

Echoes of Enslavement: The Significance of *Mañana* Today

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I approach this reflection with much fear and trepidation. Not only because this book is older than I am – not by much, at least. But also, because of how relevant what Justo wrote thirty-five years ago is to our current moment in the United States. I do not pretend to have the answers to the problems of our day. However, I approach this reflection in the spirit of "*Fuenteovejuna*," that is, *a teología* en conjunto seeking to instigate dialogue and also truth-telling. There are so many crucial themes that require discussion in Justo's work. However, I mainly want to focus on three: Justo's development of the concept of "innocent" or "guiltless" history and its role in the exegetical enterprise, I then want to consider Justo's development of the concept of "innocent history" to excavate the genealogical links between the history of Enslavement in the US, and its connections to the current ICE raids. Lastly, I want to consider how "reading the Bible in Spanish" can serve as political resistance.

I. Beyond Innocence

Gonzalez begins chapter two by situating the "Hispanic American" experience within the colonial history of the United States – in practice – showing us that in order to be able to speak "theologically," we need to understand *our* context. We can surely argue about how theology starts, but what cannot be denied is that all theological enterprise is contextual. Even then, Gonzalez reminds us that the aim is not to "idolize our culture" but to be mindful of it – how it forms us and how it comes to bear in our traditions and readings of the Bible. Justo calls us to take our histories seriously but without losing sight of our positionality with the early church, with Jesus and the apostles.¹

Taking our histories seriously is a move "beyond innocence," that is, as Gonzalez states, "to bring our fellow citizens to an acknowledgment that the present order is the result not

¹ Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 38.

merely of hard labor, daring enterprise, and rugged individualism but also of theft... remembering that we are all "*ladrones*."² For Gonzalez, herein lies the identity and function of the Hispanic church in the US – to be myth breakers, a people in exile meant to remind those around them of the myth of their innocence.³ I remember reading this in seminary and being in complete shock, asking, "How?" How can this be the role and function of the Hispanic church? Is this even in the Bible? Like the brother who approaches the preacher after the sermon – *y donde esta eso en la biblia?* I asked how? Justo surely perceived that question while writing and relays how even in the Bible, the notion of history beyond innocence is present. Gonzalez goes on to state that *biblical history is a history beyond innocence*.⁴ That is, its only real heroes are the God of history and history itself, which somehow continues to move forward despite the failure of its great protagonists.⁵ Gonzalez then astutely notes that refusing to engage Biblical history as a "history beyond innocence" will inevitably bleed into readings of Scripture. Thus, to be able to channel the voice of God in this moment, there has to be a real reckoning with the histories in which we inhabit – a history in which the Bible has consequently played a role. We must be willing not only to engage in exegetical excavation but also to excavate the historical self, examining how it has been fashioned and formed.

From my perspective, what Gonzalez laid out for us in 1990 was a call to be prophetic, that is, to make sense of the current moment by seeking to understand the past. In this way, the exegetical enterprise cannot be divorced from the socio-historical, and by this I do not mean historical criticism but an examination of the social forces that contribute to the formulation of biblical interpretations – engaging in what some call reception history. Now, I do not want to simply offer a summary of Justo's incredible work. I want (and hope to demonstrate) how relevant Gonzalez's work is to addressing the moment the Hispanic church is in today.

² González, *Mañana*, 40.

³ González, *Mañana*, 42.

⁴ González, *Mañana*, 77.

⁵ González, *Mañana*, 77.

II. Beyond a History of Innocence: ICE and its Genealogy

Reports on the number of people who have died in the custody of ICE varies. According to the Guardian, thirty-two people died in the custody of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in 2025. This violence has carried on to 2026 with devastating effect in which more people have been killed. The violent incidents are then justified by portraying them as mere operational accidents or simply outcomes of self-defense. However, when examined within the historical context of enslavement in the United States, these incidents were not merely operational outcomes but an outcome of the persistent presence of enslavement today. This history is crucial to excavate at a time when the current administration, driven by religious fervor, is fueling the erasure of these particular histories. Christianity, nevertheless, the Bible, is not exempt from these issues, particularly in its historical entanglement with enslavement. For that reason, it is vital to situate the ongoing ICE raids within a socio-historical context to expose how the current administration's campaign of violence and the Supreme Court's allowance have historical precedent but also calls us to the work of myth-breaking, that is, engaging with history beyond innocence and in turn resistance.

