

Malcolm X

Premillennium Tension

Malcolm X and the Eschatology of the Nation of Islam

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In 1930, a stranger appeared in the ghetto of Detroit, selling silks, raincoats, and a new religious philosophy that catered to the needs of an oppressed African-American urban population. He taught the tenets of a new religion—the “true” religion of the dark peoples of Asia and Africa, a religion that promised empowerment and redemption for a community ravaged by racism, migration, and a debilitating economic depression. From these humble beginnings, the silk peddler Wallace D. Fard built one of the most enduring religious enclaves in the American Black community—the Nation of Islam. Elijah Muhammad, Fard’s personal assistant, carried this philosophy to a number of the Black urban centers of the North following Fard’s mysterious disappearance in 1934.

The man who sparked the major growth in the membership of the Nation of Islam, however, was Elijah Muhammad’s own disciple, Malcolm X. Malcolm’s articulation of a political and economic agenda for the Black community in the face of entrenched racism moved the Nation from the sidelines of the racial debate to the forefront of the conflict by the 1960s. Malcolm’s tenure as a minister with the NOI, dating from his parole from prison in 1952 until his break with the Nation in 1964, saw membership in the organization rise rapidly. While scholarly works and popular culture continue to appropriate Malcolm’s message of Black nationalism through political and social unity within the African Diaspora, little has been said about Malcolm’s articulation of the Nation of Islam’s theology, the original theology of his mentor Elijah Muhammad and, by proxy, Muhammad’s mentor Wallace D. Fard. Malcolm himself began to shy away from discussing the apocalyptic visions of the NOI as the movement gained more public attention through the mass media in the late 1950s. By the 1960s, Malcolm favored more “practical” solutions, like Black economic and political separation from white America and armed self-defense of Black communities. However, in Malcolm’s early days as a minister in the Nation, he relied more heavily on the Nation’s apocalyptic visions as a message of hope—and revenge—to a struggling people. Malcolm expressed this eschatology—

the events that take place at the end of the world—through repeated references to a “War of Armageddon” and the arrival of a “mother ship.”

Drawing on his knowledge of the Bible, Elijah Muhammad’s doctrines, and the doctrines of competing contemporary philosophies, Malcolm was able to convey a compelling vision of divine retribution to a community longing for justice. In his early days as a minister, Malcolm X used the Nation’s doctrines of divine retribution to not only “enlighten” his audience, but also to skewer the philosophies of his opponents—the Masonic orders and the Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example. As the Nation’s popularity and visibility increased from the late 1950s through the 1960s, however, Malcolm and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. became constructed as ideological opposites by the media. Both men became figureheads in a classic rivalry between Christianity and Islam. Thrust onto a larger stage in a competition for the minds and souls of Black America, Malcolm departed from his earlier visions of divine judgment and subsequent utopia. Instead, he castigated King and other Christian clergymen for selling this idea of “paradise in the afterlife” as a means of pacifying the Black populace.

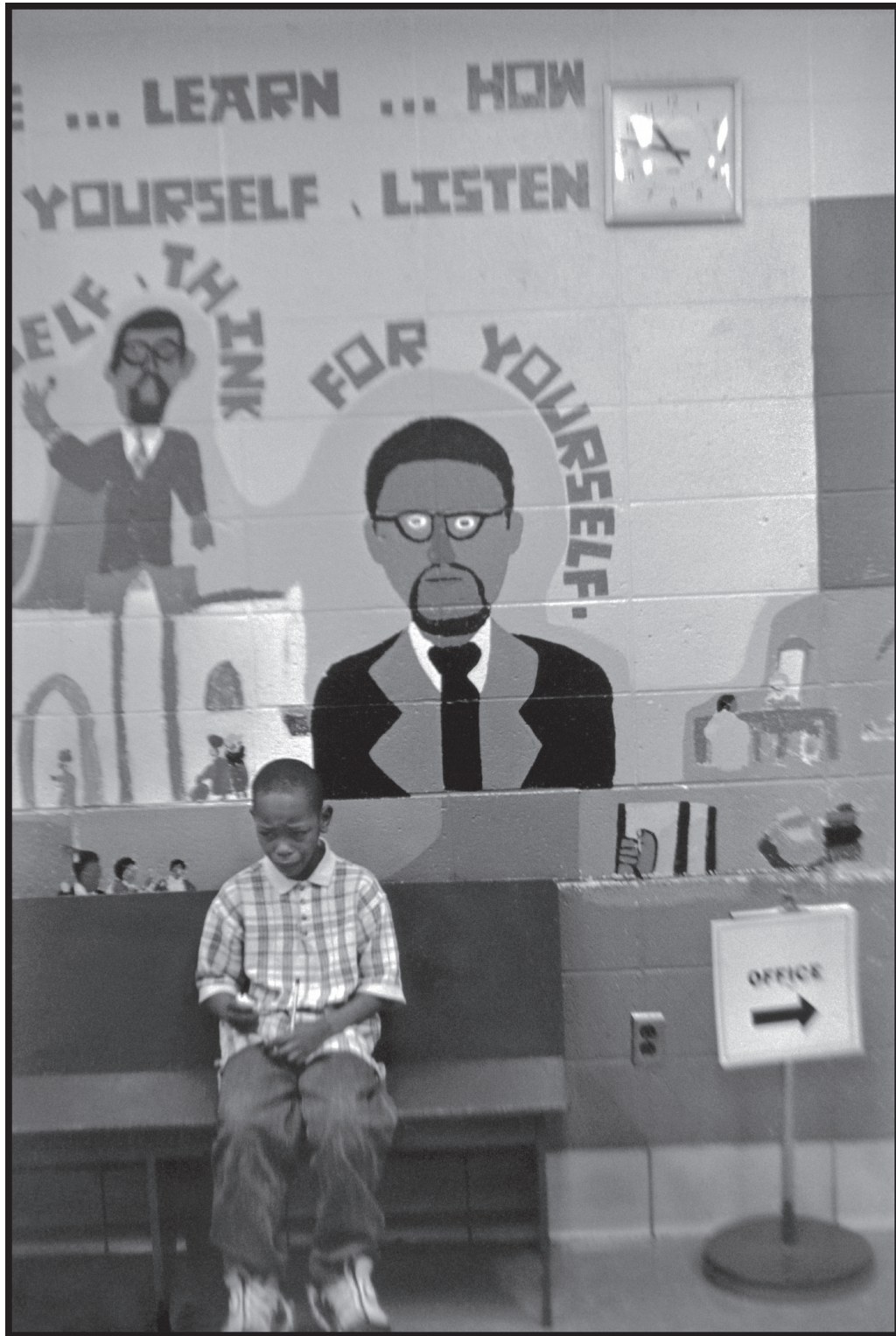
However, Malcolm’s early reliance on Nation of Islam eschatology, revealed in his references during the 1950s to a “War of Armageddon” and the “mother plane” or “mother ship,” places him firmly within a Black theological tradition of prophetic visions of deliverance. From the days of African slave narratives about “flying away” to the visions of current Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, the idea of divine retribution and subsequent deliverance has been a central component of a Black theology born beneath slavery’s yoke. This “racialized retribution” called for the salvation of the “chosen people” and the utter destruction of the non-believers and the white race.

