

# Recovering Jesus for Outcasts in Japan

## From a Theology of the Crown of Thorns

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“We have learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of outcasts.”

—D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*

“The Suiheisha Declaration is our Bible for the unliberated Burakumin.”

—Imai Kazuichi, *The Crown of Thorns*

### SUFFERING AND LIBERATION

THE BASIC THEME of this paper is the suffering and liberation of outcasts in Japan. This theme is the natural outgrowth of my belief that our theological task in contemporary Japan is to reflect critically on the liberating activity of God in the midst of oppression, taking as our focus the concrete socio-historical context of Japan's three million outcasts, the Burakumin.<sup>1</sup> This paper, therefore, seeks to analyze the suffering and pain historically experienced by the Burakumin and to discuss their situation as it relates to the biblical theme of liberation. The sole purpose of such theological reflection is to articulate the meaning of God's redemptive work in the anguished communities of Japan, thus giving the Japanese outcasts to understand that their striving for freedom is not only

consistent with their legitimate desires and expectations as human beings but also is itself the central theme of Christian faith.

I do not intend to imply by my specific focus on the suffering of the Burakumin that their victimization alone is worthy of meaning granted by Christian theology. In Japan there are other minorities that are discriminated against in various ways—Korean residents, Ainu and Okinawan people, the physically and mentally handicapped, women, etc. However, the condition of being a Burakumin best illustrates what oppression means in Japanese society today. Every conceivable brutality visited upon its least-valued members—humiliation, persecution, social marginalization—has been suffered by the Burakumin minority, and their communities are paradigmatic of victimization in specifically Japanese terms.

Although this paper also deals extensively with a theme of liberation, I disclaim the mere extension of “liberation theology” that has become fashionable in the ecumenical world. “Liberation,” as I am using the term, is actually a translation of a Japanese

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word, *kaihō* 解放, that has been used for more than seventy years by the Burakumin themselves in the struggle for justice and freedom.<sup>2</sup> The Buraku Liberation League, for example, uses *kaihō* as opposed to a word such as *dōwa* 同和 (integration) or *yūwa* 融和 (assimilation). Its function here reflects the Burakumin's self-understanding as oppressed people, and their recognition that their marginalized state is the result of mechanisms of domination. This is a harsh revelation to assimilate — that one's marginalization is not a matter of being "insufficiently integrated" into society or "not yet fully equal" with common Japanese, but a matter of being systematically kept outside of society and dominated as inherently unequal.

It is true that during the Meiji period (1868–1912) the Japanese government tried to implement a policy of integration with respect to the Buraku communities, but the policy incorporated no long-range goal to eliminate discrimination against them. Indeed, the policy presupposed the continuation of oppression and served instead to create a safety valve to prevent radical opposition on the part of the Burakumin. The price paid for this process of alleged "integration" or "assimilation" was excessive: the growing alienation of large sectors of the outcast communities and the consequent repression of all forms of self-respect. The situation eventually culminated in the Burakumin's critical opposition to integration and in their opting for the language of liberation.

Thus the language of liberation implies a need to go beyond the possibility of integration to self-determination. The first principle of the program adopted by the National Levelers' Association (*Zenkoku Suiheisha*), the first militant organization for Buraku liberation, established in 1922, was that the Burakumin "shall achieve their liberation

through their own acts." The policy of self-help thus introduced a new way of consciousness and action among the Burakumin, and the language of liberation has retained a tremendous overall function of increasing self-awareness and pride among them.

Rooted as it is in the historical experience of the Japanese outcasts, our theological language of "suffering" and "liberation" cannot but assume a socio-political dimension, which must affect the content and the methodology of reflection on faith as a specific historical event. But this vocabulary can be easily deprived of its radical character. "Suffering" and "liberation" can be used in an exclusively spiritualistic sense to imply that Christian suffering is the endurance of pain, and Christian liberation is the liberation from self and pride. This personal affirmation cannot be denied wholesale. Faith is not merely a psychological process. A human being is undeniably a social entity, and a reflection on faith in a context of societal repression necessarily goes beyond contemplation of individualistic terms. "Suffering" and "liberation" both acquire another dimension, becoming a condemnation of those who repress social and political contradiction as the locus of genuine Christian awareness and praxis.

The new social consciousness among the Burakumin is to be understood as an occasion for renewing the theological debate on the meaning of the liberating activity of God. Challenges to the theme of this debate are often raised by reducing the issue to an either/or proposition: "What is the good of changing the structure of the social system without first changing the human heart?" But psyche and structure are not opposed in the way this question implies. Changing a discriminatory social structure is one way of changing the human heart. The relationship between the human heart and its social

milieu is reciprocal, one of mutual dependence. To believe that political change will somehow make for a new humanity is naive and mechanistic, but so is the idea that a "personal" change guarantees the transformation of an oppressive social structure. This either/or proposition denies the radical dialectic unity of self and society. To change a social structure is to change the way in which the self perceives reality, to change the reference points required to maintain a discriminatory system of beliefs.

