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# The Blackness of Liet-Kynes: Reading Frank Herbert's *Dune* Through James Cone

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**Abstract:** Frank Herbert's landmark science fiction novel *Dune* has received numerous sequels, prequels, and film treatments. Detailing the saga of humanity's far future beyond our present solar system, the work plays successfully with religious, political, and ecological themes. This essay deals with the social/theological implications of two figures within the story-world of *Dune*: Its protagonist and visible hero, Paul Atrides/Muad'Dib and the lesser figure of the "Imperial Planetologist" Dr. Kynes, also known to the Fremen as "Liet". By reading these two figures through the theology of James Cone, we discover that the obvious hero is not a messianic figure but a demonic one. Further, it is the lesser character of Liet-Kynes who actually fulfills the messianic role in Cone's theological system. This essay is preceded by and makes use of Jeremy Ian Kirk's work with the film *Avatar* that provides similar analysis. Where Kirk's principal concern is with the ethical considerations of *Avatar*, this essay will more closely bear on Cone's dynamic of redemption and conversion, specifically his notion of dying to white identity to be reborn in blackness.

**Keywords:** theology; whiteness; black liberation; liberation theology; soteriology; salvation

## 1. Introduction

Frank Herbert's six *Dune* novels provide an amazing and detailed view of a possible future for the human race among the stars.<sup>1</sup> The world-building in which he engaged spans thousands of years and billions of miles in his speculative future version of our known universe.<sup>2</sup> Religion, specifically the often cynical manipulations of the Bene Gesserit Sisterhood, plays a role in the narrative. It would certainly be worthwhile to study the explicit religion expressed within Herbert's work, especially in a comparative light, insofar as it incorporates elements of Islam, Zen Buddhism, and Roman Catholicism. At present, we will be examining a more implicit sense of religious ideology expressed in Herbert's work.

<sup>1</sup> Herbert himself wrote *Dune* (1965), *Dune Messiah* (1969), *Children of Dune* (1976), *God Emperor of Dune* (1981), *Heretics of Dune* (1984), and *Chapterhouse: Dune* (1985). He left behind notes for a seventh novel, which his son, Brian Herbert, and Kevin J. Anderson turned into the two novels *Hunters of Dune* (2006) and *Sandworms of Dune* (2007). They also co-authored a series of prequel novels to Herbert's original six.

<sup>2</sup> Chilean filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowski attempted to bring Herbert to the movie screen in the mid-1970s without success. Frank Pavich released a documentary feature detailing this attempt, titled *Jodorowski's Dune*, in 2013. American filmmaker David Lynch succeeded in bringing the first novel to the screen, but the contemporary critical response was broadly negative. Subsequent generations of science fiction fans have somewhat restored Lynch's film to "cult classic" status, but nevertheless it remains a flawed interpretation. The cable channel Syfy later adapted *Dune*, *Dune Messiah*, and *Children of Dune* into two miniseries titled "Frank Herbert's *Dune*" and "Frank Herbert's *Children of Dune*" in 2000 and 2003 respectively. Considering that this latter, most critically successful film adaptation runs well over nine hours, it is perhaps best to leave the story of *Dune* to the page and not the screen. This, of course, may well point to the difficulty of adapting even the most cinematic-feeling of novels to the actual cinema. Especially when one considers the narrative structure of Herbert's novels—often employing third person omniscient narrative—and the fact that they are themselves fictional histories of a time millennia into our own future, perhaps it is indeed impossible to properly adapt them for the screen.

This essay is concerned with the first novel of the series, *Dune*. It is within this novel that we are first introduced to the Atrides dynasty, the future imperial structure of the known human universe, the society of the Fremen, the incredible sandworms, and the desert planet known alternately as “Dune”, “Arrakis”, and later “Rakis”. The story arc of Herbert’s own six novels details the development of an interstellar human society across thousands of years, closely following the Atrides family and their loyal supporters. We will first review the relevant plot points around Paul Atrides/Muad’Dib and Liet-Kynes, as detailed in this novel. Muad’Dib is written as a messianic figure for the Fremen society that resists imperial rule. While this surface-level reading could indeed be fruitful for theological examination, it is the reading of Liet-Kynes as a true messiah that concerns the present study. For this reading, we will need to first review James Cone’s Black Liberation Theology, specifically the mentions of dying to “whiteness” and being reborn in “blackness”. Both Muad’Dib and Liet-Kynes exhibit some aspect of this dynamic, but close inspection will reveal that it is not the supposed hero of the story who occupies the messianic space in Cone’s thinking. For this analysis, we will be greatly helped by Jeremy Ian Kirk’s analysis of the James Cameron film *Avatar* that follows along similar lines. Kirk opens a path to understanding where true and false messianism might exist in the analysis of fiction in Cone’s terms.

