Ceremonies of Reconciliation: Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*

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Paule Marshall's novel, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (published in 1969 and reprinted in 1984), illustrates for the nineties, as it did for the late sixties, the contemporary results of historical interactions between African, European, and American cultures. Set in the post-colonial period, it foregrounds a clash in cultural values which occurs when an American group arrives on a small Caribbean island to do research for a development project. Armed with all the correct social science theory and the best of liberal intentions, the American team must confront a people seemingly stuck in the past and unconcerned about having botched all previous development schemes. Neither the educated islanders, technology, nor outsiders have been able to overcome the cultural gap that separates the poor people of Bournehills from the modern world. The novel depicts the crippling legacy of economic exploitation and slavery that threatens to defeat everyone involved except Merle, a troubled but very strong island woman who sets off for Africa at the end to reclaim a portion of her past.

The themes of Marshall's second novel typify both a late-sixties social consciousness and the writer's personal commitment to making connections with the past and creating a new social order. But beyond the obvious portrayal of imperialism and racism lies a complex treatment of suffering, guilt and personal empowerment that makes this novel interesting, not only because the issues have enduring relevance, but also because of current debates about multicultural curricula, intellectual traditions, and the canon. When Merle leaves Bournehills at the end for a trip to Africa, she might be seen as turning her back finally and completely on Western culture to seek her roots and embrace African values. This is not, however, an English language version of *négritude*. The myths and rituals that dominate this narrative and ultimately influence her choices have more in common with Western views of individualism and Judeo-Christian notions of guilt and personal responsibility than they do with the African fatalism expressed at the beginning.

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The epigraph of *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* suggests a tale of victimization and hopelessness:

> Once a great wrong has been done, it never dies. People speak the words of peace, but their hearts do not forgive. Generations perform ceremonies of reconciliation but there is no end (from the Tiv of West Africa).

Eugenia Collier, among others, sees this epigraph as the whole story. "The essence of the novel is found, appropriately, in the epigraph at the very beginning.. . .This is a ringing accusation, a primary lesson of history regarding the separateness of cultures" (310). At the outset, the reader is prepared for an inevitable disaster; the social conditions suggest despair and many characters warn that the situation is hopeless. Indeed, as the story turns out, there is great personal and collective tragedy, but also renewal and hope which belie the fatalistic epigraph. The text seems to be at odds with itself, vacillating between a deterministic view of history played out by characters who are nothing but types, and glimpses of individual empowerment achieved by at least one character, Merle. It is in her emergence as a positive, active figure rather than as a victim that I find suggestions that the ethos represented in the epigraph does not ultimately capture the essence of the novel.

As it opens, Saul Amron, a Jewish anthropologist newly hired by an agency of the Philadelphia Research Institute, arrives on Bourne Island to study Bournehills, a pocket of poverty set apart from the rest of the island. His Main Line Philadelphia wife, Harriet, who through old family ties engineered his having been hired for this project, accompanies him, as does an assistant researcher, Allen Fuso, an Irish-Italian Catholic man more comfortable with statistics than people. Although Allen has lived on the island before, he does not play the role of guide for the newcomers; it is their landlady, Merle, the non-stop talking, middle-aged descendant of a rich white planter and black servant girl who provides most of the introductions to the heterogeneous island society. Driving her beat-up old Bentley and wearing an eclectic combination of silver Gothic saint earrings, West Africa cloth, and femme-fatale platform shoes, Merle is the embodiment of all the racial, cultural, and sexual identity crises the novel thematizes.

At first, the characterization suits a static view of society because the characters talk about themselves and others as types. For instance, in the first scene, the only other passenger on the plane with the Americans is Vere, a local boy on his way home from a stint as a migrant laborer in Florida. His presence on this particular flight only serves as a vehicle for Marshall to describe the economic and cultural

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distance between the newcomers and the Bournehills people. Allen's view of Vere exemplifies the intellectual's own thinking process and the characterization that typifies the novel at the outset. "Several seats behind, Allen Fuso saw the blue hat go up and with his Aristotelian fondness for putting everything, including people, in their proper categories, promptly placed Vere in the file in his mind marked 'Farm Labor Scheme'" (25). Likewise, one of the first lines attributed to Saul is designed to reveal what is significant about his marriage to Harriet: "I guess you know we're something of an odd match," he said. "Here I am what my father used to call even after we moved out to the coast and had some money a poor little *pitser* from New York. And here you are strictly Main Line Philadelphia" (46).