The Exodus in Nineteenth-Century Black Theology

Malcolm employed these visions of an apocalypse in the same vein that nineteenth-century African-American Christian preachers stirred their followers with the story of Exodus and the deliverance of the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians. These visions of apocalyptic deliverance emerged as Christianity’s vision of an Exodus failed to deliver on its own promise of deliverance. It is interesting to note that eschatological theology reached its zenith in the African-American community in the times of its greatest peril. In the 1870s and 1880s, as African Americans lost many of the social and political gains of the Reconstruction period, some African-American clergy began to articulate millennial visions of divine judgment and deliverance for their people.

Ministers like James Theodore Holly (1829–1911), the first Black Episcopal bishop, and Theophilus Gould Steward (1843–1924), an African Methodist Episcopal pastor, articulated a vision of the end of white world supremacy that would occur at the end of the world. Edward E. Curtis describes these “premillennialist” ministers as the clergy who believed that the great battle between God and Satan would occur prior to Christ’s return.¹ Whether Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X knew of the work of Holly and Steward is open to speculation; nevertheless, they became part of an established tradition of Black theology.

In *The End of the World; Or, Clearing the Way for the Fullness of the Gentiles*, Theophilus Gould Steward offered his own eschatological vision of the “end times” that reflected the restlessness of African Americans. Steward wrote the tract in 1888, as African Americans witnessed the failure of the Reconstruction to provide political and social justice for newly freed slaves. The brand of Christianity espoused by white clergy in the Baptist and Methodist revivals that swept the country during the time of slavery no longer held authority for people of African descent. Steward believed that Africans would hear



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the true gospel of Christ only after the end of corruption within the philosophies and practices of the contemporary Christian church. According to Steward, the end of the present age would be marked by warfare among the various “corrupted” denominations of the Christian church. After these Christian denominations destroyed themselves, a new religious age would be born, in which the darker non-Christian peoples of the world would finally hear the true gospel—a gospel unsullied by Anglo-Saxon corruption. As Steward described in *The End of the World*, “Then the really righteous unobscured by the perverse civilization—a civilization which is called Christian, but which is essentially Saxon—shall shine forth as the sun, and this hidden church of the wilderness shall come forth to lead Africa’s millions, as a part of that fullness of the Gentiles which is to come to welcome the universal Christ.”²

James Theodore Holly also outlined a role for historically oppressed races at the end of time. Holly, writing in 1884, claimed that divine retribution would occur at the conclusion of three distinct phases of Christian development. The first phase belonged to the Semitic race—the Hebrews—who preserved the Biblical scriptures. This phase ended in 70 A.D., after the destruction of the Temple. The second phase belonged to the Japhetic race—the Europeans—who were responsible for spreading the gospel during the current wave of evangelical Christianity. This second phase would end in warfare, after which a third millennial phase would begin. In this thousand-year period of peace and justice, the Hamitic races—the Africans—would finally bring the promise of Christianity to fruition. Holly wrote in “The Divine Plan of Human Redemption, In Its Ethnological Development” that “the crowning work of the will of God is reserved for the millennial phase of Christianity when Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands directly unto God.”³

Likewise, Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X’s vision of the “last times” emerged as African Americans struggled against lynching and Jim Crow segregation from the end of the Garveyite movement of the 1930s through the 1960s. The visions of Armageddon and the mother plane/mother ship are the logical outcomes of the Exodus story. The failure of the Exodus to deliver African Americans into the Promised Land in a timely fashion called for the articulation of a vision that would provide a finite point, a point where the tyranny of the oppressor would violently end and a new liberated age would be born.

