
Latin American Theology and Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Reply to Leon Klenicki

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In his discussion of liberation theology ("The Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Jewish Exploration," *American Jewish Archives*, April 1983), Leon Klenicki makes a number of important critical claims about this theological development in Latin America. "The theology of liberation," he writes, "though by appearance an advanced form of contemporary thought, repeats, and even reinforces, the anti-Judaism that has pervaded Christian theology from its very beginning."¹ The typological use of biblical texts, he continues, "face[s] Jews and Judaism with a new triumphalism, an old experience of Israel in its relationship with Christianity, a refusal to recognize the messianic meaning of Zionism and the social vocation of the Latin American Jewish communities."² While it is true that the liberation theologians have not considered Zionism or the contribution of Jewish social workers in Latin America, liberation theology can nevertheless provide a significant new basis for Jewish-Christian encounter, since these Christian theologians have gone back to their Jewish roots in the Old Testament. Suddenly Jewish and Christian writers find themselves using the same vocabulary and motifs, and this bond can pave the way for a mutual examination of commonly shared religious ideals.

For liberation theologians, the biblical account portrays the Israelites as an oppressed people. Suffering torment, their complaints lead to new burdens rather than relief.³ But the Israelites are not alone: God hears the groaning of His people and remembers the covenant He made with them.⁴ Moreover, God declares that the people will be liberated from their bondage. Moses is delegated to lead the people out of Egypt, and after many trials, this is accomplished.⁵ This story of hope has inspired the oppressed in South America. It is of solace to hear that God does not remain aloof from situations of human history,

that He acts against Pharaoh, and that Israel's liberation is not simply from individual sin and guilt; freedom involves the liberation from oppressive political and economic structures. In these ways it is clear that God has a real concern with life on earth.

As R. M. Brown explains in *Theology in a New Key*, this account shows that God is a living God and that He takes sides with the down-trodden.⁶ This means that God is against the Pharaohs of this world, the modern exploiters. And who, Brown asks, are the Pharaohs of this world today? It is not difficult to identify them, he writes; "they are the tiny minority at home who are in collusion against the great majority; they are the churches and the church-persons who give support to such oligarchies; and they are the rich and powerful from other nations who keep national oligarchies in power, thereby becoming complicit in the ongoing exploitation of the poor."⁷

Liberation theologians emphasize the scriptural message that God demands justice. This theme is found throughout the prophetic books of the Bible, and is illustrated by numerous textual references. J. L. Miranda, for example, in *Marx and the Bible*, cites the words of Jeremiah:⁸

Shame on the man who builds his house by non-justice
and completes its upstairs rooms by non-right,
who makes his fellow man work for nothing,
without paying him his wages,
who says, "I will build myself an imposing palace
with spacious rooms upstairs,"
who sets windows in it,
panels it with cedar, and paints it vermilion (Jer. 22:13-16).⁹

Referring to the practice of justice and right, and the defense of the poor, Jeremiah poses the question: "Is this not what it means to know me? It is Jahweh who speaks" (Jer. 22:16).

In this rhetorical question Jeremiah explains that knowing God entails acts of righteousness. To know God is not to engage in ritual acts or to subscribe to correct religious beliefs—to know God is to do justice. This conviction adds depth to a later passage in Jeremiah where God's new covenant is described, in which "it shall no longer be necessary for each person to teach his neighbor to know God, for all shall know Him" (Jer. 31:31-34). Here an explicit equation is made between knowing God and doing justice which transforms the nature

of the new covenant.¹⁰

Not only, according to liberation theologians, is the knowledge of God predicated on doing justice, but the worship of God also entails acts of righteousness. In this regard Miranda quotes the words of Amos (Amos 5:21, 23–24) to emphasize that without justice there can be no true cultic worship:

I hate, I despise your feasts
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies . . .
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
But let justice roll down like waters,
And righteousness like a mighty stream.¹¹

For liberation theologians such convictions, based on Scripture, have had a profound effect on their personal lives. The Colombian priest Camilo Torres, for example, stopped exercising his priestly duties, since he regarded them as a diversion from identifying with those who were trying to establish a more just society: "I have ceased to say Mass [in order] to practice love for people in temporal, economic and social spheres. When the people have nothing against me, when they have carried out the revolution, then I will return to offering Mass, God willing. I think that in this way I follow Christ's injunction ' . . . leave thy gift upon the altar and go first to be reconciled to thy brothers (and sisters).' "¹² Such an attitude is summarized by Isaiah in a passage in which appropriate forms of worship are described. God explains that fasting has made them quarrel among themselves and oppress their workers; this is not what God desires.

