. Turner saw his responsibility to fight for Christ in the here and now. Because of his faith, Turner had no need to fear death. Therefore, he could agitate and fight now in hopes of imminent deliverance but nevertheless remain willing to die not fearing the end.

The prophetic faith of Nat Turner included an appreciation of Old Testament prophets like Moses and the belief that he, himself, was a prophet to whom the Holy Spirit had appeared.³⁷ He believed that the same Spirit who spoke to the prophets of old had spoken to him.³⁸ Turner embraced prophetic violence against slavery to live out his theology of God. His violence prophesied the end of slavery in America and predicted apocalyptic racial warfare in the name of Christ. Black soldiers in the Union Army later fulfilled this prophecy

of conflict between white and black spirits. Turner's prophetic violence anticipated the apocalyptic US Civil War with brother killing brother to end slavery and dehumanization in order to preserve the Union. Turner's prophetic violence resembled the violence of God toward slavery through Moses. Moses's prophetic violence killed the firstborn sons of Egypt. Likewise, Turner's prophetic violence slaughtered white families in a brutal unleashing of the wrath and condemnation of God against slavery. Elijah's massacre of the prophets of Baal typified God's violence against idolatry and ungodliness. Turner's prophetic violence against slavery exposed the idolatrous nature of the institution. White slave-masters sacrificed respect for human life in the name of power, arrogance, greed, pride, and cruelty. They served mammon rather than God. Turner's faith thoroughly rejected the hypocritical slaveholding Christianity of his white Christian slave-masters. Amos's prophetic violence was unique because it came as an internal critique pronouncing judgment and condemnation on Israel for sin and transgressions. Amos announced that the violence of the Assyrians would overrun and overcome Israel sending her into exile. Turner's prophetic violence condemned white Christians first for their complicity in the system of violence and white power that enslaved blacks. Furthermore, his prophetic violence judged America for its perpetration of injustice and brutality against blacks. Nat Turner's prophetic violence asserted the utter incompatibility of slavery and Christianity. The gospel guaranteed freedom, liberation, life, and peace. Slavery was a denial of these Kingdom principles. Turner's prophetic violence prophesied the judgment and condemnation of slavery as institutional, structural, and systemic violence against black humanity.

The Holy Spirit occupied a central place in Nat Turner's theology. Turner believed himself to be inspired and directed by the Spirit of God. He understood that the Holy Spirit was responsible for communicating God's will to the believer. The appearance, speech, and guidance of the Spirit confirmed to Turner the belief that he was destined for a great and special purpose.³⁹ According to Turner, the Spirit revealed to him knowledge of science, astronomy, and the environment.⁴⁰ Turner understood that through the Spirit one could fulfill one's vocation and calling before God. Turner recounted that the Spirit conveyed important scripture to him: (1) "Seek ye the Kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you" (Mt 6:33)⁴¹ and (2) "the first should be last and the last should be first" (Mt 20:16).⁴² These scriptures signify the biblical nature of Turner's insurrection.

Turner was seeking the Kingdom of Heaven through his violent insurrection. He pursued a new order in which the oppressors are overcome by the oppressed. He foresaw the Kingdom of Heaven upsetting the institution of slavery and delivering material and spiritual freedom for blacks. Direct inspiration from God was claimed and pursued by Nat Turner. He asserted that the Holy Spirit revealed to him Christ's blood returning to the earth from heaven in the form of dew symbolizing that the Day of Judgment was at hand.⁴³ He contended that the Spirit of God baptized Turner and Etheldred T. Brantley in front of a group of revilers.⁴⁴ He maintained that the Spirit sent him signs in the heavens to signal when to accomplish his great work.⁴⁵ Turner's sensitivity to the Holy Spirit was a part of his religious discipleship and devotion. Through prayer, meditation, fasting, and withdrawal, Turner revealed the significant and revered role of the Holy Spirit in his theological worldview. The Spirit of God, for Turner, was instructed to inspire and guide God's people toward God's will, plan, and purpose in history and the life of the believer. According to Nat Turner, the Spirit directed and inspired his rebellion and revolutionary violence.

Nat Turner's apocalyptic outlook incited his resort to liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence. Turner envisioned the Day of Judgment at hand with the imminent return of Christ in anticipation of a new era of peace and freedom for blacks. He envisaged impending racial warfare, conflict, and crisis to birth the new age. Turner foresaw the Holy Spirit guiding him to join the struggle of Christ and to violently usher in this war against slavery. Unlike Apostle Paul, for Turner, apocalypticism did not lead to political and social conservatism but rather to radicalism through violent protest and agitation. The early church chose not to advocate for political and social justice but rather assumed the road of persecution and martyrdom valiantly awaiting Christ's return for revolutionary transformation. Turner, by contrast, was motivated to violent action and rebellion through his apocalyptic visions. He chose to actively join Christ in the struggle for freedom against the kingdom of darkness. Paul pursued conversion and reconciliation with God whereas Turner advanced war and conquest in the name of Christ.

The theology of Nat Turner legitimated and justified liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence against the perpetrators of slavery and dehumanization in the name of God and the principles of the Kingdom of Heaven. Turner initiated a war or revolution against slavery according to Christ's promise of freedom, equality, justice, and

liberation in the gospel. He planned to free his fellow slaves in love of neighbor and to join in Christ's struggle against the kingdom of darkness. For Turner, God had revealed the necessity of counterviolence to liberate black slaves in America. Turner, however, unjustly pursued vicious and brutal violence in killing women and children indiscriminately. His violence resembled holy war and God's command to the Israelites to utterly wipe out the enemy like the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:2–3). Though reprehensible, Turner's violence against white families implicated all whites in the violence of slavery and oppression. His liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence typified the apocalyptic counterviolence of God's kingdom against slavery and dehumanization.

Nat Turner's theology depended upon a particular conception of God. First and foremost, Turner's God was the biblical God of revelation of the Old and New Testaments. Turner maintained connection to the historical tradition of prophetic faith and Hebrew prophets. He spoke of God, Holy Spirit, and Christ but did not advance a systematic view of a Trinitarian God. Turner's God called and appointed prophets to carry out God's will and to inspire God's people. His God was active and immanent in the life of the believer. For Turner, God expressed transcendence through relationship. Christ was the one who had given his life for the burdens of humanity and sin. He had laid aside his burden, was seated at the right hand of God with power, and would return as an Avenger on the Day of Judgment. In Turner's theology, Christ's return was imminent and the Day of Judgment was at hand. Violence and wrath were elements of God's eternal nature. Turner's theology embraced the violent wrath and judgment of God against injustice and inhumanity.

Jesus and the Politics of Violence

Jesus did not come to overthrow the Old Testament view of God and the Law of an eye for an eye but rather to amend, to further reveal, and ultimately to fulfill that same Law of God. Jesus instructed his disciples to love the enemy, to eschew violence, and to live self-sacrificially. He advanced a philosophy of love of God and love of neighbor, even the dreaded enemy or oppressor. On the surface, his gospel strictly endorsed nonviolence and pacifism, peace, love, and forgiveness. He went to his violent death without resisting the authorities and offering forgiveness to the end. In interpersonal relationships and private affairs, it is clear that Jesus condemned violence. Yet, it is not likewise

evident that Jesus equally condemned the legitimate wars of the state or the liberating and revolutionary violence of oppressed citizens or peoples. Neither Jesus nor John the Baptist condemned the profession of Roman soldier. Jesus healed the centurion's servant (Mt 8:5–13; Lk 7:1–10) and commended his faith (Mt 8:10; Lk 7:9). Jesus never suggested to him that a soldier should give up his profession in favor of nonviolence and pacifism. In fact, the gospels of Matthew and Mark each praise a centurion for claiming Jesus to be the Son of God after his crucifixion (Mt 27:54; Mk 15:39). Jesus never absolutely condemned war but rather admitted of its inevitability until the end (Mt 24:6–7; Mk 13:7–8; Lk 21:9–10). While Jesus has often been depicted traditionally as meek and mild as an extension of his pacifism, the gospel accounts portray a more radical and revolutionary figure who reflected the revolutionary turmoil of first-century Palestine and prophesied a Kingdom of God founded on principles of justice, equality, liberation, and freedom. Each of the gospels portrays the resentment, defiance, and righteous indignation of the human Jesus. They illustrate Jesus's violent language, apocalypticism, and predictions of destruction, condemnation, and woe. Jesus's gospel was forceful and revolutionary, challenging the religious and political leaders of Israel and threatening the foundation of the Law as the central path to salvation. A more complex and complicated portrait of Jesus's politics of violence must account for this radical and revolutionary revelation of Jesus.