The Exodus in Twentieth-Century Black Theology

The Christian concept of the Exodus resonated with the African-American community during centuries of enslavement. The Biblical Exodus narrative is split into three parts: the oppression of the Israelites by the Egyptians, the journey of the liberated Israelites through the wilderness, and finally their arrival in Canaan, the “Promised Land.” The story of the deliverance of the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians provided slaves in the United States with a framework for understanding the Middle Passage, enslavement, and the promise of emancipation.⁴ However, the failure of African Americans to reach the fabled “Promised Land” after emancipation called for a revision to this philosophy within the community.

Malcolm X also employed the metaphor of the Exodus in his contemporary model of African-American deliverance. Christian contemporaries of Malcolm struggled with the idea of reaching the “Promised Land,” a place that never seemed to get any closer despite the mounting tribulations of the wilderness. While the Biblical account of the Exodus ends with the arrival of the Israelites in the land of Canaan, African-American clergy were generally unable to add a satisfactory conclusion to their story of the Exodus. Certainly, African Americans had endured enslavement and liberation from slavery by the

time Malcolm X began his ministry in the 1950s. For African Americans, however, it appeared that no “Promised Land” was in sight. For Malcolm, Elijah Muhammad was the modern personification of Moses, destined to lead African Americans away from slavery in “Egypt” (America) under the hand of “Pharaoh” (President Dwight D. Eisenhower).⁵

The Nation of Islam propagated a Black theology of liberation that spoke to the contemporary plight of African Americans in urban centers. By the time Wallace D. Fard began proselytizing in the ghettos of Detroit, African Americans had already witnessed the failure of Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) to deliver them to an earthly “Promised Land” like Canaan. Garvey lifted the hope of millions of Africans around the world with his plan of political and social self-reliance. His movement emerged in the United States at another historical low point for African Americans, coming on the heels of World War I. Black veterans returned to America from the trenches in Europe to fewer jobs, Jim Crow segregation, race riots, lynching, and a revival of the Ku Klux Klan. Garvey’s mission, outlined in the manifesto of the UNIA, called for the unity and self-determination among all African peoples. Among Garvey’s most famous exploits was the establishment of the Black Star Steamship Line, which was organized to transport millions of African Americans back “home” to a colony in Liberia. Garvey, in a sense, was himself a “modern Moses,” promising the deliverance of African Americans to the Promised Land.

Although the UNIA concentrated mainly on economic and political avenues of self-reliance for African Americans, Garvey did not neglect the realm of the sacred. He capitalized on growing resentment toward the white God propagated by the dominant Christian clergy. According to Garvey, since whatever is white cannot be beneficial to Blacks, a white God cannot be the God of nonwhite people. The Black man’s God must be Black, since God made human beings in his own image.⁶ Garvey found a preacher for his new Black religion in former Episcopal rector George Alexander McGuire, naming him the Chaplain General of the UNIA. McGuire established a seminary to train Black priests in the African Orthodox Church, sponsored by the UNIA. McGuire established the worship of a Black Christ for his congregation, and he also propagated the image of the Black Madonna and Child. By 1924, he called for the African-American faithful “to name the day when all members of the race would tear down and burn any pictures of the white Madonna and white Christ found in their homes.”⁷ Unfortunately, the rapid dissipation of the UNIA after Garvey’s deportation to Jamaica in 1927 meant that his organization never succeeded in its mission to create a new homeland and a new cosmology of Black gods. As C. Eric Lincoln argues, when Wallace D. Fard appeared in Detroit in 1930, he filled this political and theological vacuum.⁸

Wallace Fard, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X captivated African Americans by using elements of political and theological empowerment that echoed the racialized theological visions of Holly, Steward, and Garvey. The Nation of Islam’s economic platform of self-reliance—encouraging Black-owned businesses, for example—meshed neatly with the group’s theological platform of a Black God and Black liberation. But before Malcolm X began his call for the political separation of African Americans from whites, Elijah Muhammad conceptualized Black liberation from white domination through a holy “War of Armageddon” and the arrival of a “mother plane” from heaven itself.