The various deaths and kidnappings are the result of a campaign of domestic surveillance that began in the streets of Los Angeles last summer. A campaign that resulted in the kidnapping of a leader in my own faith community, and as of last week, a kidnapping of a student's husband who is currently studying in the Bible Institute program I direct. To begin to draw some historical connections, this campaign of violence was further sanctioned by the Supreme Court, which effectively legalized racial profiling in the case of *Noem v. Vazquez Perdomo* (25A169). Despite previous rulings, cries of protest went unheard as the court lifted an injunction prohibiting the ICE raids in Los Angeles. In a concurring opinion, Judge Brett Kavanaugh states that there are a lot of "illegal" immigrants in Los Angeles and the stops are no big deal. He states:

Moreover, as for stops of those individuals who are legally in the country, the questioning in those circumstances is typically brief, and those individuals may promptly go free after making clear to the immigration officers that they are U.S. citizens or otherwise legally in the United States.

However, here is the thing – it is a big deal. Especially if you consider the history underlying these kinds of stops. Moreover, these assaults echo a time when "showing your papers" was conceived as an indignity reserved for those whom the state did not consider human – enslaved people. Let me give you some examples.

Although there are connections between the Gestapo and ICE, a much more intimate connection exists between ICE and slave patrols in the American South, specifically, the Carolinas, in the early 1700s. These slave patrols were created with the ultimate goal of establishing a system of terror to extinguish slave uprisings. They were equipped with the power and capacity to pursue, capture, and return runaway slaves to their owners. Like ICE, the tactics of slave patrols were to use excessive force and surveillance to control movement and behavior, engaging in the work of dehumanization.

At this point, it is also crucial to recall the formulation and enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, in which Congress authorized local governments to seize and return runaway slaves to their owners while imposing penalties on anyone who aided their flight. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 was met with resistance, but the result was the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which levied harsher punishments for interfering in the capture of runaway slaves. The enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 essentially erased the border between the North and the South, which would allow enslaved people who reached the North to obtain their freedom. Much like ICE's tactics today, facilitated by the Supreme Court and the current Administration, kidnapping was legalized, refusing runaway enslaved people the right of a jury trial or the right to testify. Furthermore, the Act of 1850 contributed to the rise of "professional" slave catchers and provided them with legal and governmental cover to terrorize and kidnap both free and enslaved people. In many instances, these realities seem opaque because they involve laws and policy, but they were felt by all (one way or another). Take, for example, Andrew Jackson.

In her book, *Cruelty as Citizenship*, Cristina Beltran tells a story of how Andrew Jackson's early career (before he was president) involved moving slave coffles as well as providing legal assistance to and processing the claims of white Americans who had taken land from Native Americans.⁶ A slave coffle was a group of enslaved people, often chained together in a long procession, forced to march on foot, and then sold. Once, while Jackson was moving a slave column along the Natchez Trace, passing through Chickasaw and Choctaw lands, a federal agent asked for Jackson's passport. However, Jackson refused to show his papers and "flew into a rage," claiming his rights had been violated; he even worked to have those who questioned his legal status fired. Why was Jackson so upset? What was the significance or the offense in being asked for a passport, for proof of legality? To be asked for a passport was like being called a slave, and to be asked in front of enslaved people was an insult and questioning of his freedom. When there are hundreds (maybe thousands) of ICE agents roving, seeking to question a person's legal status and demanding documentation, what they are really saying is that the person is not free. The irony of the current moment is that Justice Kavanaugh views the "brief" stop as trivial. In contrast, former president Andrew Jackson, a man who built his life and legacy on enforcing chains, viewed "brief stops" as an insult to his status as a free man. Jackson understood what Kavanaugh chooses to ignore, that the requirement to justify one's movement is a definitive mark of being unfree.

