Prison, Where Is Thy Victory? A Black Panther Theology of Mass Incarceration

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Abstract

On 12 July 1969, Huey P. Newton, cofounder of the Black Panther Party, wrote "Prison, Where Is Thy Victory?," a socialist critique of America's penal system that focused on its inability to rehabilitate prisoners. Beyond its explicit rejection of American capitalism, his essay, with its very title, also invokes two passages from the Bible—Paul's epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor 15:55) and the book of the prophet Hosea (Hos 13:14) —although Newton never elaborates on their allusive force. Intertextually bound to Newton's title, these biblical passages function as a type of guiding lens through which "full-knowing readers" can engage Newton's treatment of mass incarceration. This essay provides such an intertextual reading of "Prison" vis-à-vis 1 Cor 15 and Hos 13, with particular attention to the ways Newton's biblical models simultaneously enrich and complicate interpretations of "Prison."

Keywords

Huey Newton, Black Panther Party, Black Theology, Liberation Theology, 1 Corinthians 15, Hosea 13

Introduction

On 12 July 1969, Huey P. Newton, cofounder of the Black Panther Party (BPP), wrote "Prison, Where Is Thy Victory?," a socialist critique of America's penal system that focused on its inability to rehabilitate prisoners.[1] According to Newton,

[1] *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance* (ed. Angela Y. Davis; New York: Third

the American prison population consists of two types of prisoners. The vast majority he calls illegitimate capitalist prisoners, who view prison through the lens of the capitalist game.[2] As such, incarceration for the illegitimate capitalist prisoner is to be navigated with an eye toward one's release and return to financial enterprise. Numerically smaller is the group Newton refers to as political prisoners, who consider the entire capitalist system, including its prisons, entirely illegitimate.[3] For that reason, these political prisoners condemn their incarceration as oppressive and unjust and refuse to participate in any part of it. In different yet interrelated ways, Newton argues, the illegitimate capitalist prisoner and the political prisoner are unable to be reformed: the one already tacitly accepts American values, while the other categorically rejects them. Throughout his essay, however, Newton subtly aligns his political and economic ideology with that of his "political prisoners," a rhetorical move that provides a wider critique of American society through an evaluation of its penal system—hence, the gesture to "mass incarceration" in this article's title.

Beyond his rejection of American capitalism by way of its counterproductive penal system, by entitling his essay "Prison, Where Is Thy Victory?" (hereafter "Prison"), Newton subtly invokes two passages from the Bible: Paul's epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor 15:55) and the book of the prophet Hosea (Hos 13:14), which Paul is using as a proof text. Admittedly, Newton never elaborates on the allusive force of his title, not in the essay itself nor in any subsequent essay or interview. Considering how critical he was of organized religion more generally, any specific interaction with biblical imagery is striking and warrants some scrutiny. To date, however, the interpretive implications that emerge by reading Newton's essay against his biblical intertexts remain unexamined. In fact, apart from the occasional comment in historically oriented introductions about the BPP or Huey Newton, "Prison" has not received any serious academic attention whatsoever.

This essay serves as a corrective to both of these academic absences. What follows is the first article-length treatment to engage "Prison" as a stand-alone, serious piece of sociopolitical, biblical criticism. Moreover, this essay provides a critical reading of Newton's explicitly political essay by considering the implications of his religiously charged title. This results in an intertextual reading of "Prison" vis-à-vis 1 Cor 15 and Hos 13, with a particular emphasis on how these biblical texts simultaneously enrich and complicate interpretations of Newton's ideas, thereby shedding light on ways these biblical texts have been and can be interpreted, especially by historically oppressed peoples. In my view, these biblical passages,

Press, 1971; repr., London: Verso, 2016) 60–64. Page numbers taken from the reprinted edition. Huey P. Newton, *To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House, 1972; repr., San Francisco: City Lights, 2009) 221–24. Donald F. Tibbs, *From Black Power to Prison Power: The Making of Jones v. North Carolina Prisoners' Labor Union* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 97–98.

[2] Newton, *To Die for the People*, 223.

[3] Ibid.

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along with their wider contexts, are intertextually bound within the title "Prison: Where Is Thy Victory?" and serve as a lens through which subsequent readers—those Joseph Pucci calls full-knowing readers—can interpret Newton's treatment of mass incarceration.[4]

Two salient interpretive implications emerge from my intertextual reading of "Prison," implications I shall collectively refer to as Newton's theology of mass incarceration. While acknowledging that Newton was not strictly writing a theological treatise and was active only during the dawn of America's mass-incarceration movement, I use the phrase "theology of mass incarceration" as shorthand for Newton's engagement with biblical material, however consciously evoked, that reflects his contexts as leader of the Black, radical left and as self-described political prisoner. The first interpretive implication is that Paul's description of the spiritual, immortal body, set in opposition to the physical, mortal body, corresponds to Newton's political prisoner. Comparable to the heavenly life afforded Paul's spiritual body, yet unlike the materialism that binds his own capitalist prisoners to physical concerns, Newton's political prisoner can attain a higher (eternal) reality by rejecting the underlying assumptions of the dominant capitalist system. Paul's theology in this passage corresponds to similar ideas articulated within the wider Greek philosophical system, by Plato in particular, which Newton uses to advance a Platonic and dualistic argument, an ideological complement to his engagement with Platonism elsewhere.[5] Second, the social justice theology found in Hosea, in particular the prophet's criticism of the concern for material wealth and comfort that he saw among those ancient Israelite contemporaries whom he targets, underscores Newton's distinction between prisoners bound to monetary interests and those free to confront greater social issues. That Hosea contrasts this materialism and desire for physical comfort to the ideal values the nation should have learned as a result of its enslavement in Egypt further complicates Newton's distinction between imprisoned bodies, in particular the shortsightedness of illegitimate capitalist prisoners and their blind adoption of American capitalist values.

Newton's socio-spiritual critique is not limited, therefore, to those Americans found in physical prisons but applies equally to the wider, "freer" masses. For that reason, my use of mass incarceration simultaneously gestures in two directions: first, to the wider population of the late 1960s; and second, to the millions confined within American prisons in the fifty years after Newton wrote "Prison." By highlighting the literary and ideological wealth recovered by reading Newton's intertextual engagement with Christian and Hebrew scriptures, this essay outlines a theology of mass incarceration that, for the first time, advances a uniquely Newtonian

[4] Joseph Pucci, *The Full-Knowing Reader: Allusion and the Power of the Reader in the Western Literary Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

[5] Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Harcourt, 1973; repr., New York: Penguin, 2009) 77, 249. Page numbers taken from the reprinted edition. Brian P. Sowers, "The Socratic Black Panther: Reading Huey P. Newton Reading Plato," *Journal of African American Studies* 21 (2017) 26–41.

perspective to social justice theologies popular within contemporary civil rights and Black nationalism movements.

