The Genesis of Liberation

Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved

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The Function of the Bible in the Freedom Narratives*

AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE FOR EARLY AFRICAN AMERICANS

African Americans' respect for the authority of the Christian Scriptures is a miracle in itself. Their introduction to the Bible frequently came by way of sermons from Colossians 3:22–25, Ephesians 6:5–8, and 1 Peter 2:18–20, directed at ensuring their obedience to their masters. The God they met in these sermons was firmly on the side of their tormentors, opposing their freedom, reifying the status quo. The religion they were offered did not emphasize the love of Christ in response to their choice of will, but the subjugation of their wills as a divine duty to other humans who laid claim to their bodies. In spite of this cultural introduction to the Bible, many African Americans have greatly revered the Christian Scriptures throughout their acquaintance with them. But why did African Americans attribute authority to the Bible?

Of course the simple answer is that they fell in love with the God of Scripture. In Christ they found salvation from their sins and reconciliation with the Creator of the universe. Their experience of Christianity resonated with aspects of the religions of their African forebears. They

*These narratives are generally labeled "slave narratives" in contemporary scholarship. We prefer the phrase "freedom narratives," since the authors wrote these stories—either with their own pens or voices—*after* slavery. Throughout the book, we will also use the syntactically awkward, yet precise, phrase "narratives of the formerly enslaved." Asterisks after page numbers indicate freedom narratives, which are accessible online.

were even able to incorporate cultural particularities into Christianity without compromising their expression of the faith. The Christian God was a source of strength and sustenance to them in the midst of the persistent turmoil that defined their lives. When they were weak, they could be assured that their God was strong and that they were not left to suffer the indignities of slavery alone; no matter what, Scripture testified that God was with them. This was certainly enough to lend authority to these texts. However, there may be additional contributing factors as well.

The authority of Scripture for African Americans, at its root, has the authority granted to these texts by their ancestors; so it is reasonable to begin this inquiry by reflecting on the works of some notable early authors. Often their introduction to Scripture was not a neutral spiritual experience but a hostile activity whereby Holy Writ was used to pacify them (Exod. 20, 21; Eph. 6:4–9) and justify their subjugation (Gen. 9:18–27; Gen. 10). But in these texts they found not just an otherworldly God offering spiritual blessings, but a here-and-now God who cared principally for the oppressed, acting historically and eschatologically to deliver the downtrodden from their abusers. They also found Jesus, a suffering Savior whose life and struggles paralleled their own struggles. In the biblical narratives that describe these characters they found reasons to believe not only in the liberating power of the God of Scripture, but in the liberating emphasis of Scripture itself.

Because they learned that the Bible did not denigrate African identity, they were able to use it to ground their humanity, subversively to rebut biblically based supremacist readings, to validate their right to be free and function as equals in this nation. For them Scripture generally had both spiritual and political implications;[1] in fact, it could not have one without the other. Scripture also addressed many dimensions of the lives of African Americans. In addition to its role as a religious document offering spiritual blessing, it was also consulted as the primary record for ethnographic information, a source of myth making for a people with a stolen history, a tool for political empowerment, and a guide for establishing social order. The Bible had become an indispensable part of their lives.

1. C. Eric Lincoln notes that there was "no division between sacred and secular, especially between religion and politics" in African American communities (*The Black Church in the African American Experience* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990], 199–200). Aspects of this integration of sacred and secular persist in African American Christian contexts determining that the religious character of the black church is necessarily political. For a larger discussion of politics and African American religion, see Lincoln, *Black Church,* 199–204.

As they became familiar with the Bible, it soon became apparent that the same book that was used to justify their oppression also provided hope for American African liberation. Further, recognizing that this collection of ancient texts was a seminal commonplace grounding for the development of Western civilization, they hoped that by employing the narratives found in the Bible they could find a means to argue for their full equality in terms their adversaries would have to respect. After all, even their adversaries, steeped in the Christian faith and committed to arguments based on Scripture, would have to heed the Word of God or be exposed to have failed hypocritically to adhere to the precepts of the ground of their faith. Frankly, it would have been counterproductive for this oppressed group to ignore such a valuable resource.

Below we will explore several practical reasons why many African Americans became faithful adherents of Scripture, developing their own distinctive hermeneutical traditions for reading it. Early African Americans found that they could benefit from employing the Bible as it:

1. gave them hope that God would act without human (political) intervention to provide justice for enslaved Africans;
2. grounded subversive arguments against the type of Christianity practiced by Southern slaveholders;
3. provided a mythic system that could explain their plight and a symbolic world that resonated with their own[2] while demonstrating God's fidelity to those similarly situated (slaves, exiles, sufferers);
4. allowed them the latitude to emphasize or exclude portions of Scripture based upon their needs without compromising the core of the Christian message;
5. envisioned human origins in a manner that allowed them to discern a glorious past for African peoples and discern positive dimensions of African identity;

2. Consider the following quotation, wherein Olaudah Equiano reflected on his preenslavement existence among his own people and the similarity between their customs and those of the Jews in Scripture: "Such is the imperfect sketch my memory has furnished me with of the manners and customs of a people among whom I first drew my breath. And here I cannot forbear suggesting what has long struck me very forcibly, namely, the strong analogy which even by this sketch, imperfect as it is, appears to prevail in the manners and customs of my countrymen and those of the Jews, before they reached the Land of Promise, and particularly the patriarchs while they were yet in that pastoral state which is described in Genesis—an analogy, which alone would induce me to think that the one people had sprung from the other" (*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*, vol. 1 [London: Author, 1789], 37–38*).

6. continued to be flexible enough to address their evolving plight in America (slavery, segregation, persistent inequality, etc.).

These six points do not exhaust the fullness of African American engagements with Scripture, but they do describe key interpretive advantages that the biblical narratives provided to early African American literati. Below we will briefly discuss both apolitical spiritual and subversive political appropriations of Scripture, in order to illustrate two key dimensions of their scriptural engagements.

FREEDOM IN GOD'S HANDS: APOLITICAL SPIRITUAL READINGS

Before we consider texts written by African Americans with a discernable political agenda, it is important to establish that Scripture was from the earliest times understood as the ground of ultimate trust in the Christian God. In this regard, some of the earliest African American readers found solace in the Bible as a source of spiritual transformation, even if it meant that the body would remain enslaved. We would identify such readings as "fundamentalist" readings today. Containing an evangelical zeal for Christ, such readers eschewed this-worldly politics for total reliance on the God of Scripture to rescue them from the evils of slavery and dehumanized status.

Examples of this type of reading can be seen in the work of Jupiter Hammon. One of the first African American authors, Hammon was a devout Christian. One might expect him, as an early enslaved author, to use his literacy to critique his life situation. However, though his writing addressed the contemporary crisis of North American slavery, it failed to provide a thoroughgoing critique of that institution, as would the work of later authors. Hammon instead presented a decidedly mainstream moralistic view of the Christian faith, employing the Bible as a life guide for purposes of self-improvement. Though he subtly argued against slavery, he reserved this-worldly freedom for younger people, not for himself. To him God's Word provided all the freedom that he required, as it facilitated access to heaven. Only there could humans find liberation from all that ails them.[3]

3. Jupiter Hammon, "Address to the Negroes in the State of New York," in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 34–43.