The Eschatology of the “Mother Ship”

The “mother plane” or “mother ship” of Elijah Muhammad finds its origin in a variety of sources, both sacred and secular. Paul Gilroy claims that a young Muhammad may have been influenced by the mass destruction described in the occult writings of Helena

Blavatsky and Carl Jung.⁹ However, the most concrete antecedent of the “mother plane” lies in the vision of the prophet Ezekiel, which inaugurates his chapter in the Old Testament. Elijah Muhammad refers to this vision explicitly when discussing Allah’s “mother plane.” While in exile, Ezekiel beholds four beasts in the sky, each with four heads—the heads of a lion, an ox, an eagle, and a man. These creatures are transported about the heavens on what has become known as “Ezekiel’s Wheel”:

The appearance of the wheels and their work *was* like unto the colour of a beryl: and they four had one likeness: and their appearance and their work *was* as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel. When they went, they went upon their four sides: *and* they turned not when they went. As for their rings, they were so high that they were dreadful; and their rings *were* full of eyes round about them four. And when the living creatures went, the wheels went by them: and when the living creatures were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up. Whithersoever the spirit was to go, they went, thither *was* their spirit to go; and the wheels were lifted up over against them: for the spirit of the living creature *was* in the wheels. When those went, *these* went; and when those stood, *these* stood; and when those were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up over against them; for the spirit of the living creatures *was* in the wheels. (Ezek. 1: 16–21)

Ezekiel’s vision – recorded hundreds of years before the birth of Christ—has given rise to rampant speculation about what the prophet actually witnessed. Charles Lieb describes this “wheel within a wheel” as an early attempt to “technologize the ineffable”—that is, to apprehend the power of God in contemporary mechanical terms.¹⁰ Ezekiel frames his vision in terms of a wheel because the application of the wheel was perhaps the greatest technological innovation of his lifetime. Elijah Muhammad, as the prophet bearing witness to the greatness of Allah, aligns himself with the prophet Ezekiel by creating his own vision of the wheel. As Muhammad wrote in the Nation of Islam’s key text, *Message to the Black Man in America*:

The vision of Ezekiel’s wheel in a wheel in the sky is true if carefully understood. There is a similar wheel in the sky today which very well answers the description of Ezekiel’s vision. This wheel corresponds in a way with the sphere of spheres called the universe. . . . The Great Wheel which many of us see in the sky today is not so much a wheel as one may think in such terms, but rather a place made like a wheel. The like of this wheel-like plane was never seen before. . . . The present wheel-shaped plane known as the Mother of Planes, is one-half mile of a half mile and is the largest mechanical man-made object in the sky. It is a small human planet made for the purpose of destroying the present world of the enemies of Allah. The cost to build such a plane is staggering! The finest brains were used to build it. It is capable of staying in outer space six to twelve months at a time without coming into the earth’s gravity. It carried fifteen hundred bombing planes with most deadliest explosives—the type used in bringing up mountains on the earth. The very same method is to be used in the destruction of this world.¹¹

Elijah Muhammad conceptualized the vision of Ezekiel in the language of his own mechanical universe. The plane in outer space represented the apex of mechanical devices in the 1940s and 1950s. Elijah Muhammad was spreading the message of the “mother plane” at the same time that the United States and the Soviet Union were engaged in a “space race,” with both nations actively creating and sending their own “space ships” into the atmosphere. The world watched in wonder as men tested the final frontier, reaching into the unknown. At the same time, UFO hysteria gripped the United States after the 1947 crash of a “weather balloon” in Roswell, New Mexico. Numerous UFO sightings

were reported around the country throughout the 1950s. Elijah Muhammad's "mother plane" at first seems like the ravings of a grim lunatic. However, the "mother plane" gained more legitimacy as an expression of the divine as it emerged during the political and cultural context in which the development of the Nation of Islam took place.

By bearing witness to this vision of Allah's masterful invention of divine retribution, Elijah Muhammad gains the knowledge of Allah himself, a knowledge that he imparts to his disciples and followers. As Muhammad's chief disciple and representative during the 1950s and 1960s, Malcolm X also established himself as a teacher and prophet, bearing the divine revelations of his mentor.

Malcolm X as Prophet

In addition to providing a powerful philosophy of retribution and redemption for his followers, Elijah Muhammad established himself as a prophet with his vision of the "mother plane." As a witness to Allah's wheel-plane, Muhammad elevated himself to the level of a prophet, having firsthand knowledge of the mysteries of God. He therefore articulated a tenet of Nation of Islam philosophy, a tenet that Malcolm X would later use with great effect as he gathered followers into the fold. Malcolm set the Nation of Islam apart from the mainstream Christians and many Black religious sects by revealing the "true" nature of God to Black America. As a prophet, Malcolm himself had a vision of the Nation's founder, W. D. Fard, while in prison:

... as I lay on my bed, I suddenly, with a start, I became aware of a man sitting beside me in my chair. He had on a dark suit. I remember. I could see him plainly as I see anyone I look at. He wasn't Black, and he wasn't white. He was light-brown-skinned, an Asiatic cast of countenance, and he had oily Black hair ... I couldn't place him racially—other than that I knew he was a non-European. I had no idea whatsoever who he was. He just sat there. Then, suddenly as he had come, he was gone.¹²

Like his mentor Elijah Muhammad, he is also in the position to offer divine revelation to the followers of the Nation. Malcolm's decisions about *what* mysteries to reveal to the masses frame his particularistic interpretation of the Nation's theology. The Nation's eschatology of the "mother plane" and the "War of Armageddon," culled from prophets and preachers from Ezekiel to James Theodore Holly to Noble Drew Ali, provided a theological platform from which Malcolm could launch attacks against competing cosmologies.

