



CLAUDE
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READING BLACK BOOKS

How
African American
Literature Can
Make Our
Faith More
Whole and Just



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Introduction

Right now, Black voices are in. That's why on a recent Target run, as I maneuvered past the grocery section and the LEGO aisles, I was only partly surprised to find myself standing face-to-face with a display of James Baldwin books. In this unique cultural moment where people and corporations are ostensibly committed to listening to Black voices, I want to present this humble offering: one of the best ways to listen to Black voices is to attend to Black stories, specifically the enduring ones captured in classic African American literature.

This book suggests—and performs—listening to Black stories through a particular mode of reading. This way of reading joins the literary and the theological in a dynamic interplay for the spiritual and intellectual enrichment of Christian and spiritually curious readers from all walks of life. In other words, when we read Black literature's twentieth-century classics through a dual lens—the literary *and* the theological—we unearth the ways in which God's truth addresses Black experience and how Black experience, as shown in the literature of our great writers, can prod readers from all backgrounds toward sharper theological thinking and more faithful living. There is a way to read even brutal works like *Native Son* that respects the text and enriches our faith.

The book you are holding in your hands is light on theory and heavy on practice. Each chapter is my reading of a text through this dual lens in reflection on a key Christian truth or reality, like God, hope, and sin. The reading performed in each chapter does not displace a literary reading but stands upon it like on a ladder, elevating our textual engagement from one plane to another, to challenge us and help us gain a more

expansive view. To mix analogies, the literary reading—attending to the form, content, themes, and devices of a text—becomes a bridge to theological musings: How does the text in its shape and substance raise important questions or prompt crucial lessons about ourselves, God, and the world as we know it? The answers to these questions, found through these texts being read in this manner, can make our faith more whole and more just.

Reading beyond Empathy

The great film critic Roger Ebert once called movies “empathy machines.”¹ The same can be said of literature. To read literature is to incarnate and inhabit the experience of another, as crafted by the author. Literature’s empathic power is why abolitionists leveraged slave narratives to warm the cold consciences of northerners indifferent to the suffering of enslaved Black persons. To read literature is to experience what Martha Nussbaum calls “links of possibility,” a powerful bond of empathy.²

But a theological reading of literature demands we do more than empathize. In fact, a theological approach necessarily demotes empathy from one of the central purposes of our reading to a good product that happens along the way. We are after not less than empathy but more.

A theological reading of literature takes human experience seriously enough to examine it through the grid of divine revelation; it’s the sacred, dignifying task of placing our collective story, told through literature, in conversation with God’s story. It’s listening to the stories of human experience with ears attuned to questions raised, the mind engaged in theological interplay, and the heart sensitive to the concern of human persons and the God whose image we all share.

An example may help. To read Richard Wright’s *Native Son* with empathy is to put yourself in Bigger Thomas’s traumatized existence, walking hundreds of pages in his protagonist shoes. But to read *Native Son* theologically is to do one better; it’s to walk farther in Bigger’s shoes, not ending our journey once we reach the road to empathy but seeking to reach the road to Emmaus, finding the intersection between the story of Bigger and the story of Jesus. A theological reading also considers that Wright, the author of *Native Son*, has something interrogative and constructive to say to our faith as we reflect on what that challenging message might be. To read Black literature through a theological lens is to affirm the dignity

of these stories, the wisdom of these authors, and the power of God's revelation to speak a word to us amid our collective lived experience.

The Possibility of Reading Black Books Theologically

Literature is ripe for this sort of theological reflection precisely because literature is story. And story preserves and explores our existential longings and our experiential wanderings. Reflecting theologically on literature is not far from reflecting theologically on life in all its piercing pain, profound confusion, and glimpses of joy.

Literature as story not only captures and portrays; it also has explanatory power. It seeks to make sense of life in the world. In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison presents such a question: But what kind of society will make them see me? For just and whole believers, such an inquiry cannot be answered only sociologically. The question begs to be read as a theological ask: How do we see and order human relation so that the God-given dignity of people is seen, not denied? By trying to make theological sense of our stories, we seek to bring the human predicament into the light and sense of God's kingdom.

All of which means that thinking theologically about seminal African American literature to embody a more whole and just faith is especially valuable, though rarely done. Because one's lived experience shapes one's theological inquiry, African American literature is a potent resource for theological reflection. Our literature lays bare the core concerns of modern Black experience, to which our faith has something to say. In a significant way, this book is a broadly Christian *and* a Black Christian project because a key source of reflection is the themes and concerns of Black experience represented in the literature of some of our greatest twentieth-century authors.

The Benefits of Reading Black Books Theologically

I see at least three primary benefits of reading classic Black literature with a theological perspective. First, such a reading provides *edification* and *encouragement* by demonstrating the coherence of Christianity and Black experience and concern. Second, it offers a *constructive challenge* by illuminating the blind spots where our faith and practice have not attended

to the concerns of Black experience through a lived biblical ethic, proof of a truncated righteousness and a malnourished theological imagination. Third, it provides *invitation* by showing us new areas where creative and faithful reflection and practice are needed.

Alongside these, there are the literary benefits—empathy, imagination, understanding. It is my profound joy to introduce readers to some of the most riveting texts in our literary tradition and to add a new lens of exploration for those who know these texts intimately. It is my prayer that this dual lens—the literary and the theological—will have a dual impact, making us better readers of the text and better icons of the faith.