It is instructive to qualify my methodology, which should, in turn, clarify the extent to which my reading can be directly applied to Huey Newton. On the one hand, my reading of "Prison" begins with the assumption that Newton intentionally chose the title "Prison: Where Is Thy Victory?" That this title remained unchanged in all republications of the essay further underscores the perceived suitability of the title both by Newton and by subsequent BPP members. For that reason, it is appropriate for critical readings of "Prison" to take into consideration that its title is one method Newton used to advance his ideological agenda. Accordingly, the intertextual reading that follows can be seen as outlining a few interpretive implications of Newton's choice to echo the Bible, without making any claims to having discovered *the* way to read "Prison" or to interpret Newton's writings. As an active reader and primary interpretive agent, I intentionally situate my reading of "Prison" within an ideological register that complements Newton's wider corpus. I also acknowledge that this reading of "Prison" is ultimately my own and does not explicitly lay claim to having discovered Newton's own literary or theological intentions. Rather, this intertextual and literary critique of "Prison," while carefully eschewing language of authorial intent, does, I hope, advance a method for reading Newton that adds philosophical depth to his writings and will be of use both to scholars interested in Newton and the BPP and to those interested in theological approaches advanced by intellectuals from the wider African diaspora.

This essay is divided into three parts. The first section provides a critical summary of "Prison," with a particular focus on Newton's literal and metaphoric uses of the word prison, as well as his treatment of what he sees as illegitimate capitalist and political prisoners. This summary orients Newton's critique of incarceration within his wider ideological campaign, especially its dependence on Platonic philosophy, and it is also intended to introduce readers unfamiliar with "Prison" to the general organization and argument of Newton's essay. The second section advances the first of two intertextual readings of "Prison," beginning with the title's direct allusion to 1 Cor 15. Because the interpretive implications of Newton's engagement with Pauline material complement and perhaps are informed by his familiarity with Platonic material, this second section builds on the critical reading of "Prison" provided in the first section. In the third and final section of this essay, "Prison" is read alongside the Hebrew prophet Hosea, Paul's ancient source for the line "Death, where is thy victory?". Whereas the Pauline intertext is more philosophically rich and more directly related to Newton's reading of Plato, approaching "Prison" by way of Hosea elucidates the economic force of Newton's argument. Taken together, the second and third sections of this essay provide an original, yet productive, way to read Newton's writing and clarify my decision to classify "Prison" as a theology of mass incarceration, a phrase I return to again at the end of the essay.

Critical Epitome of Newton's "Prison, Where Is Thy Victory?"

Within "Prison" Newton uses the term prison in both literal and symbolic ways. Taken literally, prison refers to the American penal system, which Newton experienced firsthand starting with his first conviction for assault in 1962 and culminating in his serving two years for manslaughter from 1968 to 1970, a conviction that was ultimately overturned due to judicial mismanagement. After two subsequent trials ended in hung juries, the manslaughter charges were dropped, leading to his eventual release from prison.[6] Newton wrote "Prison" during this tenuous period when he faced multiple charges, convictions, and mistrials and when the BPP organized the Free Huey campaign.[7] For that reason, "Prison" is based, at least in part, on Newton's own time in jail, during which he experienced the injustice and racism he saw as inherent within the American penal system.

Unlike Newton's other essays and his reflections in *Revolutionary Suicide*, which explicitly articulate the racial origins of the American judicial system, "Prison" is devoid of any overtly racial language and focuses, instead, on the economic factors that lead to carceral injustice. This somewhat remarkable absence of racial language in "Prison" coincides with a comparable evolution within the BPP during the early 1970s when the organization shifted from being primarily interested in racial (and national) issues to being focused on economic (and international) ones.[8] Newton and the BPP undoubtedly viewed race as a crucial cause of American social inequality manifested as injustice within the American judicial system, but Newton does not use race as an ideological lens in "Prison." For that reason, he orients his literal use of the term prison around those unjust realities of the American judicial system, which, in his view, suppressed political and economic opposition.[9]

On the other hand, Newton also uses prison as a metaphor for social internment beyond the four walls of the literal jail cell, thus making for a general critique of the United States, what Walter Johnson refers to as a "carceral landscape."[10] Such

[6] Fuller accounts of these events can be found in Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, and Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House, 1970; repr., Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1991).

[7] See Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Judson L. Jeffries, *Huey P. Newton: The Radical Theorist* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002); *On the Ground: The Black Panther Party in Communities across America* (ed. Judson L. Jeffries; Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010); *Comrades: A Local History of the Black Panther Party* (ed. Judson L. Jeffries; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); and J. Herman Blake, "The Caged Panther: The Prison Years of Huey P. Newton," *Journal of African American Studies* 16 (2012) 236–48.

[8] Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 122–23; Jeffries, *Huey P. Newton*.

[9] Compare James Bell, "Correcting the System of Unequal Justice," in *The Covenant with Black America: Ten Years Later* (ed. Tavis Smiley; Carlsbad, CA: SmileyBooks, 2016) 51–68; Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010); Samuel F. Yette, *The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America* (New York: Berkley, 1972).

[10] Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013) 206–43. See also Dan Berger, *Captive*

symbolic prisons rely on forces of social injustice to blind and bind individuals to patterns of thought or action that mutate them into prisoners of an oppressive state. This system benefits a select few, typically the wealthy and powerful, at the expense of the majority who, lacking wealth and political influence, suffer without recourse.

Throughout the 1960s, Black Power groups adopted the image of society as a prison, even borrowing Lenin's "prison house of nations" to describe the United States.[11] For instance, in his 10 November 1963 "Message to the Grassroots," Malcolm X said: "Don't be shocked when I say I was in prison. You're still in prison. That's what America means—prison." This quote took on a life of its own and was requoted, and misquoted, in the years following Malcolm's death. As a result, he has since been quoted as saying that all of America is a prison and that jails are just a prison within a prison.[12] Even though this is not exactly what Malcolm originally said, the misquotation quickly gained widespread acceptance and captured the imaginations of those Black Power leaders who followed in his footsteps.