On numerous occasions, Malcolm castigated the Christian clergy, both Black and white, for promoting the belief in an imaginary, mysterious heaven. Thanks to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm had the full knowledge of God—"no mysteries and spookiness, just facts that are in accord with nature."¹³ In terms of the coming War of Armageddon, Malcolm employed his logic of "nature" and his knowledge of Nation of Islam theology with great effect at an NOI rally in Philadelphia:

This is a warning to you that are living in the last day and you must decide tonight whether you want to survive the war of Armageddon. That lying preacher tells you that this is a war that will be fought between the God and the devil at the end of time. How do you think two spirits can have a war? All things are here on earth. Come out of the sky. As soon as I say 'heaven,' your mind leaps above the sun, moon and starts. You are here to learn the truth tonight.¹⁴

The "truth" that Malcolm was offering was insight into the mystical workings of Al-

lah. Malcolm accused Christian clergy of cloaking God in the mists of the afterlife. As he points out above, the Biblical God and Devil are only spirits, whose acorporeal nature would not allow them to engage in physical combat in the Armageddon. Since heaven and hell were the homes of spirits, these places could not possibly exist in the “real” physical world. In his weekly columns for the Los Angeles Herald Dispatch in 1957, Malcolm X conceptualized a physical heaven and hell with the phrase, “WHITE MAN’S HEAVEN IS BLACK MAN’S HELL.”¹⁵ He anchored the cosmology of the Nation of Islam in the context of the time, placing the contemporary conflict between the white race and the Black race in a larger theological realm. Malcolm’s Black theology had no place for a white God, and he railed against the image of a white God propagated by the Christian church.

Malcolm accused Christian clergy of telling outright lies about God to African Americans. He stated at another rally in Philadelphia that “the enemy tells you to go to church, any church because he has the preachers there to tell you lies. There is not a heaven in the sky and you are living in hell, so if you died and went there you wouldn’t know anything about it. Hell is right here in North America.”¹⁶ Employing the racial revisionism of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm skewered Christian theology. How could African Americans trust a white God of the white race for deliverance, if this white God cannot be proven to exist in terms of natural science? Malcolm continued in the same speech, “You have heard that science and religion can’t agree. The reason is because the Christian religion is nothing but lies and is not in accord with nature. There is one God, one universe, and they must be in accord or they will be destroyed.”¹⁷ By eroding the foundations of Christian theology through an appeal to logical reasoning, Malcolm was able to advance Nation of Islam as a “true” religion.

Malcolm X posited the Nation of Islam as the “true” religion by revealing Allah’s mysteries to his followers. This approach was antithetical to the approach of the Masonic orders, which thrived in urban African-American communities. For the Masons, the secret beliefs of the order were only revealed to members over a long period of time as initiates progressed through ritual “degrees” of enlightenment. At the point of the highest level of enlightenment—the 33rd degree—the initiate learns the true identity of God and the inner workings of the universe itself. However, Malcolm offered enlightenment to Black America, free of charge and all at once, in direct opposition to the Masonic system. Once again, Malcolm eroded the theology of a competitive group to elevate the theology of the Nation of Islam. While in prison in 1948, Malcolm used the Masons as a foil, testing his knowledge of Nation of Islam theology. In his autobiography, Malcolm recalled challenging a Mason with the rudimentary knowledge of Nation of Islam theology that he was learning from his cousin Reginald:

A celebrity among the Norfolk Prison Colony inmates was a rich, older fellow called John. . . . He was a proud, big-shot type, always reminding people that he was a 33rd-degree Mason, and what powers Masons had . . . I kept thinking about what Reginald had said. I wanted to test it with John. . . . ‘John,’ I said, ‘how many degrees in a circle?’ He said, ‘Three hundred and sixty.’ I drew a square. ‘How many degrees in that?’ He said three hundred and sixty. I asked him was three hundred and sixty degrees, then, the maximum degrees in anything? He said ‘Yes.’ I said, ‘Well, why is it that Masons go only to thirty-three degrees?’ He had no satisfactory answer. But for me, the answer was that Masonry, actually, is only thirty-three degrees of the religion of Islam, which is the full projection, forever denied to the Masons, although they know it exists.¹⁸

As Malcolm began his conversion to the Nation of Islam in the late 1940s, he became more outspoken in his beliefs and his defense of the beliefs of fellow prisoners. In 1950,

after his transfer from Norfolk Prison Colony back to Charlestown Prison, he wrote to the commissioner accusing prison officials of persecuting Muslim inmates. Believing that the prison's commissioner was a Mason who could not understand his message, Malcolm urged the commissioner to pass on the letter to a fellow Mason who has "acquired *his maximum* of Light (33 degrees) and he will surely understand it." In another letter, Malcolm disparaged the highest degree of the Masonic order by stating that water was "cold and lifeless" at its freezing point, 32 degrees.¹⁹