## 2. Relevant Plot Points of *Dune*

We first meet the scion of the Atrides clan, Paul, as a sleeping object of observation. His mother, a Bene Gesserit Lady named Jessica, has prepared him to be tested as a potential Kwisatz Haderach. The Bene Gesserit in Herbert’s universe are a canny sect of women who control the fate of the interstellar empire covertly. They are known, as well, to seed religious ideas on far-flung worlds. The Kwisatz Haderach is a messianic figure in their lore, a male who can withstand the transformative “spice agony” and thereby obtain some limited degree of omniscience. Paul, in this case, is remarked upon as “small for his age”, while his mother comforts her religious superior that “the Atrides are known to start late getting their growth.”<sup>3</sup> Paul is to face trial by the “gom jabbar” the following day. This is a trial by ordeal which will reveal to the Bene Gesserit whether Paul is human or “animal”, a distinction that they make based on the ability to control one’s affect under duress.<sup>4</sup>

Paul is described further when he meets the Reverend Mother again for his trial: “The old woman studied Paul in one gestalten flicker: face oval like Jessica’s, but strong bones . . . hair: the Duke’s black-black but with the browline of the maternal grandfather who cannot be named, and that thin, disdainful nose; shape of directly staring green eyes: like the old Duke, the paternal grandfather who is dead.”<sup>5</sup> This description is sufficient, along with the surname Atrides that hints at mythical Greek ancestry,<sup>6</sup> to deduce that Paul would likely be seen as “white” or at the very least European in his features. There is of course some irony to using this descriptor for a character who lives at a time when *homo sapiens* have quite forgotten the name of the planet that first sent them to the stars. Nevertheless, Herbert himself was very much a product of a world that knew Europe.

Paul is the son of a Duke, Leto Atrides, who is sent to rule Arrakis for the Padishah Emperor. He is born into aristocracy in a world filled with palace intrigues. The Atrides are to take Arrakis from the Harkonnens who currently rule in tyranny. While Leto is praised as a fair man, his position is nevertheless one of imperial imposition. To be sure, the Harkonnen rule is harsh and the Atrides rule promises to be fair, but it is still rule by an external colonizer. The empire has need of “melange”,

<sup>3</sup> (Herbert 1965, p. 3). Hereafter *Dune*.

<sup>4</sup> It barely requires noting here that the denigration of non-white people as “animal” instead of “human” was widely practiced throughout the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the Shoah, and continues today as a favorite trope of bigots and racists everywhere. Within the story-world of *Dune*, we see it amplified as a pernicious and inextinguishable part of the process of creating a social other.

<sup>5</sup> *Dune*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> The surname “Atrides” derives from the name “Atreus”, mythological father of Agamemnon and Menelaus, brother-in-law and wronged husband of Helen and combatants in the Trojan War.

the spice produced by giant sandworts who live only on Arrakis, that allows faster-than-light travel through “space folding” by the Navigator’s Guild and the mental powers of the Bene Gesserit both. Terms of colonialism are very much apt here, as the imperial aim for the planet is the continued production and export of a valuable natural resource, whether the indigenous population cares for this practice or not.