In his 1786 "Address to Negroes in the State of New York," Hammon's apolitical sentiments were evident: "Let me beg of you my dear African brethren, to think very little of your bondage in this life, for your thinking of it will do you no good. If God designs to set us free, he will do it in his own time and way; but think of your bondage to sin and Satan, and do not rest until you are delivered from it."[4] Here bondage of the flesh is deemed unimportant when compared to spiritual bondage, and the potential for earthly freedom pales in light of the promises of Christ.

A similar all-encompassing reliance on God was echoed in the work of political activist Maria Stewart. Though she had spent much of her life seeking the abolition of slavery, she had come to the opinion that her efforts were for naught. In her 1832 farewell to her friends in Boston, her theological reasons were evident: "It is high time for us to drop political discussions, and when our day of deliverance comes, God will provide a way for escape, and fight his own battles."[5] Like Hammon, she concluded that morality and godliness were to be her goals and that abolitionist political strivings were incompatible with the radical trust in "pure religion." It was up to God alone to determine the time of freedom; Hammon and Stewart viewed political activity seeking social change as vain. As these two authors illustrate, early African American authors were capable of apolitical hermeneutics expressing reliance on God alone to provide liberation, even during the antebellum period.

SUBVERSIVE POLITICAL READINGS OF BIBLICAL FAITH

Subsequent texts more thoroughly critiqued slavery. Writers like Peter Randolph and Frederick Douglass exemplify the use of the Bible to achieve other ends. Though their faith was apparent, it was not expressed with Hammon's fundamentalist zeal. Instead, their faith could not abide a separation of the spiritual and social dimensions of life; valid faith must attend to liberation and freedom in order to realize God's promise.

In his autobiography published in 1893, Peter Randolph demonstrated why initially it would have been difficult for African Americans to believe the Bible, particularly inasmuch as they received it from the

4. Hammon, "Address," 42.

5. Maria Stewart, "Mrs. Stewart's Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston," in *African American Religious History*, 208.

hands of less-than-reliable sources. Randolph critiqued slaveholders who ironically preached against theft to those they held enslaved, deeming them like Ananias and Sapphira, who "betrayed the trust committed to them, or refused to bear true testimony in regard to that trust."[6] For him "[t]he Gospel was so mixed with slavery, that the people could see no beauty in it, and feel no reverence for it."[7] From this statement we could almost conclude that he would reject the Christian God and Scripture.

As he attests, it was not the faith with which he had a problem, however, but preachers who got caught up in the spirit in worship on Sunday morning and then would whip an enslaved woman on Monday morning. He declared that "[s]uch preachers ought to be forbidden by the laws of the land ever to mock again the blessed religion of Jesus, which was sent as a light to the world."[8] For Randolph, the "religion of Jesus" was distinct from the expressions of white, slaveholding religion he was forced to endure. He could thus level a critique against slavery in Christian terms, demonstrating the failure of his ideological opponents to surmise properly the true scriptural message.

The hypocrisy of white Christianity was also a major theme for Frederick Douglass. In essence he determined that slaveholding religion was different altogether from the Christianity of Christ: "I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes,—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,—and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection."[9]

On the surface, this statement may appear to be a rejection of Christianity, but Douglass clearly emphasized that it was not Christianity with which he had problems, but a bastardized version of American religion. He continued: "What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the *slaveholding religion* of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference. . . . I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity."[10]

6. Peter Randolph, "Plantation Churches: Visible and Invisible," in *African American Religious History*, 64.
7. Randolph, "Plantation Churches," 64.
8. Randolph, "Plantation Churches," 65.
9. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 77*.
10. Douglass, *Narrative*, 118*. Some question Douglass's commitment to Christianity later in life (see *By These Hands: A Documentary History of African American Humanism*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn [New York: New York University Press, 2001], 75–100).

Raised with the hypocrisy of slaveholding Christianity, Douglass had ample reason to dismiss the Bible or to conclude that it was nothing more than a tool used to control blacks. Rather than rejecting Scripture, he used it to hold accountable those who abused it. Likening Southern slaveholding Christians to biblical scribes and Pharisees, he declared that they "attend with Pharisaical strictness to the outward forms of religion, and at the same time neglect the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith . . . professing to love God whom they have not seen, whilst they hate their brother whom they have seen."[11]

By finding biblical examples of pious people who were portrayed negatively in the Bible, Douglass was able to redeem a faith in Scripture despite the failings of Southern Christianity. Slaveholders, though pious, were not faithful Christians, but similar to central religious hierarchy during Jesus' times; like scribes and Pharisees, they misconstrued the essence of religion. In this way the Bible's authority could be upheld in spite of the rampant abuses by many Christian proslavery advocates.

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE KING JAMES VERSION OF THE BIBLE

It is not by happenstance that the first African American orators were eloquent speakers who wrote in lofty, regal English prose, a language far removed from the common verbiage of their African American enslaved and impoverished freed colleagues. The stammering slave tongue reflected in the conversations recorded in their own narratives was quite distinct from the elegant and astute rhetoric of these formerly enslaved authors. It is almost as if they were speaking an alien tongue, a language of refinement and contemplation that transcended the mundane experiences of the enslaved. It is almost as though they were speaking with the "Master's tongue," and to a certain extent, perhaps they were—but just not the masters of whom we might be thinking.

They were speaking the "Master's" language as they understood it to be reflected in the pages of the King James Version of the Bible (KJV). It was a sacred tongue, a respected tongue, a tongue that if mastered could both serve to assert the full humanity of the enslaved by demonstrating their intellectual acumen and serve as a commonplace cultural

11. Douglass, *Narrative*, 122*.

connection to the largely white audience (for their "narratives"), whom they sought to persuade through careful use of pathos and ethos to become abolitionists.

The King James Version of the Bible has been a prominent document consulted to frame theological discourse around key political movements throughout the development of life in the Americas.[12] This has been evidenced in many distinctive ways in the African American community, beginning with the first black encounters with this text in the Western world. As a people, African Americans were not easy converts to Christianity. In fact, it took more than a century, two Great Awakenings, and the typically more egalitarian evangelistic tactics of the Baptists and Methodists for Christianity to begin to make significant inroads into African American communities. But just as important as the sociological factors involved, it took the stories from the pages of the Bible to open up the hearts and souls of enslaved Africans to the Christian faith.