Jesus of Nazareth emerged from a time of revolutionary turmoil, crisis, and conflict internally among the Jews and externally against Rome. Resistance to Rome by the Jews through nonviolent and violent means occupied the historical reality of the first-century Palestine of Jesus.⁴⁶ Internally, corruption and greed influenced the complicity of Jewish leaders and powerful elites in Roman oppression and Jewish poverty. Exorbitant taxes through a system of double taxation by Rome and the religious establishment acted to impoverish and oppress the people.⁴⁷ Faced with Roman imposition and Jewish complicity, the revolutionary spirit of the times embraced the messianic hope of a powerful leader and Messiah to restore Israel's greatness and destroy her enemies. This biblical hope promised the restoration of the kingdom to Israel and the establishment of an everlasting Davidic kingship. Jesus was shaped by these revolutionary times and became the necessary prophet of God for the age. Oscar Cullmann asserts that Jesus remained separate and distinct from all the principal movements of his time.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Jesus would be familiar

with the revolutionary ethos of the age and confrontation with Rome as well as the internal Jewish divisions and class warfare. As a result of his sensitivity to these issues, Jesus directly confronted poverty and oppression in Israel. His images of the Kingdom uplifted the poor, those poor in spirit, the meek, the persecuted, and the peacemakers. While Jesus did not directly challenge Rome, the coming of the Kingdom of God necessarily relativizes all earthly kingdoms and proclaims social, political, and economic justice in the earth. Emerging from within this period of resistance and confrontation, Jesus can be seen more clearly as one who actively and forcefully challenged the status quo of Israel concerning its relationship to God, Rome, and humanity. Jesus argued with the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians while directly challenging the chief priests, elders, and Sanhedrin with his profession to be Christ (Mt 26:64; Mk 14:62; Lk 22:70). Jesus was nonviolent but a troublemaker nonetheless. His violence was self-righteousness, condemnation, and judgment. He was a revolutionary figure who aggressively and deliberately challenged the institutions and customs of his day. Jesus's historical context of external and internal crisis influenced the revolutionary character of Jesus and his resistance to the status quo, the religious and political leaders of Israel, and ultimately to Rome and imperialism. Cullmann concludes that Jesus promoted absolute obedience to God and condemnation of legalism, hypocrisy, and injustice.⁴⁹ Jesus rejected his opponents for oppressing the people through human traditions and misinterpreting the scriptures to put unnecessary burdens on their backs. Cullmann describes what he calls the eschatological radicalism of Jesus as unreserved criticism of the existing order alongside a rejection of popular resistance movements and violence.⁵⁰ Jesus rebuffed his age as evil, wicked, and adulterous. He categorically rejected the prevailing order in favor of the Kingdom of God. Jesus's revolution transcended earthly circumstances yet it promised to transform social, political, economic, and religious realities. As a true revolutionary, Jesus categorically rejected the status quo, subordinating the entire earthly realm and the present order to the irruption of the Kingdom of God. Thus, Jesus of Nazareth reflected the revolutionary nature of the times in which he lived. This revolutionary character of Jesus suggested a more complicated relationship to war and revolution than strict pacifism and nonviolence.

Most scholars have rejected a political interpretation of Jesus in favor of an apolitical and sometimes antipolitical view of Jesus. To these commentators, Jesus supposedly avoided human politics, and

his kingdom remained a spiritual and nonpolitical one. John's Jesus told Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here" (Jn 18:36). Jesus did confirm that his Kingdom was from God and not humanity, but he never discounted its political dimensions or implications. Obery M. Hendricks, Jr., for example, labels Jesus a political revolutionary.⁵¹ For Hendricks, Jesus's message demands political, social, and economic changes in Israel including the removal of unjust social and political structures.⁵² Hendricks asserts that Jesus's gospel is undeniably political.⁵³ It concerns the political, economic, and social transformation of the lives of the people and the world. Samuel Dickey also maintains that Jesus was consciously revolutionary and openly challenged the existing order of his day.⁵⁴ According to Dickey, "His vision of justice as laid down in the Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount is the greatest Magna Charta of human rights and liberties ever formulated."⁵⁵ Jesus revealed a Kingdom that met the needs of the underside of human relations. Those who mourn, suffer, and hunger and thirst for righteousness will be fulfilled in God's kingdom. Luke's Jesus identified a God of the poor and oppressed who releases the captives from bondage (Lk 4:18–19). While Jesus was not always overtly political in his life and ministry, the implications of his gospel are unmistakably political concerning economic, social, and political justice and transformation for the devalued and marginalized. Objections to a political Jesus rely on a false dualism between the material and the spiritual, the supernatural and the natural.

The case of Nat Turner illustrated that spiritual well-being and freedom from sin necessarily depends on material freedom from bondage and oppression. The gift of the Spirit necessarily transforms and changes one's material reality. The spiritual impinges on the material and the material impinges on the spiritual in a dynamic relationship. Jesus's gospel guarantees of freedom, reconciliation with God, equality before the neighbor, and liberty under God extend beyond the metaphysical and spiritual to physical and material life in the world of humanity. The Kingdom of God progressively subordinates human life to its higher principles of justice, righteousness, and freedom. Jesus's predictions of the last days further demonstrated his commitment to political ends. In Matthew 25, Jesus identified the only true test of righteousness as relief of the poor, hungry, thirsty, dispossessed, and imprisoned (Mt 25:31–46).⁵⁶ The Son of man will return to judge

and to condemn some while saving others. Jesus will ultimately judge the world according to his gospel of truth. The Kingdom of God self-consciously upsets the balance between the powerful elites and the oppressed masses. It stands for justice, righteousness, reconciliation, peace, and love. These principles of social justice represented the aims of the political Jesus.

George Aichele exposes the fantastical or supernatural violence of Jesus against the kingdom of darkness and Satan, as well as Jesus's violent words and deeds in the gospel of Mark and the synoptics.⁵⁷ This overt and hidden violence of Jesus found throughout the gospels undermines any absolute commitment to nonviolence and peace. First and foremost, Jesus saw himself at war with the kingdom of evil. He engaged in spiritual warfare through exorcisms and radical healing and sought to bind Satan as strong man and cripple his empire. The cross symbolizes Christ's ultimate victory over the devil and the salvation of humanity. This war with Satan's kingdom comes to a conclusion in Revelation with Christ's triumphant conquest over the forces of darkness (Rev 19). The entire New Testament furthers Jesus's apocalyptic depiction of a violent confrontation between good and evil. Furthermore, Jesus's violent language compromised his supposedly nonviolent and pacifist gospel. With at times a self-righteous and vitriolic tone, Jesus condemned and judged his opponents as enemies of God and the covenant. He pronounced doom on impenitent cities and predicted the destruction of the temple. His aggressive and forceful apocalypticism proclaimed doom and destruction on Israel and his enemies. In Jesus's most overtly violent act, all four gospels record the cleansing of the temple (Mt 21:12–13; Mk 11:15–18; Lk 19:45–46; Jn 2:13–15). Here, Jesus displayed righteous indignation and defiance against the temple establishment, Sadducees, chief priests, and elders. He directly challenged their authority and by implication the authority of Rome. In the gospels, Jesus is a man apart, the “man of violence” in word and deed represented by Aichele.⁵⁸ Jesus's forceful demeanor suggested that there is a proper place for violence and revolution in his gospel. While Jesus chose nonviolence to the end, it is unclear that he condemned violence absolutely in all situations and circumstances for all people. His violent predictions of apocalyptic conflict between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil unmistakably link violence to salvation and the coming of the Kingdom of God. Righteous indignation, like that of Jesus in the temple, may in fact demand a violent and revolutionary encounter.

