

## The Christology Behind the Ethics of the Black Messiah

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### Abstract

*Allan Boesak developed his ethics of the Black Messiah in the 1970s while he wrote his dissertation in Kampen, The Netherlands. These ethics said “no” to slavery, colonialism, apartheid, racism, and poverty as a consequence of oppression. Behind these ethics lies the Christological problem. Jesus Christ is truly God and truly human being, which is the universal Christian creed. What is the relationship between the universal confession to Jesus Christ as true God and true human being and the contextual confession to the Black Messiah? The Black Messiah is black for the black people for identification. Is the true humanity universal and the color contextual? The article gives a possible solution.*

**Keywords:** Allan Boesak; Black Theology; Black Ethics; Black Messiah; Black Christ; Christology

### Introduction

Allan Boesak had the opportunity to study academically in Kampen, the Netherlands, in the years 1970–1976. Boesak’s academic masterpiece was the dissertation *Farewell to Innocence*. In this work, Boesak developed the concept of black ethics. The starting point for black ethics was the Black Messiah, as the title of the first chapter of the dissertation suggested, “The Coming of the Black Messiah” (Boesak 1977:9–45).

The ethics of the Black Messiah said “no” to slavery, colonialism, apartheid, and other forms of racism. It said “no” to poverty as a consequence of oppression. Boesak argued that everybody was equal, both oppressed and oppressor. Both needed to be liberated. In the following study, key issues will be discussed based on Allan Boesak’s Black Messiah.

The development of the Black Messiah contains an interesting and relevant theological problem, namely the underlying Christology. The problem is the question of whether during the development of the ethics of the Black Messiah there is a clear, genuine Christian Christology or whether there are changes that in turn have an impact on ethics.

This paper will begin with an exploration of Boesak’s Black Messiah and the sources of inspiration behind it, after which it will follow the Christological trail in black theology. Finally it will discuss new proposals before presenting a solution to the question of Christology and race.

The method of the investigation is to include relevant sources of inspiration for the development of Boesak’s black ethics (Cleage and Cone) and relevant contributions to the discussion of Christology in black theology (Deotis Roberts and Mofokeng) in order to find a solution to the problem of Christology and race.

The thesis in this paper is that the ancient ecclesiastical Christology is race-neutral. Jesus Christ is truly God and truly human being, which is the universal Christian creed.

This true universal humanity in Christ leaves no place for racism, discrimination, and oppression. Everyone can seek inspiration in this universal humanity to counter the many erroneous developments of Christology. The original Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, was Jewish, but the ancient church theologians designed the Christology to be racially neutral. If Christology becomes a party post, it is contrary to ancient Christology.

Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew. Being Jewish was not universal but particular. Jesus of Nazareth was born and lived in a Jewish context. What kind of relationship was there between the original Jewish context and every other context in the world?

### **Black Messiah as a term**

Boesak referred to Albert Cleage's use of the term Black Messiah. Cleage's book *The Black Messiah* was not an academic book arguing for the use of the term. In Cleage's (1969:113–114,155–157,200) view, Jesus Christ was the black Messiah. Jesus was literally black because Israel was a mixture of Chaldeans, Egyptians, Midianites, Ethiopians, Cushites, Babylonians, and other peoples who were mixed with the black people of Central Africa. Jesus was, according to Cleage, a non-white zealot fighting for liberation from a white oppressive state, the Roman Empire. Cleage sought a connection to Africa, and for Cleage, Jesus was an African (Hopkins 2014:132). He wanted to build the Black Nation as an extension of the Old Testament. Jesus died, but the Black Nation lives on. Cleage's vision was in continuation of the chosen people from the Old Testament. He recognised the Old Testament and the first three gospels (Cleage 1969: 92,111). Paul destroyed Christianity by integrating Greek and Roman philosophical ideas. Thereby the religion was adapted to white Gentiles (Cleage 1969:44,93). Cleage confessed that Jesus Christ was the Black Messiah. Cleage's vision was an exclusive community of non-whites for whom he could be the Messiah.

Cleage was aware of the difficulty of the creation's theological nature. If God created man in his image, what color were human beings? Most people thought of God as white, Cleage believed. But Cleage (1969:42) also said: "There are black men, there are yellow men, there are red men, and there are a few, a mighty few, white men in the world. If God created man in His image, then God must be some combination of this black, red, yellow, and white. In no other way, God could have created man in his own image". Cleage's God was a combination of colors, but this God acted in the literal Black Messiah and only for black people. Thus, Cleage did not solve the problem of racism, but he would raise the issue of divine racism (Alexander 2016:88). The critique of Cleage hit the point that he unilaterally focused on race. He omitted other matters concerning the human and ended up in a pantheistic conception of God (Clark 2016:12).

Boesak was aware of the risk that black theology could turn into a form of black racism as a counterpoint to white racism, which he wanted to avoid. Boesak distanced himself from a variant of the Black Messiah, proposed by Cleage (Boesak 1977:42). Boesak denied that "black" was literally blackness. A Black Messiah expressed the concrete in the continued presence of Jesus Christ today. The Black Messiah symbolised Jesus Christ, so that he is trustworthy to black people. The historical Jesus was the son of poor people and lived and worked among the poor (Luke 2:21–24). The disciples were also poor. From the Old Testament, according to Boesak (1977:43), it was clear that God came to human beings in Jesus Messiah as a God who took sides for the poor in the land. God identified with the poor. The black people understood Jesus as a Black Messiah who

surrounded himself with and defended ordinary people against the systems of the Sadducees and Pharisees, where rules were set higher than human beings. Boesak also understood the Black Messiah as one who rose from the dead to deliver the oppressed from any oppression in the same way that God delivered Israel from the hand of Pharaoh.

Boesak agreed with the idea of Black Messiah as an identifying figure (Boesak 1977:42–43). The Messiah was not literally black. A Black Messiah was, for the Africans, the humane concentration of the divine power that healed the sick, expelled spirits, etc. Boesak would therefore not separate the historical Jesus from the present Christ. He was aware that he was thus deviating from many Western theologians.

