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# Reconfiguring Ignacio Ellacuría's Symbolic Conception of "the Crucified People": Jesus, the Suffering Servant, and Abel

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## Abstract

This article offers an appreciative but critical appraisal of Ignacio Ellacuría's concept of "the crucified people," which identifies the oppressed peoples of history with both Jesus and the Suffering Servant. In formulating his concept, Ellacuría does not sufficiently delineate the potential volitional differences between Jesus, the Servant, and the crucified peoples of history. As a result, the symbol of the crucified people can present potentially distorted understandings of the relationship between suffering and redemption, distortions that Ellacuría himself would disavow. After surfacing these concerns, I argue that broadening the symbolic framework of the symbol of the crucified people to include not only Jesus and the Servant but also the figure of Abel can protect against these potential distortions.

## Keywords

Abel, civilization of wealth, crucified people, Ignacio Ellacuría, historical soteriology, liberation theology, Jon Sobrino, soteriology, Suffering Servant

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## Introduction

Ignacio Ellacuría's conceptualization of the "crucified people" stands at the heart of his theology of salvation.[1] This term refers to a perennial reality: "the existence of a vast portion of humankind . . . literally and historically crucified by natural oppressions and especially by historical and personal oppression."[2] For Ellacuría, the crucified people comprise the majority of the world's population. They are those human beings who are unjustly subjected to violence and oppression resulting from the structures and systems that embody sinful human choices. The historical presence of the crucified people, then, discloses the sin of the world to those who have eyes to see. Indeed, Ellacuría finds that the crucified people constitute the principal and perennial historical "sign" through which communities of faith and goodwill must learn to "read the times" in order to respond appropriately to the demands of the Gospel.[3]

1. Ellacuría, a twentieth-century Spanish Jesuit philosopher, lived and ministered in El Salvador, notably serving as president of the Universidad Centroamericano. A prophetic critic of the repressive Salvadoran government, Ellacuría was assassinated on November 16, 1989—along with Julia Elba Ramos, Celina Maricet Ramos, Ignacio Martín-Baró, Segundo Montes, Amando López Quintana, Joaquín López y López, and Juan Ramón Moreno Pardo—by a Salvadoran military death squad, in the midst of the country's civil war. For an introduction to Ellacuría's life, ministry, and thought, see Jon Sobrino, "Ignacio Ellacuría, the Human Being and the Christian: 'Taking the Crucified People Down from the Cross,'" in *Love That Produces Hope: The Thought of Ignacio Ellacuría*, ed. Kevin F. Burke and Robert Lasalle-Klein (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 1–67. For helpful analyses of Ellacuría's theology of salvation and his broader thought, see Michael E. Lee, *Bearing the Weight of Salvation: The Soteriology of Ignacio Ellacuría* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2009); Burke and Lassalle-Klein, *Love That Produces Hope*; J. Matthew Ashley, Kevin F. Burke, and Rodolfo Cardenal, eds., *A Grammar of Justice: The Legacy of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014); Kevin F. Burke, *The Ground beneath the Cross: The Theology of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000); and Robert Lassalle-Klein, *Blood and Ink: Ignacio Ellacuría, Jon Sobrino, and the Jesuit Martyrs of the University of Central America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014).
2. Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Crucified People: An Essay in Historical Soteriology," in *Ignacio Ellacuría: Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation*, ed. Michael E. Lee (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 196.
3. See Ignacio Ellacuría, "Discernir 'el signo' de los tíempos," *Diakonia* 17 (1981): 57–59 at 58. As Robert Lasalle-Klein observes, Ellacuría draws upon Karl Rahner's theology of symbol when articulating his own theology of sign. The latter responds directly to the call in *Gaudium et Spes* to scrutinize "the signs of the times . . . interpreting them in the light of the Gospel"; *Gaudium et Spes* (December 2, 1965), §4, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. In so doing, Ellacuría's theology of signs emphasizes the concrete historical expression of that which is signified. See Lasalle-Klein, "Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People: The Contextual Christology of Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría," *Theological Studies* 70, no. 2 (May 2009): 347–76 at 353–56, https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390907000207. Ellacuría himself articulates his theology of sign most fully in Ellacuría, *Freedom Made Flesh: The Mission of Christ and His Church*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976).

While, for Ellacuría, the term "crucified people" signifies the concrete presence of oppressed persons in the world, the term also functions symbolically. Most immediately, the term emblematically unites the oppressed peoples of history with the person of Jesus Christ—"the crucified" (Mk 16:6 NAB, used throughout).[4] These peoples, like Jesus, unjustly bear the weight of the world's sinfulness. Indeed, it is precisely with respect to this shared suffering that Ellacuría wishes to ground his symbolic identification. Jesus's passion and death place him in unity with oppressed humankind, and vice versa.[5] Ellacuría underscores the identification between Jesus and the crucified peoples by connecting the latter to the figure of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah. Through their suffering, the crucified people comprise a modern-day Servant.[6] Thus, in considering the significance of the crucified peoples of history, Ellacuría constructs a symbolic matrix in which the figures of Jesus, the Servant, and the crucified peoples mutually illuminate each other.

In this article, I argue that the symbolic links Ellacuría establishes among Jesus, the Servant, and the crucified peoples of history are both generative and problematic for the formation of the Christian imagination. With regard to the problematic aspects, my particular concern focuses on the way Ellacuría's formulation of the symbol of the crucified people tends to suppress the potential volitional differences between the person of Jesus and the oppressed peoples of history. Whereas Jesus willingly takes up the yoke of the cross, the willingness of the crucified people to do so is not universalizable. Ellacuría's insufficient attentiveness to this difference within his formulation of this symbol creates difficulties for the soteriology that characterizes his broader theological project. These difficulties center on notions of redemptive suffering, concerns that Ellacuría's appeal to the figure of the Servant, as I demonstrate below, further exacerbate.

In light of the difficulties that surface with respect to Ellacuría's formulation of the symbol of the crucified people, I argue that it is possible to retrieve this symbol in a constructive way by incorporating the figure of Abel into the symbolic framework that Ellacuría establishes. Doing so functions to destabilize the existing and tightly wrought connection between suffering and salvation, allowing the reformulated symbol to reflect the horrors and ambiguities of historical suffering more adequately than it currently does within Ellacuría's schema. This reformulation of the symbol, then, can serve the mystagogical task of forming the Christian imagination in a manner that is

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For Rahner's theology of the symbol, see "The Theology of the Symbol," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, trans. K. Smyth (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 221–52.

