On the Parousia: The Black Body Electric

_And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom._ . . .

—Matthew 27:51

For the black church to effectively address the problem of body that has fragmented human communities throughout modernity and contemporarily manifests intracommunally in the form of sexual-gender oppression, it must engage the critical work of repositioning the moral currency of the “in the flesh” and the “according to the flesh” in accordance with a logic of incarnation that parallels the enfleshment of Jesus Christ, the primary image that informs the black church’s identity. Though established to respond to injustice in the world, the church’s moralscape must not be guided by the _kata sarka_ precisely because, as the moral problem of “making men” reveals, injustice too often begets injustice. Instead, even the church, and the Social Gospel–driven church especially, must ground its identity in Jesus Christ _first_ and intentionally consider how the embodied identity of the God it confesses relates and responds to the social-historical realities that unjustly pirate and confer human value “according to the flesh.” Thus, the church’s escape from its complicity in reproducing injustice is dependent on its displacing of the primacy of the sociohistorical, and its appealing to its God-image in order to better understand how the image of God manifests in the world, while recognizing that the image of God does not always correspond with inherited narratives of history and memory.

Much like the black church, the early church was threatened with intracommunal fragmentation by the identity crisis that emerged from

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the assertion of “two seemingly opposed” identities, one human and one divine in the one body of Jesus. In light of this mulattic conceptualization of God that did not correspond with notions of wholeness that normatively equate with godliness, Alexandria and Antioch’s respective claims of Jesus’s full divinity and Jesus’s full humanity contended, albeit from opposing sides, the irreconcilability of “God being born in the poverty of a barn and God dying the death of a slave on a cross.” The Chalcedonian Definition ingeniously responded to both the literal and figurative “breaking” of the body of Christ by asserting Jesus as “truly God, truly man” in a way that mediated between the “just is” in-itself a priori of Christ and the sociohistorical realities that circumscribed Jesus’s humanity. In the face of the linguistic regulation, namely, the Alexandrian and Antiochene narratives that had been constructed about the “who” of Jesus, Chalcedon infers that the truth of the God identity whose image the church is called to embody as the “body of Christ” is not restricted to the stories that have been told about it. Rather, the Definition insinuates that incarnate identity is rooted in an activity of God that is beyond how social and historical realities act upon bodies that do not make sense according to established normativity. This first activity of God revealed in God incarnate is secondarily negotiated with sociohistorical realities so that, within the context of the Christological controversy, Jesus is not limited to being either divine (completely informed by the en sarki) or human (completely guided by the kata sarka) but rather maintains both/and potential, that is, Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. Thus, amidst the crisis and violence that fractured the early church and threatened its viability, Chalcedon essentially made room for the Jesus story to be told another way, a way which suggests the possibility of wholeness in the face of that which appears irreparably fractured.

Gender relationality in the black church (along with the history of American race relations more generally) similarly exposes a record of brokenness that is rooted in the same problem of incarnation, the problem of embodied difference, that first transpired at Chalcedon in light of the apparent incompatibility of opposed identities in one body. Only, in the context of the black church and American society, the body is represented by the congregation and the American body politic, respectively. Like the Chalcedonian Definition, the Doctrine of the Incarnation as womanist mediating ethic is especially significant for addressing body injustice as it manifests in church and society insofar as it disavows either/or hierarchical frameworks that