In "Re-reading *Their* Scriptures: An Analysis of the Authority of Scripture among Early African Americans," Sadler argues that African American readers discovered within the pages of the Bible the stories of God's interaction with key biblical figures, where the Lord provides liberation, redemption, and deliverance.[13] These stories served as the mythopoeic, or "myth making" basis for African American visions of freedom and self-determination and thus gave Christianity a certain appeal to enslaved Africans. As historian Albert Raboteau discusses in his now-classic text *Slave Religion*,

> [s]laves prayed for the future day of deliverance to come, and they kept hope alive by incorporating as part of *their* mythic past the Old Testament exodus of Israel out of slavery. The appropriation of the Exodus story was for the slaves a way of articulating their sense of historical identity as a people. That identity was also based, of course, upon their common heritage of enslavement. The Christian slaves applied the Exodus story, whose end they knew, to their own experience of slavery, which had not ended. In identifying with the Exodus story, they created meaning out of the chaotic and senseless

12. For a fuller version of this discussion, see Rodney Sadler, "African Americans and the King James Version of the Bible," in *The King James Version at 400: Assessing Its Genius as Bible Translation and Its Literary Influence*, ed. David G. Burge, John F. Kutsko, and Philip H. Towner (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 455–74.

13. Rodney Sadler, "Re-reading *Their* Scriptures: An Analysis of the Authority of Scripture among Early African Americans," *Ex Auditu: An International Journal of Theological Interpretation of Scripture* 19 (2003): 153–65.

> experience of slavery. Exodus functioned as an archetypal event for the slaves.[14]

Scripture and the stories of a God who rescued the oppressed and redeemed the abused served as the entrée into the Christian faith. As John Saillant reflects, "In the second half of the eighteenth century, therefore, African American hermeneutics was born. . . . The Bible provided a context in which the sufferings of slaves could be understood and the misdeeds of the slavers judged, even if blacks could not at the moment free themselves. . . . The Bible provided an anti-slavery interpretation of history."[15]

Thus began the romance between some African Americans and the Bible. And when they were converted by the God of this book, it was the great eloquence and the archaic voice of the King James Version that evoked divinity in the text by its poetry and its royal grandeur. These stories are told in "God's language," and because of that, the King James Version quickly captured African Americans' hearts and minds. This phenomenon did not end in the nineteenth century either. African Americans retain an affinity for the King James Version, as if it were an inheritance from their formerly enslaved ancestors.[16] Alice Ogden Bellis notes in her article "The Bible in African American Perspectives" that even today

> [t]he translation of choice for African Americans is usually the King James Version. Blacks revere the KJV for the same reason many Roman Catholics still are fond of the Latin/Vulgate Bible: the poetry and antiquitous tone associated with a spirituality of earlier times, even another world. That some of the text is "mysterious,"' i.e., not fully understood, is what makes it special, instantly beckoning one to prayer and active dialogue with God. Modern translations, in

14. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 311. While the exodus theme may have been present in the spirituals (which are more difficult to date), the biblical theme was less popular in the narratives of the formerly enslaved before 1860. According to Sylvester Johnson, the exodus story became prominent among African Americans *after* emancipation, not before (*The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God* [New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004], 53).

15. John Saillant, "Origins of African American Biblical Hermeneutics in Eighteenth-Century Black Opposition to the Slave Trade and Slavery," in *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, ed. Vincent Wimbush (New York: Continuum, 2000), 236–37.

16. In one recent national study, completed in March 2014, it was determined that preference for the King James Version remains significantly more prominent (more than 20 percent higher) among African American readers than among their white counterparts ("The Bible in American Life: A National Study by the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture," 13), accessed January 19, 2015, http://www.raac.iupui.edu/files/2713/9413/8354/Bible_in_American_Life_Report_March_6_2014.pdf.

> making the text idiomatic in a contemporary way, cause the Bible to become suspect as a dubious translation of modernisms.[17]

The King James Version is to African American preaching, oration, and literature what Alexander Pushkin was to Russian literature. Without the Shakespearean poetry and prose of this text, born during the life of this great Old English–speaking literary genius, the black bards would not have had the platform from which to soar to the remarkable heights that they reached with such memorable offerings as Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" or Maria Stewart's "Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston," or Martin King's "A Letter from a Birmingham Jail," or even James Weldon Johnson's "The Creation."

A fair treatment of this subject is not possible in the brief space of this introductory chapter. For the sake of introduction, in this chapter we will explore the role of the King James Version in early black literacy then divide the historical African American appropriation of the King James Version into two basic types, "functional quotations" and "literalist interpretations," and talk about the implications of both of these hermeneutical moves on formerly enslaved African American autobiographers.

KING JAMES VERSION AS THE BASIS OF LITERACY

Stephen B. Reid notes in his book *Experience and Tradition*: "It was from the Bible that many black slaves learned to read and it was to the Bible that so many of them went to find guidance, comfort, a word of hope, and the promise of their deliverance from sin and slavery. The Bible has been the source of inspiration for poetry and song, as well as the inspiration for drama and sermon."[18]

These few words from Reid ably sum up the significance of the Bible for early African Americans. Though thought by most in contemporary society to be a religious book and a source of spiritual wisdom, for the first African Americans who encountered Scripture when enslaved, the Bible was far more important than that. It was a God book, a "talking

17. Alice Ogden Bellis, "The Bible in African American Perspectives," in *Teaching Theology and Religion* 1.3 (1998): 161–65 (162).

18. Stephen Breck Reid, *Experience and Tradition: A Primer in Black Biblical Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 11.

book,"[19] a book that controlled life and death. Because of this, the Bible inspired African Americans to learn to read and write. Harriet Jacobs illustrates this as she recounts her experiences tutoring an older enslaved man:

> As soon as he could spell in two syllables he wanted to spell out words in the Bible. The happy smile that illuminated his face put joy into my heart. After spelling out a few words, he paused, and said, "Honey, it 'pears when I can read dis good book I shall be nearer to God. White man is got all de sense. He can larn easy. It ain't easy for ole black man like me. I only wants to read dis book, dat I may know how to live, den I hab no fear 'bout dying."[20]

Jacobs's account demonstrates a common theme in the narratives of formerly enslaved African Americans: the Bible inspired them to want to learn to read. This same sentiment was expressed by Frederick Douglass as he recounted his initial quest for literacy in the 1895 Frederic Holland authored biography, *Colored Orator:*

> I remember the first time I ever heard the Bible read, and from that time I trace my first desire to learn to read. I was over seven years old; my master had gone out one Sunday night, the children had gone to bed. I had crawled under the center table and had fallen asleep, when my mistress commenced to read the Bible aloud, so loud that she waked me. She waked me to sleep no more. I have found since that the chapter she then read was the first of Job. I remember my sympathy for the good old man, and my anxiety to learn more about him led me to ask my mistress to teach me to read.[21]

Frederick Douglass's recollection of this pivotal event in his life exemplified the importance of the Bible to enslaved African Americans. It was Scripture that emboldened them to engage in the act of resistance that is reading; they knew that they were taking their lives into their hands[22] but deemed it to be worth the risk. It was Scripture

19. "I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent" (Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 106–7*). For a fuller analysis of this trope, see chap. 2.

20. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself* (Boston: Published for the Author, 1861), 112*.

21. Frederic May Holland, *Frederick Douglass: The Colored Orator* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1895), 14*.