4. The word symbol derives from the Greek *sumbolon*, meaning "to throw together." Ellacuría's framing of the oppressed peoples of the world as "crucified peoples" immediately, if implicitly, connects the oppressed peoples of history with Jesus Christ.
5. Ellacuría, "Crucified People," 196–97.
6. Along these lines, Ellacuría writes that the corporate figure of the "crucified people is the historical continuation of the servant of Yahweh, who continues to take the sin of the world away from the human person, from whom the powers of that world continue to strip everything, snatching even life, especially life" (translation is mine). See Ellacuría, "Discernir 'El Signo' de los Tiempos," 58.

better able to reflect upon the fraught and ambiguous relationship between suffering and redemption.[7]

## Examining Ellacuría's Conception of the Crucified People

Expanding upon his initial description of the crucified people of history, Ellacuría maintains that this people comprise "that collective body that, being the majority of humanity, owes its situation of crucifixion to a social order organized and maintained by a minority that exercises its dominion through a series of factors, which, taken together and given their concrete impact within history, must be regarded as sin."[8] With this understanding in mind, he reflects upon the historical sign of the crucified people from a particular christological angle, "one that places in unity the figure of Jesus with that of oppressed humankind: his passion and death."[9] Specifically, Ellacuría is intent on establishing a unifying connection between the passion of Jesus and the suffering of the crucified people of history to demonstrate that "historically oppressed people serve as the continuation, par excellence, of the saving work of Jesus" in the world.[10]

The line of continuity that Ellacuría delineates between Jesus and the crucified people of history is in many ways straightforward. The crucified peoples, like Jesus, bear the sin of the world. They suffer multiple forms of oppression and experience degradation and marginalization because of the unjust ways the powers of the world have structured historical reality. Thus, like Jesus, the crucified peoples appear as innocent victims insofar as their experiences of oppression are rooted not in their own sinfulness but in the sinfulness of their crucifiers. Furthermore, as innocent victims, the crucified peoples *reveal* the sin of the world to the world. Here, the disclosure of sin is accompanied by the continuation of God's offer of salvation to the world. "In its very existence the crucified people is already judge," writes Ellacuría, "and this judgment is salvation, insofar as it unveils the sin of the world by standing up to it; insofar as it makes possible redoing what has been done badly; insofar as it proposes a new demand as the unavoidable route for reaching salvation."[11]

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7. The mystagogical dimension of Ellacuría's delineation of the crucified peoples coheres well with his own formation as a Jesuit priest. On this point see, J. Matthew Ashley, "Ignacio Ellacuría and the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola," *Theological Studies* 61, no. 1 (February 2000): 16–39, https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390006100102; and J. Matthew Ashley, "A Contemplative under the Standard of Christ: Ignacio Ellacuría's Interpretation of Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*," *Spiritus* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 192–204. With regard to the specific function of the symbol of the crucified people within Ellacuría's thought, it is telling that he alludes to the crucified peoples of history as "the standard bearers" of Christ, a clear reference to the meditation on the "two standards" in the *Spiritual Exercises*. See Ellacuría, "Crucified People," 204.
8. Ellacuría, "Crucified People," 208.
9. Ellacuría, "Crucified People," 196–97.
10. Ellacuría, "Crucified People," 196.
11. Ellacuría, "Crucified People," 223.

In "standing up" to the crucifying forces of historical reality, the crucified people not only express a praxis that is consonant with Jesus's salvific praxis of the reign of God—which itself is characterized in a fundamental manner by the preferential option for the poor—they also reveal the patterns of sin that the powers of the world would cover up.[12] Accordingly, the historical presence of the crucified people creates the condition for the possibility of conversion on the part of those who lived in blind comfort amidst the sinful violence of historical reality. Hence, the crucified people, who may or may not identify with the visible church, offer a sign of salvation to communities of faith who seek to follow Jesus. For Ellacuría, then, "the crucified people have a twofold thrust: it is the victim of the sin of the world, and it is also bearer of the world's salvation."[13] Accordingly, the sufferings of the crucified people of history constitute a "life-giving death."[14]

As I have already noted, in constructing his symbolic identification between Jesus and the crucified people of history, Ellacuría introduces the figure of the Suffering Servant from the book of the prophet Isaiah as a mediating figure between Christ and the crucified people. Within the Christian tradition, of course, Jesus is commonly recognized as the supreme exemplification of the Servant. However, especially within various interpretations of Jewish thought, the figure of the Servant also points to a collective reality. In the latter understanding, the Servant is a *people* who are collectively persecuted for their faithfulness to YHWH.[15] For Ellacuría, the crucified people of history continue the corporate work of the Servant exemplified in the person of Jesus. This threefold connection among Jesus, the Servant, and the crucified people allows Ellacuría to underscore the collective and ongoing task of bearing the weight of both sin and salvation within historical reality. Although Jesus's life, death, and resurrection comprise the climax of God's saving work, the collective task of participating in salvation both precedes the Christ event and continues in history after that event.

At this juncture of my argument, it is possible to offer an initial evaluation of Ellacuría's key term. The greatest strength of the symbol of "the crucified people" lies in its evocativeness. The signifying power of this symbol has the potential to form and

12. Ellacuría explicitly identifies the idea of a cover-up with the history of Western extractive colonialism and neocolonialism dating back to the voyages of Christopher Columbus. See Ellacuría, "The Latin American Quincentenary: Discovery or Cover-up?," in Lee, *Ignacio Ellacuría*, 27–38. In general, Ellacuría was acutely aware of the power of sin to obfuscate and distort reality. On this point, see Jon Sobrino's discussion of Ellacuría's use of the metaphors of the "inverted mirror" and "copro-analysis" in Sobrino, *No Salvation outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 60–61.

13. Ellacuría, "Crucified People," 223.

14. Ellacuría, "Crucified People," 199.

15. For a helpful overview of the history of interpretation of the figure of the Suffering Servant, see Marc Brettler and Amy Jill-Levine, "Isaiah's Suffering Servant: Before and after Christianity," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 73, no. 2 (April 2019): 158–73, https://doi.org/10.1177/0020964318820594. Brettler and Jill-Levine maintain the view that the Servant likely referred to an individual figure originally. Nonetheless, they point to the figure's corporate identity throughout centuries of interpretation.

energize the Christian imagination in numerous generative ways. Here, of course, the term "crucified" is key. In the first place, crucifixion was an act of state-sponsored terrorism implemented widely by the Roman Empire as part of its multi-modal strategy to maintain dominion over the places and peoples it occupied and sought to control. Accordingly, the language of "*crucified* people" works to illuminate the fact that the sufferings of these people are not naturally occurring phenomena resulting from the universal character of human finitude.[16] Instead, "crucified" suggests that the sufferings of the peoples are historical, structured by sinful political, economic, and cultural powers that render some human lives far more vulnerable to exploitation, trauma, and violence than others.[17] The crucified peoples bear the marks of continually unfolding histories of human injustice, blindness, and collective hard-heartedness. The symbol, then, invites all those who encounter it to have "eyes to see" (Mt 13:16) the violence that the world would obfuscate.