III. *Y La Biblia?*

Now we might be asking ourselves, *y que tiene que ver esto con la Biblia?* What does this have to do with the Bible? As I mentioned in the beginning, the Bible is no innocent actor in this history either. If you have watched the Department of Homeland Security's advertisements

⁶ Beltrán, Cristina, *Cruelty as Citizenship: How Migrant Suffering Sustains White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 61.

meant to recruit agents, you have probably noticed that they use certain texts to situate and fuel their violence.⁷

This is not too dissimilar from the tactful use of the Bible by enslavers, especially texts like Philemon. Philemon played a crucial role within the context of the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850. In her book, *African American Readings of Paul*, Lisa Bowens shares a report from Charles Colcock Jones, in which he notes the reaction of enslaved people to a sermon in which it is interpreted that Paul is sending the runaway slave Onesimus back to Philemon. It says:

I was preaching to a large congregation on the Epistle to Philemon, and when I insisted on fidelity and obedience as Christian virtues in servants, and upon the authority of Paul, condemned the practice of running away, one-half of my audience deliberately rose and walked off with themselves; and those who remained looked anything but satisfied with the preacher or his doctrine. After dismissal, there was no small stir among them; some solemnly declared that there was no such Epistle in the Bible; others, that it was not the Gospel; others, that I preached to please the masters; others, that they did not care if they never heard me preach again.⁸

Bowens goes on to state that this interaction reveals that white ministers were employing Paul's letter to Philemon to justify obeying masters and denouncing running away from slavery. The reaction of enslaved Black people was to reject that message by walking out on the sermon, declaring that the letter did not exist, or by simply maintaining that this message was not the Gospel, and claiming that the sermon was constructed to please the masters.⁹ For some, there was a sense in which this message did not truly encapsulate the Gospel, which is not too far-fetched to conclude if you have heard somewhere about how the God of Israel freed a group of enslaved people from the yoke of Pharaoh in Egypt. Moreover, what this memory of Jones may be demonstrating is how the Bible, in this case, Philemon, was used to justify something like the Fugitive Slave Act. Even abolitionists like Frederick Douglass fought against this interpretation of

⁷ Some of the texts are the following: Isaiah 6:8: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me'; Matthew 5:9: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

⁸ Lisa M. Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 171.

⁹ Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul*, 172.

Philemon and also, by extension, against this law by engaging the history of enslavement in antiquity. In one of his speeches, he says the following:

...They have declared that the Bible sanctions slavery. What do we do in such a case? What do you do when you are told by the slaveholders of America that the Bible sanctions slavery? Do you go and throw your Bible into the fire? Do you sing out, "No union with the Bible!" Do you declare that a thing is bad because it has been misused, abused, and made bad use of? Do you throw it away on that account? No! You press it to your bosom all the more closely; you read it all the more diligently; and prove from its pages that it is on the side of liberty—and not on the side of slavery.¹⁰

So, this leaves us with a question – and Howard Thurman poses it poignantly in his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, "Does the bible have anything to say to those whose backs are against the wall?" Thurman would say yes, and so would Gonzalez. In *Manana*, Gonzalez invites us to "read Scripture in Spanish" (84). That is, a reading that includes the realization that the Bible is a political book; a reading in the "vernacular," not only in the cultural and linguistic senses but also in the sociopolitical sense. (84). Gonzalez aptly states: "That at the time of the Reformation, Scripture was the captive of dogma and ecclesiastical authority, today it is often made the captive of historical criticism, textual analysis, form criticism, or whatever the latest word in biblical scholarship may be" (86). What Gonzalez then invites us to do is to read Scripture "in the vocative," to read Scripture as the living Word of the living God, giving us not so much information about correct doctrine but one that helps us understand our own difficult passages in the "pilgrimage of obedience" (88). A reading that will allow us to say, like the enslaved people in Jones's letter, that is not the Gospel. And we can say that because that is who we are – those who must live beyond the myth of innocence – those who break myths. If we continue to ignore the tendrils of our shared past of enslavement, and its presence in our midst, and how it continues to inform our conceptions of others, our theologies, our faith, and even policies, we will find ourselves in an endless torrent of unfreedom and violence that continues to dehumanize.

¹⁰ Frederick Douglass, "The American Constitution and the Slave: An Address Delivered in Glasgow, Scotland, on March 26, 1860," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, vol. 3, 1855–63, ed. John Blassingame (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 362–63.

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