

Article

Hoping against Hope: Dealing with Hopelessness in Ancient Times and Today [†]

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Abstract: The hope of Abraham was “hope against hope,” the apostle Paul notes in a famous passage in his letter to the Romans 4:18. Such is the hope of the underdog, whose hope is not backed up by the powers that be, manifest by the prevalent empires of the day. Any discussion of hope in this context needs to deal with the limits of hope that have been expressed powerfully by Miguel De La Torre in his book *Embracing Hopelessness* (2017). As a result, the faith of Abraham that led to hope against hope cannot be blind faith, or what has sometimes been called “the power of positive thinking.” COVID-19 has once again reinforced this insight. Only when the challenges and the roadblocks to faith and hope are seen and embraced, and when false hope is exposed for what it is, can glimpses of real hope break through.

Keywords: religion and neoliberal economics; economic downturn; false hope; hopelessness; religion and liberation; alternative power

The hope of Abraham was “hope against hope,” the apostle Paul notes in a famous passage in his letter to the Romans 4:18. Such is the hope of the underdog, whose hope is not backed up by the powers that be, manifest by the prevalent empires of the day. Any discussion of hope in this context needs to deal with the limits of hope that have been expressed powerfully by Miguel De La Torre in his book *Embracing Hopelessness*,¹ reinforced by experience of the COVID-19 pandemic that has affected the globe in unprecedented ways, and in particular working people and racial and ethnic minorities.² By contrast, hope understood as optimism or positive thinking is the hope of those who enjoy some privilege, wealth, and power. The American Dream props up such hope for broader segments of society, usually linked to the privileges of race, gender, sexuality, or nation.

Viewed from below—from the perspective of those who are exploited, oppressed, or marginalized in any given age—it is clear that the faith of Abraham that led to hope against hope cannot be blind faith, or what has sometimes been called “the power of positive thinking.” Only when the challenges and the roadblocks to faith and hope are seen and embraced, and when false hope is exposed for what it is, can glimpses of real hope break through. Viewed from above—from the perspective of those endowed with power, wealth, and privilege—things may be different: Even during the Great Recession of 2007–2009, while most Americans lost savings and jobs (virtually eliminating the African American middle class), the failing banks were bailed out by the government and the subsequent

¹ (De La Torre 2017).

² For a concise overview see (Leonhardt and Serkez 2020).

recovery assured that the rich got even richer than before. During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the same happened once again, with the Federal Reserve System providing one trillion dollars a day³ to shore up large financial institutions, while individuals earning less than \$75,000 received a one-time relief payment of \$1200. By late June 2020, these measures were successful in stabilizing the stock market, even though unemployment remains at record levels. Most observers agree that the crisis is far from over.

During the dozen years after the Great Recession, it may have seemed that the economy was a safe haven again and many Americans who had not yet benefited from this shared the hope that President Trump would make America “great again.” In view of this hope, which has not delivered for the majority of Americans and which is falling to unprecedented lows during COVID-19, the time has come to embrace hopelessness. This is crucial not only for the underdogs who know that the hope of the one percent is not their hope; the remaining 99 percent would also do well to embrace a sense that optimism and the power of positive thinking may not be able to save the day. The good news is that embracing hopelessness may be the beginning of a different sort of hope—hope against hope.

Those who study the economy have become increasingly aware that “a rising tide does not lift all boats.” Even when economic tides were rising, as they did for over a decade since the Great Recession, more and more people were not benefiting any more, even in the United States. As a result, neoliberal economics will need to give an account, and its basic hope and faith claims are open to challenge and question.⁴ The same is true for religion: The hope and faith of the Gospel of Prosperity are increasingly open to challenge as well, as there is little evidence that its benefits have extended much beyond the preachers of prosperity, some of their prodigies, and a handful of other individuals. It appears that even the hope and the faith of mainline religion are no longer being taken for granted—disillusionment with religion could be one reason why the numbers of church members and worship attendance continue to shrink, and no one knows yet what the fallout of COVID-19 will be.

In my book *No Rising Tide*, written during the Great Recession, I have discussed the lessons of large-scale economic downturn in terms of the “logic of downturn.”⁵ This logic, taking a closer look at reality from the perspective of economic collapse, helps us to gain a clearer sense for what is really going on, not only in economics but also in religion, politics, and culture. This logic of downturn stands in opposition to the widely promoted claims that are tied to the proverbial mountaintop experiences (economic, political, religious, and cultural), which are hardly sustainable long-term. Nevertheless, the logic of downturn does not provide a pessimistic view of the world; just the opposite: It maintains that the bursting of economic, political, religious, and cultural bubbles is ultimately good news, for only when we lose false hope can we gain true hope. As the hope for “pie-in-the-sky” is increasingly called into question, true hope can shine through. This hope is no longer found at the top, with business, political, faith, and cultural leaders, but at the bottom, where common people are forming new ways of working and living in solidarity. COVID-19 takes a special place in this development, as it has made us aware again of how the world is ultimately dependent on essential workers, without whom we cannot survive: The food, farm, grocery, transportation, janitorial, cleaning, and of course, health care workers. Many of them have started to make their voices heard again in various actions and protests, including organized strikes.