Second, as is readily apparent to anyone working from within the Christian tradition, the symbol of the crucified people functions to identify the oppressed and marginalized peoples of history with the person of Jesus Christ, the crucified one, who was killed for confronting the reign of sin within his own historical context. Thus, the phrase "crucified people" stands as a vivid two-word recapitulation of the "Judgement of Nations," where Jesus announces to the nations of the world, "whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me," and "what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me" (Mt 25:31–46).[18] The symbol, then, makes an immediate claim upon the collective lives of Christian communities of faith. To borrow from the language of Jon Sobrino, the symbol makes plain that there can be "no salvation outside of the poor."[19] Accordingly, the symbol functions to elucidate a fundamental and perennial orientation of the task of Christian discipleship, calling communities of faith to make incarnate "the option for the poor" within their collective life. As Ellacuría states, the symbol of the crucified people challenges the church to not "avoid passing through the passion when it proclaims the resurrection."[20]

Third, as I already have noted, in linking the sufferings of the oppressed peoples of history to Jesus's passion and crucifixion, the symbol of crucified people underscores

16. In arguing against naturalizing the deaths of the crucified, Ellacuría writes, "Making it natural would entail both eliminating the responsibility of those who kill prophets and those who crucify humankind, thereby veiling the aspect of sin in historical evil." Ellacuría, "Crucified People," 204.
17. Along these lines, Lee contrasts Ellacuría's soteriology with that of the theologies of "deep incarnation," which tend to equate crucifixion with death and thereby naturalize the cross. As Lee argues, Ellacuría's understanding of history maintains a distinction between crucifixion and death. This distinction allows Ellacuría to preserve the category of sin more adequately than the deep incarnationalists. See Michael E. Lee, "Historical Crucifixion: A Liberationist Response to Deep Incarnation," *Theological Studies* 81, no. 4 (December 2020): 892–912, https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563920985816.
18. Ellacuría, "Crucified People," 223.
19. Ellacuría makes explicit reference to the Judgement of Nations in "Crucified People," 223.
20. Ellacuría, "Crucified People," 198. This point is especially worth underscoring at a time when critiques of notions of redemptive suffering, often rightly observed, threaten to mute acknowledgement of a cost to discipleship within a world shaped, in part, by sin.

the status of the oppressed as *innocent* victims. Like Jesus's passion and death, the suffering of the crucified people of history results not from their own sinfulness but from the presence of sinful historical injustice. The symbol, then, works to clarify the presence and shape of the sin of the world at any given historical moment. Indeed, when reflecting upon the character of the Servant, Ellacuría highlights the Servant's innocence. From the perspective of faith, the Servant "suffers sin without having committed it."[21] In so doing, the innocent Servant bears the sin of the world, unveiling the concrete manifestations of sinfulness within history.

Finally, for communities of Christian faith who are resisting oppression, the symbolic power of the language of "crucified people" can function as a consoling force. In the struggle for life and justice, it can be immensely powerful to identify one's sufferings with those of Christ and, in so doing, name God's presence within the very context from which God appears to be absent. Indeed, in the year prior to the initial publication of Ellacuría's essay "The Crucified People," Óscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador, delivered a striking homily to the Catholic community in Aguilares, amidst the military occupation of their town. "You are the image of the Divine One who has been pierced," Romero proclaimed. That "figure representing Christ nailed on the cross and pierced by the lance is the image of all those people who, like Aguilares, have been pierced and violated. But if you suffer with faith and give your suffering redemptive meaning, then Aguilares will sing a joyful hymn of liberation because when they look on the one they pierced they will repent, and they will see the heroism and the joy of those whom the Lord blesses in their suffering."[22] Although Romero does not use Ellacuría's specific term in his homily, their rhetoric is nonetheless resonant.[23] In the context of Aguilares, the notion of "a crucified people" (a people pierced) can function to comfort the afflicted by assuring them that God is with them.[24]

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21. Ellacuría, "Crucified People," 217.
22. Óscar Romero, "A Torched Raised on High," June 19, 1977, 2, www.romerotrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol1_16_TorchRaisedOnHigh.pdf. It should be underscored that, here, Romero is speaking to a people already engaged in a struggle for justice. He is not advocating a passive acceptance of suffering that maintains a sinful status quo.
23. Romero does in fact make use of the term "crucified people" after the publication of Ellacuría's essay. In a speech at Leuven in 1980, Romero says of the oppressed, "They are the crucified people, like Jesus, the persecuted people like the Servant of Yahweh. They are the ones who complete in their body what is lacking in the passion of Christ." Óscar Romero, *La voz de los sin voz: La palabra viva de Monseñor Romero*, ed. Jon Sobrino, Ignacio Martín Baró, and Rodolfo Cardenal (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2001), 188. In this instance, Romero's language exhibits quite clearly the problematic elements that I identify below within Ellacuría's construction of the symbol of the crucified people.
24. Here, Romero's exhortation also affirms that suffering that is willingly undertaken has the capacity to catalyze conversion on the part of hard-hearted oppressors. In this manner, Romero's view is resonant with Martin Luther King Jr.'s fourth principle of nonviolence, which maintains that suffering can redemptively transform dynamics of oppression. See Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (Boston: Beacon, 2010), 85.

In light of the foregoing observations, one can affirm that Ellacuría's formulation of the symbol of the crucified people provides a helpful interpretive lens when scrutinizing the signs of the times. Nonetheless, there are notable difficulties with the way Ellacuría constructs his symbol. Fundamental to these difficulties is his description of those persons who comprise the category of "crucified people." As I have noted, his normative conception of this category includes all those who are oppressed and suffer death-dealing poverty and violence because of the sin of the world. This broad definition aligns well with the desire to affirm Jesus's self-identification with "the least of these." However, that same definition becomes troubling when one attaches soteriological significance to the suffering of the crucified. This is because, as I have already noted, Ellacuría's principal definition of the crucified people of history does not adequately attend to the issue of volition. A statement from Jesus in John's Gospel orients us to the heart of the issue. In the fourth Gospel, Jesus proclaims, "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own" (Jn 10:18). In his explicit praxic commitment to the love of God and neighbor, Jesus willingly lays down his life.[25] This, however, points to a potential and often stark contrast between the experience of Jesus and that of the crucified people of history. For, while Jesus willingly lays down his life, far too frequently the historical forces of sin *take* the lives of the oppressed.[26] This point of contrast, therefore, discloses a tension intrinsic to Ellacuría's formulation of the symbol of the crucified people. With respect to the question of will, the passion and crucifixion that Jesus willingly undertook cannot be identified in a universal or straightforward manner with the sufferings of the oppressed people of history.

Gustavo Gutiérrez's analysis of poverty is helpful in underscoring the problem with the lack of volitional distinction that I am indicating in Ellacuría's conception of the symbol of the crucified people.[27] Poverty, in the first instance for Gutiérrez, is a

25. This observation is consonant with Ellacuría's christological thought. In being willing to proclaim, enact, and embody the Reign of God, Jesus confronts the sinful forces of the antikingdom, and for that he is killed. Thus, while Jesus does not seek the cross, he accepts it as a possible historical consequence of his willingness to bear witness to the love of God in a fallen and disordered world. Rather than turn away from his vocation in an attempt to preserve his life, Jesus willingly gives his life in service to God's reign. Along these lines, see Ignacio Ellacuría, "Por qué Muere Jesús y por qué lo Matan," *Misión Abierta* (1977): 17–26.

26. It is worth noting here another difficulty with the symbol of the crucified people. The term itself tends to obscure the agential capacity of the poor and marginalized. After all, to be crucified is to be literally suspended, with one's ability to act significantly impaired if not removed. I do not attend to this problematic aspect of the term in this article. Indeed, my argument focuses precisely on the ways in which sinful violence and injustice can, and oftentimes do, impair a person's ability to act. In my view, a way forward in attending to this problem is to ensure that the descriptor of "crucified peoples" is utilized in tensive complementarity with other symbols of liberation. On this point, see Peniel Rajkumar, "'How' Does the Bible Mean? The Bible and Dalit Liberation in India," *Political Theology* 11, no. 3 (2010): 410–30, https://doi.org/10.1558/poth.v11i3.410.

27. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 162–73.

death-dealing reality promulgated by human sinfulness. In this sense, poverty bears no redemptive quality. Rather, it is a condition that Christians and persons of goodwill must condemn. Gutiérrez, however, identifies another category of poverty operating within the unfolding history of sin and grace. In his schema, solidaristic poverty functions as an essential element of discipleship.[28] This latter form of poverty refers to how persons willingly enter into the spaces and conditions of marginality and heightened precarity (i.e., the spaces of death-dealing poverty) as a form of protest against these conditions. For Gutiérrez, solidaristic poverty bears witness to God's saving will both for and within history precisely because it makes manifest the love of God and neighbor and, in so doing, counters the sinful forces of alienation that are at work in the world. Thus, Gutiérrez finds that solidaristic poverty "is an act of love and liberation. It has redemptive value."[29]

The problem with the way Ellacuría identifies the sufferings of Jesus with those of the crucified people of history is that it collapses the distinction that Gutiérrez makes between death-dealing poverty and solidaristic poverty. As a result, within Ellacuría's formulation of the symbol of the crucified people, the differing realities of death-dealing poverty (in which lives are taken) and solidaristic poverty (in which lives are freely given out of love) can appear virtually indistinguishable with respect to how they bear witness to salvation. Accordingly, Ellacuría's formulation of the symbol risks attributing redemption to suffering as such.[30]

To be fair, Ellacuría appears to be aware of the danger inherent in his universalized conception of the crucified people. At various points in his argument, he notes the

28. For Gutiérrez, solidaristic poverty is intrinsic to discipleship because, for communities of faith, this commitment to solidarity is predicated upon spiritual poverty, an openness to hearing and responding to the will of God. See Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 169–71.

29. Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 172. Strikingly, given the critique of Ellacuría's conception of the crucified people that I develop in this article, Gutiérrez entitles an essay that he writes in honor of Ellacuría "No One Takes My Life from Me, I Give It Freely." See Burke and Lassalle-Klein, *Love That Produces Hope*, 68–72. Ellacuría is, of course, keenly aware of the difference between death-dealing poverty and solidaristic poverty. The issue that I am highlighting in this article is that he does not maintain this distinction in his conception of the crucified people. This is likely because, when conceiving of the symbol of the crucified people, Ellacuría was not concerned primarily with questions of volition but rather with the task of affirming the humanity and sanctity of persons and communities that had been degraded and demonized by the powers at work in El Salvador. This primary concern is likewise reflected in his use of the term in "Discernir 'el Signo' de los Tiempos" and is consistent with his ecclesiological vision. On this last point, see Ellacuría, "La Iglesia de los Pobres: Sacramento Histórico de Liberación," *Estudios Centroamericanos* 32 (1977): 707–22.

30. To be clear, this is not Ellacuría's intention. He is dubious of naturalized conceptions of "expiation and sacrifice." Ellacuría, "Crucified People," 205. Indeed, in distinguishing between why Jesus died and why Jesus was killed, he wishes to reject any notion that "the brute fact of being crucified of itself were to bring about resurrection and life." Ellacuría, "Crucified People," 210. Nonetheless, Ellacuría's own manner of defining the crucified people of history is at odds with his intention.

importance of the praxis of the crucified people of history. Indeed, I have already cited one of these instances above, noting that Ellacuría points to the crucified people's praxis of resistance—"standing up"—as bearing particular soteriological significance. Here, however, one begins to discern an inconsistency in the way he conceives of the crucified people of history. On the one hand, the crucified people simply suffer oppression. On the other hand, they suffer as a result of their struggle against sinful injustice. Moreover, when this incongruency presents itself within his thought, he tends to underscore his description of the crucified people simply as those who suffer irrespective of their volition or praxis. Consider two notable examples of this rhetorical move.

Reflecting upon the character of the Suffering Servant, Ellacuría writes, "The Suffering Servant of Yahweh will be anyone who discharges the mission described in the Songs—and, par excellence, will be the one discharging it in more comprehensive fashion."[31] Here, Ellacuría's emphasis is on the praxic aspect of the Servant, suggesting that volition is of primary importance when identifying this figure. However, immediately after making this statement, he continues, "Or *better*, the Suffering Servant of Yahweh will be anyone unjustly crucified for the sins of human beings, because all of the crucified form a single unity." In this instance, the Servant is one who is simply made to suffer. Here, volition appears inconsequential. Instead, it is the fact of suffering that identifies the figure of the Servant—a view that is consistent with his governing definition of the crucified people of history as those who comprise the majority of the world.[32]

The inconsistent nature of Ellacuría's description of the crucified peoples is also evident when, soon after affirming that the passion of the crucified people (the corporate Servant) must have a connection to "the working out of the Reign of God," he writes:

> This likening of the crucified people to the Servant of Yahweh is anything but unfounded. If we can see common basic features in both, there is moreover the fact that Jesus—or that was the view of the early Christian community—identified himself with those who suffer. That is, of course, true of those who suffer for his name or for the Reign, but *it is also true of those who suffer, unaware that their suffering is connected to the name of Jesus and the proclamation of his Reign.* This identification is expressed most precisely in Matthew 25:31–46, and, indeed, that passage appears just before a new announcement of his passion (Matt 26:1–2).[33]

31. Ellacuría, "Crucified People," 218.
32. The move to emphasize the fact of suffering is consistently echoed by Ellacuría's interpreters. For example, in expositing upon Ellacuría's thought, Burke writes, "the servant is accepted by God through his/her likeness to Jesus, *above all, his/her likeness to what happened to Jesus in his passion and death on the cross* . . . On the basis of the similarity between the passion of Jesus and the passion of the crucified people, Ellacuría concludes that the people appear not only as victim of the sin of the world, but as savior and judge of the world. The crucified peoples represent the savior in history insofar as they epitomize the crucified body of Christ which bears the sins of the world in order to save the world." Burke, *Ground Beneath the Cross*, 185; emphasis mine.
33. Ellacuría, "Crucified People," 223; emphasis mine.

In this passage Ellacuría affirms that the crucified people are those who suffer, regardless of their connection to the praxis of God's reign. This of course runs counter to the criterion that he had just delineated. To be fair, it is possible to defend his rhetoric in the passage above by suggesting that the language that I have italicized refers to the question of the "anonymous Christian"—one whose pattern of life is consonant with that of Jesus despite not identifying confessionally with Jesus.[34] In this instance, then, Ellacuría may be referencing those who, irrespective of their religious identification, give their lives out of solidaristic love. Indeed, in my view, this is likely what Ellacuría intends here. However, this defense is undercut by the fact that he immediately cites the "Judgement of Nations" in support of his argument. The difficulty with Ellacuría's appeal to Matthew 25 is that, in this passage, Jesus identifies with "the least of these" not because of their witness of the Reign of God but precisely because of their suffering and rejection. In this biblical narrative, Jesus identifies with the crucified people regardless of their praxis.[35] Again in this instance, for Ellacuría, it is simply the fact of suffering that appears to mark these peoples as "the bearers of salvation."[36]

The contradiction present within Ellacuría's competing descriptions of the crucified people tends to be overlooked by interpreters of his thought. Instead, and unsurprisingly given Ellacuría's prevailing use of the term, interpreters have tended to adopt his description of the crucified people of history as those who suffer affliction

34. For one example of Rahner's thought on this subject, see Karl Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6 (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 390–98. Rahner's concept has been critiqued and defended from a wide range of perspectives. My aim here is not to enter into these debates but merely to observe that this concept likely influenced Ellacuría on this point.