Boesak promoted a theology in which God took the side of the black oppressed. Racism should be avoided. Boesak did not establish an exclusive theology for black people but ethics with an open contextuality.

When Boesak chose the term “Black Messiah” for a particular matter, it was better chosen for a South African context than a context of James Cone’s conception of a Black Christ. It was a contextually determined choice adapted to “the black” as a transcontextual topic because it transcended the context of the North American origin. The Black Messiah had to be relevant in other contexts where black people live, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, etc.; i.e., where black people lived in the African diaspora.

Boesak operated with a Black Messiah, not with a Black Christ. Boesak distanced himself from Cleage’s strong nationalist tendency. Boesak had a transcontextual liberation theology that has a broader perspective. Boesak’s theology worked specifically for black people, but it also works in general for all the oppressed.

The idea of the Black Messiah was discussed in South Africa. In 1964, Marie-Louise Martin wrote a very critical treatise on the messianic movement in the independent churches of southern Africa (Martin 1964). The criticism was that church leaders were perceived as Messiahs, sometimes as self-proclaimed Messiahs.

M. L. Daneel (1984) mentioned that in 1984, there were 7000 groups with twenty million adherents and 30 percent of South Africa’s black people were members of an independent church. The issue of the Black Messiah could be assessed in the field of tension between syncretistic corruption and legitimate contextualisation. Daneel (1984) believed that Martin’s critique was too strong and unvarying, although he agreed there was a tendency for church leaders to have too strong a role in the independent churches. Kelebogile Thomas Resane (2020) discussed developments from Shembe to the present day. One risk was that leaders could not be corrected “from below” (Resane 2020:11).

Cleage and Boesak believed that Jesus Christ was the only Messiah. Boesak himself took the Messiah as his point of departure in his attempt to build black ethics of liberation. Boesak (1977:42) perceived Jesus Christ as a Black Messiah, as an object of identification in the liberation struggle.

### **The Black Christ as background for Boesak**

Boesak was inspired by James Cone for *Farewell to Innocence*. Black theology, according to Cone (1969:1–2), was such that any denominational church had to make identification between the man Jesus and the suffering poor and oppressed black people. Black theology had to use the liberating power of the gospel for black people under the oppression of white people (Cone 1969:31). Christianity was a religion of liberation in

which political, social, and economic justice were consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ. A theology that did not care was not a Christian theology. Blackness represented oppression and liberation in any society (Cone 1970:11–12). The black people were God’s chosen people, not to suffer but to be free (Cone 1970:108). The black people regarded God as black. It was the heart of theology, and therefore black theology rejected the notion that God was for all people (Cone 1970:120). God chose Israelite slaves and became the oppressed self in Jesus Christ, who experienced humiliation and suffering. God’s choice of Israel and his incarnation in Christ showed that his mission is to liberate the oppressed (Cone 1970:121). The second exodus was that God extended His gift of love to the oppressed. There was no neutral God. Black theology believed that God would set the oppressed black people free. According to Cone, it is blasphemous to claim that God loved white people when they were oppressors. Love without justice was unacceptable (Cone 1970:29–33). Cone connected God and black people in love: “He is black because he loves us, and he loves us because we are black” (Cone 1970:137). Through this love, God decided against the white people, according to Cone (Cone 1979:138). Cone could state that “Christian theology begins and ends with Jesus Christ” (Cone 1970:197). Black theology created the needed distance from the White Christ (Cone 1970:199). Cone did not consistently use the term Messiah but referred to Albert Cleage’s Black Messiah (Cone 1970:204). Cone emphasised that his views were not identical with Cleage’s, but he agreed that the Black Messiah was the only true Christological statement. Cone used the phrase “Christ is black” (Cone 1970:204).

Cone was Christ-centric and connected the liberation to Christ: “The finality of Jesus lies in the totality of his existence in complete freedom as the Oppressed One, who reveals through his death and resurrection that God himself is present in all dimensions of human liberation” (Cone 1970:210). The theologically important thing about Jesus Christ was that he was black and against white values. In doing so, he was the cause of a Copernican turn (Cone 1970:213). His blackness clarified the definition that he was incarnate. He was not created to be a slave (Cone 1970:215–216). He had many titles: Son of God, Son of Man, Messiah, Lord, Son of David. The problem with these titles was that they did not clearly show that he was the suffering servant of the Lord for the black people. That was why Cone himself used the title “Black Christ” (Cone 1970:212–217).

Cone believed that the question of whether Jesus was literally black was irrelevant because “light” black people were subject to as much oppression as “black” black people. The crucial thing was that you were not white. Cone pointed out that Cleage was not entirely wrong when he described Jesus as a “black Jew”. There was solid theological reason to describe him as “the Black Messiah”. Cone himself maintained the term “Black Christ” because it showed Christ’s continued concrete presence today (Cone 1970:218–219).

In 1975, Cone went closer to the biblical texts and expressed: “Jesus was a Jew!” Through his Jewishness, Jesus was connected to God’s salvation story, where Exodus was an important event. Yahweh became a Jew in Jesus of Nazareth, thereby making possible the reconciliation of the world to himself (1 Cor. 5:19). Jesus’ Jewishness, therefore, was essential to his person. He was not a “universal” man but a particular Jew who came to fulfill God’s will to liberate the oppressed (Cone 1975:119). Jesus’ Jewishness was an expression of the concreteness of his existence in history. Black

Christology had to take a new path as an alternative to Christology from below, cf. Pannenberg, Christology from above, cf. Barth, or Christology from before, cf. Moltmann (Cone 1975:130). Black Christology represented Jesus Christ involved in the oppressed struggle for liberation. In 1975, Cone maintained that Jesus was the Chosen One. He was the suffering servant, and he was black because he was a Jew. Theo Witvliet discussed Cone's Christology. Witvliet underscored the importance of the messianic praxis of the Jew Jesus of Nazareth and the renewing power of the Spirit (Witvliet 1987:21).