Malcolm continued his attack on Masonry beyond prison walls as he ascended the ranks of Nation of Islam's ministry. He stated at a NOI rally in January 1957 "that in Islam they have the knowledge of the entire 360 degrees in lieu of the 33 degrees of Masonry. He told that they taught immediately who the God is and that you could not learn this until you reached the top of the Masonic orders. He told them, too, that it was all free, but that the Mason paid for each step."²⁰ In other meetings, Malcolm humiliates members of the Masonic lodge in his audience by revealing their rituals in public, like the secret name of their founder Hiram Abiff and their initiation ritual of "walking the burning sands." Hakim Jamal wrote in his memoir about Malcolm's use of Masonic philosophy in his ministry:

Malcolm told us to try to visualize a line across a piece of paper. This line he called a 'horizontal.' Then he explained how Masons are told that they are raised to a living perpendicular and they are only given or sold 32 degrees. At the Dead Level, or lying down like a dead body, they have no 'light' or 'knowledge.' When they are raised to the living perpendicular, they are made upright, to walk like a man, with dignity and knowledge. . . . I was being raised, this day, by God himself, Malcolm X. He was giving us light, wisdom and knowledge.²¹

Like his mentor Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm was in the position to offer "light, wisdom and knowledge" to potential followers. This knowledge would take its ultimate form in a description of final deliverance—the "War of Armageddon."

Malcolm X and the War of Armageddon

The Nation of Islam's teachings about the "mother plane" is a component of a larger theological metaphor, the "War of Armageddon." Malcolm X described the "mother ship" as part of Allah's final judgment of the earth through a range of natural disasters and catastrophes. In Christian eschatology, "Armageddon" refers to the place where the last battle between good and evil takes place before the Day of Judgment. The word "Armageddon" appears only once in the Bible, in the prophecies of St. John:

And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs come out of the mouth of the dragon, and out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet. For they are the spirits of devils, working miracles, which go forth unto the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty And he gathered them together into a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon. (Rev. 16: 13–16)

The remainder of this chapter goes on to describe the methods of the Lord's judgment—through diseases, poisoned water, fire, darkness, drought, earthquakes, and hail (Rev. 16: 1–21). Malcolm combined the imagery of the Biblical Armageddon with his own concepts of contemporary catastrophe. In his weekly column for the *Los Angeles Herald Dispatch*, Malcolm wrote of Elijah Muhammad leading African Americans through

the apocalypse and on to a “heaven on earth”:

This man [Elijah Muhammad] like Moses, just as ancient Moses did, would condemn the modern Pharaoh's religion (Christianity), his plurality of gods (Trinity), and his SLAVE EMPIRE (America). This Modern Moses would not teach his long enslaved people to love their enemies (the wicked white race who had enslaved them), but would ask OUR GOD, the GOD of our foreparents, to destroy this wicked white race and the Slave Empire with plagues of cancer, polio, heart diseases, air auto and train DISASTERS . . . floods, droughts, earthquakes, tornadoes and HURRICANES, WHITE MAN'S HEAVEN IS BLACK MAN'S HELL. This Modern Moses, like ancient Moses would want a land for his people, FREE and AWAY from the wicked white slavemaster. This and this alone, would be SALVATION . . . a heaven ON EARTH for his people. But, the slavemaster would oppose this because THE BLACK MAN'S HEAVEN WOULD BE THE WHITE MAN'S HELL.²²

Here, Malcolm clearly draws a logical line from the Exodus to the Armageddon by personifying Elijah Muhammad as a “modern Moses.” As discussed earlier, the Exodus was one of the most potent concepts in African-American theology as a method of offering the hope of deliverance to an oppressed people. Malcolm calls upon this theological tradition of the Exodus and the imagery of the Biblical apocalypse, while placing his own unique stamp by adding an element of “racialized retribution.” He conceptualizes this retribution through a contemporary model of mass destruction, in this case a combination of natural disasters like weather phenomena and deadly plagues, and mechanical catastrophes like plane crashes and train wrecks. While the Biblical catastrophes revealed in Revelation are only directed against unbelievers and the followers of Satan, Malcolm's War of Armageddon is directed against unbelievers and the white race. As a matter of fact, the War of Armageddon had already begun, according to Malcolm, as the “devils” were already suffering through tribulations sent by Allah:

Devils are evil and there is not a way you can save them because the Almighty God is going to destroy them Himself. We ask you to follow ELIJAH MUHAMMAD and get away from this man. . . . You are the descendants of the moon people and are from the tribe of Shabazz. Your home is the east and God is giving you a chance to return but you must remember that only the righteous will be taken. . . . There are many wars going on now and you know that these are between the gods and the devils. The God is using nature as one of his many weapons. He is sending hurricanes so fast they can't name them. He is drowning them in floods and causing their cars to crash and their airplanes cannot stay up in the sky with all the research work they do. Their boats are sinking because Allah controls all things and he is using all methods to begin to wipe the devils off the planet. You find the enemy dying of diseases that have never been so deadly. Cancer, tuberculosis, etc. are taking them off the scene. The black man, whether you will accept it or not, is the god.²³

The Nation of Islam racialized their eschatology by conflating the white race with Biblical “devils.” Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X frequently depicted whites as “devils” to their followers, a fact that has also been well documented through the mainstream media.²⁴ Malcolm logically interpreted the Biblical Armageddon as the end of global white rule by making the white race the central component of his demonology. The FBI reported that