The three Americans are conspicuously divided into Protestant, Catholic, and Jew; and all social positions in the islands are exemplified, from the white former colonizers to the black commoners of Bournehills with all of the shadings of color and status of the mulatto population in between. Characters are easily labeled—Jewish intellectual, WASP wife, poor black boy become successful lawyer, callous factory manager, arriviste black politician—and they serve, like Saul and Allen's case studies, to illustrate Marshall's ideas about cultural history and the results of imperialism. But the novel ultimately overcomes the simplifications of the early chapters by virtue of her ability to bring to life the two principle characters, Saul and Merle, and their attempts to make sense of their own places in history.

Saul arrived in Bournehills eager, but apprehensive, about getting back into the field after years in academe. He had sworn off fieldwork because his first wife, who had survived the Nazi death camps, died giving birth while they were on assignment in Honduras. Now, with Harriet's encouragement, he puts the best of his experience into getting to know the people before he designs the development project. Merle, on the other hand, is in retreat from the developed world. She left Bournehills for London as a bright and hopeful student; she returned with a spirit broken by her husband. He had abandoned her and returned to Africa with their only child when he learned of Merle's affair with a white woman. Saul is troubled by his past, but Merle has been rendered almost dysfunctional by hers. At the beginning, they are observers rather than participants in the local society—Saul because he is a newcomer, Merle because she has rejected the typical roles of the educated islanders but can no longer be a commoner.

As time passes, Saul feels there is a mystery about the place that his research training has not equipped him to fathom. Merle has hinted to him that there are deep, even mystical reasons for Bournehills being the way it is, and Saul feels "he would have to come to know and un-

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derstand her, really know her, before he would ever hope to know and understand Bournehills; that she was, in the old Biblical sense, the way" (260). The complicated Merle is merely one face on the deeper mystery of human suffering which Saul must confront. He will learn that the proud sense of racial, ethnic, and personal suffering articulated here cannot be understood intellectually or corrected by development schemes, no matter how enlightened. As he searches for answers to why these people take an almost perverse pride in their backwardness and refusal to change, his friendship with Merle develops, and he becomes involved in significant rituals of the community. These provoke several epiphanic moments drawing him simultaneously forward into the life there and backward into memories of his own people. His struggle to understand the "other" as well as connect with his past parallels Merle's struggle to accept the past and act in a constructive way in the present. Marshall's narrative art is at its height in these multi-voiced and allusive scenes where individuals re-enact centuries-old patterns that link them ritualistically to prior communities and bond them in the present. Others have mentioned the importance of ritual (McCluskey, Spillers), primarily to point out how it binds the individual with community, but the rituals are also connected to deeper spiritual truths that warrant further comments.

For Hortense Spillers, for whom Saul and Merle are both individuals and representatives of their cultures, Saul suffers not because he is Jewish, but because he is a victim of the cult of science and technology which has alienated him from his spirituality. In a reading inspired by Burke and Fanon, Spillers presents Saul as representative of the powerful but corrupt first world which must learn and "develop" through his contact with the spiritually wholesome black world. "Essentially, no one in Bournehills is 'bettered' by their presence, but for them [Saul and Allen] this tenure of research in the Caribbean—not their first—will be their last and most devastating because they are brought to consider that the humanity they must heal is their own" (156).

One step in healing his tortured humanity occurs when Saul witnesses the ceaseless labor of Stinger and his pregnant wife Gwen, who "heads" two-hundred-pound loads of cane for hours under the scorching sun. Saul stumbles away dazed by heat and confused by the spectacle of crushing physical labor endured without question. Spillers compares the moment under the blazing Caribbean sun to Saul's namesake's conversion on the road to Damascus. As Saul leaves the field, he is picked up by Merle who sees his distraught state and for once does *not*, as Spillers mistakenly claims, tease him about his investigations. It is the beginning of a closeness between them that will culminate in their carnival night intimacies.