In the Abrahamic faith traditions, which should be considered resistance traditions in one way or another as I will argue in what follows, there are many examples for such hope, including the Exodus, the Babylonian Exile, the Jesus traditions, and the traditions of the early Paul. Could it be that only those who have truly embraced hopelessness—in the many forms of slavery, exile, and imperial conquest—can come to a deeper sense of hope that defies the false hope and security of the status quo?

³ (Rugaber 2020).

⁴ Even economists have talked about economics as religion, arguing that what matters in neoliberal economics is not hard evidence but faith claims that are not being tested. See, for instance, (Nelson 2001).

⁵ See (Rieger 2009, chp. 2).

1. The Logic of Downturn and the Exodus

According to the Moses traditions that are shared by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Moses was raised at the court of the Egyptian Pharaoh as an Egyptian prince. As a member of the Egyptian elites, he would therefore have been one of the primary beneficiaries of the Egyptian economy. The decisive turn in this story occurs when Moses begins to notice that the success of this economy is built on the back of slave labor. The logic of downturn catches up with Moses when he notices the economic hardship that his kinsfolk are forced to endure (Ex 2:11).

That Moses overreacts and kills one of the Egyptian slave masters is part of the story (Ex 2:12), but this act is never justified in the text and it does not lead to the liberation of the slaves. Liberation becomes a possibility only later, when Godself joins Moses in the logic of downturn, realizing what is going on. In the book of Exodus, Yahweh makes this statement:

“I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (Ex 3:7–10).

A thoughtful reader of this text might wonder whether Godself learned a valuable lesson in the process, as the text does not explain why God hears the cry of the people only at this point in history and not before. In any case, the text makes it clear that from this point forward, God is becoming involved in acts of liberation.

Moving from past to present, potential parallels emerge: Without needing to equate the contexts directly, experiences of severe struggle continue. Like Moses and Yahweh, many Americans may not have experienced the most brutal consequences of economic downturn in their own bodies—even during COVID-19 some people enjoyed the safety of their own homes, able to work from comfortable spaces. Nevertheless, the stark realities of suffering are presented to them by the fate of members of their communities like relatives, loved ones, friends, co-workers, and those who provide essential services. In the bigger picture, according to one report, as many as 60 percent of Americans experience at least one year of poverty in their lives.⁶ Even if it will take some time until deep-seated false hopes wear out, the pressing realities of long-term unemployment, of children moving back home due to their inability to find adequate employment, of lack of benefits like health care, which lead to people dying before their time, cannot be deferred indefinitely.

What is perhaps most important in the story of the Exodus is that it runs counter to the false hopes of the status quo. As Moses and Yahweh gradually begin to understand what is happening to their people in their own ways, no effort is made to justify the situation or to encourage the Hebrew slaves to put up with their situation in the hope that things will be different in some distant future. Neither is there any effort made to integrate the Hebrew slaves into Egyptian society in order to improve their status. And while Pharaoh is provided opportunity to change the ways of oppression and exploitation, this never happens. Still, even in the house of Pharaoh, there is some resistance: In the Hebrew Bible, Pharaoh’s daughter adopts the Hebrew baby Moses (Exodus 2:1–8); and in the Qur’an, Pharaoh’s wife Asiya (Moses’ adoptive mother in the traditions of Islam), converts to the God of the Hebrews (Qur’an Sura 66:11) and supports Moses and Aaron.

This might lead us to wonder whether contemporary efforts at integration and inclusion, commonly promoted by many liberal-minded religious communities, provide true hope or peddle the false hopes of the status quo. Even when corporations seek to integrate workers into the status quo, for instance, often with cheap promises (“everybody is a leader”) or with threats that things could be worse than they already are, workers do not necessarily benefit a great deal. And when diversity is celebrated in

⁶ (Zimmermann 2015).

liberal society, those who are different from the dominant majority are often co-opted for the dominant interests rather than liberated to pursue their own concerns.

In the parts of the Exodus story that are shared by Muslims, Christians, and Jews, the outcome is surprisingly clear and straightforward. Despite the dire situation of the Hebrew slaves, seen in full force only by those who embrace the logic of downturn as experienced by the slaves and those who share their concerns, actual liberation from slavery in Egypt eventually takes place. This is the location of true hope, over against the false hope that puts up with the status quo and declares it ultimate and final. Moreover, in this story God is found in a very particular place: Neither as the impartial judge above the fray, nor on the side of the status quo; rather, God is firmly on the side of the slaves. Here, true hope shifts from those who feel secure in their hopes—the Egyptian elites represented by Pharaoh—to those who may feel that they have nothing to hope for—the Hebrew slaves.