35. A further defense of Ellacuría's position could be marshalled if the crucified people were analogous to "the sheep" who unknowingly served Christ in practicing the works of mercy (hence, anonymously witnessing to God's reign). However, for Ellacuría, the crucified people stand as analogous to "the least of these." Again, then, it is the category of *suffering* and not the specific *quality of praxis* that seems to most define the crucified people, a view that is consistent with his initial definitions of the crucified people. Indeed, Ellacuría's inconsistent description of the crucified people is closely connected to his conflation of the significance of the Suffering Servant and the Judgement of Nations.

36. It is common for expositors of Ellacuría's thought to echo his appeal to the Judgement of Nations in support of the view that the crucified people are the bearers of salvation. For example, see Sebastian Pittl, "The Crucified People as a Historical Subject? Contemporary Relevance of Two Concepts of Ignacio Ellacuría's Philosophy and Theology," in *A Grammar of Justice: The Legacy of Ignacio Ellacuría*, ed. J. Matthew Ashley, Kevin F. Burke, and Rodolfo Cardenal (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), esp. 250–51. In appealing to the Judgement of Nations, Michael Lee connects the biblical narrative to Ellacuría's emphasis on the kenotic dynamic of the incarnation and Jesus's ministry. See Lee, *Bearing the Weight of Salvation*, 89. Ellacuría's appeal to kenosis, however, only underscores the problem of agency/will since kenosis describes the freely enacted self-emptying of the Word out of love, a point that is dissonant with those persons among the "least of these" whose lives are emptied and taken against their will.

regardless of their volition or praxic commitment.[37] This, of course, leaves Ellacuría's formulation of the crucified people open to the critique that I have just delineated.

The difficulty that I have described—regarding how Ellacuría's formulation of the symbol of the crucified people fails to address adequately the issue of volition within the experience of suffering—is, in fact, intensified by his incorporation of the figure of the Suffering Servant into the symbol. In the first place, this amplification results from key passages within Isaiah's oracle that explicitly affirm the redemptive value of the Servant's suffering and death. "He bore the punishment that makes us whole," the oracle reads, "by his wounds we were healed" (Is 53:5). Ellacuría's appeal, then, to the figure of the Servant upholds and highlights not only the innocence of the crucified people of history, as Ellacuría wishes his appeal to underscore, but also the redemptive power of the people's experiences of suffering.

Most troublingly, Isaiah's prophetic discourse also affirms that God wills the suffering of the Servant. As a pivotal verse reads, despite the Servant's innocence, "it was the Lord's will to crush him with pain" (Is 53:10). For anyone trained to take a critical view of notions of redemptive suffering, this verse from Isaiah stands out in its notoriety.[38] Nonetheless, it is possible to interpret this passage in a manner that identifies God's pleasure not with the Servant's suffering in and of itself but with the love the Servant bears for the world.[39] However, Ellacuría's formulation of the symbol of the crucified people does not support this type of hermeneutics. Since Ellacuría's formulation of the symbol connects the figure of the Servant to "the majority of humanity" who are crushed by death-dealing conditions of oppression, the symbol implies that God is, in fact, pleased with these crushing historical conditions and the suffering and death that derive from them.[40]

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37. For example, when discussing the notion of the crucified people, Burke affirmatively cites Ellacuría's basic definition of the crucified people as the majority of the world's population, who unjustly suffer. Following Ellacuría, Burke rightly emphasizes the historically conditioned character of this suffering. Continuing to follow Ellacuría, Burke then moves to connect this suffering to the figures of Christ and the Servant. See Burke, *Ground Beneath the Cross*, 180–85. Amongst Ellacuría scholars, Robert Lasalle-Klein is perhaps the most guarded with respect to the symbol of the crucified people, describing it as a "profoundly ambivalent sign of both sin and salvation" (Lasalle-Klein, *Blood and Ink*, 307). In reflecting upon the concept of the crucified people, Lasalle-Klein foregrounds the category of solidaristic suffering in relation to salvation, writing, "the suffering innocence of the crucified people is a sign that invites and demands a compassionate response from followers of Jesus as an act of faith in the God of the Reign that he announced" (306). Note, however, that in Lasalle-Klein's comment, it is not the crucified people of history who are a sign of salvation but those who respond in mercy. Thus, it remains unclear how the suffering of the crucified people is, in itself, salvific.
38. Ellacuría himself approaches this verse cautiously, noting the strong rhetoric of Isaiah. Nonetheless, as I argue below, this caution does not deter him from making problematic connections between the Servant and the crucified people.
39. Here, Paul's words are particularly instructive: "If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor 13:3).
40. This implication, of course, is at cross purposes with Ellacuría's clear commitment throughout his work to denounce the crucifying forces of history while proclaiming that God finds these forces abhorrent.

I am not the first to confront the difficulty that the issue of volition presents regarding Ellacuría's formulation of the symbol of the crucified people. Sobrino responds to this problem when developing his own closely related theology of martyrdom. In reflecting upon the suffering and deaths of the crucified people of history, Sobrino delineates an important distinction that bears directly on the issue of volition with respect to the suffering borne by the crucified. In the first place, for Sobrino, the crucified people of history include those persons who "structurally reproduce the martyrdom of Jesus" by prophetically confronting the historical forces of sin that run counter to the reign of God while accepting the life-threatening consequences of their acts. Here Sobrino includes figures such as "priests, nuns, catechists, delegates of the word, students, trade unionists, peasants, workers, teachers, journalists, doctors, lawyers, etc."[41] This category of martyrs—"Jesuanic martyrs," to use Sobrino's terminology—willingly lay down their lives through their commitment to the possibility of a new, more just world.[42] Sobrino then goes on to identify another category of crucified martyrs, those whose lives have been taken from them.[43] Here he describes "the masses who are innocently and anonymously murdered, even though they have not used any explicit form of violence, even verbal. They do not actively lay down their lives to defend the faith, or even directly, to defend God's Kingdom." These people "die slowly day after day and die violently with incredible cruelty. . . . They are simply killed and massacred. And they die without freedom, if not through necessity."[44] Sobrino, echoing Ellacuría's thought, identifies these peoples with the Suffering Servant. However, Sobrino immediately acknowledges that "there is no word in church language to express what, if any, excellence there is in their death."[45] Thus, he articulates, at least implicitly, a discomfort with making such an identification.

The distinction that Sobrino identifies in describing the complex historical reality signified by "crucified peoples" is helpful insofar as it directly acknowledges the volitional differences at play with respect to how the crucified might bear the sin of the world. Nonetheless, difficulties remain with the symbol of crucified people even when acknowledging these distinctions. Most obviously, a contradiction exists between Sobrino's acknowledgement of the difficulty, if not impossibility, of affirming excellence in the deaths of persons whose lives "have been taken" and Sobrino's continued

41. Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 269.
42. See Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 122–25.
43. Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 270. Sobrino also delineates another category of crucified martyrs comprised by those persons who enter into the struggle for justice by taking up arms against the oppressive forces at work in history. Since this category does not bear directly on the argument of my article, I have chosen to not include it in the main text. The questions of whether or not, or under what conditions, one can rightly enact violence in the service of love and justice are, of course, vexing for communities of faith in any time and place.
44. Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 270.
45. Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 270.

desire to connect the crucified peoples of history to the figure of the Suffering Servant. For, while the Servant, as Sobrino elsewhere stresses, is indeed an innocent victim, the Servant nonetheless remains identified with conceptions of suffering that necessarily ascribe "excellence" to the death of the victim. Indeed, this is the contradiction at the heart of Ellacuría's formulation of the symbol of crucified people. Sobrino's analysis recognizes this impasse, but it does not present a way of attending to it.