As intellectual heir to Malcolm X, Newton builds his critique of the carceral system (and of the United States) on a foundation first laid by Malcolm.[13] Malcolm's association of American society with imprisonment pervades Newton's writings, from his use of Plato's cave prisoners as a metaphor for the Black community to the core of his argument in "Prison."[14] This is most explicitly articulated in *Revolutionary Suicide*, when Newton dedicates his testimony against the charge of manslaughter to address American racism with carceral and Platonic imagery:

> I tried to explain what a deep impression Plato's allegory of the cave had made on me and how the prisoners in that cave were a symbol of the Black man's predicament in this country. It was a seminal experience in my life, I explained, for it had started me thinking and reading and trying to find a way to liberate Black people.[15]

Newton frequently invokes Plato's cave allegory and the Socratic method as ideological templates for his own street philosophy. When chatting with friends on the streets of Oakland or during parties, Newton, like Socrates before him,

Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014) 51.

[11] Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage, 1967); Berger, *Captive Nation*, 49–90.

[12] C. Gerald Fraser, "Black Prisoners Embrace New View of Themselves as Political Victims," *New York Times* (16 September 1971) 49; Roberta A. Johnson, "The Prison Birth of Black Power," *The Journal of Black Studies* 5 (1975) 395–414, at 409; Herman Badillo and Milton Haynes, *A Bill of No Rights–Attica and the American Prison System* (New York: Outerbridge & Lazard, 1972) 11.

[13] Nikhil P. Singh, "The Black Panthers and the 'Undeveloped Country' of the Left," in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (ed. Charles E. Jones; Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1998) 57–105, at 71–77; Jeffries, *Huey P. Newton*, 55–56, 66, 75; Mumia Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom: A Life in the Black Panther Party* (Cambridge, MA: South End, 2004), 60–61, 66–67.

[14] For a more complete treatment of Newton's use of Plato, see Sowers, "The Socratic Black Panther."

[15] Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 249.

routinely challenges his friends' assumptions about reality which, in his view, bind them like prisoners to oppressive systems. One central feature of his street philosophy is the conviction that if his friends were freed from these ignorant assumptions, they would, in turn, experience full social and racial liberation.[16] Their ignorant assumptions, however, vary depending on the specific circumstance; in *Revolutionary Suicide* Newton imagines prisoners bound to racial ignorance, whereas in "Prison" they are shackled by economic forces.[17]

Rather than choose between these literal and symbolic uses of prison, an interpretive decision that would water down the rhetorical force of Newton's argument, my reading embraces both as complementary and necessary to any critical engagement with Newton's writings, "Prison" in particular. By allowing Newton's division between illegitimate capitalist and political prisoners to describe reality within physical prisons and American society more generally, the reading that follows draws attention to the strikingly nuanced connections Newton draws between forces of captivity and oppression equally pervading jail cell and city street.[18]

"Prison" opens with a mathematical analogy based on the rule that the whole can never be greater than the sum of its parts.[19] While pertinent to geometry, Newton claims, this principle breaks down when applied to humans, because, in addition to their physical bodies, humans consist of immaterial elements, such as emotions and ideas, which exist simultaneously within and beyond each individual: "In the case of humanity the whole is much greater than its parts because the whole includes the body which is measurable and confineable and the ideas which cannot be measured nor confined."[20]

As a result, these immaterial elements are more difficult to control. Ideas, in particular, have the ability to connect humans to each other, both as individuals and as collectives or communities, sometimes across vast distances but certainly without the need for direct, physical contact. For that reason, it is impossible to control anyone through physical incarceration, because restraining their body ultimately

[16] Ibid., 77. See also Huey P. Newton, "The Correct Handling of the Revolution," in *The Black Panthers Speak* (ed. Philip S. Foner; Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970; repr., Chicago: Haymarket, 2014) 41–45, at 42. Page numbers taken from the reprinted edition. Huey P. Newton, "Huey Newton Talks to the Movement about the Black Panther Party, Cultural Nationalism, SNCC, Liberals, and White Revolutionaries," in *The Black Panthers Speak* (ed. Foner), 50–67. Fleeta Drumgo, "We Are All Prisoners," *The Black Scholar* 2 (1971) 32–33; Steven V. Roberts, "Prisons Feel a Mood of Protest" *New York Times* (19 September 1971) 5; James B. Jacobs, "Criminology: Stratification and Conflict among Prison Inmates," *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 66 (1976) 476–82, at 480–81; Sowers, "The Socratic Black Panther."

[17] Compare Amy A. Ongiri, "Prisoners of Love: Affiliation, Sexuality, and the Black Panther Party," *The Journal of African American History* 94 (2009) 69–86, at 70.

[18] Johnson, "The Prison Birth of Black Power," 396.

[19] Compare Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom*.

[20] Newton, *To Die for the People*, 221.

fails to control their ideas. Newton concludes this section of "Prison" by applying his argument directly to the BPP and to analogous anticapitalist movements:

> The ideas which can and will sustain our movement for total freedom and dignity of the people cannot be imprisoned, for they are to be found in the people, all the people, wherever they are. As long as the people live by the ideas of freedom and dignity, there will be no prison which can hold our movement down. Ideas move from one person to another in the association of brothers and sisters who recognize that a most evil system of capitalism has set us against each other, although our real enemy is the exploiter who profits from our poverty. . . . The walls, the bars, the guns and the guards can never encircle or hold down the idea of the people. . . .The prison operates with the idea that since it has a person's body it has his entire being, because the whole cannot be greater than the sum of its parts.[21]

Through this opening mathematical analogy and its ideologically laden conclusion, Newton introduces three interdependent propositions inherent to the argument that develops over the rest of the essay. First, humans consist of physical and incorporeal elements that remain separate and distinguishable from the other.[22] Whereas the physical half of a human can be easily contained within a cage, the immaterial half, in contrast, cannot be controlled simply with walls, bars, guns, and guards. Second, this is a universalizing dualistic model for the human whole, which can and should be applied equally to prisoners in physical jails and to those outside physical prison walls. Third, the pure incorporeal body, i.e., the philosophical ideal, is synonymous with the rejection of American capitalism, in particular its reliance on exploitative economics. This final point anticipates Newton's eventual conflation of his own anticapitalist arguments with those of the political prisoner.

Having established this theoretical framework for the impossibility of rehabilitating prisoners by only controlling their physical bodies, Newton explains that the incorporeal half of a person—that half entirely unaffected by prison—ultimately reveals how a person interprets society and participates within it. Accordingly, Newton divides the prison population into two overarching types of inmates. Most accept American values of money, power, and conspicuous consumption uncritically.[23] Because power and money rest in the hands of a select few, these prisoners originally pursued power and money in ways deemed illegal by society, resulting in their arrest and conviction.[24] Newton calls these inmates illegitimate capitalist prisoners.[25] Some prisoners, in contrast, critically interrogate American society and recognize that it benefits a select few and

[21] Ibid., 222.