In these ancient stories lay the deep and strong roots of liberative religious traditions that are shared by different religious communities in different historical periods; in U.S. history, the Exodus tradition manifested its power both in the liberative religion of the African-American slaves and in the civil rights movement. Nevertheless, we must not forget that, almost from the beginning, there were efforts by dominant religion to subvert and assimilate these traditions. In addition, the slaves themselves, after the experience of liberation, at times can lose heart and vision. Ancient and modern interpretations of what happened when the Hebrew slaves reached the Promised Land have resulted in perverting the hope of the slaves by turning it into the hope of the powerful. Certain biblical traditions that describe the arrival in the Promised Land in terms of conquest and bloodshed (Josh 1–12), for instance, seem to be doing just that, as do modern endorsements of conquest and crusade. According to one of some of these biblical traditions, Jericho is destroyed and all its inhabitants and their livestock are killed, saving only precious metal and the family of an informant (Josh 6).

Nevertheless, traditions like these do not necessarily express the hopes of the liberated slaves themselves, who would not likely have had the means or the power required for such acts of conquest or the luxury to kill livestock, but the hopes of those in power who seek the power of absolute control. Besides, whatever little historical evidence exists for what happened after the Exodus could indeed point to a very different process of immigration into the Promised Land, according to which the Hebrew slaves joined forces with the residential rural population in order to form liberation movements from the rule of oppressive city states. Even in the Bible, there are alternative traditions of how the Hebrew slaves settle in the Promised Land, in solidarity with the population, and the good news is that these alternative traditions, which guide us to a much more substantive hope, could never be completely repressed.⁷ Remnants of these alternative traditions can be seen even in the book of Joshua, that otherwise seems to narrate the conquest (see, e.g., Josh 15:63; 16:10; 17:12).

2. The Logic of Downturn and the Babylonian Exile

The Babylonian Exile represents an important turning point in the Hebrew Bible, combining both a severe crisis and critical renewal. About 70 percent of the Hebrew Bible deals with the question of how the Exile happened and what can be learned from it, even though it never acquired the same theological centrality as the Exodus.⁸ Although there are few solid historical sources about the Babylonian Exile, it is estimated that 20,000 persons, about 25 percent of the population, were displaced.⁹

It is commonly acknowledged that most of the people exiled to Babylon as a result of the Babylonian Empire's agenda of conquest were members of the Judean elites. One of the important themes of the Exile is, therefore, the logic of downturn found in a loss of power and control, which is

⁷ See, for instance, the account in (Gottwald 2009, pp. 150–57).

⁸ See (Albertz 2012, p. 27). Also: “The exilic period represents the most profound caesura of all eras in Israel’s history. Here, the religion of Israel underwent its most severe crisis, but here, too, the foundation was laid for its most sweeping renewal” (p. 33).

⁹ (Albertz 2012, p. 23).

related to important transformations of the topic of hope. The experience of the Exile shattered the hope built on a dominant theology, which believed that David's monarchy would last forever. This dominant theology remembered the Exodus not as subversive hope but as hope for domination: "Who is like your people, like Israel? Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people, and to make a name for himself, doing great and awesome things for them, by driving out before his people nations and their gods"? (2 Sam 7:23) In the United States, the myth of American exceptionalism is also built on theological themes of dominance: God is seen as being on the side of American elites and the Christian religion, supposedly superior to other nations and other religions. This dominant belief system, too, has been and keeps being challenged in its own ways during extended times of downturn. As the Babylonian Exile shows, dominant theology is not only challenged from below, as in the Exodus, but sometimes also from the inside out—from the ranks of those who too quickly assumed they would be the beneficiaries. During experiences of tremendous downturn—including the Great Depression, the Great Recession, and the onset of COVID-19—even members of the middle class were deeply affected by the events.

While the false hope of dominance was shattered in the Babylonian Exile, the exiled were treated relatively well, and the expectation was that they would eventually assimilate. Assimilation, in this context, would have amounted to the exchange of the false hope of the dominant theology of the Judean Empire for the false hope of the dominant theology of the Babylonian Empire. Nevertheless, despite a host of opportunities for Jews to assimilate and do well for themselves in the Babylonian Empire, the hope for liberation from empire did not die out. To many, the hope of the Babylonian Empire seemed less real than the emerging hope in a God who would redeem the people from the clutches of that empire.