All four gospels recount Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem where he is acknowledged and recognized as the Messiah (Mt 21:1–11; Mk 11:1–11; Lk 19:28–40; Jn 12:12–19). Jesus self-consciously assumed the role of deliverer and liberator. S. G. F. Brandon argues that the triumphal entry was an assertion of political messiahship and challenge to both Jews and Romans.⁵⁹ Most scholars argue, however, that Jesus reinterpreted his position as Messiah in the light of Isaiah's Suffering Servant. They assert that Jesus was a suffering and abused Messiah rather than a conquering king and destroyer of Israel's enemies. These scholars only account for one-half of Jesus's witness concerning the Messiah. Jesus was not either suffering servant or conquering king but both in one. In Jesus's mind, the vanquishing and warring Christ was the Son of man who returns to pronounce judgment and condemnation on humanity. The same Jesus of Nazareth resurrected is the commander of the armies of Heaven (Rev 19:11–16). Christ will return in fury to defeat the kingdom of darkness and institute the Kingdom of God. Jesus's view of God's Kingdom was both realized and future. The Kingdom of God was at hand in first-century Palestine (Mt 4:17; Mk 1:15; Lk 4:43). For Jesus, God's Kingdom had indeed come. It would progressively grow from a mustard seed to affect the world over time. Yet, it would not be finally fulfilled until the end of time that Jesus described as the coming of the Son of man (Mt 24:3–31; Mk 13:3–27; Lk 21:7–28). For Jesus, the Messiah had to suffer and die but would be resurrected and would come again from Heaven. In the second coming, Jesus would assume the role of a warring Messiah who decisively defeats the kingdom of evil. His suffering and death set the stage for his final, violent return and conquest.

Given Jesus's revolutionary context of crisis and confrontation internally and externally alongside messianic hopes and radical faith in God, coupled with Jesus's violent language, apocalyptic predictions of doom and destruction, pronouncements of woe and condemnation, and antagonistic, self-righteous confrontational defiance against Israel's religious and political leaders; joined with Jesus's political and social justice commitments and implications concerning the Kingdom of God; and combined with Jesus's forceful, radical, and revolutionary gospel, it is evident that Jesus would not make a categorical and absolute prohibition of war and violence in his teachings. He condemned violence in interpersonal and private affairs but did not absolutely condemn war and violence in every situation and circumstance. His apocalyptic predictions of destruction revealed that the Kingdom of God will come at times with violence, crisis, and upheaval. Jesus did

not negate God's counterviolence or the prophetic violence of God's prophets against slavery, idolatry, and social injustice. Furthermore, he affirmed the violence, condemnation, and judgment of the Son of man. Jesus did not overthrow the Old Testament jealous and warring God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in favor of a pacifist and nonviolent God and Father of Jesus Christ. Rather, Jesus underscored the tension between God as love and God as justice and righteousness. Love demands justice, and peace is often achieved through conflict. In the case of the Hebrews in slavery in Egypt, God's love manifested itself through God's counterviolence against slavery. Additionally, Jesus rejected legalism, literalism, and hypocrisy. It is, therefore, unlikely he would impose a rigid legal standard concerning violence in all contexts. In the plan and purpose of God, Jesus went to his death nonviolently. It is not clear however that Jesus would require the same selfless nonviolence in the case of the oppressed slave. The Jesus of the gospels would not condemn Nat Turner outright as unchristian and unjust for his liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence. A categorical, literalistic, and absolute prohibition of violence does not conform to the entire character and context of Jesus's words and deeds. Jesus demonstrated that violence and revolution cannot be avoided in the life of Christianity. Jesus's witness suggested that apocalyptic violence like that of Nat Turner may in fact conform to God's will and coming Kingdom. In addition, Jesus's life, death, and resurrection illustrated that violence and salvation are interrelated in the Bible and that the Kingdom of God at times comes through crisis, violence, and conflict.

Just War Theory

Christian Just War Theory proposes that violence is acceptable for the Christian following Christ in extreme situations of last resort demanding justice and loving protection of the oppressed neighbor. By contrast, the early church interpreted Jesus literally, absolutely, and categorically with respect to the question of violence choosing by Jesus's nonviolent example to suffer persecution and martyrdom rather than commit violence against Rome. Christianity's rise from persecuted sect to tolerated religion under Constantine (272–337 CE) to official religion of the Roman Empire under Theodosius I (347–395 CE) fundamentally changed dominant Christian views on violence.⁶⁰ A new revolution in the fourth century brought Christianity to acceptance and participation in violence and warfare.⁶¹ Once Christianity

had been wedded to the state, it became implicated in the wars of the state and needed a philosophy of violence that could justify and legitimate war. Augustine (354–430 CE) would articulate such a theory of just war that asserted that war was necessary due to human sin and fallen-ness.⁶² Christian Just War Theory was further developed and advanced by Aquinas into three specific criteria for war: legitimate authority, just cause, and right intention.⁶³ Modern criteria for just war include proportionality of the cause, reasonable prospect of success, last resort, just means, and protection of innocents.⁶⁴ According to John Howard Yoder, mainstream Christianity has embraced the Just War Theory as its official position since Constantine.⁶⁵ Just war thinkers legitimate and justify war and violence in defense of liberty, the oppressed neighbor, and defense of populations.

Christian Just War Theory assumes the inevitability of war and proposes the legitimacy and justice of wars waged by legitimate and sovereign authorities to defend human rights, liberty, and justice. Traditional just war principles do not, however, recognize the legitimacy of revolution and rebellion like Nat Turner's. Nonetheless, as does Turner, Christian Just War Theory acknowledges the Old Testament God of violence and wrath who commanded the Israelites to fight and kill. Therefore, just war advocates conclude that war cannot be absolutely and categorically wrong in the sight of God. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus prophesied, "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places" (Mt 24:6–7). Here, Jesus did not endorse war, but nevertheless admitted of its inevitability in human affairs. Violence and war will not be overcome by the Kingdom of God until the end times when the apocalyptic violence of the Son of man will destroy them. Therefore, peace is ultimately achieved through further violence. Jesus's vision of the Son of man and his prediction of the destruction of the temple revealed that the Kingdom of God will violently judge and condemn the unrighteousness. Christian Just War Theory asserts that Christians cannot avoid war or abstain from the violence in human history. Luke's Jesus himself proclaimed, "I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished! Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division" (Lk 12:49–51). Christianity brings warfare and discord as Jesus

predicted. It forces one to choose between the Kingdom principles of justice, peace, and liberation and the reality of oppression, suffering, and dehumanization. Notwithstanding, Christian Just War Theory applies Jesus's ethical principles of love to the violence of war. War must be pursued and conducted justly and ethically. Love of neighbor and defense of the weak must be the guiding principles. F. Sawyer asserts, "Christian ethics usually rejects the totally pacifist approach, because we have the right and duty to defend the oppressed."⁶⁶ War waged in defense of justice is deemed acceptable. Just war theorists conclude that Christians can engage in war that is necessary and theologically considered legitimate and just.

Ambrose (c. 339–397 CE), Bishop of Milan, first developed the Christian theory of the just war in order to defend the empire against barbarians.⁶⁷ Douglas S. Bax argues, "Ambrose, then, formulated his doctrine of war to provide Christian and moral support for the defense of the empire together with the church against the heretical barbarians."⁶⁸ Ambrose built his theory upon the foundation of the Old Testament and classical antiquity including Cicero (d. 43 BCE) who gave classic form to the Roman ethic of just war.⁶⁹ By pursuing Just War Theory, Ambrose was necessarily rejecting the pacifist tradition of the early church. Bax asserts, "Ambrose therefore relegated pacifism to the sphere of private morals and to the clergy."⁷⁰ According to Ambrose's formulation, (1) the cause of the war must be just, (2) the conduct of the war must be maintained with respect for enemy rights, and (3) the clergy should abstain from war.⁷¹ Traditional Christian just war principles later developed by Augustine were founded upon Ambrose's theory.