Cone's theology was exclusive to blacks in North America, which led Boesak to call it a regional theology (Boesak 1977:143). Cone drew a straight line from the first Exodus to the second Exodus, which according to Cone was the liberation of black people in the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century. Cone worked in a closed context. Western thinking influenced Cone.

### **The Black Messiah**

According to Boesak, the black people perceived God/Jesus as a present God with hands and feet. He was a God with whom black people could identify. Boesak (1977:39) could therefore mention several black people from the nineteenth century who with their statements showed that they perceived God/Jesus as their own when they talked about "God is a Negro" and about a "Black Messiah". The struggle of black people for liberation and justice had always been associated with the notion that God was fighting on their side.

For black people, this association affected the theological understanding of Jesus Christ. Black theology would not separate the historical Jesus from the Jesus who was present in the situation (Boesak 1977:41). It is a fallacy known from Western theology. Boesak would maintain the confession of Jesus Christ as true God and true man. This position is in line with the apostles' testimony of the historical Jesus. Boesak pointed out that it was in the works of Jesus that one saw the works of God, cf. John 14:9. As a counterpoint to the white Jesus, Boesak would add the Black Messiah. Then he had the ethics of the Black Messiah. Boesak sought contextual ethics that could solve South Africa's problem.

### **The Christological confession behind the Black Messiah**

In his masterpiece *Farewell to Innocence*, Boesak wrote about the Black Messiah while attesting to Jesus Christ as "very God and very man", as classical Christology has always done (Boesak 1977:41). What did it mean to speak of the Black Messiah and at the same time confess Jesus Christ as very God and very man?

Dirkie Smit (2014:34) marked the centre of Boesak's black ethics in saying, "Jesus is Lord and evil is real!" Boesak's concerns were to translate these two realities into ethics and practical Christian life (Smit 2014:34). Boesak's point of view was the universal reign of Jesus Christ. He was Lord of all history and worked in all nations and ambiguous political, economic, and social actions. Therefore, the Lordship of Christ gave strength and courage to fight against apartheid, injustice, and dehumanisation. Boesak's work was prophetic criticism (Koopman 2014:37-41).

Tinyiko Maluleke underscores that Boesak in the time of his studies in the Netherlands had seen the Black Messiah, and that could be important for the future. His driving motivation was the phrase “Jesus Christ is Lord” (Maluleke 2016:5, 14).

### **A shortcoming?**

The time after Constantine the Great left a problem: the White Christ. As a reaction, black theology took both the words of the Bible and the black experience of suffering seriously. God was the God of slaves, God was the God of justice and liberty, and in Jesus Christ, he was revealed. It was in him that God promised liberation from slavery and captivity, healing from disease, restoration of humanity, and resurrection from death. Boesak expressed respect for the Christology of the Church Fathers, as expressed in Nicea and Chalcedon. Nevertheless, there were shortcomings. The concept of homoousia does not cover the issue of blackness (Boesak 2011:5) in connection with Cone’s statement about his concept of homoousia in *God of the Oppressed*. Cone wrote in that book that he had respect for the Christology of the Church Fathers in Nicea and Chalcedon. It was true, as Athanasius wrote, that Jesus was of the same divine nature as the Father. The status of logos in the Deity was important to the Church’s continued Christological discussion, but it did not answer the questions of the black people about how Jesus could be with them in their need. The concept of homoousia was not the answer to the questions of the black people, according to Cone (1975:14).

In 2009, Boesak (2009:38–41) explained that during his trip to the United States in 1973, he met both James Cone and Albert Cleage, and after that trip he knew the Black Messiah. Boesak then mentioned “The Jesus of Nicea, Chalcedon and the ancient creeds”. But Boesak saw a problem. “Indeed, in the rendition of the European renaissance, this Jesus was too beautiful, too aloof, too aristocratic for the pain, filth and ugliness of slavery and degradation, too light for the darkness of our misery as black people. The Jesus of Constantinian Christianity, without the crown of thorn but with the crown of laurels, with his wounded hands holding the sword and the standard of the empire, in whose holy name we were caught and chained, disrobed and shamed, flayed and slaughtered, disowned, unnamed and unmade and finally baptized – that Jesus bore no resemblance at all to the Human Son” (Boesak 2009:39).

In 2019, Boesak again cited James Cones’ word about Nicea and Chalcedon, that the dogma of homoousia is not the answer to the black question, and he cited his own words in *Running with Horses*. The homoousia humanity was not a black humanity. It did not take “into account the black situation of slavery, genocide, racism, and dehumanization” (Boesak 2019:4).

Boesak criticised the very concept of homoousia for not accommodating the problem of the blacks, and he criticised the development of the European Renaissance for the same. But he did not explain how the people of the ancient church should have been able to predict and judge conditions after the colonial era.

Therefore the questions remain: What is the problem with the concept of homoousia? What can the Black Messiah give that classical Christology does not have? What kind of ethics can the Black Messiah contribute that classical Christology could not deliver?

With these questions, we will go back to Boesak’s Black Messiah and see what he and his sources of inspiration have to say. After that, we will look at some other contributions and discuss the issue.

### **Boesak's theological program**

Boesak's *Farewell to Innocence* was the first book about black theology written by a person from South Africa. In his book, Boesak presupposed the general action of God in history. However, God had also acted specifically in the history of Israel and through Jesus Christ. Boesak laid a theological foundation for black theology on these theological topics in the first main chapter of *Farewell to Innocence* (Boesak 1977:9–45), which was titled “The Coming of the Black Messiah: On Theology”. The main ethical question that Boesak was concerned about within this chapter was the question of where theology must take action to lead the unjust society into a just society. This section included Boesak's treatment of biblical material.