What is perhaps most fascinating is that in the situation of the Exile Jews developed new hope linked to a new set of Earth-shaking theological insights. Many of the biblical writings on creation, for instance, were produced during the Exile, as the people began to understand that their God was not subject to the Babylonian Empire that controlled them; their God, instead, was the creator of a world that made room for alternative ways of life and for a place where even the widows, the orphans, and the strangers could flourish.

The Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation has its origins in these experiences of an alternative God who turns out to be fundamentally different from empire: The God whom the people of Judah and Israel worshipped could no longer be envisioned merely as a personal or tribal deity, located exclusively on Mount Zion, but was now seen as the creator of the whole world, who was at work in its liberation. Most important to the emergence of an alternative hope was that this faith in the creator was not a triumphalist vision, but a vision that nurtured the endurance and resistance of the people in exile. Similar hope has been emerging in recent decades in various liberation theologies, which understand that the marginalized are not only surviving in mysterious ways but that many of them are acquiring new agency in the struggle, despite many challenges and setbacks.

Key to this new hope is that, like in the Exodus, suffering is not only experienced by the people but by Godself. Ideas like the aseity and impassibility of God, assumed by later theological and metaphysical traditions and shared in popular imaginations even today, are not part of these ancient texts. While the Exile is often attributed to God's anger and disappointment about God's people, God is also an agent of liberation who is considered to redeem the people in "love" and "pity" (Is 63:9). According to the prophet Ezekiel, God is disappointed and God's anger is directed against the prophets of false hope, who say "peace" when there is no peace, and who "smear whitewash" on a bad situation (Ez 13:10). As this false hope is actively broken down by God ("I will break down the wall that you have smeared with whitewash, and bring it to the ground, so that its foundation will be laid bare" [Ez 13:14]), new hope emerges that is stronger and perhaps more hopeful than any hope of an elitist system could ever be, at least in the long run.

The liberation that is promised here reflects a new understanding of God and of hope. Hope emerges where God associates with people who are beginning to organize: "Assemble yourselves and come

together, draw near, you survivors of the nations!” (Is 45:20a), and where the false gods of power are rejected: “They have no knowledge—those who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a god that cannot save” (Is 45:20b). This emerging vision is broader than the hope of the elites, as it includes all of the downtrodden who are experiencing the pressures of the empire.¹⁰ As Pinchas Rosenblüth has pointed out, the various theological interpretations of the Exile helped Jewish people throughout history to deal with their suffering and, thus, prevented them from annihilation. In this way they also maintained an ongoing sensitivity for the suffering of other people and the injustice they experienced.¹¹

What has often been described as Deutero-Isaiah’s “monotheism” (e.g., Is 44:6)—not to be confused with philosophical debates of the values of monotheism vs. polytheism—is not an abstract theological development but rooted in the rejection of the imperial gods of false hope. At stake is not another imperial move of domination but an anti-imperial one that challenges the powers that be. Moreover, like the false hope of the empire, the hope that emerges among the people in exile cannot be limited to one aspect alone: It is not only a religious hope, it is at the same time a hope that is cultural, political, and economic. The images of God that emerge out of this alternative hope are holistic as well. This insight is crucial for contemporary religion, at a time when narrow modern definitions of religion that filter out social, political, and economic categories are still in vogue in some places, and when religion has often become part of the status quo.

To be sure, the hope that grows out of a new vision of God as the creator of the earth, defeating the idols of the empire, has also been misused. In the first creation story in the book of Genesis, for instance, God creates the human being with the following directive: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gn 1:28). While interpreters of this passage have often emphasized that dominion does not have to be structured according to the domination modeled by empires, there is a resonance of empire theology here that is ambiguous. Without maintaining close links to the resistance theologies of the exiles, such passages were often misinterpreted and misused in the history of theology, even if only in the reinterpretation of dominion as a benevolent paternalism. However, only if the dominant powers are subverted, rather than merely displayed in a more benevolent light, will empires ultimately be overcome.

Visions of God that emphasize God’s absolute power and superiority remind us of the old domination theology of the Judean Empire, but they can be read as subversive if seen as part of the resistance traditions of the exiles that subvert the power of the empire and exchange false hope for true hope: “See the Lord’s hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear” (Is 59:1). And while the Babylonian Empire eventually fell, as did virtually all other empires, the hope of the exiles has remained alive throughout the centuries and continues to inspire struggling people even today.