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Spillers' more important point, however, is that through this experience, Saul gains insight into the type of love Burke describes as love of life, *ubertas*, the fecundity and abundance implied in the total physical involvement of the laborers in the cyclical work of harvesting crops and reproducing themselves. Saul has much to learn from Bournehills because he is technological man alienated from the sources of communion through ritual which bind the Bournehills people to each other, their history, and the "Ineffable" through their work. "Saul's customary method of understanding and estrangement is 'abstract'.... But here, in the midst of a mindless fertility, taking place in an infinite progression and regression of exact appearances and in the presence of a natural force of unusual persistence and uniform intensity, the intellect verges on the rediscovery of the muted connection between 'love' and 'work'" (170).

Spillers concludes that, in spite of the tragedies at the end, Saul and even Bournehills have a future because they represent the dialectics of the New World culture which will combine *veritas* (read science and technology) renewed by its contact with the repressed third world cultures, which have maintained their contact with the vibrant *ubertas*. Technological man will be saved, his soul restored by his recognition of the love of life, the type of productivity that is fertility rather than time clocks and destructive machines. As she points out, "Technological agent must recover feeling, memory, extension, generosity, and receptivity—those elements that cluster under the name of compassion" (171).

This is, of course, reminiscent of *négritude* vision of the black world supplying the lost affective realm to the white world. Certainly, this is part of what happens to Saul, but it is at best a partial explanation of the novel. The final events of the story suggest that it is Merle, not Saul, who has a future different from the past.

By focusing on what Saul must learn from Bournehillls, Spillers has overlooked the causes and meaning of Merle's healing on one hand and Harriet's total destruction on the other. And, in emphasizing what Saul's culture lacks, she has missed the universal quality of human suffering which is so generously distributed to each of Marshall's characters, white and black, rich and poor. For much of the novel, suffering is problematized through characters who don't act but are already formed by historical and cultural forces they either don't comprehend or don't care to acknowledge. Not fully formed beings, they seemed doomed to play out their assigned roles. But Saul and Merle confront suffering in multi-voiced scenes appropriate to the complexity of the problem and the cultural setting. One of them, Merle, emerges a different person.

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A crucial scene is in the cane fields when Saul has visions, not just of fecundity and useful labor, but of death, suffering, and reckoning. When he tries to describe what has happened to the young Gwen's eyes under the pressure of her headloads and hours of labor in the heat, "he could not, except to say they had the same slightly turned up, fixed, flat stare that you find upon drawing back the lids of someone asleep or dead" (163). Surely he has seen a vision of intense physical suffering caused by an economic system that reduces people to beasts of burden. The other part of his vision is of his mother's dramatic recounting of her Sephardic ancestors' flight from the Inquisition to the new world "as though it were the one outstanding example of all the suffering known to man" (164). It is, he says, the story which enables him to understand the suffering of all people. The chosen people should be able to empathize with "the timeless people" of the novel, but there is more here than just brotherhood between Black and Jew.

This vision is succeeded by one of an old man who presided over Saul's New York neighborhood from an apartment window. He "turned every day into Yom Kippur, atoning not only for his sins but, because of the steady light pounding of that fist, day in and day out, for those of the world as well" (165). As Saul continues, he remembers that he heard the old man had died, and he wonders almost cynically now, "Who would there be to atone for the world now, who to do daily penance for the host of crimes committed by man against man?" (165) As a child this man was a joke to Saul; now he is a reminder that we need more than ever to offer Yom Kippur prayers. Nevertheless, Saul is not yet able to see that a simple identification with fellow victims is not enough. To offer Yom Kippur prayers is to acknowledge through ritual the idea of sin and personal responsibility, which is difficult for the modern intellectual armed only with social science theory to accept. Seeking to understand these people, Saul must confront cultural rituals that echo pre-modern ways of knowing.