[22] Compare Steven Nelson, "Nelson Mandela's Two Bodies," *Transition* 116 (2014) 130–42, at 130–31.

[23] Newton, *To Die for the People*, 223.

[24] Johnson, "The Prison Birth of Black Power," 400; Norman S. Hayner and Ellis Ash, "The Prisoner Community as a Social Group," *American Sociological Review* 4 (1939) 362–69.

[25] Newton, *To Die for the People*, 223. Compare Johnson, "The Prison Birth of Black Power," 396.

oppresses the majority. Considering American values illegitimate, these prisoners work to overthrow this oppressive system, a decision that invariably leads to their imprisonment.[26] Newton refers to this type of inmate as the political prisoner.[27]

Because each prisoner's incorporeal half influences their engagement with society, in Newton's view, their incorporeal disposition also makes them incapable of social rehabilitation. For illegitimate capitalist prisoners, inasmuch as they navigate the penal system with an eye toward release and a return to their capitalist pursuits, they already embrace American, capitalist values.[28] As a result, there is nothing to rehabilitate illegitimate capitalists to—they are already aligned (allied) with society. By rejecting the entire capitalist system, including its rules, values, and prisons, political prisoners, in contrast, serve their sentences without cooperating with the system. They also experience a type of epistemological out-of-body experience whereby their ideas escape the confines of the jail cell and rest with the people.[29] Imprisoning the physical body of political prisoners, therefore, has no lasting or rehabilitating effect on them.

By way of conclusion, Newton explores the ethical implications of his argument:

> The dignity and beauty of man rests in the human spirit which makes him more than simply a physical being. This spirit must never be suppressed for exploitation by others. As long as the people recognize the beauty of their human spirits and move against suppression and exploitation, they will be carrying out one of the most beautiful ideas of all time.[30]

Building on his dualistic model for humanity, half physical (visible), half spiritual (invisible), Newton situates ethics and morality within the spiritual part, a claim that, in effect, allows both illegitimate capitalist prisoners and political prisoners to be capable of dignity and morality. But within Newton's ethical system, when people appreciate the beauty and dignity of their spirits, they naturally resist oppression and exploitation in all its forms, a behavior more closely associated with political prisoners.[31] This implies that human ethics rests exclusively within the spiritually enlightened (socialist) person. By never attributing to illegitimate capitalist prisoners an ethical code, Newton underscores how securely they are bound to the unethical life, inextricably chained to American values.

[26] Sophia Hansen-Day, "'Seize the Time:' The Role of Political Development in Building a Formerly Imprisoned Black Intellectual's Subjectivity and Praxis," *Tapestries: Interwoven Voices of Local and Global Identities* 4.1 (2015).

[27] Newton, *To Die for the People*, 223. Compare Robert Chrisman, "Black Prisoners, White Law," *Black Scholar* 2 (1971) 44–46, and Berger, *Captive Nation*, 68.

[28] Newton, *To Die for the People*, 223; Chrisman, "Black Prisoners, White Law." Contrast these views with the justification for mass imprisonment advanced by Mark S. Fleisher, *Warehousing Violence* (London: Sage, 1989).

[29] Newton, *To Die for the People*, 224; Hansen-Day, "'Seize the Time.'"

[30] Newton, *To Die for the People*, 224.

[31] Compare Johnson, "The Prison Birth of Black Power," 397; Badillo and Hayes, *A Bill of No Rights*; Ralph Ginzburg, "Castrated: My Eight Months in Prison," *New York Times Magazine* (3 December 1972) 38; George Mangakis, "A Letter from Prison," *Transition* 39 (1971) 14–19, at 15.

Newton concludes "Prison" by echoing the mathematical analogy that opened the essay: "Because the human whole is much greater than the sum of its parts [*sic*]. The ideas will always be among the people. The prison cannot be victorious because walls, bars, and guards cannot conquer or hold down an idea."[32]

This conclusion bookends the essay around a single, unifying theme. Through his use of "victorious," Newton also gestures to the title of the essay and underscores his overarching claim that the penal system is destined to fail. Although he argues that neither illegitimate capitalist nor political prisoners can be rehabilitated, by his conclusion the illegitimate capitalist prisoners have receded into the background to allow the idea, or spirit—marked by its resistance to oppression and its connection to the people, which are both closely associated with political prisoners—to emerge as the ultimate focus of the argument.[33] This implies, of course, that since illegitimate capitalist prisoners only pursue society's oppressive rules, they are devoid of their own (just) ideas or values of social liberation.[34] More subtly, Newton suggests that only political prisoners contain a soul, the ethical idea (ideal), while illegitimate capitalist prisoners, in contrast, are reduced to base, physical desires, soul-less bodies, the ethical walking dead. This contrast between a person's spiritual (socialist) and physical (capitalist) sides can only be fully appreciated by reading "Prison" alongside the two biblical passages Newton echoes, beginning with Paul's epistle to the Corinthians.

Newton Reading Paul

The longest authentic letter written by Paul to a church he founded, 1 Corinthians is part of an epistolary exchange between Paul and the Corinthian church leadership who, from his perspective, were failing to ground their theological and ethical teachings on principles essential for the ideal Christian community. For that reason, this letter and the only other one from the series to survive (2 Corinthians) are marked by anxiety and urgency as Paul attempts to convince the Corinthian leadership of his views.[35] He also reiterates those theological and ethical issues that the Corinthian communities had seemingly failed to understand. At times, Paul adopts the persona of a sensitive teacher patiently reminding his pupils of previous lessons; at times, his tone is sterner, even polemical, as he reprimands the leadership (and the community) for their obvious errors.

In chapter 15, Paul addresses bodily resurrection, a recurring topic in his epistles and one that he claims was central to his original message in Corinth but had been

[32] Newton, *To Die for the People*, 224.

[33] Mangakis, "A Letter from Prison," 16.

[34] It is instructive to compare Newton's position here with his discussion of Black capitalism in Huey P. Newton, "War against the Panthers: A Study of Repression in America" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 1980) 21–24.

[35] Bruce J. Malina and John J Pilch, *Social Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) 59–60.

altered in some way.[36] His underlying concern is that, in his absence from Corinth, the church community had been teaching that there was no resurrection of the dead.[37] Dale Martin reconstructs the background to 1 Corinthians differently and argues that Paul is concerned that the Corinthian elites' exclusionist ideology had influenced their understanding of the eschaton, among other matters, in a way that reinforced a classical, Greco-Roman hierarchy.[38] Because bodily resurrection was central to his theology of redemptive grace and to his eschatological hopes, Paul addresses this topic at some length. Within his clarifying remarks about bodily resurrection, he uses the line "Death, where is thy victory," the phrase, adapted from Hosea that Newton, in turn, adapts in his title, "Prison, Where Is Thy Victory?" Because the allusive potential in Newton's engagement with this biblical passage is somewhat complex, it is worth quoting in full:

> What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.
>
> What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:
>
> "Death has been swallowed up in victory."
> "Where, O death, is your victory?
> Where, O death, is your sting?"
> The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.
> (1 Cor 15:42–56 NRSV)

[36] Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (trans. John Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1978) 109, and idem, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM, 1999) 147–51.