LITTLE stated that in the War of Armageddon, the white devils will be destroyed and when the war begins it will be necessary to be on the right side. He stated that in the War of Armageddon, there will be no uniforms because the color of the person's skin

will be all the uniform that is necessary. . . . He stated that even the offspring of the white devils will be 'run through' as they must pay for the sins of their fathers.²⁵

This racialized Armageddon bears a resemblance to the writings of Holly and Steward, prophesy that also linked Armageddon with the end of white world domination. Malcolm described the combatants in the final War of Armageddon in 1957, clearly drawing the battle lines:

There is going to be a war like no other before on earth and it will be the last war of the world. Blood will run like water and there will be death everywhere. The Black man will win this war because the war will be between God and the devil. The Black man being God and the white man being the devil. After that there will be peace on earth forevermore because all the devils will be gone, never to return again. Many Black men, women and children will die with the white man because they love him and will not believe he is the devil. . . . No bombs will fall on the United States until all the Black people have heard the truth about God and the devil. When we have all heard the truth the war will start.²⁶

Malcolm's assertion about "the Black man being God" is also rooted in a nineteenth-century Black theology. AME Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, for example, said at an 1895 Baptist convention that African Americans had "as much right biblically and otherwise to believe that God is a Negro, as you buckra or white people have to believe that God is a fine-looking, symmetrical, and ornamented white man. For the bulk of you and all the fool Negroes of the country believe that God is white-skinned, blue-eyed, straight-haired, projecting nosed, compressed lipped and finely robed *white* gentleman, sitting upon a throne somewhere in the heavens." Turner later revealed that his comments were ironic, meant to illustrate how race had warped the American vision of God among African Americans and whites.²⁷ However, the Nation of Islam literally transposed Turner's "Black God" into its own theology of liberation. This articulation of a Black theology was a reversal of the European association of the color black with the devil and the color white with purity. Now that God himself was Black, the devil could only be white. The racialization of God allows for the racialization of God's judgment upon humanity.

Malcolm further reveals the nature of this racialized retribution in a September 1952 letter intercepted by the FBI:

All over the world the Dark Peoples know that the devil's time is up, and those Dark Peoples want to swoop down like a huge Tidal Wave and wash the devils from this planet. . . . Allah Himself is holding them back, but only long enough to let all of us hear the Truth that His Messenger is Teaching. When we all have heard and had a chance to accept or reject it and have chosen which side we'll be on . . . then Allah will allow his 'Sea of Black Soldiers' to swoop out of the East and make this entire hemisphere a 'sea of blood' (red sea) . . . but this sea will part and let those of us pass by who are for the Truth. . . . We are living in the Bible today. While reading it, bear this in mind and all will be clear.²⁸

Here, Malcolm calls upon the image of the Biblical Great Flood as the method of God/Allah's ultimate retribution against the (white) devils. The "Sea of Black Soldiers" that arrives from the East and the "sea of blood" refer back to the Revelation prophecies. Revelation 16: 3,12 reads: "And the second angel poured out his vial upon the sea; and it became as the blood of a dead man: and every living soul died in the sea. . . . And the sixth angel poured out his vial upon the great river Euphrates, and the water thereof was dried up, that the way of the kings of the East might be prepared." However, the most fantastic

catastrophe to afflict the white race would be the arrival of the “mother ship.”

Malcolm and the Mother Ship

A central component of the Nation of Islam eschatological construct of the “War of Armageddon”—the violent destruction of the white world and subsequent creation of a “Black Man’s Heaven”—is the arrival of the “mother ship.” Malcolm’s own version of Nation of Islam eschatology is culled primarily from the Bible and the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm’s description of the “mother plane” closely adheres to Muhammad’s teachings. At a Harlem Temple Number Seven meeting in 1954, FBI surveillance noted that:

LITTLE told this group that there was a space ship 40 miles up which was built by the wise men of the East and in this space ship there are a number of smaller space ships and each one is loaded with bombs. LITTLE stated that when ELIJAH MOHAMMED of Chicago, Illinois, gives the word these ships will descend on the United States, bomb it and destroy all the ‘white devils’. According to LITTLE these bombs will destroy all the ‘devils’ in the United States and that all the Muslims in good standing will be spared. LITTLE claimed that their Prophet ELIJAH MOHAMMED was sent to the United States 20 years ago to save the ‘Black people.’²⁹

It is important to note that while Elijah Muhammad referred to his vision of Ezekiel’s wheel as a “mother plane,” Malcolm describes this machine as the “mother ship.” The semantic shift reflects the contemporary relevance of a “ship” as opposed to a “plane.” The prophet Ezekiel conceptualized his engine of deliverance based on the technological innovation of the wheel. When Elijah Muhammad was aiding the growth of the Nation of Islam in the 1930s through the 1940s, the airplane was the technological pinnacle of mankind’s ambitions. Malcolm X began proselytizing for the Nation in the 1950s, in a post-war America that had deployed the atomic bomb. Additionally, the “space race” with Russia and the rash of UFO sightings beginning in 1947 at Roswell, New Mexico fueled Malcolm’s vision. An FBI informant reported in 1956 that