## The Symbol of the Crucified People and the Figure of Abel

The foregoing analysis has illuminated the ambiguity in Ellacuría's use of the term "crucified people." On the one hand, the symbol can function positively, attuning the Christian imagination both to the concrete destructive realities of sin at work in the world and to the demands placed upon communities of faith to confront and transform these realities. In these ways the symbol can aid and energize the work of discernment and discipleship amongst communities of faith, while also potentially consoling oppressed communities of faith amidst their struggles for justice. On the other hand, the symbol can distort the experiences of those whom it would signify by failing to communicate the volitional differences amongst the crucified peoples of history. Given this ambiguity, retrievals of Ellacuría's symbol ought to be both critical and constructive.

One productive response to the difficulties present in Ellacuría's construction of the symbol of the crucified people is to reformulate the symbol by expanding the framework of its coordinates. Since there are not only lines of continuity among Jesus, the Servant, and the crucified peoples of history but also lines of discontinuity, it is helpful to introduce into Ellacuría's thought matrix a figure who helps to foreground the tensive forces at work in these relationships. Here, Abel, the primordial victim of history, who in Genesis is murdered by his brother Cain (Gn 4:1–16), recommends himself for inclusion within the symbol of the crucified people.[46]

There are several reasons to incorporate the figure of Abel into the symbolic matrix of the crucified people that Ellacuría establishes. In the first place, Scripture's characterization of Abel resonates with Ellacuría's basic description of the crucified people. The narrative of Genesis presents Abel as a figure who is degraded by the social and cultural forces of his "lifeworld."[47] As the younger brother, Abel would have occupied

46. To be clear, in arguing for the inclusion of Abel within the symbolic matrix of the crucified people, I am not advocating the displacement of Jesus or the Servant from this matrix. Rather, these figures ought to be held together in a tensive unity that allows for the signs of the times to be scrutinized precisely through these tensions.

47. The concept of "lifeworld" describes the dominant interpretation of reality that is maintained by a given society or culture and the persons that compose that society or culture. Edmund Husserl describes "lifeworld" as "the world that is constantly pregiven, valid constantly and in advance as existing . . . . Every end presupposes it; even the universal end of knowing it in scientific truth presupposes it, and in advance." See Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 382. My point here is that, within both the "world of the text" and the "world behind the text," Abel appears as a marginalized figure.

a diminished standing within his world when compared to the status of his brother Cain, the primordial couple's firstborn son. Indeed, within the world of the text, Abel's marginalized status is dramatically intensified through his very name, which derives from the Hebrew *hebel* and translates as "vapor," "nothingness," or "worthlessness."[48] Abel's name, then, intimates that the sinful world in which he lives has sought to reduce him to the status of "nonperson."[49] That world, and certainly Cain, deems Abel's life to be of little account. For Abel, as for the crucified people of history, the social, political, and cultural formations of a world shaped by sin fail to offer hospitality. As such, the figure of Abel resonates with Ellacuría's definitional understanding of the crucified people. Indeed, as the primordial victim testified to in Scripture, the figure of Abel captures the perennial and universal presence of the victims of history better than the figure of the Servant.

In a second line of continuity with both Jesus and the Servant, Scripture depicts Abel as an innocent victim. Cain's murder of his brother results not from Abel's wrongdoing but, rather, from Cain's own disordered desire. This view is captured powerfully by Gutiérrez in his reading of this Genesis narrative. For Gutiérrez, God prefers Abel's offering to that of Cain, but not because Abel's was qualitatively better. Rather, God's preference is rooted in God's preferential option of the poor. In affirming Abel's offering, God raises up the lowly while simultaneously casting doubt upon Cain's presumption and entitlement. As Gutiérrez writes, "God looked with favor on Abel . . . not in order to spurn Cain, but rather to force the latter to think about his younger brother, communicate with him and protect him. It is clear that Cain did not accept this preference for Abel."[50] It is Cain's own attunement to vice and presumptuous privilege, rather than any wrongdoing on his brother's part, that leads him to murder. Abel's innocence, therefore, is not only consonant with that of Jesus and the Servant but also captures well the character of the unjust sufferings and deaths of the crucified peoples of history. Like Abel's, the sufferings and deaths of the latter result not from their own culpability but rather from the sinful blindness and hard-heartedness of their siblings. Thus, Abel's innocence serves to elucidate the experience of the crucified peoples of history, helping to disclose the sin of the world to those who would have eyes to see.

Importantly, the incorporation of the figure of Abel into the symbol of the crucified people also helps to attend to the problem of the differences in volition amongst the crucified peoples of history. Here one finds an important point of discontinuity between Abel and Jesus/the Servant. In contrast to the kenotic dynamic evident in Christ's act

48. On the first two translational possibilities, see Larry Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 205. On the third, see Ellen van Wolde, "The Story of Cain and Abel: A Narrative Study," *Journal for the Study of Old Testament* 16, no. 52 (December 1991): 25–41 at 29.

49. Gutiérrez coins this term, describing the "nonperson" as "the human being who is not considered human by the present social order—the exploited classes, marginalized ethnic groups and despised cultures." See Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 193.

50. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 116.

of giving his life in love for the world, Abel appears to the reader of Genesis as a figure *emptied* of his humanity, already dehumanized by a world that looks upon him and names him "nothingness."[51] Likewise, whereas Jesus willingly lays down his life, Abel's life is simply taken—he is murdered by a sibling who is overwhelmed by pride, jealousy, and entitlement. Thus, while Abel is like Jesus in that he is an innocent victim who is murdered in accordance with the logics that define the "city of Man,"[52] Abel is also notably *unlike* Jesus in terms of how Scripture depicts the exercise of his will. The inclusion of the figure of Abel within the symbol of the crucified people, then, works both to surface and to keep in view the differences in volition that characterize the experiences of suffering by the crucified peoples of history.

As I have already implied, the question of volition amongst the oppressed peoples of history is closely related to the issue of God's judgement regarding the human experience of suffering. It is with respect to this latter concern that the inclusion of the figure of Abel within the symbol of the crucified people serves its most important function. In contrast to God's judgment with respect to the Suffering Servant, whom God is pleased to crush, God responds to Abel's murder with outrage and anguish. "What have you done?" (Gn 4:10), God cries out to Cain. In Genesis, one finds no redeeming quality in Cain's murder of Abel. Unlike the Servant, the younger sibling's life was not expended "as a reparation offering" nor shall Abel "see his offspring" or "lengthen his days" (Is 53:10). To use Sobrino's terminology, there is no "excellence" that can be ascribed to Abel's death. The event is left unjustified by the authors of Genesis, for it is unjustifiable. Instead, the discerning community of faith is left to ponder the cry of Abel's blood emanating from the ground. Identifying the experiences of historical crucifixion with those of the figure of Abel foregrounds both the historical conditions of these deaths (as opposed to natural death) as well as the relative blamelessness of the victims without having to imply that God is in some way pleased with these realities.