Ultimately, the “maternal grandfather who cannot be named” turns out to be the hated Baron Vladimir Harkonnen. This detail serves principally to underscore the Bene Gesserit’s aims in manipulating heredity. They are the keepers of parental and birth records and they acknowledge, later, that they had hoped to bring the Kwisatz Haderach in the generation following Paul Atreides through an acknowledged Harkonnen-Atreides union. It is additionally stated that a Bene Gesserit can control the sex of a gestating fetus and that Jessica was supposed to only bear female children for Duke Leto Atreides, thereby setting up the future union of Atreides and Harkonnen. By bearing a son to Leto, Jessica disrupts this plan.<sup>7</sup> The Harkonnens are secretly allied with the Emperor to destroy the Atreides, a feat accomplished by the assassination of Leto resulting in Paul’s and his mother’s flight to the desert. It is here that the scion of the Atreides meets the Fremen, a desert-dwelling people indigenous to the planet.<sup>8</sup>

Paul is seen as a potential messianic figure both by the Bene Gesserit and by the Fremen, based on a cultural legend that was likely planted by the Bene Gesserit generations ago. Following his father’s assassination, he is indeed sent into the desert and into Fremen society. Before this, however, he encounters the planetary ecologist Dr. Kynes who, through palace intrigue, had received imperial instructions to aid the Harkonnens in eliminating the Atreides. Kynes, however, is impressed by Paul, recognizing traits of the promised Fremen messiah within the younger man.

His first encounter with the people he had been ordered to betray left Dr. Kynes shaken. He prided himself on being a scientist to whom legends were merely interesting clues, pointing toward cultural roots. Yet the boy [Paul] fitted the ancient prophecy so precisely. He had “the questing eyes”, and the air of “reserved candor”. Of course the prophecy left certain latitude as to whether the Mother Goddess would bring the Messiah with her or produce Him on the scene. Still, there was this odd correspondence between prediction and persons.<sup>9</sup>

Ironically, the Atreides have already heard of Kynes by another name. He was given the name “Liet” by the Fremen and is known by this double identity. For much of the narrative in *Dune*, the Atreides are unaware of the connection. Indeed, Paul himself only realizes that “Liet” and “Kynes” are the same person after his death.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> In a world of space-folding, prescience, and fantastical beasts, it is perhaps forgivable to allow this piece of biological fantasy. Insofar as we have yet discovered, sex characteristics are determined by the X and Y chromosomes. Sex characteristics are determined to be female if two X chromosomes are present and male if there is an X and a Y, either of which would be provided by the male partner. This, of course, says nothing of socially constructed gender nor does it adequately account for the lives of intersex and sexually indeterminate people.

<sup>8</sup> “Indigenous” may indeed be a stretch here. All human life in the universe of *Dune* is terrestrial in origin. The Fremen are a nomadic people whose life seems to be based broadly on Bedouin culture. At any rate, they are considered a different “people”, though still *homo sapiens*, when seen aside the Imperial structure. As such, their status as “indigenous” is meant to imply not that they originate on the planet Arrakis, but rather that they are the original human beings to have taken up residence there.

<sup>9</sup> *Dune*. p. 169.

<sup>10</sup> Upon entering the Fremen stronghold, the following occurs:

*Liet*, Paul thought. Then: *Chani*, daughter of *Liet*. The pieces fell together in his mind. *Liet* was the Fremen name of the planetologist.

Paul looked at Farok, asked: “Is it the *Liet* known as *Kynes*?”

“There is only one *Liet*”, Farok said.

Paul turned, stared at the robed back of a Fremen in front of him. *Then Liet-Kynes is dead*, he thought”. *Dune*. p. 554.

Paul does indeed retake Arrakis from the Harkonnens. He takes the entire empire, in fact. It is here that perhaps the greatest contrast between our two potential messiahs can be seen: Paul Atreides/Muad'Dib seizes the reins of power and continues a system of empire. Liet-Kynes dies in a passion narrative at the hands of that same empire. He is executed by the returning Harkonnens as an ally of both the Fremen and the Atreides, dying of exposure in the desert while hallucinating the presence of his father. The death of Liet-Kynes parallels Matthew's passion narrative, with both Liet-Kynes and Jesus suffering mockery at the hands of powerful empires and both engaging in a one-sided dialogue with their fathers who appear to refuse help. In Matthew, we hear an echo of Psalm 22: "And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"<sup>11</sup> Liet-Kynes's hallucinatory dialogue with his own father is distinctly more antagonistic than the one in the gospels, yet still he laments: "Why aren't you helping me? . . . Always the same: when I need you most you fail me."<sup>12</sup> One of his last thoughts is the recollection of his father warning him that the Fremen could find no worse fate than to fall into the hands of a hero. This, however, is precisely the fate to which they are delivered.