He [Malcolm X] stated that many have talked about something in the air and that America is talking about building a satellite in the sky; but they feared to tell the people the truth, that is an effort to combat what has been sighted in the air from which other planes have been seen to emerge and return. He stated that the speed of these planes has not been matched by any vehicle at present known to science, but Allah taught the Messenger [Elijah Muhammad] that there was a mother plane in the sky and that when the time came, this would be the instrument that would destroy America and that it would burn for years.³⁰

Malcolm brought the “mother plane” into reality by claiming that Americans had in fact already interacted with the celestial ship, that the white American government could not hope to apprehend the vehicle of judgment. Simply put, the technology of Allah and his followers is far more advanced than the technology of his racial adversaries—the white God and the white race.

For Malcolm, the arrival of the mothership and Allah’s brand of justice was immediately on the horizon. People on earth would have little time to prepare for the destruction. Continuing the conceptualization of the mothership in terms of modern American warfare, Malcolm “explained how the destruction of North America would come about in the following manner:

First the planes would drop pamphlets written in Arabic and English explaining that they should get on to your own kind at once. He stated at this time the Muslims would have already left North America, and you would have to find a way out for yourself.

He stated that next there would come a trumpet so piercing to your ears that it would drive men insane, pregnant women would have their babies, and some would drop dead.

The last part of the destruction would be an airplane returning ALLAH to the Almighty God Himself. He would light a match that would cause a fire which no man could put out.³¹

In this passage, Malcolm again conceptualizes the apocalypse through a mix of traditional sacred and contemporary profane elements. The sound of the “piercing trumpet” inaugurates Malcolm’s apocalypse, much like the sound of the trumpet that the apostle John hears at the opening of his apocalyptic vision (Revelation 4: 1). The idea of the cosmic airplane dropping leaflets in different languages may have its roots in contemporary American war practices of dropping propaganda leaflets on enemy countries during wartime via airplane, most notably General Douglas MacArthur’s famous “I Shall Return” propaganda materiel that was dropped on the Philippines in 1944 during the Japanese occupation of that island nation.

Malcolm X articulated the eschatology of the Nation of Islam during his rise as a minister, from 1952 until late 1959. As the profile of the Nation grew in the national press, Malcolm eschewed his earlier musings on the mother ship and shifted his focus to more earthly matters. In his struggle to bring African Americans closer to a paradise on earth, Malcolm turned away from the fantastic visions and began to concentrate on creating brotherhood in the African Diaspora through political and economic strategies. However, Malcolm’s racialized vision of the Armageddon captivated an audience desperate for deliverance. He offered new revelations of the divine, revelations that were denied to African Americans by contemporary religious sects. For a brief moment, Malcolm X participated in a dialogue of deliverance that began with the Exodus narrative. The eschatology of the Nation of Islam provided a completion to the Exodus, a Promised Land here on earth for all Africans after the destruction of the white race. Malcolm became part of a tradition in Black nationalist theology, a tradition of racializing the cosmos and translating the mysteries of the divine for all African Americans.

Malcolm faced a paradox as the Nation of Islam gained popularity across the country. On one hand, Malcolm spoke about political and economic concerns of the Black community—concerns that were grounded in the everyday reality of his followers. On the other hand, he spoke of a forthcoming Armageddon, a battle just over the horizon here on earth, a battle that would end white world domination. Perhaps Malcolm abandoned the mother ship because it no longer fit so easily into his practical economic and political plans for African Americans. Perhaps he abandoned the Armageddon because it always remained over the next hill, just out of reach. Whatever the reason, for a short time Malcolm provided a metaphor of liberation and retribution in the context of African-American struggle. Ultimately, he succeeded in elevating the Nation of Islam while damning the competing philosophies of his opponents.

Notes

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3. Ibid., 54–55.
4. Eddis S. Glaude, *Exodus: Religion, Race and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 1–2.
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6. C. Eric Lincoln, *Black Muslims in America*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), p. 57.
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8. Ibid., p. 62.
9. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 331.
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11. Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America*, Ch. 125:1–6.
12. Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X as Told to Alex Haley* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 190.
13. FBI Surveillance file, January 31, 1956.
14. Ibid.
15. *Los Angeles Herald Dispatch*, October 10, 1957.
16. FBI Surveillance file, January 31, 1956.
17. Ibid.
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19. Louis A. DeCaro, *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 94.
20. FBI Surveillance file, January 31, 1956.
21. Jamal, *From the Dead Level*, pp. 181–184.
22. *Los Angeles Herald Dispatch*, October 10, 1957.
23. FBI Surveillance file, January 31, 1956.
24. For example, see “The Hate that Hate Produced,” transcript, 1959.
25. FBI Surveillance file, April 30, 1957.
26. Ibid.
27. Curtis, pp. 66–67.
28. FBI Surveillance file, September 23, 1952.
29. FBI Surveillance file, March 16, 1954.
30. FBI Surveillance file, January 31, 1956.
31. FBI Surveillance file, May 23, 1955.