So while African American believers will have a profound interest in this work, it is in no way exclusive in its audience or its benefits. I believe those well versed in these literary texts will gain much from these reflections, as will those coming to these works for the very first time. Readers may choose to read the literary text before, alongside, or after the corresponding chapter—each will yield its benefits. (Note that spoilers do abound, but the texts examined here are worthy of multiple readings.) There’s much here for Christians of all backgrounds and the spiritually curious to learn concerning both these seminal texts and the Christian faith.

Toward a More Whole and Just Faith

The conviction that a particular reading of African American literature can help make our faith more whole and just is a nod to the famous words of Frederick Douglass, who distinguished between the two forms of Christianity at play in America. Douglass boldly declared:

What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the *slaveholding religion* of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference. . . . To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.³

According to Douglass, America has been home to two forms of Christianity, one whole and “proper” and one “corrupt” and “partial.” Some of the concerns addressed in the literature we’ll examine are those that “the

Christianity of this land,” to borrow Douglass’s phrase, has given only cursory or warped attention.

Theological reflection on the experience of Black folks, as told in our seminal literature, therefore encompasses a desire to move from the partial and warped to the whole and holy. This approach shines a multidirectional light, illuminating some of American Christianity’s residual blind spots while highlighting the enduring beauty of Black Christian faith particularly and the truth and beauty of “proper” Christianity generally. The separation between doctrine and ethics—between body and soul, between what is believed and what is lived, between orthodoxy and orthopraxy—is the seed of the partial faith Douglass decries. Faithfully integrating body and soul concerns—as a dual-lens reading does—is one critical way to return to a faith that is whole and just.

An Orientation before Reading

What is African American literature? For African descendants in America, our literature was first forged in the same fire that sparked African American Christianity: the harrowing trauma of chattel slavery. Put most simply, African American literature is literary texts concerned with or expressive of Black experience, from the vernacular tradition birthed on cotton fields—our church songs, oral tales, and spirituals—to the literary tradition that includes the poems of Margaret Walker and the novels of Toni Morrison.

Both our literature and our Christian faith were born of our historical experience. Both are like roses that grew from the concrete, beauty emerging from the brutal conditions of our suffering. That slaves—banned from becoming literate—developed both oral and written literary excellence is no small feat. That slaves embraced and purified the very faith held by their slave masters as a proslavery tool of oppression is a wonder and a testimony.

While I caught bits and pieces growing up, I didn’t get anything close to a proper introduction to African American literature until my studies as an undergraduate and then in graduate school. Since then, I’ve wrestled for years with the connection between Black literature and Christianity, first as a student, then briefly as an adjunct English professor, and primarily as a pastor, slowly discovering how our literature can prompt us to think more robustly about our faith and how our faith gives us a grid through which to ponder the experiences described in our literature.

I mention this because, for both the novice and the experienced, African American literature is often difficult to read in form and content. Here Christians should hypothetically be somewhat prepared, since Scripture is often difficult terrain for the same reasons. Like Scripture, African American literature is unflinchingly honest in its depiction of human depravity. As readers engage the literary texts covered in this book, it is important to read prayerfully and communally, remembering that, as with Scripture, description does not mean prescription or endorsement.

In preparing to engage African American literature, readers should recall that the truth is often troubling. The world is a joyful and cold and brutal place—and Christians, of all people, know and reckon with reality in both its glory and its devastation. This means being prepared for the trauma and grime of *Beloved* and the violence of *Native Son*. Readers should respect their conscience, evaluate the work critically in relation to its theme and form, and consider how the truth of the human condition is being unfurled. These are large and difficult tasks to do by oneself. Take up these texts with somebody else and work through the beauty and devastation together. Reading these texts—alongside this book—can help us become incarnate in the stories and wounds of others, as Christ did for us.

Also note that my readings are not a presumption or an argument that any of the authors I engage with possessed an explicit Christian or theological agenda. The theologizing emerges from my reading of their literary forms and themes as a literary-minded pastor-theologian. This means that chapters are a blend of close reading, theological reflection, and Christian proclamation and application. Depending on the literary work in question, chapters vary, with some taking on an apologetic flair—answering the concerns of a text with a particular Christian conception—and others demonstrating how an author’s content and craft showcase a positive resonance with or critical approach to the Christian tradition.

To attend to some of the seminal writers of the twentieth century, as I do in this project, is to look at authors who did not necessarily write with an explicit theological purpose the way Phyllis Wheatley or Douglass did. This nonreligious factor makes their concerns, I believe, more pressing and important for Christians to examine. Again, these authors serve as wise guides leading us to grasp afresh the questions and themes of Black experience, which our faith has grappled with—and must continue to do so.

A few others have taken up this important and rich symbiotic connection between Black literature and Christianity. In 1938, Benjamin E. Mays

published *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature*, turning a keen analytical eye toward the evolution of African Americans' depiction of God and Christianity. I see this present work as a remixed homage to Mays's work, showcasing central questions at the heart of Black experience in America and the contours of Christian faith and responding to such questions biblically, contextually, and prophetically.

I have attempted to come to this book about books as a guide who integrates my affections: my love for these stories, my love for what they say about Black experience in both trials and triumphs, and my love for Jesus and his kingdom. Whether you have just picked up a book by James Baldwin at Target or have a dog-eared copy, it is my prayer that the fruit of this book will reflect something of this motivational origin, that as you generously give of your time to read and engage this work, you will find your own love inflamed and increased both for these texts and for the Word who became flesh to interpret all stories and embrace all peoples. May we lean in together, listening by reading, and in the process may our faith be made more whole and just, to the glory of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Image of God

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

But what kind of society will make him see me . . .