[37] Malina and Pilch, *Social Science Commentary*, 122.

[38] Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1995) 104–8. Compare Gerhard Sellin, *Der Streit um die Auferstehung der Toten: Eine religionsgeschichtliche und exegetische Untersuchung von 1. Korinther 15* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986) 17–37.

Paul articulates his theology on the bodily resurrection through a series of oppositional concepts—perishability vs. imperishability, dishonor vs. glory, weakness vs. power, the spiritual body vs. the physical body, earthly vs. heavenly, immortality vs. mortality—dichotomies that underpin his assumptions about human bodies and souls. In order to substantiate his seemingly dualistic argument, Paul invokes two representative examples for the physical and spiritual body: Adam and Jesus.[39] As the body created out of dust, Adam represents that half of the human whole destined for death and decay; Jesus, in contrast, is heaven-born and thus represents that half of the human ultimately destined for immortality. By having their physical bodies dressed with spiritual features (imperishability and immortality) through clearly articulated divine agency, humans experience a corporeal change, which makes possible their eventual resurrection, a parallel to Jesus. This eschatological clothing imagery, which frequently underscores God's active participation throughout, parallels comparable symbolic language about conversion and baptism found elsewhere in the Pauline corpus (Gal 3:27, Rom 13:14, Col 3:9–10, Eph 4:22–24, 2 Cor 5:1–4).[40]

Throughout this passage, Paul prioritizes the spiritual body over and against the physical one, a rhetorical technique that creates a natural association between his catalog of positive concepts (imperishability, glory, power, and immortality) and the spiritual or heavenly half of the human whole, leaving the physical, earthly half to be equated with perishability, dishonor, weakness, and mortality (see Rom 7:22–23). This precedence of the spiritual side of the human over the purely physical is made more forceful through the explicit connection of baptism and resurrection with the spiritual in this reading. Accordingly, the spiritual "half" (so to speak) is afforded eternal life, and the physical half is relegated to death and decay. While this metaphor of putting on imperishability and immortality suggests a significant connection between a human's spiritual and physical halves, over the course of the passage the physical half slowly recedes into the background.

Paul's argument here complements and, perhaps, assumes cosmological arguments advanced by a number of ancient philosophical traditions.[41] Platonism and Stoicism can be seen most evidently in his emphasis on the spiritual, immortal body over and against the physical one, although the insistence that death should not be feared also has deep roots in Epicurean theology.[42] Arguably, one can also see in Paul's argument vestiges of Platonic metaphysics, however mediated through

[39] Compare Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 3–37.

[40] Chong-hun Kim, *The Significance of Clothing Imagery in the Pauline Corpus* (JSNTSup 268; London: T&T Clark, 2004).

[41] The Greco-Roman philosophical influences on Paul's theology are more fully articulated in Martin, *The Corinthian Body*.

[42] See also Henrik P. Thyssen, "Philosophical Christology in the New Testament," *Numen* 53 (2006) 133–76; Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Contraversions; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 61–62; and Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament: Complete in One Volume* (New York: Scribner, 1951) 204.

Hellenistic and imperial Stoicism and, of course, with ample indebtedness to Paul's more immediate context in the Judaism of the first century CE and its affirmation of the general resurrection of the dead. While the influence of various Greco-Roman philosophical traditions on Paul's theology is a well-established and ongoing topic, it is doubly important when reading Newton reading Paul. Since Newton was deeply immersed in the study of philosophy, any Newtonian critique of 1 Cor 15—a passage that could, in his mind, readily advance a two-fold, oppositional corporeality—should complement Newton's own dualistic readings of ancient philosophical texts, especially those of Plato.[43]

That said, the following interpretive reading of Newton through 1 Cor 15 does not necessitate a resolution of the much discussed and rather controversial matter of the precise philosophical tradition that most influenced Paul. Rather, central to this section is the consensus that Paul frequently drew not only from contemporary Judaism but also from the wider Greco-Roman philosophical milieu, although Pauline scholars might not agree on the particulars. Of this ancient philosophical milieu, Newton certainly engaged the writings of Plato most frequently; he famously claimed to have taught himself to read English by using a translation of Plato's *Republic*, and references to Plato can be found scattered throughout his essays as well as in *Revolutionary Suicide*. For that reason, the comparisons between Newton and Plato made in the rest of this section model an exegetical strategy that complements Newton's reading and writing habits; they do not necessarily imply that these Platonic texts had a direct influence on Paul's cosmology or philosophy.

The oppositional language Paul uses to characterize his spiritual and earthly bodies, when read alongside Newton's argument about capitalist and political prisoners, provides one fruitful avenue for interpreting Newton's intertextual engagement with Paul. In both Paul's and Newton's arguments, only one body, the spiritual one and the political one, respectively, has the potential to ascend toward the good. For Paul, this ascent occurs through a metamorphosis of sorts as the mortal body clothes itself in immortality and undergoes, in his words, a change. Contextually about baptism, this corporeal conversion from old to new marks the beginning of the body's journey from the earthly to the heavenly.

Newton, in contrast, never explicitly indicates that his political prisoners are converted former capitalist prisoners. But reading Newton alongside Paul provides one fruitful interpretive avenue. For instance, the differences between Newton's capitalist and political prisoners parallel those between Paul's earthly and heavenly bodies. Paul's spiritual body is defined by its opposite (the physical body) just as Newton's socialist body is defined by its opposite (the capitalist body). In the case of Newton, the rejection of what he regards as capitalist materialism and economic oppression is what distinguishes political prisoners from illegitimate capitalist ones. Said differently in Pauline-influenced language, only by stripping

[43] Jeffries, *Huey P. Newton*; Sowers, "The Socratic Black Panther."

off capitalism and putting on socialism can anybody become a political prisoner, a socialist some-body, as it were.