The Babylonian Exile marks the beginning of Israel’s life in the Diaspora, which has continued ever since. Hope for the descendants of Israel is tied to life as an ethnic minority, which requires rethinking one’s identity, as Albertz has pointed out.¹² Yet more seems to be at stake than ethnicity, if the universal hope proclaimed by Deutero-Isaiah (e.g., Is 41:1) is taken seriously: Alternative interpretations of faith in God are providing not only the people of Israel but all those who are marginalized by empires with new hope. In the history of the United States, for instance, this hope is embodied in social movements which have been supported by religion, including abolitionism, suffragism, the labor movement, and the civil rights movement. In more recent times, the Occupy Wall Street movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, the immigrant rights movement, and the climate justice movement have reported similar experiences.¹³

¹⁰ This is one of the challenges addressed in my book *Jesus vs. Caesar*. See (Rieger 2018).

¹¹ (Rosenblüth 1982, p. 714).

¹² (Albertz 2012, p. 31).

¹³ See (Douglas 2015; Rieger and Kwok 2012).

3. The Logic of Downturn and the Jesus Traditions

In the history of Christology, the Greek term *kenosis*—emptying—has gained currency. According to an ancient Christian tradition that Paul picks up in Philippians 2, Jesus Christ, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6–8). While systematic and constructive theologies typically conceptualize the theological terms of this passage and provide speculations about their meaning, the logic of downturn requires a different theological move, beginning with a closer look at the history that is in the background.

The *kenosis* of Jesus Christ is tied to the incarnation—God becoming fully human—yet this becoming-human is not a matter of generic humanity. Jesus, after all, does not become human in general terms but is born into a particular family of day laborers in construction in a particular place and time, under the auspices of the Roman Empire.¹⁴ Perhaps this is the dangerous memory that is preserved when Philippians 2 talks about Jesus taking the human form of a slave. The logic of downturn would not have been foreign to day laborers both past and present, as they are often exploited by their masters due to an almost absolute differential of power, and their jobs were never secure. Moreover, unemployment was a prominent reality at the time of Jesus among day laborers, as indicated for instance in Matthew 20:1–16. For construction workers, when some of the big Roman building projects were finished (in Galilee, several cities close to where Jesus grew up were under construction at the time), those who were no longer needed were simply let go. It is likely that Jesus and Joseph experienced this kind of unemployment themselves, and it is likely that they would have known many fellow workers who also struggled with unemployment. In our own time, when jobs are less secure than ever in the history of the United States and unemployment, including long-term unemployment, is always a threat looming over people’s heads, more and more of us can relate to these experiences as well. In the early days of COVID-19 in the United States, unemployment affecting many levels of society was higher than at any point since the Great Depression of the 1930s, and it is conceivable that things might get worse.

In this context, false hope does not aid the survival of working people and their families. The promises of false messiahs, like the false hopes of the neoliberal economy claiming that each generation will be better off than the one before or that a rising tide will lift all boats, are, therefore, not only a theological problem; they can become actual matters of life and death. Perhaps this is the reason why Jesus was so concerned and why we should be concerned as well: “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray” (Mk 13:5–6). True hope, in contrast, does not come in the form of big ideas, promises, or theological claims, nor does it take the shape of some vague optimism that everything will turn out all right.¹⁵

There were several persons by the name of Jesus in the first century who preached radical messages. Some were harassed and beaten by the Romans, but one of them—Jesus of Nazareth—was executed on a cross in the manner of a political revolutionary. This Jesus was executed, probably because he had become too dangerous or, expressed in terms of hope, because the hope that he preached to the “least of these” was a real hope that the world could be different and that people’s oppression would end. The message of the kingdom of God, which Jesus preached, was not just a pious idea, disconnected from reality; the kingdom of God was not a false hope, designed to keep the people docile, it was at hand (Matthew 3:2: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”) in a real

¹⁴ Mark 6:3a: “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?” The Greek term “tektōn,” which is often translated as carpenter, would be more adequately translated as construction worker, which was a day laborer’s job.

¹⁵ See the critique of the role of optimism that has been misleading generations of Americans as developed by (Ehrenreich 2009).

fashion. What differentiated Jesus of Nazareth from his contemporary, the radical preacher Jesus ben Hananiah, was that he not only preached but also organized people as part of his ministry.¹⁶

What the villages of Jesus' time needed was not merely a theology of hope but the kind of practices that would weld communities together in the face of the divide-and-conquer tactics of the empire and its burdens of taxation and exploitation. Organizing has taken on new importance again in religious communities today, from community organizing to the beginnings of a religion and labor movement.¹⁷ True hope is more likely found where people build power together than where they look for outside help, whether from the elites or from the sky.

In light of this history, the theological notion of *kenosis* takes on a very different shape. It is not necessarily an abstract metaphysical concept that talks about God and humanity in general—the stuff of too many sermons. *Kenosis* describes a historical process in which God in Christ divests Godself of the dominant power, represented by the Roman Empire and much of status-quo religion. This kind of *kenosis* moves in parallel to Jesus rejecting the devil's tempting offer of top-down rule over all the kingdoms of the world (Mt 4:8–10). Moreover, this divestment of dominant power is not a divestment of power in general, a notion that is fashionable with a certain romanticizing kind of Christianity that represents another form of false hope. Survival for day laborers in construction or for slaves depends on asserting and reclaiming some form of power. True hope also cannot be maintained without power.