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

“I am a man.” On February 12, 1968, over two hundred Black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, bore this revolutionary message written on signs and embodied in their protest against the work conditions that had led to the death of two fellow workers.¹ The strike, which included more than one thousand Black sanitation workers, drew the support of Martin Luther King Jr., who would give the last days of his life to this cause. “You are here,” King proclaimed to those on strike, “to demand that Memphis will see the poor.” One of the sanitation workers described the motive and message years later: “We felt we would have to let the city know that because we were sanitation workers, we were human beings. The signs we were carrying said ‘I Am a Man.’”²

Christianity is no stranger to the importance of “I am” statements. God’s self-disclosure declared him to be I AM (Exod. 3:14). Through seven “I am” statements, John’s Gospel explains who Jesus is, the eternal Word made flesh. There is, then, both theological origin and depth to the “I am

a man” declaration of those workers. The declaration is a demand, in the face of the opposite, to be recognized and seen as a person whose being derives from the Creator God himself. It is a call to be seen as fully human and made in the image of God.

The image of God is like a doctrinal diamond, refracting multiple truths about humanity. From its first pages, Scripture sets forth the image of God (*imago Dei*) by declaring God as Creator and humanity as creature-persons: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27).³ An endless and wondrous catalog of diverse emphases and applications emerges from this doctrine. Two broad categories of this truth—*structure* and *function*—help demonstrate the beauty and, sometimes, the neglect at work in our conception of being image bearers of God.

The image of God answers the existential question, What in the world am I in this world for? In the mandate to worship God, reflect him through-out creation, carry out his rule over the world, exist in flourishing relationship to other image bearers, we encounter the *functional* aspect of being a person, an image bearer. In this truth, we see the wondrous purpose for which each of us was formed and fashioned. We are God’s representatives, our image marking his dominion over the earth. We are to be in covenant relationship with him, and we are to reflect his righteousness (Eph. 4:24). The image of God can be understood as “the special status that all human beings have as those made to reflect our Creator’s character and commissioned to carry out his purposes in the world.”⁴

For such a massive mandate, resources are required. The *structural* aspect of the *imago Dei* means that God has created us with wondrous capacities—rationality, creativity, relationality—that, though marred by sin, still mirror him and help us fulfill our divine function and purpose. The *imago Dei* in us “must therefore be seen as involving both the structure” (our “gifts, capacities, and endowments”) and our “functioning” (our “actions,” “relationships to God and to others,” and the uses of our God-given “gifts”).⁵

What’s Missing: The Visceral Doctrine

Thinking *structurally* and *functionally* helps us grasp some essential contours of the *imago Dei*, a layered and extensive theological category. Still, when we turn to the realities of image bearers, like those revealed by the sanitation workers in Memphis or expressed in a literary work like *Invisible*

Man (1952), much standard Protestant theological reflection does not account for the doctrinal elephant in the room. What does it mean to live as an image bearer when other image bearers try to limit your existence? While the image of God cannot be extinguished in any person, the freedom to image God can be restricted—not simply by our sin but by the unrighteousness of others. This is a theme not always explored by theologians but vital to African American experience in the face of racism and thus central to Black theologians and novelists and to our very notions of what it means to be human.

What remains overlooked in some conceptions of the *imago Dei* is the necessity of embodied expression. An overemphasis on the structural elements of the *imago Dei* “often emphasizes human capacities in rather disembodied ways.”⁶ This reductionism in turn leads to what theologian Marc Cortez describes as a temptation “to be satisfied with an account of ‘true humanity’ as an abstract concept separate from the hard realities of a broken world.”⁷ Black literature, like *Invisible Man*, will not permit such abstractions. This is its gift, because by situating our understanding of the *imago Dei* alongside the hard realities of a broken world, we escape reductionism and venture into a deeper exploration of what it means to image God. We find that the image of God in us is not solely our relationality, rationality, or creativity: it is those things—and more—strung together, expressed in our actual living, manifested and enacted in our bodies, “extend[ing] to the whole person . . . in soul and body, in all . . . faculties and powers.”⁸ The agency and power to righteously express one’s essence and function as an image bearer—that is, mirroring God, ruling over his creation, exercising autonomy, and being treated with dignity and returning the favor—is part of the image of God in action. *Invisible Man*’s attention to the embodied experience of invisibility pushes us into a deeper recognition that the *imago Dei* is a visceral doctrine concerned with blood and bones, dignity and freedom, bodies and sight.

Ellison’s Invisibility and Image

Widely lauded as one of the finest twentieth-century novels, *Invisible Man* is an expansive, landmark text, tracing the painful absurdity of Black life in the Jim Crow South and the thinly veiled racism of the urbane North. Ellison’s novel is comedic and tragic, gritty and surreal, mythic and symbolic, layered and accessible. At its center is Ellison’s nameless protagonist

and his quest to find dignity in an American society devout in its denial of his humanity.

The novel opens with the protagonist mulling over his life's journey—the events readers will soon experience—with an arresting, metaphorical “I am” declaration: “I am an invisible man.”⁹ Invisibility in *Invisible Man* conveys restricted freedom and selective visibility. Readers quickly find that Invisible, the nameless protagonist, is not seen as a full human complete with autonomy and dignity. He is viewed only as a living pawn to be acted upon or moved in service to any agenda but his own.

