



**THE SACRED NARRATIVE OF NAT TURNER:
ENGAGING THE GREAT WORK OF FREEDOM**

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PART 1. When we remember and recount the sacred narrative of Nat Turner, we must remember also the Kawaida fundamental teaching that our oppressor cannot be our teacher, especially about our heroes and heroines, about what is good or evil or about what counts as real, relevant or righteous. We must remember too Min. Malcolm X's teaching that the oppressor thru his immoral and amoral mind and his fantasy, fiction and falsehood generating media can and routinely does "turn the victim into the criminal and the criminal into the victim". And we must remember also the Hon. Marcus Garvey's teaching that "Our history is too important to leave in alien hands", especially the hands and history books of our oppressor. And finally, we must remember Harriet Tubman with freedom on her mind and weapon in her hand, courageously breaking her chains and calling on her enslaved people to rise up in rebellion and "go free or die".

Only in this context of a history of righteous and relentless struggle by our people, awareness of the outright erasure, falsification and devious denial of our history by our oppressor and the fictitious inflation and shameless fabrication of his own can we know and recount the sacred narrative of Nat Turner, Fire Prophet and freedom fighter. And only then can we understand, appreciate and recount the sacred narrative of our people as a whole in their awesome world-shaping and self-making march and struggle thru human history.

Nat Turner judges enslavement as a radical evil in the world. Even before the words and concepts of genocide and the Holocaust of enslavement are developed, he reasons that enslavement is a morally monstrous system of human death, destruction, deformation and diminishment. And he is determined to sacrifice his life to

eradicate and end it. His use of the category and image of the *serpent*, which in biblical language and imagery represents the devil, reaffirms his conception of enslavement as a radical evil in the world. Enslavement is the will and work of the devil and evil, and he believes God wants and wills freedom in the world, freedom from enslavement and oppression.

Like Harriet Tubman later, he will not let his oppressor be his teacher or tutor, his priest or his preacher. He will dare to understand and commune with God in his own way. He will see his own visions, hear the divine voice with his own ears and heart, and he will pray his own prayers of liberation and practice acts of audacious self-determination. Indeed, Tubman informs us that she would not let the enslaver teach her about God or teach her how to pray. Instead, she said "I prayed to God to make me strong and able to fight and that's what I have prayed for ever since". Thus, Nat Turner tells us the Divine speaks to him calling him to a "great work". The recorder does not let him speak the word, but it's *the great work of freedom* or liberty as it was often called in those times. Like the Old Testament prophets and the biblical scriptures, he fashions the voices and visions into a freedom call and commitment, and he talks of fire and brimstone, freedom for the captive and oppressed, and the redemptive shedding of blood. To call freedom, liberty or liberation a great and divinely inspired and assigned work invests it with a spiritual and moral authority and urgency that makes him and his fellow freedom fighters fearless and willing to sacrifice their lives to this sacred cause.

Nat Turner sketches in outline some conceptual building blocks for a liberation theology, as it would develop throughout early history and emerge in full form in the 60's. By theology I mean, as the dean of Black

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theology James Cone says, “God talk”, that is to say in Kawaida, talk about the will, wants and ways of God as we are able to discern them. And by liberation theology, I mean a theology that roots liberation in the will, wants and ways of God. In other words, we are talking about a theology that focuses on freedom as a divinely endowed and sanctioned condition and capacity for human beings. Thus, in Nat Turner’s account of his actions to free the enslaved Africans, he tells us that his mission of liberation is divinely assigned and he parallels Jesus’ sacrifice for the redemption of humankind with his divine assignment to redeem, i.e., liberate, his people. He says, “On the 12th day of May, 1828, I heard a loud voice in the heavens and the spirit instantly appeared to me and said the serpent was loose and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the serpent for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first”.

Note that he calls the White enslaver the serpent, i.e., the devil, indicating he represents and embodies radical evil in the world. Note too that he conceives of his project as a struggle through which the first is made last and the last is made first. This is rooted in biblical teachings concerning the new world to come, but it also finds reaffirmation in Frantz Fanon’s assertion that in decolonization or true liberation “there is therefore the need of a complete calling into question of the colonial situation. If we wish to describe it precisely, we might find it in the well-known words: “the last shall be first and the first last”. It is, in a word, putting the conditions and practice of freedom by the colonized and enslaved

people first, their interests first and defeating and disempowering the oppressor, ending his ability to dominate, deprive and degrade.

Captured and put on trial, Nat Turner pleads not guilty and reaffirms that he feels, believes and reasons he has done nothing wrong in fighting for the freedom of his people. Again, he calls the fight for freedom, a great work and offers his life, as the ultimate sacrifice, for it. And yet in this so-called “confession”, called this by his pretended lawyer, there is, again, no mention of freedom by Nat, and no discussion of the sin, savagery and radical evil of the Holocaust of enslavement. Instead, there is only a tale of killings without cause or context. But as we will see, Nat Turner is a reluctant soldier even in his unbreakable will to achieve freedom for our people.

In his so-called confession, after being convicted, there is only one time the word “freedom” is mentioned. It is when a man named Will joins the struggle, and Nat reports that he “asked Will how came he there”. And “he answered his life was worth no more than others and his liberty was as dear to him”. Then Nat says he asked Will, “If he thought to obtain it?” and “he said he would or lose his life” trying. Now, Will uses the word liberty for freedom, as was done in those days. For example, in a similar defiance of death and commitment to freedom, Harriet Tubman says she would “go free or die”. And she says, “I reasoned that out in my mind; there was two things I had a right to: liberty or death”. “If I couldn’t have one I’d have the other.” And so reasoned Nat Turner and all our freedom fighters and martyrs for liberation before and after him.

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