The local custom of the Sunday pig sticking is ostensibly nothing more than a habitual way to provide protein for the Bournehills community, but it echoes the most ancient of animal sacrifices and substitutes here for religious rites. The sacrificial victim expiates the violence of the males and assures the health of the larger community, just as any sacrifice is designed to ritually put man in harmony with the fundamental forces of life. There are echoes of both animist and Christian sacrifice in the intelligence attributed to the sow and Ferguson's claim that she is praying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" (253) The men's silence as the leader chooses who will slit the pig's throat and their attempts to

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spare the animal pain reflect the respect for life so crucial to the sacrificial taking of one. Their contained violence only surfaces once the animal is dead and they begin the actual butchering process. But soon, libations are poured, the men share a small bite of roasted meat, and their good spirits are restored as they distribute the meat to the community.

Saul has stayed through the entire process this particular morning and finds himself troubled by its intimations of human sacrifice. When he gags on the pork, he is reminded of his membership in a different sacrificial community. The elemental function of sacrifices, using the pain and suffering of a person or an animal as a representative atonement or propitiation to bring the community into touch with that which is beyond—gods, ancestors, or life forces—is fundamental to the African and Judeo-Christian cultures that have formed this society. Even this secularized version works its power in Saul. He leaves the scene "reminded, more acutely than at any other time, of his status among them. He was and would continue to be a stranger in their midst.... And yet, to contradict these impressions,... there had been beneath the violence of the act an affirmation of something age-old, a sense of renewal, which had left him exhilarated, in a high mood" (259).

In the short, very dramatic section of the novel, "Carnival," the personal and collective face of suffering is bared in a series of powerful maskings and unmaskings. During this period of street dancing, parades, and momentary suspension of normal authority structures, the powerless rule and the privileged are rendered impotent. The largest group of victims, the Bournehills people, arrive at the celebration in their ragtag costumes once again determined to re-enact their one historical moment of glory, the slave uprising led by Ned Cuffee. None of the other islanders want to hear this old story about Ned, who killed the plantation owner, burned down his house, and held off whole regiments of British soldiers for months. But, in the ancient tradition of drama, their enactment ritualistically draws the entire community into a joyous identification with the suffering and triumph of the Bournehills hero:

> The pattern was repeated throughout all of New Bristol's crooked streets, but as the afternoon approached evening, the time devoted to the numb procession and those parts of the pageant dealing with the revolt's defeat became less and less, until finally these portions disappeared altogether, and the only thing retained was the soaring tribute in song and dance to Cuffee, his victory on the hill and life in Bournehills during his reign. With that the resistance of the crowd gave way, as it did every Carnival Tuesday when the Bournehills band reached its climax and in so doing seemed to lift the entire town onto its shoulders and take it marching with it. (288)

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The Carnival Tuesday celebrations show a collective triumph fabricated from the story of defeat, and a series of other reversals appropriate to the topsy-turvy world that is Mardi Gras. The celebration is an Afro-Caribbean elaboration on a medieval European festival whose purpose was to indulge the flesh and reverse all hierarchies in a final purge before the sobriety of the Lenten season. The indulgence and anarchy are preludes to self-confession and penance. Here the quiet young man, Vere, wreaks a violent vengeance on an unfaithful girlfriend, while Allen is forced to confront his failure with women. Even more dramatic is Harriet's hysteria caused by her inability to control the dancing crowd that sweeps her along and deposits her on the side of the road, physically unharmed but psychically repulsed by their energy and seeming irrationality. The cool, competent WASP never speaks much of this night, but her confrontation with the joyful and irrational emotions of the crowd creates an insurmountable barrier between her and the island people. The night marks her last attempt to become involved with them.

It is not surprising, then, that Carnival night ends with Saul and Merle engaged in lengthy, soul-wrenching revelations about their personal tragedies. Prodded by Merle, Saul talks of his first wife who died screaming that it was all his fault. He has always felt guilty about her death and never was able to accept his own powerlessness in a senseless world that would allow a woman to survive the Nazis but die in childbirth. His wife's accusations forced him to realize he was not a modern Moses destined to deliver the oppressed from suffering. Ironically, he is again trying to play this role in Bournehills, although he seems just as uncertain of its ultimate purpose. In response to his story, Merle offers no absolution or advice, only her own personal burden of guilt.