Liet-Kynes does not only echo Jesus of Nazareth in literary form. As we will shortly see, it is his story that bears more in common with Christian messianism when viewed through the lens of James Cone's theology. We will turn first to a brief overview of Cone's understanding both of "whiteness" and of salvation. In Cone's terms, we will see Liet-Kynes as "black" and Paul/Muad'Dib as "white". We will be aided in discovering this pattern by recalling Jeremy Kirk's prior work with James Cameron's film *Avatar*, but first the necessary background from Cone.

### 3. "Whiteness" and Salvation in James Cone

One of the signature contributions James Cone made to theology was his attention to the elision of moral language and racial description in theology; Cone called out boldly for the inversion of the association of "white" with "good" and "black" with "evil" that has been baked into theology. From the very start of his output in 1969, Cone identified "white" with the structures of hegemony and authority in the world, stating, "There is, then, a need for a theology whose sole purpose is to emancipate the gospel from its 'whiteness' so that blacks may be capable of making an honest self-affirmation through Jesus Christ."<sup>13</sup> Cone would spend the next 50 years expressing that theology.

In the midst of the turmoil of the late 1960s, Cone spent five weeks in his brother Cecil's church writing his first work, *Black Theology and Black Power*. He wrestled here with joining the two driving halves of his thoughts: His blackness and his Christianity. Later, in explaining the draw of both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., Cone ascribed his love of blackness to Malcolm and his love of the church to Martin. Yet, his early work is marked by an unease with Christianity as practiced in the United States. He wonders, "Is it possible to strip the gospel as it has been interpreted of its 'whiteness', so that its real message will become a live option for radical advocates of black consciousness?"<sup>14</sup> This is not an idle, rhetorical question. Numerous leaders in the nascent Black Power movement questioned whether the slave-owning religion that birthed the Ku Klux Klan could be a useful and positive spiritual home for black people. In addressing this question, Cone begins to define his understanding of "white" and "black" as they relate both to Christian ethical concerns and to race. Idiomatically, United States English has long associated "white" with goodness and "black" with evil. Cone sought to reverse this, seeing instead that an enslaving people could only be evil in the eyes of the God of Exodus. Such a God becomes incarnate not for the continuation of an unjust status quo, but explicitly for the liberation of an oppressed people. "Jesus' work is essentially one of liberation.

<sup>11</sup> Matt 27:46 NRSV.

<sup>12</sup> Dune. p. 443.

<sup>13</sup> (Cone 1997a, p. 32). Hereafter BTBP.

<sup>14</sup> BTBP. p. 33.

Becoming a slave himself, he opens realities of human existence formerly closed to man [sic].<sup>15</sup> Of course, as Allen has already reminded us, economic exploitation undergirds racial oppression. Therefore, for Cone, “the Kingdom is for the poor and not the rich because the former has nothing to expect from the world while the latter’s entire existence is grounded in his [sic] commitment to worldly things.”<sup>16</sup> With these equivalencies, Cone begins to establish his dynamic of blackness as allied with God and liberation against oppressive whiteness.

For those of European descent, Cone brings a note of liberation as well. It is not, however, the same note he sounds for the oppressed. “If the work of Christ is that of liberating men [sic] of alien loyalties, and if racism is, as George Kelsey says, an alien faith, then there must be some correlation between Black Power and Christianity.”<sup>17</sup> Whites must be liberated from their own racism, while blacks will be liberated from the oppression of whiteness. “The white structure of this American society, personified in every racist, must be at least part of what the New Testament meant by the demonic forces.”<sup>18</sup> Whites, for Cone, must be liberated from the demonic structures that they themselves have either created or been complicit in continuing. This is, all at once, a call to repentance and to liberation.