Boesak was not alone with ethics and Christology in South Africa. Simon Maimela reflected on the work of Christ. Since Gustaf Aulén, there had been three major concepts of atonement – the ransom theory, the satisfaction theory, and the subjective theory. Liberation theology found all three concepts inadequate in a world with the tyranny of racism, class, sex, poverty, and ignorance (Maimela 1982:49). The three theories reduce sin to metaphysical and individual realities. Slavery, poverty, ignorance, disease, injustice, and oppression are in the world, with human suffering as a consequence. Liberation theology finds “these conceptions of atonement grossly inadequate to express the full and comprehensive dimension of what life and death of Christ on the cross entail” (Maimela 1982:50). The question was what the correct Christian understanding of sin is. Liberation theology focused on the collective problem here and now. It included poverty, injustice, oppression, hatred, racism, denial of freedom, and other forms of sociopolitical problems that put a person at odds with his fellow human beings. Maimela saw a connection between Christology and ethics just like Boesak: “In other words, the atoning work of Christ ushers in a totally new state of existence in which all forms of human deprivation, degradation and misery are abolished” (Maimela 1982:52).

Liberation theology wanted to see the atoning work of Christ as involvement in the human struggle for freedom in concrete historical terms. Maimela talked about God's victory over evil. He wrote, “Christians can start to embody and institutionalize this victory here and now in anticipation of the ultimate victory that comes with Christ's second coming” (Maimela 1982:53).

### **Black liberation**

Boesak's black liberation ethics were based on the experiences of black people in South Africa. Black people were characterised by suffering and oppression (Boesak 1977:9). Boesak connected the black experience with a certain belief, and through that, he developed black ethics. Faith was directed to the gospel of Jesus Christ, where both content and framework were deliverance. Boesak moved between these two points. The connection between the points was a definite belief: “It is believed that in Jesus Christ the total liberation of all people has to come” (Boesak 1977:10). Faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ was important for the liberation struggle. Boesak rejected the theology characterised as the white man's religion and slave religion. This theology interpreted the gospel in such a way that it legitimised oppression. Such views once discouraged blacks, but in recent years the consciousness of black Christians has been strengthened.

The gospel should be liberated. Therefore, a new way of doing theology should be established, and a new way of believing that no longer would ignore what had been

overlooked, namely the situation of the black people. In interpreting the gospel, the authentic perspective was important, which was the liberation of the poor. Boesak connected the black experience with the concept of God. Liberation, justice, freedom, humanity, love, and fellowship, rather than oppression, injustice, slavery, and submission characterised the God of the Bible (Boesak 1977:10–11).

Black theology did not want to be exclusive, and therefore it would not establish a new form of apartheid in which white people were excluded. The white people had a special need to be liberated (Boesak 1977:16). Boesak viewed the possibility of liberation more positively than Cone. Boesak agreed with Cone that the core of the gospel of Jesus Christ was liberation, but he could not follow Cone when he defined blackness as something inseparably linked to oppression and liberation (Boesak 1977:17).

The gospel of Jesus Christ should be the judge of all reflection and action (Boesak 1977:12), and theology should be participation in the acts of the liberation of Yahweh revealed in Jesus Messiah (Boesak 1977:13). Black theology must take hold and establish a new area of application, and as such, it is situational and contextual (Boesak 1977:13). Black theology must be theology for “blackness” (Boesak 1977:15).

Cone identified blackness and oppression because blackness symbolised oppression in any society. Boesak saw a difference because not only black people were affected by the problem but also white people, even if they did not realise it. Boesak emphasises that black people should be liberated from their oppression. White people should also be liberated from their role as oppressors, even if they do not want to liberate themselves (Boesak 1977:16).

Boesak mentioned Steve Biko in two places in his dissertation (Boesak 1977: 163,171). Boesak discussed Black Consciousness (Boesak 1977:75–65,138–142). He would develop it into South African Black Power and Black Theology.

Steve Biko was a co-founder of SASO in 1968, and in 1969, he was elected president of the organisation. Until his death in 1977, he was the inspirer and advocate of the Black Consciousness movement. Steve Biko said that being black was “not a matter of pigmentation – being black is a reflection of a mental attitude” (Biko 1978:48). Participation in Black Consciousness is to go on the road towards emancipation. Liberation is of paramount importance in Black Consciousness against the major force of White Racism. Steve Biko’s point of view was that in a colourless and non-exploitative egalitarian society, the Black Consciousness approach would not be relevant. Apartheid was introduced in South Africa for economic reasons, so the white could enjoy privileges at the expense of blacks (Biko 1973:36).

### **Use of the Bible**

Boesak developed his theological view of liberation based on biblical core points. The name of God, Yahweh, was revealed to Moses and Israel. Yahweh’s name had to be known in all future generations for the acts of liberation (Ex 3:15). God had heard the cry of the oppressed in suffering and would liberate them (Ex 3:7–8). Exodus, the liberation, was the liberation par excellence. The liberation was part of the confession of Israel (Ex 15:1–21). The theme of liberation permeates the Old Testament from Gen 15:14 to Dan 9:15. Exodus was not a myth but an event that showed that God was for justice, righteousness, and love. The Messiah was the promised one, and he proclaimed

his task, cf. Luke 4 (Boesak 1977:20). However, according to Boesak, Western theology had been spiritualised so that the conditions that Jesus mentioned in Luke 4:18–21 were not taken seriously. Furthermore, Western theology had legitimised unjust and oppressive structures and relationships. Jesus’ programmatic proclamation of the year of grace was a reference to the year of the Sabbath and the year of Jubilee, cf. Lev 25:55 (Boesak 1977:23). Boesak mentions many places in the Old Testament where references were made to Sabbath and Jubilee years (Isa 52:7, 58, 61:1, Ps 107:20). Slaves were set free (Jer 34), the property was returned to its original owner (Ezek 46) and the people of Israel returned from exile (Isa 61). Boesak substantiated this aspect with the word from Lev 25:10 “to all the inhabitants of the earth” (Lev 25:10). Other Bible translations said that there was liberation “through the land to all its inhabitants” (ESV 2010). This liberation was behind Jesus’ programmatic speech (Luke 4). Boesak believed this was more dynamic than static and expected changes.