The alternative power that Jesus of Nazareth embodies is diametrically opposed to the top-down power of the status quo. It is the power of the last, which shall be the first (Matt. 20:16). It is the power of the poor, whom Jesus calls blessed, and not the power of the rich, on whom he pronounces woe (Lk 6:20;24), a challenging message that is also embraced by Mary, his mother (Lk 1:48;52). In other words, the *kenosis* of dominant power is not a rejection of all power but the reversal of dominant power manifest in humility (the everyday reality of a slave) and obedience to the beat of a different drummer. True hope is ultimately rooted in this alternative power, although it might seem for a while as if the dominant power has the corner on the market of hope. Yet dominant power invariably fails: The Roman Empire is no more, and the glory of the particular conquests and colonialisms that shaped the world from the 16th to the 20th centuries has by and large ended, as neocolonial structures took over. True hope reminds us that the dominant form of neocolonial globalization that marks our age, promoting new forms of top-down power, can be expected to meet a similar fate. Only false hope can maintain that the neoliberal world system (or any other world system) will last forever.¹⁸

Obedience, in Jesus' history, is thus not a matter of seeking death. The popular and widespread claim that "Jesus was born to die" might claim some reference to Philippians' "obedience to the point of death," but something else appears to be at stake here. Jesus' obedience to God takes on a particular form in his life and ministry, in his message of the kingdom of God and of good news to the poor, in his healings, and in his work of organizing the people ("follow me" [Mark 1:17]). This obedience is not the moribund desire to die; obedience is an engaged way of life and of exercising a power of resistance that is ready to face the consequences, including death. Indeed, the consequences for a life embodying an alternative hope that contradicts the dominant hope of the Roman Empire and the supporting establishment religion are not hard to envision: Such alternative hope became so real and so dangerous that it had to be defeated, "to the point of death."

Parallel to the Moses traditions, there are many efforts to assimilate this budding hope as soon as it emerges. The passage in Philippians 2 can be interpreted in terms of another sort of triumphalism. Jesus' *kenosis*, it might be assumed, has a "happy ending," just like mainline Christianity in the United States considers Jesus' resurrection on Easter to be the "happy ending" of a temporarily lost battle on the cross on Good Friday. Philippians 2:9–11 concludes the *kenosis passage* quoted in the beginning in

¹⁶ (Horsley 2002, pp. 51, 129).

¹⁷ See, for instance, the work of the following organizations: Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), Faith in Action, Jobs with Justice (JwJ), Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ), and Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE).

¹⁸ For a more sustained argument on globalization see (Rieger 2010).

this way, seemingly providing another happy ending: “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Does this mean that Jesus is Lord just like all the other lords, beginning with Caesar, whose official title was “lord”?

There is another way of interpreting all of this. If Philippians 2:9–11 were to amount to Jesus’ exaltation and promotion to the top floors of the empire, the existence of Jesus the day laborer would be negated in another rags-to-riches story. Yet God’s incarnation in Jesus, the day laborer in construction, was not merely a mistake or a meaningless accident of history. The logic of Jesus’ incarnation, life, ministry, death, and resurrection points in a different direction: The last who will be the first embody a different power and a different hope. If the greatest in the kingdom of God are those who serve (Mark 9:33–37), power and glory need to be redefined. Here lies the real hope for day laborers and their friends; everything else is pie-in-the-sky, as the position of the emperor (or that of other dominant power brokers of today in politics, economics, and religion) must always remain the position of the few, never of the many. As a result, the exaltation, which follows the *kenosis* of the day laborer in construction, ultimately clashes with the history of dominant lordship in the Roman Empire and provides a different kind of hope. In the language that gained popularity with COVID-19 we might ask: “Who is the truly essential worker?”

4. The Logic of Downturn and Paul: Hope against Hope

In the world of the Roman Empire, hope is defined by the success of the emperor, who is confessed as lord and son of god, titles that have also been attributed to Jesus by early Christianity. This hope has been mistakenly identified with the hope of the apostle Paul, who is described as a Roman citizen in the book of Acts and whose mission is often said to have been supported by the infrastructure of the Roman Empire, including the opportunities it afforded for travel.

Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that Paul found himself in ongoing conflict with the Roman Empire, constantly in and out of its prisons (2 Cor 11:23), brutally beaten (2 Cor 11:23), and probably executed by it. According to Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, Paul’s recollection that he was beaten with rods (2 Cor 11:25) even calls into question whether he held Roman citizenship, as Roman citizens were not to be subjected to this particular punishment.¹⁹ Whether he was a citizen or not, Paul was painfully aware of the abuses of the Roman Empire and the fate of those who did not comply with it. There is little doubt that he experienced what we have called the logic of downturn in his own body.