Is not this what I require of you as a fast—
to loose the fetters of injustice,
to untie the knots of the yoke,
to snap every yoke and set free those who have been crushed?
Is it not sharing your food with the hungry,
taking the homeless poor into your home,
clothing the naked when you meet them
and never evading a duty to your kinsfolk? (Isa. 58:6–7)

To liberation theologians it is clear that their message will in all likelihood not be accepted by the established churches. Rather, drawing upon the biblical concept of a saving remnant, they see themselves

as a minority within the body of Christ. This is not an attitude of despair; it is consonant with the prophetic role. In 700 B.C.E., when Amos inveighed against evil and cultic corruption, he told the ancient Israelites to “hate evil, and love good, and establish justice within the gate.” And yet, the most he promised was the possibility that “the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph” (Amos 5:15). This should not, however, result in an elitist attitude, but as J. Ratzinger points out in *Le Nouveau Peuple de Dieu*, the remnant has an obligation to others: “God does not divide humanity (the ‘many’ and the ‘few’) to save the few and hurl the many into perdition. Nor does he do it to save the many in an easy way and the few in a hard way. Instead we could say that he uses the numerical few as a leverage point for raising up the many.”¹³

Embodying this message of liberation, the church is to be, in the words of Helder Camara, “the Abrahamic minority.” Abraham was the one who obeyed God and traveled to new and unexplored places. As Camara explains: “Everywhere there are minorities capable of understanding Action for Justice and Peace and adopting it as a workshop for study and action. Let us call these minorities the Abrahamic minorities, because like Abraham, we are hoping against all hope.”¹⁴ It is this Abrahamic minority who will hear the cries of the oppressed; they are the ones who will be committed to “the most important task in our century, to free those two out of three who are still in slavery, even though they are no longer called slaves.”¹⁵

In this Christian message, it is obvious that liberation theologians have relied heavily on the central biblical themes of freedom from oppression, justice, and the role of the saving remnant. Utilizing pentateuchal and prophetic imagery and symbolism, they have explored the role of the church in contemporary society, and in these ways they have revitalized and readapted the teachings of the Old Testament. This return to scriptural sources provides a bridge between Judaism and Christianity. While Jews cannot accept any christological doctrines embedded in the exposition of this message, they can recognize much common ground. These are particularly important links in the modern world, where the rich and the poor live side by side. In the light of this return to Jewish sources, it is now possible for both faiths to work together in trust and hope. Such a joint project is far removed

from those centuries of mistrust and persecution in which Jews and Christians regarded one another with contempt and hostility.

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Notes

1. L. Klenicki, "The Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Jewish Exploration," *American Jewish Archives* 35, no. 1 (April 1983): 37.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.
3. Exod. 1:8-14.
4. Exod. 2:23-25.
5. Exod. 3:7-10.
6. R. M. Brown, *Theology in a New Key* (Philadelphia, 1978).
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.
8. Jer. 21:13-15.
9. J. Miranda, *Marx and the Bible* (New York, 1974), p. 44.
10. Miranda's use of prophetic material is explained by Brown, *Theology in a New Key*, p. 91.
11. Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*, as quoted in Brown, *Theology in a New Key*, p. 92.
12. As quoted in *ibid.*, p. 93.
13. As quoted in *ibid.*, p. 160.
14. H. Camara, *The Desert Is Fertile* (New York, 1974), p. 69.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Correction

In the November 1983 issue a line was mistakenly omitted from the bottom of page 207 of Abraham J. Karp's article on the Conservative rabbinate. It should read "Nor was this the major problem facing the young rabbi. The congre-"