As stated at the beginning, the main purpose of this paper is to model the kind of theological reflection possible in the context of liberation for the Japanese outcasts. The main questions to which my discussion will constantly return include: What challenge do the Burakumin pose both to our theological reflection and to the church in Japan as a whole? How might our theological agenda be set within their concrete historical context? What fundamental contribution can theology offer to the ongoing reflection on and the attempt to overcome the discrimination against the outcasts in Japan? What new perceptions and directions can theology gain from their struggle for equality?

#### THE SUIHEISHA'S ADOPTION OF THE CROWN OF THORNS

On March 3, 1922, at the inaugural convention of the Suiheisha, the following declaration was read aloud to some two thousand representatives from almost all the Buraku communities in Japan:

Burakumin throughout the country, unite! . . . Brothers and sisters! Our ancestors sought after and practiced liberty and equality. But they became the victims of a base contemptible system developed by the ruling class. They became the martyrs of industry. As a reward for skinning animals, they were flayed alive.

As a recompense for tearing out the hearts of animals, their own warm, human hearts were ripped out. They were spat upon with the words of ridicule. Yet all through these cursed nightmares, their blood, still proud to be human, did not dry up. Yes! Now we have come to the age when men and women, pulsing with this blood, are trying to become divine. The time has come when the martyrs' Crown of Thorns will be blessed. The time has come when we can be proud of being *Eta*.<sup>3</sup> . . . Let there be warmth in the hearts of people, and let there be light upon all humankind. From this, the Suiheisha is born.<sup>4</sup>

The official flag of the Suiheisha was unfurled for the first time. It was black, emblazoned only with a round crown of thorns dyed blood-red, intentionally symbolizing the passion of Jesus. The flagpole was fashioned in the shape of a bamboo spear, symbolizing the militancy of traditional Japanese peasant uprisings against injustice. Similarly, a year later, when the central office of the Suiheisha sent out a message urging the Burakumin to attend the second national convention, the text repeatedly emphasized the crown of thorns in a messianic manner as the symbol of the association's militancy.

The flag with a Crown of Thorns of the color of blood should be the symbol of our suffering and martyrdom. Come and gather in front of an altar and mourn for the tens of millions of our ancestors groaning underground. Once we were lowly people, 賤民 (*senmin*). Now we are chosen people, 選民 (*senmin*). Three million beloved brothers and sisters, for a "better day," let us unite!<sup>5</sup>

"Martyrdom" and "suffering" are Christian terms rendered by the Japanese outcasts as symbols to express their pain, their groaning, and their long history of oppression.

“Chosen people” and “blessing” have been rendered in like manner to express their “eschatological” expectation and hope for liberation. Most of the Suiheisha founders, including Saikō Mankichi, the principal author of the declaration, were *not* Christian. It is significant, therefore, to note their utilization of Christian symbols, along with their use of Buddhist and Marxist terms, to recall and interpret their experience in the past and to express hope for the future.<sup>6</sup> In the declaration, Saikō denounces the dominant class of his country who have systematically oppressed the Burakumin on the basis of their “mean and filthy” occupations such as animal-slaughtering, butchering, and skinning. It is the rulers themselves, says Saikō, who have “ripped out” and “flayed alive” the human hearts of the Burakumin to make them scapegoats of a semifeudalistic society. He also challenges that oppression. Indeed, his voice is prophetic, echoing the similar cry of Micah, who fiercely denounced the rulers who did “flay men alive and tear the very flesh from their bones.”

And I said:

Listen, you leaders of Jacob, rulers of Israel,

Should you not know what is right?

You hate good and love evil,

You flay men alive and tear the very flesh from their bones;

You devour the flesh of my people,

Strip off their skin, splinter their bones. (Micah 3:1-3)

The various biblical stories with their themes of suffering and liberation, such as the Exodus story and the parables of Jesus, provided rich symbolism for the Japanese outcasts to understand and to interpret the destiny of their people. Their instinct sharpened by the experience of oppression, they rightly found in the Bible images that could bear the weight of both their struggle and

thirst for justice. The appeal for the second national convention in 1923 evoked the event of Exodus, comparing the enslaved Burakumin to the people of Israel led by Moses. It reads:

March 3rd of 1922 shall be remembered as the glorious foundation day of the National Suiheisha. It was the day when our three million brothers and sisters under curse chose the path towards liberation. It reminds us of the people of Israel who used to be the despised in Egypt, tried to be free from oppression, led by day in a pillar of cloud and by night in a pillar of fire, and marched into the desert of Paran. Since then a year has passed, and now our day of the Second National Convention has come. Though the wilderness is endless and the promised land of Canaan is still far, our marching tone is even higher and more brave. History is a process of liberation. Three million brothers and sisters and six thousand unliberated Buraku, unite under the flag of the crown of thorns!<sup>7</sup>

More than anything else, however, the Burakumin came to relate their experience to the biblical symbol of Jesus' passion. For these people, the crown of thorns is not a symbol of militancy in the sense of conquest or triumph over others in society; nor does it function to adorn in the manner of the Japanese imperial family's use of the “throne of chrysanthemums” crest. It is a symbol that has led the oppressed Buraku communities to experience fellowship with one another and to extend solidarity to other exploited and marginalized people. It is a symbol that calls all people under oppression into solidarity with one another.

