

Cone then proceeds to explain how these themes were understood in black theology:

Justice was understood in terms of the God who establishes the right by punishing the wicked and liberating their victims from oppression. Liberation was understood in terms of deliverance of the oppressed from the bondage of slavery -- if not "now" then in the "not yet". Hope was understood in terms of the expectation that the suffering of the victims would be eliminated. The idea of heaven was not so much an otherworldly hope, but the means by which slaves affirmed their humanity in a world that did not recognize them as human beings, a way of saying that they were made for freedom and not slavery. Love was understood in terms of its relationship to God's justice, liberation, and hope. God's love was made known primarily through divine righteousness, liberating the poor for a new future. Suffering created the most serious challenge to black faith. African-Americans turned to two texts to resolve the dilemma between the goodness of God and the suffering of blacks. In the account of the Exodus they found the belief that God is the liberator of the oppressed. In Psalm 68:31 they found an obscure reference to God's promise to redeem Africa ("Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God"). But the tension and the dilemma remained.

Although there were some significant forerunners to Black Theology, including Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. and Jr. (pastors of Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York), Howard Thurman (dean of Rankin Chapel and professor of theology at Howard University, and dean of Marsh Chapel and minister-at-large of Boston University, and pastor of the Fellowship Church of San Francisco), Benjamin E. Mays (president of Morehouse College), and Martin Luther King, Jr.; yet after the assassinations of King and Malcolm X, many black theologians began in 1966 to advocate the development of a black theology. Rejecting the dominant theologies of Europe and North America as heretical, and feeling that a new starting point in theology must be defined by people at the bottom and not the top of the socio-economic ladder, they focused on God's liberation of the poor as the central message of the gospel. For the biblical meaning of liberation, black theologians turned to the Exodus, while the message of the prophets provided the theological content for the theme of justice. The gospel story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus served as the biblical foundation for a re-interpretation of love, suffering, and hope in the context of the black struggle for liberation and justice.

Black Theology has largely de-emphasized the Western theological tradition. Black theologians came to believe that European and North American theologians have stifled the indigenous development of the theological perspectives of blacks by teaching them that their own cultural traditions are not appropriate sources for an interpretation of the Christian gospel; that the Western theological tradition as defined by Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Schleiermacher is the essential source for a knowledge of the Christian past. But when black theologians began to concentrate on black culture and history, they felt that their own historical cultural traditions are far more important for an analysis of the gospel in the struggle for freedom than are the Western traditions that participated in their enslavement.

In assessing the present direction of Black Theology, Cone states: