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READING THE BIBLE IN ANTEBELLUM CONTEXTS

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SUSAN CHRISTOPHER SHIELDS

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To Daddy, who taught me to read out of Shelby Foote's *Civil War*.

To Mommy, who never made me do my homework.

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INTRODUCTION
BEYOND WORDS: READING THE BIBLE IN ANTEBELLUM CONTEXTS

My grandfather was in slavery. And my grandmother was a full-blooded Cherokee Indian. She had a little education. But they could both read the Bible. It is one of the most peculiar things in my life. My grandfather could not read a newspaper but he could read a Bible and understand it.

— Stanley James[1]

"Nothing, in short, could be more obvious than the biblical character of the United States during its early years."[2] In the almost forty years since Mark Noll summed up the matter in his introduction to *The Bible in America*, countless scholars have joined him in commenting on the surprising consensus, reached rather quickly in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War, that made the Bible—reading it and referencing it, interpreting it and applying it, owning it and distributing it—the key to unifying and defining a young nation. As Noll explained:

> This was the period in which Bible societies arose to place a copy of the Scriptures in the hands of every citizen, an effort which even so un-evangelical a figure as Thomas Jefferson supported in 1814 with a $50 contribution. . . . It was an age when public leaders unabashedly proclaimed their devotion to Scripture. John Adams could call the Bible "the best book in the World." Henry Clay referred to it as "the only book to give us hope in darkness." Daniel Webster asserted that it was "the book of all others for lawyers as well as for divines." And Abraham Lincoln named it "the best gift God has given to man."[3]

In a more recent book on the Bible in America, Noll wrote that "trust in 'the Bible alone' emerged by the end of the eighteenth century as one of the most important colonial legacies to the new nation," creating and defining the American public to which his title refers.[4] Before the

[1] Stanley James, interview, in Deborah Brandt, *Literacy in American Lives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 116.

[2] Mark A. Noll, "The Image of the United States as a Biblical Nation, 1776–1865," in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 41.

[3] Ibid., 40.

[4] Mark A. Noll, *In the Beginning Was the Word: The Bible in American Public Life, 1492–1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

Bible became the moral compass of the new republic, it had been an ideological springboard for revolution. Nathan O. Hatch, in his own essay for *The Bible in America* and in his persistently influential 1989 monograph *The Democratization of American Christianity*, noted the extreme lengths to which Americans had taken the old Protestant concept of *sola scriptura* in the age of Enlightenment. This "populist hermeneutics," Hatch argued, was widespread and appealing enough not only to start and sustain the War for Independence, but also to reconstitute authority on the other side of war by elevating the right of private judgment to a sacred duty.[5] A decade later, Peter J. Thuesen lamented the way nineteenth-century Americans had taken Protestantism's "piety of 'Scripture alone'" and, "using intellectual currents issuing from the Enlightenment of the previous century," united evangelicals and their detractors alike in the pursuit of a "relentless biblical empiricism."[6] More recently, David Kling reflected that even "in a democratic environment of religious freedom, where common people carried the right of private interpretation to its logical conclusion, interpretive chaos," in general Bible-reading Americans interpreted the story of Israel in one way, as parallel to their own: "With independence achieved, the rhetoric of the Exodus took on a decidedly nationalist emphasis that expressed the myth of chosenness and destiny. . . . Both peoples were the unique recipients of divine favor."[7] This is the most common story of biblical literacy in the nineteenth century: that through an individualist ethic of reading the Bible for oneself, Americans defined a collective national identity and manifest destiny.

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[5] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 182.

[6] Peter J. Thuesen, *In Discordance with the Scriptures: American Protestant Battles of Translating the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 12.

[7] David W. Kling, "A Contested Legacy: Interpreting, Debating, and Translating the Bible in America," in *American Christianities: A History of Dominance & Diversity*, ed. Catherine A. Brekus and W. Clark Gilpin (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 218, 219.

The authors of this scholarly narrative have sometimes acknowledged its complications—namely, that this ideological consensus reflected very little specific agreement and included very few Americans. Studies of the Bible and Christianity in the early republic which centralize democratized *sola scriptura* tend also to centralize white men, and thus concern new forms of authoritarianism as much as revolution- and revival-sustaining antiauthoritarianism. Hatch's thesis on the transfer of religious authority to non-elites depends with rare exception on the actions and testimonies of white men who were arguably non-elites before the Revolution, but who by its end had become "a new sort of elite."[8] And as Kling points out, Americans' vision of themselves as a new Israel was only viable if they ignored another, arguably more fitting metaphor, entertained by thousands of enslaved people in their midst, that cast them as Egypt.[9] Scholars like Amanda Porterfield, Candy Gunther Brown, and Seth Perry have shown that the empowerment of laypeople to read the Bible for themselves was accompanied by a proliferation of new means of mediating that relationship by controlling the ways the Bible could be read and the conclusions drawn by individual readers.[10] Contemporaries of these trends, too, recognized their authoritarian potential. Theologian John Williamson Nevin wrote of the proliferation of new sects in the early nineteenth century that they were "full indeed of professed zeal for Protestant liberty, free inquiry, an open Bible, universal toleration, the right of all men to think for themselves, and all such high-sounding phrases"; but this rhetoric allowed the same people who sowed the seeds of anticlericalism "to wield a true hierarchical despotism over all who are

[8] Seth Perry, "The Endless Making of Many Books: Bibles and Religious Authority in America, 1780–1850" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2013), 16.

[9] Kling, "A Contested Legacy," 218–222. On African American interpretations of the Exodus story, see Albert J. Raboteau, "African Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel," in *Religion and American Culture: A Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. David G. Hackett (New York: Routledge, 2003), 73–87.

[10] See Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (University of Chicago Press, 2012); Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789–1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Seth Perry, *Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

thus brought within their power."[11] Nevin's thesis suggests that the vast diversity of the religious landscape in the antebellum era was not a manifestation of the radical freedom to interpret the Bible individually; it was rather a response to a crisis of authority, the proliferation of a new framework for religious absolutism, all the more effective for its lack of specific content.[12]

This story of biblical literacy in the nineteenth century, then, is not about consensus per se, but rather the ascendency of consensus itself as a form of authority. Enlightenment ideologies proclaiming natural reason and innate moral sense as the sole arbiters of truth may have empowered individuals to read the Bible for themselves, but not to read it in individual ways or to reach individual conclusions. The trends recognized by these scholars reflect an ideal of Bible-reading hailed by a relatively broad cross section of influential figures in the early national era—leaders both religious and secular, evangelical and liberal, Federalist and Jeffersonian—who seem to have regarded the Bible (rhetorically, if not in practice) as essentially tantamount to human reason. According to this ideal, reason and the Bible—the laws of nature and of nature's God—reveal and affirm the same self-evident truths, and the inevitable actions which these truths impel are justified without reference to the particulars and contingencies of a given age, place, or people. The pursuit of universal truths required, by this logic, the exercise of universal capacities, detached from all forms of "outside" influence—from church or theological tradition, from history or political philosophy, from family or personal experience. All sources of particularity and contingency were to be shorn from individual readers so that only the rational faculties shared, at least, by white male voters, were left. Whatever could be agreed upon by those who read in this way must necessarily be right; whatever deviated from this consensus was

[11] John Williamson Nevin, "Antichrist and the Sect," in James Hastings Nichols, ed., *The Mercersburg Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 103.

[12] See James D. Bratt, "Religious Anti-Revivalism in Antebellum America," *Journal of the Early American Republic* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 65–106.

wrong by virtue of the fact that it deviated. Behind this ideal of reading, I suggest, is a belief—or, perhaps more accurately, a fear—that a democratic republic could only be achieved by citizens whose subjectivity had been erased.

The Bible made a fitting object of this search for objective truth. As the Word of God, the Bible promised to be a source of relevant meaning to all people everywhere forever. For many Christians throughout history, this has meant that the Bible is a source of fixed meaning with one correct interpretation that is unchanged by worldly contexts or forces. The ideology of *sola scriptura* is authorized by this assumption. Luther and later Protestants did not champion vernacular Bibles and lay biblical literacy because they believed that the idiosyncratic interpretations of individual believers should be authoritative; their policies evinced not so much confidence in the common man as confidence in the Bible itself. The doctrines of Rome were unnecessary adornments to scripture's ability to make its plain sense known to the humblest of readers. This faith in the undying clarity of biblical truth was amplified to justify the translation of the Word into vulgar languages, and also to ease the anxieties of translators and their audience. The introduction to the 1769 edition of the King James Version (the standard text in England as well as America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) made clear that even a poor translation could not destroy biblical truth: "We do not deny—nay, we affirm and avow—that the very meanest translation of the Bible in English, set forth by men of our profession, . . . containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God."[13] Translators connected their work to the inspired scholarship of Hebrew scribes and gospel writers; in particular, their

[13] "Preface of the King's Translators," in Alexander Campbell, ed., *The Christian Baptist* [vols. 1–7], revised ed. (Cincinnati: D. S. Burnet, 1835), 514. Benjamin Blaney's 1769 Oxford edition of the King James served as the base text for Isaac Collins's American edition, which itself became the base text for countless subsequent versions. Later the Philadelphia Bible Society and American Bible Society used plates procured by the British and Foreign Bible Society which matched Blayney's edition, the British text "by the late 1820s displacing Collins's text as the American standard" (Perry, *Endless Making*, 44, 60).

work was ratified by the storied Septuagint, "which promised, in effect, that the divine could infuse a derivative translation, that the vernacular, common tongue could build a ladder to God, and that the holiness of his Word need not by shrouded by an esoteric language."[14] John Witherspoon's introduction to Isaac Collins's 1791 American edition of the King James, reprinted in countless Bibles through the 1870s, "drafted a brief overview of the bible's providential translation history to replace the traditional dedication to King James."[15] Later versions which used Collins's text (for instance, a 1792 edition owned by George Washington and entitled *The Self-Interpreting Bible*) often deleted Witherspoon's first paragraph explaining the absent dedication in favor of the opening sentence, "The Providence of God is particularly manifested in the preservation of the Holy Scriptures."[16] Once Bibles in the vernacular no longer required justification, American Christians preserved eternal scriptural truth by staying out of its way—or at least trying to. The American Bible Society's constitutional dedication to circulating the Bible "without note or comment" helped them "to rise above sticky doctrinal issues," but it was also a matter of principle, as one member explained: "So far as commentators enable us to understand what we read, we may be grateful for their aid. But we are not to look for improvements on a revelation from heaven. The volume of immutable truth is not to be wrought into a more perfect form by metaphysical refinement."[17]

The historian's difficulty arises from the duty to take these claims to the Bible's immutable truth seriously while acknowledging that, from a historical perspective, its mutability

[14] Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5. "In 1530, for example, German presses invested Luther with the same halo of inspiration that surrounded the Septuagint translators and later the Apostles. Philo's praise of the 'prophets' of translation was echoed in a new Testament frontispiece that shaped Luther in to the very Apostle Matthew himself" (ibid.).

[15] Perry, *Endless Making*, 45.

[16] *The Self-Interpreting Bible*, ed. John Brown (New York: Hodge and Campbell, 1792), i.

[17] John Fea, *The Bible Cause: A History of the American Bible Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 63; President [Jeremiah] Day, "Commentaries on the Scriptures," *Missionary Herald* 20, no. 7 (July, 1824), in *The Missionary Herald, for the Year 1824, Vol. XX* (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1824), 227.

is inescapable. The Bible is, to most Christians, a text unlike any other, and by regarding it in this way for centuries they have made it just that. But in this it is simultaneously like all other texts: its meaning is constituted in part by its readers and everything they bring to it. In an age of enlightenment and revolution, when many formerly objective truths seemed suddenly less certain, a scientific morality based on natural reason and immutable biblical truth appealed especially to those in America who stood to benefit most from the independence and stability of the United States. But whatever they claimed to be doing, it was in fact impossible then as now to read scripture without external or personal influences. And whether or not the Bible's truths are eternal and fixed from the perspective of an almighty God, Christians have found ways to argue about nearly every word of it. Nineteenth-century Christians agreed, broadly speaking, that there was a right way to read the Bible. They believed that those who read the right way would reach the same, correct conclusions. They did not, however, agree at all about the specifics—how to read the Bible the right way, or what the correct conclusions were.

The scholarly narrative of consensus regarding the Bible depends on a theological and ideological ideal espoused, but never really practiced (for it was impossible in practice), by a range of influential (and historiographically favored) political and religious leaders, which aligned a way of reading the Bible with a particular political project, that of establishing and sustaining a new democratic republic, based on the assumption that rational citizens would essentially agree. In its ideal form a rational biblical literacy was useful in promoting revolution and rhetorically constituting authority in the young nation. But this is only a small part of the story of the Bible in the United States. Especially among the majority of Americans whose status was relatively unchanged by the Revolution; for whom even the highest degree of biblical literacy or reasonableness could not entail political power; whose interests and desires diverged

from a culturally ascendant vision of the United States; and whose particularities (race, sex, language, etc.) disqualified them from acting as generic white male citizens, different understandings and uses of the Bible frequently prevailed. Many willfully read the Bible through their personal experiences, circumstances, and allegiances, believing that these enhanced rather than invalidated their readings. These readings could be proudly particular and contingent; many enslaved black people, for instance, viewed it as a badge of spiritual honor that God had helped them learn to read the Bible in ways individually suited to the special needs wrought by their condition of bodily bondage. Most who read the Bible in the nineteenth century were unconcerned with bolstering a particular idea of America. The Cherokee, whose interests were directly at odds with nationalist beliefs about the manifest destiny of the United States, selectively adopted and rejected aspects of biblical literacy with the aim of protecting their own sovereignty. Some developed alternative ideals of biblical literacy to combat the United States' own supposedly rational forms of tyranny. In the most famous novel of the nineteenth century, Harriet Beecher Stowe contrasted the flaccid secular reading of white men with the activated Bible-reading of female and black characters to chastise an America ruled by self-interest and individualism, rather than by self-denying benevolence toward others.

The variety of these projects reflects the variety of readers. This work seeks to show, through examination of three antebellum contexts, not only that Americans interpreted the Bible in diverse ways and according to diverse agendas, but also that they entertained extremely broad definitions of both "the Bible" and literacy. These broad definitions, too, reflect the variety of readers: far from desiring an objective, intellectual, and impersonal exercise of universal capacities, antebellum readers imagined biblical literacy in particular, contingent, and spiritual ways that could transform even ostensibly non-religious reading into a religious experience.

Furthermore, for most Americans it was not enough merely to be able to read and make sense of the Bible; true biblical literacy was that kind of reading which caused one to live and act in accordance with God's word.[18] Biblical literacy—really knowing the Bible—is set apart from other reading because it almost always implies application, acting in accordance with that which one has read.[19] As such, biblical literacy, more obviously than other kinds of literacy, is established through the non-literate activities of readers. (For instance, one is not biblically literate because one has read a commandment, but only if one follows the commandment.) This high standard of literacy made the Bible a powerful tool of critique, reform, and resistance even for people who had not achieved the standards of literacy as they are conventionally understood: it was possible to be biblically literate—to live according to the Bible—without having read it; at the same time, the mere act of reading the Bible did not constitute biblical literacy at all. Thus, in practice, biblical literacy was inevitably particular, contingent, and embodied—constituted through what readers did with the text.

BIBLICAL LITERACY IN THEORY

Noll has written that "only the Bible—and often in the form of 'the Bible alone'—survived the Revolution's assault on old-world traditions."[20] It is certainly true that a significant number of

[18] In *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), Paul J. Griffiths delineates religious reading from what he refers to as "consumerist reading." Griffiths argues that religious readers take what they read to be stable sources of meaning and not merely of information. Religious reading involves practical and ethical considerations beyond the merely intellectual capacity to read a text. In religious reading, therefore, the text is not merely a thing to be consumed, but rather, "the religious reader becomes textualized (an embodiment of the work)" (46). Especially through memorization, according to Griffiths, the reader takes the text into herself, incorporating it into her own being and construction of meaning. I take rational biblical literacy to be, in Griffiths terms, an attempt to read a religious text according to a consumerist hermeneutic. This rational/consumerist form of biblical literacy, I argue, does not describe the vast majority of religious reading in the antebellum era.

[19] "Biblical literacy," for the purposes of this study, also encompasses both the religious importance of the ability to read in a religion of the book, and the expanded definitions of literacy—ways of knowing the Bible—authorized by a biblical religion in which reading is paramount.

[20] Noll, *In the Beginning*, 9.

religious and political leaders in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries seem to have viewed the Bible as a useful tool in establishing the Revolution's self-evident truths. It is also true that their rhetoric provided, especially through historical reiteration, the foundational intellectual tradition of the United States. When Thomas Jefferson wrote that he was "a sect by [him]self" and speculated that "in that branch of religion which regards the moralities of life," all Christians would agree if not for "crazy theologists" and "those who call themselves ministers," the deist echoed a mythos of individualism, egalitarianism, and common sense authored as much by some ministers and "theologists" as by himself.[21] To a significant degree this rhetoric was influenced by colonial Christian attempts to marry biblical religion to Enlightenment thought. A confluence of factors in the eighteenth century led some prominent religious leaders, both evangelical and those who would come to be called "liberal," to increasingly emphasize the reasonableness of Christian religion. Foundational to this effort was a definition of biblical literacy as the application of innate and universal rational faculties to scripture. The marriage of an Enlightenment understanding of Bible-reading to the Enlightenment ideology of republicanism gave the Revolution a Christian righteousness, and Christianity a republican rationality. The Bible did not merely survive the Revolution; it helped to make it. And when Americans had ceased to be England's subjects, rational biblical literacy promised to purge what remained of their subjectivity.

The ascendency of rational biblical literacy in the authoritative vacuum wrought by violent separation from England was facilitated by religious developments during the first half of the eighteenth century. The First Great Awakening of the 1730s and 40s had arguably opened the door to revolution by introducing new forms of egalitarian rhetoric and mass communication.

[21] Thomas Jefferson to Ezra Stiles Ely, June 25, 1819, Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Library of Congress, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-0542 (accessed February 3, 2019).

Additionally, according to a controversial thesis by Alan Heimert, the First Great Awakening revealed a deep divide within colonial Christianity between pious, conversion-focused "New Light" evangelicals and anti-enthusiasm "Old Lights" who, in their efforts to dampen the fervor, advanced the increasingly popular assertion "that Christianity is pre-eminently a rational religion."[22] This religious conflict, argues Heimert, foreshadowed and perhaps even laid the groundwork for the political conflicts of the Revolutionary period, with evangelicals aligning with the "rank-and-file Jacksonians and Jeffersonians," with their "impatience with 'hard politics,'" and the Old Light (eventually "liberal") Christians aligning with the Federalists, both concerned with "keep[ing] the 'multitude' from involving itself" in matters of governance, whether of church or state.[23]

It was the Old Light backlash against the revivals that introduced two of the most important preconditions for the rise of republican ideology: Enlightenment-influenced belief in an innate moral sense adjoined to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, and the resultant reduction in importance of sin and hell, which paved the way for a more optimistic view of human capacities.[24] While the leading lights of the First Great Awakening—Jonathan Edwards, Isaac

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[22] Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 5. On the First Great Awakening and mass communication, see Harry S. Stout, "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (October, 1977): 519–541. In his well-known 1982 essay, "Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretive Fiction," Jon Butler suggests that the conclusions drawn by Heimert and Stout, among many other scholars, overstate the influence of the Great Awakening on the Revolutionary War and on other events and social trends in American history.

[23] Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 15.

[24] Among Americans the Scottish philosophers, especially Thomas Reid and Frances Hutcheson, and their leading American interpreter, the aforementioned John Witherspoon, were perhaps especially influential in popularizing belief in the existence of a moral sense. It was often these authors, more than Locke, for example, who American theologians read. Noll argues that between 1763 and 1815, "Scottish philosophy proved immensely useful as an intellectually respectable way for political leaders to reestablish public virtue and for religious leaders to defend Christian truth on the basis of a science unencumbered by tradition" ("Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 2 [Summer 1982]: 218). However, John Mikhail cautions that belief in innate and universal moral faculties was a widely shared element of Enlightenment thought and "hardly unique" to Scottish Common Sense Realism ("Scottish Common Sense and Nineteenth-Century American Law: A Critical Appraisal," *Law and History Review* 26, no. 1 [Spring 2008]: 167). Contemporaries

Backus, John Wesley, and George Whitefield—did not think of the Bible as a source of authority independent of theological systems or trained clergy, those who opposed them, in combatting what they perceived as enthusiasm run amok, championed a rational approach to the Bible whose primary unit was the individual reader. In his 1759 Harvard Dudleian Lecture on natural religion, Congregational minister Ebenezer Gay wrote that God made human beings "rational Creatures," able to "learn from his Works, what is good, and what is required of them. Natural Conscience is his Voice, telling them their Duty. . . . And so Men are *a Law unto themselves*, are supply'd with a Rule of Actions within their own Breasts."[25] The views of these liberal-leaning Protestants deviated from even the softened Calvinism of Edwardsean evangelicals by virtually ignoring the role of sin as an impediment to any inherent sense of "the good" in human beings.[26] For Edwards and his fellows, virtue was not a natural capacity of created beings, but rather something

affirmed this commonality; in a 1786 address to the American Philosophical Society, Benjamin Rush spoke of the innate moral faculty that went by many names:

> St. Paul, and Cicero, give us the most perfect account of it that is to be found in modern or ancient authors. . . . It is the "moral sense" of Dr. Hutchison [*sic*]—the "sympathy" of Dr. Adam Smith—the "moral instinct" of Rousseau—and "the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world" of St. John. I have adopted the term of moral faculty from Dr. Beattie, because I conceive it convey[s] with most perspicuity, the idea of a power in the mind, of choosing good and evil. ("An Enquiry into the Influence of Physical Causes Upon the Moral Faculty," in *Two Essays on the Mind*, ed. Eric T. Carlson [New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1972], 1–3)

As Mikhail notes, John Adams wrote similarly, "Being men, they all have what Dr. Rush calls a moral faculty; Dr. Hutcheson a moral sense; and the Bible and the generality of the world, a conscience" (John Adams to John Taylor, April 15, 1814, Washburn Collection, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6278 [accessed February 4, 2019]). Noll admits that as evangelicals and transcendentalists alike "became Common Sense realists, however, they did not usually devote much attention to the carefully constructed arguments" of the Scots. Though it was often through these philosophers that American theologians became aware of ideas like the moral sense, the distinctive elements of Common Sense thinkers were less influential than certain features it shared with other sources of Enlightenment thought. On the finer details of Hutcheson, Witherspoon, and others, see Gideon Mailer, *John Witherspoon's American Revolution: Enlightenment and Religion from the Creation of Britain to the Founding of the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), esp. 54–61.

[25] Ebenezer Gay, *Natural Religion, as Distinguished from Revealed: A Sermon Preached at the Annual Dudleian-Lecture, at Harvard-College in Cambridge, May 9, 1759* (Boston: John Draper, 1759), 10–11.

[26] In contrast to Gay, Edwards used natural principles to illustrate humanity's sinfulness, as in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," where gravity is used to illustrate the way one's natural weight (and natural state of sin) act to pull one constantly down to hell but for the restraining hand of God ("Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003], 89–105).

received from the Holy Spirit, an "indwelling vital principle," absolutely distinct from congenital rational faculties.[27]

Edwards's chief opponent in the revivals provided "the most prominent example of the unraveling of theological orthodoxy by an exclusive appeal to biblical authority."[28] In the wake of the Great Awakening against which he had railed, preeminent Boston minister Charles Chauncy spent several years closely studying the Bible, an endeavor that resulted in his rejection of eternal punishment and acceptance of universalism, beliefs he kept hidden until near the end of his life because they affirmed an innate moral sense in humans and thereby undermined his own Calvinist tradition. In a letter to Ezra Stiles, he stated in favor of his secret work, "The whole is written from the scripture account of the thing and not from any human scheme. It will not, I believe, comport with what is called orthodoxy, but I am verily persuaded it contains the real truth."[29] When Chauncy finally published *The Mystery Hid from Ages and Generations* in 1784, they appeared less idiosyncratic then they might have decades earlier. However much the religious differences revealed by the first round of revival paralleled or inspired the political differences that defined the Revolutionary period, by the time Rhode Island became the last state

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[27] Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, Shown to be Both a Scriptural, and Rational Doctrine," in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, 108.

The supposed existence of an innate moral sense, especially as described by Schaftesbury and Hutcheson, was Edwards's principal target of criticism in works like *The Nature of True Virtue*. As George Marsden explains, "British moralists since the time of John Locke were attempting to establish a new moral philosophy as a science that would be equivalent to the new natural philosophy, or natural science." Frustrated by decades of violence in Christendom, "the grand hope of the modern moral philosophers was that they could discover universally valid moral standards with which they could adjudicate competing absolute claims and in effect stand above them." Hutcheson believed that a moral sense allowed human beings to discern what is right and beautiful, and to name it as virtue. He argued that "all of humankind were endowed by their Creator with a sense of moral beauty sufficient to lead them, if they followed its dictates, to a life of virtue for which they were also promised eternal rewards." For Edwards, this failed to take into account the effect of sin and the need for repentance and regeneration which had to precede the ability to be virtuous and recognize virtue; "a truly spiritual sense of beauty was what distinguished the regenerate from the unregenerate" (George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003], 464–465).

[28] Nathan O. Hatch, "Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum," in *The Bible in America*, 63.

[29] Charles Chauncy, "A Sketch of Eminent Men in New-England, In a Letter from the Rev. Dr. Chauncy to Dr. Stiles," in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Vol. IX* (Boston: Hall & Hiller, 1804), 163.

to ratify the constitution in 1790, another wave of revivals was beginning—one that would, among other things, resolve the pietist-rationalist divide and unite new voters in the sacralization of private judgment by elevating the doctrine of "the Bible alone." So-called rational Christians had flocked to Unitarian and Universalist churches in response to evangelical orthodoxy. Unitarian clergyman Noah Worcester, hoping to "encourage common christians to examine the scriptures for themselves," wrote that they "were designed for the great mass of mankind, and are in general adapted to their capacities."[30] The optimistic views of ministers like Gay and Chauncy, deemed "rational" because they depended for certainty on scripture as judged by a universal and innate moral sense, found favor with the nation's deist founders like Benjamin Franklin, who self-funded the publication of "the magnum opus of colonial rationalism," *Philosophica Elementa*, and pursued its author, Anglican minister Samuel Johnson, for head of a proposed Philadelphia college; and John Adams, who himself wondered in his diary, "Where do we find a precept in the Gospel requiring Ecclesiastical Synods? Convocations? Councils? Decrees? Creeds? Confessions? Oaths? Subscriptions? And whole cart-loads of other trumpery that we find religion encumbered with in these days?"[31]

But this reverence for individual biblical literacy stripped of outside influence was not limited to liberal Christians. Elias Smith of Woburn, Massachusetts resigned from his position as pastor of a Calvinist Baptist church and, rejecting both Calvinism and Universalism, explicitly linked the rise of Jeffersonian politics to the birth of an American Christianity unencumbered by the tyranny of established churches. "My brethren," he said at a July Fourth oration, "while thus enjoying these privileges under a republican government, let us be republicans indeed. Many are

[30] Noah Worcester, "On Humility in the Investigation of Christian Truth," *The Christian Disciple* 1, no. 1 (May, 1813): 18.

[31] Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 6; John Adams, diary entry from February 18, 1756, in *The Works of John Adams*, vol. 2 (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1850), 5–6.

republicans as to government, and yet are but half republicans, being in matters of religion still bound to a Catechism, creed, covenant, or a superstitious priest."[32] As an unaffiliated itinerant preacher, Smith declared proudly that in his sermons he "endeavored to attend closely to the plain declarations of the scriptures of truth, without any regard to the opinion of any man. . . . If there are any errors in this work, they are mine and not another man's."[33] Echoing Smith's wariness of other men's opinions, Alexander Campbell, a leader of the American Restorationist Movement which sought to re-establish non-denominational apostolic Christianity, wrote,

> there is not a man upon the earth whose authority can influence me. . . . I have endeavored to read the scriptures as though no one had read them before me, and I am as much on my guard against reading them to-day, through the medium of my own views yesterday, or a week ago, as I am against being influenced by any foreign name, authority, or system whatever. [34]

The eccentric Harvard graduate, itinerant preacher, and sometime-Shaker William Scales urged simply, "let me beseech you to see for yourselves; don't give up your understandings to other men."[35]

These attempts to transcend all authority but that of individual natural reason and the text parallel developments in other emerging democratic public spheres of the long eighteenth century. The ideal public man in France, Britain, and the United States, too, was "one who rose above the entanglements of family and community to engage other men in the disinterested

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[32] Elias Smith, *The Loving Kindness of God Displayed in the Triumph of Republicanism in America*, cited in Jonathan D. Sassi, *A Republic of Righteousness: The Public Christianity of the Post-Revolutionary New England Clergy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 87.

[33] Elias Smith, *Sermons Containing an Illustration of the Prophecies To Be Accomplished from the Present Time, Until the New Heavens and Earth are Created, When All the Prophecies Will Be Fulfilled* (Exeter, NH: Norris & Sawyer, 1808), iv.

[34] Alexander Campbell, letter from the editor, *The Christian Baptist*, April 3, 1826, in *The Christian Baptist, Published Monthly, Vol. III*, ed. Alexander Campbell (Buffaloe, Brooke County, VA: A. Campbell, 1825–1826), 204.

[35] William Scales, *The Confusion of Babel Discovered; or, An Answer to Jeremy Belknap's Discourse upon the Lawfulness of War* ("America": 1780), v–vi. On this interesting figure, particularly his relations with the Shakers, see David D. Newell, "William Scales' 1789 'Mystery of the People Called Shakers': Introduction," *American Communal Societies Quarterly* 0 (preview issue), no. 1 (October, 2006): 6–13.

pursuit of universal principles."[36] He was a rational and independent being, unencumbered and uninfluenced by the trappings of denomination, political party, or personal history.[37] His principle mode of discourse, as Jürgen Habermas has shown, was both textual and public[38]; bourgeois civic life was predicated on the establishment of a republic of letters, "where printed texts—shorn of the personalized traits of their authors—circulated widely among anonymous individuals."[39] Ironically, the "individualization of conscience," as Hatch called it, was as much about transcending as elevating the individual. The Revolution had unleashed a dangerous and violent potential by acknowledging the rights of persons to rebel against a government they perceived as unjust. For a consensus to be reached among people who now ruled themselves, they had to operate as generic rational beings whose innate and universal faculties would, naturally, bring them all to the same conclusions. Thus, an ethic of "the Bible alone" set the parameters for United States citizenship after the Revolution. Idiosyncratic readings, like idiosyncratic people, were dangerous in a democracy. The early nineteenth century saw vast

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[36] Susan Juster, "Demagogues or Mystagogues? Gender and the Language of Prophecy in the Age of Democratic Revolutions," *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 5 (December, 1999): 1566.

[37] For more on the formation of the democratic public sphere and its ideal men, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); and Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[38] See for example Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 51–56. He writes:

> Just as secrecy was supposed to serve the maintenance of sovereignty based on *voluntas*, so publicity was supposed to serve the promotion of legislation based on *ratio*. Locke already tied the publicly promulgated law to a common consent; Montesquieu reduced it altogether to *raison humaine*. But it remained for the physiocrats . . . to relate the law explicitly to public opinion as the expression of reason. A political consciousness developed in the public sphere of civil society which, in opposition to absolute sovereignty, articulate the concept of and demand for general and abstract laws and which ultimately came to assert itself (i.e., public opinion) as the only legitimate source of this law. (53–54)

Under republican ideology, laws become merely "rational rules of a certain universality and permanence," general and abstract products of natural reason en masse (53). The assumed "parity of all cultivated persons" in the public sphere means they are "set free" from subjectivity there (54). I am interested here in the way republican ideology, under the guise of a universal natural reason, demands consensus, and its complementary erasure of subjectivity or difference as legitimate bases for political and religious empowerment.

[39] Juster, "Demagogues or Mystagogues?" 1566.

numbers of people insisting that the Bible had a plain sense in spite of it being equally useful to those on opposite sides of any number of debates, from slavery to women's rights to temperance, and on and on. Those who claimed additional knowledge of God's plan in the form of visions and dreams, such as Joseph Smith and Ann Lee, risked ridicule and condemnation if these strayed too far from what could be established by plain sense, or, especially, if their race and sex rendered their assertions of authority offensive. ("I was astonished with myself," wrote one apostate Shaker in 1800, "that ever I imbibed such absurd ideas; but the reason was, I never searched the scriptures to see if these things were so."[40]) One needed only literacy assisted by natural reason to understand the Bible; all other purported aids were dangerous distractions.

There is some irony, then, in the fact that this age of "the Bible alone" also saw a proliferation of Bibles printed to include charts, tables, and timelines "that tied the sacred narratives to specific historical times and places."[41] What Thuesen refers to as "the truth-obsessed reading of scripture" crystalized in America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when, as early as the days of Edwards, readers began to understand the Bible as a text with origins and a translation history, whose sacred stories might map on to actual events in world history.[42] This "truth-value," writes Thuesen, was "the common currency of modern Protestantism," and "the price placed on every biblical story, every Bible version."[43] Bibles were even printed with currency tables that converted Roman dinarii to the American dollar and tables

[40] Reuben Rathbun, *Reasons Offered for Leaving the Shakers* (Pittsfield, MA: Chester Smith, 1800), 16.
[41] Perry, "Endless Making," 12.
[42] Thuesen, *In Discordance*, 10.
[43] Ibid. Thuesen goes on to note that these historical standards of truth were held by both evangelical and liberal Protestants:

> Bible translation controversies between conservative and liberal Protestants stemmed first of all from modern assumptions that, ironically, both groups held in common. As [Hans] Frei put it in another context, conservatives and liberals are "siblings under the skin" in confusing literalism at the level of understanding the biblical text with literalism at the level of knowing historical reality. In this logical confusion, conservatives and liberals betray themselves as equal heirs of a critical epistemology that subjected every text to the test of historical reference. (11)

that placed biblical events on the timeline of world history.[44] The desire for the Bible to make plain sense led Americans increasingly to view biblical truth in terms of historical and even mathematical exactness.

Though the addition of these aids might appear to run counter to republican standards of *sola scriptura*, their inclusion was in fact intimately related to the desire for consensus and clear public communication in emerging democracies. The ability to relate events and figures in the Bible to the United States—even to be able to predict future events in such a new nation on the basis of the Bible—was one means of proving that its founding had been ordained by providence, that its laws derived from sacred truth as well as public consent, and that republican political and religious leaders had not read in error. At the same time, visions of the millennium in the wake of ratification increasingly centralized legibility and clarity of communication. In his *Treatise on the Millennium*, Samuel Hopkins envisioned the Second Coming, the principal effect of which would be the eradication of misunderstanding. He theorized that "the Bible will be much better understood than ever before," and that "those things which now appear intricate and unintelligible, will then appear plain and easy"; "The conversation of friends and neighbours" in the millennium "will be full of instruction, and they will assist each other in their inquiries after the truth and in pursuit of knowledge"; "all will probably speak *one language*," so that people "will be able to communicate their ideas with more ease and precision, and with less ambiguity and danger of being misunderstood."[45] Though it also seems reflective of anxiety over the proliferation of sects in the wake of disestablishment, Hopkins's vision is that of an ideally

[44] See Perry, "Endless Making," 12.

[45] Samuel Hopkins, *Treatise on the Millennium* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas and Ebenezer T. Andrews, 1793), 59, 76, 77.

republican religious world defined principally by the free, peaceable, and public exchange of ideas and a robust print economy:

> This [common language] will also greatly facilitate the spreading of useful knowledge . . . to all parts of the world; and render books very cheap, and easy to be obtained by all. There will then be no need of translations into other languages, and numerous new impressions, in order to have the most useful books read by all. Many hundreds of thousands of copies may be cast off by one impression, and spread over all the earth. And the Bible, one of which, at least, every person will have, by printing such a vast number of them at one impression, may be afforded much cheaper than it can be now; even though it should be supposed that no improvement will be made in the art of printing, and making paper . . . the contrary is much more probable, viz. that both these will then be performed, in a better manner, and with much less labour and expense, than they are now executed.[46]

Following in the tradition of Edwards, Hopkins was careful not to present himself as a prophet, but rather as a careful reader whose many extremely specific predictions with regard to Christ's return arose directly from his straightforward interpretations of biblical prophecies, which "can be understood, and the real meaning of them . . . made plain, by a careful and diligent attention to them, and comparing them with each other."[47]

As Jonathan Butler has noted, this "appeal to prophecy as 'evidence' echoed the earliest conservative Enlightenment thinkers."[48] The innovation of nineteenth-century millennial predictions was in the treatment of the Bible as a mathematically exact text. As early as the 1679 Oxford edition of the Authorized Version, bibles commonly included dates in the margins allowing readers to track the historical timeline of sacred events and their distance from present day; these dates, based on the calculations of Archbishop James Ussher, are "the most prevalent cause for the popular persistence of 4004 BC, for example, as the date of creation among some

[46] Ibid., 78.
[47] Ibid., 8.
[48] Jonathan Butler, "From Millerism to Seventh-Day Adventism: 'Boundlessness to Consolidation,'" *Church History* 55, no. 1 (March, 1986): 52.

segments of American Christians: it appears next to Gen 1:1 in countless editions."[49] Among these is the 1838 London edition used by the nineteenth century's most famous predictor of the millennium, William Miller, who relied on the 4004 BC date to locate Christ's return in the year 1843 (fig. 1). Both the man and his mission were the perfect embodiment of the young republic's rustic egalitarian ethos. Miller was a farmer, a veteran of the War of 1812, a former deist, and like all quality prophets, reluctant. He had no stomach for Calvinism, "a system of *craft*, rather than of *truth*," nor for a God who would "give us the Scriptures to teach us the way of eternal life, and at the same time clothe them in a mantle of mysticism."[50] When he began to earnestly study the Bible in 1816, he followed the republican protocol of setting aside all outside influences: "I laid by all commentaries, former views and prepossessions, and determined to read and try to understand for myself." He read "in a methodical manner," "comparing scripture with scripture," and developing fourteen rules of interpretation, for which he created a chart with "rules" in the left column and "proofs" in the right (fig. 2).[51] He ultimately found scripture more reasonable than deism: "The Bible was now to me a new book. It was indeed a feast of reason; all that was dark, mystical or obscure, to me, in its teachings, had been dissipated from my mind before the clear light that now dawned from its sacred pages."[52]

Miller's message found support in part because of its rationality, in part because of its messenger's humility, both of which publisher Joshua V. Himes emphasized.[53] Miller rested his case for 1843 on Enlightenment modes of biblical interpretation that assumed the Bible was

[49] Perry, "Endless Making," 12.

[50] William Miller, "Memoir of William Miller," in *Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology, Selected from Manuscripts of William Miller with a Memoir of His Life*, ed. Joshua V. Himes (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1842), 9.

[51] Ibid., 11.

[52] William Miller, *Memoirs of William* Miller, ed. Sylvester Bliss (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1853), 76–77.

[53] On Millerite demographics and characteristics, see Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, eds., *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987).

internally consistent, requiring no outside texts or commentaries for additional clarification aside from widely agreed upon dating of sacred events. Like all republican readers, including Hopkins, he eschewed the label of prophet, arguing instead that his deductions had proceeded naturally from the text, and that indeed any dedicated reader would reach the same conclusions. The proof of Miller's calculations lay not in his particularity, but in his ordinariness, his status as simply a man and his Bible, a citizen like any other. Though Millerites' "celebration of God's purging judgment" often "put them beyond the evangelical pale," Millerism became a popular movement (one capable of surviving even the "Great Disappointment" and reinventing itself as Seventh-day Adventism) because it placed republican ideals of religious knowledge at the center of its beliefs and practices.[54] Writes Paul Boyer, "Just as the Jacksonians claimed that any (white male) citizen could perform the duties of government, so the Millerites insisted that untutored believers could unravel the apocalyptic mysteries. Millerism heralded the full democratization of prophetic belief in the United States."[55]

But not just any "untutored believer." While Millerism had its share, for instance, of female followers (even prominent ones like Angelina Grimke) and female prophets (like Seventh-day Adventist founder Ellen G. White), its status as the most mainstream of millennialist movements in the antebellum period owes something to the person of its founder and namesake. Where Miller was the fulfillment of republican white religious manhood, female millennialists like Jemima Wilkinson and Ann Lee were regarded as "negative images of the idealized public sphere that male prophets and male republicans were busily erecting in the

[54] Benjamin McArthur, "Millennial Fevers," *Reviews in American History* 24, no. 3 (September, 1996): 377.

[55] Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 85.

aftermath of revolution."[56] Wilkinson biographer David Hudson speculated that she took her followers to the wilderness of upstate New York where they would be "cut off from a constant intercourse with an enlightened community" because this "seemed more likely to perpetuate her dominion."[57] Mother Ann Lee of the Shakers "was the prime target of patriot writers seeking to discredit the anti-republican world of female mystagoguery."[58] Both her Britishness and her claims to charismatic power led republican writers like Amos Taylor to mistrust her: "To be a body of more than two thousand people, having no will of their own, but governed by a few Europeans conquering their adherents into the most unreserved subjection, argues some infatuating power; some deep, very deep design at bottom."[59] In the years following her death, even Lee's own followers downplayed her charismatic powers (healing, speaking in tongues, communing with the dead) and emphasized instead her role as nurturing "Mother Ann."

But then again, even aside from her gender, Lee did not exactly fit the mold of republican religious leadership. Though republican men might be said to have embraced illiteracy as a form of spiritual superiority insofar as they rejected the instruction of learned elites and all external guides in reading the Bible, their version of illiteracy was nothing like Lee's. Lee could not read, and the Shakers rejected all printed texts, including the Bible, as lesser versions of the true word of God, which existed only in the hearts of believers. Nonetheless, textual metaphors defined the relationship of Shakers to their leader and to God: Lee referred to herself as "Ann the Word" and called her followers "my epistles, read and known of all men."[60] Though her self-styling as a

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[56] Juster, "Demagogues or Mystagogues?" 1573.

[57] David Hudson, *History of Jemima Wilkinson, A Preacheress of the Eighteenth Century* (Geneva, NY: S.P. Hull, 1821), 50.

[58] Juster, "Demagogues or Mystagogues?" 1573.

[59] Amos Taylor, *A Narrative of the Strange Principles, Conduct, and Character of the People Known by the Name of Shakers* (Worcester, MA: 1782), 3.

[60] William Leonard, *The Life and Sufferings of Jesus Anointed, Our Holy Savior and of Our Blessed Mother Ann* (New York: A. G. Hollister, 1904), 82; Shakers, *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of Mother Ann Lee*, 2nd ed. (Albany: Weed, Parsons & Co., 1888), 242.

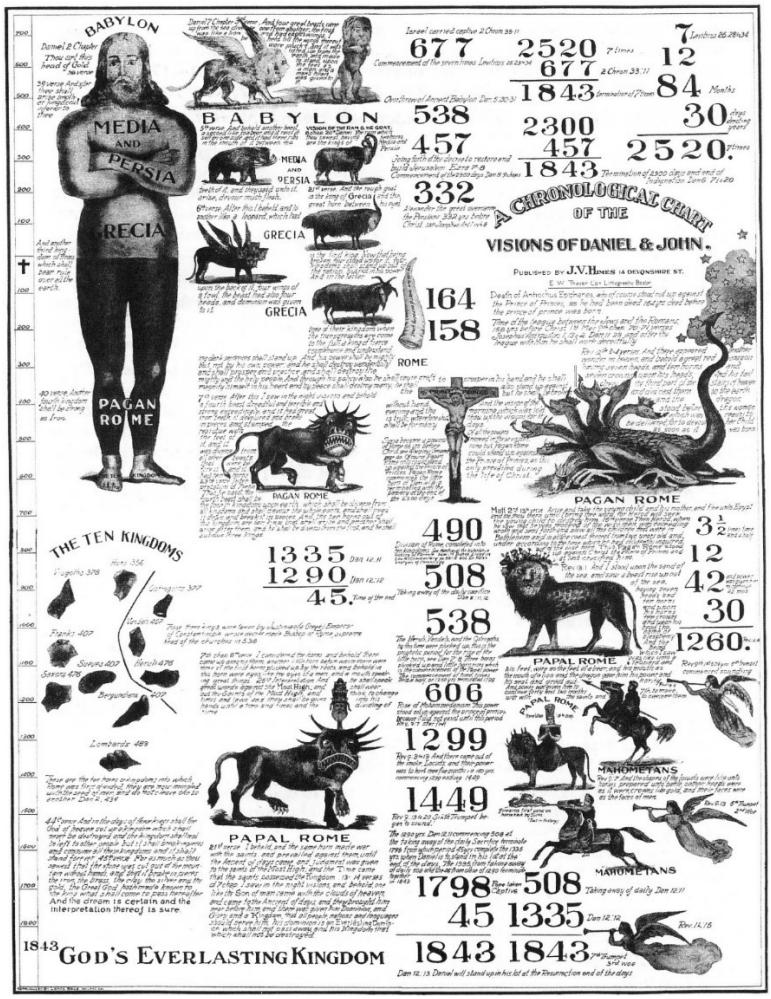

Fig. 1: "A Chronological Chart of the Visions of Daniel & John," originally published by Joshua V. Himes in 1843. Basing his calculations principally on Daniel 8:14 ("And he said unto me, Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed."), Miller assumed that the cleansing of the sanctuary indicated Earth's purification by fire at the Second Coming. Using the well-known day-year principle, he translated 2,300 days into 2,300 years, a period which he claimed must have started in 457 BC with the decree to rebuild Jerusalem by Ataxerxes I of Persia (Ezra 7–8). Image found in P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 310.

RULES OF INTERPRETATION.

In studying the Bible, I have found the following rules to be of great service to myself, and now give them to the public by special request. *Every rule should be well studied, in connexion with the scripture references, if the Bible student would be at all benefited by them.*

RULES.	PROOFS.
I. Every word must have its proper bearing on the subject presented in the Bible.	Matt. v. 18.
II. All scripture is necessary, and may be understood by a diligent application and study.	2 Tim. iii. 15, 16, 17.
III. Nothing revealed in the scripture can or will be hid from those who ask in faith, not wavering.	Deut. xxix. 29. Matt. x. 26, 27. 1 Cor. ii. 10. Phil. iii. 15. Isa. xlv. 11. Matt. xxi. 22. John xiv. 13, 14. xv. 7. James i. 5, 6. 1 John v. 13, 14, 15.
IV. To understand doctrine, bring all the scriptures together on the subject you wish to know; then let every word have its proper influence, and if you can form your theory without a contradiction, you cannot be in an error.	Isa. xxviii. 7—29. xxxv. 8. Prov. xix. 27. Luke xxiv. 27, 44, 45. Rom. xvi. 26. James v. 19. 2 Pet. i. 19, 20.
V. Scripture must be its own expositor, since it is a rule of itself. If I depend on a teacher to expound it to me, and he should guess at its meaning, or desire to have it so on account of his sectarian creed, or to be	Ps. xix. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11. cxix. 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105. Matt. xxiii. 8, 9, 10. 1 Cor. ii. 12, 13, 14, 15, 16. Eze. xxxiv. 18, 19. Luke xi. 52. Mal. ii. 7, 8.

Fig. 2 Excerpt from William Miller's "Rules of Interpretation," with rules in the left column, and their corresponding biblical proofs in the right. Chart found in William Miller, *Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology Selected from Manuscripts of William Miller; with a Memoir of His Life*, vol. 1 of *Miller's Works*, ed. Joshua V. Himes (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1842), 20–24.

female counterpart to Christ was unique, her embodied metaphors of biblical literacy were not. In fact, they represented an alternative to the rational biblical literacy that helped to define the republic, one increasingly popular among those for whom access to books and literacy was highly, even legally restricted; whose interpretations of scripture ran contrary to white male supremacist assumptions; and for whom literacy and Christianity were imperialist mandates rather than tools of liberty.

BIBLICAL LITERACY IN PRACTICE

In practice, biblical literacy in antebellum America encompassed a far greater range of beliefs and activities than the norms of rational biblical literacy comprehend. The growing market of print and consumer culture meant that more people than ever were regularly interacting with an increasingly wide variety of textual artifacts. The printed word was still scarce enough in the antebellum era, however, that it maintained an exotic value in antebellum groups for whom access to text was restricted or rare. As literacy became a qualification for enlightened citizenship, withholding it became a means of controlling access to power, seeking it a way of claiming power, among other things. These historical developments inspired creative approaches to Bible-reading, but much older traditions authorized these approaches. The doctrine of "the Bible alone" tended to define the Bible as a strictly literary artifact, but for centuries before the Reformation, knowing the Bible did not mean reading it, but rather embodying it through memorization, recitation, prayer, and ritual activity.

Indeed, bodily or embodied notions of Bible-reading are as old as the Bible itself.[61] Jesus is "the word . . . made flesh" (John 1:14). In the Old Testament, the image of writing on the heart

[61] In his study of the history and psychology of the "self-as-text" concept from antiquity to the modern day (*The Book of the Heart* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000]), Eric Jager posits the Bible as a principal

typically denotes the internalized Law, as in Deuteronomy 6:6 ("The words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart") and in Proverbs, which adjures the reader to keep the commandments and "write them on the tablet of your heart" (3:3, 7:3). Jeremiah 31:33 has a slight twist on this image, and has God as the scribe: "I will put the law within them, and I will write upon their hearts." Paul used metaphors of embodied text and writing extensively, for example in his discussion of the letter and the spirit in a message to the Corinthians: "You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men; and you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor. 3:2–3). Paul evidently found the idea of tablets of the heart to be a fitting metaphor for the incarnate gospel, and often doubled down on this bodily image by characterizing the heart as "fleshly" or "human."[62] Thomas à Kempis's influential *Imitation of Christ* extended the image of interior writing to encourage believers to develop a heart-centered spirituality. Although the lessons between Jesus and "the Disciple" which comprise much of *Imitation* are derived from scripture, the devotee is instructed to copy these into his heart and study them there: "Write my words on your heart and earnestly reflect upon them . . . . What you do not understand through your reading and studying, you will know when I come to you."[63]

Through its metaphors of internal writing and its promise that God, Christ, or the Spirit could (or must) complete religious knowledge via action in a believer's heart, the Bible authorized and legitimized a far broader range of literate activities than did literacy

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origin of notions of embodied text in Western culture. Classical philosophers, most influentially Plato and Aristotle, associated interior writing with the *psyche* (soul) or *nous* (mind) (5); "By contrast with classical literature," writes Jager, "the Bible associates interior writing almost exclusively with the heart" (9).

[62] Jager, *The Book of the Heart*, 14.

[63] Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, trans. William C. Creasy (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), 57.

conventionally understood (as the ability to interpret characters as words, for instance); these metaphors imply that God attends to the needs of individual readers, that he compensates for a lack of skill or understanding by making the Bible known through other means than academic reading. In the many instruction manuals for proper and profitable reading published during the nineteenth century, authors attempted to curtail the chaotic potential of empowered lay readers. Books like *The Anxious Inquirer after Salvation, Directed and Encouraged* described "profitable reading" as a "mental exercise" performed "with deep seriousness," "when you are alone," and in "your place of retirement."[64] But for Americans of all stripes, reading was not exclusively a solitary, intellectual pursuit performed in a study or library. Reading was often social; people read aloud to one another in their homes, at sewing circles, at lumber camps, and in taverns.[65] Neighbors met on Sundays to read the Bible and other religious texts together, and passed shared libraries from house to house.[66] A report from the American Tract Society demonstrates that even silent reading could be communal: a colporteur who "left some Tracts" at a "grog-shop" later "saw them nailed up, with the leaves open, so that all could read."[67] Many rural and poorer Americans did not have the luxury of devoting ample time and undivided attention to studying, so reading often took place outdoors during other physical work. One colporteur told of "a farmer who took his book into the field, reading while he rested and thinking while he worked"; another met a man shaving shingles in North Carolina, and sat with him on his shaving horse to teach him the alphabet out of the *Tract Primer*.[68] One former "profane drunkard" reported to a

[64] John Angell James, *The Anxious Enquirer after Salvation, Directed and Encouraged* (New York: D. Appleton, 1834), 5–9.

[65] See David Paul Nord, "Religious Reading and Readers in Antebellum America," *Journal of the Early Republic* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 269.

[66] See for example American Tract Society, *Nineteenth Annual Report* (1845), 54–55; *Twenty-First Annual Report* (1846), 33.

[67] Joseph K. Wight, report in American Tract Society, *Twentieth Annual Report* (1845), 93.

[68] Nord, "Religious Reading," 268, 269.

meeting of Tract Society agents that he had been converted to sobriety and Christianity while riding home fifteen miles on horseback, when he took a tract out of his hat to read.[69] Women regularly heard the Bible and other books read aloud while they completed housework, especially knitting and sewing.

For many Americans, the scarcity of books, combined with the strong association of reading with religious activity, lent all texts a sacred cast. Far from laying aside all commentaries, they regarded commentaries, church histories, and even secular texts as tantamount to Bibles. A New Jersey woman told two colporteurs that she "had two or three Bibles or Testaments," only to present them with Isaac Backus's history of the Baptists and a Greek Lexicon. "These were her Bibles!" the incredulous young men wrote in their report.[70] Jonathan Cross wrote in his memoir of colportage in the Allegheny Mountains that a "woman told me they had a Bible, and plenty of religious books . . . . When she presented the stock, it consisted of an old copy of the history of George Washington. She believed it to be a Bible, as no one about the house knew a letter."[71] Colporteurs were variously horrified and amused by these encounters, and in their reports they regularly dismissed such practices (and their practitioners) as "stupid," "ignorant," and "indifferent" with regard to the Bible.[72] But from another vantage, these stories betray a great reverence for the Bible: even those who could not read wanted to believe that they owned one, or kept secular books to stand in for Bibles they had not yet obtained. These semi-literate, semi-religious practices suggest that books in general could possess a sacred value for people who were illiterate, as did the massive, mainly decorative

[69] [Jonathan Cross], *Five Years in the Alleghanies* (New York: American Tract Society, 1863), 112.

[70] F. N. Ewing and J. D. Meek, "Report of Fielding Nathaniel Ewing and John Douglas Meek," in *Colporteur Reports to the American Tract Society, 1841–1846*, Transcriptions of Early Church Records of New Jersey (Newark, NJ: New Jersey Historical Records Survey Project, 1940), 5.

[71] [Cross], *Five Years*, 94.

[72] Ewing and Meek, "Report," 4.

family Bibles that became popular in the nineteenth century for wealthier, literate Americans, even if they were never read.[73]

For many Americans, biblical literacy was defined also in the way texts were used and cared for. As David Paul Nord has shown, in homes where literary materials were scarce and precious, people "used their books intensely yet cared for them intensely as well."[74] It was a compliment to refer to books as "worn out"; colporteurs were gratified to find on returning to a neighborhood or town that books and tracts they had handed out on a previous visit had nearly disintegrated from being carried in pockets, read often, or shared with others.[75] Sometimes books were cut up and made into multiple books. One woman noted sadly that she had once owned a Bible; however,

> a little school was opened in the neighborhood, and she wanted her four little boys taught to read, but had no books nor any way to get them, and she had to cut her Bible into four parts to make each of them a book, and they soon went to pieces, and she lost her Bible.[76]

The American Tract Society apparently recognized and respected these sacrifices, if the styling of typeface is any indication: another woman, they noted in their *Nineteenth Annual Report*, "wishing to supply her two grandsons, who were about connecting themselves with the church, with a portion of the Bible, *split one in two pieces and gave each a part*."[77]

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[73] As Colleen McDannell (*Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995], 79) notes:

> A plain Bible made up of the Old and New Testaments had a "use value" that was exclusively religious. Such a Bible was, in effect, a tool that produced spiritual insights, moral instruction, and doctrinal justifications. However, large numbers of Bible were sold during the nineteenth century because Christians used the Bible in additional ways. No longer merely a religious tool, the Bible became a revered possession that activated sentiment and memory. Bibles assumed qualities that transformed them from acting as a saving text to functioning as a saving object.

[74] Nord, "Religious Reading," 260.

[75] See for example American Tract Society, *Nineteenth Annual Report*, 54–55; *Twenty-First Annual Report*, 33. *Twenty-Second Annual Report* (1847), 72; *Twenty-Fifth Annual Report* (1850), 101.

[76] [Cross], *Five Years*, 68.

[77] American Tract Society, *Nineteenth Annual Report*, 61.

Just as texts were honored through hard use, they were also honored through careful preservation. One man who was given a copy of J. G. Pike's *Persuasives to Early Piety* and who "was led to the Savior by its perusal," "made a leather bag for it that it might not be injured, and commenced lending it extensively."[78] Readers made collections of tracts "sewed together and covered with deerskin."[79] One colporteur inquired of a poor Virginia woman who lived far from any church or Sunday school how she had "got her children so well instructed": "She ran into her cabin and brought her whole library, which consisted of a part of a Testament, and several little books and tracts sewed together, which I learned had been given her by colporteurs in their visits."[80]

Sometimes the manner in which text was received, found, or cared for seemed to enhance its spiritual efficacy. An agent of the American Bible Society related the story of a young Catholic girl who picked up "a part of the New Testament" a neighbor boy "had carelessly dropped":

> This met her eye, she commenced reading, became interested, and concealing it from the rest of the family, for fear of the displeasure of her father, she took opportunities to read it through. The Scriptures, "without note or comment," she had never before seen, or at best, never read, and considered it a sin to do so. But in reading this small portion of the word of God . . . through the instrumentality of his "quick and powerful word," the Spirit "convinced her of sin, or righteousness, and of a judgment to come" . . . . In this situation she continued for several months . . . with no book that she could read for instruction, with nothing but that small portion of the Testament, which had so providentialy [*sic*] fallen into her hands, to guide her. This she read, with many tears, over and over again. At length she experienced . . . the pardoning love of God . . . and found that same portion of God's word, which had been as "barbed arrows" to her soul, as so many "leaves from the tree of life, for the healing" of her wounded spirit.[81]

[78] Ibid., 28.
[79] [Cross], *Five Years*, 105.
[80] Ibid., 186.
[81] "Convert from Popery," *The Protestant* 1, no. 12 (March 20, 1830): 95.

Anti-Catholic though it may be, this anecdote is notable for its illustration of a miraculous discovery of text: the accidental manner in which the material was acquired, its rarity and taboo status in her household, the need of keeping her possession a secret, the fragility of those "leaves from the tree of life" (a presumably an unbound portion of the New Testament, delicate and inconsequential enough to be dropped without notice)—how might the physical coincidences and acts associated with her reading have facilitated or enhanced her experience of conversion?

Texts were also personalized through the act of writing in the Bible and other books. At the very least, readers regularly wrote their names in books, whether they owned or were merely borrowing them. As one colporteur testified, "I have frequently met with books several miles from where I sold or gave them, having been read and loaned from one to another, with the name of each reader marked on the cover."[82] Mothers often lamented to colporteurs that they longed for Bibles because without one "they had no place to write the children's names & ages in."[83] Family record-keeping was a primary function of the fancier tomes kept in wealthier nineteenth-century homes; these large, decorated volumes came with specially designed pages for writing down births and deaths. The margins of Bibles could be a place to make cross references and other spiritually edifying notations; just as often, however, they could be a place for non sequiturs of a more personal nature, especially in a time when blank paper might be hard to come by. As Linford D. Fisher shows in his study of the 1663 Wôpanâak (an Indian language) Bible, much marginalia "simply suggests a personalization in terms of a blank space to write."[84] Bibles and other books were used for handwriting practice, as diaries and journals, and to keep track of

[82] American Tract Society, *Twenty-Sixth Annual Report* (1851), 100.

[83] T.H. Cleland, "Report of Thomas Horace Cleland," in *Colporteur Reports*, 46. See also "Monthly Report," in *Colporteur Reports*, 39.

[84] Linford D. Fisher, "America's First Bible: Native Uses, Abuses, and Reuses of the Indian Bible of 1663," in *The Bible in American Life*, ed. Philip Goff, Arthur E. Farnsley II, and Peter J. Thuesen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 41.

to-do lists or plans for the day, among other things. These incidents of people putting themselves into books demonstrate, from one point of view, a casual, utilitarian regard for texts. At the same time, writing names and other notes into a Bible could be acts of preservation and sacralization: to do so was perhaps to share a bit in the comparative permanence and prestige of the printed word, and to join one's own story to the greatest story ever told.

Just as Americans wrote themselves into texts, they also liked to take texts into themselves by reading books and tracts until they knew them by heart. School children not only learned to read the Bible, they learned to recite it. Writing from this period, both formal and informal, is chock full of biblical allusions and citations drawn from memory rather than directly from the Bible itself. Sometimes books were read so often that they changed the way people spoke. A colporteur was impressed by a man who had read Richard Baxter's *The Saint's Everlasting Rest* so many times that he talked like Baxter. "I have sometimes thought one might nearly tell what book was in the house by the tone of the remark," the colporteur wrote. "Where they have Bunyan, they use his language; and so with Baxter, Doddridge, Payson, and others. Where they have but few books, the impression is deep."[85] This form of literacy-beyond-text, in which text was almost literally embodied in the reader through memorization, recitation, or foreknowledge, was often preferable in religious contexts to mere academic literacy. In her study of Rebecca Cox Jackson, a black Shaker eldress, Etta Madden shows that although Jackson desired and attained literacy in the academic sense, as a religious leader she continued to privilege what Madden calls "spiritual literacy."[86] Though Jackson read Shaker texts, she wrote

[85] *American Messenger*, April, 1851, cited in David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 146.

[86] Etta Madden, "Reading, Writing, and the Race of Mother Figures: Shakers Rebecca Cox Jackson and Alonzo Giles Hollister," in *A Mighty Baptism: Race, Gender, and the Creation of American Protestantism*, ed. Susan Juster and Lisa MacFarlane (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 210–234.

that "being told that I should be instructed in it [a Shaker book] . . . meant that I should have the spiritual meaning of the letter revealed in my soul by the manifestation of God. This revelation, then, being in Heaven, was the true book which must come to give us the true meaning of the letter—as 'the letter killeth, but the spirit maketh alive.'"[87] It was an important component of Jackson's authority that she had been taught by the Spirit to read and write, and that she had been preaching Shaker doctrine before she had ever received a doctrinal book.[88] Though literacy conventionally understood was a part of Jackson's religious life, it was always "subordinated to the realm of spiritual literacy, which includes bodily presence, mysticism, and orality."[89]

This capacious, biblical definition of literacy reflected not only the physicality of text and literate activity and the embodiment of text in readers, but also the relationships between readers. For most all Americans (including those who held rational approaches to scripture in high regard), reading the Bible was not only and not always primarily a matter of cognition—of reading and understanding the text correctly; in addition, it involved application to both spiritual and practical relationships. Reading the Bible was a conversation not only between the reader and God but also with "a community of those now doing what they [were] also doing."[90] For the antebellum characters discussed in the following chapters, reading the Bible for oneself was not an individualistic endeavor to shed the influence of others, but rather a means of learning how to respond justly and ethically to their inevitable influence.

Chapter 1 examines enslaved black communities as a context for antebellum biblical literacy. For people under the deprivation and brutality of slavery, academic standards of literacy

[87] Rebecca Jackson, *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*, ed. Jean McMahon Humez (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 290.
[88] Madden, "Reading, Writing," 227; Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 290.
[89] Madden, "Reading, Writing," 225.
[90] Griffiths, *Religious Reading*, 69.

obscure the vast majority of literate techniques and practices. In attending to slaves' own definitions of literacy, which included a far greater range of literate activities, it becomes clear why, in the words of one visitor to a Georgia plantation, "they who were unable to read were as anxious to possess the Bible as those who could."[91] For several reasons, the Bible and literacy in general were often inseparable to those in bondage. The Bible was frequently the only book, if any, which enslaved people regularly saw, read, or heard read, and any education they received was almost always religious in context and objective. Even the laws which governed the treatment of enslaved and free black people regularly elided religious and educational endeavors and gatherings. Though literacy in secular contexts could be desirable or advantageous (and also disadvantageous) for those living under slavery, most enslaved black Christians—like most free white Christians—viewed biblical literacy as the most important end of all reading ability.

Thus, in spite of extremely low rates of literacy, many enslaved people highly prized the ability to read—especially the ability to read the Bible—and developed ways of participating in biblical literacy and attaining its benefits in spite of their lack of access to education. By treating books and education as things of sacred significance, enslaved people determined and maintained individual, familial, and communal values that were at odds with slavery's efforts to dehumanize them. Many children and adults who accepted the risks of pursuing conventional literacy, even if they never achieved it, developed interests, goals, and self-understandings that were distinct from their enslavement. By creatively redefining literacy in biblical and often embodied terms, others claimed to have gained the ability to "read." One participated in literacy by owning, touching, or seeing one's name written in a book. Memorization, recitation, and miraculous literacy, often accompanied by postures of reading such as donning spectacles or

[91] Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Bros., 1849), 271.

tracing words with one's finger, enabled technically illiterate people to maintain education as a value for their communities and to authoritatively critique whites for withholding it. Enslaved people spoke of God as having written his words on their hearts, which demonstrated not only his divine disapproval of their bondage, but also his willingness to intervene in it by providing them with the ability to read.

Chapter 2 investigates Cherokee attitudes toward the Bible and English-language literacy more broadly as these attitudes shifted over the course of the antebellum era. For most of the eighteenth century, Protestant missionaries found virtually no interest in Christianity among the Cherokee. By the early nineteenth century, however, devastated by massive population and land losses during and after the Revolutionary War (in which they sided with the British), greater numbers of Cherokee people viewed acculturation with white Americans as their only hope of avoiding removal and even cultural extinction. Protestant missionaries from various sects, most affiliated with the federal government's extensive efforts to "civilize" Native Americans, were allowed to open schools in the Cherokee Nation so that native children could be reared in a curriculum of English-language literacy along with Christian religion, often against the wishes of Cherokee leaders and parents. Only a small percentage of Cherokees welcomed the mission schools or sent their children there, and very few students converted to Christianity; however, the high stakes of adopting or rejecting literacy and the gospel make the saga of the Bible in the Cherokee Nation, where it was embraced by a few, rejected by many, and ignored by most, a fascinating part of its reception history.

Prior to the Trail of Tears, the Bible's main value to the Cherokee people was its status in white American society. It was the carrier of English-language literacy (which was offered to Cherokee only through the efforts of Christian missionaries), which some Cherokee believed

would allow their nation to negotiate effectively for their rights. It was also a token of the Christian norms that counted to white Americans as civilization; by selectively adopting aspects of biblical religion and culture, Cherokee demonstrated their ability to syncretize Cherokee and American ways of life. As removal crises multiplied, the pressure to assimilate intensified; the interests and aims of the Cherokee people—namely, the maintenance of their sovereignty—directly opposed belief in the manifest destiny of the United States. Yet the biblical literacy of the Cherokee was not merely strategic. In adopting elements of the Bible, they also remade the Bible in their image, forging a new Christian-Cherokee identity.

Chapter 3 analyzes depictions of literacy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe's analysis of the problem of slavery and its persistence in her era rests on her critique of white male reading practices. White male characters are constantly seen reading or—more often—pretending to read newspapers while decrying their wives' anti-slavery positions as irrational. Stowe depicts these men (even the nice ones) as almost pathologically detached from the cruelties they enact, and seemingly paralyzed in response to slavery even when they know it is wrong. At the same time, Stowe rarely shows white women in the novel reading, yet we know them to be deeply biblically literate because of their attitudes toward slavery, their compassion for those in need, and also because they are constantly engaged in practical, physical activity on behalf of others, especially knitting and sewing. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, biblical literacy is evident not primarily through Bible-reading, but rather through actions on behalf of others which are revealed by the characters who perform them to be motivated by what they read in the Bible. Stowe unites white women with Uncle Tom through a shared desire to live according to biblical principles of selflessness. This desire is constantly thwarted by the evils of slavery, and

demeaned or dismissed by white men whose political and economic literacy gives them exclusive power to stop the abuses of slavery, but renders them too morally impotent to do so.

For decades, scholarship on gender in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been driven by the themes of sentimentalism, particularly domesticity and motherhood. Antebellum evangelical women's political thought has similarly been regarded as a product of their position in society—their dependency on men and confinement in the private sphere—rather than their ideological and religious influences. Stowe's depictions of literacy, I argue, reflect a rigorous and sophisticated critique of the self-interest and individualism that mark white men's exploits in the American public square. By allowing the Bible to be gendered feminine in the wake of the Revolution, and then relegating it, along with women, to the private sphere, Americans had ensured that slavery would continue. Contrary to scholars who have argued that Stowe insists on the moral superiority of the disempowered and domestic, the novel is a critique of this very formula: why, Stowe asks, is the morality of the Bible limited to the private sphere, where it can do only limited good?

***

The histories covered in the following chapters end, at best, on notes of melancholy. Slavery was abolished, eventually, but only through a war that was followed by decades of continued attempts to deny black people their rights and safety. The Indian Removal Act effectively ended efforts to incorporate indigenous people into the idea of America; the Cherokees were forcibly expelled from their lands, and thousands died along the Trail of Tears. The American Anti-Slavery Society split largely due to conflict over women's role in the organization. The Civil War stalled many progressive causes, and by its end another rebellion had sanctified white manhood in blood, and a new, even more capacious biblical nationalism emerged.

But embodied readings of scripture motivated potent and enduring critiques of the values which gave rise to these conditions, while also helping those who lived under them to survive and even thrive. The groups discussed here are linked not by a particular fate, nor even by very similar attitudes toward the Bible. My reasons for discussing them together are twofold. First, ensconced in their disparate strategies of Bible-reading is a shared acceptance of difference; that is, their theories of biblical literacy and uses of the Bible honored the differences between people that result from different histories, cultures, and experiences. Their biblical literacies were unapologetically particular and contingent, while also enabling robust analyses of an America that seemed to require homogeneity as a prerequisite for equality. The ideology of rational biblical literacy sought a foolproof system of unity: if all people could be reduced to the qualities they shared in common, their innate faculties, then they could agree. Paradise in the eyes of Samuel Hopkins was a world in which everyone spoke the same language. This, Stowe understood, was the rationale behind an American public sphere that allowed slavery to proliferate by demanding that men sacrifice private feeling in order to reach political consensus. It was the thinking behind efforts to "civilize" the Cherokees and other Indian groups: if they could only become like white Americans, then coexistence might be possible. It undergirded the racism that justified slavery by making black people seem too different for equality to be possible or desirable. The biblical literacies developed in the following chapters are linked by the belief that particularity and contingency are the basis of humanity, not a threat to it.

My second reason for discussing these groups together is that collectively they demonstrate that the historiographically ascendant narrative of the Bible in antebellum America reflects ideology rather than practice, and a minority ideology at that. Though the idea of "the Bible alone" carried considerable cultural cachet in this period, the Bible, of course, has never

really been alone. It is impossible to reduce America's nineteenth-century cultural hermeneutic to "the Bible alone," because the Bible cannot be—and never has been—read in a vacuum. When Noll asked in *The Bible in America* whether "ministers, preaching from the Bible as public spokesmen, really use[d] Scripture as a primary source for the convictions they expressed," he posed a question that cannot be answered via the discipline of history. The answer, from a historical perspective, to Noll's question of whether these ministers were "in fact merely exploit[ing] Scripture to sanctify convictions—whether nationalistic, political, social, or racial—which had little to do with biblical themes," is neither "yes" nor "no," but, rather, another question: Who or what determines scripture's themes apart from the people who read and "exploit" it?[92] While in religious contexts texts may have fixed and eternal interpretations, in historical contexts they do not. Meaning is a relationship between the reader and the text, and while particular readings may be easier to defend publicly than others, clarity and precision is something owed to other readers, not to the text itself. The various convictions, commitments, and conditions of different readerships not only are legitimately brought to bear on a text, they are a necessary and inseparable component of a text's meaning. I hope that the interpretive contexts of the following chapters open up new ways of telling the story of the Bible and its readers in antebellum America, though they far from exhaust the possibilities. There are as many stories as there are readers.

[92] Noll, "The Image of the United States as a Biblical Nation," 41.

CHAPTER ONE

"WRITTEN ON THEIR HEARTS": BIBLICAL LITERACY UNDER SLAVERY

> Do they believe that on giving the Bible, the unlettered slave will at once—by some miraculous transformation—become a man of letters, and be able to read the sacred Scriptures?
>
> — Frederick Douglass[1]

> The Lord has shown me many visions, and I know he lives true because he not only lives in my soul, as Job said, but he lives about me every day, and since I can't read he directs my path.
>
> — Anonymous ex-slave[2]

In May, 1849, at the annual meeting of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in New York, Henry Bibb enthusiastically discussed ongoing efforts by the American Missionary Association to send bibles to enslaved people in the South. Bibb hoped the wider anti-slavery community could be moved to support the plan, which had already been endorsed by such prominent former slaves as Samuel Ringgold Ward and Henry Highland Garnet. Employing his own biography as evidence for the importance of these efforts to the larger project of bringing slavery to an end, Bibb argued "that no permanent liberty could exist unless it was based on the word of eternal truth," and that "if . . . the Bible had been placed in the hands or within the reach of the poor, defenseless and unhappy slave, we need not be here on this occasion, to advocate the rights and liberties of one-sixth of the people of this country."[3] The next day Frederick Douglass also addressed the Society, condemning the idea that the Bible alone could free any slave, saying, "Give him [freedom] first, and then you need not give him anything else. He can get

[1] Frederick Douglass, "Bibles for the Slaves," *Liberator* XVII, no. 4 (January 28, 1848): 1.

[2] "Autobiography IV: Pray a Little Harder," in *God Struck Me Dead: Voices of Ex-Slaves*, ed. Clifton H. Johnson (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969), 127–128. This book is a collection of conversion narratives culled from interviews with former slaves conducted between 1928 and 1940 by the Fisk University Social Science Institute.

[3] *Annual Report of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, Presented at New York, May 8, 1849, with the Resolutions and Addresses* (New York: A. & F. Anti-Slavery Society, 1849), 8.

what he needs."[4] For the next several months, Douglass engaged in increasingly heated debate with those who backed the plan, especially Garnet, with whom he tangled both in public and in print, via scathing editorials in Douglass's *North Star* and Ward's *Impartial Citizen*. Both Douglass and Garnet were escaped slaves and Christians. Both believed that the Bible and Christianity, honestly read and practiced, opposed slavery. But while Garnet argued that the spirit of the Bible would inspire Southern slaves to resist their bondage, Douglass countered that in the South the Bible had become the very tool by which slaveholders convinced "many good religious colored people . . . that God required them to submit to slavery and to wear chains with meekness and humility."[5]

Douglass and his opponents disagreed over which came first for enslaved people—the Bible, or freedom? Bibb contended that "if he had had the advantage of reading the Bible in early life, he would never have become the subject of such deep degradation."[6] He and Garnet spoke of bibles "placed in the hands" and "within the reach" of enslaved people as though they would advance emancipation by their mere physical proximity. Douglass criticized Bibb for grossly exaggerating the number of slaves who could read; indeed, Bibb claimed in his own autobiography that "slaves were not allowed books, pen, ink, nor paper to improve their minds."[7] For Douglass, arguably the most powerful voice there ever was on the relationship between literacy and freedom, enslaved people were so deprived of education—and the religion of the white South so distorted by allegiance to the slave system—that it was foolish to expect them to

[4] Frederick Douglass, "Too Much Religion, Too Little Humanity: An Address Delivered in New York on 9 May 1849," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, series 1, vol. 2, *Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, 1847–1854*, ed. John W. Blassingame (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 182.

[5] Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written By Himself: His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2012), 54.

[6] *Annual Report of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society* (1849), 7.

[7] Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: 1849), 15.

be able to read the Bible, let alone to understand and act on its implications. Douglass attacked the bibles-for-slaves initiative on the grounds of its impracticality: "Do they suppose that slaveholders, in open violation of their laws, will allow their slaves to have the Bible? How do they mean to get the Bible among the slaves? It cannot go by itself—it must be carried—of what value is the Bible to one who cannot read its contents?"[8]

Though Douglass himself had overcome these obstacles by acquiring literacy and gaining, while still a slave, his own sense of Christian truth independent of the version his oppressors preached, his point was difficult to dismiss. The estimations understandably vary widely as to the rate of literacy among enslaved people during the antebellum era, but certainly it was very low, with most scholarly estimates ranging from about five to fifteen percent at the highest.[9] There is also ample evidence that many slaveholders were reluctant to allow the religious instruction of their slaves; even when they did, religious leaders were often motivated to teach the Bible in ways that supported slavery—for instance, by focusing on passages about obedience, or by ignoring the book of Exodus (in which Moses leads a group of Israelite slaves out of captivity). Douglass also knew that literate Christians like himself, Garnet, Ward, and Bibb, who had escaped slavery, were few and far between. Furthermore, the role of literacy in Douglass's life was not universally positive: after reading *The Columbian Orator* at the age of twelve, Douglass felt acutely the despair of being unable to do anything about a situation he suddenly recognized as deeply unjust, and became filled with hatred and nearly suicidal.[10]

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[8] Douglass, "Bibles for the Slaves," 1.

[9] On the difficulty of measuring literacy among the enslaved, see Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 8–9. Noting that "there can never be exact measurements of the extent of literacy among enslaved African-Americans," Cornelius covers several methods which have been used to estimate a range between five and fifteen percent (8). The difficulty is exacerbated by the problem of defining what constitutes literacy in any context, but especially under the special circumstances of enslavement.

[10] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston: Anti-slavery Office, 1849), 41.

Literacy could be an enormous liability for the enslaved, especially when it was gained in secret. In addition to the psychological burdens Douglass experienced, those who disobeyed their masters by learning to read risked harsh punishment, separation from friends and family through sale, and even their lives. Perhaps Douglass did not endorse the plan because it asked enslaved people to take up additional risks and responsibilities in order to regain their freedom, rather than demanding that slaveholders give back what they had stolen.

This debate over sending the Bible to the enslaved, although it occurred between prominent free black men, reveals the complex relationship between literacy and religion, and the role of that relationship in both sustaining and mitigating slavery. Relevant as the debate was to the cause of abolition, however, it was somewhat distant from everyday lives of enslaved people, whose involvement with religion and text was important but rarely resulted in freedom. In the 1970s, Albert Raboteau handily dismissed the old binary of rebelliousness and docility, which had defined scholarship about slave religion for decades, by showing how even behaviors that seemed to uphold the status quo could be seen from another vantage as subversive.[11] For instance, when William Grimes forgave and prayed for his master, he was simultaneously recommitting himself to the obedience his master required and declaring himself morally and spiritually superior to the man who owned him and would one day answer to God specifically for Grimes's own suffering.[12] Similarly, literacy, or reading and its associated activities more broadly defined, should not be considered simplistically liberating for slaves. First, enslaved people had reasons to desire literacy aside from the aid it might (or might not) provide in achieving freedom from slavery. Foremost, perhaps, among these other motivating factors was

[11] See Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, updated ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), esp. ch. 6.

[12] William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave, Written By Himself* (New York: 1825), 44–45.

religious belief. Many enslaved people who acquired literacy learned to read in religious contexts; thus, studies of slave literacy are in many ways inextricable from studies of slave religion, since the Bible was likely the only book, if any, with which many in bondage ever interacted, and religious instruction likely the only, if any, they received. Second, whatever education enslaved people received was usually provided or withheld by whites according to the terms of the slaveholding power, and thus education was used, like religion, to bring about outcomes that suited masters. Whether or not slaveholders were successful in bringing about these outcomes, the role of literacy in the lives of the enslaved is complicated by these dynamics.

However, Douglass perhaps underestimated the creativity of enslaved people in circumventing obstacles like those he faced. In his speech to the Anti-Slavery Society, Douglass related to the crowd that "Mr. Bibb told me in conversation, that he believed if the slave had the Bible, the Lord would help him read it," eliciting laughter from some of those gathered.[13] Yet many enslaved people claimed precisely this kind of divine intervention in their attempts to read the Bible and other texts. Many also echoed Garnet and Bibb's faith in a spirit of the Bible and in the power of books as objects "placed in the hands" of those who were generally barred from holding them. Missionaries from the American Missionary Association reported that enslaved people spoke of the ability to "read him [Jesus] here in my heart just as you read him in de Bible," and of the Bible being "written on their hearts."[14]

Scholarship on slave education and literacy has tended to downplay the role of religious structures and belief, even though most enslaved people who explained their efforts to learn claimed to be motivated by religion (namely, they wanted to be able to read the Bible), and even

[13] Douglass, "Too Much Religion," 184.

[14] Mansfield French, excerpt from *The Beauty of Holiness* (May 1862), reprinted in *American Missionary* 6 (June, 1862): 138; *American Missionary* 7 (April, 1863): 81, cited in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 242.

though religion and education were largely inseparable in antebellum America—the two were closely linked, for instance, in the minds of slaveholders fearful of black rebellion. Biblical literacy was neither the key to resistance against slavery, as Bibb and Garnet maintained, nor irrelevant to the cause of freedom, as Douglass argued. But the importance of the Bible in antebellum American culture did authorize powerful means for undermining slavery's dehumanizing forces: the religious veneration of books and education, which helped enslaved people to cultivate and maintain values and practices that were at odds with slavery; and expanded religious definitions of literacy, which allowed a greater number of enslaved people to participate in literate and religious critique.

"IN THE TIME OF THE OLD PROPHET NAT": READING, RELIGION, AND REBELLION

Understanding the degree to which black literacy and religion were feared and restricted by whites can help us to better recognize and appreciate the wide variety of literate practices among the enslaved. By the nineteenth century, religion and literacy had long been connected in discussions of slavery, not least of all because the Christianization and education of "heathen" Africans had been a principal rationale for the practice. However horrible enslavement was for those in bondage, white participants comforted themselves with the knowledge that Africans were better off in America, where they could be exposed to Christianity and Euro-American learning. Because they chose to believe that there was no civilization in Africa, most white Americans took little notice of black forms of community, knowledge, or religion, or wrote them off as superstitious, barbaric, or exceptional when they did.[15] Christian ministers who took the

[15] For instance, when North Americans encountered literate Muslim slaves who could write, they denied their "Africanness," and decided that they must be Moorish or Arab royalty. See Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles* (New York: Routledge, 1997), esp. 34, 130–131.

mission to enslaved Africans seriously often affirmed these assumptions about Africa's spiritual and intellectual "darkness." In *The Negro Christianized*, influential Puritan minister and slaveholder Cotton Mather argued for the humanity of slaves on the basis of their capacity to be converted. He thus urged upon masters the necessity of humane treatment and religious instruction: "Let us make a Trial, Whether they that have been Scorched and Blacken'd by the Sun of *Africa*, may not come to have their Minds Healed by the more Benign *Beams* of the *Sun of Righteousness*."[16] Mather, who named his own slave "Onesimus" after the runaway slave whom Paul sent back to his master, had to contend with slaveholders who worried that baptized slaves must be freed.[17] Mather stated emphatically that conversion did not entitle slaves to freedom (though he fretted that slaveholders were more concerned about keeping their slaves than Christianizing them).[18] Rather than freeing slaves, Mather's priority was the creation of new Christians, along with the maintenance of New England's Christian society, to which cruel slaveholders were a threat. "When we have *Slaves* in our Houses," he wrote in *Theopolis Americana*, "we are to treat them with *Humanity*, we are so to treat them that their *Slavery* may really be their *Happiness*; Yea, In our treating of them, there must be nothing but what the Law of CHRIST will Justify."[19] Another great Puritan divine and slaveholder, Jonathan Edwards, condemned the slave trade but defended domestic slaveholding on grounds similar to Mather's.

[16] Cotton Mather, *The Negro Christianized* (Boston: Bartholomew Green, 1706), 2.

[17] In one of America's earliest anti-slavery tracts, *The Selling of Joseph*, Massachusetts judge Samuel Sewall argued that for Christians "to persist in holding their Neighbours and Brethren under the Rigor of perpetual Bondage, seems to be no proper way of gaining Assurance that God has given them Spiritual Freedom" (Samuel Sewall, *The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial* [Boston: Bartholomew Green and John Allen, 1700], 3). However, even Sewall seems to tacitly affirm the widespread view of Africa as a continent in need of redemption: he attacks the proslavery defense that African slaves "are brought out of a Pagan Country, into places where the Gospel is Preached" not by denying African's heathen status, but rather by arguing that "Evil must not be done, that good may come of it, The extraordinary and comprehensive Benefit accruing to the Church of God, and to *Joseph* personally, did not rectify his brethrens' Sale of him" (2–3).

[18] Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 16, 7.

[19] Cotton Mather, *Theopolis Americana* (Boston: B. Green, 1710), 16.

For Edwards, too, the priority was the spread of the gospel. The slave trade, he felt, had done much to damage the reputation of Christianity in Africa by making it "dangerous for other nations to live near God's people."[20] Domestic slavery, however, brought Africans into the Christian fold. Edwards, the first minister at his parish to baptize blacks and admit them to full membership, considered the conversion of enslaved people to be evidence of a "remarkable season" of revival.[21] The famous evangelist George Whitefield wrote ambivalently that "Enslaving or misusing their [slaves'] Bodies would, comparatively speaking, be an inconsiderable Evil, was proper Care taken of their Souls."[22]

This emphasis on educating and Christianizing Africans in bondage helped to justify slavery, but also threatened and annoyed masters. Some slaveholders denied that their chattel even had souls. Francis Le Jau, an Anglican missionary in South Carolina, reported that "many masters can't be persuaded that Negroes and Indians are otherwise than Beasts, and use them like such."[23] Others believed education and religion would make slaves disobedient. As Virginia

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[20] Jonathan Edwards, "Draft Letter on Slavery," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 16, *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 76.

[21] Jonathan Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God," in *Edwards on Revivals* (New York: Dunning & Spalding, 1832), 47.

[22] George Whitefield, "Letter III. To the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South-Carolina," in *Colonial North America and the Atlantic World: A History in Documents*, ed. Brett Rushforth and Paul W. Mapp (New York: Routledge, 2016), 271.

[23] Francis Le Jau, *The Carolina Chronicle of Dr. Francis Le Jau, 1706–1717*, ed. Frank J. Klingerberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956), 55. Though Le Jau was critical of planters, he was himself unnerved when the literacy and religion of his enslaved flock seemed to move too far outside his control. As Katharine Gerbner recounts,

> Over time, Le Jau became increasingly skeptical about the consequences of teaching reading and writing. In 1710, Le Jau recounted an event with an enslaved man who was described as "the best Scholar of all the Negroes" and a "very sober and honest Liver." Apparently, this man had prophesied that the "moon would be turned to Blood," a prediction he "read . . . in a Book." Le Jau was alarmed that this man had put "his own Construction upon some Words of the Holy Prophet's." Le Jau did not want his enslaved congregants to develop their own interpretations of the Bible and he concluded, "those men have not judgment enough to make a good use of their Learning." The incident revealed Le Jau's discomfort with black authority and his growing reticence to promote literacy. He urged the Society to reserve such skills only for the "fittest persons." (*Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018], 125)

minister John Bragg put it, owners were "generaly [*sic*] not approving" of slave baptism, "being led away by the notion of their being and becoming worse slaves when Christians."[24] The most serious concern was that converted slaves were legally and spiritually entitled to freedom. Though in truth no legal statute compelled American masters to free slaves who had been baptized, anxiety over this issue ran high enough that by 1706 at least six colonial legislatures had passed acts declaring that Christian baptism did not alter the status of a slave. A Virginia law passed in 1667 stated explicitly that its aim was to soothe the consciences of slaveholders so that, "freed from this doubt," they might "more carefully endeavor the propagation of Christianity."[25] Anglican missionaries in the South who wanted access to enslaved souls impressed upon planters their responsibility to Christianize their slaves while also assuring them that religion would not threaten their absolute authority. Furthermore, missionaries placated slaveholders by teaching a version of Christianity that emphasized obedience. Maryland minister Thomas Bacon, for instance, told his enslaved congregants that their owners were "God's overseers," and that they must "do all service for them as if [they] did it for God himself."[26] As Jon Butler has argued, these policies left no means by which slaves could refuse to obey their owners, even when following commands "forced them into illegal and immoral acts."[27] "The stress on absolute obedience," writes Butler, "turned minor infractions of planter authority into major confrontations, and the result brought forth the first fixing of an indelible image in American race relations—the perpetually disobedient black." The appearance of insolence "was all but

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[24] Quoted in Joan R. Gunderson, *The Anglican Ministry in Virginia, 1723–1766: A Study of a Social Class* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989), 111–112.

[25] William Waller Hening, *Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619*, vol. 2 (Richmond: R. & W. & G. Bartow, 1823), 260. On the legal status of converted slaves, see Oscar Reiss, *Blacks in Colonial America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), esp. ch. 13.

[26] Thomas Bacon, *Four Sermons Preached at the Parish Church of St. Peter* (London: J. Oliver, 1753), 34.

[27] Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 143.

guaranteed by the doctrines," first articulated by missionaries, "that demanded absolute rather than conditional obedience." As a result of attempts by Christian leaders to translate religious justifications for slavery into actual evangelizing, "the meanings of blackness and disobedience had already begun to converge."[28]

The link between religious education and rebellion was further catalyzed by several violent uprisings in the first few decades of the nineteenth century. By the 1830s, enslaved people constituted close to 50 percent or more of the population in numerous counties throughout the South. In the midst of mounting anxiety about the growing number of slaves, Nat Turner's 1831 revolt in Southampton County, Virginia (where black people, slave and free, made up 59 percent of the population according to the 1830 census) arguably did more than any other single event to connect reading, religion, and rebellion in the Southern white imagination.[29] From August 21 to 22, Turner and a group of slaves killed approximately 60 white people, most in their homes. The state executed 56 slaves accused of participating in the revolt, including Turner, and an additional 100 to 200 blacks were killed by white mobs in the aftermath.[30] Regarded as highly intelligent, Turner had learned to read and write at a young age. He was known as a prophet and preacher, and his revolt was rumored to have been partially inspired by biblical prophecies. Turner had also reportedly read the black writer David Walker's 1829 pamphlet, *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, in which Walker wrote that "the bare name of educating the coloured people, scares our cruel oppressors almost to death."[31] Abolitionist fiction

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[28] Ibid., 146.

[29] Lincoln A. Mullen, "The Spread of U.S. Slavery, 1790–1860," interactive map, accessed October 24, 2017, http://lincolnmullen.com/projects/slavery.

[30] See Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (Boston and New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996), esp. "The Aftermath of the Rebellion," 18–23. See also Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York: New American Library, 1975), 114.

[31] David Walker, *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles, Together with a Preamble, to the Colored Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly to Those of the United States of America*, 2nd ed. (Boston: David Walker, 1830), 37.

like Richard Hildreth's 1836 novel *The Slave*, as well as the many popular slave narratives of the period, reinforced the idea that blacks who learned to read and write were more likely to run away or rebel. In his *Narrative*, Douglass explained that from the moment his master put a stop to his attempts become literate, he knew that education would be "the pathway from slavery to freedom."[32]

In the wake of events like Turner's revolt, the German Coast Uprising, and Denmark Vesey's thwarted insurrection, several Southern states placed greater restrictions on black education and religion.[33] Turner's actions prompted a debate about slavery in the Virginia House of Delegates during its 1831–1832 session, where various petitions were submitted for emancipation, colonization, and removal of free blacks. The House ultimately declined to make any changes to the slave system in Virginia; only one bill was passed as a result of the debate, perhaps inspired by Governor John Floyd's assertion that "the negro preachers" had been "the most active among ourselves, in stirring up the spirit of revolt."[34] The bill prohibited black preachers—free or slave—and made it illegal for slaves to attend nighttime religious meetings unless accompanied by their masters.[35] Several states, counties, and cities passed anti-literacy laws making it illegal for anyone—white or black—to teach slaves or even free blacks to read or

[32] Douglass, *Narrative*, 37.

[33] These better known North American insurrection plots—occurring in 1831, 1811, and 1822, respectively—were part of a much larger Atlantic trend of slave rebellions and conspiracies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Some scholars have noted that the decades from the 1770s to the 1840s saw the largest and most frequent incidents of slave revolt, and that, significantly, this time period coincides with the white Atlantic's Age of Revolution. The rise of libertarian ideology, progressive movements like abolitionism, and economic and political destabilization born of these Euro-American revolutions may have inspired or occasioned an increase in slave resistance. See David Geggus, "Slave Rebellion During the Age of Revolution," in Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie, eds., *Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions, 1795–1800* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2011), 23–56.

[34] John Floyd, "Extracts from the annual message of gov. Floyd—Dec 6," *Niles' Weekly Register* 41, no. 1,059 (January 7, 1832): 350–351.

[35] Erik S. Root, ed., *Sons of the Fathers: The Virginia Slavery Debates of 1831–1832* (New York: Lexington Books, 2010), 17. According to Root, "the bill further prohibited free blacks from making a living, proscribing their participation in trades and handicraft if they refused the opportunity of being removed to Liberia . . . . One trade was omitted from much of this regulation—Barbers. This trade was considered too beneath whites to engage in the craft."

write. Georgia, for example, passed the following law (not the first of its kind in that state) in 1833:

> If any person shall teach any slave, negro, or free person of color, to read or write either written or printed characters, or shall procure, suffer, or permit a slave, negro or person of color to transact business for him in writing, such person so offending shall be guilty of a misdemeanor.[36]

A law for the city of Augusta, Georgia in effect between 1820 and 1829 read, "No person shall teach a negro or person of color to read or cause any one to be taught within the limits of the City, nor shall any person suffer a school for the instruction of negroes, or persons of color to be kept on his or her lot."[37] In addition to making it illegal to teach slaves and even free blacks to read and write, governments attempted to prevent enslaved people from educating themselves by making it illegal for them to meet with each other for any reason. A Virginia law passed just prior to Turner's revolt, in addition to mandating up to six months of jail time for any white person caught teaching slaves to read or write, elided black religion and education under the umbrella of unlawful assembly:

> Every assemblage of negroes for the purpose of religious worship, when such worship is conducted by a negro, and every assemblage of negroes for the purpose of instruction in reading or writing, or in the night time for any purpose, shall be an unlawful assembly. Any justice may issue his warrant to any officer or other person, requiring him to enter any place where such assemblage may be, and seize any negro therein; and he, or any other justice, may order such negro to be punished with stripes.[38]

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[36] Charles Colcock Jones and Salem Dutcher, *Memorial History of Augusta, Georgia* (Syracuse, NY: D. Mason, 1890), 322. Along with laws restricting black literacy, Georgia also passed laws prohibiting the "circulation or bringing into this State . . . any written or printed pamphlet, paper, or circular, for the purpose of exciting to insurrection, conspiracy, or resistance among the slaves, negroes or free persons of color of this State, against their owners or the citizens of this State" (ibid.).

[37] Ruby Lorraine Radford, "Slavery," in *Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 4, Telfair-Young (with combined interviews of others)*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://lcweb2.loc.gov/mss/mesn/044/044.pdf, 317.

[38] General Assembly of Virginia, *The Code of Virginia: With the Declaration of Independence and Constitution of the United States; and the Declaration of Rights and Constitution of Virginia* (Richmond: William F. Ritchie, 1849), 747. Previous Virginia law codes had also prohibited meetings of slaves for the purposes of "teaching them reading or writing," and authorized officers to "inflict corporal punishment on the offender or offenders" (William Goodell, excerpt from Virginia Revised Code of 1819, in *The American Slave Code in Theory*

It was not unusual for these laws to recommend different punishments for black and white people caught teaching slaves to read. A typical North Carolina law which made it illegal to teach enslaved people to read or write or to provide them with pamphlets or books mandated fines or jail time for white offenders; fines, jail time, or whipping for free black offenders; and whipping for enslaved offenders.[39]

Even in states where no such anti-literacy laws existed, "withholding education," as Orville Taylor has noted, "was merely accepted as a normal practice in the system of slavery."[40] The practice was so widely accepted, in fact, that even in states such as Arkansas that did not legally forbid educating slaves, many, like former slave Adeline Blakely, believed that "there was a law against teaching a slave to read and write."[41] Black religion, too, was effectively

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and Practice: Its Distinctive Features Shown by Its Statutes, Decisions, and Illustrative Facts [New York: American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1853], 321).

[39] "Act Passed by the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina at the Session of 1830–1831" (Raleigh: 1831), cited in Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African-American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 206–207. For more examples of anti-literacy laws in the antebellum South, see Williams, "Appendix," in *Self-Taught*, 203–213.

[40] Orville W. Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1958), 187.

[41] Mary D. Hudgins, interview with Adeline Blakeley, in *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 1, Abbott–Byrd*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.021, 182. Interviews conducted by the Federal Writers' Project have been digitized by the Library of Congress and may be accessed at https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/.

Scholars have generally agreed that these interviews present several challenges: the subjectivity and inaccuracies of memory; the advanced age of those interviewed and their relative youth during slavery; the social dynamics between the mostly white interviewers and black interviewees in the South; the non-representative sample of ex-slaves interviewed; the revisions and literary flourishes imposed by interviewers and editors; the fairly superficial and otherwise problematic questionnaire used by interviewers; and the fact that most of those interviewed were living in the abject poverty of the Great Depression, and thus may have been more apt to reflect fondly on slavery. John Blassingame determined that the "deliberate distortion and interpolation of the views of the WPA staffers pose a serious challenge to historians who rely on the interviews" ("Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *The Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 4 [November, 1975]: 484). Blassingame believed that historians were on surer ground relying on narratives and autobiographies written by former slaves themselves; for him the example of Peter Bruner, the one ex-slave interviewed by the WPA who also wrote an autobiography, is particularly damning for the interviews as a source: "A careful reading of the two stories reveals many of their similarities. But there are so many contradictions in the two accounts that it is obvious that (1) Bruner concealed some things from the interviewers, (2) the transcription was inaccurate, or (3) Bruner by 1936 had forgotten many of the details he included in his 1918 narrative" (491). Blassingame argues that Bruner's narrative demonstrates psychological depth and describes the development of his identity and attitudes toward slavery, while his interview is comparatively shallow and underdeveloped. He ultimately leaves it to the individual historian to

quashed even in places where it was not illegal. Charity Bowery, an enslaved woman interviewed by Lydia Maria Child in 1847, recalled that "all the colored folks were afraid to pray in the time of the old Prophet Nat":

> There was no law about it; but the whites reported it round among themselves that, if a note was heard, we should have some dreadful punishment; and after that, the low whites would fall upon any slaves they heard praying, or singing a hymn, and often killed them before their masters or mistresses could get to them.[42]

It seems unlikely that masters would have allowed mobs of "low whites" to kill their valuable slaves once the revolt had been effectively repressed and avenged; but Bowery reminds us that enslaved people and masters alike—with justification, in some cases—linked literacy and religious faith to rebellion.

Some masters flouted these laws and customs. The owner of Samuel Hall, for instance, offered schooling to his slaves several times a week. Hall wrote in his autobiography that even

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determine what kind of slave testimony is most appropriate for his or her venture. While I take Blassingame's cautions to heart, the historian of slavery is fairly bereft of direct testimony from her subjects. I wish all of the ex-slaves interviewed by the WPA had also written autobiographies for comparison—though those who published personal narratives are hardly representative of most slaves either, and their testimony, too, was often influenced by the white editors who brought these works to the abolitionist market. The men and women interviewed by the WPA left no other records of their experiences under slavery, and one instance of testimony, however problematic, is more than we have from the vast majority of slaves.

These sources should be valued for more than their scarcity, however. True, they are not particularly useful for quantitative analyses of slavery in America, since they do not consist of a representative sample of former slaves and the interviews were not designed to elicit such consistent data; but quantitative analyses of American slavery as a single object of study suffer in the first place from the incredible diversity of practice from owner to owner, region to region, and year to year, among other things. Since I am not trying to determine literacy rates, my research should be more or less uninhibited by the quantitative shortcomings of the interviews. Since my subject is relatively uncontroversial (at least compared to questions about cruelty or quality of life, for instance), my research should be less affected by issues of candor between interviewers and interviewees. Still, interviewers and editors doubtless changed, ignored, or redacted some of the ex-slaves' comments pertaining to literacy, and certainly many ex-slaves withheld information on the subject, as they might have on any subject. It is understandable that ex-slaves and interviewers alike might avoid conversation about children who were beaten after being caught with a book, but shouldn't we then take even more seriously the several interviews that do mention such abuse? Particularly striking is where the interviews line up with narratives written by escaped and former slaves and with testimony from missionaries, as they often do with regard to literacy. My hope is that the variety of sources consulted for this study has helped to bolster my use of the interviews.