Invisible's invisibility demonstrates one manifestation of our fractured, sin-plagued image bearing: image bearers degrading and limiting image bearers. “What makes sin so serious” writes theologian Anthony Hoekema, “is precisely the fact that man is now using God-given and God-imaging powers and gifts to do things that are an affront to his Maker.”¹⁰ In *Invisible Man*, the affront to the Maker is the use of God-given imaging powers to inhibit the freedom to image. In a cruel irony that runs against the grain of creation, image bearers strip fellow image bearers of the freedom to image by applying their God-given capacities to restrict the image-bearing capacities of others. To experience such is to be seen not as an image bearer but as a commodity, selectively worthy of humane treatment, one who is in the end expendable and therefore invisible.

The Source of Invisibility

What is the source of Invisible's invisibility? As quickly as we hear Invisible's declaration, “I am an invisible man,” we learn the cause of his plight. His invisibility is not the result of a defect in him but is a moral fault found in those who behold him: “My invisibility . . . occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.”¹¹ The problem of Invisible's invisibility—and thus the problem of Black people's disregarded dignity—is firmly in the eyes of the beholder, the eyes of the white individuals who make up the society in which the nameless Invisible navigates as Ellison's proxy for countless Black Americans.

This sort of diagnosis raises the eyebrows of theologically minded readers, drawing us toward the notion of sin—a malfunction of the spirit, a malady that burrows deeper than rational, surface externals. That this

“peculiar disposition” is “a matter of . . . their *inner* eyes” suggests that the source of the scourge is not an occasional slipup but more like an error bred in the bones.¹² The problem is more ontological than functional. Though the *inner eyes* of fellow image bearers are the cause of invisibility, the impact upon Invisible is restrictive, and it is felt bodily.

The novel’s early battle-royal scene is an appalling example of invisibility and its visceral, bodily consequences. As the high school valedictorian of his southern school, Invisible is invited to deliver a speech on Black humility to an audience of the town’s most important white leaders. Upon arrival, Invisible is not called to the podium but forced by the white organizers to partake in the entertainment that precedes his speech. What follows is a traumatizing, degrading debacle: Ten Black students are led into a smoky ballroom under the drunken gaze of “the most important men of the town . . . bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers, merchants” and placed before a “magnificent blonde [woman]—stark naked” before being blindfolded, set in a makeshift boxing ring, and commanded to blindly beat each other battle-royal-style while the white townsmen hoot, holler, and hurl racial epithets.¹³ Bruised and beaten, Invisible is thankful to close the night with his speech, swallowing his own blood and saliva to expound on the need for Blacks to be humble and socially responsible. He’s rewarded with a briefcase and a scholarship to a Negro college. He feels “an importance I had never dreamed.”¹⁴

The battle royal, in the novel’s view, is society in miniature: Black people are visible only within the confines of a commodified existence. Representatives of every slice of society gaze upon Invisible as a means to an end, a human prop for fetishized entertainment and a muzzled voice for proclaiming that the absence of equality is due to the absence of Black responsibility. Because Invisible is invisible, he must entertain before he speaks, and even his rhetorical pursuits are confined to the talking points of a segregated society. The crowd hardly listens to a word of Invisible’s speech about social responsibility “until, no doubt distracted by having to gulp down my own blood, I made a mistake and yelled a phrase I had often seen denounced in newspaper editorials, heard debated in private”—he yells out “social equality.”¹⁵ Then “the laughter hung smokelike in the sudden stillness,” and “sounds of displeasure filled the room.” Invisible’s slip of the tongue puts the crowd at attention and himself under interrogation.

“You sure that about ‘equality’ was a mistake?”

“Oh, yes, sir,” I said. “I was swallowing blood.”

“Well, you had better speak more slowly so we can understand. We mean to do right by you, but you’ve got to know your place at all times. All right, now, go on with your speech.”¹⁶

To know his place is to embrace their limits on his freedom, his body, his image bearing. He is restricted in his freedom to image God, his body forced to perform violence and his mind and mouth encouraged to preach a false gospel of dignity through merit.

The Function of Blood

Blood functions in two pivotal ways in this moment in Invisible’s journey that illumine the dignity and physicality of the *imago Dei*. Blood, of course, is charged with theological significance. In Scripture, blood makes expiation for sin (Lev. 17:11), and “the life of every creature is its blood” (Lev. 17:14). Hymns like “Nothing but the Blood” and gospel classics that declare “the blood still works” speak to the nature of our salvation: in Jesus, “we have redemption through his blood” (Eph. 1:7). Life, both temporal and eternal, is a matter of blood.

The theological significance of blood reveals deeper insight into Invisible’s blood-swallowing denial. To even utter words that blame Black responsibility for the problem of white racism—the message that appeases the white crowd—Invisible must swallow his own blood, the very substance of life within him. To champion social responsibility as the path to human dignity is to deny one’s God-given humanity as an image bearer. Dignity by works is a false gospel. Dignity is not earned; it is given, and given by the very hand and heart of God, who fashioned us. Dignity is rooted in the *imago Dei*; it is the inherent freedom of all persons to be; it is the right to live as image bearers. These are the theological realities Invisible must swallow and deny in order to proclaim responsibility as the way out of invisibility, responsibility as the ladder to that basic right of equality. Under the threat of violence upon his body, he must swallow and downplay the life in him.

In Holy Communion, the church partakes in the mystery of the body and the blood of Christ, a sacrament that unites us as one in Christ as we feed on his life and death. To have fellowship with this society that possesses warped inner eyes, Invisible must partake of a disfigured sacrament, one not of union but of denial. He must swallow his own blood, denying his own dignity, to survive and advance. Under the gaze of those who see

us as invisible, there can exist no true embodied association befitting an image bearer, only a false peace achieved through an unholy self-denial.