Augustine (354–430 CE) pursued a more integrated account of the Old Testament and the New Testament in his development of the just war tradition.⁷² He accepted that war was necessary due to human sin.⁷³ Augustine also adopted the classical idea of natural justice and natural rights.⁷⁴ Augustine asserted that the defense of the just and the good may necessitate violence.⁷⁵ The two foundational principles of just war theory, *jus ad bellum* (just causes) and *jus in bello* (just means), come from several statements of Augustine summarized by Aquinas (1225–1274 CE).⁷⁶ Augustine and Aquinas both conclude for a war to be just; it must be a just cause and practiced through just means. Aquinas, for instance, advanced three criteria for a just war.⁷⁷ First, the war must be waged by the authority of a sovereign or legitimate government. Thus, no individual or band of comrades can pursue a just war. Second, the war must be a just cause to avenge a

wrong. Third, the war must come from right intention. It must promote good and avoid evil. These principles condemned war for profit, hatred, domination, empire, and colonialism, for example. Sawyer identifies three more criteria that govern modern Just War Theory.⁷⁸ First, the war must be fought with appropriate and reasonable means. Second, war must come as a last resort. One must exhaust all legal and legitimate avenues of resolution prior to going to war. Third, the war must distinguish between civilians and soldiers. War must strive to avoid killing innocents or noncombatants. Additional modern criteria include proportionality of the cause in light of the harm done and reasonable prospect of success.⁷⁹

Daniel A. Dombrowski argues that modern warfare cannot meet the criteria of just cause and just means.⁸⁰ He asserts that there was no just war in the twentieth century.⁸¹ For Dombrowski, modern weaponry and warfare inevitably threaten the killing of innocents.⁸² Nuclear weapons, mass bombing of cities, and air power mean that modern war is unjustly indiscriminate. It does not sufficiently distinguish between civilians or noncombatants and soldiers. The Christian Just War Theory is further flawed by its rejection of just revolution and just rebellion. Authority does not only reside in the state but also in the people. The people should have a right to revolt against slavery, injustice, tyranny, and terror in the name of God. Likewise, the slave has the right to rebel against the slave-master. Christian Just War Theory, however, categorically rejects the violence of the freedom fighter or revolutionary.

Nat Turner's insurrection failed the criteria of the just war because it was not conducted by a legitimate authority or sovereign government. It was the violence of an individual band of comrades. Certainly, however, it did reflect a just cause with right intention. Slavery is an inherent evil that denies justice and peace. Turner's rebellion sought to end a wrong and establish a moral good. Furthermore, Turner's violence utilized appropriate means. Turner did not have access to unethical modern weaponry. In addition, his slave insurrection came as a last resort. In response to the naked violence of slavery, Turner reacted with counterviolence as the only legitimate chance to free his people. However, Turner's rebellion was brutal and vicious according to white Virginians, killing innocent woman and children. Turner's insurrection utilized unjust means in slaughtering noncombatants. But, is anyone really innocent in the enslavement of another race? Even the women and children benefited from the violence done to blacks. By Christian just war standards, however, Nat Turner's revolt failed

the test of righteousness. The indiscriminate violence of a gang of rebels, however compelling, does not meet just war criteria. Nonetheless, are these standards the true principles of Jesus or simply the position of the mainstream church after Constantine? Shouldn't Christian Just War Theory be updated to the present moment of Third World revolution and religious revival? In light of contemporary revolutionary factors and conditions in the Third World, Christian Just War Theory must expand to include just revolution and just rebellion. Christian theology must account for the justice and legitimacy of Nat Turner's revolution and rebellion against slavery.

Toward a Theology of Just Revolution

The Southampton Insurrection inspires a renewal of Christian efforts to justify and legitimate just revolutions and just rebellions like that of Nat Turner. According to Hannah Arendt, the modern perspective on revolution emerged from the American and French Revolutions.⁸³ Arendt asserts, "The modern concept of revolution, inextricably bound up with the notion that the course of history suddenly begins anew, that an entirely new story, a story never known or told before, is about to unfold, was unknown prior to the two great revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century."⁸⁴ Revolution in modern consciousness signifies a sudden and rapid break in the course of history and the introduction of a progressive new chapter. Arendt argues that crucial to the modern understanding of revolution is the idea of freedom and a new beginning.⁸⁵ Modern revolutions give birth ideally to greater liberty and social change. Arendt further contends that revolution in the modern age is concerned with both liberation and freedom.⁸⁶ P. L. Geschiere and H. G. Schulte Nordholt assert, "In every revolution there is a consciousness of an unbearable yoke which must be thrown off."⁸⁷ Revolution concerns both material and spiritual freedom and liberation from bondage and alienation. Jürgen Moltmann maintains that revolution signifies the breakthrough of something new.⁸⁸ Revolutions produce an essential and indispensable shift from the past to the future. Anthonie Van Den Doel speaks of revolution in the classical sense symbolizing "radical change in the traditional order of power and relationships."⁸⁹ Society and social facts are significantly and critically altered by revolution. According to Canaan S. Banana, revolutionary transformation "entails a fundamental change in the structural basis of our entire system: economic, social, political or religious."⁹⁰ Revolution demands substantial and

meaningful modifications in the institutional, structural, and traditional order of society. In modern understanding, revolution is a rapid and abrupt fundamental change in the status quo toward a new and more just human reality. John T. Pawlikowski emphasizes that revolution also entails a new consciousness alongside structural change.⁹¹ Pawlikowski states:

Thus I would define revolution as the process whereby a segment of human consciousness experiences a hopeful alienation from existing social structures, which alienation leads to the creation of new social structures that bring about more equality. The key point is that revolution does not consist solely in structural change, but in a new consciousness of basic human equality; but the alienation results not in despair but in the replacement of the defective institutions with ones that better embody the new consciousness.⁹²

Revolutions stem from the radicalization of human consciousness toward the goal of greater freedom and justice. Charles C. West argues, “Revolution is, then, a state of consciousness which defines the existing law and order—the existing balance of power—as violence, and is devoted to its basic overthrow.”⁹³ Thus, revolution inspires new and rapid structural changes in human culture toward the goal of freedom alongside the revolutionizing of human consciousness concerning equality and liberation. Revolutions can be nonviolent or violent. The US civil rights movement was an example of a revolution practicing nonviolent resistance. However, Almeri Bezerra de Melo argues, “Until today, practically all the true revolutions have been effected by means of violence.”⁹⁴ The modern revolutions in Britain (1640), America (1776), France (1789), Russia (1917), and China (1948) all demanded violence on a large scale.⁹⁵ Turner’s insurrection qualifies as such a violent modern revolution. It was birthed by a new radical consciousness in black religion and theology. Blacks perceived themselves as a chosen people created and affirmed in the image of God. God did not will their suffering and enslavement. God would free them as a people. Structurally, Turner’s rebellion threatened to destroy the institution of slavery and introduce a new age of peace and freedom for blacks. Like other modern revolutions, including the American Revolution, Nat Turner’s insurrection concerned liberation, freedom, and equality. It proposed a new American story of justice and liberty for black people. Turner’s revolt pursued this revolutionary transformation of America and its racist institutions. Turner’s rebellion, like the American Revolution, was also uniquely Christian

and based on Christian principles. Van Den Doel suggests that revolution in a Christian framework “is the possibility for a new and better order established by God.”⁹⁶ God is the architect and author of a more humane and just future. Van Den Doel further asserts, “Christian participation in revolution is not motivated by hatred for people, neither by trust in violence, but by solidarity with those that suffer, in whom Christ meets us, by a willingness to forgive, and by the hope for a new and just social order.”⁹⁷ As a Christian revolutionary, Nat Turner defiantly asserted that God was the catalyst for his actions. Turner was ostensibly pursuing the Kingdom of Heaven on earth through his revolutionary conduct. Turner initiated a black Christian revolution against slavery and dehumanization in the name of God.