[42] Lydia Maria Child, "Charity Bowery," in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John W. Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 267.

when "the law was changed so that my people could have no schooling," his owner "opposed the law and decided that his Negroes should read and he gave us a chance to learn." Again, new laws were passed with heftier fines, but Hall's master continued to teach him out of "an old elementary speller." "But I did not take on enough learning," laments Hall, "and my master would say to me: 'old fellow, you will rue it,' which I have. Later my eyes were opened and I could see the great mistake I had made, for from the day they began to shut off the learning from the Negro they began to bind them tighter."[43] One wonders whether that is exactly what Hall's master meant; nonetheless, Hall learned to view the withholding of education as key to maintaining the slave system.

Hall's master seems to have been an exception, as slaves and former slaves from throughout the South reported that their masters were adamant that they remain illiterate. According to them, enslaved people were closely monitored and masters were quick to admonish those caught learning to read, in possession of a book, or already literate. Hannah Crasson claimed that her master "wuz harder down on dat den anything else. You better not be ketched wid a book."[44] According to emancipated slave Ellis Bennett, "White man let no nigguh read fore war . . . . See nigguh walking by wif a buk in 'is 'hand. White man call, 'Nig-gu-h nigguh, God dam! Come heah!' Nigguh come. Wite man snatch buk. Say 'Buk no fo' nigguh; buk fo' wite man.' Kick nigguh in slack o pants say, 'Git long wuk you son of a b—!'"[45] Many former

[43] Samuel Hall, *Samuel Hall, 47 Years a Slave; A Brief Story of His Life Before and After Freedom Came to Him* (Washington, IA: Journal Print, 1912), 27–28.

[44] T. Pat Matthews, interview with Hannah Crasson, in *Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams–Hunter*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.111, 193.

[45] Claude W. Anderson, interview with Ellis Bennett, in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, ed. Thomas E. Barden, Charles L. Perdue, Jr., and Robert K. Phillips (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 29. The incredibly poor transcription work of many of the WPA interviewers is evident here. The misspelled words seem designed to capture the illiteracy or assumed illiteracy of those interviewed. However, as my colleague RL Watson pointed out in discussions of an earlier draft of this chapter, they instead evince illiteracy on the part of the interviewers, or at least ignorance of standard protocol for transcribing dialect.

slaves reported far harsher and crueler punishments than confiscation of their books. George Thompson, who attempted to learn to read a spelling book as a child under slavery, said that "after receiving three severe whippings I gave up and never again tried for any learning, and to this day I can neither read nor write."[46] Several former slaves reported that masters cut off fingers and thumbs of slaves caught learning to read.[47] George Womble claimed that when a master on an adjoining plantation caught his son "teaching a little slave boy to write," he gave his son "a severe beating," "then cut the thumb and forefinger off of the slave."[48] "When Dr. Cannon found out dat his carriage driver had learned to read and write whilst he was takin' de doctor's chillun to and f'um school," Tom Hawkins recalled, "he had dat Niggers thumbs cut off and put another boy to doin' de drivin' in his place."[49] The message of such punishments was

[46] William R. Mays, "Slavery Days of George Thompson," in *Vol. 5, Indiana, Arnold–Woodson*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.050, 196.

[47] For more anecdotal examples of prohibitions on slave education, see interview with Doc Daniel Dowdy, *Vol. 13, Oklahoma, Adams–Young*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.130, 78; Mary A. Crawford, interview with Henry Nix, *Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3, Kendricks–Styles*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.043, 144; and Marjorie Jones, interview with Lizzie Williams, in *Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 2, Jackson–Yellerday*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives form the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn, 396–397.

[48] Edwin Driskell, interview with George Womble, in *Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 4*, 189.

[49] Sadie B. Hornsby, interview with Tom Hawkins, in *Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey–Jones*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.042, 130–131. Ex-slave William McWhorter suggests that these stories may have derived from a figure of speech: "Lordy, Mistess, ain't nobody never told you it was agin de law to larn a Nigger to read and write in slavery time? White folks would chop your hands off for dat quicker dan dey would for 'most anything else. Dat's jus' a sayin', 'chop your hands off.' Why, Mistess, a Nigger widout no hands wouldn't be able to wuk much, and his owner couldn't sell him for nigh as much as he could git for a slave wide good hands. Dey jus' beat 'em up bad when dey cotched 'em studyin' readin and writin', but folks did tell 'bout some of de owners dat cut off one finger evvy time dey cotch a slave tryin' to git larnin'" (Sadie B. Hornsby, interview with William McWhorter, in *Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3, Kendricks–Styles*, 97). However, Samuel Hall apparently believed the punishment was legally mandated: "If the Negro ever learned to write and it was made known the law was that he or she must suffer the loss of a finger to keep him from writing" (Hall, *Samuel Hall*, 28).

clear to slaves: "No books of any kind wus allowed," and most were "daresome to be caught with a paper book or anything if we were tryin' to learn to read and write."[50]

It was thus obvious to enslaved people that educated, religious blacks were threatening to whites, and they identified several motives for the restrictive policies under which they lived. Adeline Cunningham explained that masters feared literate slaves were more likely to run away, and according to Jenny Proctor, "Dey say we git smarter den dey was if we learn anything."[51] Easter Jones believed that the only thing masters cared to teach slaves was work: "Chillun didn't know whut a book wus in dem days . . . . Dey didn' learn me nothin' but to churn and clean up house, and 'tend to day boy and spin and cyard de roll [card wool or cotton]."[52] The enslaved understood that whites viewed enforced illiteracy as an effective, even essential tool of their bondage, as Proctor explains:

> Dey wasn't no church for de slaves but we goes to de white folks arbor on Sunday evenin' and a white man he gits up dere to preach to de niggers. He say, 'Now I takes my text, which is, nigger obey your marster and your mistress, 'cause what you git from dem here in dis world am all you ev'r goin to git, 'cause you jes like de hogs and de other animals, when you dies you aint no more, after you been throwed in dat hole.' I guess we believed dat for a while 'cause we didn' have no way findin' out different. We didn' see no Bibles.[53]

Proctor suggests that had enslaved people been allowed to see the Bible, they might have known not to believe what the white preachers said about it—namely, that it was all about how they were chattel and should obey their masters. Since they were unable to read the Bible for

[50] T. Pat Matthews, interview with Annie Stephenson, in *Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 2*, 314; Matthews, interview with James Turner McLean, in *Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 2*, 84. For more examples of the kind of violence threatened and employed against slaves who attempted to learn to read, see Williams, *Self-Taught*, 18.

[51] Interview with Adeline Cunningham, in *Vol. 16, Texas, Part 1, Adams–Duhon*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.161, 267; interview with Jenny Proctor, *Vol. 16, Texas, Part 3, Lewis–Ryles*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.163, 213.

[52] Radford, "Slavery," 318.

[53] Interview with Jenny Proctor, *Vol. 16, Texas, Part 3, Lewis–Ryles*, 213.

themselves, however, it could be difficult for enslaved people to critique anything whites told them about it and what it said regarding slavery and proper behavior for the enslaved.

Difficult, but not impossible. Because they recognized that whites felt threatened by the idea of literate slaves, many enslaved people learned to be suspicious and critical of white approaches to scripture even when they could not be sure what it really said. Sometimes the banality and repetitiveness of white religious leaders suggested their agenda:

> Couldn't none of us read no Bible and dere warn't none of de Niggers on our plantation ever converted and so us never had no baptizin's. De preacher preached to de white folks fust and den when he preached to de Niggers all he ever said was: 'It's a sin to steal; don't steal Marster's and Mist'ess' chickens and hogs; and sech lak. How could anybody be converted on dat kind of preachin'?[54]

In this report, former slave Tom Hawkins attributes the ineffectiveness of the preacher to his concern for white property over black souls. Even though "all he ever said" was on the subject of stealing, Hawkins believes there is more important and efficacious material the preacher is not addressing, material he would not address because it would apparently undermine the masters' policy of enforced ignorance. As former slave Ervin E. Smith put it, "white people taught their niggers what Bible they wanted them to know," which they could only do by ensuring that the enslaved did not teach themselves.[55] Their comparative ignorance of the Bible, however, did not prevent enslaved people from criticizing these white policies and their effects, as in the following case related by Reverend Charles Colcock Jones in 1856:

> I was preaching to a large congregation on the *Epistle to Philemon*: and when I insisted upon fidelity and obedience as Christian virtues in servants and upon the authority of Paul, condemned the practice of *running away*, one half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves, and those that remained looked any thing but satisfied, either with the preacher or his doctrine. After dismission, there was no small stir among them; some solemnly declared

[54] Hornsby, interview with Tom Hawkins, *Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey–Jones*, 131.

[55] Samuel S. Taylor, interview with Ervin E. Smith, in *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6, Quinn–Tuttle*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.026, 190.

> "that there was no such epistle in the Bible"; others, "that they did not care if they ever heard me preach again!"[56]

These dissenters evince varied degrees of familiarity with the Bible, but they all reach the same conclusion: Jones has failed to relay to them the most important parts of scripture and has instead either lied to them about its contents or used it to manipulate them for the benefit of their masters. Their confident critique of Jones's preaching suggests, potentially, a corporate hermeneutic according to which the meaning of the Bible is not automatically tantamount to what it says. Whether or not Philemon is in the Bible, Jones is a worse reader, less biblically literate than his enslaved congregants, because he uses scripture to insist on their obedience to their masters.

In response to this kind of preaching (among other things), some enslaved people formed their own secret churches. According to former slave Fannie Moore:

> None o' the niggers have any learnin', warn't never 'lowed to as much as pick up a piece o' paper. My daddy slip an' get a Webster book and den he take it outen de fiel and he larn to read. De white folks 'fraid to let de children learn anythin'. They fraid dey get too smart and be harder to manage. Dey nebber let em know anything about anythin'. Never have any church. Effen you go you set in de back of de white folks chu'ch. But de niggers slip off an' pray an' hold prayer-meetin' in de woods den dey tu'n down a big wash pot and prop it up wif a stick to drown out de soun' ob de singin'. I 'member some of de songs we uster sing.[57]

Moore echoes the language in many anti-literacy laws by eliding the distinction between education and religion; she seamlessly shifts from talking about restrictions on education and her father's efforts to undermine them, to talking about limited access to church and the secret church meetings held by the enslaved community. Learning and worship—the restrictions on

[56] Association for the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in Liberty County, Georgia, *Tenth Annual Report of the Association for the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in Liberty County, Georgia* (Savannah: The Association, 1845), 24–25.

[57] Marjorie Jones, interview with Fannie Moore, in *Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 2, Jackson–Yellerday*, 132–133.

both as well as the workarounds devised by the enslaved—are simply part of the same topic. As critics of their environment, black people noticed that the efforts of white Christians to use the Bible as a prop of their enslavement depended somehow on keeping them from being able to read it for themselves.

In some sense, white fears about black literacy, especially in combination with black religion, are borne out in the anecdotes about and narratives by slaves and former slaves: some of them did link literacy and Christianity with their efforts to escape or otherwise undermine or resist the dehumanizing efforts of the system. At the same time, rare is the tale of life in bondage that expresses an appreciation for either education or religion in terms of its ability to help one escape or explicitly resist slavery. That is, whites concerned that literacy could be used to undermine slavery were not wrong, but this subversion rarely took the forms they most feared (escape or violent rebellion). Reading was valuable to enslaved people for reasons other than those that made black literacy threatening to whites, and it undermined the system of slavery in ways whites overlooked because of their racist views of black potential and their focus on preventing overt disobedience.

GLORY IN TRIBULATIONS: THE SANCTIFICATION OF BOOKS AND EDUCATION

What made literacy worth the risk and effort of pursuing it? Enslaved people who describe their clandestine educational efforts frequently mention that they spent their only money and all their free time on the endeavor, and risked horrible punishments—why? Janet Duitsman Cornelius, whose 1991 book *When I Can Read My Title Clear* remains one of the most in-depth accounts of slave literacy, has suggested three main reasons that reading became so valuable to some slaves. First, education became attractive because it was withheld—its scarcity made it precious, and learning to read the Bible, for instance, "enabled a slave to undercut a master's attempt to restrict

Christian teaching to carefully selected Biblical passages."[58] Second, noting that most enslaved people who learned to read either on their own or from whites mention a religious context for their learning, Cornelius suggests that they were motivated by opportunities for religious leadership, as "the ministry was the chief outlet for such ambition, and the literate preacher served as a leader of the black community both during and after slavery."[59] It is true that literate preachers were often leaders in slave communities, and it thus makes sense that religious literacy might have been attractive to enslaved people who desired to lead. But surely few pious black preachers would tell the story in that order: that they wanted the respect and trust of their fellows and saw learning to read the Bible as the best way to get it. Cornelius points out an important possible factor in slaves' desire to read, but it is also necessary to take into account the reasons slaves themselves gave for their actions. While few who lived in bondage directly mention the possibility of leadership as a reason for their educational pursuits, many say simply that they wanted to be able to read the Bible for themselves, like many Americans in the antebellum period. Like many free Christians, enslaved Christians took Bible-reading seriously. Like the white Methodists and Baptists who had the greatest success in evangelizing slaves, black Methodists and Baptists truly believed that reading the Bible was central to their Christian religious practice, regardless of any positive or negative consequences they might incur—the opportunity to lead, perhaps, but also harsh and even violent punishment.[60]

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[58] Janet Duitsman Cornelius, "'We Slipped and Learned to Read': Slave Accounts of the Literacy Process, 1830–1865," *Phylon* 44, no. 3 (1983): 172.

[59] Ibid., 182.

[60] This explanation—that genuine religious faith was an important factor for enslaved people who desired to learn to read the Bible—aligns with general trends in American Christianity during this period. Enslaved people were first converted in large numbers in the wake of the evangelical revivals that swept the colonies beginning in the 1740s. George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and other revivalist preachers "made special mention of the fact that blacks were flocking to hear the message of salvation in hitherto unseen numbers" (Albert J. Raboteau, "African Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel," in *Religion and American Culture: A Reader*, ed. David G. Hackett [New York: Routledge, 2003], 77). Revival meetings were usually more spontaneous and less regulated than other religious services, and black people were often more welcome to participate as exhorters and preachers. Few

At a time when personal Bible-reading was being hailed as the centerpiece of Christian practice by a wide variety of Christians, including the very people having the greatest success converting slaves, why wouldn't those in bondage value Bible-reading for its own sake? Indeed, while many slaveholders regarded education and religion as twin pillars of insubordination, most enslaved people seem to have viewed one as a means to the other: in interviews with former slaves conducted by the Federal Writers Project, the most frequently expressed motives for learning to read were religious. Even the most casual reader of narratives by slaves and former slaves will notice that two books are mentioned with far greater frequency than any others, often in the same sentence: the Bible and Webster's blue-back speller (*The Elementary Spelling Book*, so nicknamed for its blue cover). Most enslaved people who were taught to read by whites were taught in Sunday schools, and in most cases such teaching was intended only for religious application. The Bible was the only book which many enslaved people regularly read or heard others read.[61] As W. L. Bost remembered, "Us poor niggers never allowed to learn anything. All

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denominations took greater advantage of this zeal for impromptu, outdoor, egalitarian religion than the Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians whose memberships consequently exploded, and who enjoyed unprecedented success in converting slaves. The centrality of the conversion experience among these evangelical groups was a stark contrast to the slow, methodical process of indoctrination and catechism attempted by Anglican missionaries. (Anglicans also had to contend with limited active membership among Southern whites, along with the aforementioned suspicions of masters reluctant to convert their slaves.) The experiential emphasis in movements nurtured on the revivals lowered the barriers to conversion for the poor, illiterate, and enslaved, and the countercultural flouting of hierarchical leadership structures compared to other denominations (at least in the early days of Methodist and Baptist success) made more room for all classes of society to take an active role in religious worship. Finally, "evangelicals also tended to de-emphasize instruction and downplay learning as prerequisites of Christian life" (ibid.). This is not to say that learning—especially reading the Bible—was unimportant to evangelicals, only that instruction did not have to precede conversion or acceptance within church communities. Indeed, although evangelicals have often (with justification) been considered anti-intellectual compared to establishment denominations like the Anglicans and Congregationalists, they arguably made personal Bible-reading a higher priority than these other Christian groups, in part because their mistrust of elite, Harvard- and Yale-educated ministers placed greater responsibility on individual believers to read and interpret for themselves. For a comprehensive account of relations between white and black evangelicals in antebellum Virginia, see Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

[61] Of course, there were plenty of exceptions to this general trend. For instance, ex-slave William Curtis reported that he "never went to school much but my white folks learned me to read and write. I could always have any of their books to read, and they had lots of 'em" (interview with William Curtis, in *Vol. 13, Oklahoma, Adams–Young*, 51).

the readin' they ever hear was when they was carried through the big Bible."[62] Though this fact seems to have annoyed Bost, many others developed a desire to read the Bible for themselves. John Hunter recalled that his mother "never went to school in her life. Still she saw she could read the Bible, the hymn-book, and such things like that as she wanted to before she died."[63] Similarly, an ex-slave named Minksie (or Minksy) prayed when he "was a small boy, 'Lord, just give me de power to read de bible, old blue back speller and the hymn book'. He done dis and I know de bible by heart. I could preach for six years, and never tell all I know. I can't write a word or read anything but dese books."[64] Sometimes religious education followed from more purely academic pursuits. A narrative of the life of former slave Edmund Kelly reports that after bribing white children with candy "for a speller and a few lessons," he began to study on his own in secret. "Early each night," we learn, "he retired with a prayer that God would guide and direct him and wake him at eleven P. M.; thus he first learned how to pray." Kelly later became a licensed Baptist minister, best known for "writing letters on simple gospel themes to be read to the unconverted"—and perhaps illiterate—"for their salvation."[65]

Finally, Cornelius argues that enslaved people wanted to learn to read because they "were aware of the promise of literacy as a path to mobility and increased self-worth":

> An interesting interpretation of this message came from a poor white boy who assured the enslaved Thomas Jones that "a man who had learning would always find friends, and get along in the world without having to work hard, while those who had no learning would have no friends and be compelled to work very hard for a poor living all their days." Lucius Holsey, who was the son of his master and who identified in many ways with the white world, "felt that

[62] Marjorie Jones, interview with W. L. Bost, in *Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams–Hunter*, 141.

[63] S. S. Taylor, interview with John Hunter, in *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 3, Gadson–Isom*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.023, 363.

[64] Interview with Minksie (or Minksy), in *Vol. 10, Missouri, Abbot–Younger*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.100, 367.

[65] William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising* (Cleveland: Geo. M. Rewell, 1887), 291–293.

> constitutionally he was created the equal of any person here on earth and that, given a chance, he could rise to the height of any man," and that books were the path to proving his worth as a human being.[66]

Put another way, literacy could give the enslaved hope by allowing them to envision a future outside of slavery where they might earn money from their own labor, maintain friendships, pursue self-improvement, and be recognized as equals. However, literacy, though it was usually risky to obtain and in many ways a liability to have, could make life better under slavery, not just after slavery, even if one did not seek increased mobility or leadership opportunities. Cornelius and others have significantly downplayed the importance of religious faith in the educational pursuits of the enslaved. Literacy in general could be useful for imagining alternative futures in this life, but the religious form of literacy most available to the enslaved was also useful for imagining a day beyond this life where not only would black people be treated as equals, but those who had held them unjustly as slaves would be punished. This ultimate reality had consequences in the real world, too: not only had God already judged and condemned the actions of slaveholders, but through the Bible he was available to help the enslaved through their trials. That belief was instrumental for the many in bondage who valued text or pursued and achieved the ability to read, who turned literacy and books into tools for maintaining family and community connections, memorializing their dead, envisioning a world beyond slavery, and developing their own beliefs and culture—all of which undermined the slave system's attempts to control the minds as well as the bodies of those in bondage.

Indeed, testimony from slaves and former slaves demonstrates that many of the benefits of literacy were relevant to the condition of enslavement. At the most basic level, literacy could help connect one's own life to the lives of others. As one former slave reported, families of

[66] Cornelius, "We Slipped and Learned to Read," 181.

slaves who were sold "didn't even know who you was sold to or where they was carryin' you, unless you could write back and tell 'em."[67] Illiterate slaves frequently had to ask their masters to read and write private letters, a necessity that further restricted the already limited intimacy and privacy enjoyed by enslaved people. Letter-writing could sustain family and friendship ties in spite of slavery's upheavals, upheavals designed by whites, at worst, to deliberately dissolve those ties and, at best, with little regard for preserving them. Slaves who could write could potentially curate their own personal lives and conduct them privately. Taken on their own, these practical benefits of literacy provided the foundation for a private life that masters could not know or control, and an identity nuanced by relationships that were not wholly dictated by the system of slavery. The ability to undermine or circumvent masters could be its own reward. Margaret Terry, for instance, delighted in frustrating her mistress by knowing the white children's school lessons when the white children themselves did not: "She told me one day, 'Margaret, you stop studying with the children.' I would find out where the lesson was and would get it just the same, but she didn't know it."[68]

Merely pursuing or appreciating literacy, whether or not one actually achieved the ability to read, provided enslaved people with opportunities to develop interests, hobbies, and goals. George Thompson's attempt to become literate afforded him a long-term, self-directed goal for personal development that was distinct from his servitude. Although Thompson "was not allowed to have books" as a child under slavery, "on Sundays," he reported, "I would go into the woods and gather ginseng which I would sell to the doctors . . . and with this money I would buy a book that was called the Blue Black Speller."[69] Perhaps even more significantly, he profited,

[67] Louise Oliphant, "Compilation Richmond County Ex-Slave Interviews: Mistreatment of Slaves," in *Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 4, Telfair–Young*, 294.

[68] Susie R. C. Byrd, interview with Margaret Terry, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 285.

[69] Mays, "Slavery Days of George Thompson," in *Vol. 5, Indiana, Arnold–Woodson*, 196.

for once, by his own labor. It may be no coincidence that the conversion that immediately inspired South Carolina slave James Bradley's desire to read the Bible occurred the same year he began to earn money to buy his freedom. Bradley may not have desired literacy in the hope that it would make him free (or in the hope of becoming the first African-American student at Lane Theological Seminary), but reading and writing may have allowed him to imagine a future in which all was not "dark and hopeless bondage."[70] Another ex-slave, Julia Frazier, recounted her desperation as a child under slavery to pore over a particular book in her master's library:

> I liked dustin' part best 'cause I could git my hands on de books and pictures dat ole Marse had spread out all over his readin' room. Ole Missus used to watch me mos' times to see dat I didn't open no books. Sometimes she would close up all de books an' put 'em on de shelf so's I couldn't see 'em, but Marse never liked her messin' wid his things. Dere was one book dat I was crazy about . . . didn't know nothin' of what it was 'bout, but it had a lot of pictures, Injuns and Kings and Queens wid reefs on dey heads. Used to fly to dat book and hold it lookin' at de pictures whilst I dusted wid de other hand.[71]

What must it have meant to this girl to have a favorite book, and to discover that she was interested in pictures of Native Americans and royalty? For those who have been encouraged since childhood to seek knowledge and cultivate interests as much as possible, it is difficult to imagine what it might be like to be constantly discouraged in that regard. The slave trade decimated (but clearly did not eliminate) the largely oral culture of its captives, and slaveholders did their best to prevent the formation of an African-American culture that did not revolve around enslavement itself or select owner-approved and -controlled practices. Literacy could be helpful when it came to imagining other ways of life, considering identities outside of enslavement, and cultivating private lives and personal interests. Opportunities in the world around enslaved people may have seemed hopelessly limited, but the world within them was

[70] James Bradley, "Brief Account of an Emancipated Slave," in *The Oasis*, ed. Lydia Maria Child (Boston: Benjamin C. Bacon, 1834), 108.

[71] Claude W. Anderson, interview with Julia Frazier, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 97–98.

boundless. Books and the ability to read and write became precious because they were one means of cultivating that world.

Frazier's desire to look at pictures in a book she could not read also suggests the importance of books, especially the Bible, as objects in the antebellum era. Although evangelicals placed particular emphasis on Bible-reading, and although Bible-reading had unique significance for the enslaved, they were far from the only ones to make the Word the center of Christian and American life. The Bible had unprecedented currency in the antebellum period, both as a thing read and interpreted and as a material artifact. Initiatives like those undertaken by Bibb and Garnet were common and characteristic of Americans' overwhelming faith in the Bible as an object whose very presence might improve a household and unite a nation. This faith gave birth to several national, state, and local societies devoted simply to distributing bibles to people who did not have one. From 1829 to 1831, the largest of these organizations, the American Bible Society, held its first "General Supply," an extraordinarily ambitious attempt to provide every family in the United States with a Bible. "The General Supply," writes John Fea, "put the ABS on the map as the largest and most powerful benevolent society in the country. Its reach was unprecedented."[72] The efforts of the ABS and other charitable organizations were made possible by the increasing affordability of books and other printed material. As Colleen McDannell has pointed out, "The peak years (1810–70) of both ABS Bible distribution and commercial Bible publishing paralleled the extraordinary growth of Protestant denominational institutions."[73]

Though books were still a luxury to most Americans, publishers began to cater to an emerging market of middle-class families by printing special editions of the Bible. Compared to

[72] John Fea, *The Bible Cause: A History of the American Bible Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 49–50.