Blood That Cries Out

Invisible's blood speaks another, better word than denial. His blood cries out like Abel's, though not from the ground but from within his own body. Invisible, "distracted by having to gulp down" his own blood, calls out unintentionally for social equality, the very freedom to live as a person imbued with dignity as an image bearer of God. The better word that Invisible speaks, caused by the presence of his blood, is the message of equality and dignity that finds its weightiest anchor in the *imago Dei*: I am a man. What Invisible must deny—his blood—is the very substance that causes him to call out for the dignity befitting all image bearers. It is blood, the source of life and salvation, that causes a divine slip of the tongue: image bearers are made for dignity and freedom.

Invisible Man's focus on the physicality of invisibility can help remind readers that the *imago Dei* is a matter not of abstraction but of embodiment. This does not mean, as disability studies have shown us, that disabled persons are less the image than the able-bodied. Rather, it means that imaging is for all—not simply theoretical but lived. The image of God contains structures like rationality but at the same time supersedes them. What good is it—as in Invisible's case—to reflect on your rational capacities when you can employ them only under the threat of violence or censor? The freedom to be all that God has made a person to be is an indispensable part of what it means to carry the mantle of image bearer.

Theologian Bruce Fields asserts that "the most heinous manifestation of racism is to deny, in various forms, the full humanity of other human beings created in the image of God."¹⁷ This denial is invisibility, a visual rejection of God and his image in all human persons. Just as the *imago Dei* is a bodily doctrine, invisibility is a bodily denial. It leaves persons objectified, dehumanized, forced to choke down, literally or metaphorically, their own blood. This visceral aspect is easily forgotten. As Ta-Nehisi Coates observes, "All our phrasing—*race relations*, *racial chasm*, *racial justice*, *racial profiling*, *white privilege*, even *white supremacy*—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth."¹⁸ All this, *Invisible Man* reminds us, is connected to the invisibility of human

dignity, which is tied to the freedom and flourishing of human persons, not in theory but in flesh.

Living Invisible

Visibility and dignity are at the crux of much of African American history. When Richard Allen and Absalom Jones simply wanted to pray in the front of their church undisturbed, they sought to be seen in body and soul. When Sojourner Truth raised her voice to speak for the rights of Black women, declaring, “Ain’t I a woman?” she effectively issued a rhetorical demand to be seen.¹⁹ They sought to be seen as those made and dignified by God, for they knew they were viewed by most as invisible.

Though our stories are not as harrowing as those of centuries past, we each carry our own stories of being rendered invisible. Years later, I’m still shell-shocked that after an innocuous spat, a girl in my seventh-grade class looked at me and did not see me as a whole person but as *something* to whom she could declare, “I wish we still had you as slaves.” I don’t remember if I even uttered a word in response, but I remember what I felt, and invisible is tragically fitting. That moment brings to mind others—friends no longer speaking to me after talking with their parents, and my first assault by the N-word—all producing a strange realization of how I was seen.

Invisible’s realization of his invisibility is a traumatic awakening that builds, like a cursed crescendo, through the course of the novel. For most of the novel, Invisible recounts his days prior to recognizing his invisibility. We watch as Invisible lives with pharisaical adherence to the laws of respectability politics and ideals of personal responsibility, only to be boomeranged back and forth between false hope and dehumanizing embarrassment, finding himself used and discarded by each figurehead and institution he encounters. In this way, *Invisible Man* immerses us in the disorienting whirlwind of living as one rendered invisible by fellow persons, structures, and systems.

Living invisible—as one whose dignity is given by God but denied by humanity—produces profound internal tension and can leave an indelible mark of existential confusion. Invisible experiences a dizzying conflict and disorientation at a most fundamental level of personhood: his identity. His existence is marked by a “painful, contradictory voice . . . within me,” a pulsating “guilt and puzzlement” as he feels the pull of revenge toward an unjust society and his “obsession with my identity” in the form of questions like, “Who was I, how had I come to be?”²⁰

These are the grand questions of existence we were made to ask. Danger lurks in the horde of answers that offer definitions of self and dignity in every which way besides the truth of our belonging to God and bearing his image. For those who search for dignity and identity under the harsh gaze of inner eyes that see them as invisible, the challenge takes on another layer of danger. If we are not carefully armed with a countertruth, then how they see us soon becomes how we see ourselves. Like Invisible, we will swallow our own blood and internalize the gaze of their inner eyes. There is then grave danger emotionally, spiritually, and physically of living in a chaotic world that possesses an unholy, demeaning gaze that looks upon image bearers of God and pronounces them invisible.

This danger forms part of the epic conflict pulsating at the heart of *Invisible Man*: Invisible's quest to find himself and assert his dignity against the persons and forces that see him as selectively and partially human. The image of God in man and woman necessitates the freedom to exist and image, but living invisible means, at nearly every turn, having this freedom challenged and constrained, not simply by one's own sin nature but by the unrighteousness of others.

The Search for Visibility

The story line of the novel advances as Invisible experiences the whiplash of his invisibility and responds with new strategies—from personal responsibility to career prospects to political activism—for coping with his invisibility and asserting his personhood as a man.²¹ In particular, education, via the scholarship to a Negro college won at the battle royal, becomes Invisible's messianic hope. But he soon suffers a crisis when his college tenure dissolves after he chauffeurs his school's white trustee, Mr. Norton, on a voyeuristic ride to observe the troubling lives of nearby rural Black folks, leaving the trustee deeply traumatized. The Negro college president, Dr. Bledsoe, castigates Invisible for not knowing that he should have lied to Mr. Norton and kept him in the confines of the campus. After rebuking Invisible (“instead of uplifting the race, you've torn it down”²²), Dr. Bledsoe expels him from the college and sends him into exile: he is to journey to New York City to work and earn tuition for the following year.