Her story reveals enough about the nature of her relationship to the rich white woman in London for the reader to see that she is not an innocent victim of either the woman or her husband. Merle is disgusted with herself and this woman for making her uncertain about her sexual orientation (I agree with Judith Fetterley that the text is homophobic—cf Spillers' discussion). She also admits that she deliberately insulted the woman after taking her money for years. She even refers to herself as an example of the corruption that her husband, the proud African, was trying to avoid. Although losing him and her child caused her the greatest pain of her life, she says she "knew in my heart he had done the best thing.... " (35). Merle may have gone to London an innocent, but, once there, she became a spiteful opportunist at the very least.

Near dawn of Ash Wednesday when they go off to spend the rest of the night together, it is not so much passion as compassion that brings them together. As fellow sufferers, they find each other a use-

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ful refuge. For Merle, Saul is a spiritual healer, her juju man, as she called her London psychiatrist. But whether their relationship liberates them from the past, or only makes them exemplar victims, is problematic.

The Whitsun season, which gives its name to the final section of the novel, is the British term for Pentecost, a holy day associated with tongues of fire symbolizing the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles and founding of the church. Here it brings a series of apocalyptic catastrophes—Vere's death during his moment of glory in the road race, the closing of the sugarcane mill and near destruction for Bournehills, Merle's nervous breakdown, Harriet's attempt to save her marriage by having Saul removed from the project, and finally her suicide.

If the novel ended here, the spirit of Pentecost would be reversed and the fatalism of the epigraph would be triumphant, that is no great wrong such as the shameful history of slavery can ever be forgotten or overcome. The consequences of the abuse of black women's sexuality, fertility, and physical labor, as well as the basic denial of human rights to all black people, is shown to continually play itself out a hundred years later in the Caribbean in emotionally crippled people like Merle. Also, the people of Bournehills, struggling against poor soil, poor diet, and lack of education, suffer the effects of multinational corporate decision making in many ways. Even "ceremonies of reconciliation" such as liberalism, especially as expressed through the do-gooder, rich girl Harriet, are stripped of their refined facade when her personal interests are threatened. She reveals its/her latent racism, superficiality, and potential for abuses of power when she writes a single letter that changes the course of her husband's career and jeopardizes the future of everyone in Bournehills.

At the very end, Saul is a broken man who must deal with the guilt associated with Harriet's death and his derailed career. When Merle asks him what he will do, he says, "I haven't thought about it.... But I'll make out, I guess. Once you've hit bottom as often as I have you either stay down or start finding it easier to drag yourself up again. I don't know which it'll be for me" (466). This does not sound like Spillers's man with a future.

On the other hand, Merle is abrim with confidence and direction. She has sold all her possessions and bought a ticket for Uganda so that she can find her daughter. She is so boldly breaking with her personal past and collective sorrow that her itinerary takes her south to Rio, then to Dakar, a direct reversal of the diaspora's trajectory and a clear rejection of the route through London, the false motherland for Anglophone blacks of the Caribbean. The change in Merle is so dra-

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matic that we have to ask what in the narrative has prepared this. If the hopelessness of the epigraph were true, then this ending would be completely contrived. It may be a surprise, and Merle doesn't explain much, but I believe she (and Marshall) abandon much of the contemporary sociological theory that appears to dominate the novel in order to draw on an ancient Western philosophical and religious tradition whose myths are woven as subtexts throughout the novel. The rituals that enrich that story contradict the fatalism of the West African folk wisdom. This is not to say that Merle gets religion in a narrow sense; in fact, this is the point at which she sheds the Gothic saint earrings that are her trademark. She is rejecting the "high church" they represent because of its connections to a domineering white world she must overcome. But in her conversion from victim to agent she expresses, nonetheless, belief in individual responsibility, freedom to act, repentance, and faith in the future, which are all fundamental to Western spiritual and political traditions. "It's as both of us have said any number of times," she began. "I'll never get around to doing anything with what's left of my life until I go and look for my child.... I'll just go on as I am ... doing nothing but sitting out on this verandah all day or down in that damp cave of a room feeling sorry for myself and blaming everyone and everything for the botch I've made of things" (464). She is, for the first time, actually looking at her individual situation and admitting that she is responsible, that she must make amends, and must act. She even admits she feels some responsibility for Harriet's death because of the confrontation they had.