22. "Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her,

that captured the imagination of enslaved blacks, who had been legally prohibited from learning to read or write, because their enslavers feared what would happen if they developed their full intellectual capacity. In response to his stated desire to read, Douglass's enslaver noted that "if this one should ever be taught to read the bible, there would be no keeping him a slave."[23] But, as Douglass's legend states, having heard his enslaver prohibiting him from learning to read, "at once he made up his mind to get all he could."[24]

So began the rise of one of the most important intellectuals and social activists in the history of the United States. Through cunning he learned to read, often manipulating the free white youngsters in the neighborhood to share their school lessons with him. But it was always the King James Version that was his primary pedagogue.[25] Later in life, he recalled learning to read by picking up stray pages of the Bible from the gutter, cleaning and drying them, and then stealing away to study them in secret.[26] His scriptural studies would often occupy him until long into the night.[27]

Of course Douglass lived (1818–1895) during a period when the King James Version of the Bible was the dominant English version of the Bible. Not only might we suspect this because of the eloquent prose that he employed in his writing and oration; we can also recognize this from the quotations of Scripture that he used in his own writings. While we will address his use of Scripture more below, the King James Version was likely the first piece of literature that early African American literati encountered, desired to learn, and eventually mastered. This alone makes it a significant artifact for African American history and should pique our curiosity about the influence this version had on the intellectual development of black Americans. But the use of this text was not as straightforward as we might expect; instead of simply appropriating the text as it was given, they adapted this version

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among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, 'If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. Now,' said he, 'if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave'" (Douglass, *Narrative*, 33*).

23. Holland, *Frederick Douglass,* 15*.

24. Holland, *Frederick Douglass,* 15*.

25. Another key book for Douglass was "The Columbian Orator," which helped Douglass improve his oratory skills and gain perspective on the master/slave relationship; see Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), 157–58, 264, 275, 343.

26. Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time* (Hartford, CT: Park Publishing Co., 1881), 83*.

27. Holland, *Frederick Douglass*, 48–49*.

of the text in several ways to address the concerns of African American rhetors.

FUNCTIONAL QUOTATIONS: USE OF THE BIBLE IN FREEDOM NARRATIVES

One of the interesting trends with early African American appropriations of the King James Version in liberationist-oriented literature was the use of this translation as the basis of "functional quotations." By functional quotation we mean that they employed the King James Version as their base text and then playfully modified the text typologically, often replacing the biblical heroes with the African American community and the biblical villains with their enslavers or oppressors. They preserved the gist of the text as well as the poetic and archaic dimensions of its language, yet the exact words and word order were less important and often modified slightly to fit the authors' own narrative contexts.

In the appendix to Douglass's first autobiography, published in 1845, he offers an extensive citation from the King James Version of Matthew 23:

> The Christianity of America is a Christianity, of whose votaries it may be as truly said, as it was of the ancient scribes and Pharisees, "They bind heavy burdens, and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. All their works they do for to be seen of men.—They love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, . . . and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi.—But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in. Ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayers; therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation. Ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.—Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint, and anise, and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith; these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Ye blind guides! which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter; but within, they are full of extortion and

> excess.—Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity."[28]

In this instance he reproduced the passages that deal with the "woes" against the scribes and Pharisees and used these to critique the "religion of the South," the strange Southern perversion of the Christian faith that not only existed amid the dehumanizing conditions of the Southern slavocracy, but that was ultimately just "a mere covering for the most horrid crimes."[29]

As he reproduced the text, he began with the King James Version, but he deliberately altered his quotation at points relevant to his rhetorical aims to deal more precisely with his focal concerns and to avoid passages that adhered less to his interests. Douglass's quotation demonstrated that early African Americans made use of the King James Version, but that they appropriated the text in a manner that best suited their arguments for freedom and social transformation. Hence, instead of an actual quotation, Douglass employed a functional quotation, a quotation that achieved the author's rhetorical ends by altering the text in purposeful ways.

We see this strategy at work in the writings of another formerly enslaved person, William Anderson. Anderson also utilized the King James Version as the base text for his functional quotations. Consider the following quotation, wherein Anderson generally followed the King James Version but modified some terms, verb tenses, and word orders and even added material from other psalms almost as though he was reciting them himself, typologically assuming the identity of the psalmist:

Anderson's Text	KJV Psalm 23 w/ addition
"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want; He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters.	**Psalm 23:1** The LORD *is* my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

28. Douglass, *Narrative*, 120–21*.
29. Douglass, *Narrative*, 77*.

Anderson's Text	KJV Psalm 23 w/ addition
Yes, He restoreth my soul; He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness, for His **own** name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I **shall** fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.	3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou *art* with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Yes, thou anointeth my head with oil; thou spreadeth a table before me, in the presence of mine enemies.	5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy **have followed me** all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.	6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.
I once was young, but now I am old, and I never have seen the righteous forsaken nor his seed begging bread.	**Psalm 37:25** I have been young, and *now* am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.
The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."[30]	**Psalm 24:1** The earth *is* the LORD's, and the fulness thereof;

Anderson used this functional quotation almost as a triumphant crescendo in his narrative to affirm his faith in God despite the many "dangers, toils, and snares" that he had endured at the hands of those who sought to imprison or reenslave him. If we look carefully at his appropriation of this passage, we will note subtle purposeful changes in his appropriation of the King James Version:

1. the addition of the word "yes" to verses 3 and 5 to confirm that God has acted in his own life,
2. the addition of the word "own" in verse 3 to express the intimate relationship he has with God,

30. William J. Anderson, *The Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson, Twenty-Four Years a Slave* (Chicago: Daily Tribune Book and Job Printing Office, 1857), 44*.

3. the substitution of the term "shall" for "will" in verse 4 to demonstrate that he was kept from fearing evil,
4. the substitution of the past tense "have followed me" for "shall follow me" in verse 6 to demonstrate the faithfulness of the Lord throughout the various crises in his life.

This functional quotation of the King James Version personalized the passage and served as a powerful theological summation of his life experiences and a potent rhetorical tool to convince his readers of both the hardships he endured and the fidelity of God. Subsequent to this quotation of Scripture, he began to riff, if you will, off of several biblical and religious themes to describe his jubilation that the Lord had rescued him from his countless perils.[31]

LITERALIST INTERPRETATIONS: KING JAMES VERSION AS BASE TEXT FOR PARTICULAR MOVEMENTS

The King James Version of the Bible has also proven useful for certain Africana movements that, based upon particular translational choices made in this version, were able to frame their theologies. These groups developed particularized interpretations of Scripture that make them distinctive and that distinguish them from typical mainstream Africana Christian interpretive traditions.

One African American movement that has based fundamental details of its interpretive tradition on the King James Version is a group called the Ethiopianists. Growing from the seeds of mid-nineteenth-century ideas of David Walker and Henry Highland Garnet, this group blossomed in the latter half of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries in the work of religious leaders like missionary intellectuals Alexander Crummel and Edward Blyden and institutional leaders Bishop Henry M. Turner and Marcus Garvey. The thrust of their movement was based upon the understanding of one passage in

31. "Therefore I will trust in Him, as did Job, Peter, Paul and all the Apostles of old. O, like Jonah, I can almost say 'I have cried to God out of the belly of hell,' for some of these jails resemble a hell, and I have been in many of them in the United States; for where the slaveholders did not put me in, these mean Northerners or Free State men, both black and white, would concoct plans to imprison me. But, bless the Lord, the old man Anderson still lives, while many of them are falling to rise no more. Yes, glory to God, I expect to shout Victory when the world is on fire" (Anderson, *Life*, 44–45*).

the Psalter (Ps. 68:31 KJV): "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God."

Over the years, this text has posed considerable problems for English translators who have understood it to mean very different things. For example: "Envoys will come from Egypt; Cush will submit herself to God" (NIV); "Let bronze be brought from Egypt; let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out its hands to God" (NRSV).

Attempts to make sense of this verse—which George Knight has deemed the "most notorious in the whole Bible"[32]—have led to some difficult and somewhat unsatisfactory text critical choices to arrive at translations that resemble the NIV's verse 31a "Envoys will come from Egypt" and the NRSV's verse 31b "Let Cush hasten to stretch out its hands to God." In essence, the passage seems to suggest a future moment when people of the great southern empires of Egypt and Cush will hasten to Jerusalem to worship YHWH. This verse is thus an attempt, as these translations suggest, to elevate the Judeans' self-estimation by predicting a moment when mightier nations, under which Judah has served as vassal, will prostrate themselves before Judah's God.[33]

From this obscure text grew an elaborate ideological movement that sought to make sense of African Americans' plight in the aftermath of the abolishment of systemic chattel slavery. It was a complex and internally conflicted ideology. It celebrated the sovereignty of God as the one who allowed the enslavement of Africans in order for them to become "civilized" and Christianized by the Europeans who oppressed them. It also hailed the providence of God, who would soon deliver Africans and give them an opportunity to exercise their superior genius in the reordering of the world. At the same time it both provided a theological legitimization for the horrors of slavery and it decried slavery as a crime against a once-and-soon-again-to-be-great people. As presented in the distinctive rendering of the King James Version, this text served as a prophecy of God's impending activity in the very near future; it was an eschatological foretelling of a return to prominence and purpose of a debased and humiliated people.

Based on the King James Version's translation of this single verse, members of the Ethiopianist movement were able to find biblically based theological support for their particular nationalist ideology. They took the text and exploited it, using the notion of "princes" to reflect

32. George A. F. Knight, *Psalms* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 1:315.

33. Rodney S. Sadler Jr., *Can a Cushite Change His Skin? An Examination of Race, Ethnicity, and Othering in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 135–37.

the former greatness of their ancestors and "Ethiopia" to refer to the entire continent of Africa poised on the brink of a revival.[34] Thus a historically significant faction that continues to impact contemporary life in Africana communities was born of a dubious translation of a difficult verse.

Consequently, we see that the King James Version served a distinctive purpose in shaping the aesthetic and the form of early African American rhetoric, and this aspect continues to influence everything from black preaching to black thought. The lyrical nature of the text, the archaic form of high English prose, and the descriptive literary elegance are evident in the writings of the previously enslaved.

For early African American writers, the King James Version was their pedagogue and primer to the literary world. It formed and shaped black thought in ways that are undeniable even today. Perhaps the intimacy of the African American romance with the King James Version is behind the contemporary African American aversion to recent translations built on more reliable and older witnesses to the original form of the biblical text. Perhaps the history of African Americans with this text has kept them beholden to it in a way that not only gives it primacy, but locates divine authority in its pages not easily transferred to other versions. The history of African American biblical interpretation begins with an engagement with one particular translation, the King James Version. And this translation floods the pages of the narratives of the formerly enslaved, who believed foremost in the God of liberation.

PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT

To analyze the function of the Bible within the "Freedom Narrative" tradition. This project is an attempt to analyze the function of the Bible within the nineteenth-century narratives of the formerly enslaved prior to the Civil War. What role did the Bible play in the controversy surrounding slavery? How did various interpreters utilize its authority in maintaining their position, whether for or against the peculiar institution? Our primary focus is to explore the perspective of African Americans who had escaped bondage, since we have no written record from enslaved persons during their enslavement. At the time of their writings, the authors of the narratives were free—at least

34. George M. Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 57–93.

in terms of their physical bodies. In their stories, they were attempting to free their minds and, they hoped, the bodies of others. Based on a firsthand experience of the peculiar institution, many of the African Americans who escaped became abolitionists, so the logic of liberation was the hermeneutical wedge they utilized to crack open the Bible. As scholars of the Bible, we are drawn to their use of the Bible—a collection of books that was frequently used ideologically to keep blacks enslaved—and how they negotiated the interpretations associated with this ancient collection. We want to narrate the interaction between their context and their Bible. And we want to recount this story through their voices.[35]

To reclaim early black interpreters. While it is important to state what this study is, it is equally important to be clear about what this project is not. It is not an analysis of how the formerly enslaved interpreted biblical texts in order to contribute to an understanding of the religious documents in their ancient settings.[36] They were not historical biblical critics. Rather, we want to narrate the stories of African American interpreters in the nineteenth century so that our readers are able to grapple with the significance of the reception and use of the Bible within the antebellum struggle of enslavement. So this study is secondarily a story about the Bible and its history and a story about nineteenth-century slavery. More significantly, this is primarily a study of African American identity and how nineteenth-century black Americans—all formerly enslaved—engaged the greatest theological conundrum of their day by challenging the appropriation of the Christian Bible to enforce their enslaved condition.[37] With W. E. B. DuBois, we assume what he asserted over a century ago: "The things evidently borrowed from the surrounding world undergo characteristic change when they enter the mouth of the slave. Especially is this true of Bible phrases."[38]

35. For this study, we utilize narratives "written by herself/himself" and those dictated to (usually white) editors. We are aware of the influence of some of these *white* abolitionist editors. See Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 144–45. If we were to make use only of narratives written by the formerly enslaved, we could not speak of *female* perspectives until 1861, when Harriet Jacobs penned her narrative.

36. Attention to the meaning of biblical passages within their ancient settings, from the perspective of nineteenth-century African American interpreters, would also be a fruitful project.

37. Of course, outside of the freedom-narrative tradition, African Americans read and appropriated the Bible for various reasons not limited to political and confrontational purposes. In most circumstances, they did not have white audiences in mind when they read their Bibles.

38. W. E. B. DuBois had the spirituals in mind specifically in *Souls of Black Folk* (orig. 1903; New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003), 185.

Literacy rates among enslaved African Americans in the nineteenth century are difficult to determine.[39] Formal educational opportunities were generally illegal, so literacy was relatively low. Yet for various reasons, many slaveholders taught members of the enslaved to read.[40] Our narratives are filled with examples of these opportunities of learning. Furthermore, several of these authors—including Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, James W. C. Pennington, and William Wells Brown—eventually became recognized public figures in nineteenth-century abolitionist circles.[41] Nonetheless, because of their direct experience of enslavement, they spoke on behalf of their fellow sisters and brothers in bondage, some of whom were their blood relatives.