Dr. Bledsoe sends Invisible away with seven sealed letters addressed to “several friends of the school” who will do “something” for Invisible upon his arrival in the North. Though the letters are meant to introduce

Invisible and request help to get him a job, Dr. Bledsoe warns that the letters must remain sealed if Invisible wants help, for “white folks are strict about such things.”²³ As Invisible’s hope shifts from education to employment, Ellison’s imagery mirrors John’s apocalypse, the book of Revelation, in which the seven seals cannot be opened but by the Lamb, and the seals bring judgment upon the earth (Rev. 6:1–17).

Such biblical allusions foreshadow ominous fortunes for Invisible that he, still unaware of his invisibility, cannot discern. Instead, he sees in the letters the newest path to traverse to arrive at a sense of identity and dignity. Encouraged that the letters “were addressed to some of the most important men in the whole country,” Invisible enters his northern exile with a burgeoning sense of dignity on account of the sealed letters, though this confidence is tempered, for the letters are seen by no one:

I caught myself wishing for someone to show the letters to, someone who could give me a proper reflection of my importance. Finally, I went to the mirror and gave myself an admiring smile as I spread the letters upon the dresser like a hand of high trump cards.²⁴

Understood theologically, Invisible’s desire for “a proper reflection of my importance” is the longing to be seen by others in such a manner that confirms the image of God in him and ratifies his inherent dignity in deed and in word. This longing is part of Invisible’s lifelong search for self: “All my life I had been looking for something and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. . . . I was looking for myself.”²⁵ It is the longing of the human heart that is fearfully and wonderfully made: the desire to know ourselves as full of dignity and to have our dignity affirmed, not only in ourselves by ourselves, but by the world at large.

Invisible’s longing for a proper reflection of his importance prompts questions about the toil of living invisible and the communal nature of imaging God together. Finding no proper reflection of his importance as an image bearer in a Jim Crow world, Invisible labors to give himself what he has not received from others. He turns to the mirror to gain a proper glimpse of his visibility as it reflects his own image and the sealed letters. But with no one to properly see and affirm his dignity, Invisible’s turn toward the mirror falls flat, a demonstration that the image of God in us is most seen and celebrated in community, not in isolation.

It is together, not in isolation, that a proper reflection of our importance as the *imago Dei* is most fully affirmed. “Humanization,” Fields notes,

“does not occur autonomously. . . . The capacity to experience full humanity is developed in the context of more than one, that is, in community.”²⁶ This truth reveals the callous capacity of a Jim Crow society and a broken humanity. The former’s effects linger among us, while the latter is a reality firmly fixed. Quite naturally, the bent of our land and of our hearts is not the affirmation of the *imago Dei* but the commodification of the image, the exaltation of the dollar, and the maintenance of the status quos that thinly mask racialized realities. In creation, we were made for association—with God and one another—but in society, we experience alienation. Who, then, can give us a proper reflection of ourselves in a world that bombards us with messages that demean and wound us in ways that make us interrogate our own God-given dignity?

Left to himself, Invisible turns, in part, to himself, lifting his own smile upon himself, reflecting himself to himself, in a move reminiscent of the Lord’s countenance smiling upon Israel, declared in the Aaronic priestly blessing (Num. 6:24–26). With no one willing to affirm the reflection of God in him, Invisible takes that priestly duty upon himself. He does so in a syncretistic flourish, not solely believing in his dignity as an image bearer but resting also on the promise of the sealed letters. The scene is tragic, for the letters in which he hopes are but a flimsy substitute for what he is himself: one made in God’s image.

At this point, Invisible reflects us back to us. There is dignity in our merits, work, and education. But not the sort of foundational dignity that can bear the weight of defining us in a world often out to degrade us or to deify us—both of which distort the image. As those made to mirror God, we must continually look upward, toward him. We are not those afraid of the horizontal. We can and must look to the mirror of our existence, trace the structural gifts of our humanity, feel the spark of dignity in us, and rehearse, each day, that we are made and seen by a good and gracious Creator. But we must look to God to know something of the deep dignity that is within us as those redeemed and covenantally loved by God.

Those rendered invisible by the world must gaze upon the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15–20). It is in Jesus of Nazareth, the image of the invisible God whose image we bear, that we receive a proper reflection of ourselves in the most profound sense. It is this Jesus who came for and among the invisible of the world: those deemed less than, those beheld with a gaze of hatred and indifference, those classified by the world as unworthy, unfit, unlovely. The knowledge and reception of God’s love is transformative for all, but especially for the invisible. Speaking of the

disinherited, a body of people similar to those seen as invisible, Howard Thurman points out that “the awareness of being a child of God tends to stabilize the ego and results in a new courage, fearlessness, and power.”²⁷ To know deep in one’s bones that one is made and loved by God is to be filled with reservoirs of resolve to image God in freedom and righteousness, no matter the world’s gaze.

The Fault of the Inner Eyes

Because the novel’s narrative is foregrounded with the revelation of Invisible’s invisibility (“their *inner* eyes”) and his opening “I am” declaration (“I had to discover I am an invisible man”), most of the novel sizzles with the tension of anticipation: When and how will Invisible discover he is invisible? Ellison creates a layered sense of dramatic irony. We know, as readers, that Invisible is invisible, and Invisible as the narrator knows the same, but the Invisible we follow in the chapters of the novel is not yet woke from his slumber.

In step with the novel’s attention to the embodied nature of visibility and dignity, Invisible’s epiphany moment is also visceral. Now a grassroots activist in Harlem for a multiethnic movement called “the Brotherhood,” Invisible is a dynamic speaker under the marching orders of Brother Jack, a white man, and the movement’s mission to shape “a better world for all people.”²⁸ Here too Ellison’s protagonist is soon confronted with the ugly truth of his invisibility. In the eyes of this movement, he is less a person and more a commodity. After leading an unauthorized protest in honor of Brother Tod, Invisible finally understands how he is perceived. As Brother Jack berates Invisible for speaking without the permission of the Brotherhood’s committee, he pounds the table and yells his rebuke, and Ellison shows us the root cause of invisibility from Invisible’s view:

Suddenly something seemed to erupt out of his face. You’re seeing things, I thought, hearing it strike sharply against the table and roll as his arm shot out and snatched an object the size of a large marble and dropped it, plop! into his glass. . . . And there on the bottom lay an eye. A glass eye.²⁹

Ellison conveys the expected in a manner unexpected: Brother Jack has a glass eye, and everyone besides Invisible is firmly in the know. Ellison’s protagonist thinks he’s been seen in his humanity—after all, he’s been a

leader, speaker, and influencer in the movement—but the symbolism of the glass eye demonstrates otherwise. Those who possess a glass eye have, in the novel’s terms, a “polished and humane facade” of moral sight behind which is a “harsh red rawness.”³⁰ The glass eye enriches the novel’s earlier attention to the inner eyes as the cause of invisibility. How we behold others is a projection of one’s inner condition on a physical plane of another’s flesh. Our inner eyes become flesh in love and association, or glass in facade and exploitation, according to how we view the God-given flesh of others.

Soon, Invisible experiences a deeper revelation: “I looked around a corner of my mind and saw Jack, Norton, and Emerson merge into one single white figure. . . . Now I recognized my invisibility.” Each branch of society embodied by these figures—and society as a whole—possesses a glass eye, a defect that renders Black life invisible, not fully worthy of humane treatment but “simply a material, a natural resource to be used.”³¹

Invisible’s conversion moment—his awakening—is visceral and visionary. He sees things on two planes: the physical—an eye erupting from an angry white face—and the spiritual—his mind prompting a transformative vision. Both revelations affirm that the invisibility of Black people is not the result of a fault in our being or doing. The fault of invisibility resides in the gaze of persons and institutions that blend into “one single white figure.”

Though we are not sinless, we are not at fault for the invisibility imposed upon us. Like all persons, we bear God’s image. Like all humanity, we share an existence and a nature that is at once broken and beautiful. Like all people, we possess in our very selves a humanity that is worthy of affirmation, that demands an embodied freedom, and that needs gracious redemption.

Imaging rightly demands sight and freedom: true sight of self, God, and others; the freedom of our bodies to image; and, most vitally, Christ’s redeeming grace, which gives freedom from sin’s power and restores God’s image in us (Col. 3:10). Imaging rightly requires not only true self-understanding (theory) but also embodied application (freedom, practice).

Wise readers, then, will recognize that the issue of invisibility is not solved by Invisible’s self-discovery alone. No matter how he understands and sees himself, he still lives in a world where others will see him. No matter how we understand ourselves, we must reckon with how others see us—and they must reckon with how we see them. Were Invisible to have recognized his invisibility immediately, he would have stepped out of the waters of racial naivete, but his life and body would still have been, in part, subject to the gaze of others. A proper diagnosis does not automatically

produce a remedy. The novel thus continually provokes an urgent question: How can Invisible survive—the very baseline of imaging God—when the problem of his invisibility resides not in his body, his merits, or his actions but in others’ inner eyes? Translated into contemporary speak, *Invisible Man* specifically suggests that the problem is not Black lives but white sight.

Black Lives, White Sight

History holds the receipts. Whether literally or metaphorically, in words or in deeds, in aspirations or in actions, when African Americans have asserted, “I am a (wo)man, see and treat me as such,” the world by and large has scoffed, alternating between responses as explicit and violent as lynching or as subtle and nefarious as redlining. The dignity of Black persons has far too often been subordinate to the evaluative inner eyes of white sight. Functionally speaking, white sight has often determined whether Black lives matter. Lamenting the seemingly endless killings of unarmed Black people by law enforcement, Michael Eric Dyson has captured it painfully well: “We draw breath. They draw conclusions. Our lives draw to an end.”³² To be invisible is to be a people viewed on a sliding spectrum of dignity dependent on the optics of the situation and our proximity to what is deemed safe and respectable, all on the basis of another’s inner eyes.

History tells us that when it comes to the *imago Dei*, one’s doctrinal statement can be on point while one’s inner eyes are unholy. One prominent pastor-author observes:

As I reflect on several racial flashpoints over the past few years, I fear I have been too quick to think to myself, *Yes, of course, image of God. Every Christian already knows that and believes that.* But white Christians in this country have *not* always believed that, or at least they have not always acted like they really believe it.³³

This is where Black literature can push theological reflection closer to biblical wholeness. The image of God, when put in conversation with Black experience through the mode of literature, can never be reduced to theoretical belief. Ellison’s work moves us from the theoretical to the lived.