Here, then, the figure of Abel works to correct Ellacuría's tendency to overidentify the sufferings of the crucified people of history with God's salvific work. Rather than suggesting that it is appropriate to attribute salvific significance to the taking of lives,

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51. I am not suggesting that Abel's intrinsic dignity as a human is truly diminished. Rather, I am emphasizing the way the death-dealing gaze of Abel's lifeworld forcibly perceives him in this manner.

52. Here, I am using this term advisedly with a twofold purpose. On the one hand, I am referring to Augustine's *City of God*, which maintains that the "city of man" is organized in accordance with the logic and desire of Cain. See Augustine, *City of God*, Bk. XV. Second, I have chosen to capitalize "Man" here in reference to the work of Sylvia Wynter, who maintains that the political formations of the world today are shaped disproportionately by "Man"—the white, colonizing, male, heterosexual, "Christian" subject. In my view, Wynter's conception of Man stands as an appropriate contemporary analogue to the biblical figure of Cain, and one that coheres well with Ellacuría's own historical commitments. See, for example, Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 257–337.

the figure of Abel orients the symbol of the crucified people to the language of lament, demanding salvation *from* crucifixion. This orientation is, in fact, entirely consistent with Ellacuría's own understanding of the central task of Christian discipleship: responding to the cry of the oppressed by laboring to take the crucified peoples down from their crosses.[53]

There is an additional way in which the inclusion of the figure of Abel within the symbol of the crucified people is valuable for both the retrieval of this symbol and the mystagogical task of theology.[54] In both Ellacuría's and, perhaps especially, Sobrino's work there is a tendency to identify within the crucified peoples a desire to grant absolution to their crucifiers. For example, in reflecting upon the general disposition of the crucified peoples amidst their experiences of unjust suffering, Sobrino writes, "The crucified peoples are ready to forgive their oppressors. They do not want to triumph over them but to share with them." In a similar vein, he continues, "The crucified peoples offer great love . . . a great offer of humanization."[55] This claim ought to be scrutinized. In considering Sobrino's comment here, I wish to acknowledge that Sobrino is a pastoral theologian who has worked in his daily life with communities of faith in El Salvador, communities that may have, in fact, adopted the posture of forgiveness that Sobrino describes. At the same time, it is likely that Sobrino's affirmation of the willingness of the crucified peoples to forgive also draws from the analogical connection that he and Ellacuría identify between Jesus and the crucified peoples of history. Since they affirm that the crucified peoples are fundamentally *like Christ*, it follows that the people's response to their crucifiers will echo Christ's pronouncement on Golgotha, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). But even if this is true of the communities that Sobrino references, this claim surely cannot be upheld in a universal manner.

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53. Ellacuría refers to the image of taking down the crucified peoples from their crosses at different points in his work. For example, he writes, "the call to true catholicity and ecumenism has at its center . . . local churches that have embodied themselves in the crosses of history and have worked to lower crucified peoples from the cross." See, for example, Ignacio Ellacuría, "Misión actual de la Compañía de Jesús," *Diakonia* 68 (1993): 33–42 at 39.
54. Another way in which the inclusion of Abel into the symbolic matrix of the crucified people is valuable is too far-reaching in its implications to surface in the body of this article. Here, I'll merely note that the inclusion of Abel within this symbolic matrix can be used to affirm not only the volitional but also the ontological dissimilarities between Jesus, who is fully Divine, and the crucified peoples, who are not, for, as the author of Hebrews observes, Jesus's blood "speaks more eloquently than that of Abel" (Heb 12:24). To be clear, the blood of Christ does not speak more eloquently in articulating the agony of crucifixion but in its expression of divine love.
55. Given the concerns that I have raised in this article, I should note that Sobrino hastens to add that this love "is not masochism or an invitation to suicide." Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 56.

In contrast to Jesus's clear plea for divine forgiveness, the aforementioned cry associated with Abel's death is much more ambiguous. When God confronts Cain over the latter's act of fratricide, God exclaims, "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!" (Gn 4:10). Here, the content of Abel's cry from the soil remains unclear. One strand of interpretation characterizes Abel's cry as a resolute entreaty for redress. Ton Hilhorst, for example, maintains that this is the view offered by the author of the letter to the Hebrews: "Abel's spoken words . . . are a trusting, and trust-inspiring, plea for justice."[56] In crying out for justice, Abel's voice bears witness against the injustice of his murder, while implicitly affirming the steadfast trustworthiness and righteousness of God. Notably, the precise shape that justice might take remains unspecified.

A second line of interpretation with respect to the character of the cry of Abel's blood maintains that it is not merely a cry of protest but, more specifically, an ongoing cry for vengeance.[57] This line of interpretation is exemplified in the book of Enoch. There, the angel Raphael proclaims that he hears a spirit complaining to the heavens. The angel continues, "This spirit is the one that came out of Abel, whom Cain, his brother, killed. And he will complain about him until his offspring are destroyed from the face of the Earth, and from amongst the offspring of men, his offspring perish" (Book of Enoch 22:7). Abel thus appears as an enduring witness for the innocent victims of history crying out for their murders to be avenged. In this second interpretive line, justice takes the explicit and unsettling (unsettling at least from the perspective of the "crucifiers") form of retribution.

My purpose in raising the two lines of interpretation pertaining to the cry of Abel's blood is not to argue for the primacy or veracity of one interpretation over and against the other. Rather, it is to observe that both interpretations function as a caution for persons and communities of faith who would inscribe a disposition of forgiveness onto the victims of history. Incorporating the figure of Abel into the symbolic matrix of Ellacuría's term does not displace Jesus's plea for forgiveness. It does, however, counter the inclination that communities of Christian faith might have to place this plea uniformly upon the mouths of the crucified peoples of history. When taken together, Abel's ambiguous cry and the words of Jesus point to a wide variety of responses on the part of crucified peoples in answer to their own experiences of oppression. While all these responses might not conform to the Christian ideal of forgiveness, they are nonetheless human responses. Allowing these responses to be heard on their own terms is, again to use Sobrino's words, an act of humanization.

In sum, the inclusion of the figure of Abel within the symbol of the crucified people allows the symbol to address the vagaries of history and the ambiguities of suffering

56. Ton Hilhorst, "Abel's Speaking in Hebrews 11.4 and 12.24," in *Eve's Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuizen (Boston: Brill, 2003), 126. See also Frederick Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 286.

57. On this point, see John Byron, "Abel's Blood and the Ongoing Cry for Vengeance," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (October 2011): 743–56.

in a more nuanced manner than the conventional composition of the symbol facilitates. In Abel, one finds an innocent victim whose life is not given but taken because of the sinful inclinations of his sibling/neighbor—a victim whose murder is met with protest and lament. Within the symbol of the crucified people, then, the figure of Abel brings to the foreground the question of volition and cautions against the impulse of simply identifying the sufferings of the crucified peoples of history with those of the redemptive figures of Jesus and the Servant. As such, the figure of Abel encourages a more thoroughgoing discernment of reality in light of what Ellacuría names as the principal sign of the times.

In its identification with the crucified peoples of history, the figure of Abel is not meant to replace the figures of Jesus or the Servant. Nor should Abel be understood in a manner that absolutizes or essentializes its difference from the latter pair.[58] Instead, the tensions that are manifest among the figures of Jesus, the Servant, and Abel allow for a critical account of both the similarities and dissimilarities between the crucified peoples of history and figures of redemption to emerge. Such an account can benefit the tasks of both speaking about historical suffering and responding to that suffering in light of the Word of God.