It should be emphasized that it was the Burakumin themselves who first took Jesus' crown of thorns as the symbol of their suffering and liberation. Most of them were not church-goers. They simply took the

Bible and read in it their daily experience. Some Christians, however, have found in the Burakumin's interpretation of Jesus' crown a symbolic vehicle for their identity of faith, witnessing to the dimensions of divine activity working among the outcasts in Japan.<sup>8</sup> For them the crown of thorns has become a symbol of the solidarity of God with the marginalized, the oppressed, and the exploited. It has come to signify the person of Jesus, who makes the groaning of the despised his own cry for liberation. The symbol reveals that God is also suffering with them, while promising their freedom from that oppression. The crown of thorns has become a sign of the divine purpose that redeems history from the effects of human evil.

But is this process of symbolism and interpretation by the Burakumin and some Japanese Christians really legitimate in the light of Christian faith? Or is the symbol of the crown of thorns merely used as an image corresponding to a pseudo-messianic character of the Suiheisha? Do we really have here a new way to articulate the truths inherent in faith, or do we have a "false ideology," divorced from authentic Christianity? One way to approach these questions is to examine the original meaning of the crown of thorns, as it has been understood in the Bible and theological traditions.

#### THE CROWN OF THORNS IN THE BIBLE AND THE CHURCH

The first obvious meaning of the crown of thorns is in its implicit and explicit differences between the priestly and princely crowns of the Old Testament. The Hebrew kings and aristocrats were thought to be set apart by Yahweh in the wearing of royal crowns (*nezer*).<sup>9</sup> Josephus describes the priestly crown as a three-tiered diadem worn over the turban around the nape of the neck. Both crowns indicated "dedication and

consecration" to Yahweh. They signified not only the noble rank and authority of the wearer, but also the sacred religious nature of his office, given by God. They were called the holy crowns; they were engraved with the words "Holy to the Lord" and decorated with pure gold. Among the priestly class, only high priests could wear this crown, and they were few. It conferred authority to intercede for the nation of Israel and to offer sacrificial rituals to Yahweh in the Holy Temple of Jerusalem. In a word, a crown in the ancient world of Israel was a symbol of high rank and special achievement in society.

Jesus' crown of thorns is significantly different from those of the high priests and kings of Israel. It is a mere crown of thorns (*akanthinos stephanos*) that accords him neither glory nor respect in this world. According to the description of Jesus' crowning with thorns (Mark 15:17, Matt. 27:29, John 19:2,5), Jesus was first scourged, then clothed with a mock-royal cloak, crowned with thorns, beaten on the head with a rod, spat upon, mocked by soldiers, reclothed with his own garment, and finally led out to be crucified. The crown that was forced down on Jesus' head was nothing more than a braided circle of thorny stems, which the Roman soldiers used to deride Jesus after Pilate sentenced him to death. This crown was intended to mock and humiliate him as a criminal who had imagined himself to be the "King of the Jews." The crown of thorns signifies mockery, humiliation, and dishonor.

The apostle Paul, however, saw in Jesus' crown of thorns the exaltation that was the ultimate outcome of his humiliation. A symbol carries the freight of what was, what is, and what is to come, and the crown of thorns is not limited to its past meaning as a sign of mockery. At the very center of Paul's faith lies the assertion that a humiliated and

despised man named Jesus was, and is, and will be the glorious Son of God, the messiah who delivers the world from sin. The most high and powerful God has been incarnated in the human figure of the lowest and powerless. From the very beginning, this central paradox marked the difference between the new faith in Christ and the various religious streams current in the world of his time. Paul was aware of the fact that the proclamation of a suffering messiah was foolishness to enlightened Greeks and a scandal for orthodox Jews. But for Paul as well as for the people of the early church, Jesus' crown, together with the cross, was a symbol of victory. The New Testament states that the faithful would wear the crown of rejoicing (I Thess. 2:19), of righteousness (I Pet. 5:4), and life (James 1:12; Rev. 2:10). The crown given by Jesus Christ to the persecuted is "an unfading crown of glory" (I Pet. 5:4). God crowned Jesus with thorns so that he would taste suffering and death for the world, but as God redeemed him from death, exalting him and turning his dishonor into honor, God will crown men and women in their sufferings "with glory and honor" (Heb. 2:7). In the faith of the early church, Jesus' crown of thorns became the symbol of the solidarity of God the Father with Jesus the Son through his passion and resurrection, inviting the rejected and despised of the world into the joyful fellowship of the Kingdom.

According to Lanternari, the Christian faith among the poor in medieval Europe preserved the character of a "religion of the suppressed,"<sup>10</sup> and the poor farmers and artisans knew their faith would bring them into spontaneous fellowship with a mystical Christ. The cross and the crown of thorns became the objects of popular faith among them, and during times of persecution, war, poverty, and starvation, a Christ crowned with thorns was often experienced as directly present. At the great Christian pag-

eants during Lent and Holy Week, the wretched people would carry in their processions a statue of the crucified Jesus crowned with thorns. Jesus' passion was a major Christian pageant for the marginalized in general. Here we could contend that their daily experience rightly grasped the authentic element of the Christian faith in the Passion story; a profound insight into the meaning of the gospel for the poor and the marginalized underlies that emphasis.