This progress from physical to metaphysical reality reverberates in ancient philosophical texts beyond Paul's epistle to the Corinthians. For instance, in Plato's *Symposium* the sympotic encomia to Eros culminate in Diotima's metaphysical speech, interpreted variously, including as an unfiltered sketch of Plato's own philosophy. According to Diotima, the physical body, initially bound to corporeal pleasures and appetites, must first be freed from these desires before progressing toward loftier ones and eventually culminating in the study of philosophy (*Symp.* 210a–212c). As people ascend to a spiritual reality, their concerns and values ascend in measure, beginning with perishable and mortal ones but eventually leading to imperishable, immortal ones.

The spiritual progression, exemplified in the *Symposium* but common in many philosophical schools, clarifies Newton's notion of ideological transformation in "Prison." According to this reading, Newton's capitalist prisoners are bound to their physical reality, but, by stripping off their physical and material concerns and by putting on ideas associated with the people (i.e., socialism), they ascend to a new spiritual reality and are transformed into new prisoners: political prisoners. This ideological progression from base physicality (materialism) to self- and social consciousness (philosophical spirituality) underpins Newton's understanding of the human condition, beginning with himself. In *Revolutionary Suicide*, Newton describes himself as bound to physical and monetary concerns until his eyes were opened by reading Plato's *Republic*. To apply Newton's description of Plato's "cave prisoners" from *Revolutionary Suicide* to his political prisoners in "Prison," the essential calling of political prisoners is to free capitalist prisoners from their physical and material bonds and to help these now former capitalist prisoners turn into fellow political prisoners.[44] Such conversion moments echo comparable events articulated by Paul, Socrates, and others, giving Newton's dualistic model of incarcerated bodies intertextual depth, philosophical complexity, and ethical urgency.

In 1 Cor 15:56 Paul elaborates on his meaning of the question "Death, where is thy victory?" This section, when read alongside "Prison," further augments the intertextual force of Newton's echo of this passage, in particular his choice to replace Paul's death with America's prison. According to Paul, death's sting comes through the power of sin, which he equates with the law.[45] Contextually, Paul employs this anti-law language to distinguish his early Christian communities from their first-century religious competitors, synagogue-based diasporic Judaisms in particular, and to argue that new converts to his sect of Judaism did not have to adhere to traditional Jewish dietary restrictions or undergo circumcision. By intertextually linking his critique of the American legal system with a Pauline

[44] Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 249; Sowers, "The Socratic Black Panther," 36–37.

[45] Malina and Pilch, *Social Science Commentary*, 128.

passage often taken (whether accurately or not) to be about the oppressive nature of legal authority, Newton adds biblical weight to his argument and gives his dualistic model a nuanced complexity. On a surface reading, the defining characteristic of Newton's political prisoners is their opposition to the oppressiveness of capitalism; more subtly and intertextually, however, Newton implies that, like Paul and the early Christians, American political prisoners reject capitalist laws because they function as the means of social oppression and promote, in Paul's language, sin and death. As a result, for political prisoners, breaking America's unjust laws is the highest good, comparable, in one particularly powerful (if now often challenged) reading, to Paul's rejection of Jewish purity laws.

Newton's use of Pauline material to justify his breaking of unjust American laws parallels similar sentiments expressed by Martin Luther King Jr. during the peak of the civil rights movement. For instance, King penned the following in his 1963 "Letter from a Birmingham Jail":

> But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. . . . Just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.[46]

King here equates his message, conveyed through nonviolent, direct action, to Paul's equally disruptive message. To be sure, very early in his development as a self-described street philosopher, Newton had dismissed King's strategy of nonviolence as an ineffective way to combat American racial injustice and had, instead, adopted a posture of self-defense by whatever means necessary. Despite the radical dissimilarities in their methods and messages, Newton and King each seamlessly harmonize his social actions alongside parallel biblical contexts. And because King and Newton (and Paul) directly challenged oppressive power structures and created social tension by violating unjust laws, they inevitably experienced imprisonment.

Whereas Socrates argued that one should obey laws, even unjust ones (*Crito* 49a–54d), Newton and King deviate from their Socratic models and argue instead that political prisoners (to draw from Newton) have a moral obligation to resist unjust laws. According to King, who borrows heavily from Platonic texts in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," one should especially break unjust laws created to oppress Black citizens or to rob them of their basic human rights:

> One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.[47]

[46] Martin L. King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Penguin, 1964) 77.
[47] Ibid., 83–84.

By expressing parallel ideas based on similar ancient sources and using comparable language, Newton's political prisoners become intertextually predicated on King's divinely inspired lawbreakers. This congruity exists alongside their drastically different ways of violating unjust laws and Newton's explicit rejection of nonviolence, which was, in effect, a rejection of the civil rights movement. For both Newton and King, it is a moral and ethical imperative to resist unjust and oppressive laws. This sets Newton and King against Plato's Socrates, despite their shared use of the cave allegory, and more closely aligns them with Paul, from whom they also draw heavily. That said, Newton, King, Paul, and Socrates were all committed to inspire in others a passion for truth and justice and to oppose—admittedly, in different ways—unjust, corrupt, and oppressive power structures.

Throughout what was in Newton's time usually taken to be anti-law polemics on Paul's part, the apostle frequently contrasts the lifelessness and death of obeying the law with the freedom and life associated with rejecting it in favor of the gospel (see Gal 3:1–5:13). According to Paul's theology in this particular reading, freedom from the law comes at a fairly high price: death through the law or, in the case of Jesus, suffering a cursed death (see Gal 3:13). In his theory of revolutionary suicide, Newton postulates a similar fate for the conscious cave prisoner or street philosopher: racial and social liberty costs one's entire life.[48] Said differently, in order to bring freedom to the people, the true revolutionary must first be willing to die for the people.[49] Or, as this relates to "Prison," political prisoners are condemned by the very legal system they have rejected, a parallel between Newton's "Prison," King's "Letter," and Paul's theology, but one that further distinguishes them from Plato's Socrates and his dogmatic insistence on obeying even the most unjust and harmful laws.

By reading Newton's "Prison" through his Pauline echo, Newton's criticism of the American legal system comes into sharper focus. This criticism was a central and recurring feature of organizations during the civil rights and Black power movements, one that remains relevant nearly fifty years after Newton wrote "Prison." Through his echo to 1 Corinthians, Newton links his essay with his implicit understanding of Paul's theology and, in so doing, implies that the American legal system is predicated on sin and death. Newton also more directly provides the only antidote for that sinful system: its outright rejection as illegitimate (unlawful). With a series of legal wordplays (legality, legitimacy, illegitimacy, etc.) that situates the illegitimate capitalist prisoner against the political prisoner who denies the legitimacy of the American system, Newton equates his argument about modern incarceration with his biblical sources and their resistance to ancient social, religious, and economic power structures.