Boesak believed that in Jesus, the universality of God’s deliverance was directed not only to Israel but to all peoples (cf. Titus 2:11). Jesus, the Messiah, was the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham, which meant that all nations on earth would be blessed (Boesak 1977:24–25). Boesak rejected that it should merely be understood spiritually. It was the socially oppressed who suffered from injustice and who were harassed by others who were promised a new kingdom through the Sabbath and Jubilee years. This is what black theology calls “the wholeness of life” and “total liberation” (Boesak 1977:26).

The consequence of this liberation theology is ethics where all human beings are held equal and have the same dignity.

In the post-apartheid era, Boesak developed his Exodus motif. In his more recent works, he focuses on not only racism, but broadened his perspective. In 2012, he wrote articles in the book *Radical Reconciliation*. Boesak has a penchant for biblical figures facing injustice in the world. One of these is Rizpah, one of Saul’s widows. Saul’s commander Abner abused her (2 Sam 3:6–8). Later, in spite of her grief, with courageous patient actions, she showed the humanity that made King David provide a dignified burial for king Saul and his descendants (2 Sam 21:7–14) (Boesak 2012a: 25–39).

Boesak also sees the tax collector Zacchaeus as a model for real reconciliation and justice. After the Day of salvation came to him, he would pay back four times what he had stolen (Lk 19:8). (Boesak 2012b:68).

In 2019, Boesak published the book *Children of the Waters of Meribah*. He wrote this book long after apartheid. Boesak seeks to develop his theology of liberation for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Boesak’s thinking is affected by his indignation at the injustice of the world. He does not see 1994 as the solution to South Africa’s problems, because more than 50% of the population continue to live in poverty (Boesak 2019:xvi). Boesak has eyes for the marginalised, such as Moses’ sister Miriam, the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21–28) and the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–41). Boesak believes that the intuition for the oppressed is opposite of what the slave traders, the white missionaries and the representatives of the empires had said. The oppressed had to question the way in which the whites had applied the biblical message (Boesak 2019:19). For Boesak, this meant that the Eurocentric peoples had made the biblical message abstract. The liberation theology that Boesak developed was contextual. In Boesak’s view, this meant that it was relevant and present.

Boesak has not developed more academic reflections on contextualisation. From the

1970s to the time after 2000, there was a clear shift from the black perspective to a broader perspective where all types of oppressed people need liberation.

### **The Black Messiah**

Blackness was associated with a level of inferiority of blacks in South Africa during apartheid. Boesak was looking for points of connection for the fight for black humanity. As early as 1894, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner stated; “God is Negro” (Boesak 1977:39). This statement brought Boesak to the view that black theology was a black conception of Jesus Christ. Boesak was against the distinction between the historical Jesus and the Jesus who is present today. Jesus was not only divine but also the incarnation of Yahweh, and he who had seen the works of Jesus had seen the works of God, wrote Boesak (1977:41) regarding John 14:9.

Boesak rejected the white Jesus. The white people preached to the white and demanded the submission and obedience of black people. Black people had “to confess Jesus Christ as the Black Messiah”, writes Boesak (1977:42) with inspiration from Cone. Boesak held that Cleage was the first to use the term Black Messiah, and he believed that Jesus was literally black. Boesak objected that this view was irrelevant. The Black Messiah was an expression of the concrete continued presence of Jesus Christ today. For black theology, the black Messiah symbolised Jesus Christ as a sign of suffering, misery, and struggle in a powerful way transformed by his resurrection. The black people saw through the Messiah that God sided with the poor. He identified with those in need (Boesak 1977:42–43). Boesak saw the Black Messiah as a pedagogical means of mutual identification between Jesus Christ and oppressed black people. God identified with the poor, and the black people who were disadvantaged could identify the works of God in the works of the black Messiah.

In 1984, Boesak again affirmed that Jesus Christ was the embodiment of true divinity and true humanity. In him, God was in the world of human beings in a clear and distinct form. He who saw him in action saw his father in action, Boesak stated, cf. John 14:9. Was the Jesus who showed true love and justice identical with the Jesus that the white slave traders believed in while bringing slaves from Africa and transporting many to their deaths before the survivors reached the slave owners in North America? No, Boesak replied and agreed, reiterating his support for Cone’s call to confess Jesus Christ as the Black Messiah (Boesak 1984a:11).

Boesak rhetorically asked whether Jesus practiced “Christian sadism”. No, Jesus put an end to the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, for example, when they ate widows out of their homes. Instead, he set forth the heavy conditions of the law such as justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23), and he required people to move on and stop sinning (John 8:11). For black theology, Jesus as the Black Messiah became the irrevocable guarantee of true humanity (Boesak 1985:12–15). Once he has identified with the weak, the weak can identify with him.

### **Christology from the side?**

The Black Messiah was important in Boesak’s dissertation but did not play any role in his subsequent work until 2011. Then the Black Messiah was mentioned in a reflection on the historical Jesus (Boesak 2011). Boesak read Andries Van Aarde’s book about the historical Jesus, *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus as Child of God*, that contributed to the

discussion of the historical Jesus. When Joseph was not the father of Jesus, then Jesus was in a sense fatherless. In Jesus' own days, being fatherless was stigmatising in Jewish, Greek, and Roman contexts. There had probably been a defamatory campaign by Jesus' detractors that focused on alleged illegitimacy (Boesak 2011:1), from which sprang supporters' thoughts of the virgin birth, the life and ministry of Jesus, and the development of the dogma of Jesus' two natures as God and man. All of this underscored that Jesus was, in a sense, subversive to earthly rulers. According to Boesak (2011:2), Van Aarde was critical of a split of the historical Jesus and the Jesus of faith.

Boesak was enthusiastic about Van Aarde's analysis. He had written in *The Tenderness of Conscience* that the incarnation was illustrated by the revelation of God in Jesus from the Galilee of the Gentiles. He was the One who emptied himself (cf. Phil 2:5–11). Boesak (2011:8) said that it was to this fatherless man that God declared "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). That statement was neither metaphorical nor iconic, but rather Christological, Boesak (2011:8) wrote, referring to what both Cone and he himself had written before.