[73] Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 72.

the spartan volumes handed out by charities, these books were often large and extravagantly decorated, ostentatious proof of a family's religious and moral character, but testaments also to their wealth and standing. Publishers had to convince families to buy these expensive bibles "not only because they were the Word of God but because the book as object could civilize and socialize persons."[74] In order to justify and market special editions of a common text that was being given away for free in large numbers, "producers had to transform it into a domestic commodity that could inspire purified sentiments even if it was never read."[75] Indeed, they were often difficult to use for that purpose: as one woman wrote, "We had a big family Bible . . . it must have been made to sell, certainly not made to read; it was too heavy unless one laid it on the floor."[76] Others took a more romantic view of the so-called "home Bible." Around 1841, George P. Morris penned a poem called "My Mother's Bible," later a popular hymn. In it the speaker recalls his mother's hands holding the book, and the voices of his family members living on through the words they read aloud from it. In the last stanza he writes dramatically to his Bible, which he presses to his heart,

> Thou truest friend man ever knew,
> Thy constancy I've tried;
> When all were false, I found thee true,
> My counsellor and guide.
> The mines of earth no treaures give
> That could this volume buy;
> In teaching me the way to live,
> It taught me how to die.[77]

Morris's poem alludes to another attractive feature of many home bibles: family record pages, the formalization of the seventeenth-century tradition of logging the births, deaths, and

[74] Ibid., 89.
[75] Ibid., 87.
[76] Anne Ellis, *The Life of an Ordinary Woman* (Boston: Houghton Miflin, 1929), 104.
[77] George P. Morris, "My Mother's Bible," *Graham's Magazine* 19 (1841): 52.

marriages of family members in the margins and on blank pages of the family-owned Bible. Books were rare, expensive, and passed down through generations; the Bible, the most important (and sometimes only) book a family might own made a fitting place to keep such information. Antebellum family editions of the Bible updated this practice by including special pages designated and designed for recording these dates. Thus, one context in which the Bible is frequently mentioned in slave narratives is as a family record, since an enslaved person often only knew her age or date of birth if her master's family had recorded it in their family Bible (fig. 3). Several of the former slaves interviewed by the Federal Writers Project claimed to have gotten their ages in this manner. Charles Coles of Maryland said that his master always had enslaved children "baptized by the priest, and given names and they were recorded in the Bible."[78] Kate Billingsby's year of birth was recorded "in a Bible the Buckners [her owners] gave her when she was married."[79] The narrative of the life of the slave Uncle Johnson reports that "his first master felt that his servants were in some sense members of his family, and recorded their names in the family Bible. The old man remembered seeing opposite his name 1745. The month he could not recall."[80] In his autobiography from 1910, former slave J. Vance Lewis, whose year of birth remains unknown, writes, "Whether the date of my birth interests you or not, I know that it was not passed by unheeded by my former master, for recorded upon the leaves of the family Bible, I find the following record: 'Born of Doc and Rosa Lewis, on December the 25th . . . , a son, whose name is Joe, and whose birth has increased my personal

[78] Interview with Charles Coles, in *Vol. 8, Maryland, Brooks–Williams*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.080, 4–5.

[79] Interview with Kate Billingsby, in *Vol. 7, Kentucky, Bogie–Woods (with combined interviews of others)*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.070, 60.

[80] Gustavus L. Foster, *Uncle Johnson, the Pilgrim of Six Score Year* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1867), 64.

property one thousand dollars.' So that I was a Christmas present to my master."[81] Thomas Ash could only guess at his age because "the old Bible containing a record of my birth was destroyed by a fire, many years ago."[82]

Enslaved people, too, kept this tradition, though they had far fewer opportunities to do so and often had to improvise when it came to books. As one woman explained:

> My mother was also taught to read and maybe write a little. Anyway I know just how old I am for the date of my birth was written down in the Bible. That is something a very few of the remnant of slaves know. They guess at their ages for their ignorant mothers had no way of recording their births.[83]

Former slave Mandy Morrow could not tell interviewers her exact age, "'cause I never gits de statement from my massa. My daddy keep dat record in he Bible and I don't know who has it."[84] Like Morrow's father, Bill Simms's mother took up the custom: "my oldest daughter had written my mother before she died, and got our family record, which my mother kept in her old Bible. Each year she writes me and tells me on my birthday how old I am."[85] Some enslaved people could not begin their own tradition of Bible record-keeping until after emancipation. In an episode far less dramatic but at least as poignant as Morris's poem, Julia A. White showed her family Bible to a WPA interviewer:

> The master's family was thoughtful in keeping our records in their own big family Bible. All the births and deaths of the children in my father's family was in their Bible. After Peace, father got a big Bible for our family, and—wait, I'll show you. . . . Here they are, all copied down just like out of old master's Bible. . . .

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[81] J. Vance Lewis, *Out of the Ditch: A True Story of an Ex-Slave* (Houston: Rein & Sons, 1910), 8. See also interview with Sena Moore, in *Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson–Quattlebaum*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.143, 209: "Marse Riley have a Bible out yonder at Jackson Creek dat show's I's eighty-three years old."

[82] Emery Turner, "Reminiscences of Two Ex-Slaves," in *Vol. 5, Indiana, Arnold–Woodson*, 8.

[83] John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 590.

[84] Interview with Mandy Morrow, in *Vol. 16, Texas, Part 3, Lewis–Ryles*, 138.

[85] Leta Gray, interview with Bill Simms, in *Vol. 6 Kansas, Holbert–Williams*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.060, 13.

> Here's where my father and mother died, over on this page. Right here's my own children. This space is for me and my husband.[86]

While the practice of record keeping may have had special significance for people who were lucky to know their own birthdays, slaves may also have followed the tradition simply because it was popular among their fellow American Christians. E. S. Williams, a missionary to a freedman's bureau, wrote that when renewing the marriage vows of emancipated slaves, she "always g[a]ve these couples a bible with their name written in it, and the date of marriage—also the dates of the births of their children, as near as I can get them":

> I urge upon them the importance of legal marriage—as *right*, and as a benefit to children—and strive to make the precious book more precious in their eyes, because it gives account of what their children and friends will like to know. They seem to like to have the writing in the bible; and that they love the good book itself with a real love and sincere veneration, no one can doubt who sees how they will crowd the church, more to hear the Bible read than to hear preaching.[87]

Though Williams's observations reflect a paternalistic attitude toward newly freed people, family Bible records were precious to white families for the same reasons: the Bible was an important book to many antebellum Americans, many of whom, white and black, liked to have their family histories inside it.

Some enslaved people who kept family records had to do without bibles, however. In these cases, the texts chosen as alternatives necessarily indicate more than mere convenience. The family records of James Blount, a captive in North Carolina, were kept, in the apparent absence of a Bible, in two other texts which might have been just as valuable to an enslaved

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[86] Beulah Sherwood Hagg, interview with Julia A. White, in *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 7, Vaden–Young*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.027, 111. See also T. Pat Matthews, interview with Joe High, in *Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams–Hunter*, 410: "Let me git my Bible. I wants to be on de square, because I got to leave here some of dese das. Dis is a record from de slave books. I've been tryin' to git my direct age for 35 years. My cousin got my age. I wuz born April 10, 1857. My mother's name wuz Sarah High. Put down when she wuz born, Oct. 24, 1824. This is from the old slave books."

[87] E. S. Williams, letter of 26 April 26 1863, *American Missionary* 7 (June, 1863): 139–140.

family: the 1811 edition of *The Universal Letter-Writer*, an educational text with examples of different kinds of correspondence and legal documents, and containing, among other things, "proper methods of addressing superiors and persons of all ranks, both in writing and discourse; and valuable hints for grammatical correctness on all occasions";[88] and, from 1839, *A Complete Ready Reckoner*, which provided "forms of notes, bills, receipts, petitions, &c.," and "a set of useful tables" for things like interest rates (fig. 4).[89] That books were still the chosen vessels for such records—rather than, say, religious pamphlets, or separate sheets of paper decorated with religious imagery—demonstrates both the practical protective function of books, but also, perhaps, that the book was considered a more essential part of the ritual than any explicitly Christian content. At the same time, the use of non-religious books for such a purpose indicates both the value of books at large, perhaps especially educational books, for black families (thus, their suitability as heirlooms), but also that even non-religious books could hold some form of religious status. After all, it was not uncommon for ostensibly secular books in the nineteenth century, such as school primers, to contain religious stories or pictures of religious subjects. The frontispiece of Blount's copy of *The Complete Letter-Writer* is an image, similar to that found in several editions of Webster's blue-back speller, of the goddess Minerva "Recommending Youth to acquire a Knowledge of Writing Letters," while a putto holds a laurel wreath above the pupil's head like a halo (fig. 5). Though not explicitly Christian, this introductory imagery affords the acquisition of writing an otherworldly significance and orients its pursuit toward an ultimate reality. By recording births and deaths in the pages of the Bible, American families demonstrated their belongingness both in their particular time and place, with its attendant values and traditions, and in the greater context of a sacred history, with their own genealogies listed

[88] Thomas Cook, *The Universal Letter-Writer* (Hudson, NY: William E. Norman, 1811), title page.
[89] Michael Kelly, *A Complete Ready Reckoner* (Philadelphia: W. A. Leary, 1839), title page.

Fig. 3: Designated family record page from the New Testament of Frederick and Ann Torkenton Patrick. This page lists family deaths alongside the births of slaves (note the word "slave" written vertically next to several entries). Though the book was printed in 1848, the family records written in it date back to 1769. Image from the Frederick and Ann Torkenton Patrick Family Bible Records, N.C. Family Records Collection, State Archives of North Carolina Digital Collections, http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15012coll1/id/5951/rec/2, 5.

Fig. 4: Blount family record pages from *A Complete Ready Reckoner.* A key difference between these records and those kept by white families is that here the enslaved are not identified as such. Image from the James Blount Family Bible Records, N.C. Family Records Collection, State Archives of North Carolina Digital Collections, http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/ref/collection/p15012coll1/id/52781, 6.

Fig. 5: Frontispiece from the Blount family copy of Thomas Cook's *The Universal Letter-Writer* ([Hudson, NY: William E. Norman, 1811], title page). Image from the James Blount Family Bible Records, N.C. Family Records Collection, State Archives of North Carolina Digital Collections, http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15012coll1/id/52838/rec/14, 9.

alongside those of Abraham and Jesus. The enslaved Blount family had to expand these traditions out of necessity, but they may have selected the tools of improvisation with the same goals in mind: books signifying the extraordinary value of education, self-improvement, and economic independence in their particular time and place, and whose contents promised a reality beyond slavery, where the fulfillment of intellectual potential was encouraged and rewarded.

Apart from the tradition of record keeping, books could be a means of maintaining familial bonds between enslaved people who were often divided carelessly or deliberately from loved ones by the same white Americans who gave sacred importance to their own genealogies. Former slave Elder Green, for example, reported to the WPA that he "wanted to learn so bad . . . because my mother prayed and cried over us so much." He describes his father as "a good man, but I didn't see much of him because he belonged to different people."[90] Green's few memories of his semi-literate father are focused on the reading lessons he received whenever they were allowed to see each other: "One of the last things he said to me was, 'Son, here is a blue-back spelling book. Keep it with you as long as it lasts and when it wears out buy another one.' I kept it for years and years."[91] Green's desire for literacy was driven by his mother's love and concern and by his immense respect for the limited education his father was able to obtain. Both father and son recognized the spelling book as a kind of family heirloom, a utilitarian tool but also a keepsake memorializing the relationship between parent and child at the moment of its dissolution. Once his father left his life for good, Green continued to get his education bit by bit for many years until he was able to read and write. Both the speller and Green's pursuit of

[90] George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, vol. 19 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), 147.

[91] Ibid., 166–167.

literacy can rightly be called testaments to the Green family bond: if the system of slavery would not respect that bond, a spelling book would keep the family values alive in the son.

For white families both poor and wealthy, books were precious possessions, markers of status, and often powerful objects whose mere presence might improve a home and its inhabitants. For those to whom books and the ability to read them were even rarer, they became all the more valuable, and the overlap between literacy and religion all the more conspicuous. In the eighteenth century, evangelist Samuel Davies worried that owning books was as important to enslaved people as obtaining salvation:

> I am told, that in almost every house in my congregation, and in sundry other places, they spend every leisure hour in trying to learn, since they expect Books as soon as they are capable of using them. Some of them, I doubt not, are excited to it by a sincere desire to know the Will of God, and what they shall do to be saved. Others, I am afraid, are actuated by the meaner principles of curiosity.[92]

The banning of literacy made reading more mysterious, and therefore, perhaps, more sacred. For some, simply holding or owning a book became a way of reading it; the Bible, especially, might even be laid on or held to the body in healing rituals, or used for protection of a household.[93] The aforementioned Fannie Moore claimed that the Bible had saved her master from a gunshot:

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[92] Samuel Davies, *Letters from the Rev. Samuel Davies, &c. Shewing the State of Religion in Virginia, particularly among the Negroes*, 2nd ed. (London: R. Pardon, 1757), 17.

[93] See for example Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926). Puckett writes that among "literate Negroes," "superstitions even gather around the seat of learning itself." For example, he notes a "very widespread" belief "that if you . . . sleep with your books under your pillow, you will surely know your lesson" (579). Puckett indicated that black Southerners placed open bibles under their pillows as part of the "counting instinct" method of protection from witches: "While the sacredness of the Bible adds extra power to the charm, the value lies in the fact that the witch must count every letter in the book before taking her midnight gallop. Some Negroes use any ordinary book, or simply throw a newspaper on the floor under the impression that they will awake and find any attempted marauder counting the letters" (165). As Grey Gundaker has noted (and as Puckett himself admits), "Europeans and Euro-Americans also use books and print for many purposes including divination that scholars of literacy and print usually write off as superstition" ("Give Me a Sign: African Americans, Print, and Practice," in *A History of the Book in America, Vol. 2: An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790–1840*, ed. Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010], 656 n. 82). He argues that practices like these receive less attention from scholars of literacy and print "because the same premises that have associated literacy with good citizenship have also marginalized activities involving print that fail to conform to schooled definitions of literacy" (494). It is my contention that these kinds of practices and beliefs should be considered a part of the matrix of activities that constitute literacy.

"Effen he hadn't had a Bible in his pocket de bullet go clear through his heart. But yo' all kno' no bullet ain't goin' through de Bible. No, you can't shoot through God's word."[94] Lula Chambers observed another woman attempting to use the Bible for protection: "I never will forget, I saw a real old darky woman slave down on her knees praying to God for his help. She had a bible in front of her. Course she couldn't read it, but she did know what it was, and she was prayin' out of her very heart, until she drawed the attention of them old Ku Klux and one of 'em just walked in her cabin and lashed her unmerciful."[95] In another example of educational books taking on religious significance, missionary Harriet Ware, observing a funeral, reported that enslaved children were "singing their A, B, C, through and through again, as they stood waiting round the grave for the rest to assemble . . . . Each child had his school-book or picture-book . . . in his hand—another proof that they consider their lessons as in some sort religious exercises."[96]

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[94] Jones, interview with Fannie Moore, 136.

[95] Interview with Lula Chambers, in *Vol. 10, Missouri, Abbot–Younger*, 80. Since the Klan did not exist until the end of 1865, either the attacker was not a member of the KKK, or the woman Chambers saw was no longer legally a slave. Chambers does not specify the year this incident took place.

[96] Harriet Ware, letter of 9 June 1862, in *Letters from Port Royal Written at the Time of the Civil War*, ed. Elizabeth Ware Pearson (Boston: W. B. Clarke, 1906), 65. Pearson includes a poem written by a certain "W. C. G." at Port Royal who observed the same funeral. It includes the following lines (67):

> 'T was at set of sun; a tattered troop
> Of children circled a little grave,
> Chanting an anthem rich in its peace
> As ever pealed in cathedral-nave,—
>
> The A, B, C, that the lips below
> Had learnt with them in the school to shout,
> Over and over they sung it slow,
> Crooning a mystic meaning out.
>
> A, B, C, D, E, F, G,—
> Down solemn alphabets they swept:
> The oaks leaned close, the moss swung low,—
> What strange new sound among them crept?
>
> The holiest hymn that the children knew!
> 'T was dreams come real, and heaven come near;
> 'T was light, and liberty, and joy,
> And "white-folks" sense,—and God right here!

Black religious leaders were known to preach and perform marriages while holding bibles they could not read, sometimes substituting the blue-back speller for the Bible.[97] Practices like these suggested that all books and all reading was in some sense biblical.

The scheduling of educational pursuits may also have contributed to the religious valence of books and reading in enslaved communities. For many black people, Sunday was the day of learning, whether this meant attending Sabbath school or studying a speller during one's extremely limited free time. Missionaries set up schools that taught literacy on Sundays, when the greatest number of slaves were released from labor.[98] For many Christians today, Sunday activities still carry spiritual significance; for enslaved Christians in the nineteenth century, the significance of these activities was heightened by the strains of slavery, which placed extraordinary limits on time for socializing with family and friends, personal hobbies and chores, and even relaxation and sleep. Some, like Peter Randolph, turned the opportunity to attend church into study: "I used to go to church to hear the white preacher. When I heard him read his text, I would read mine when I got home. This is the way . . . I learned to read the Word of God when I was a slave."[99] There was often no distinction between religious and non-religious study. Noah Davis recalled learning to read from his father, who taught both his own children and neighboring servants "out of a New Testament," "on those Sabbaths when we remained at

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Over and over; they dimly felt
This was the charm could make black white,
This was the secret of "Massa's" pride,
And this, unknown, made the negro's night.

[97] See for example Samuel S. Taylor, interview with Amanda Ross, in *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6, Quinn–Tuttle*, 83: "They married in that time by standing up and letting someone read the ceremony to them. My master was a Christian. There wasn't no jumpin' over a broomstick on my master's place. The white folks didn't have no nigger preacher for their churches. But the colored folks had 'em. They preached out of these little old Blue Back Spellers—leastways they was little blue back books anyhow."

[98] See Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 37–38, 113–114.

[99] Peter Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life: Or, Illustrations of the 'Peculiar Institution'* (Boston: 1855), 15.

home": "I fancy I can see him now, sitting under a bush arbor. Reading out of that precious book to many attentive hearers around him."[100] Others used their free time on Sundays to earn money to buy books; George Thompson, as we saw above, gathered his ginseng on Sundays.

Thompson's commitment to his education, in spite of the obstacles and harsh consequences he faced (he was whipped on three occasions after being caught with books), is a testament to his personal strength, but also, potentially, to the values of his community. When Jenny Proctor explained how she learned to read, she used the communal "we": "we slips around and gits hold of dat Webster's old blue back speller and we hides it 'til was in de night and den we lights a little pine torch, and studies dat spellin' book. We learn it too. I can read some now and write a little too."[101] Books became centerpieces in slaves' homes and communities, perhaps, as a way of maintaining religious study and self-improvement as central cultural values even though most members of the community were prohibited from practicing what they preached. Whites could try to prevent enslaved people from learning to read and write, but they could not keep them from teaching each other to prize education. The presence of books, even if no one could read them, was a reminder that the world of slavery was not the only world that could be.

THY WORDS WERE FOUND, AND I DID EAT THEM: REDEFINING BIBLICAL LITERACY

Just as reverence for books and learning could help enslaved communities maintain education as a cultural value, the development of religious definitions of literacy could allow those in bondage

[100] Noah Davis, *A Narrative of the Life of Rev. Noah Davis, a Colored Man, Written By Himself, at the Age of Fifty-Four* (Baltimore: John F. Weishampel, 1859), 10.

[101] Interview with Jenny Proctor, *Vol. 16, Texas, Part 3, Lewis–Ryles*, 213. An extant letter from a Virginia slave to the bishop of London from 1723 provides further evidence that enslaved people were frequently studying together and sharing their knowledge of letters. According to Thomas N. Ingersoll, the author appears to have had help from other slaves in composing the letter, as evinced by the use of both the singular and plural forms of the first person, echoed in Proctor's words above. The letter and Ingersoll's analysis are from "'Releese us out of this Cruell Bondegg': An Appeal from Virginia in 1723," *William and Mary Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (October, 1994): 777–782.

to read even if they could not reach academic standards of literacy.[102] These alternative forms of reading and writing are easily overlooked if literacy is defined too narrowly or considered exclusively in terms of overt resistance. Too frequently, scholars of the slave experience, taking their cues from classic narratives like those of Frederick Douglass and Olaudah Equiano, have seemed to equate the move from slavery to freedom with the transformation from illiteracy to literacy, or a predominantly bodily existence to a life of the mind. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., for instance, has written that "sheer literacy . . . was the very commodity that separated animal from human being, slave from citizen, object from subject."[103] Gates accurately sums up the view of many nineteenth-century Americans: slaveholders certainly held black people to these hegemonic, Enlightenment-influenced standards of literacy and humanity (indeed, proslavery ideology to a large degree made Enlightenment standards hegemonic), and used their failure to meet these standards—a failure ordained by legal and social measures to prevent the education of enslaved persons—to justify their enslavement. According to Lindon Barrett, the dominant ethos of slavery defined black identity exclusively in terms of the body, and defined bodies exclusively as objects:

> African Americans who are forced to live illiterate lives, who are forcibly identified with the limited sphere of the body, are in as manifest a fashion as possible seemingly restricted to being objects of thought and never its subjects. . . . Literacy provides manifest testimony of the mind's ability to extend itself beyond the constricted limits and conditions of the body. To restrict African Americans to lives without literacy is seemingly to immure them in bodily existences having little or nothing to do with the life of the mind and its

[102] It was only in the early nineteenth century that literacy education moved outside the home and into schools where it could be standardized and defined in ways that included certain practices and people and excluded others. The association of literacy with good citizenship, economic well-being, and intellectual potential was not universal or inevitable, and was in part a racial project. See Gerald F. Moran and Maris A. Vinovskis, "Schools," in *A History of the Book in America, Vol. 2: An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790–1840*, ed. Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010], 286–303.

[103] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the Racial Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 24–25.

> representation. Conversely, to enter into literacy is to gain important skills for extending oneself beyond the condition and geography of the body.[104]

Some literate former slaves, like Douglass and Equiano, offered their own capacity to achieve this form of "academic" literacy as a key proof of slavery's injustice. They sought to demonstrate the degree to which black illiteracy was forced rather than natural in order to counter the claim that slavery was the natural condition of African people by exposing the circular reasoning—the "imperative of illiteracy," as Allen Dwight Callahan has called it—that justified the system.[105] This does not mean, however, that they or other slaves and former slaves agreed that to be illiterate was to be inhuman or unworthy of freedom. Over-reliance on autobiographies by escaped and former slaves, which frequently centralize the move from illiteracy to literacy in part to authenticate the first-person narrative, has perhaps led scholars to unintentionally reproduce the slaveholding logic that literacy is the predecessor to self-consciousness, subjectivity, and interiority.

However, evidence from slaves and former slaves (including Douglass and Equiano) dispels the notion that existence without literacy is merely bodily, or that reading and writing are purely intellectual experiences.[106] Indeed, the testimonies of black readers demonstrate what is true for all people: that the intellectual and the physical are not discrete categories.

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[104] Lindon Barrett, "African American Slave Narratives: Literacy, the Body, Authority," *American Literary History* 7.3 (1995): 419.

[105] Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 13.

[106] Douglass goes to considerable lengths in his autobiographies to disrupt the ethnographic link between white blood and literacy which racists could use to explain his achievements as a speaker and writer. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he attributes his literacy "not to my admitted Anglo-Saxon paternity, but to the native genius of my sable, unprotected, and uncultivated mother—a woman, who belonged to a race whose mental endowments it is, at present, fashionable to hold in disparagement and contempt" ([New York: 25 Park Row, 1833], 58). In insisting on this point, Douglass not only reverses a prevailing racial assumption, but also demonstrates that his mother's life of physical labor was not, ultimately, antithetical to literacy, though he does regard her ability to read as somewhat mysterious, almost miraculous: "How she acquired this knowledge, I know not, for Tuckahoe is the last place in the world where she would be apt to find facilities for learning. . . . That a 'field hand' should learn to read, in any slave state, is remarkable, but the achievement of my mother, considering the place, was extraordinary" (ibid.).

Understanding literacy as something which somehow transcends the body and inaugurates the mind fails to help us understand the many slaves who claimed to be able read and write without ever having learned to do so; who were only able to read and write some of the time; who could only read or recognize certain words and phrases in certain books; who memorized large portions of text; who used and cherished books they could not read; and who claimed to have words inscribed in and on their own bodies. Many slaves who did not pursue or never attained literacy according to the conventional definition were nevertheless said to read and write, and developed distinctively bodily and religious ways of doing so.

This tendency of scholars to equate an "academic" literacy with humanity is evident in the trope of the "talking book," which might more fittingly be called the "silent book." This persistent image in slave narratives was identified by Gates as the beginning of an African-American literary tradition. The earliest known example is from James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw's 1774 *Narrative*:

> [My master] used to read prayers in public to the ships [*sic*] crew every Sabbath day; and when I first saw him read, I was never so surprised in my whole life as when I saw the book talk to my master; for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips. I wished it would do so to me. . . . I follow'd him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I open'd it and put my ear down close upon it, in great hope that it would say something to me but was very sorry and greatly disappointed when I found it would not speak.[107]

Gates argues that Gronniosaw and subsequently several other black authors "used the same metaphor as a crucial scene of instruction to dramatize the authors' own road to literacy, initially, and to authorship, ultimately."[108] He interprets the trope as representing a desire for literacy, and

[107] James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Written by Himself*, 2nd ed. (Newport, RI: S. Southwick, 1774), 22.