Due to Cone’s playfulness with terminology, it may be confusing to consider how a person born of European heritage might become black or indeed be liberated from “whiteness”. While Cone does state that “blackness” is not a skin tone, we are still left with the possibility of an impossible attempt at justice. When Cone claims that white Christians will not change the kyriarchical social order radically, he is clear that he does not make this claim because of an inherently evil nature to white people. “I do not make this claim because I think that whites are by nature more evil than any other group of people. I make this claim because of the Christian doctrine of sin which says that individuals or groups will claim more than what they ought to, if they can get away with it.”<sup>19</sup> This Niebuhrian read on sin further informs Cone’s understanding of social interaction. Cone never hesitates to name the evil of whiteness, either in the abstract or in the particular and historical notion of white brutality against black bodies:

What is most amazing about the black community as a whole and the Black Church in particular is their willingness to forgive whites their brutality during slavery, lynching, and even oppression today in the ghettos of the urban cities. But despite our willingness to extend the right hand of fellowship, whites continue their massive assault upon the humanity of our people and get angry with us if we say we don’t like it. It seems that whites have been allowed to do what they wish to us so long that they regard such inhumane invasion of black humanity as synonymous with their freedom.<sup>20</sup>

In his estimation, then, the structures of whiteness—the structures of kyriarchy—are analogously the same as those New Testament forces described as demonic. They are the supports of an unjust system of exploitation. How, then, can one extricate oneself from this system and engage in the project of liberation?

While never quite programmatic in his assertion, Cone proposes that this is accomplished by dying to one’s whiteness and being reborn as black:

When whites undergo the true experience of conversion wherein they die to whiteness and are reborn anew in order to struggle *against* white oppression and *for* the liberation of the oppressed, there is a place for them in the black struggle of freedom. Here reconciliation becomes God’s gift of blackness through the oppressed of the land. But it must be made

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<sup>15</sup> BTBP, p. 35.

<sup>16</sup> BTBP, p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> BTBP, p. 39.

<sup>18</sup> BTBP, pp. 40–41.

<sup>19</sup> (Cone 1999, p. 77).

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

absolutely clear that it is the black community that decides both the *authenticity* of white conversion and also the part these converts will play in the black struggle of freedom. These converts can have nothing to say about the validity of their conversion experience or what is best for the community or their place in it, *except* as permitted by the oppressed community itself...white converts, if there are any to be found, must be *made* to realize that they are like babies who have barely learned how to walk and talk...For if whites are truly converted to our struggle, they know that reconciliation is a gift that excludes boasting. It is God's gift of blackness made possible through the presence of the divine in the social context of black existence. With the gift comes a radical change in life-style wherein one's value system is now defined by the oppressed engaged in the liberation struggle.<sup>21</sup>

This dynamic of rebirth is key to understanding the present reading of *Dune*. We will return to this idea shortly. At present, the dynamic itself is of interest. Cone suggests here that those who have benefited from whiteness must be doubly-converted as Christians. In this, he echoes the story of Cornelius in Acts 10 and 11. Cornelius is a Roman centurion known to be faithful to the God of Israel, yet God still sends Simon-Peter to his house with a message of salvation. An agent of the empire must not only be converted religiously but doubly-converted by the community of the oppressed.

#### 4. Jeremy Kirk on James Cone and James Cameron

I am preceded in reading a popular, fictional, work with messianic themes through James Cone by Jeremy Ian Kirk, whose earlier essay "Popular Messianism, Complicity, and the Continued Relevance of Liberation Theology" provides scaffolding for the constructive reading of *Dune*. In discussing the film *Avatar* and Cone's understanding of liberation, Kirk writes, "They are opposed to one another to such an extent that the messianic in *Avatar* is the anti-Christ of black liberation theology."<sup>22</sup> Understanding Cone's explicit linkage of whiteness with sin and empire, we begin to understand the roles of Liet-Kynes and Paul/Muad'Dib in a similar light to how Kirk sees the pair of Tsu'tey and Sully in Cameron's film.<sup>23</sup> Kirk's reading of Cone's theology of the cross is salient here: "The cross is salvific, but salvation comes amidst defeat, horror, and the suffering of the innocent. These and other theologies of the cross bring hope to victims of oppression because they place the suffering of human beings at the center of God's concerns for and activity in the world."<sup>24</sup> This victory-in-defeat is described by Reinhold Niebuhr as a "transvaluation of values", a phrase he lifted from Nietzsche, and which Cone further appropriates to describe the victory of the cross in Christian thought.