The overall problem that Van Aarde and Boesak raised was that after Constantine the Great, a Christology had been established from above. In response, modern Western theology had later established a Christology from below. Van Aarde's alternative was a Christology from the side. Jesus grew up in the Galilee of the Gentiles, a fact that was not well liked among the elite either in Jerusalem or in Rome. Rumors that Joseph was not his father had been widespread. Jesus was unmarried and thus not reputable. No serious Jew would marry his daughter to such a man. Many insults were used against him, e.g., by the Samaritans. None of the leading Pharisees, Herodians, high priests, and scribes liked him when he criticised the abuse of power at the temple institution in Jerusalem. However, he had a strong faith in God and a love for the weak, fatherless, widows, outcasts, oppressed, poor, sick, and suffering who were victims of the power structures. He broke with political correctness when he called a strong-believing woman Abraham's daughter (Luke 13:10–17).

Was it Christology from the side? Van Aarde believed that Christology from above was based on "post-Easter" Bible texts that focused on the resurrection, while Christology from below was based on "pre-Easter" Bible texts that emphasised Jesus' life and preaching. Christology from the side is about how Jesus is understood in the present (Van Aarde 2001:11–12). It was still Christology from below, yet in a broader variant. The question is whether it is an incarnation Christology or an adoption Christology. Typically, Christology from below was an adoption Christology, in which the human Jesus became the Son of God either at baptism or resurrection (Bird 2017). Incarnation Christology was about the eternal Son of God who became man by taking on human flesh (John 1, Phil 2). Boesak speaks several times about the incarnation in his discussion of Van Aarde's book (Boesak 2011), so Boesak's enthusiasm for Van Aarde's book was tense.

In this discussion of earlier and later Christology, it would pose false alternatives to claim that adoption Christology comes from the New Testament and incarnation Christology comes from the Old Church confessions. The apostle John emphasised that the Word became flesh (John 1) and in his letters, he underscored that true Christology is the incarnation Christology (1 John 1:1, 1 John 4:2 and 2 John 1:7). John wrote his writings long before Constantine the Great and the ancient Christian creeds. Paul wrote

about Christ, “for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col 1:19). There is strong evidence of incarnation Christology in the New Testament.

### **Roberts’ contribution to the discussion**

A relevant contribution to the discussion of the Black Messiah came in 1971 from James Deotis Roberts. He knew Cleage’s Black Messiah and acknowledged the matter, but distanced himself from Cleage’s formulation of theology. Jesus Christ, like the Black Messiah, was both Liberator and Reconciler. Roberts (1971:69) emphasised both and stated, “liberation must never overshadow reconciliation”. Note that Roberts distinguishes between liberation and salvation (Chimhanda 2010:435).

Roberts needed to explain his position about the Black Messiah. Roberts understood why Black Muslims called white people devils. He also understood that Black Nationalism would limit the love to only reaching out to black people. Both were wrong (Roberts 1971:117). At the overall level, there was no difference between messianic and Christological. Roberts rejected a literal view of the Black Messiah. Blackness was symbolic but important for black people. Roberts had studied Hinduism, Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Therefore, it was important to establish that Christians believed in one incarnation of God in Christ. It was only there that light, life, and truth were revealed from God (Roberts 1971:134). All people on the planet needed to meet Christ present in their ethnic group and cultural form. The Black Messiah was therefore the universal word that became flesh. Roberts distinguished between the universal and the particular. The universal Christ was for all people and as such was colourless. The universal Christ had to reconcile black people with all other people. On the other hand, the particular Black Messiah/Christ had to liberate black people through participation in the experiences of black people (Roberts 1971:139–140).

Roberts knew Western thinking – the philosophers Camus, Sartre, and Heidegger, and theologians Pascal, Kierkegaard, Brunner, Barth and Bultmann. To be coherent in his theology for black people, Roberts (1971:142–143) agreed with Donald Baillie’s main view that God was in Christ, namely, “that the Jesus of history is the Christ of faith”. Roberts showed how in each of Christ’s three offices – as prophet, priest, and king – Christ makes both something universal for all and something particular for the oppressed.

Despite the formal similarities between Cleage’s and Boesak’s ideas about the Black Messiah, the content of Boesak’s view of the Black Messiah was much closer to Roberts’ view. Roberts presented his view in the field of tension between particularity and universality, writing that both topics have their place in the context of the Christian faith. The Black Messiah was not literally black but was an identifying figure for black people in their world of experience in the black church and the black community. The choice was not between the white middle-class Christ or Cleage’s Black Messiah. Roberts was in favor of a particular/contextual black Messiah, but not in favor of Black Christology and black dogma. According to Roberts, there is a universal colorless Christ, and there are symbolic, existential visualising perceptions of him that are red, yellow, brown, black, and white. The universal Christ is particularised in the Black Messiah. The Black Messiah set black people free, and the universal Christ reconciles black people with the rest of the world (Roberts 1971:130–139).

Llewelyn MacMaster points out that Boesak agreed with Roberts that reconciliation should happen between equals and that liberation and reconciliation were not easy or cheap. Faith and love should not be passive but obedient to confront racism, hatred, and all forms of oppression (MacMaster 2016:229). The precondition was that God had reconciled us to Himself in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:18) and given the ministry of reconciliation to the believers.

### **Mofokeng's Black Christology**

Takatso Mofokeng made a serious contribution to black Christology with his dissertation in 1983. Mofokeng's starting point was that faith in Jesus Christ would give black people power in the struggle for liberation (Mofokeng 1983:x). Jesus Christ was the prototype from whom black people could learn during suffering and death. Victims could identify with Jesus' suffering and become his followers, but Mofokeng wondered how the victims of oppression and exploitation could reflect on the history of Jesus of Nazareth and especially his resurrection (Mofokeng 1983:29).