To explore critical readers from the "underside." The Bible's role in religious and political debates leading up to the Civil War has received recent attention among historians and scholars of religion alike.[42] Mark Noll has presented the nineteenth-century debate over the Bible as the theological crisis of the century.[43] Most frequently, this "history" has been told from the perspective of white interpretation on both sides, with occasional references to a few major black voices (e.g., Frederick Douglass).[44] Our goal is to explore this area of history through the lens of one of the most significant primary sources available to studies on slavery, that is, from the perspectives of those recently held in bondage. What did those persons most directly affected by the enslavement system think about the perpetuation of religious ideologies that kept them in bondage? Did these persons on the margins of US society take opportunities to reflect on and respond to the cultural "logic" guiding the political and economic forces of the day, despite their condition?

The narratives of the formerly enslaved allow us an unprecedented opportunity to hear their contributions to the debates of their day, especially on the religious arguments behind this vast network of forces

39. The historian Eugene Genovese thought that W. E. B. DuBois's numbers—approximately 5 percent of the enslaved had learned to read by 1860—may "be too low" (*Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* [New York: Vintage Books, 1974], 563).

40. John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 8th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 155.

41. Sojourner Truth dictated her story to Olive Gilbert, who served as editor of *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828* (Boston: The Author, 1850). Truth's contemporary biographer, Nell Irvin Painter, discusses the challenges encountered between the abolitionist editor and Truth's desire to relay her own story, in *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996), 103–10.

42. Cf. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

43. Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

44. To Noll's credit, he provides a brief section on "African Americans, the Bible, and Slavery" (*Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 64–72). See Johnson, *Myth of Ham*.

maintaining the institution of enslavement. Of course, our consideration of the biblical texts within the freedom narratives is far more general than this. Many of the texts are not utilized as a critique of their white counterparts but simply for exploring their own concerns, celebrating freedom with a psalm, mourning death with a lamentation, as well as declaring their own theological justification of their freedom from their own Scriptures. We want to tell the story of their engagement with the Bible in light of that context.

To recover the early history of a black biblical hermeneutic. Many scholars frequently relay the story of black "critical" interpretation of the Bible as if it began *after* the Black Theology movement of the 1960s.[45] This is technically an appropriate way to report the history of African American interpretation, if "critical" is defined as awareness and use of the *historical critical* method. If we define "critical," however, as an engagement with the biblical text that accepts literal interpretations of the ancient text but rejects a simple contemporary application of that interpretation, then we should look further back into African American history.

To put it another way, frequently, the formerly enslaved were critical interpreters of the biblical text, not because they questioned the literal interpretation of a passage, but because they challenged the dominant cultural (and popular) paradigm of appropriation associated with the interpretive tradition of a biblical reading. Vincent Wimbush has recognized this kind of critical engagement with the Bible in African American interpretive circles long before the civil rights movement of the twentieth century.[46] He focused his attention, among other things, on the antebellum spirituals as one form of biblical interpretation, at least with respect to their critical reinterpretation of the Christian tradition.[47]

More recently, Wimbush has turned his attention to one of the earliest accounts in the freedom narrative tradition, one written by Olaudah Equiano, as a way of fully exploring the "first reading" contact of Africans with the Bible that he outlined in his 1991 "interpretive

45. See Michael Brown, *Blackening of the Bible: The Aims of African American Biblical Scholarship* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press Int., 2004).

46. "The Bible and African Americans: An Outline of an Interpretive History," in *Stony the Road We Trod*, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 81–97. Also, Vincent Wimbush, "'Rescue the Perishing': The Importance of Biblical Scholarship in Black Christianity," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, vol. 2, 1980–1992*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 210–15.

47. Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans," 87–89.

history."[48] We too have tried to engage these early semibiographical narratives as significant, early examples of black critical readings of the Bible.[49] Part of our goal in this project is to recover and narrate some of this early engagement with the Bible as a way of tracing the origins of a black biblical hermeneutic. Generally, we are narrowly focused on the narratives of the formerly enslaved, primarily because these primary sources have been overlooked in this regard. A fuller investigation into African American hermeneutics would move beyond the narratives to include also the spirituals, sermons, ecclesial publications, and public speeches.[50]

To show the extensive role of black agency. All in all, our interest lies in relating part of the history of black agency.[51] African Americans were engaged in the processes of their day, despite the social, political, and ideological barriers challenging their involvement. The narratives give us one significant window into that period and allow us to hear, even if only partially, the words of those on the borderlines of bondage and freedom. In a country that considered itself to be a "Christian Nation,"[52] these Americans, without the rights of full citizenship, wrestled too with their Bible and discovered interpretations, whether in community or on their own, that allowed for potential liberating possibilities for their cause and for their own lives. These formerly enslaved individuals lifted up the pen to write and raised the voice to speak about an experience of enslavement that included a religious setting in which the Bible was frequently interpreted to enforce and maintain their status and condition. For the most part, they sifted through these theological constructions to reclaim the Bible for themselves and placed it on the side of the oppressed. In light of the conditions of the day, this took an unimaginable ingenuity.

48. Vincent Wimbush, *White Men's Magic: Scripturalization as Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). See also Willie Jennings's utilization of Equiano's story to explore the intersections of race and theology, in *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 169–203.

49. See Rodney Sadler and Emerson Powery, "Reading against Jesus: Nineteenth-Century African Americans' View of Sabbath Law," *SBL Forum* 3.5 (2004), www.sbl-site.org. Also, see Powery, "'Rise Up Ye Women': Harriet Jacobs and the Bible," *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts and Contemporary Worlds* 5.2 (2009): 171–84.

50. See Allen Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

51. Walter Johnson explores the complex nature of discerning human "agency" among enslaved people within the North American context, in "Agency: A Ghost Story," in Richard Follett, Eric Foner, and Walter Johnson, *The Problem of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 8–30.

52. See, among others, John Fea's *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011); also Richard Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*; especially his chapter on the "Christian nation" (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004). Sylvester Johnson tackles this popular assumption from the nineteenth-century black perspective (*Myth of Ham*).

They took a text—used against them—and made it their own, often reversing the implications of normative mainline interpretive patterns. Furthermore, many of them told their stories publicly. Countless others relayed them privately. As Yolanda Pierce recognizes, our authors operated out of a liminal space, neither enslaved nor free, that effected their hermeneutical decisions: "Because a liminal space is one of possibility, its occupant is free to determine his or her direction and identity."[53] In the public narratives, they left behind a legacy of their commitment, a snapshot of their lives, a challenge to the system of bondage, and a critical engagement with the sacred texts of the cultural religious tradition.

THE NARRATIVES: AN INTRODUCTION

As Albert Raboteau concluded in *Slave Religion*, "The missionary's ideal picture of a Christianized master-slave relationship contributed to the Southern myth of the benevolent, planter-patriarch presiding benignly over his happy black folks. In reality it was realized no more frequently than most religious ideals."[54] Among other things, the unsuccessful nature of this "Southern myth" was visible in the presence of the individuals who had escaped bondage and lived to tell a different story. When a few of the formerly enslaved picked up their pens, they responded directly to this myth in order to (re)shape Northern perspectives on the Southern institution; as persons tenuously free, their new interstitial existence belied the reality of the myth.