Kirk finds that the narrative's supplied, tripartite, messiah figure is a success only for whiteness. "*Avatar's* messiah exemplifies black liberation theology's antichrist, albeit one particular to contemporary liberalism . . . Sully is a white, colonial messiah. He cannot liberate the Na'vi people because he is not one of them."<sup>25</sup> While in the film, Sully does come to inhabit a native body, he is better described—as Kirk puts it—as an "oppressor who changes sides."<sup>26</sup> The changing of sides is indeed admirable, but it does not rise to the level Cone would require, inasmuch as Sully does not exhibit characteristics of conversion. He comes to the space of the oppressed indigenous population as an outsider and a conqueror. Kirk describes a particularly troubling encounter with a "banshee" (something akin to an extraterrestrial dragon) that is best described as a sexual assault. Throughout the film, Sully continues in a mode of domination, never once suffering the weakness and defeat that show

<sup>21</sup> (Cone 1997b, p. 222). Hereafter GotO.

<sup>22</sup> (Kirk 2013, p. 153). Hereafter Kirk.

<sup>23</sup> These two would map to similar points in the reading of *Dune*. An important distinction that will be dealt with in the conclusion is that Liet-Kynes displays the dynamic of dying to whiteness that Tsu'tey, an indigenous figure in *Avatar*, does not need to display.

<sup>24</sup> Kirk, p. 155.

<sup>25</sup> Kirk, p. 157.

<sup>26</sup> Kirk, p. 156.



ultimate victory through the transvaluation of values. “The tools of oppression are simply reordered to counter oppression through the agency of the oppressor-turned-ally. There is no *transvaluation of values* but only an appropriation of militant colonial values for the sake of the oppressed indigenous population.”<sup>27</sup> The indigenous male mentioned above—Tsu'tey—is sacrificed instead of Sully. Kirk locates the authentic messianic figure in him rather than in the white savior that the film puts forth. What Sully completely misses as a potentially salvific figure in this film is real transformation. He takes on a different body yet maintains an ideology of whiteness. He is a white colonizer quite literally injected into an indigenous body. While his actions bring about a level of material liberation for the indigenous population, the ideology underpinning these actions—conquest and exploitation—does nothing for their spiritual liberation. We will see this pattern repeated below when Paul/Muad'Dib becomes Fremen in name yet perpetuates a system of empire that does not lead nor contribute to the meaningful liberation of Fremen society.

Kirk's focus here is on the ethical framework of *Avatar* in light of Cone's theology. He finds that the broader public, inclusive of the academic establishment, are complicit in perpetuating empire by assenting to the popular messianism of such films. We miss the real messianic figure in a funhouse mirror version of salvation and sacrifice. He is correct to infer that there is also often a foil in such works. In *Avatar* there is a messianic figure to which Cone might assent: One who is of the indigenous and oppressed people and who sacrifices his own life for their survival. The film, and by further implication its audience, rejects this messiah who suffers and fails in favor of a muscular, victorious messiah who changes nothing about his prior exploitative actions but their direction. Sully is, in other words, still Sully and still a violent, militaristic, and non-messianic figure. While he does turn to defeat the explicit forces of empire, he smuggles in their implicit ramifications. This is the danger of the “white savior”. It is, in other words, being afflicted with a hero.

## 5. The Blackness of Liet-Kynes

It would be possible, and indeed worthwhile, simply to follow Kirk's lead and assert that Liet-Kynes presents a more authentic messiah figure than Paul/Muad'Dib. The significance, however, goes still deeper than this. Liet-Kynes not only represents a more authentic messianic figure, but he also represents a man who has died to whiteness and been reborn into blackness in order to become such a messiah. This transformation is both necessary for and indeed at the center of what Cone suggests for people born to whiteness. It bears repetition that Cone does not mean some kind of body-swapping is necessary. If that were sufficient, then Kirk would have to accept Sully as a legitimate messianic figure. The fact that Sully is not such a figure further underscores the internal nature of the transformation Cone requires.