While the official position of mainstream Christianity has been Just War Theory since the fourth century CE, the church has been equally against the prospect of a “just revolution.”⁹⁸ Davis Brown contends, “The tendency to treat war and rebellion separately has persisted throughout Christian (and Western) philosophy, law, and political theory.”⁹⁹ The Christian Just War Theory distinguishes between the two by only supporting the use of force by legitimate authorities rather than bands of comrades or revolutionaries. Charles Villa-Vicencio asserts, “The dominant tradition of the church has, however, tended to bless the state’s use of violence while condemning violent revolution against the ruling authorities.”¹⁰⁰ He traces this predisposition in favor of the state to Constantine’s Edict of Milan in 313 CE granting tolerance and ending persecution of Christianity.¹⁰¹ Van Den Doel likewise links the antirevolutionary stance of Christianity to the union of church and state under Constantine.¹⁰² He further argues that the church’s counterrevolutionary position extended from the Church of Rome to the Reformation churches.¹⁰³ For instance, Van Den Doel asserts, “When revolutionary movements arose, like the Peasants’ War of 1524–26 or the Anabaptist Münzer episode of 1534–35, the Reformation was quick to condemn and suppress them.”¹⁰⁴ In addition, he contends that both Martin Luther and John Calvin denied the right of the individual to rebel.¹⁰⁵ Luther was particularly suspicious of rebellion and revolt against civil authority.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, Van Den Doel describes the church during the eighteenth-century French Revolution as “counter-revolutionary, restorationist, and conservative.”¹⁰⁷ According to him, Christianity has historically “chose for the status quo or the restoration of the previously existing order.”¹⁰⁸ Christians have tended to equate the status quo and present order

with God's will and purpose.¹⁰⁹ Heinz Dietrich Wendland traces the negative character of contemporary Christian discourse on revolution to the strong tradition of conservative Christian thought during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹¹⁰ Despite coming from a revolutionary leader and prophet named Jesus and being inspired by revolutionary ideas about God and faith, Christianity traditionally condemns revolution and locates the use of force within the powers of the state. This antirevolutionary perspective of the church has obscured and distorted the image of Jesus and his revolutionary movement. Wendland further asserts that the church should assume a positive and critical attitude toward revolution because the church was born out of the eschatological and revolutionary force of the gospels.¹¹¹ As recently as 1968, however, the Theological Commission of the Christian Peace Conference submitted its work on "The Just Revolution" and repudiated the obvious parallel between the theory of just war and the notion of just revolution.¹¹² The Commission concluded, "But the theory of a 'just war' cannot simply be translated into a theory of a 'just revolution.'"¹¹³ While it is true that due to the limits and failings of Christian Just War Theory in the modern age one cannot merely transform the theory of just war to that of just revolution, the principles of just war articulated by Augustine and Aquinas suggest an analogous though separate philosophy of just revolution or just rebellion.

The Christian foundation for the right of just revolution begins with Aquinas's support for the right to rebel against tyranny and tyrannical government because it is not instituted for the common good of the people but for the private good of the ruler.¹¹⁴ Roger L. Shinn argues, "Alongside the doctrine of just war, with its prevalently conservative cast, there has been a doctrine of just opposition to tyrants-in effect, a doctrine of just revolution."¹¹⁵ The Theological Commission of the Christian Peace Conference similarly locates just revolution in the doctrine of the right and obligation to resist.¹¹⁶ The October 1966 report of the commission at Sofia states, "This doctrine calls on Christians actively to resist a government which misuses its authority."¹¹⁷ According to the commission, "the aim must be to set up a new and better order" and the revolution must exhaust all legal opposition.¹¹⁸ While Christianity has traditionally supported the state and suppressed the right of the individual to rebel, it has nonetheless in Aquinas's doctrine of resistance recognized the right of the people to rebel against tyranny and tyrannical government. Christianity acknowledges that the people in some real sense have

God-given inalienable rights to be respected and preserved by government. The American Revolution represented a decisive movement against tyranny and oppression from Great Britain. Similarly, Nat Turner's insurrection symbolized the resistance to the grossest form of tyranny, forced enslavement and poverty.

Certain foundational principles govern the pursuit of a just revolution or just rebellion. First, one must recognize that revolution is inherently coercive whether nonviolent or violent. The Theological Commission of the Christian Peace Conference argues, "Revolution necessarily involves the use of force, because the existing social relationships represent structure of power which, for their part, use force in the most varied forms to maintain the *status quo*."¹¹⁹ Revolution meets the violence of society head-on with necessary force, whether nonviolent or violent. Revolutionaries must decide in each revolutionary moment if violence or nonviolence is the best possible path toward the goals of the revolution. It should be evident however that nonviolent resistance maintains the same coercive power of force as violent insurrection. It aims to alter and transform unjust conditions and violent social circumstances. Nonviolent resistance disrupts and obstructs social norms and the existing order of power as does violence and force. The commission has been unwilling to articulate universal rules for just revolution arguing instead that revolution requires "responsible and well-informed analysis of all possible circumstances" in each revolutionary situation.¹²⁰ Therefore, no absolute and categorical standard of nonviolence or violence should apply to revolution. Second, revolution should not be pursued for the sake of revolution. John J. Vincent asserts:

Revolution can never be an end in itself. The problem of revolution lies basically not in the possibility of its miscarriage or its degeneration, but in what is done when it has succeeded. A perfectly "achieved" and fully "realized" revolution means at the same time the conclusion of the actual revolutionary period and the commencement of the post-revolutionary order of society.¹²¹

Vincent suggests that a successful revolution must integrate the initial revolutionary spirit into the postrevolutionary order and structure of society.¹²² The aims and principles of the revolution should be pursued and followed rather than the mere idea of revolution. Revolution should not be arbitrary or capricious. Third, the outcome of the revolution must follow the path toward peace and understanding. Van

Den Doel contends, “Every revolution must be followed by forgiveness, justice, and reconciliation if consolidation of the good that has been gained is to be achieved.”¹²³ Martin Luther King, Jr.’s nonviolent black revolution, for example, was ever mindful of its ultimate commitment to the beloved community. Revolution must finally bring resolution, reunification, and reconciliation to be deemed successful.

Just war principles have sometimes proven themselves to be irrelevant and inapplicable in the modern age. According to Shinn, Just War Theory is insufficient and artificial in contemporary war.¹²⁴ Shinn asserts that the prospect of the killing of innocents or non-combatants and the possibility of disproportionate damage versus gain in modern warfare necessarily violates just war standards.¹²⁵ In WWI, the Great War, more than 10 million persons were estimated to have died including 5 percent civilian with another 20 million wounded.¹²⁶ In WWII, 52 million perished with 48 percent civilian noncombatants.¹²⁷ Shinn indicts both modern weaponry and revolutionary guerrilla warfare for targeting innocents.¹²⁸ For example, Shinn argues, “Aerial bombardments of cities and guerrilla destruction of villages, though different in scale, are similar violations of the traditional rules of just war.”¹²⁹ Modern technology, which accentuates killing and destruction, however, makes revolution unlikely according to Shinn.¹³⁰ Revolutionaries face disproportionate and forbidding military power of the state. Nevertheless, Shinn condemns guerrilla warfare because it does not confine itself to military targets. Revolutionaries, like legitimate authority, must be bound by ethical standards forbidding the killing of civilians or noncombatants. Eileen Egan challenges Just War Theory because seemingly all wars are declared just.¹³¹ She contends, “The just war conditions, as a means of preventing war or of lessening its brutality, have shown themselves to be irrelevant to the war-makers.”¹³² War, it is argued, cannot conform to just war principles in the modern era. States wage war without regard to ethical mandates and proscriptions. Given the indiscriminate nature of modern technology to kill and destroy, combined with unethical rulers and state apparatuses, Just War Theory may no longer be pertinent. Similarly, revolutionaries are often driven to brutality and terrorism due to inferior and unequal war machines. The desire to meet force with force distorts the ethics of the engagement. Nat Turner’s brutal killing of women and children, for example, violated the principles and standards of just war by engaging deliberately in the killing of innocents or noncombatants. Turner himself recognized the seriousness and severity of such

indiscriminate killing. He planned to begin at the Travis residence killing all whites, men, women, and children until he had gained strength and could later spare women and children.¹³³ Due to the frailty of Just War Theory in the modern age, it is evident that one cannot simply transfer the just war to a theory of just revolution. However, the principles of the Christian just war tradition remain particularly relevant and applicable for constructing a Christian theology of just revolution and just rebellion in this revolutionary age.