Mofokeng's prerequisite for Christology was the total testimony in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Jesus represented the end of the old and the beginning of the new. Mofokeng (1983:31) means that "The fact that the acting subject of the history of liberation is God-man brings us within the sphere of dogmatic formulations of Chalcedon" (Mofokeng 1983:31). The formulations in Chalcedon contained Christological forms but do not contain the full truth (Mofokeng 1983:101).

The Christological formulations of the Nicene Creed and Chalcedon were indeed the attempts of the ancient Church Fathers to profess Jesus Christ in concrete conflict situations. It is not historically accurate to expect the Christological formulas to solve every problem because the creeds were written to answer concrete questions that had been raised.

Mofokeng agreed with Chalcedon's formulations of Jesus Christ but emphasised that it is "the history of Jesus" that is the hermeneutical key to understanding Chalcedon's formulations (Mofokeng 1983:71–72); if Jesus had not been born and had not died, there would be no Christology. The incarnation, where God became man, was God's action for the fallen and suffering man. Black Christology began in "the stable and the manger in Bethlehem" (Mofokeng 1983:243). There the Son of God was born as a Jew, and there the Old Testament and the New Testament were connected. Jesus was not only a Jew, but he came from Galilee of the Gentiles in a particular time and place. In his life, it turned out that he was in opposition to the hierarchy of the Pharisees, scribes, lawyers, Levites, and priests. He arose, never to die again (Mofokeng 1983:235).

In his reflections on black Christology end ethics, Mofokeng wanted to reach a new black humanity, and he relied on Boesak, who had written that man was created by God to create his own identity and community (Mofokeng 1983:228). Black people should not have lower value or dignity than white people. Black people needed to be liberated so that they could see themselves as equals with everyone else. God's intention in history was the "creation of a new man" (Mofokeng 1983:49). Mofokeng agreed with Boesak that blacks must have a new self-identity and a new community (Mofokeng 1983:229, 239). The new humanity that black people seek through Jesus Christ is the dignity and self-respect that God creates so that they are equal to other people.

Classical Christology declared that true humanity was in Christ. This statement has a universal significance. The consequence is that everybody has the same dignity and everybody is equal as a human being. God is present in this history, which means that the liberation and humanisation of the poor and oppressed are grounded in the history of Jesus (Mofokeng 1983:243, Forrest 1987:173). The poor and oppressed have to go back to the Bible for identification with the story of Jesus. This study of the Bible gives a historical view of Jesus as a true man (Mofokeng 1983:244; Forrest 1987:175).

## Discussion

For Boesak's liberation theology, the Exodus was the decisive biblical event. In the Exodus, Israel was liberated from slavery in Egypt. Nevertheless, it did not lead to a permanent condition. The people lived in apostasy from God, idolatry, and moral dissolution during forty years of desert wandering and after their conquering into the Promised Land. They adapted to the lives of the surrounding peoples. Later they became slaves and were in captivity for seventy years in Babylon. Only a remnant of Israel followed God's way. Later, the Romans occupied Israel, and Jesus did not liberate the people of Israel economically, socially, and politically. The defeat of Qumran in the year 68 AD, the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 AD, and the fall of Masada in the year 73 AD are historical signs of the political and national catastrophe.

Boesak (1977:41–45, 1984:21) wrote that God walked with his people. He who has seen the Son has seen the Father (John 14:9). Here is a faint connection between Israel's Exodus from Egypt and South Africa during and after apartheid. From the history of Israel, it is not possible to deduce that permanent economic, social, and political freedom came through Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah of Israel. Theo Witvliet does not believe that the confession of Jesus Christ as Black Christ or the Black Messiah as present in his people can be justified, as liberation theologians usually do. Rather, the perspective is pneumatological, as the Holy Spirit was present when the Spirit came upon Jesus in Nazareth, when he gave his program speech, cf. Luke 4:16–21 (Witvliet 1997:224). This is a critical point because Boesak rejected spiritualisation.

It may be relevant to consider whether John Howard Yoder's chapter "The Possibility of a Messianic Ethic" in *The Politics of Jesus* could bring new aspects to the discussion of the ethics of the Black Messiah. Yoder was very critical of the influence of Western philosophy on theology. Alan Storkey continued the discussion, for example, in the book *Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers* from 2005.

The black ethics derived from the Black Messiah said "no" to slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. Racism and racial oppression should be eliminated, and people should treat one another equally. It said "no" to poverty based on oppression. Poverty can never be legitimised, but there is a permanent problem with poverty. In the text about the sabbatical year, it is clear: "For there will never cease to be poor in the land" (Deut 15:11). Jesus of Nazareth said, "For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me" (Matt 26:11). Although the problem of poverty is impossible to solve, efforts must be made to improve the situation of the poor.

When Cone and Boesak said that the concept of homoousia in Chalcedon did not solve the black problem, it was a rhetorical problem. But where in Nicea and Chalcedon is there talk of a white Christ? No place! Nicea confessed that Jesus Christ was consubstantial with the Father. Chalcedon said "that we should confess that our Lord

Jesus Christ is one and the same Son, the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the same of a rational soul and body, consubstantial with the Father in Godhead, and the same consubstantial with us in manhood, like us in all things except sin” (Kelly 1993:339). This means that Jesus Christ is consubstantial with every human being in the world except in sin. This consubstantiality with the sinless Jesus Christ leaves no place for oppression, slavery, apartheid, racism, and poverty based on oppression which spring from sin.

Neither Nicea nor Chalcedon speak of a white God or a white Christ. The White Christ is a later contextual interpretation. Some have sought to universalise the white Christ. It is a mistake to universalise a skin colour. This mistake must not be made again. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss Christology again.

Cleage was aware of a difficulty. If God created man in his image, what color was it? Most people think of God as white, Cleage believed. He wrote: “There are black men, there are yellow men, there are red men, and there are a few, a mighty few, white men in the world. If God created man in His image, then God must be some combination of this black, red, yellow, and white. In no other way, God could have created man in his own image” (Cleage 1969:42). Cleage saw the problem but could not solve it. For Cleage, it was clear that God and the Messiah, with a combination of colours, were non-white. That was the critical point. The debate was simplified into two opposites: white versus non-white. Cleage focused unilaterally on race and omitted other matters concerning the human (Clark 2016:12).