It may seem awkward at first to use a black theologian to analyze a white science fiction writer. While Cone engaged non-traditional theological resources such as poetry, spirituals, and blues music in crafting his work, he stuck close to black sources, often quoting Countee Cullen, James Baldwin, and other literary figures. Cone, however, insisted throughout his career that white theologians, for example me, must re-center their thinking on black suffering. He left the mechanism by which we white theologians might do this un-examined because it is our work to do and not his. If we wish to be partners in the spiritual and socio-political liberation of black people, we cannot require Cone to give us explicit instructions for transforming ourselves. We may risk error in a good-faith effort and thereby move closer to a goal of allegiance. Therefore, in seeking a literary example of a hero who has died to a white identity, we keep with Cone in the use of literature in theology. We additionally engage in something of a comparative theological model by which we learn something about Christianity (how to die to whiteness and be re-born in blackness) by studying a different tradition: In this case, that “tradition” is not a religion but is a speculative world. Finally, the fact that Herbert was white

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<sup>27</sup> Kirk. p. 158.

while Cone was black should be no barrier when Cone persistently engaged white theologians such as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Reinhold Niebuhr throughout his career.

Cone makes reference to the Philippian jailer who frees Paul and Silas in Acts 16 as a representative of one who seeks conversion to blackness-with-God.<sup>28</sup> Paul and Silas are jailed as disruptive non-citizens who have interrupted a Roman couple's use of a slave girl as a fortune teller. They are beaten and jailed, but miraculously freed. Their jailer asks them how he might be saved. Paul and Silas are later released yet demand an official apology, as they were treated as vagrants although they were, in fact, Roman citizens. Through this reference, we can quickly ascertain what the transformation that God directs becomes in human actions. Paul and Silas are taken from jail and given medical care, food, and water. They are taken into a space of caring and healing. Following this bodily healing, they are to be released from prison, yet they insist on further restorative justice from their captors. They demand not only their release but the additional acknowledgment that their capture was unjust to begin with. The transformation has both personal scope, insofar as the jailer and his family are converted and become followers of Jesus, and societal scope, insofar as the magistrates are humbled and made to apologize for their ill treatment.

Continuing the allegorical read of this passage and what it has to say about whiteness in society, we can read it as follows. It is in the first place unjust and injurious to the people of God that white supremacy exists. Recall that Paul and Silas were jailed not as much for preaching a different religion but for threatening to disrupt the dominant and exploitative hegemony of the wealthy in Roman society.<sup>29</sup> The current dominant and exploitative hegemony of the United States is nothing more and nothing less than what Cone calls whiteness. Inasmuch as whiteness is the support scaffolding of the new empire, it is inherently opposed to the work of liberation in Christ.

Cone goes on to discuss this saving work, stating:

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<sup>28</sup> One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation". She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her". And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe". The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here". The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household". They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go". And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, "The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace". But Paul replied, "They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves". The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. After leaving the prison they went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed. Acts 16: 16–40 NRSV

<sup>29</sup> Space prohibits an extended analysis, yet I would be remiss if I did not tie this to the contemporary trend of white people calling the police for perceived infractions by black people. Such incidents as Sarah Braasch reporting Lolade Siyonbola to Yale Campus Police (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/09/us/yale-student-napping-black-trnd/index.html>), the arrest of Donte Robinson and Rashon Nelson at a Philadelphia Starbucks (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/14/us/philadelphia-police-starbucks-arrests/index.html>), or the fiasco of Jennifer Schulte's attempt to call the police on a black family for having a cookout in an Oakland park all show a similar dynamic of a dominant culture threatened by the presence of a culture it has itself oppressed.



The resurrection means that God's identity with the poor in Jesus is not limited to the particularity of his Jewishness but is applicable to all who fight on behalf of the liberation of humanity in this world . . . His presence with the poor today is not docetic; but like yesterday, today also he takes the pain of the poor upon himself and bears it for them . . . If Jesus' presence is real and not docetic, is it not true that Christ *must* be black in order to remain faithful to the divine promise to bear the suffering of the poor?<sup>30</sup>

He acknowledges that "blackness" as a christological title is historically contextual, yet so too are the biblical titles bestowed on Christ, along with every possible depiction of Christ throughout history. "But the validity of any christological title in any period of history is not decided by its universality but by this: whether in the particularity of its time it points to God's universal will to liberate particular oppressed people from inhumanity."<sup>31</sup> Cone identifies the necessity of Christ's blackness with the "least of these" in Matthew 25:45.