In a world where the emperor claimed the title lord, calling Christ lord must have created problems and perhaps been dangerous. Why would Paul maintain such a practice, if he could have used plenty of other titles? The answer is found in a growing agreement among scholars that when Paul proclaims the lordship of Christ, he rejects the lordship of the Roman emperor in the same breath.²⁰ The modern separation of religion and politics, according to which Christ would have been lord over matters of religion and the emperor would have been lord over matters of politics, was not an option in the ancient world. Rome did not allow for the separation of religion and politics, as it sought to rule over religion just as much as over politics, and neither did Jewish-Christian theological thought separate the two realms, because God was seen as ruler over the whole world and not just over matters of religion.²¹

No matter what privileges Paul might have enjoyed at some points in his life, with his conversion to Christianity he placed himself on the side of the God of the crucified Jesus Christ, whom he understood to have elected those who were not wise, not powerful, and not of noble birth: “But God

¹⁹ (Borg and Crossan 2009, p. 68).

²⁰ For an extended theological assessment of this topic see (Rieger 2007, chp. 1).

²¹ This was the point of Jesus’ request to give Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and to God the things that belong to God (Mk 12:17). Every ancient Jew would have known what belongs to God: Not just religion but everything.

chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are" (1 Cor 1:27–28). This is no abstract theological claim. In Paul's ministry, this theology amounts to an act of solidarity with those considered foolish, weak, and nothing, which contradicts the logic of the empire. No wonder that the empire struck back, an experience that is still being made even today by all those who keep taking the side of the underdogs.²²

Key theological notions in Paul's theology provide us with a fresh understanding of the alternative hope that he proclaimed in opposition to what he understood to be the false hope of the Roman Empire. His theology of justification is a case in point. Whereas the justice of the Roman Empire supported those in positions of privilege and wealth—a form of justice that is quite common in neoliberal capitalism where the lawyers of the corporations tend to maintain the upper hand—the justice of God supported those who were not able to support themselves: "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law" (Rom 3:28). What is at stake here is not primarily a narrow religious transaction but a way of life that includes everything; like Roman notions of justice, God's justice comprises matters of religion, politics, economics, etc. If Paul wanted to talk about an exclusive religious transaction, he might have chosen other theological terms that were not as loaded politically and economically as the terms of justice and justification.

Paul's hope is built, therefore, not on the privilege of the Roman Empire but on the solidarity of God in Christ: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God" (Rom 5:1–2). While the full implications of this often-debated aspect of Paul's theology are commonly overlooked when theology is done in a context of privilege, theologians working on the margins have taken note, particularly in Latin America.²³ The subject matter at hand—hope that moves from the bottom up rather than from the top down—is experienced today by many others, most of whom rarely have access to alternative interpretations of Paul but share his experience.

Paul knows that the glory of God is manifest not in the triumphs of the empire but in suffering for the reign of God: "We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5:3–5). Hope, according to this passage, is not a matter of the emotional highs that people experience in moments of so-called mountain-top experiences; rather, it grows out of the character that is developed in situations of downturn. For Paul, this was experienced first-hand in the communities of the early Christian churches that were not narrowly concerned with religion and ritual but provided new ways of life. For good reasons, the book of Acts calls Christians the "people of the way" (Acts 9:2; 19:9, and several other places) and gives intriguing reports of early Christian solidarity (Acts 2, 4).

Today, the hope that Paul talks about, growing out of suffering, is at work in communities who confront suffering and struggle against it. The Christian base communities in Latin America have often been cited as examples, and it is inspiring to know that many of them are alive and well despite the fact that they had to endure great adversity, not least of all from the churches themselves. But there are similarly resilient communities around the world, many found in Pentecostal and Evangelical traditions as well as in some mainline denominations. The liberation theologies that are rooted in these groups are transformed as the movements are transformed, but they are alive and well, even in

²² In the United States, this has been the experience of countless labor leaders, who were killed without much recognition. The events of the Haymarket massacre in Chicago in May 1886, for instance, are remembered in May Day celebrations around the world as the international day of labor, while May Day is not officially observed in the United States.

²³ See, for instance, (Tamez 1993).

the United States.²⁴ The existence of such alternatives, and the reemergence of hope in their midst in difficult times, may well be the greatest miracle of all. Here, hope is reborn in the midst of struggle. During the early days of COVID-19, some cases where essential workers demanded better protection and consideration from their employers have already proven successful. In addition, the wide-spread protests in the wake of the killing of George Floyd by police have had some effect in creating awareness of deep-seated racism and providing some countermeasures. We will have to see how these movements continue in what some are already calling “the new normal.”