The official church, however, did not recognize the crown of Jesus as a radical symbol of the authentic originality of the Christian faith. Reflection on the crown of thorns was generally devotional or contemplative, and by the end of the Medieval Era, church tradition had elaborated around it a "mystique of sorrow and suffering." That is to say, Jesus' crown was grasped in passive terms, understood to represent an inward experience for each individual and not for communal transformation. Its message of suffering and liberation was understood to imply endurance in this world and freedom in the next or at the end of time. The symbol had become dissociated from Jesus' historical cause for the poor and the oppressed and was utilized as a cult object—fragmented, as it were, from the whole, along with Jesus' "Five Wounds," "Precious Blood," and "Sacred Heart."

When the period of the Enlightenment began to affect the church, theologians and modern humanists came to despise and abhor the miserable image of the suffering Christ; it was understood as a contradiction of everything that modern and progressive spirituality represented. Instead of seeing the crown of thorns as a symbol of suffering and liberation, liberal theologians exchanged the dark cultic image of medieval faith for the bright crown atop the glorious figure of a triumphant Christ—more repre-

sentative of the righteousness, beauty, and morality of the humanist ideal. In a time of progress and human advancement, the longing for fellowship with an abandoned and tormented Jesus and his unpleasant crown appeared to deny the evolutionary impetus toward the good, the true, and the beautiful. The crown of thorns of the suffering Christ has never been a valued symbol for a bourgeois faith in modern society.

It is the oppressed Burakumin themselves, and not the church theologians and biblical scholars in Japan, who have rightly recovered the radical meaning of Jesus' crown of thorns. Their revived focus on the crown of thorns is much more praxis-oriented in character than either modern or medieval European counterparts. Among them Jesus' crown is no longer seen as an object of personal cult nor as an expression of misery or inescapable fate in one's individual life. It is not, as seen in many medieval paintings of the Passion, or *Anfechtung*, an expression of the inward wrestling of the tormented soul with self and sin. On the contrary, when interpreted in the eyes of the Japanese outcasts, Jesus' crown of thorns has become a symbol representing, in an oppressive world, the kingdom of freedom and justice to come. It goes beyond the "golds and roses" draped around the crown by an interpretation formulated to fit the needs of civil religion. It has become a symbol that both points to the pain of the marginalized and reveals the hope of their final victory. Recovered through the eyes of the Burakumin, the symbol of the crown of thorns confirms Christian faith as the faith in the liberating work of God for the outcasts in the world.

#### A NEW NAME FOR JESUS

How can we in the church recover the originality of Jesus' crown of thorns when the

way we think about him has been so conditioned or, one might say, "distorted"? Pastors and theologians in Asia, orthodox and liberal alike, have presented images of Jesus that are mostly alien to the daily experience of the Asian people in general, and to that of the outcasts in particular.

One powerful voice protesting this alien image of Jesus is that of playwright Kim Chi Ha, a Korean Catholic, who was tortured and imprisoned during the 1970s for his human rights involvements in Korea. The setting of his play, *The Gold-Crowned Jesus*, is a ghetto in a small town.<sup>11</sup> A leper, a beggar, and a prostitute—the three main characters—are obviously the social victims of Korean society. They sit down together, with empty stomachs, and lament their misfortune. Nearby stands a statue of Jesus with a golden crown on his head. It was constructed by a company president who, in the play, prays the following prayer:

Jesus, the gold crown on your head, it really suits you. It's perfect. You are truly the king of this world, when you wear that crown. You are the king of kings. You are handsome, you are really handsome in that crown. Dear Jesus, never forget that your gold crown was made from the cash contributed by yours truly last Christmas. . . . Please, Jesus, help me make more money. And if you do that for me, Jesus, next Christmas I will cast your whole body in gold.<sup>12</sup>

One cold night, however, this statue suddenly cries out to the leper, one of the most despised in the Asian world, that he must liberate Jesus from captivity. The statue says that if he is to come and save those who are toiling he must first regain his own freedom. Priests, bishops, business industrialists, not to mention powerful government officials, will not free him. The leper asks in awe, "What can be done to free you, Jesus, to

make you live again so that you can come to us?" To this question, Jesus replies:

It is your poverty, your wisdom, your generous spirit, and even more, your courageous resistance against injustice that makes all this possible. . . . It is sufficient that I keep The Crown of Thorns. The crown of gold is merely the insignia of those ignorant, greedy, and corrupt people who value only displays of external pomp and showy decorations.<sup>13</sup>

In the statements, "I keep the crown of thorns" and "The crown of gold is the insignia of those greedy and corrupt people," Kim pits the crown of thorns against the crown of gold forced on Jesus' head by the rich and the powerful. And this is the hermeneutical principle by which we need to find Jesus anew in the church and to recover him for the Asian outcasts. Needless to say, the mission of the church is to proclaim Jesus' good news to those who are suffering and tormented. But this is not the whole story. Paradoxically speaking, those who are suffering and oppressed are not only the objects of evangelization, but also the subjects of evangelizing the church from which they received the gospel. The true figure of Jesus could be revealed through their "poverty, wisdom, generous spirit, and courage." It is the church that needs to be evangelized by the suffering people if it is to retain its vigor and strength for the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Discussing the exact part of Kim's play, C. S. Song argues that it is not a shock to hear that Jesus first asks the outcast to release him from the cement statue.<sup>14</sup> Song asserts that the church in Asia has alienated Jesus from the poor for a long time by allying itself with the establishment. Those who control society dress Jesus in golden splendor, hoisting him high above the altar. They have taken him away from the hands of the

marginalized, sealing his mouth with solemn liturgies and sophisticated sermons. "Kim vigorously protests this captivity of Jesus in the institutionalized church," says Song, "and Jesus' image has been identified with the titles and names of the powerful in the world." If Jesus is to have any meaning for the Asian peoples, he must take off the gold crown as Kim alludes in the play. He must regain a simple crown of thorns and join the oppressed in their suffering and joy. If Jesus is a savior merely for the powerful, he has nothing to do with the wretched in Asia.