The two foundational principles of Christian Just War Theory, *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, articulated by Augustine and Aquinas, supply a starting place for a theology of just revolution.¹³⁴ Revolution must emanate from just causes or legitimate and justifiable foundations, and revolution must practice just means or ethical engagement. Just causes signify that the revolution seeks legitimate and justifiable goals like the ending of tyranny, slavery, oppression, and dehumanization. Revolution must aim to defend the oppressed and advance the interests of freedom, liberation, justice, and equality. Just means symbolizes that the revolution is fought through legitimate and justifiable practices of war. The means of revolution must conform to ethical standards like the non-killing of innocents. Aquinas articulates three classic criteria for just war: legitimate authority, just cause, and right intention.¹³⁵ Revolution, however, is not pursued by legitimate or sovereign authority. In fact, revolution declares the proper authority to be illegitimate and unjust. A theology of just revolution recognizes legitimate revolutionary authority that comes from the people who are oppressed. It is legitimate because it represents the will of the people. A theology of just revolution acknowledges the right of the people to revolt against tyranny, slavery, oppression, and dehumanization. Right intention is also an important dimension of the just revolution. Revolutions must not be pursued for revenge, hatred, racism, or other illegitimate sources of anger and cruelty. Nat Turner did not seek revolution to punish his white slave-masters or to gain revenge for cruel treatment.¹³⁶ He was not racist toward whites, having been baptized by the Spirit alongside a white man and having been raised in the religious practices of his white Christian slaveholders.¹³⁷ Turner like other revolutionaries merely sought liberation and freedom from slavery and dehumanization. His cause was just, including the emancipation of all blacks from slavery. He and his band of slaves represented the will of the people as the legitimate revolutionary authority. Turner practiced right intention by following higher principles of justice, equality, and freedom rather than bitterness, anger,

and hatred. Where Turner came to violate standards of just revolution was in his use of unjust means through the killing of innocent women and children.

Modern Christian Just War Theory articulates certain additional criteria to govern the practice of just causes and the employment of just means that should apply to revolution in the modern age. First, the violence of war and revolution can only come as a last resort where all legitimate and lawful means of resistance, including nonviolent resistance, has been pursued and exhausted. Violence then becomes a necessary evil to bring about justice. The Theological Commission of the Christian Peace Conference, for example, contends that the ecclesiastical tradition teaches that revolution can use force only as a last resort.¹³⁸ In a situation in which the oppressor is already using force, where all means of lawful criticism and lawful action have been explored, and wherein “a situation must have arisen in which people are being hurt to a larger extent by the activity or lack of activity of the oppressor than would be the case in a violent revolution,” the commission recognizes the need for violence as a last resort.¹³⁹ Second, the violence of war and revolution must be proportionate to the cause; the good must outweigh the harm inflicted.¹⁴⁰ The violence of revolution is necessarily destructive and produces suffering while seeking transformation and deliverance. A theology of just revolution acknowledges that violence must be proportionate and reasonable in the pursuit of rebellion. The violence of modern weaponry threatens the integrity of such a principle. Swiftly and deliberately, the modern war machine can decimate populations and destroy lands. In the hands of revolutionaries, these same weapon systems must be used with integrity and honor focusing on achievable, measurable, and legitimate military objectives rather than mass casualties and terror. Revolution in the modern age must be waged legitimately and justly. The violence of the revolution cannot disproportionately exceed the violence of the regime. Third, war and revolution must expect reasonable prospect of success.¹⁴¹ Revolutions should come as inevitable transformations in the status quo based on the radicalization and revolutionizing of human consciousness. Revolutions are too destructive to be whimsical and arbitrary. Revolutionaries must believe in the possibility of success. Yet, the revolutionary may not be as calculated as others in the prospect of victory. A revolutionary is willing to fight and die for a just cause with right intention. Martyrdom is an equally powerful form of success as victory. While revolutionaries should avoid unwinnable battles with lack of widespread support, reasonable prospect of success is not

the primary consideration in just revolution. Revolutions gain momentum as they develop. Fourth, war and revolution must practice just means including the non-killing of innocents and noncombatants.¹⁴² This is the most problematic area for just revolution and modern warfare including the insurrection of Nat Turner. While not able to utilize modern weaponry but guns, knives, and horses, Turner engaged in the brutal slaughter of women and children. Modern weaponry is sufficiently indiscriminate to ensure rather than avoid the killing of innocents. How can modern revolution employ just means? It must respect life, freedom, equality, liberty, and justice. It must shun and avoid the killing of noncombatants. As the less established force in society, revolution must not devolve into rage, anger, and cruelty. Revolutions depend on guiding ethical principles that transcend earthly circumstances and motivate the rebellion. Applying ethical rules to revolution including legitimate revolutionary authority, just cause, right intention, last resort, proportionality of cause, reasonable prospect of success, and just means suggests that revolution can be noble, just, and legitimate in the modern age.

The American Revolution of 1776 and the Nat Turner slave rebellion of 1831 serve as paradigmatic examples of just revolution or just rebellion in modern America. Essentially, each incident presented a just cause based on inalienable and God-given rights to freedom, life, and liberty. The colonists claimed forced enslavement and taxation by the imperial British power without proper representation and sovereignty of the people. They decried tyranny and tyrannical government, the lack of personal and religious liberty, and claimed the guidance of God's providence. Turner resurrected these foundational American ideals of freedom from slavery for blacks. He likewise denounced tyranny, ungodliness, and hypocrisy in the name of God. Each movement emanated from a legitimate revolutionary authority. The American revolutionaries represented the will of the oppressed classes of people. The will of the people to rebel against tyranny was embodied in the revolutionary movement. Turner's legitimacy came as a fellow slave with a divine plan of deliverance. He represented the will of the slave to rise up against the slave-master. Turner's insurrection was a movement of black slaves who were empowered by their community to seek freedom. Both revolutions were pursued with right intention. Hatred, racism, and evil did not motivate rebellion but rather freedom, justice, and liberty. On the basis of just cause, revolutionary authority, and right intention, the American Revolution and Southampton Insurrection qualify as just revolutions or rebellions.

The pursuit of just means, though compromised by the modern era, was followed by the American Revolution although Turner's insurrection violated the standards of just means by resembling holy war in its execution. The American colonists bended the traditional standards of war and engaged in guerrilla warfare, which they nonetheless confined to military targets. The British occupied the colonies and so the colonists were forced to fight on their own land by targeting all British troops through unconventional warfare. By killing women and children, Nat Turner, by contrast, invoked the tradition of holy war characteristic of the Hebrew people in the Bible (Deut 20:16–17; 1 Sam 15:2–3).¹⁴³ According to Yoder, holy war does not come as a last resort, is religiously revealed and commanded by God rather than politically calculated, grants no rights to enemies, is not guided by practical effectiveness, and does not have success as a criterion.¹⁴⁴ Yoder further asserts, "Martyrdom in a holy cause is to be sought and is just as valuable, just as satisfying, as success."¹⁴⁵ Holy war can arise from religious zeal, fanaticism, and fundamentalism. Shinn contends, "Crusaders tend to absolutize their cause and glorify war; advocates of the just war accept it as a necessary evil in a sinful world."¹⁴⁶ There is no place for holy war in the modern era of universal human rights, natural justice, and natural law. Such God-inspired slaughter like the Crusades is religious terror. To be just, Turner should have avoided the killing of innocents. Just revolution must be conformed to ethical mandates brought on by the modern age. To employ just means in modern revolution, the revolution must come as a last resort, with proportionality of the cause versus the harm, reasonable prospect of success, and the non-killing of innocents or noncombatants.