This becomes a part of the necessary moral change God graciously initiates as above. By point of negative comparison, Cone remarks on how theologians continue to do their work absent this necessary transformation, asking:

Why is it that white theologians in America have interpreted God's relation to black suffering in such a manner the divine empowerment of the oppressed to fight actively against the evils of racism is absent from their analyses? Can this be due to anything else than the fact that the social existence of the oppressors inevitably distorts the biblical message?<sup>32</sup>

Theologians who cling to their whiteness, thereby implicitly or explicitly denigrating the suffering of their black sisters and brothers, have not received the transformative gift of grace which Cone describes as "becoming black with God". They are too bound to the earthly structures of social hegemony to be agents of liberation, and they, therefore, stand athwart salvation itself.

Once we receive the gift to become black with God, however, we become like the jailer above. We offer material aid to the oppressed. We can no longer be bystanders watching in silent complicity as empire carries out its too-real destruction of the bodies of the oppressed. This is not, to use Niebuhr's phrase, the construction of individual ladders to heaven.<sup>33</sup> Becoming black with God entails an understanding of salvation as communal. Indeed, ". . . God's election involves the responsibility to struggle with God in the fight for justice."<sup>34</sup> Central here is the concept of justice, which cannot be distinct from salvation or from freedom. Here we recall Paul's and Silas's demand that the magistrates recognize not just that they are free to go but that indeed they were unjustly imprisoned. This struggle is not a pie-in-the-sky delivery of salvation but a call to a just social order here and now.

This is the crucial difference between Liet-Kynes and Paul/Muad'Dib. Liet-Kynes has chosen to aid the Fremen in creating an arable climate on Arrakis. He has become part of Fremen society; indeed, he is leader of a Fremen community. He has married, had children, and taken a name as a Fremen. His final thoughts are: "*And I am a desert creature . . . You see me father? I am a desert creature.*"<sup>35</sup> It is true that Liet-Kynes dies to protect what he believes is the messiah of the Fremen, yet it is also the case that Paul/Muad'Dib cannot fulfill a christological role in any allegorical reading of *Dune*, unless Christ becomes an emperor of a very real political realm. Paul/Muad'Dib seizes the Padishah Emperor's throne and initiates another dynastic reign. In this reign, Fremen are not freed from but are subsumed into imperial society. They are "liberated" only in the sense that they are now part of the machinery of empire. Paul/Muad'Dib's liberation is not subversion of their exploitation. It is a simple inversion of

<sup>30</sup> Cone. GotO p. 125.

<sup>31</sup> Cone. GotO p. 125.

<sup>32</sup> Cone. GotO pp. 168–69.

<sup>33</sup> (Niebuhr 1932, p. 277).

<sup>34</sup> Cone. GotO p. 168.

<sup>35</sup> Dune. p. 446.

an exploitative power structure. Herbert follows this reign for five further novels, and his son picked up the seventh, eighth, and a series of prequel novels set before the events of *Dune*.

Liet-Kynes dies to the whiteness of empire and exploitation before we meet him. Recall that he is both the Imperial Planetologist and the Judge of the Change, charged with ensuring that the transfer of power from Harkonnen to Atreides is lawful and appropriate. It is from this position that he acts in subversion of the aims of empire. Should Arrakis become an arable climate, the great sandworms that supply the necessary spice will become extinct. His plan is to slowly and gradually create a paradise for the Fremen. This must necessarily come at the expense of the empire. His actions, then are not the simple inversion of Paul/Muad'Dib, but rather a subversion and—indeed—a transvaluation of values. Like Christ, he dies humiliated and alone, calling out to a father who may not hear him. Yet Herbert puts him in the analogous role of John the Baptist, proclaiming the coming messiah. For Herbert's novel, the messiah who comes does not bring subversion, liberation, or transvaluation. He brings only a different emperor for the same empire.

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