It is an obvious fact that church-goers in Japan belong mostly to the middle-class intellectuals and that they understand Jesus Christ through their position in society. But the Burakumin outcasts understand him quite differently. They have understood him and the preaching of the Kingdom in terms of their socio-historical experiences of suffering and dreams. They would interpret him from the underside of history and start to liberate Jesus from the captivity of those who boast of rank and honors.

Confronted with the person of Jesus in the Bible, the Japanese outcasts have begun to associate him with images that would correspond to their living experience of his inexhaustible reality. For example, as early as the 1920s, a man named Mori Yuichi said that "Jesus crowned with thorns" is a "liberator for us, the Burakumin."<sup>15</sup> He related the New Testament story of Jesus to the story of fellow captives in Japan. He argued that Jesus had made the declaration of emancipation nearly two thousand years ago, long before the Emancipation Decree was issued by the Meiji government in 1871. What impressed him particularly was Jesus' opening words of his ministry in Luke 4:18-19:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me;

he has sent me to announce good news  
to the poor,  
to proclaim release for prisoners and  
recovery of sight for the blind; to let the  
broken victims go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's  
favor.

Unless our Christology is analyzed in the light of the Japanese outcasts' anguish, hopes, and dreams, we cannot bring out what Jesus' good message means for the segregated villages, crowded ghettos, and daily battles for freedom fought in their communities. The most serious weakness shared by Japanese academic theologians and biblical scholars is that they grant the socio-historical life of Jesus with the oppressed only a secondary role. Salvation is understood to occur at the ontological level rather than being genuinely historical and communal. Liberation is interpreted only in terms of the individual dimension. In order to avoid that cooptation of academic tradition, our investigation of Christology must study what Jesus Christ did in terms of the concerns of Asian outcasts. Our questions are: What name can we give to him that expresses a liberative understanding of his message and person? Who is Jesus for those who suffer under the oppression of castism? What title would emerge from their analysis of the figure of Jesus?

#### JESUS AS THE ONE CROWNED WITH THORNS

##### *Jesus as Co-Sufferer*

Of all the possibilities, the "One Crowned with Thorns" could become the Christological title par excellence for the Burakumin. Jesus as the "One Crowned with Thorns" has two main characteristics. First of all, Jesus appears before them as a co-sufferer. Because the Japanese outcasts are suffering discrimination and suppression, the Chris-

tological importance must be found in this reality of suffering with the marginalized. If Jesus is not suffering as they are, then his life and death will have little significance for them. We must make clear that the Spirit of Jesus is suffering with them. Even now, the exact pains of the outcasts in Japan are felt as his own.

What was absurd to Greeks and offensive to Jews (I Cor. 1:8) was the Christian faith in which a messiah suffers. A suffering messiah was a totally absurd notion for the highly cultured Greeks. A messiah, as conceived within the powerful city-state of Athens, would have been a sage-king full of power, wisdom, and glory who would preside over the world of generals, philosophers, and thinkers with leisure time in which to mediate and to argue; meanwhile, the rest of the slave population would have to toil and labor. Such a messiah would possess military skills and would be able to lead his armies into battlefield, conquer enemy territories, and enslave captives. His messiahship would be consolidated by his capacity to empower the nation. On that basis, the Greeks dismissed Jesus as the suffering messiah, absurd and useless.

For the Jews, a suffering messiah was also a highly offensive notion. Like the emperor of Japan before World War II, the messiah awaited by the priests and the Pharisees had to be free from every contamination of the world. That is what "sacred" and "holy" means—to be set apart from all people and things that are unclean and defiled. In the figure of Jesus, however, the concept of messiah took a radically different form. Moltmann observes: "As an outcast Jesus brought the gospel to outcasts through his death. Through his self-sacrifice he brought God to those who had been sacrificed. Through his death under curse he brought liberating grace to those who are cursed according to the law."<sup>16</sup> Jesus took the form of

an outcast and thus the identity of the despised and the powerless. This identification reached its climax at the passion, when Jesus was crowned with thorns and crucified. As Hebrews 13:13 reminds us, Jesus not only died once and for all but continues to bear upon himself the affliction and wounds of all the despised. He shall continue to be crowned with thorns until the day of the final redemption. He is still present among the forsaken, the wretched, and the marginalized. If all of this statement is Christologically true, then it must also be true that Jesus stands today with the three million Burakumin in the midst of their sufferings. Wherever there are cries and groaning, there is the Spirit of Jesus; he is suffering together with the marginalized in Japan.