[48] Huey P. Newton, "Speech Delivered at Boston College: November 18, 1970," in *The Huey P. Newton Reader* (ed. David Hilliard and Donald Weise; New York: Seven Stories, 2002) 160–75, at 161–62; Sowers, "The Socratic Black Panther," 40.

[49] Newton, *To Die for the People*.

Newton Reading Hosea

Paul, like Newton, quotes, echoes, and paraphrases a wide range of ancient texts, some of which were eventually compiled into what is now called Hebrew scriptures or the Hebrew Bible.[50] In fact, when Paul writes "Death, where is thy victory?," he draws from a passage where the Hebrew prophet Hosea (through God's voice) condemns Israel for abandoning him (Hos 13). Hosea's language assumes a theology steeped in social justice, a recurring feature of the prophetic tradition.[51] This section interprets "Prison" through the lens of Hos 13 by applying the Hebrew Bible's prophetic value for social justice onto Newton's critique of the American legal system, especially its practice of incarcerating voices of opposition.

> Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol?
> Shall I redeem them from Death?
> O Death, where are your plagues?
> O Sheol, where is your destruction?
> Compassion is hidden from my eyes. (Hos 13:14 NRSV)

Contextually, this verse comes near the end of an extended passage about divine wrath emanating from Israel's rejection of God, which the prophet repeatedly associates with materialism, financial security, and idolatry. In 13:2, Hosea denounces Israel's idols of silver, objects fashioned from precious metals, explicitly silver yet, with a gesture to the golden calves, also intertextually gold. Implicit in this rebuke is the conviction that Israel's obsession with precious metals, silver in particular, is a core manifestation of their idolatry. Their material comforts lead to complacency and, eventually, to the abandonment of God: "When I fed them, they were satisfied; they were satisfied, and their heart was proud; therefore they forgot me" (Hos 13:6 NRSV). In return for Israel's forsaking God, he threatens a series of punishments, which include open destruction (13:7–9), sorrow (13:13), death (13:16), and material and financial sanctions. In 13:15, God vows to dry up Israel's water systems and plunder their treasuries; both punishments directly related to their misuse of precious metals and materialistic (agrarian) complacency.

The authors of the Hebrew Bible, especially those writing within the prophetic tradition, tend to conflate Israel's economy and religion into a single interrelated and symbiotic system.[52] Prophetic figures routinely equate worship of the Hebrew God with a concern for the poor, the foreigner, and the socially marginalized.[53] As

[50] Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 108–31.

[51] Uri Regev, "Justice and Power: A Jewish Perspective," *European Judaism: A Journal for a New Europe* 40 (2007) 148–64.

[52] Rainer Kessler, *The Social History of Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008) 108–17, and Bernhard Lang, "The Social Organization of Peasant Poverty in Biblical Israel," *JSOT* 24 (1983) 47–63.

[53] Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 644–46.

an illustrative example, Amos characterizes God's wrath as specifically targeted against the powerful (5:9) because of their oppressive taxation against the poor (4:1; 5:11) and acceptance of civic bribes (5:12; 5:15), despite their vibrant religious festivals (5:21), sacrifices (5:22), and worship (5:23).[54] According to Amos, Israel's wayward path is more ethical and economic than religious, a view that culminates in his famous call, "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24 NRSV).[55] Those perpetuating social injustice on a national scale are imagined as political leaders (Mic 3:1, Isa 29:20) who ignore the plight of the poor and oppressed with an eye toward their own financial gain (Ezek 18:7–8; Hos 5:11; Mal 3:5; Eccl 4:1, 5:7; Isa 1:17–20, 5:8, 58:6; Jer 6:6, 7:6; Mic 2:1–3; Zech 7:10, 11; Pss 12:5, 140:12; and Prov 22:23, 23:11).[56] While some kings defend the poor, foreigners, and widows and, as a result, obtain prophetic approval (Jer 22:15–16), within the rhetoric of these prophetic polemics, they are presented as easily outnumbered by those who oppress the poor and receive condemnation and criticism. To be sure, this depth of prophetic criticism might be inherent to the generic features of prophetic literature, written during or immediately after periods of deep social unrest, and thus are not simple, straightforward accounts of empirical realities.[57]

Prophetic concerns for economic justice, oppression of the poor, and the dangers of financial ease complement themes in "Prison," in particular Newton's characterization of illegitimate capitalist prisoners as driven by money, power, and conspicuous consumption.[58] Despite their desire for financial gain, such prisoners lack the ability to acquire profit through legal means and are, in effect, imitators of their wealthy oppressors—mini-oppressors in their own right. By drawing a comparison between illegitimate capitalist prisoners and those oppressors outside the physical prison, Newton's critique of the exploitative disposition of capitalist prisoners is, in effect, a criticism of American capitalism more generally. As a system predicated on economic oppression and exploitation, beginning with slavery and the genocide of indigenous peoples, American capitalism breeds a populace addicted to material profit, indifferent to the harm caused either to themselves or to others. Such consumerists are, in effect, prisoners of their materialist greed even if they have never spent time behind bars.

[54] Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, "A Fresh Look at Amos 4:1–3 and Its Imagery," *VT* 59 (2009) 460–74; Robert B. Coote, *Amos among the Prophets: Composition and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 24–32; Kessler, *The Social History of Ancient Israel*, 109–10; and Hemchand Gossai, *Social Critique by Israel's Eighth-Century Prophets: Justice and Righteousness in Context* (New York: Lang, 1993; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006) 244–260. Page numbers taken from the reprinted edition.

[55] Nwaoru, "A Fresh Look," 462.

[56] Ibid., 471; Klaus Koch, *The Prophets: The Assyrian Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); and Gossai, *Social Critique*.

[57] Gossai, *Social Critique*, 158.

[58] Newton, *To Die for the People*, 223.

This system of financial oppression is only brought to light by political prisoners who point out "that the people at the bottom of the society are exploited for the profit and advantage of those at the top . . . there is no sacredness, there is no dignity in either exploiting or being exploited."[59] As modern counterparts to Hebrew prophets, political prisoners denounce the financial oppression and materialist idolatry they see in society. Outside the physical prison, the voice of resistance against the evils of capitalism is also raised by Newton's street philosophers, those individuals not yet incarcerated for challenging the dominant empire. While Newton models his idealized street philosopher in *Revolutionary Suicide* on Plato's Socrates, in "Prison" he intertextually orients his political prisoners and their critique of economic oppression in spiritual terms with parallels to the Hebrew prophets: "they forgot me" (Hos 13:6 NRSV); "there is no sacredness."[60]

Hosea opens his critique of Israel's rejection of social justice with a brief summary of the Exodus narrative, in particular the Israelites' enslavement in Egypt and their subsequent liberation through divine intervention.[61] In the prophetic tradition, glosses to Exodus remind Israel about God's defining characteristics, made manifest through his covenant. These glosses also, rather explicitly, articulate ideal behaviors expected of those within the covenant: inasmuch as God challenged exploitative slavery in Egypt and acted on behalf of freedom and justice, so also must his people not economically oppress others (Amos 2:10, 3:1, 4:10, 9:7; Lev 19:33–36). When Israel's material comfort and complacency are juxtaposed with God's active hand in resisting economic oppression, the abandonment of God by some Israelites—characterized by their active exploitation of others—becomes all the more stark.