5. Conclusions

For true hope to emerge, false optimism and positive thinking need to be questioned and the unsustainable hopes of the status quo need to break down (if they have not already disappeared). Despite the fact that, at the beginning of 2020, the economy of neoliberal capitalism has had one of its longest upturns in history, COVID-19 has brought back the logic of downturn with a force not seen since the Great Depression. While neoliberal economics and its religious supporters have built successful organizations that have done some good and have benefited some people, it has never been able to live up to its promise of benefiting the majority of the population, even in privileged countries like the United States and the member states of the European Union. Even in the current economic climate of downturn, the one percent’s shares in the stock market have been successfully stabilized for the time being, while more and more of the 99 percent whose well-being is tied to their labor are left behind.²⁵

A similar kind of economy dominates in the world of religion, where the preachers of prosperity have benefited disproportionately, when compared to other people of faith, and built huge enterprises. To be sure, a small number of the followers of the Gospel of Prosperity also struck it rich. However—and this is the dark underbelly of the Gospel of Prosperity—this approach is unlikely to lift the masses out of poverty, thus perpetuating false hope on a broad scale. More specifically, rather than lifting the masses out of poverty, the Gospel of Prosperity allows its followers to blame those who fail to be economically successful, as they have only themselves to fault and no one else.

It is often overlooked that mainline Christianity is also losing credibility in the wake of these developments. Although it may not proclaim the message of prosperity—that God only blesses those who are rich and wealthy—as blatantly, by not providing alternatives to a system that benefits the few rather than the many, mainline Christianity becomes complicit with it. As a result, much of mainline Christianity is stuck providing charity and services that help some people survive, without much hope that things will ever be different for those on the bottom of society. Yet when Jesus preaches good news to the poor (Mt 11:5, Lk 4:18), is he preaching what amounts to hand outs and soup kitchens, or is he preaching something more akin to the audacious hope that the poor will no longer be poor?

If the false hope promoted by neoliberal economics and some forms of religion were merely failing to produce results for the masses, we might move on to the next thing. Unfortunately, much of this promotion of false hope makes things worse because it results in the victims being blamed for their misfortune.

In economics, the belief that anyone can make it results in the dismissal of those who fail to make it and who have fallen on hard times. This mechanism is internalized to such a degree that the unemployed often blame themselves for losing their jobs (or during COVID-19 the coronavirus is blamed) rather than looking at the deeper economic roots of the problem. Those unfortunate

²⁴ See, for instance, the work of Latin American theologians Jung Mo Sung and Néstor Míguez, as well as many North American theologians that address the matters of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender.

²⁵ (Prius 2019): “The top 1 percent of US citizens earn 40 times the national average and own about 38.6 percent of the country’s total wealth. The highest figure in any other developed country is ‘only’ 28 percent.” For an overview of the earlier history see (Popper 2011). According to Popper, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office reported that the income of the richest one percent of American households rose 275 percent between 1979 and 2007, while during the same time the income of the poorest 20 percent grew only 18 percent.

souls who are losing their jobs do not even seem worthy of extended support from the community, as unemployment benefits in the United States end fairly quickly and continue to be cut while bailouts of financial institutions and large corporations are common.

In religion, those who are not successful, healthy, and wealthy are likely to be seen as the ones who are less faithful and committed by the preachers of the Gospel of Prosperity. The preachers of mainline Christianity are generally not so crude, but relegating those who are considered “less fortunate” to charity and social services still amounts to a refusal to acknowledge the deeper roots of the problem. In all of these cases the fault is ultimately found with those for whom the dominant hope does not materialize or with their communities, and little alternative empowerment is provided. Even well-meaning and often useful efforts at education find the problem with those who “lack” it, rarely asking the question why some have access to virtually every level of education (all the way to the elite universities, including standardized tests, tuition, and comfortable living arrangements) and most do not.

True hope, in contrast to false hope, never puts the burden on the victims or blames them. Just the opposite: True hope is tested precisely where people experience trouble, oppression, and exploitation. What difference does this hope make in the lives of those who need it the most and in their communities? What difference, if any, does it make in the structures of the economy, religion, politics, and culture?

If such questions are raised, true hope can never be a grand concept pronounced by those who are better off. Telling a struggling person or community that things will be better in the future (whether in a couple of years or decades, as neoliberal economists are claiming, or after death, as so many theologians continue to maintain) only makes things worse. True hope in this context can only be what encourages people to keep fighting and to organize, as they realize that hope keeps emerging from struggles and that these are the places where they are most likely to find God at work. Is this not the message of the Exodus, the Exile, of Jesus, and of Paul?

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