Theologically, this means the test of our belief in the *imago Dei* is not what we believe about the doctrine of the image of God but how we, in

real life, view, treat, and relate to our fellow image bearers—particularly those most prone to be rendered invisible. Our doctrine is not tested by its rational precision but by its lived application.

Beyond Binaries

While attuned to the particulars of Black plight on account of white sight, *Invisible Man* also voices concern for the universality of rendering invisibility and being rendered invisible. Ellison's concern for both the specific truth of Black experience and the universal truth of human experience manifests in the novel's structure and bookends. The novel opens with the declaration "I am an invisible man" and ends with a question: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"³⁴ *Invisible Man* begins with "I" and concludes with "you," showcasing first the particulars of invisibility manifested in Black experience before asking readers if such an experience of invisibility may also mirror their own.

The first word of the novel is a preached word, an indicative truth—I am an invisible man—and the last word, like the conclusion of a well-crafted sermon, drives the audience toward the ponderous: Does this narrative, in any way, speak for you? In this manner, the novel's framing—epilogue and prologue, opening salvo and final word—reveals part of its urgency and, in our case, its theological wisdom—that is, its pressure to consider our shared human association, how we see each other and live together.

This attention to the particulars and the universality of being invisible reflects Ellison's distinct philosophy of the human predicament, one that distanced him ideologically from the prominent Black writers of his day. Of course, by leaving his protagonist unnamed, Ellison used his character to represent the universality of Black experience in twentieth-century America. But Ellison stubbornly refused to be pigeonholed as a writer of the Black experience alone. True literature, in Ellison's view, is capacious, fingering the jagged grain of the human condition in a way that transcends binaries and division. Unlike Richard Wright, Ellison's friend and early mentor whom we'll examine in later chapters, Ellison did not see Black literature's purpose as the task of protest. Literature, according to Ellison, is a container for the truth, not for protest propaganda. Literature is not indoctrination but revelation, a bright and complex light shining upon the complications of the human condition.³⁵ For this reason, such literature can deepen our theology, both in theory and in practice, and alert us to

the truth of God in places hidden due to our hesitancy to venture into the depths of human experience, Black or otherwise.

For instance, Ellison's I/you dynamic reminds us and reveals in fresh ways that we are made for life together, no matter how polarized our communities might be. We exist in a garment of inescapable mutual destiny that plays out not in the theories we believe about one another but in the dignity and visibility we perceive in and grant to one another in time and space, in embodied flesh, and in enacted freedom. We cannot image God in our fullness apart from the grace of Christ and the practice of association with one another. Thus, to not see others as image bearers is to not properly image ourselves; it is a malfunction of our divine function: life together as image bearers under the rule of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's also a malfunction of our structure as image bearers, a malfunction of body and soul and a misreading—an immoral seeing—of God's image among us in the embodied flesh of the other.

While our seeing may not be like that of Bledsoe, Norton, or Brother Jack, anytime we see and relate to others as a means to an end, eyeing them and engaging them on the level of personal gain rather than their dignity and need as an image bearer, our seeing is theologically skewed. Honest introspection—if we dare stomach it—may reveal how normalized our rendering others invisible has become. When we view children as a drain and nuisance, coworkers as footstools to our advancement, significant others as receptacles for our frustrations and dispensers of our happiness, we walk in the tragic tradition of fallen humanity, seeing God's visible image bearers not through the true lens of their dignity but selectively, as commodities. We render them invisible.

A New Imagination

Such seeing is a profound moral emergency. It ruptures the association for which we are made and reveals, as its cause, a malfunction of body and soul. Renowned twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth notes, "The human significance of the eye and all seeing" is that through our seeing "the other should be visible to and seen" as human. Tragically, "seeing is inhuman if it does not include this seeing."³⁶ Barth's wisdom, our acquaintance with sin's pervasive power, and Ellison's I/you dynamic collaborate to keep the theological insights of invisibility and moral sight from remaining comfortably on the dichotomous surface of us vs. them, white vs. Black,

minority vs. majority. A confluence of forces and experiences—Scripture, theology, our stories, and the stories of those around us—demands that we take seriously our nature and existence as those who have, in some ways, been rendered invisible and, in other ways, shamefully returned the favor. Invisible’s invisibility “exposes severe limitations in the American social imagination.”³⁷ In the face of such a judgment, who among us can claim to be fully clear of the charges?

What, then, is the way forward? If our sight is off, causing us to sin against God and his image bearers, our eyes—that is, our moral and social imagination—must be removed, replaced, redeemed. If our eyes cause us to sin, we must tear them out, Christ declared (Matt. 5:29; 18:9). How is this done with our *inner* eyes? The evaluative gaze must be replaced by our common kinship and human mutuality as those in and of God’s creation.

Our sight needs redemption, which requires both repentance and a Redeemer who can give us a fresh vision for human association by drawing us back to the old purpose for which we were made. Christ—the image of God—must be the center of our vision, but not in any one-time, generic sense. He must be the center of our vision continually in the scriptural sense as the image of true humanity and the redeemer of broken humanity. He is the one who seeks the invisible, comforts the outcast, and dissolves the hostilities between those who have seen each other through the lens of hatred, exploitation, and invisibility. It is Christ, the image of the invisible God, who mends and heals broken image bearers—body, soul, eyes, and all—so that we might grow to behold one another rightly, our bodies together in harmony as we image our Creator under the Spirit’s powerful, loving sway. For “it is a great and solemn and incomparable moment” when two persons “look themselves in the eye and discover one another.” It is this moment of seeing that “is in some sense the root formation of all humanity without which the rest is impossible.”³⁸