Incorporating the figure of Abel into the symbolic matrix of the crucified people also presses upon and responds to questions of soteriology, questions that are always in Ellacuría's sight when he employs his symbol. As God's response to Cain's murder of Abel makes clear, there is no redemptive balm to be found in the taking of life. The identification of Abel with the crucified people of history, then, problematizes Ellacuría's claim that the crucified people act as a locus of salvation. It does not, however, obviate the claim. This is because the sin of the world must be confronted with the greatest exigency precisely with respect to this locus. Thus, it is within this space that expressions of courage, mercy, and love—expressions that participate in and bear witness to God's saving grace—become incarnated most vividly, so that the sin of the world might not simply be borne but also transfigured, or at least made more bearable.[59] The work of mercy exercised within these spaces is salvific—work that finds a crucial element of its expression in the cry of protest to God and to the world in the face of sin and death.[60]

58. After all, there is a long tradition within Christian thought of affirming Abel's righteousness, a descriptor that is apt for both Jesus and the Servant (e.g., Mt 23:35; Heb 11:4).

59. Here, we can recall Ellacuría's exhortation that persons and communities of faith and goodwill not avoid passing through the passion in their embrace of resurrection hope. It is also worth recalling Gustavo Gutiérrez's affirmation that even the poor must make an option for the poor. The work of mercy is not the prerogative of the privileged. Nor should the poor be reduced to an object through which the privileged work out their salvation.

60. Again, the emphasis on the salvific character of mercy is precisely what Ellacuría intends with the notion of taking the crucified people down from their crosses. However, this notion is muddled by Ellacuría's basic formulation of the symbol of the crucified people.

## Abel and the Crucified People in Liberationist Discourse

In closing, it is worth observing that the narrative of Cain and Abel is already present within the symbolic imagination at work in Ellacuría's theology. In his final major essay, "Utopia and Prophecy in Latin America," the Spanish Jesuit reflects upon the "civilization of wealth" that has come to characterize the Global North.[61] In his view, this civilization is driven by greed and marked by, among other characteristics, "unsolidarity," "ethnocentrism," "exploitation," and a "permanent aggression against the environment shared by the rest of humanity."[62] Thus, this civilization stands as "the greatest resistance to the historical construction of the Kingdom of God."[63] Strikingly, Ellacuría then moves to identify the civilization of wealth with the figure of Cain: "The path of rapid and unequal enrichment has led to a Cainite rupture of humanity and to the formation of an exploitative, repressive, and violent human being."[64] In other words, the cultural and ideological value systems of the civilization of wealth form those persons who internalize these values into a type of human who approximates the hard-heartedness that characterizes the figure of Cain.[65]

Although Ellacuría's reference to Cain is in passing, it has profound implications for the retrieval of his thought. If the hegemonic civilization of wealth that Ellacuría describes is identifiable with the figure of Cain, then it is fitting for those peoples who suffer continual crucifixion as a result of the myriad forms of violence endemic to the structures of this civilization to be identified with the figure of Abel. Set within the framework of a "Cainite" civilization, the crucified people appear, in the first place, as Abel, a people whose humanity is "nothingness" to those who have given their hearts over to the idol of greed (Col 3:5; Eph 5:5). It is this crucified people, again recalling the Judgement of the Nations, with whom Jesus identifies most fully. Moreover, it is this people, along with all other peoples, who may choose to willingly bear the burden of sin through the work of confrontation, denunciation, and proclamation. Accordingly,

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61. Ignacio Ellacuría, "Utopia and Prophecy in Latin America," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 315. It is likely that the contrasting "civilizations" of wealth and poverty that Ellacuría describes in this essay are informed by Ignatius of Loyola's "Mediation on the Two Standards," in which the exercitant is urged to contemplate the opposing standards of Christ and of Satan and ultimately to commit one's will to the former. See paragraphs 136–42 of Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*.
62. Ellacuría, "Utopia and Prophecy," 310.
63. Ellacuría, "Utopia and Prophecy," 310.
64. Ellacuría, "Utopia and Prophecy," 310–11.
65. It is plausible that Ellacuría's description of the civilization of wealth was shaped by a sermon given by fellow Jesuit Rutilio Grande. In his "Apopa Sermon," Grande, who was also murdered by the Salvadoran military, compares the oppressive forces at work in El Salvador to the figure of Cain. For access to the sermon, see Anthony Ferrari, "A Life of Faith and Courage," Media and Publications, Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education, Santa Clara University, www.scu.edu/ic/media–publications/articles/article-stories/a-life-of-faith-and-courage.html.

those persons and communities whose desires and praxis have conformed to the sensibilities of Cain must confront the reality of the innocent victim and respond to the divine interrogative, "What have you done?"[66]

In view of the foregoing observation regarding the place of Cain and Abel in Ellacuría's thought, it is noteworthy that James Cone, the seminal articulator of Black liberation theology in the United States, not only drew upon the symbol of the crucified people but also, in his final writings, turned his focus to the figures of Cain and Abel when reflecting upon the experiences of Black persons amidst death-dealing phenomena of anti-Black racism. In his profound meditation on the relationship between the cross and the lynching tree, Cone presents the historical forces of white supremacy at work in the US as functioning to crucify Black persons and communities.[67] Notably, however, among the last pages that Cone authored before his death, he connects the violence of the lynching tree not to the cross but to Cain's sinful murder of Abel. Cone's reflection upon the history and ongoing violence of white supremacy is worth citing at length here:

> As I come to the end of my theological journey, I can't stop thinking about black blood: the blood of Denise McNair (age 11), Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, and Addie Mae Collins (14)—four black girls in Birmingham, Alabama; Emmett Till (14), Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis (17), and Michael Brown (18)—four teenage boys from the North and South. These children, whose names should never be forgotten, were lynched by white men and became symbols of the horrific violence of white supremacy in our time.[68]

It is here that Cone makes an explicit analogy to the first two sons of the primordial couple. "Cain can be viewed as a metaphor for white people and Abel for black people," Cone writes. "God is asking white Americans, especially white Christians, 'Where are your black brothers and sisters?' And whites respond, 'We don't know. Are we their keepers?' And the Lord says, 'What have you done to them for four centuries?'"[69] Cone's work, then, stands as a testament to the aptness for incorporating the

66. This question, of course, is consonant with Ellacuría's interpretation of Ignatius's colloquy at the foot of the cross. Ellacuría asks the church in Spain to place itself at the foot of the crucified people and ask, "What have I done to crucify them? What am I doing in order to uncrucify them? What ought I to do so that this people will be raised?" See Ellacuría, "Las Iglesias latinoamericanas interpelan a la Iglesia de España," *Sal Terrae* 826 (1982): 219–30 at 230. Here I am following Kevin Burke's translation. See Burke, *Ground beneath the Cross*, 26.
67. It is noteworthy that references by Cone to Ellacuría, Sobrino, and the symbol of the crucified people bookend *The Cross and the Lynching Tree.* See James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), xiv, 161.
68. James H. Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 170.
69. Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, 170. This metaphor should not be used to ontologize Blackness.

figure of Abel into the symbolic matrix of the crucified people—his haunting interrogative, like Abel's blood, both elucidating the sin of the world and crying out for justice.[70]


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