In this project, our primary interest lies in the dozens of narratives published before the Civil War (1861–1865). A large number of formerly enslaved persons wrote their accounts themselves; others dictated their stories to white abolitionist editors, who occasionally rearranged the story lines for a public hearing. In most of these political stories prior to the war, emancipation was the driving theme within the accounts and, for our purposes, one of the significant (if not the most significant) hermeneutical lenses for engaging biblical passages of relevance to their times.

These nineteenth-century African American autobiographical narratives are part of a specific genre, generally following prescribed themes

53. Pierce, *Hell without Fires: Slavery, Christianity, and the Antebellum Spiritual Narrative* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 67.
54. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 165.

laid out by the abolitionist community.[55] The majority of these individuals began their lives in bondage in the American South and gained their freedom after spending many years enslaved. These texts describe the nature of slavery, its effects on the subject, the institutions that governed enslaved lives, and significant events in the subjects' lives that led to their freedom. They were not simply dispassionate rehearsals of these events but were usually (though not exclusively) composed as public political documents, used to further the abolitionist cause by demonstrating that slavery was an inhumane institution that robbed human beings not only of their liberty, but of their very lives. As Harriet Jacobs wisely put it, "There are wrongs which even the grave does not bury."[56]

Our interest in this collection of material from the nineteenth century is of a *religious* nature; more specifically, the role of biblical interpretation within these narratives.[57] For many of the formerly enslaved (though not all), their stories reflect on their past circumstances of bondage and their present desires of freedom for others, with attention to the relationship between God and slavery. In the words of one of these authors, "There is not a solitary decree of the immaculate God that has been concerned in the ordination of slavery, nor does any possible development of [God's] holy will sanctify it."[58] These words come from the Rev. James Pennington, who was formerly enslaved and eventually became a leading African American abolitionist after gleaning his formal theological education sitting outside of classrooms at Yale Divinity School.[59]

In chapter 2, we discuss how the Bible functioned as a symbol within these narratives, marking title pages (occasionally) and appearing symbolically throughout their stories, even when no direct quotation was in mind. It is important, however, not to overstate the case. Many narratives of the formerly enslaved do not include references to the Bible, exegetically or figuratively. Several African American narratives were not influenced positively by any Christian ideas or rhetoric.

55. See Theodore Weld, *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839). Benjamin Quarles calls Weld "the driving spirit behind the organized abolitionist movement" before 1840, in *Lincoln and the Negro* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 46.

56. Jacobs, *Incidents*, 294*.

57. Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress Press, 1986), 179. See Abraham Smith, "Putting 'Paul' Back Together Again: William Wells Brown's *Clotel* and Black Abolitionist Approaches to Paul," *Semeia* 83/84 (1998): 251–62; R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 74–109; Margaret Aymer, who focuses more on Douglass's letters than his narratives, in *First Pure, Then Peaceable: Frederick Douglass Reads James* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2008); and Callahan, *Talking Book*.

58. James Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1849), 76*.

59. Pennington was a minister who succeeded Theodore Sedgwick Wright at Shiloh Presbyterian Church in New York City. In 1849, he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Heidelberg.

But most were! Many of these accounts engage the Bible, directly and indirectly, in order to place these sacred texts on the side of the cause of emancipation.

Furthermore, the *symbolic function* of the Bible expressed larger cultural expectations about its apparent usefulness to mark the significance of one's life, especially in ways that influence the conversation about slavery. As one (white?) anonymous author wrote, "Aaron has a great knowledge of the Bible but cannot read a word." In the nineteenth century, the Bible held an unmatched cultural position as a tool that speaks to peoples' lives—spiritually, religiously, and politically—and, accordingly, it held high cultural value within the African American oral community, even without African Americans ever reading it for themselves. (African American spirituals provide excellent examples of this oral cultural impact.)

On the other hand, once the formerly enslaved began to read and write *critically* (and these narratives were representative of this process), an engagement with the texts of the Bible (and the literacy needed to interpret it) began to produce some popular *but critical* assessment of the words in the Bible's pages. These stories, then, enlighten an immediate generation of the need to talk back to the "talking book" for purposes of individual survival and community uplift.[60]

THE SABBATH, BIBLE READING, AND LITERACY

Antebellum Sabbath gatherings among the enslaved were closely monitored and frequently disrupted. Nat Turner's insurrection (1831) forced many independent African American churches to join their white counterparts formally.[61]

From the religion of their oppressors, African Americans inherited a belief in the Sabbath that encompassed rest from labor, worship of God, and a time for social engagement. For some of them, this was an opportunity for subversive activity as well. Not only was it a time when God guaranteed them one day each week for respite and spiritual and intellectual nurture; a few of them could plan opportunities for escape.

60. The metaphor originates with James Gronniosaw, in the first published freedom narrative, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, As Related by Himself* (orig. published in 1772). See Henry Louis Gates, *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 132. Gronniosaw published seven editions and sold thousands of copies up through 1811.

61. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 178.

Yet many of the enslaved were not allowed to attend to this biblical Sabbath mandate, due to state literacy laws in some instances and to local white religious biases in others. Much of the discussion in the narratives of the formerly enslaved emphasized this point, that is, how slave laws obstructed the observation and practice of Sabbath law.[62] In the narratives of the 1840s in particular, many discuss the unevenness of the practice of Sabbath law in their respective enslaved communities, in order to inform Northern audiences of the general failure of this biblical practice in Southern polite "Christian" society.[63]

Two motifs predominate the discussions of the Sabbath day in the slave narrative tradition, which we explore in chapter 3. First, on this day, the establishment of Sabbath-day schools was a viable option, which would allow for opportunities for securing literacy *and* developing community. The *second* major motif that emerges from the narratives of the formerly enslaved is that the Sabbath day was potentially an occasion for the enslaved to make a literal, physical escape. Both motifs can be viewed under the larger umbrella of "freedom"—spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, *and* literally—the theme that drove these antebellum stories.

For authors of the autobiographical slave narratives, the Sabbath, if practiced correctly, was a symbol for freedom in all of its manifestations. The freedom narratives call for a significant reorientation of the belief in the Sabbath law. In an attempt to raise the ire of white (Christian) abolitionists, African Americans endeavored to convince their audiences of the inconsistent practice surrounding this biblical commandment within the slaveholding communities of the South. Whatever else the Sabbath day may have meant to nineteenth-century African Americans in the antebellum period, it was also intended to be a time for community and a time for liberation. In fact, Sabbath ideology helped to facilitate the development of the early black church movement and corporate autonomy.[64]

62. Mary Prince provides an excellent example in *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave. Related by Herself. With a Supplement by the Editor* (London: Published by F. Westley and A. H. Davis, 1831), 23*. Almost a decade later, in 1839, Theodore Weld published *American Slavery*, in which he requested more testimonies from those who had escaped the immoral institution.

63. Prior to 1820, most of the enslaved had not yet been convinced of Christianity's value (Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 149), so this may partially explain the rise of the freedom narratives during the 1840s and 1850s.