Endō Shūsaku, a Japanese Catholic novelist, pictures Jesus as co-sufferer most vividly in the last part of his well-known book *In the Vicinity of the Dead Sea*. He describes a Jew named Kobarsky who is about to be handed over for execution in the Nazi concentration camp:

I looked at Kobarsky as he waddled along accompanied by a German guard on his left. For a moment — just a flash — I saw with my own eyes another man waddling along beside Kobarsky, a person who was dragging his feet just like the prisoner. The man on his right also wore the same prison garb and like Kobarsky had a stream of urine dripping to the ground behind him.<sup>17</sup>

From the context of the novel, “the man” accompanying Kobarsky on his death march is understood to be Jesus himself. This is Endō’s image of Jesus as co-sufferer. Though Endō himself employs the word “companion” 同伴者 (*dōhansha*) rather than “co-sufferer” 共苦者 (*kyōkusha*) for Jesus, it is clear that Endō is depicting the person of

Jesus as present in the life of the people who toil and suffer. He argues that insofar as Jesus has assumed the identity of the hurt and the weak, he is with them.

A theology of Buraku liberation must affirm that Jesus continues to be identified with those who are discriminated against under suppression. It must be announced that he is present among the Burakumin farmers in the villages and low-paid workers in the cities. Jesus took the form of an outcast in his incarnation, becoming totally identified with humanity in its most miserable form. To call him the “One Crowned with Thorns” is the ultimate symbolism of this identification.

But our understanding of the person of Jesus remains one-sided if we see this meaning only in his being a co-sufferer. A new life in Jesus means also the overcoming of suffering and bondage. Endō’s one-sided emphasis on Jesus as a companion leads to a dead end wherein Jesus is conceived as merely meek and docile, and cannot serve as a source of strength to break the cause of sufferings. One cannot proceed from Endō’s standpoint to criticize the traditional images of Christ that do not foster liberation.<sup>18</sup> A Christ who suffers but does not liberate is a Christ embodying the “interiorized impotence of the oppressed” (Hugo Assmann). The image of a suffering Son of God might serve as a critique of the powerful and monarchical Christ, or of God as the almighty king. But it little supports efforts to achieve political, social, and historical liberation for the Burakumin. This is why it is important for us to cultivate theologically as well the person of Jesus as liberator.

#### *Jesus as liberator*

We have seen previously that the Burakumin themselves explored the image of Jesus as liberator of the oppressed. For our

concerns, however, Kim Chi Ha's ballad, *Chang Il Tam*, which portrays Jesus as a man for Asian outcasts par excellence,<sup>19</sup> is also useful. It was confiscated by the late Park regime as proof of his "conspiracy to publish subversive materials."

Chang Il Tam, the hero of the ballad, was born at the bottom of society as a son of the Paekchong, i.e., Korean outcasts similar to the Japanese Burakumin. Since childhood he had seen the misery of his people, and his experience of agony eventually led him to become "a preacher of liberation." He followed the way of Im Kok Chong, a legendary Korean thief, believing that the Paekchong and other poor people of Korea ought to regain what the rich and powerful had taken from them. He started robbing affluent aristocrats and giving money to the poor. He was arrested and thrown into prison, but even there he shouted to his fellow prisoners, "We must be liberated! Down with the degraded bourgeoisie!" He then escaped from the prison and, chased by the police, ran into a ghetto where some women were being forced to work as prostitutes. Chang called those women his mother and kissed their feet, declaring, "The soles of your feet are heaven," and "God's place is with the lowest of the low!"<sup>20</sup>

Later Chang climbed Mount Kyeryong and preached to beggars and prostitutes that a new Kingdom could be established on the land of the Eastern Sea. He advocated social change, political resistance, and the practice of "the communal ownership of property."<sup>21</sup> His major theme, "the transformation of the lowest into heaven," required radical praxis and the consciousness raising of the outcasts themselves. He asserted that the most despised is God's noble agent to bring justice and peace into the world. He openly claimed that it was the sacred duty of the outcasts to "purge the wild beast that lurks within human hearts," which alluded to a symbolic

act of the Paekchong's traditional occupations of butchering and cleaning.

Then one day, Chang asked the people to gather around an altar in the wilderness and organized a march to "the evil palace," the capital city of Seoul. Led by him, the poor and the marginalized started their march to make the "eternal journey toward paradise where food is shared by all."

The story continues, but it is enough to know that Chang Il Tam is Kim's image of Jesus who offers the hope of freedom to the outcasts in Asia. The heaven to which the beggars and prostitutes are marching is a kingdom of this world where justice and peace prevail. It is not an other-worldly place after death, as is often preached by the church. Kim's approach to Christology is mediated through an analysis of the communal reality of sufferers. But, contrary to Endō's work, Kim's attempts to detect the social mechanism that generates the agony of the people. It tries to elaborate a praxis that is liberative in a historical context. Chang Il Tam does not simply seek an inner-directed conception of compassion as the oriental sages often do to reach enlightenment by themselves. Like legendary sages, he climbed the mountain of Kyeryong, but he did not stay there forever. He came down to the reality of the people, strove to be truly with them, and proposed that they change the oppressive structure itself.

In our present historical situation in the various Buraku communities, a Christology devoid of a liberating praxis would signify acceptance of the existing discriminatory society and lend support to those who oppress. A Christology for the Burakumin must not only take the side of the outcasts and give them consolation but also compel one to emancipatory praxis by faith in Jesus as liberator.