[108] Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay, "From Phillis Wheatley to Toni Morrison: The Flowering of African-American Literature," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 14 (Winter 1996–1997): 96.

the book's silence as a tragic representation of the suffering that defines a racial identity and its literary tradition. In his analysis of Equiano's use of the trope, Gates explains how illiteracy and objectification mutually reinforce one another: "When Equiano, the object, attempts to speak to the book, there follows only the deafening silence that obtains between two lifeless objects. Only a subject can speak. Two mirrors can only reflect each other." Literacy, Gates writes, transforms Equiano into a living being: "Through the act of writing alone, Equiano announces and preserves his newly found status as a subject. . . . If once he too was an object, like a watch, a portrait, or a book, now he has endowed himself with the ultimate sign of subjectivity in his master's culture."[109] Callahan, citing Gates's analysis, also interprets the image of the talking book as representing a longing for the "academic" literacy through which enslaved people might overcome an otherwise insurmountable obstacle between them and the Bible: "African Americans confronted the Bible as a book both opened and closed. As the Word of God it spoke to them, but as a written text it greeted its illiterate black readers with silence."[110] Perhaps because the very existence of these autobiographical texts necessitates the attainment of freedom, Gates seems to elide the move from illiteracy to literacy to authorship with the move from

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[109] Henry Louis Gates, "The Trope of the Talking Book," in *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 170. Though Gates consistently reminds us that these encounters between black authors and text occur in the context of "the language of the master" and "his master's culture," I find disturbing the degree to which he assumes that the objectification of these men was effective and complete. That is, Gates seems to argue here, based solely on the trope of the talking book, that Equiano was really made a "lifeless object" by slavery. While the psychological effects of being treated like an inhuman object were no doubt profound, I do not believe that Equiano's mere use of the trope can be used to argue that he lacked all subjectivity prior to literacy.

Gates also fails to take into account the possible religious dimension of Equiano's desire for literacy. Although *The Signifying Monkey* is particularly interested in the themes of presence and absence, Gates does not consider the portrait of Equiano included as a frontispiece with his *Interesting Narrative*, in which Equiano holds an open Bible inscribed "ACTS Chap. IV V. 12." This verse reads, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." While this evocative clue can be interpreted in a variety of ways, Lynn A. Casmier-Paz notes that "name" here is an elusive referent, and that the citation of Acts appears directly above Equiano's name in the frontispiece. This, she suggests, imparts to the writing of former slaves a power similar to scripture: "the open chapter and verse assert that salvation is an effect of 'the name'—Jesus/Equiano—and the slave narrative/Bible is a threshold through which readers enter for salvation" ("Slave Narratives and the Rhetoric of Author Portraiture," *New Literary History* 34, no. 1 [Winter 2003]: 96).

[110] Callahan, *The Talking Book*, 13.

enslaved object to politically conscious subject: "literacy," he argues, "stood as the ultimate parameter by which to measure the humanity of authors struggling to define an African self in Western letters. It was to establish a collective black voice through the sublime example of the individual text . . . that most clearly motivated black writers."[111]

But as Srivinas Aravamudan has argued, "slaves were already political and psychological subjects of the human community despite their master's treatment of them as chattel and commodity, and continued to be subjects both before and after they were coerced into the Middle Passage and the work of the plantation."[112] Western "academic" literacy was not a prerequisite for political consciousness, racial identity, or, for that matter, knowledge of biblical truth. An equally compelling explanation for the trope of the talking book is that it represents not a desire for literacy itself, per se, but rather for the Bible, the specific book with which these authors or their characters attempt to talk. As Tiya Miles and Tara Bynum have convincingly argued, the black authors who took up the trope of the talking book were often more concerned with the transformation from nonbeliever to Christian than from illiteracy to literacy.[113] The autobiography of free black preacher John Marrant, for instance, is a classic example of the captivity narrative genre popular among American Protestants; in his version of the talking book

[111] Gates, "The Trope of the Talking Book," 144. The appearance of the talking book trope in several of these early narratives by black authors no doubt marks a significant and potentially foundational pattern in African-American literature, at least insofar as it seems to represent black writers referencing one another's work. However, the image of talking books is not exclusive to African Americans; Cherokee, for instance, used the same image (see ch. 2), and while they may have picked it up from black slaves, the metaphor may also be common among oral people who encounter books and reading.

[112] Srivinas Aravamudan, *Troicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 271.

[113] See Tiya Miles, "'His Kingdom for a Kiss': Indians and Intimacy in the Narrative of John Marrant," in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 163–188; and Tara Bynum, "A Silent Book, Some Kisses, and John Marrant's *Narrative*," *Criticism* 57, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 71–90.

trope, it is an Indian princess who attempts to speak to the Bible.[114] Marrant's use of the talking book image "offers no white man to act as the master in possession of the book learning that grants him the power to hear and read the Word. Instead, Marrant, a free black man from Charleston, reads from the Bible." While Gates "imagines literacy as the ability, based on knowledge of the alphabet and phonetics, to read a book," Marrant depicts "a religious literacy" constituted by "a true believer's ability to read, understand, and hear the Word properly."[115] Callahan rightly points out that "slaves were not content with illiterate worship in a religion of the Book," but this is not tantamount to a desire for "academic" literacy; as we will see, enslaved people developed solutions to this problem that not only did not depend on attaining academic literacy, but which in some cases they deemed superior to mere "academic" literacy.[116]

Indeed, as Callahan himself has noted, "for many slaves biblical literacy began with spontaneous aural memorization and oral recall."[117] As Robert Q. Mallard, son-in-law of Charles Colcock Jones, put it, "To those who are ignorant of letters, *their memory is their book.*" Mallard recalled being "forcibly struck" by his enslaved students' ability to remember "*passages of scripture*," and noted that "those questions which turned upon and called for passages of Scripture, the scholars answered more readily than any other."[118] Another missionary, S. G. Whiton, was impressed by the "remarkable" ability of one his students to "repeat a great many

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[114] John Marrant, *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black*, 4th ed. (London: Gilbert and Plummer, 1785), 25–26. See Miles, "'His Kingdom for a Kiss,'" 177.

[115] Bynum, "A Silent Book," 76.

[116] Callahan, *The Talking Book*, 12.

[117] Ibid., 11. Walter J. Ong notes that the Bible is particularly suited to this form of recall, as it is "indeed a text but one preserving recognizable oral patterning" (*Orality and Literacy* [London and New York: Routledge, 2002], 36). He cites by way of example the "nine introductory 'ands'" of Gen. 1:1–5 (in translations which keep close to the Hebrew original): "And the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God moved over the waters. And God said: Be light made. And light was made," etc. This additive translation reveals the residue of what was originally "orally based thought and expression," designed for oral rather than literate forms of memorization and recall (36). Slaves' ability to memorize scripture they had only heard, rather than read, amazed many white observers, but it may have seemed a more natural method to slaves, whose culture was, due to both American oppression and West African tradition, largely oral.

[118] Robert Q. Mallard, *Plantation Life Before Emancipation* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1892), 118.

chapters entire" from the Bible: "This morning, among others, he repeated the first chapter of Matthew, hardly making a single mistake in that long list of genealogies."[119] Enslaved preachers combined memorized Bible verses with improvised speech mimicking what they heard in sermons by white preachers. Although "not a slave on [his] place could read a word from the Bible," Jefferson Franklin Henry reported that "some few could repeat a verse or two they had cotch from the white folks and them that was smart enough made up a heap of verses that went 'long with the ones they larned by heart."[120] Many slaves who witnessed this kind of performance considered it a form of reading, though they distinguished it from the kind of reading performed by white preachers. Rachel Adams, for instance, knew several enslaved people who could "read de Bible by heart": "Once I heard a man preach what didn't know how to read one word in de Bible, and he didn't even have no Bible yit."[121] Enslaved preachers who knew the Bible "by heart"—who could preach without needing to read—were often preferable to traditionally literate preachers. Elder Green, who became a Baptist preacher after learning to read the Bible, gained renown "all over the South, West, and as far North as Kansas" for his ability to preach without the aid of a text. Though Green orients much of his story around his pursuit of literacy, he deliberately sidelines his reading abilities in order to legitimize his preaching, which was more godly because he "just went running without parse of script and. . . was filled with the Holy Ghost."[122]

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[119] *American Missionary* 10 (September, 1866): 197.

[120] Sadie B. Hornsby, interview with Jefferson Franklin Henry, in *Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey–Jones*, 185. Henry placed this form of preaching within a larger framework of communal memory: "They never had larnt to read the songs they sung at funerals and meetin'. Them songs was handed down from one generation to another, and, far as they knowed, never was writ down" (185).

[121] Sadie B. Hornsby, interview with Rachel Adams, in *Vol. 4, Arkansas, Part 1, Adams–Furr*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn041/, 5.

[122] Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 19, 168.

By combining the physical accoutrement of literacy with skills in memorization, some in bondage were able to perform even more complex versions of reading. A clergyman at a night school for free blacks in North Carolina told of a "fugitive from slavery" who

> carried a big Bible about with her through the woods and swamps,—"toted it around," as she says herself, 500 miles and more. She couldn't read, but she had got her old mistress to turn down the leaves at the verses she knew by heart, and often she would sit down in the woods and open the big Bible at these verses, and repeat them aloud, and find strength and consolation.[123]

Another woman learned to spell and recognize the name "Jesus":

> After that it was a favorite employment with her to take the Bible and search for the name that was so precious to her. She had no idea in what parts of the Bible it was to be found; and so, opening it anywhere, she would travel with her finger along line after line, and page after page, through the wilderness of words that were all unintelligible signs to her, till she found the name of which she was in quest.
>
> "And, oh!" she said, in narrating her experience, "how dat name started up like a light in de dark, and I thought, 'Dere's de name of my Jesus!"[124]

In these two examples, women who would be considered academically illiterate combined the physical equipment of literacy (books) with quasi-literate acts in order to participate in beneficial forms of religious reading. These alternative forms of reading seem to have produced results as efficacious as "real" Bible-reading. One woman took considerable risk by weighing herself down with a large Bible and by stopping to "read" it during her escape. However, in spite of her being unschooled, her version of reading still worked as a temporary respite from the outer world of danger and oppression, which she momentarily traded for an inner world of relative safety and comfort. The other woman was, from one point of view, an even better reader of the Bible because of her imperfect literacy: no doubt she took more notice of—and delight in—the name

[123] David Macrae, *The Americans at Home: Pen-and-Ink Sketches of American Men, Manners, and Institutions,* vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1870), 229–230.

[124] Ibid., 113.

of Jesus compared to many other Christians, precisely because "Jesus" was the only word she could read.

These forms of reading were often looked at curiously by whites, even when they were hardly distinguishable from conventional literacy. Mary Mann-Page Newton, the daughter of a slaveholder, described the memory-aided reading of her slave, Aunt Deborah:

> We handed her an open Bible, and the delighted old woman, with the book upside down, mumbled over and over again, "In meh father's house dar's many mansions." Then, when encouraged to read more, she began to move up and down, swaying from side to side, shouting fashion, her beaming black face bent over the book, and half said, half chanted, "I thank de Lord, he took meh feet out 'n de miry cla, long wid Mary, Shadrach, an' Bednego." She evidently thought that she was reading.[125]

Aunt Deborah's version of reading is a combination of physical performance and mental recall. She holds the book in her lap and bends over it (and dons a pair of spectacles), but ultimately she chants, shouts, and sort of dances, so that she simultaneously takes the posture of inwardly oriented literate study and outwardly oriented oral performance. Though Newton seems to regard Aunt Deborah's version of reading as humorous, it comes remarkably close to the "real" thing: many people in Aunt Deborah's time (as in our own) read the Bible as a collection of familiar verses, some of which they could recite by heart, nonetheless turning most often to the ones they knew best. Furthermore, the chanting of particular phrases in the Bible has been a feature of Christian practice ever since bibles have been read (the Lord's Prayer being one obvious example). Aunt Deborah is biblically literate in precisely the manner Christian education demands: she is able to cite and recite the text from memory. As important as the Bible-as-object was in the nineteenth century, biblical literacy has often surpassed the use of a text. Scripture

[125] Mary Mann-Page Newton, "Aunt Deborah Goes Visiting: A Sketch from Virginian Life," in *The Journal of American Folklore, Vol. IV, No. XIV*, ed. William Wells Newell (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1891), 356.

itself says that knowing the Word can mean having it in your heart. Why shouldn't Aunt Deborah think she is reading?

This sense, widely shared by American Christians, that knowing the Bible was something beyond the mere ability to read the words on the page led some enslaved people to develop religious forms of reading that were more authoritative because they were aided by God or the Holy Spirit. In his autobiography, John Jea, a freed slave who worked internationally as a preacher, used the talking book trope to set up a detailed story of his experience of miraculous biblical literacy, which he distinguishes explicitly from conventional literacy. Jea explains that it was his master who "took the bible and showed it to me, and said that the book talked with him." His master's sons, too, attempt to trick Jea, who wonders "how they could take that blessed book into their hands, and to be so superstitious as to want to make me believe that the book did talk with them; so that every opportunity when they were out of the way, I took the book and held it up to my ears, to try whether the book would talk with me or not." Jea, who has already converted to Christianity, "could not hear it speak one word, which caused me to grieve and lament, that after God had done so much for me as he had in pardoning my sins, and blotting gout my iniquities and transgressions, and making me a new creature, the book would not talk with me." Jea prays for six weeks for "the Lord to give me the knowledge of his word, that I might be enabled to understand it in its pure light, and be able to speak it in the Dutch and English languages" (Jea lived in Dutch New York).[126] When Jea is finally given the ability to read, it is not an instantaneous gift; rather, an angel comes to instruct him:

> the Lord was pleased in his infinite mercy, to send an angel, in a vision,. . . with a large bible in his hands, and brought it unto me, and said, "I am come to bless thee, and to grant thee thy request," as you read in the Scriptures. Thus my eyes were opened at the end of six weeks, while I was praying, in the place where I

[126] John Jea, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher. Compiled and Written by Himself* (self-published, c. 1811), https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jeajohn/jeajohn.html, 33–34.

> slept; although the place was as dark as a dungeon, I awoke, as the Scripture saith, and found it illuminated with the light of the glory of God, and the angel standing by me, with the large book open, which was the Holy Bible, and said unto me, "Thou hast desired to read and understand this book, and to speak the language of it both in English and in Dutch; I will therefore teach thee, and now read;" and then he taught me to read the first chapter of the gospel according to St. John; and when I had read the whole chapter, the angel and the book were both gone in the twinkling of an eye.[127]

Noting that Jea uses the language of Peter's jailbreak in Acts 12, Callahan explains that he is "rescued from a dark prison by an angel, and miraculously liberated from illiteracy."[128] But Jea is explicitly not liberated from a general illiteracy, only from his inability to read the Bible, which is the only thing he asks to be able to read: "From that hour, in which the Lord taught me to read," he claims, "I have not been able to read in any book, nor any reading whatever, but such as contain the word of God."[129] Jea's inability to read other kinds of text is not a deficiency, but rather a part of the miracle. Ministers and magistrates throughout New York test his claim that "the Lord had taught me to read in one night, in about fifteen minutes"; several times they "brought forth spelling and other books, to see if I could read them, or whether I could spell, but they found to their great surprise that I could not read other books, neither could I spell a word; then they said, it was the work of the Lord, and a very great miracle indeed."[130]

The belief that God or his emissaries could teach the illiterate to read the Bible was apparently somewhat common among slaves. Several claimed that God taught them to read certain texts or inscribed words directly on their hearts or tongues and allowed them to preach as though they had studied the Bible all their lives. One missionary recorded the following words of a fugitive woman behind Union lines:

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[127] Ibid., 35.
[128] Callahan, *The Talking Book*, 15.
[129] Ibid., 38.
[130] Ibid., 37.

> "Oh! I don't know nothing! I can't read a word. But, oh! I read Jesus in my heart, just as you read him in de book"; and drawing her forefingers across the other palm, as if tracing a line: "I read and read him here in my heart just as you read him in de Bible. O,. . . my God! I got Him! I hold him here all de time! He stay with me!"[131]

Another missionary, Susan H. Clark, who worked with recently freed people at Fortress Monroe, also noted this image of text on the heart:

> The Bible being so long a sealed book to them, they believed that God revealed everything that pertained to their salvation, without reference to the Bible or its teaching. They think no one should read the Bible until after conversion—that it is *then* a guide. Some say it is written on their hearts, and that is all they want.[132]

One ex-slave recalled an illiterate uncle who "had a good memory. After hearing scripture read he could stand and preach for over an hour, and every word seemed to find lodgment in some heart":

> My uncle couldn't read, so Miss X. just read off a little scripture to him, and he would stand up before us and preach away for an hour or more. I didn't know then how he could do it, but I know now. He was full of the spirit, and the words come to him from on high.[133]

Another illiterate ex-slave who was allowed to give spontaneous sermons to his master said that he could "tell anyone about God in the darkest hour of midnight, for it is written on my heart."[134] "I had never known anything about the Bible," another reported, "but it was revealed to me. I was taught how to pray by the Lord."[135] George Briggs adjured his interviewer to "consider all dat you hear me arguing and saying is from a gift and not from edication. Romans 6, 'lows: 'Speak plain words, not round words, kaise all de round words is fer dem dat is edicated.'"[136]

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[131] French, excerpt from *The Beauty of Holiness*, 138.
[132] *American Missionary* 7 (April, 1863): 81.
[133] "Autobiography II: A Preacher from a God-fearing Plantation," in *God Struck Me Dead*, 68.
[134] Ibid., 18.
[135] Ibid., 109–110.
[136] Caldwell Sims, interview with George Briggs, in *Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 1, Abrams–Durant*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.141, 84.

This widespread belief that God could give the unlettered the words to preach with authority was one means by which slaves dealt with masters who forbade them from learning to read or accessing books: even those who were kept from reading the Bible could develop personal interpretations of scripture and instruct others, even their masters. What's more, according to the evangelical faith of many slaves, these unschooled, miraculous sermons were all the more true because they were the product of the Holy Spirit rather than academic training. We miss this point if we fail to distinguish between biblical literacy and literacy conventionally understood.

However, God's help in the area of literacy was not always restricted to the Bible; he was sometimes said to guide secular instruction as well. When the illiterate W. E. Northcross felt called to preach, he prayed "night and day" that he might learn to read. God provided for him in the form of a blue-back speller and teacher, and even protected him when his master discovered his plan: "his heart had been touched by Divine power, and he simply told me that he heard that I had a book, and if I was caught with it I would be hung."[137] God also helped illiterate elder slaves to participate in the instruction of the young. Dellie Lewis told the following story of her grandmother:

> Us house servants was taught to read by de white folks, but my gran'-mammy, Alvain Hunter, dat didn't have no learnin' but dat knowed de Bible backards an' farwards, made us study. When me an' my brother was learnin' outen de Blue Back Speller she say:
>
> "How's dat? Go ober it."
>
> Den we would laugh an' answer, "How you know? You can't read."
>
> "Jus' don't soun' raght. De Law tell me when its raght. You-all can't fool me so don't try."[138]

[137] W. E. Northcross, "Autobiography of Reverend W. E. Northcross," in *Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons–Young*, 300–301.

[138] Mary A. Poole, "Dellie Lewis knows cures and 'cunjer'," in *Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons–Young*, Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, accessed October 24, 2017, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.010, 257.

Hunter's religious version of literacy gives her the authority not only to make her grandchildren study, but to guide their study in spite of her own lack of schooling. These anecdotes depict a God who rejects racism and slavery by intervening in black lives to correct the injustice of their having been kept from religion and education.[139] Not only did religious forms of literacy provide black people with alternative ways of reading and writing, it also confirmed that slaveholders were wrong to restrict their education and that God himself would intervene to correct the problem. Through religious definitions of reading, enslaved people doubled down on white fears about literate chattel by confirming that literacy was indeed powerful, and furthermore that there was nothing anyone could do to prevent slaves from getting what God willed they should have.

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The religious life and thought of enslaved people has never been studied independently of the conditions and effects of slavery. Such a project would likely prove impossible and pointless. It is because of slavery that "slave religion" exists as a category of study in the first place. Nonetheless, it may still behoove historians to consider what such a study might look like, and to examine why we consider enslavement to be such a totalizing identity.[140] After all, we can and often do study the religion of antebellum white Americans without paying particular attention to

[139] Rebecca Cox Jackson, whose education options were also limited as a free black woman in Philadelphia in 1857, learned to read as an adult after being taught by God through prayer. While working as a dressmaker, she heard a voice in her mind ask, "Who learned the first man on earth?" When she answered that it was God, the voice replied, "He is unchangeable, and if He learned the first man to read, He can learn you." Immediately, Jackson tells us, "I laid down my dress, picked up my Bible, ran upstairs, opened it, and kneeled down with it pressed to my breast, prayed earnestly to Almighty God if it was consisting to His holy will, to learn me to read His holy word. And when I looked on the word, I began to read." She eventually worked her way through the entire Bible in this manner of praying and reading, "until," she writes, "I could read anywhere" (Rebecca Jackson, *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*, ed. Jean McMahon Humez [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981], 108).

[140] Frederick Douglass gave voice to the traumatic and transformative effects of enslavement when he described himself as "broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed . . . . [T]he dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!" (*Narrative*, 63). This self-definition as "brute," however, clearly did not imply either a lasting or a complete transformation, as Douglass's conduct continued to be marked by a famously indomitable humanity.

their status as "free people," or as people more likely to enslave rather than be enslaved. It feels wrong not to acknowledge the profound trauma slavery inflicted on black people (though scholars generally have the option of ignoring its effect on white people); but when does our duty to take this trauma into account become overly determinative? At what point do we risk reproducing the logic of the system, which confused its deliberate efforts to dehumanize with actual inhumanity? It is impossible that enslavement had no effect on the identities of the enslaved, and enslaved people became subjects of interest to scholars precisely because their circumstances were unique in human history. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that although enslavement universally had an effect on people in bondage, the effect itself was never universal. Slaveholders may have believed that the human beings they owned were just property; they may have designed the "peculiar institution" to be as convincing in that regard as possible. But we must not confuse the intended effect with the actual outcome.

It is because slavery did not work perfectly that slaveholders were so threatened by black literacy. As Heather Andrea Williams explains,

> masters made every attempt to control their captives' thoughts and imaginations, indeed their hearts and minds. Maintaining a system of bondage in the Age of Enlightenment depended upon the master's being able to speak for the slave, to deny his or her humanity, and to draw a line between slave consciousness and human will. The presence of literate slaves threatened to give lie to the entire system. Reading indicated to the world that this so-called property had a mind, and writing foretold the ability to construct an alternative narrative about bondage itself.[141]

This argument helps illustrate why some enslaved people were so attracted to literacy that they employed industrious, unconventional, and often dangerous methods of obtaining conventional literacy, while others redefined literacy in unconventional, often religiously inflected ways that could not be closed off by such things as laws, harsh masters, and manipulative preachers; why

[141] Williams, *Self-Taught*, 7.

Scottish geologist Charles Lyell wrote of a visit to a Georgia plantation where the planters had "permitted the distribution of Bibles among their slaves" that "it was curious to remark that they who were unable to read were as anxious to possess them as those who could."[142] First, literacy suggested that the form of slavery masters needed and wanted was not and never had been possible, that no human being could be instrumentalized to the degree that the system of slavery demanded if it was to be indefinitely maintained. Second, even if, as Douglass argued, nothing short of abolition would compensate for the injustice of slavery (and even then, maybe not), literacy at least allowed enslaved people to imagine alternatives to that condition, and to resist its dehumanizing forces. At the same time, the severity of American racial slavery rendered almost any human act an act of resistance. It is thus impossible not to read the literate actions of enslaved people as a form of resistance, but at the same time necessary to try to see them in other human contexts. Just because slaveholders were threatened by literacy does not mean that it was attractive to slaves only or even primarily because of its potentially liberating aspects. The educational endeavors of enslaved people indeed prove that the dehumanization slavery sought to accomplish may have been much more successful in the white imaginary than in the black.

The believer and the Bible contain multitudes; meaning is located somewhere between them. Perhaps Douglass's resistance to the bibles-for-slaves initiative owed something to his reluctance to valorize the text too much as a stable source of meaning. He had, after all, seen it used to subjugate as well as liberate black people; the authority even of the Bible depended on how the reader used it. But like the text, readers too are irreducible. Meaning is not found primarily in their circumstances, but rather in what they do with them. In the context of slavery, the standards of "academic" literacy were not only cruelly inflexible but failed to capture the true

[142] Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Bros., 1849), 271.

value of reading. Touching books, reciting memorized passages, preaching extemporaneously, recognizing the name of Jesus—enslaved people counted these as literacy, perhaps, because that was a compassionate response to the limitations imposed by slavery. This same compassion they ascribed to their God:

> I profess to know nothing about the world nor its ways. I can't read a line either of the scriptures or any other kind of writing, but I do know this: Whenever the truth from heaven is read before me I can talk to the Father. . . . I may not speak the words just like they are in his printed book, but I am right anyhow and know it. I often wish I did know how to read, but since I didn't have the chance to learn—being fearsome to be seen with a book when I was a slave—God has seen my need and made me satisfied. He has taken me, a fool—for sometimes my head was beat so I thought I was foolish—and hidden with me the secret of eternal life.[143]

[143] "Autobiography VI: Slavery Was Hell without Fires," in *God Struck Me Dead*, 156.