Joseph Skerrett sees the change in Merle from victim to agent in psychological rather than spiritual and political terms. Reading her character as Erik Erikson would, Skerrett maintains that Merle represents the identity crisis of the "middle-years generativity." He says that Merle is able to move from a negative identity based on guilt over not recognizing her mother's murderer, to release, when she can laugh at Harriet's offer to buy her off because she feels no guilt about Saul. She unburdens herself and "no longer has a bedeviling need to fill her life with verbal intimacy to blot out the image of her failed generativity—her inability to mother her own daughter" (73).

For him, Merle achieves maturity when she realizes that she may not know the future; "she only knows that it is her responsibility as a woman to help generate it" (73). But Merle does not express any hope of taking over her mothering role, and this reading misses the larger issues. The novel is not about a crisis of motherhood, nor is it about refusing guilt. On the contrary, Merle expresses feelings of guilt even about Harriet's death. The novel is about whether we as individual

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humans can act, can recognize and accept legitimate guilt, then get beyond it; or, whether destiny is circumscribed by the past and whether guilt means defeat.

Harriet recognizes her personal guilt for the first time at the very end, but it leads her to self-destruction rather than freedom. Throughout the night after Saul has left her, Harriet recalls her guilty past, starting with the matriarch who began her family fortune with the slave trade, up to her first husband's career working on the hydrogen bomb. Although she had left him because of this work, she comes to the "shattering realization that morning upon awakening of her complicity in the destruction planned, and the feelings of guilt and horror at herself which she had sought to flee by leaving him—only, she had to admit, . . .to seek out a Saul with whom she could repeat the pattern" (459). She is the classic (and stereotypical) weak character who cannot face the truth.

Both women ultimately recognize that they made choices, that they bear some of the guilt, and that they are free to act. Saul is still the embodiment of suffering, and it is not clear whether he will accept his part of the blame for Harriet's death or how he will choose to act in the future. He hasn't pierced the mystery of suffering because he believes that if he can't eradicate it, he is defeated. When Cane Vale machines break down and threaten the survival of people who depend on them, he wanted to change the entire system, but Merle saw a more practical solution—he could use his development money to buy new parts and have them flown in. At that point, the inaction of all the men in the story drives her into another breakdown, but at the end, she stops waiting for someone else to act. Merle shakes off the role of victim, gives up blaming her father, the white woman in London, her husband, the corrupt politicians on Bourne Island, and everyone else for her situation. She looks within and is not only willing to repair the damage in her personal life but also to return and act within the community as a teacher, or even more significantly by entering politics. She doesn't expect too much from seeking her child. As she says, "Even if things don't work out, it will be enough for me just to have seen her. . ." (465). And she realizes that she won't change the world. "Whatever little I can do that will matter for something must be done here. A person can run for years but sooner or later he has to take a stand in the place which, for better or worse, he calls home, do what he can to change things there" (468). The universal nature of human suffering will only be alleviated in small, local ways.

Although she rejects the corruption and abuse of the Euro-American economic system, her final actions and thoughts reflect traditional Western spiritual and political beliefs that she can act as an indi-

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vidual, recognize and accept her own guilt, and live by hope of a new life. In leaving for Africa, she seeks atonement for her own part of the guilt connected to circumstances separating her from her daughter. She, like the old man who watched over the streets of Saul's childhood, recognizes that suffering, at times out of proportion and unjustified, is simply part of the human condition. Her suffering has ultimately humanized, not defeated her. Having sought atonement, she will then achieve the "ceremony of reconciliation" that neither the fatalism of the Tiv allows, nor the spiritually bankrupt Harriet and the defeated social reformer Saul were able to accomplish.

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