We have followed the person of Jesus in the light of our concerns with the contemporary

Buraku issue. We have found that Jesus was crowned with thorns as a result of his mission to the marginalized and the despised in the world. He was hostile to the religious ideologues of his day and was eventually condemned because of his relentless attack on an ideology that promoted oppression of the poor. He was resurrected from death to show that the final victory will be in the hands of the socially abandoned. He not only suffers with them but also gives hope for their liberation in history.

#### TOWARDS A CHURCH WITH THE CROWN OF THORNS

Jesus was folly to the wise, a scandal to the devout, and a disturber of the law in the eyes of the mighty. That is why he was crowned with thorns and ridiculed. As Paul says, if anyone identifies with Jesus this world is negated to him or her. When a person realizes that one has been on the side of discriminators against the powerless but wants to walk in the light of Jesus' freedom, that person has to give up his or her previous identity and gain a new identity in Jesus. That person has to obtain a new citizenship in the world of the despised to make a real conversion from the sin of discrimination. This is why struggling with the Burakumin is a necessary part of the church in Japan.

The church in Japan, however, has long failed to recognize its own inherent oppression against them.<sup>22</sup> Some may try to tone this down, or to offer various interpretations of it, but that does not change the fact. It is not widely known in the ecumenical church community that Japan is guilty of oppression, and continues to discriminate against its own minority. Much attention has been paid to the "miracle" of Japan's economic prosperity but, certainly, among the Japanese who did not benefit appreciably from that success are the Burakumin. A report of the World Council of Churches states:

Perhaps the least-known case of the group oppression is that against the Buraku in Japan, which shows only too vividly that once an identifiable group has been marked out for oppression at some point of history, it is extremely hard to eliminate the stigma.<sup>23</sup>

Long gone is the time when the church in Japan could handle the question of Buraku oppression by simply stating that God created all men and women equal and that there exists no discrimination in the church. Today it is the church itself that is called to answer for oppression. It is being called into question by many who have experienced in their daily lives the terrible distance that separates the church from the issue of Buraku discrimination. It is even being called into question by non-Christians who are far away from the life of the Christian community, but who are involved in the struggle for liberation, and see the church as an obstructive force in the effort to eliminate Buraku oppression and to construct a more just society.

The dominant churches in Japan have been mirroring the North American and European churches, uncritically borrowing their theologies, institutions, canon laws, spirituality, and even life styles. They have not found new forms appropriate to the world of the outcast communities in the process of liberation. The people who want to shape their life to the demands of those communities find it extremely difficult to accept ecclesial structures that do not take serious account of the causes underlying the present social reality of Japan.

Today a new type of ecclesiology has begun to be worked out among Burakumin Christians. The reflection of the church that identifies with Jesus' crown of thorns is being conducted from within the concrete experiences of suffering and hope in their communities. It is trying to proclaim solidar-

ity with the pains of the Burakumin and to do a liberating praxis with them. If this mission is seriously promoted henceforth, a new church could eventually emerge that takes seriously the figure of Jesus Christ who was born as and died as an outcast and was resurrected for the despised.

The majority of churches in Japan have not given much attention to the problem of Buraku oppression, but I am convinced that the time will come for them to assume a more active role in the struggle for freedom.

Beyond the undeniable fact that Buraku oppression exposes millions of people to daily hostilities ranging from verbal intimidation to segregation in marriage, housing, and employment, ultimately, the credibility of the gospel of Jesus Christ—and thus, the future of the church in Japan—is at stake. The task of the church in Japan is somewhat comparable to that of the prophet Isaiah, who was struck by a vision of God to liberate his people, but he was also keenly aware of the blocks in himself that served to negate that vision. “Woe is me! I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips” (Isa. 6:5). He understood the deep sense in which he was a part of the problem. But in spite of this difficulty in himself, in a moment of faith and decision, he responded courageously, saying “Here I am! Send me” (6:8).

In the pursuit of the vision of a liberated society in which there exists no oppression, the church in Japan must rise above the blocks within itself and respond to the call of God, as the prophet did, even though the church, too, has been a part of the problem. The responsibility of the church is to proclaim the vision of the Kingdom of God, transcending the narrow boundaries of caste and bringing justice to the world. The church in Japan is facing a great challenge. It has been chosen for great causes. It is being challenged on its ability to speak the truth of faith. Its trial has just begun, and before it

are only two choices: either the church keeps the golden crown for the powerful and the respected; or takes it off and recovers the crown of thorns that has been revealed in the eyes of the despised and the forsaken in Asia.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For reading the history of Buraku oppression in English, see George De Vos and Wagatsuma Hiroshi, *Japan's Invisible Race*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1972); Minority Rights Group, ed., *Japan's Minorities: Burakumin, Koreans & Ainu* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1974); Roger Yoshino & Murakoshi Sueo, *The Invisible Visible Minority: Japan's Burakumin* (Osaka: Buraku Liberation Publishers, 1977); Buraku Liberation Research Institute, *Long-suffering Brothers and Sisters, Unite!* (Osaka: Kaihō Shuppan, 1981); Sugino-hara Juichi, *The Status Discrimination in Japan* (Kobe: Hyogo Institute of Buraku Problems, 1982); Mikiso Hane, *Peasants, Rebels & Outcasts: The Underside of Modern Japan* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Inoue Kiyoshi, *Buraku no Rekishi to Kaihō Riron* [History of the Buraku and theories of liberation] (Osaka: Tabata Shoten, 1969), pp. 125–126.