Christian revolution is not founded on the idea of revolution but on the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁴⁷ The gospel imperatives of love of God and love of neighbor must inhabit Christian ideals of revolution. Wilfried Daim asserts, "To 'obey God rather than men'—this is the foundation of every revolution the thrust of which is in the direction of the evolution of mankind."¹⁴⁸ Christian revolution aims to revolutionize human consciousness and to instill the liberating and revolutionary principles of Christ into earthly structures and powers. Daim names Moses the "first of the world's great revolutionists."¹⁴⁹ Moses's revolution against Egyptian slavery in the name of Yahweh liberated the Hebrews and birthed a people with a common purpose and destiny. The Theological Commission of the Christian Peace Conference argues that Christian revolution must not be inspired by hatred and evil or faith in violence and rebellion.¹⁵⁰ The commission

further proclaims, “It can only be inspired by our sense of oneness with the sufferers in whom Christ meets us and by our hope for a new and just order and by our readiness to forgive.”¹⁵¹ Christian revolution promotes liberation, freedom, and reconciliation. For Van Den Doel, Christian revolution pursues the possibility of a new and better order established by God that institutes the liberating and revolutionary principles of the gospel.¹⁵² In developing a theology of rebellion, Rolland F. Smith argues, “The act of rebellion is an act of fellowship, for it is an affirmation of a *human* value; it gives man a feeling of identification and founds his solidarity.”¹⁵³ Smith contends that the very existence and essential dimension of humankind is located in rebellion.¹⁵⁴ Rebellion reflects the human spirit yearning to be free and united with God. The possibility of Christian revolution means the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. The leaders of the American Revolution were God-fearing men who placed faith in God’s providence in America against their imperial masters. In this case, as in the Exodus, Christian principles of freedom, equality, life, and liberty birthed a free and independent nation. Nat Turner was inspired by his Christian religious, spiritual, and theological beliefs to open rebellion and revolution. Turner’s Christian revolution became a condemnation and judgment of slavery and dehumanization in the name of God.

Can the history and legacy of Christian violence, which has been waged largely on behalf of the status quo, the state, and the traditional orders and structures of power, create space for a revolutionary Christianity that legitimates and justifies Christian revolution against tyranny, slavery, oppression, and dehumanization whether violent or nonviolent? Such a radical Christianity rejects categorical, literalistic, and absolutist prohibitions against violence and revolution. Such a revolutionary Christianity recognizes the necessity of violent resistance in a fallen world due to human sin and depravity. To protect the poor and oppressed neighbor, the Christian revolutionary rises up against disempowering and dehumanizing forces in society. Middleton asserts, “The world is in perpetual need of transformation, of revolution—but because the world stands in this need, then so too does Christianity, for Christianity is nothing if it is not to do with men’s relationships to one another.”¹⁵⁵ The revolution inspired by Christ motivates future revolution through its perpetual commitment to the radical and revolutionary principles of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God necessarily relativizes human kingdoms and subordinates them to higher principles of God’s justice, liberation, and humanization. Moltmann contends, “Humanity is waiting for a

revolutionary Christianity which will call the world evil and change it.”¹⁵⁶ Christianity has the responsibility to foster and stimulate revolutions of consciousness and revolutionary transformation in the world toward greater freedom, equality, justice, and liberation. The Kingdom of God is both realized and future. In the present moment, Christ has come and brought salvation; God has been reconciled to humanity. The blessings of God are upon human society in the here and now. Yet, the Kingdom of God is also not yet. There are greater levels of freedom and justice awaiting humanity on earth and for eternity. Christians assume the responsibility to fight for the oppressed neighbor and the realization of that greater and more humane world. Such a radical and revolutionary Christianity inspires and promotes Christian revolutions throughout human history. A Christian theology of just revolution or just rebellion, inspired by a revolutionary Christianity, accounts for both the justice and the inhumanity of Nat Turner’s Christian revolution against slavery and dehumanization.

Redeeming Nat Turner

Redeeming Nat Turner does not come from excusing his brutal and vicious killing of women and children or accepting his claims to prophethood and radical black theology but from careful deliberation and consideration of the prophetic dimensions of his liberating and revolutionary violence against slavery and the theological implications for inspiring future just revolutions or just rebellions and the development of a revolutionary Christianity that promotes freedom, equality, liberation, and justice in its understanding of salvation and the gospel. Turner prophetically and definitively denied the compatibility of slavery and Christianity. His radical black slave religion and early black theology unequivocally rejected enslavement and dehumanization for black people. It thoroughly denounced racism, racial injustice, and white supremacy. Turner’s revolution against slavery judged and condemned the peculiar institution in America from the standpoint of the poor and oppressed black slave. His insurrection embodied the gospel of Jesus Christ to Turner and his fellow conspirators. For Turner, Christianity represented freedom as well as the pursuit of righteousness and justice. In his understanding, Christianity demanded revolutionary praxis and radical social action. Furthermore, Turner’s black theology defiantly declared that Christianity could uphold and defend the violence of the enslaved and oppressed against their slave-masters and oppressors. Christianity,

from Turner's perspective, demanded it. God would not abandon the black slave in the midst of oppression and terror by a violent white regime. Turner's rebellion justified and legitimated liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence against slavery and dehumanization in the name of the Kingdom of Heaven. His revolt invited the counterviolence of God against idolatry, social injustice, and unrighteousness. Turner's insurrection concretely demonstrated that categorical and absolute prohibitions against violence do not express God's will in all situations and contexts, especially in the life of an oppressed people. Revolution to build and further the Kingdom of Heaven on earth may at times necessitate violence and warfare.

Nat Turner's rebellion came as a shocking and violent example of the tradition of African American religious resistance to slavery, racism, and white supremacy. Turner's radical black religion and theology defended and affirmed the black slave as created in the image of God with inalienable rights to freedom, life, and liberty, viewed blacks as common people with a shared destiny, and imagined a future era of peace and freedom for blacks in America. Christ was seen as a liberator and deliverer from both sin and material bondage. Turner's black Christianity meant freedom in the here and now, freedom from slavery in America, and vindication in this present life. It signified material and spiritual freedom from bondage and inhumanity. Through private conversations with his God, Nat Turner resolved to make the ideals of the Kingdom of Heaven a reality for black slaves through violent rebellion. His liberating and revolutionary violence set the stage for the ultimate defeat of slavery and the prophetic condemnation and judgment of racial injustice. Guided by prophetic and apocalyptic rage, Nat Turner answered the call of his God to defeat his enemies and to combat the destruction of his people.

Nat Turner's violent insurrection emerged from his unique social location, historical context in the violent antebellum South, peculiar theological understanding, and personal relationship with God. Turner illustrated that theology inhabited the worldview of black slaves and acted to motivate social action and resistance including violence. While one cannot substantiate and prove his role as prophet, Turner's black theology nonetheless made prophetic claims about the Kingdom of Heaven and the gospel. His liberating and revolutionary violence against slavery resembled the prophetic violence of the Hebrew prophets found in the Old Testament. Due to his religious, spiritual, and theological perspectives, Turner's violence was uniquely Christian violence though it came uncharacteristically as the violence

of the oppressed and humiliated. While some argue that Jesus categorically condemned violence as unchristian, a careful reading of Jesus indicates that Jesus condemned violence in interpersonal affairs and private matters but did not condemn violence and war absolutely in every situation and context. He did not categorically condemn the wars of the state or the violence of the oppressed. He did not advise the soldier to become a pacifist. In fact, he predicted apocalyptic violence to usher in the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. Built on a fragmented and mystical theological foundation, Turner's personal theology, though highly individual and particularistic, embraced the prophetic violence of Moses and the apocalyptic outlook of Jesus's politics of violence. Therefore, the construction of a Christian theology of just revolution or just rebellion redeems Nat Turner though it simultaneously exposes and indicts his killing of innocents. It justifies and legitimates Turner's violent rebellion as a just revolution expressing a just cause with right intention through a legitimate revolutionary authority, the community of black slaves. Turner's war against slavery, however, was a just revolution that unethically employed unjust means. To be fully legitimate and just in the modern era of revolution, Turner's insurrection should have rejected the call to holy war and refrained from the killing of innocent women and children.