This allusion to Israel's Egyptian enslavement adds nuance to an interpretation of "Prison" in a few essential ways. On the one hand, the enslavement and liberation of the Hebrew people parallel the experiences of Black Americans and invite an intertextual interpretation that racially charges "Prison," despite its ostensible absence of racial language. As a result, Black America is rhetorically positioned as God's chosen people and the object of his favor. Of course, there is a rich tradition within the Black exegetical tradition of comparing the daily experiences of Black Americans to the biblical people of Israel, both before and after their enslavement in Egypt/America.[62] Newton's intertextual engagement with Hosea in "Prison"

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Gossai, *Social Critique*, 230.

[62] Jacob S. Dorman, *Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Phillip Richards, "The 'Joseph' Story as Slave Narrative: On Genesis and Exodus as Prototypes for Early Black Anglophone Writing," in *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Rosamond C. Rodman; New York: Continuum, 2000; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012) 221–35 (page numbers taken from the reprinted edition); John Saillant, "Origins of African American Biblical Hermeneutics in Eighteenth-Century Black Opposition to the Slave Trade and Slavery," in *African Americans and*

resembles similar ideas articulated by Black biblical exegetes, including a number of intellectuals active during his lifetime. This might also be a vestige of his childhood when his father served as a Baptist minister.

On the other hand, both during their enslavement and after receiving their freedom, the ancient Israelites and Black America suffer from an unjust and exploitative system, which, according to the prophetic critic, they replicate in turn (Hos 13:1–2, 10–11). Said differently, the majority of Black Americans have bought into an illegitimate system designed to oppress the poor and to benefit a select few. Against this oppressive system emerge Newton's political prisoners and the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. These voices of resistance attempt to persuade the majority to reject this illegitimate, unethical system, although they are frequently unsuccessful and risk imprisonment or death. In this reading, as a political prisoner par excellence, Newton's role in "Prison" becomes intertextually indistinguishable from that of a Hebrew prophet. Unlike the Hebrew prophets for whom God's active hand in redeeming Israel is ever present, in Newton's application of this biblical material, human agents—the prophet above all others—function as the primary enactors of social justice.

In this section, I have argued that Newton's use of "Death, where is thy victory?" also intertextually draws "Prison" into conversation with the Hebrew prophetic tradition, Hosea in particular. Newton's socialist critique of the American incarceration system, therefore, echoes the prophetic concern for social justice and the prophet's repeated insistence that divine wrath follows economic oppression. Read obliquely, Hosea's reminder of Israel's servitude in Egypt parallels American slavery and Black liberation, although, in this reading, both peoples return to patterns of oppression by replicating an oppressive system. Finally, Newton situates himself as a modern prophet calling for a rejection of capitalism and Western economic idolatry.

Conclusion

This critical analysis of Huey Newton's "Prison, Where Is Thy Victory?" has underscored the need to engage Newton as a sophisticated theoretician with an equally sophisticated method of engaging various sources, especially ancient and biblical ones. In my opinion, the approach modeled in this essay provides new and nuanced ways to view Huey Newton as the intellectual and ideological leader of a radical movement. Central to my reading is the assumption that Newton has something important to offer and should be taken seriously. At the same time, I intentionally distinguish between Newton the philosophical activist and his personal struggles later in life, culminating in his untimely death in 1989. In my view, there is no need to reconcile his intellectual life with his personal one, for to do so might distort and oversimplify more than it clarifies. While this might also

the Bible (ed. Wimbush and Rodman), 236–50; and Eddie S. Glaude, *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

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be true for most influential thinkers, it is especially the case for Newton, in part because academic and popular treatments of him tend either to idealize or to vilify his ideas and actions. Therefore, following Judson Jeffries's methodology, I engage Newton as an intellectual thinker in his own right.[63]

By reading "Prison" alongside 1 Cor 15, Newton's dualistic theory about humanity comes into sharper focus. This is especially the case when his political prisoners are set alongside Paul's spiritual bodies, which, in turn, underscores the contrast between the base materialism of Newton's illegitimate capitalist prisoners and the spiritual vitality of his political prisoners. Interpreting Newton by way of Paul facilitates the suggestion, supported in Newton's other essays, that illegitimate capitalist prisoners are able to evolve into political prisoners, similar to the way Paul's earthly bodies will change into spiritual bodies, dressed in immortality (a metaphor for baptism). For Newton (the ideal political prisoner), this radical enlightenment came, first, through his study of philosophy and, second, through his active resistance of social oppression, even if that oppression originated with the government and necessitated violating (unjust) laws.

The ethical and spiritual force of Newton's critique of American capitalism is further nuanced when "Prison" is read alongside Hosea's prophetic critique of Israel's economic injustices. Two recurring features of prophetic literature are its emphasis on social justice and its opposition to exploitative behaviors by the elite against those without social, political, or economic power. Hosea writes within this tradition, as does Newton, however indirectly, when he gestures toward Hos 13:14. This analogy would thus suggest that American materialism and greed are so pervasive that the majority of its citizens have abandoned their moral foundation, requiring prophets/political prisoners to reorient the people around the values of mutual care and collective responsibility. Because institutions of power and exploitation are threatened by these champions of social justice, many of them are imprisoned where they persist in their resistance to American values.

In my view, Newton's oblique gestures toward this biblical material are part of a single, fairly consistent intertextual and interpretive program, of which his direct engagement with Platonic philosophy is also part. His interpretive program reveals not only how well read he was but also how intentionally he articulated his ideas. In addition to being the founder and intellectual leader of the Black Panther Party, Newton emerges in this essay as a radical theologian of sorts inasmuch as he used biblical material to advance his critique of the American penal system. But his engagement with biblical material is hardly explicit and requires reading both passages alongside each other. The theology of mass incarceration that emerges from this reading of "Prison," while undoubtedly relevant to Newton and his readership in 1969, is still as relevant fifty years later, when the United States finds itself incarcerating more of its citizens than any other country in the world.

[63] Jeffries, *Huey P. Newton*.