Kameron Carter made an in-depth study of Cone’s Christology that showed that Cone was very dependent on Barth and Tillich. For his part, Cone would not separate Jesus of history and Christ of faith. Thus, Cone rejected many heresies from the Old Church, namely Docetism, Apollinarism, Nestorianism, and Eutycianism, all of which called into question humanity (Carter 2008:169). With black theology, Cone wanted to change the status of black people from “it” to “them”. And that was exactly what led to him being criticised for relating to the kind of blackness created by whites (Carter 2008:190). Cone’s dependence on Tillich led to a critique of his view of “ontological blackness” (Carter 2008:182). Carter (2008:192), for his part, believed that YHWH’s people are “mulatto people”, and therefore “Jesus himself as the Israel of God is Mulatto”. The critical question is whether mulatto is a new universalisation of skin colour.

Carter did not believe that Jesus’ Jewishness is against non-Jewishness (Carter 2008:159). Carter speaks of “the Jewish, non-racial flesh of Jesus” (Carter 2008:192). He tried to de-dramatise the case. Nevertheless, it seems problematic to claim that when Jesus was not a racist, it was because he was a Jew. Another solution must be found to the problem.

### **Universal and contextual Christology**

Boesak was primarily interested in the ethics derived from the Black Messiah. He referred to the ancient church confessions that maintain that Jesus Christ is true God and true man. It is possible to distinguish between presupposed Christology and contextual Christology (Daneel 1984:58). The presupposed Christology said that Jesus Christ is true God and true man. The universal and constant element is that he is a human being, a human being without sin. He was “consubstantial with us in manhood, like us in all things except sin” (Kelly 1993:339). The consubstantiality applies to all, black people,

brown people, red people, yellow people, white people, mulatto people. This is the actual meaning of homoousia, the consubstantiality of Jesus Christ with all human beings.

Cone is incorrect when he writes that “Jesus’ Jewishness therefore was essential to his person. He was not a “universal” man but a particular Jew who came to fulfill God’s will to liberate the oppressed” (Cone 1975:119). His criticism of the Christology of Chalcedon is unfair but shows that he did not understand it. Jesus Christ is consubstantial with God in divinity and consubstantial with every human being in humanity without sin.

The contextual Christology said that Jesus’ humanity has a different layer. Jesus was specifically a Jew, and being a Jew is not universal but contextual. If all people are to be able to identify with Jesus Christ as their Messiah, then this contextual element can be decontextualised and recontextualised (Hesselgrave & Rommen 1989). The context of his origin was Jewish, but the contexts of use are many around the globe. The same principle is applied by Paul when he acts as a Jew for Jews and as a Greek for Greeks (1 Cor 9:20). In the Jewish context of origin, Jesus the Messiah was light brown, but in different contexts of application, he can be perceived differently. Jesus can be black for the black people, brown for the brown people, red for the red people, yellow for the yellow people, and white for the white people, and mulatto for mulattoes. That is how he can be the Messiah for all people.

As true God, Jesus Christ is universal. He is consubstantial with God The Father in divinity and consubstantial with human beings in humanity without sin. As a true human being, he is universal, so no human being, regardless of time, place, and context, is outside the intention of his love (Matt 28:18–20).

The criticism of the concept of homoousia in Chalcedon from Cone (1975:14) and Boesak (2011:5) did not hit the target. After Constantine the Great, a relevant contextualisation in Northwestern Europe was to talk about the White Christ. Later it was a failure to try to universalise the White Christ. The criticism of Cone and Boesak hit on this failure.

Boesak would not separate the historical Jesus from his presence today (Boesak 1977:411). The following discussion after Boesak said the same. Jesus of history is the Christ of faith (Deotis Roberts 1971:142–143) and it is “the history of Jesus” that is the hermeneutical key to understanding Chalcedon’s formulations (Mofokeng 1983:71–72). In the New Testament incarnation, Christology has a strong place.

Boesak wanted a Black Messiah as the figure of identification. He was not literally black as an issue of pigmentation. Boesak’s choice of “Black Messiah” as a term is an example of Christology from below. Jesus was a Jew with a “light brown” pigmentation. It belongs to Christology from below. But Boesak also emphasises that Jesus is true God and true human.

Tinyiko Maluleke distinguished in the Christology between Jesus of Nazareth, who walked on the streets of Israel, and Christ, who is at the right hand of God (Maluleke 1994). At the right-hand side of God, Christ is universal God and universal man, but in the concrete earthly appearance on the streets of Israel, he was concrete and contextual.

Maluleke mentioned sixteen titles for Jesus in the West and eight titles for Jesus in Africa, including “The Black Messiah”. Maluleke argued that Africa must be taken seriously as a valid and creative “host” of Christ, and that talk about Christ in Africa

should include both white Africans and black Africans. Roberts also has a point in talking about the colourless Christ and the black Messiah.

The ancient ecclesiastical Christology is race-neutral. Nicea says that the Son of God Jesus Christ is “Light of Light”. When his seemingly colourless light is refracted through a prism, all the individual colours emerge. The same thing happens in a rainbow. Presupposed Christology says that Jesus is the universal God and that he is the universal human being. He contains all colours, and he can meet people wherever they are in their needs.

## Conclusion

The ethics of the Black Messiah said no to slavery, colonialism, apartheid, and other forms of racism. It said no to poverty based on oppression. Everybody is equal, both oppressed and oppressor. Both need to be liberated. Everybody in this world must see Jesus Christ as the incarnated Son of God as true God and true human. Everybody is allowed to see him in their context, black people as The Black Messiah, brown people as The Brown Messiah, red people as The Red Messiah, yellow people as The Yellow Messiah, white people as The White Messiah, the mulatto people as The Mulatto Messiah.

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