<sup>3</sup> “Eta” literally means “much filth.” Outcast status and social codes of untouchability in Japan were set during the medieval period, reflecting a complex network of economic, political, and religious conditions. It was in the rigid stratification of society under the Tokugawa Shogunate, beginning in 1600 A.D., that the degraded outcast status of those practicing “defiled” jobs was formally established. The lowest status of the outcasts were called the *Hinin*, or “non-people,” a heterogeneous group made up of beggars, prostitutes, entertainers, mediums, diviners, religious wanderers, executioners, tomb-watchers, and fugitives. Above the *Hinin* were the *Eta*, hereditary outcasts who were forced to perform occupations considered ritually polluting, including animal slaughter and disposal of the dead. Since outcasts who practiced jobs involving death and blood were seen to be subhuman by nature, *Eta* status was inherited through birth or was obtained

through marriage or close associations. See Herbert Passin, "Untouchability in the Far East," *Monumenta Nipponica*, 12 (1956).

<sup>4</sup> Buraku Mondai Kenkyūsho, ed., *Suihei Undōshi no Kenkyū* [A study of the history of the Suihei movement] vol. 2 (Kyoto: Buraku Mondai Kenkyūsho, 1971), p. 143.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>6</sup> Inoue Kiyoshi, *Buraku Mondai no Kenkyū* [A study of Buraku problems] (Kyoto: Buraku Mondai Kenkyūsho, 1959), pp. 107–108. Wagatsuma argues that the founders of the Suiheisha were probably influenced by Christian socialism and the social gospel in the 1920s when Japanese Christian liberals introduced Christian symbolism into social issues. See De Vos and Wagatsuma, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Buraku Mondai Kenkyūsho, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>8</sup> Seminars and study groups have been organized by pastors and theologians to reflect theologically on the issue of Buraku liberation from the early 1960s. See The Christian Conference for the Buraku Liberation, ed., *Buraku Kaihō Kirisutōsha Kyōgikai Sanjū Nenshi* [The thirty years of the Christian conference for the Buraku liberation] (Osaka: The Christian Conference for the Buraku Liberation, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> See *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 3d ed., entry under "crown;" *New Bible Dictionary*, 2d ed., entry under "crown of thorns;" *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols*, 2d ed., entry "crown" and others.

<sup>10</sup> See Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults* (New York: MacGibbon & Kee, 1963).

<sup>11</sup> Kim Chi Ha, *The Gold-Crowned Jesus & Other Writings* (New York: Orbis Books, 1978), p. 85ff.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 109–110.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>14</sup> Song Choan Seng, *The Compassionate God* (New York: Orbis Books, 1982), p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted by Fujino Yutaka in his article, "The Foundation of the National Suiheisha and Christianity," *Fukuin to Sekai* [The gospel and the world] (March, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1978), p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> Endō Shūsaku, *Shikai no Hotori* [In the vicinity of the Dead Sea] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1978), p. 323.

<sup>18</sup> Endō's Jesus as companion seems to function only in terms of a personal paradigm. Endō identifies himself with the tax-collectors and sinners as in Luke 15:7, 18:13, and Matthew 18:14. He seeks to follow Jesus who is the companion of sinners, but in reality Endō stands socially and politically on the side of the establishment by struggling only against his own "darkness of inner self." Only subjectively does he call himself a sinner. See criticism of Endō in Arai Sasagu, "Jesus, the Companion," *CTC Bulletin*, no. 3 (April, 1982), p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> Kim, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–30.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> Here Kim is influenced not by Marxism but by the teaching of the Tonghak Movement. The Tonghak, or "Eastern Learning," founded by Ch'oe Che Un in 1859, is an eclectic (partly Christian) religious sect that attracted the poor peasants and workers. See Chi Myong Kan, "The Tonghak Peasants Revolution and Christianity," *Seisho to Kyōkai* [The Bible and the church], no. 7 (1983), pp. 8–13. On the history of the Paekchong, see Rhim Soon Man, "The Paekchong: Untouchables of Korea," *Journal of Oriental Studies*, vol. XII, nos. 1 & 2, (1974).

<sup>22</sup> Kudō Eiichi, *Kirisutokyō to Buraku Mondai* [Christianity and the Buraku problem] (Tokyo: Shinkyō Shuppansha, 1983), p. 5. According to Kudō, the evangelical mission toward the Buraku communities was started at the Hiromae Church in Aomori Prefecture in 1877 by Protestant missionaries. The Japan Episcopal Church (Sei Kō Kai) built a church in Tokyo in 1878. In 1888 the Burakumin in Okayama began organizing a Bible study group at Takeda. However, the leaders of the mainstream churches hardly realized the needs of the Burakumin for freedom, and eventually the churches in Japan retreated from almost all Buraku communities.

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Rogers, *Race: No Peace Without Justice* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980), p. 29.