64. Without reference to Sabbath law, Raboteau makes a related point: "In some areas of the South, the 'rise of the black church' was not a post- but a pre-emancipation phenomenon" (*Slave Religion*, 196). This seems to have been true even among non-free African Americans.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF "RACE" AND THE BIBLE

It is not hard to imagine that one popular topic in Sabbath schools would have been the biblical origins of race. These issues inhabited the air of the decades leading up to the Civil War, and the Bible played a primary role in discussions on the origins of racial groups. A thorough biblical investigation of "race" was less popular, however, than interest in the scriptural passages supporting slavery. Indeed, in most circles the two were commonly conflated. Yet, as Mark Noll succinctly put it, "[o]n slavery, exegetes stood for a commonsense reading of the Bible. On race, exegetes forsook the Bible and relied on common sense."[65]

Of course, the so-called "curse of Ham" account provided wide popular support for the dominant racial myth of the nineteenth century, even though Genesis 9 was not closely examined by most.[66] Even among black interpreters, it was common to accept the *blackness* of Ham's (and, Canaan's) skin color, despite the lack of exegetical evidence within the biblical narrative itself. Many African Americans innocently shared the larger cultural assumption that Genesis 9 was a statement on racial origins.[67]

But independent African American thinkers discovered other biblical passages more suitable for their purposes. In chapter 4, we center our attention on William Anderson's interpretation of 2 Kings 5, which was examined to explain skin origins. Anderson discovered an alternative biblical story to confront the dominant popular myth and turned his attention to the story's conclusion: "And [Gehazi] went out from [Elisha's] presence," in the King James Version, "a leper as white as snow." For Anderson, *whiteness*, not blackness, was the curse![68]

THE "MASTER'S MINISTER" AND THE (PAULINE) BIBLE

In chapter 5, we give consideration to how Paul and his writings were reread in order to locate emancipation *from* the "master's minister."[69]

65. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 418.

66. See Thomas Virgil Peterson, *Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South*, ATLA Monograph Series 12 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1978). As Stephen Haynes suggests, it is difficult to determine at what point slavery and race became conflated with Genesis 9 in Western interpretations (*Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2002], 6–8).

67. According to Sylvester Johnson, it was impossible to do otherwise, but William Andrews will be an example of one who did.

68. Toni Morrison's question seems apropos: "What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level *always* conscious of representing one's own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be 'universal' or race-free?" (*Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* [New York: Vintage, 1993], xii).

69. The term "master's minister" derives from Nancy Ambrose, as told by her grandson, Howard Thurman, in *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), 30.

The "master's minister," as we learn from Nancy Ambrose (Howard Thurman's grandmother) and many other formerly enslaved persons, loved to pontificate on Paul. Sabbath schools, among the darker races, would have provided opportunities to compare notes on the sermons they heard. Was "Brother Saul" really in favor of their bondage and mistreatment? They could then wrestle, exegetically and critically, with the Pauline passages utilized in these speeches. Henry Bibb acknowledges as much in 1849, writing about the absence of *black* Sabbath schools in Kentucky.[70] The enslaved, "with but few exceptions," did *not* trust in this type of (white) utilization of the Bible. Despite the lack of religious education, the enslaved would not accept their condition as divinely ordained. Intuitively, black Christians developed a distinctive hermeneutical approach to these passages, while others walked away from such a Pauline-dominated religion.

Addressing the Paul of the "master's minister" was not the only focus within these African American sources. There were other active agents of interpretation who circumvented the Pauline obedience passages altogether and discovered a Paul they could embrace. Many of them—including Solomon Bayley (1825) and Richard Allen (1833)—found a cosufferer who could relate to their present circumstances of abuse, neglect, and impoverishment while they journeyed through life.[71] They discovered a biblical Paul (in the letters *and* the Acts of the Apostles) who spoke to their condition.

If the freedom narratives are representative of black interpretation, many of the enslaved discovered that the Pauline letters could be read in alternative ways. "Servants, obey your masters" would not be the final word. Rather, a theological commitment to God's love would preempt their hermeneutical approach. They knew it intuitively and believed it theologically. As many contemporary scholars recognize, however, the New Testament presented a critical challenge for the abolitionist position.[72] Yet these early black biblical interpreters developed a

70. "This is where they have no Sabbath Schools; no one to read the Bible to them; no one to preach the gospel who is competent to expound the Scriptures, except slaveholders. And the slaves, with but few exceptions, have no confidence at all in their preaching because they preach a pro-slavery doctrine" (Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* [New York: Author, 1849], 23–24*).

71. The cosufferer motif is most clearly present in Solomon Bayley's and William Anderson's narratives (see chap. 5). See Raquel St. Clair's recent critique of womanist's emphases on Jesus as "co-sufferer," in *Call and Consequences: A Womanist Reading of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

72. See Caroline Shanks, "The Biblical Antislavery Argument of the Decade, 1830–1840," *Journal of Negro History* 16 (1931): 151; also J. Albert Harrill: "Most embarrassing for today's readers of the Bible, the proslavery spokesmen were defending the more defensible position from the perspective of historical criticism" ("The Use of the New Testament in the American Slave Controversy: A Case History in the Hermeneutical Tension between Biblical Criticism and Christian Moral Debate," *Religion and American Culture* 10 [2000]: 174).

hermeneutics of survival that allowed the biblical Paul—who believed in a God who "hath made of one blood all nations"—to remain within their canon.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NARRATIVE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

Raboteau wisely comments about the engagement between Christianity and African Americans in the early decades of the nineteenth century: "The slaves did not simply become Christians; they creatively fashioned a Christian tradition to fit their own peculiar experience of enslavement in America."[73] This "peculiar experience" was shaped—positively and negatively—by a sporadic and highly creative engagement with the Christian Bible. For the formerly enslaved who penned their own narratives, literacy meant the beginning of basic freedom. *Biblical* literacy allowed these black interpreters to "talk back" to the "talking book" and thereby to engage in a critical hermeneutical challenge to the widespread oppressive use of Scripture on the side of the peculiar institution.

Their God and their Bible would not allow for the dehumanization of those on the underside of life. Their God and their Bible were more inclusive than that. It was also, as Vincent Wimbush suggests, an attempt "to enter the mainstream of American society."[74] As interpreters of the sacred text, they too could engage in the religious practices informed by an interpretive tradition. And they would push back when they needed to do so. Critical interrogation of the Bible was as crucial, in American society, as a careful understanding of the United States Constitution. Therefore, as demonstrated by their reading of biblical texts—well before President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation[75]—there existed at the core of their religious beliefs a firm conviction in the God of freedom and a hermeneutical strategy that claimed the Bible as the *genesis of liberation*.

73. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 209.

74. Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans," 93.

75. The proclamation to free the enslaved within Southern territories was a central political strategy to increase the success of Lincoln's primary goal to restore the Union. Also, the proclamation, at least, opened up the opportunity for the formerly enslaved to join the Union army (George M. Fredrickson, "A Man but Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality," *The Journal of Southern History* 41/1 [Feb. 1975]). Less well-known in the national memory surrounding the Emancipation Proclamation was Lincoln's desire to recolonize African Americans (i.e., "Negro deportation"). Yet, as Benjamin Quarles points out, the public document was well received, and Lincoln himself too became a positively mythic figure in the black imagination (*Lincoln and the Negro* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 131).