Ultimately, then, the redemption of Nat Turner lies in consideration of the existential, spiritual, religious, and theological plight of the oppressed slave in a violent regime before God. Does the slave have the right to rebel by any means necessary in the name of the Kingdom of Heaven and the covenant of freedom and life? If freedom and the guarantees of the gospel depend on necessary violence, does the slave have the right to be free? The God and theology of Nat Turner finally empowered him to violently resist the forces of evil and to rise up in defiance against the institution of slavery in pursuit of his inalienable right to freedom, life, and liberty. In Turner, the incompatibility of violence and Christianity was decisively rejected and abandoned. Turner sought to fight with Christ for Kingdom ideals of freedom, equality, liberation, and justice. His liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence was the means through which he pursued the Kingdom of Heaven as poor black slave in an inherently violent white regime. Turner embodied the militant black slave's appropriation of the gospel and imminent eschatological hope in freedom on earth. He was a revolutionary manifestation of his nineteenth-century slave community and historical era in the antebellum South. Nat Turner's prophetic Christian violence and revolution against bondage

and degradation in the name of the Christ invoked and entreated the wrath, condemnation, and judgment of God against slavery, racism, and white supremacy in America. His violent struggle and prophetic violence was finally vindicated with emancipation and the defeat of slavery through the US Civil War.

In the rebellion of Nat Turner, one finds the union of violence and religion. Turner's social condition of slavery and humiliation cried out against his understanding of himself as created in the image of God and endowed by his Creator with inalienable rights. Religion empowered him to love God, to love himself, and to love his people. Religion, however, also exposed and accentuated the glaring injustice and inhumanity of his social state of inequality, poverty, and enslavement. Religion highlighted the inconsistencies between his condition before God and his place in the world. Furthermore, religion uncovered the root of his problems, his earthly oppressors and slave-masters. While religion has the capacity to pacify some, others are awakened to a new demand for struggle and resistance when they are denied God-given rights to freedom, equality, self-determination, and liberty. Religion can inspire violence when one's religious, spiritual, and theological expectations of life are upset by intolerable, demeaning, and perverse realities. When one is violently denied the right to freedom, life, and liberty, religion may demand counterviolence and insurrection. The Kingdom of Heaven can only become a reality on earth when humanity chooses to eliminate inequality, social injustice, unrighteousness, corruption, and wickedness. Until that day, freedom fighters like Nat Turner will continue to be awakened by their faith in God to violence and war in order to uncompromisingly and insistently guarantee the rights to life. Religion and theology will continue to inspire just revolutions and just rebellions against degradation and inhumanity.

Nat Turner's violent insurrection concretely represented the militant black Christian slave's appropriation of the liberating and revolutionary gospel of Jesus Christ. Turner's radical black theology envisioned Christianity as a religion of freedom and resistance to sin and evil. He rejected the deceitful and hypocritical Christianity of his slave-masters and oppressors, which justified and sanctified the enslavement and degradation of black people. Turner's social location as religious and educated yet poor, black, male slave conjoined with his historical context in the intractable, intransigent, and violent antebellum South to establish the foundations of his revolutionary theology and the necessity of violent resistance. His particularistic and unique Christian theology united the radical beliefs and understandings of his black slave

religion and Southern Evangelicalism to the prophetic violence of the Old Testament and the apocalyptic violence of the New Testament. Turner's theological worldview embraced liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence alongside God's apocalyptic counterviolence, wrath, and condemnation to end slavery and dehumanization in the name of Christ. A theological account of Nat Turner and his violent slave revolt reveals that in the end Turner was willing to justify and legitimate the necessity of liberating and revolutionary violence against the institution of slavery in America in order to forcefully and aggressively pursue the gospel of Jesus Christ and to finally fulfill the Kingdom of Heaven on earth for himself and other black slaves.

Notes

Introduction

1. Henry Irving Tragle, *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1971), xv.
2. For views on Nat Turner, see Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1975); Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Gayraud S. Wilmore, "Three Generals in the Lord's Army," in *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 77–98.
3. Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International, 1969), 298.
4. Wilmore, "Three Generals," 95.
5. See Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996).
6. Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 136–137.
7. Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), ix.
8. Wilmore, "Three Generals," 88.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Irons, *Proslavery Christianity*, 136.
11. Greenberg, *Confessions of Nat Turner*, 46.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, 47–48.
15. Oates, *Fires of Jubilee*, 145.
16. See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove, 1968).
17. Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1983), 97.

18. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan considers the words of Jesus on violence in *Violence and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 43–45.
19. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan discusses Martin Luther King, Jr. and his philosophy of love in *Refiner's Fire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 74–80.
20. Malcolm X is noted for his defense of violence in self-defense. See speeches and writings of Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary* (New York: Pathfinder, 1992); *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Pathfinder, 1989); *February, 1965, the Final Speeches*, ed. Steve Clark (New York: Pathfinder, 1992); *Malcolm X: Speeches at Harvard*, ed. Archie Epps (New York: Paragon House, 1991); *The End of White World Supremacy: Four Speeches*, ed. Benjamin Goodman (New York: Merlin House, 1971).
21. Kirk-Duggan explores the pervasiveness of violence in the Bible and Christian thought in *Violence and Theology*.
22. C. A. J. Coady, *Morality of Political Violence* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 22.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, 23.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Kirk-Duggan, *Violence and Theology*, 2.
27. The Eisenhower Commission defined violence as “behavior designed to inflict physical injury to people or damage to property.” George R. Edwards, *Jesus and the Politics of Violence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 3. For the purposes of studying Nat Turner, one can concentrate on human victims of violence. In the case of the slave, violence is experienced both as a human and as property.
28. Kirk-Duggan, *Violence and Theology*, 2.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, 3.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, 23.
34. J. David Turner, *An Introduction to Liberation Theology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 28.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Kirk-Duggan, *Violence and Theology*, 2.
37. John Howard Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, ed. Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 383.
38. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *Misbegotten Anguish: A Theology and Ethics of Violence* (St Louis: Chalice, 2001), 21.
39. Jacques Ellul, *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective*, trans. Cecelia Gaul Kings (New York: Seabury, 1969), 97.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Helder Camara, *Spiral of Violence*, trans. Della Couling (London: Sheed and Ward, 1971), 30–34.
42. *Ibid.*, 30.

43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., 34.
45. Rubem A. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope* (New York: Corpus Books, 1969), 125.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Kirk-Duggan, *Violence and Theology*, 11.
49. Ibid.
50. James F. Rinehart, *Apocalyptic Faith and Political Violence: Prophets of Terror* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 19.
51. Chapter 4 discusses the violent language, pronouncements of woe, condemnation, and doom, and apocalypticism of Jesus as it relates to his politics of violence.
52. Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have a Dream: Writing and Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 125–134.
53. Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary*, 1–13.
54. King, *I Have a Dream*, 30.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., 30–31.
58. Ibid., 109.
59. Ibid., 127.
60. Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 56.
61. King, *I Have a Dream*, 109.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid., 51.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid.
69. Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary*, 10.
70. Ibid., 11.
71. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 9.
72. Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary*, 115.
73. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 9.
74. Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary*, 176.
75. King, *I Have a Dream*, 51.
76. Ibid., 29–33.
77. Greenberg, *Confessions of Nat Turner*, 44.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid., 45–46.
80. Ibid., 44–45.
81. Ibid., 45.

82. Ibid., 46.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid.
85. Ibid., 46–48.
86. Stephen B. Oates, *Our Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, and the Civil War Era* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), 123.
87. Randolph Ferguson Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia: Baptist Community and Conflict, 1740–1840* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 199.
88. Oates, *Fires of Jubilee*, 145.
89. Ibid.
90. Oates, *Our Fiery Trial*, 123.
91. See Greenberg, *Confessions of Nat Turner*.
92. Oates, *Fires of Jubilee*, 122.
93. Ibid., 122–123.
94. Ibid., 123.
95. Ibid.
96. Ibid. It is my contention that *Confessions* reveals Nat Turner's unique and deeply personal theological perspectives and understanding of God that ultimately informed and motivated his violent quest for freedom.
97. Oates, *Our Fiery Trial*, 7.
98. Dale W. Brown, *The Christian Revolutionary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1971), 14.
99. Ibid., 13.

I A Portrait of Nat Turner

1. Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), xi.
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4. See Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996).
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9. Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt*, xv.
10. Stephen B. Oates, *Our Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, and the Civil War Era* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), 123.
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14. *Ibid.*, 48.
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4 The Gospel of Jesus Christ and Violence

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