CHAPTER TWO

THE "GREAT BOOK" IN THE CHEROKEE NATION

As a result of the United States government's civilization programs and the efforts of both conservative and assimilationist Cherokee, the early nineteenth century saw profound and rapid change in the Cherokee Nation in many areas, including literacy, property ownership, government organization, farming practices, and gender roles. Although this cultural transformation earned the Cherokees their widespread reputation as "the most civilized tribe in America," the progress of "civilized" religion in the Nation was comparatively slow and modest.[1] In looking at the Bible among Southeast Indians, it is important to note how little headway missionaries ever made in spreading Christianity and its cultural norms. In an 1830 interdenominational resolution to defend the Cherokee in the struggle against removal, missionaries' own inflated numbers (which included resident whites and enslaved blacks) contradicted their claims to great progress in their Christianization efforts.[2] They listed the total of number of church members between all the denominations represented by missionaries in the Cherokee Nation, after more than thirty years of evangelism, as 1,152, less than seven percent of the population.[3] James Price Evans, who lived among conservative Cherokee for two years,

[1] See for example Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004), 381.

[2] Daniel S. Butrick, et al., "Cherokees" [letter to the editor], *Cherokee Phoenix*, January 1, 1831, https://www.wcu.edu/library/DigitalCollections/CherokeePhoenix/Vol3/no32/cherokee-phoenix-page-2-column-3a-page-3-column-5b.html (accessed January 8, 2019).

[3] Ibid. This percentage is based on the 1835 census which listed 16,542 Cherokee living in Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina to be removed to Oklahoma according to the Treaty of New Echota (1835 Census of Cherokees Living East of the Mississippi River [Henderson Roll], cited in Jerry Clark, *Eastern Cherokee Census Rolls, 1835–1884* [Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 2005], 4). Many put the number of Cherokee ultimately removed at closer to 20,000 or 22,000. William G. McLoughlin estimates that by the late 1830s "nine-tenths of the Cherokees continued to remain outside the Christian fold" (*Champions of the Cherokees: Evan and John B. Jones* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014], 155. These estimates align closely with the numbers reported by the various denominations proselytizing in the Nation: William W. Crouch found that Methodists claimed 736 Cherokee members in 1829, the ABCFM (Presbyterians) claimed 262 Cherokee members in 1833, and the Baptists claimed 232 Cherokee members in 1836 ("Missionary Activities among the Cherokee" (master's thesis, University of Tennessee, 1932), 96–99, 107, 111–112, 130, 144, 153, 155–156, cited in

noted that in spite of the upheavals of acculturation and population loss, many communities "cling to their old customs as much as possible, and on many occasions, exhibit the original character of the tribe" by, for instance, continuing to observe the Green Corn Ceremony.[4] The missionaries themselves admitted as much in their resolution, when they wrote that "conjuring . . . is still, to a considerable extent, practiced by the old, and believed in by the less enlightened even of the young."[5] William McLoughlin has shown that the Cherokee revived their traditional religion several times between 1789 and 1839—for instance, in the Ghost Dance movement of 1811–1812, a period of intense prophesying in response to the looming war between England and the United States, among other anxieties.[6] Of those few Cherokee who joined churches in the decades before the Trail of Tears, as many as half ultimately left voluntarily or were expelled, most often for intemperance or adultery.[7]

But conversion and church membership are not the only measures of the Bible's significance in the Cherokee Nation. True, few Cherokee embraced the Bible in the antebellum era. They did not develop widely shared biblical interpretations or Christian practices as compared with, for instance, black slaves.[8] However, the pressure to become biblically literate

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Carolyn Ross Johnston, *Cherokee Women in Crisis: Trail of Tears, Civil War, and Allotment, 1838–1907* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 41.

[4] James Price Evans, report, John Howard Payne Papers, vol. 6, Ayer Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago, IL: 201–202.

[5] Butrick, et al., "Cherokees" [letter to the editor].

[6] William G. McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renascence in the New Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), esp. ch. 8. McLoughlin argues that the Ghost Dance revival emerged in part in response to the "growing gap between the three hundred or so families who were prospering most through acculturation and the two thousand or more families who were still struggling to make ends meet each year" (169). See also Michelene E. Pesantubbee, "When the Earth Shakes: The Cherokee Prophecies of 1811–12," *American Indian Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 301–317.

[7] See Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787–1862* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 61–63. Berkhofer notes that "frequently when one person was disciplined, many of his relatives left the church in umbrage" (62).

[8] In fact, missionaries in the Cherokee Nation were often frustrated to find that the only people interested in attending their church services and Sunday schools were local slaves, who, for various reasons, "did not meet the high standards the Moravians set for Christian conversion":

> Though often fervent in prayer, song, and profession of belief, they were inconsistent in religious attendance and Christian deportment . . . . Perhaps also, the Moravians sensed that it would appear

(in terms of both English-language acquisition and Christianization) and the stakes of adopting or rejecting Christianity were arguably much higher for the Cherokee than for slaves. Although Christianization and education were major justifications for slavery, by the antebellum era educated and religious slaves were widely considered liabilities by Southern whites. Missionaries who attempted to reach slaves were regularly met with indifferent or hostile masters. Laws throughout the South made teaching slaves to read or allowing them to gather for religious worship illegal in many counties and states. By contrast, the missionaries in the Cherokee Nation had the support—in many cases, the financial support—of the United States government. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), for instance, justified federal aid by tailoring its efforts to the government's acculturation policies, endeavoring to make the Cherokee not only "Christian in their religion," but also "English in their language, civilized in their manners."[9] What's more, by the time Christians began to set up long term missions in the Cherokee Nation, assimilation with Americans was being offered as a potential means of preserving what remained of a drastically reduced native population and its homelands.

Every facet of this particular piece of the Bible's history in America is shaped by the fact that the Cherokee were fully aware that they lived in a state of crisis: the encroachment of white Americans onto their lands was constant, the threat of forced migration immediate. Indeed, the government's civilization programs were launched in order to address and ultimately exploit devastating losses incurred by various tribes by the end of the Revolutionary War. Allied with

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strange to start their mission church with black slaves as the first and most numerous members. In any case, no blacks were considered sufficiently pious to be baptized and admitted to Christian worship. (McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 48)

[9] American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, "Report, 1815," *First Ten Annual Reports of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, with Other Documents of the Board* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1834), 124.

the British, the Cherokee were already "reduced to a conquered people at the Treaty of Paris."[10] Their population had declined from 22,000 in 1770 to 12,295 in 1809, and they had lost half of their hundred-thousand square miles of homelands. A fleeing Chickamauga faction then occupied the Lower Tennessee River Valley, continuing their warfare from 1780 to 1794, bringing more than forty towns to ruin on land that was then absorbed by white settlers.[11] By the Treaty of Holston in 1794, the Cherokee "acknowledged the destruction of their way of life," having lost the fur and deer skin trade, their hunting grounds, most of their villages, and thousands upon thousands of their people.[12] They viewed the civilization program as a plan for revitalizing tribal sovereignty through "conscious acculturation."[13]

The major obstacle to Christian missions prior to this moment of desperation was the "belief of the natives in their own superiority."[14] As McLoughlin argues,

> Christianity made virtually no impact in tribes that were sufficiently strong, autonomous, and healthy to pursue their own way of life. Every scholar of Indian missions has confirmed the view that Christianity succeeded only when a tribe had lost its autonomous ability to control its affairs either through military conquest, or by losing its hunting ground to white settlers, or by removal from its

[10] Julius H. Rubin, *Perishing Heathens: Stories of Protestant Missionaries and Christian Indians in Antebellum America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 121.

[11] McLoughlin, "Cherokee Anomie, 1794–1910: New Roles for Red Men, Red Women, and Black Slaves," in *The Cherokee Ghost Dance: Essays on the Southeastern Indians, 1789–1861* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 5–6. McLoughlin explains the terrible circumstances that continued to wreak havoc upon the Cherokee population long after the Revolutionary War:

> Known as "the Lower Towns" or "Chickamaugans," this Cherokee faction continued to raid the white settlements in a guerrilla war that flared sporadically from 1780 to 1794. Refusing to honor treaties made with the new American government by the Upper Town chiefs in 1785, 1791, and 1792, the Lower Towns continued fighting long after the British had made peace. . . . Enraged frontier settlers refused to distinguish between the friendly Upper Towns and the guerrillas in the Lower Towns. Invading peaceful Cherokee villages, they provoked many of them to join the guerrillas. Eventually almost every Cherokee village, of which there were close to sixty, was ravaged, often more than once. (6)

[12] Rubin, *Perishing Heathens*, 121.

[13] Raymond D. Fogelson and Paul Kutsche, "Cherokee Economic Cooperatives: The Gadugie," in *Symposium on Cherokee and Iroquois Culture*, ed. William N. Fenton and John Gulick (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin, 1961), 98.

[14] James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 78.

> homeland to some barren reserve, or by the ravages of epidemics for which it had no immunity.[15]

For reasons we will see below, Christianity was, generally speaking, an unattractive substitute for natives' traditional religion; only once the Cherokee had reached a state of sufficient "cultural disorientation and dysfunction" did the Bible become potentially useful to them.[16] Although in the end the United States determined to steal their lands regardless of what Cherokees did about the Bible, for much of the early nineteenth century, it must have seemed reasonable, especially in light of the federal government's support for acculturation programs, to believe that retaining or losing their lands could have a great deal to do with adopting elements of Christianity and obtaining English-language literacy.

It was in this context that Elias Boudinot, born Gallegina Uwati, solicited funds from white churchgoers for the founding of a press and a seminary in Cherokee country. It was in this context that nine-year-old Susan Taylor, a student a Brainerd mission school, wrote in a letter shared with potential benefactors of the school, "We ought to learn very fast, so we can teach our brothers and sisters and other heathn [*sic*] children."[17] And it was in this context that Catharine Brown converted to Christianity, became a teacher at Creek Path mission school, and wrote to her friends, "My heart bleeds for my people, who are on the brink of destruction."[18] Missionaries celebrated what seemed to them to be Brown's complete abandonment of Cherokee cultural practice in favor of Christianity, English-language literacy, and white femininity. In his popular memoir of her life, Rufus Anderson interpreted her words as referring to the spiritual threat of

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[15] William G. McLoughlin, "Native American Reactions to Christian Missions," in *The Cherokees and Christianity, 1794–1870: Essays on Acculturation and Cultural Persistence*, ed. Walter H. Conser, Jr. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 16.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Susan Taylor to Jeremiah Evarts, February 23, 1829, John Howard Payne Papers, vol. 8: 55.

[18] Catharine Brown, letter to Mr. and Mrs. Hall of 30 May 1819, in Rufus Anderson, *Memoir of Catharine Brown, a Christian Indian of the Cherokee Nation* (New York: John P. Haven, 1825), 54.

eternal damnation to her "heathen" people; but Brown might also have referred to the bodily threat of removal, the kind of earthly destruction ultimately wrought by the Trail of Tears.

The Bible's principal value to the Cherokee in the antebellum era was its utility as a token of what counted to white Americans as "civilization"; that is, more than any of its specific content, the Bible's status as an instrument of negotiation between two cultures made it an object of interest to some Cherokee. Cherokee attitudes toward the Bible and Christianity, and toward the missionaries who promulgated them, shifted along with their social and political situation. In the aftermath of their heavy losses in the Revolutionary period, when some degree of cultural integration with whites still seemed like a possibility, Cherokee who showed any interest in the Bible tended to view it as a book of knowledge, a potential source for the same kind of sovereignty white Americans had used it to claim. Whites' possession of the book explained why they had been able to conquer native people, and once they shared its content with the Cherokee, the two would achieve cultural and technological parity. As the removal crisis intensified, the Bible and, often more pointedly, the English-language literacy that accompanied the adoption of Christianity became important tools of political negotiation. Most who welcomed the mission schools in this era did so not principally out of any interest in Christianity, but so that their children would learn the standards of English rhetoric and therefore be better equipped to fight for the rights of the Cherokee Nation, or at least to thrive in American society. Others who adopted Christianity used the morality and language of the Bible to express their sorrow over the suffering of their tribe and to pray for their salvation, and offered their own saved souls as proof that adaptation and integration were possible for all Cherokee. (A majority of Cherokee did not think much about the Bible at all, or viewed both the Bible and English-language literacy as threats to the Cherokee way of life.) Generally speaking, it was not until the diaspora of the Trail

of Tears that the specific content of the Bible—Exodus in particular—became a somewhat widely shared source of comfort.

This is not to suggest that we ought to doubt the sincerity of Cherokees' Christian expressions, or that native lives in the antebellum period can be utterly reduced to the removal crisis. The temptation to view Cherokee responses to the Bible and Christianity entirely through the lens of their victimization at the hands of the United States' government and people is strong; the political dynamics of their situation unavoidably inform every instance of contact between white Americans and Cherokees, but these dynamics alone do not tell the whole story, nor was their effect simplistically oppressive. Even under profound stress and hardship, people are complex, resilient, and creative. Indeed, as scholars like Michael C. Coleman and James A. Clifton have convincingly argued, negotiating between cultures could be a positive source of identity, purpose, and "enlarge[ed] cognitive worlds."[19] For some Cherokee, the Bible and English-language literacy were sources of a Christian-Cherokee identity, as well as tools through which to demonstrate this identity. Missionaries often did not recognize these complex forms; they tended to view Cherokee and Christian identities as mutually exclusive, even though missionaries themselves had to adapt the Bible and Christian practice in order to reach Cherokees.[20] Even under the imminent threat of removal, the relationship between natives and Americans remained an ongoing negotiation, and power, if imbalanced, continued to flow

[19] James A. Clifton, "Alternative Identities and Cultural Frontiers," in *Being and Becoming Indian*, ed. James A. Clifton (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1989), 30. See also Michael C. Coleman, "American Indian School Pupils as Cultural Brokers: Cherokee Girls at Brainerd Mission, 1828–1829," in *Between Indian and White Worlds: The Cultural Broker*, ed. Margaret Connell Szasz (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994).

[20] One fascinating area of syncretic effort undertaken by missionaries that cannot be covered here is the translation of biblical words and concepts into forms that could be psycholinguistically understood by the Cherokee. See Alan Kilpatrick, "A Note on Cherokee Theological Concepts," *American Indian Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 389–405.

multidirectionally.[21] If sincerity of belief and social negotiation are mutually exclusive, then no one believes sincerely. Much as some antebellum Americans might have liked to claim to read scripture acontextually, in instrumentalizing the Bible to negotiate between Cherokee and American culture, between white and native people, and between traditionalist and assimilationist Cherokee, Cherokee read the Bible like all Americans did: through the lens of their particular needs, desires, and experiences. The Bible in which individual Cherokee believed (or did not believe) was not a given text but rather a product of that negotiation.

THE BIBLE WITHOUT CHRISTIANITY: EARLY MISSIONARY EFFORTS AMONG THE CHEROKEE

Although the losses sustained by the Cherokee over the course of the antebellum era provided them with increasingly bad or limited options, the arc of their changing relationship to missionaries and the Bible demonstrates a high degree of creativity and consideration with regard to cultural negotiation. Early missionaries in Cherokee country met with everything from indifference to firm opposition, but rarely with enthusiasm.[22] That white visitors frequently misunderstood or openly disparaged Cherokee practices likely did little to recommend Christianity, and the annoyance of tribal leaders from whom they sought welcome is frequently preserved in accounts of these visits. In one typical interaction, the trader Alexander Longe,

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[21] For instance, though most missionaries never tried to learn Cherokee, the famed Baptist Evan Jones realized that Christians would never reach full-blood Cherokees until they learned their language. This proved extremely difficult for Euro-Americans; Evans's own efforts to learn Cherokee took ten years in spite of the fact that he already spoke several languages. Jones was also an early adopter of Sequoyah's syllabary, which he acknowledged was far more effective in bringing about Cherokee literacy than any missionary effort up to that point because it originated from a native speaker. See James W. Parins, *Literacy and Intellectual Life in the Cherokee Nation, 1820–1906* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 24–26.

[22] According to McLoughlin:

> The only missionary who seems to have made a serious impression on the Cherokees in the eighteenth century was the mysterious Christian Gottlieb Priber. He lived among them from 1736–1743, when he was captured by the British and jailed on suspicion of being a Jesuit in league with the French. He died in prison in 1745, and the large manuscript dictionary of the Cherokee language which he had compiled was lost. (*Cherokees and Missionaries, 1789–1839* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984], 35 n. 1).

having observed a Cherokee priest instructing people to fast prior to a feast day, "told [the priest] that all their doctrine was false and displeasing to that divine power that he told me of." Longe then asked him, "If some of our priests were to come here and teach you, would you renounce your ways of worship?" "We would gladly," the Cherokee priest replied sarcastically, "for then we should be as wise as you and could do and make all things as you do. . . and peradventure the great god of the English would cause us to turn white as you are." When Longe defended the virtues of English priests, the Cherokee priest commented,

> But I think. . . that they do not teach them to their people for you may see every day before your face that these white men that live amongst us a trading are more debauched and more wicked than the beatest of our young fellows. Is it not a shame for them that has such good priests and such knowledge as they have to be worse than the Indians that are in a manner but like wolves?

Tellingly, Longe did not contradict the priest but only responded that "if they were in sight of their priests they durst not do anything of that kind."[23] Chief Yonaguska (or Junaluska), who refused to let missionaries circulate among his townspeople until they provided him with an oral translation of the Gospel of Matthew, shared the skepticism of his priestly tribesman: "It seems to be a good book," he responded, when he had heard it; "strange that the white people are not better after having had it so long."[24] An account of the Presbyterian missionary John Martin, who lived among the Cherokee between 1758 and 1759, noted that "having preached till both his audience and he were heartily tired," he "was told at last, that they knew very well, that, if they were good, they should go up; if bad, down; that he could tell them no more; that he had long

[23] Alexander Longe, "A Small Postscript on the Ways and Manners of the Indians Called Cherokees," ed. David H. Corkran, *Southern Indian Studies* 21 (October, 1969), 16, 18, 20.

[24] James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokees*, in *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology To the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1897–98*, part 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1900), 163.

plagued them with what they no ways understood, and that they desired him to depart the country."[25]

Sometimes the Cherokee critique was more pointed than mere disinterest or annoyance. In 1759 a Presbyterian named William Richardson approached the Cherokee leader Great Warrior with a proposal for educating tribal youth and was met with an appraisal of white child-rearing practices:

> He told me he had seen children at school among the English, and that the master loved them that read well but corrected them that did not with a rod; now they never corrected with a rod, but pour'd waters upon them or threatened them with physic which does as well. I told him he need not be affraid [*sic*] for they should not be wipt with a rod and so he went away without telling me anything whether he would have them learn or not.[26]

Perhaps similarly discouraged by a visit to the Cherokee, the missionary John Hammerer reported that "the Fondness the *Indians* have for their Children will always prevent them from sending any competent Number of them at least, into the Colonies to have them educated."[27] These differences in child-rearing practices were not unrelated to Cherokees' early rejection of Christianity and disinterest in missionaries. As Tom Hatley explains, "the permissive parenting of Cherokees, in which discipline, when it came at all, was likely to come from the mother's family at the hands of a female relation or uncle, could hardly have come up against a more

[25] Henry Timberlake, *The Memoirs of Lt. Henry Timberlake: The Story of a Soldier, Adventurer, and Emissary to the Cherokees, 1756–1765*, ed. Duane H. King (Cherokee, NC: Museum of the Cherokee Indian Press, 2007), 34.

[26] William Richardson, *An Account of My Proceedings Since I Accepted the Indian Mission on October 2d, 1758*, in "An Account of the Presbyterian Mission to the Cherokees, 1757–1759," *Tennessee Historical Magazine*, *Series II* 1, no. 2 (January, 1931): 136.

[27] John D. Hammerer, "An Account of a Plan for Civilizing the American Indians," ed. Paul L. Ford, in *Winnowings in American History, Indian Tracts, No. I* (Brooklyn: Historical Printing Club, 1890), 16.

striking opposite than the paternal discipline designed into Protestant theology and its educational precepts."[28]

Christianity's patriarchal organization was one of several issues that may have made it a generally unattractive alternative to Cherokee traditional religion. McLoughlin argues that Christianity failed to address the three foundational elements of Cherokee life: "corporate harmony, bountiful harvests, and sacred healing."[29] Compared to the sacred system of the Cherokee, which emphasized communal wellbeing, Christianity was a religion of individual salvation, one that sometimes placed people in competition with one another for God's favor. Missionaries, along with the United States government, sought to convert Cherokee to private property ownership as well as Christianity, a system under which, for instance, "the tribal granaries that provided public relief when harvests failed would cease to exist."[30] Christians also condemned native medicine as superstition and witchcraft, but provided no alternative system of medical care, either secular or spiritual. Though Christians prayed for the sick, they did not expect prayers to cure patients; rather, they prayed that all might accept God's will, however it came to pass, and left the treatment of illnesses to medical professionals, though they rarely brought these professionals with them where they missionized. Cherokee, however, "regarded physical illness as a manifestation of spiritual malaise" and treated it with sacred rituals. They

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[28] Tom Hatley, *The Dividing Paths: Cherokees and South Carolinians through the Revolutionary Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 59. Far from being minor issues, these differences in child-rearing spoke to deep-seated cultural assumptions:

> What mattered was not solely kinship—whether mothers or fathers were in charge—but how authority was discharged. Because the handling of dependents—especially children but also anyone in the charge of another—went to the heart not only of the Cherokee family but also of Cherokee political life, the debate over child-rearing practices was not at all irrelevant. The cultural issues which lay behind the debate anchored the politics of adulthood as well as childhood. Authority and dependency, in contexts ranging from child-raising to warfare, were to become the points of reference against which Cherokee society would measure its own distinctiveness from, and ultimately its opposition to, colonial society. (59)

[29] McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Christianity*, 15.

[30] Ibid., 16.

were "appalled by the failure of Christians to perform religious ceremonies to counteract disease," and even Christianized Cherokee frequently continued to practice traditional medicine.[31] Even Catharine Brown, whom missionaries hailed as the most Christianized Cherokee, resorted to traditional medicine to treat her brother John's tuberculosis. She and John's wife had planned to take him to a sulfur spring in Alabama, but, unable to travel that far, they stopped at a spring they hoped would have similar properties. John drank the water and bathed in it in an effort to cure his illness. These treatments reflect the spiritual properties with which Cherokee invested water—they "bathed in running streams daily before sunrise in order to purify themselves spiritually, and rituals normally involved 'going to water,' as they phrased it."[32] Water's role as a purifying agent in Cherokee culture also suggests that this medicine was imagined as a way of treating the "spiritual malaise" that may have influenced John's sickness.

Like healing, American Christians—at least, as they presented themselves to the Cherokee—did not view the harvest as a religious aspect of their lives, but rather as something they controlled via the science of farming techniques and not through ritual appeals to God. Although in reality Protestant orthodoxy did not prevent Christians from attempting to affect their farms—or any other aspect of "secular" life—via religious methods, they expected from Cherokee a higher degree of separation between the sacred and profane, and regarded their agricultural rituals as heathen superstition (one role of mission schools was to transform

[31] Theda Perdue, "Catharine Brown: Cherokee Convert to Christianity," in *Sifters: Native American Women's Lives*, ed. Theda Perdue (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 86–87. Perhaps this is one reason Cherokee so readily accepted defeat in the wake of cultural decimation: seeing so many of their people ravaged by illness made them think they had angered God or lost his favor. In the revivals of Cherokee traditional religion that sprang up periodically prior to removal, Cherokee prophets often argued that their cultural crises were the result of God's displeasure at their having given too much land to white people (see Big Bear's prophecy below).

[32] Perdue, *Sifters*, 87. By accompanying John on this healing mission, Catharine also filled a distinctively Cherokee role: healing was the responsibility of a person's clan, and while John's wife was not a member of his clan, his sister was.

Cherokee boys into "practical farmers").[33] But the single most important religious ritual in Cherokee society, the Green Corn Ceremony, is a festival in honor of the Corn Mother, Selu, thanking her for corn, rain, sun, and good harvests. The ceremony is a time of communal renewal as well: minor offenses are forgiven, arguments are set aside, homes are cleaned out, and individuals cleanse themselves spiritually. The harvest—the maintenance of balance between the people and the natural world—was central to Cherokee life; there simply was no equivalent emphasis in Christianity. Perhaps missionaries in the eighteenth century failed to garner any interest because the form of Christianity they offered in place of traditional religion failed to account for these important areas of Cherokee life.

But things had changed by the turn of the century, as recovery seemed less and less a possibility. As Hatley explains, for Cherokee "the most discouraging sign of this time was not a numerical abstraction; rather it was felt in the sorrow of lost neighbors, and in the unrelenting emptiness of towns left behind." The Cherokee had handily outnumbered the colonists in 1700; by 1790, their population had declined dramatically, while a swelling white and black population had turned their lands into a "minority enclave."[34] Every decade of the 1700s had seen the tribe reduced further by disease, famine, and war. Not only were these constant losses of neighbors and whole towns demographically devastating, they were also traumatizing. When US Indian Agent Benjamin Hawkins visited a town settled by native refugees of the Indian War of 1776, he discovered "children exceedingly alarmed at the sight of white men, and here a little boy of eight years old was excessively alarmed and could not be kept from screaming out until he got out of the door, and then he ran and hid himself."[35] It is out of this refugee context that many Cherokee

[33] Calvin Jones, "Account of the Cherokee Schools, Communicated by Gen. Calvin Jones, of Raleigh, to the Editor of *the Register*," *American Monthly Magazine* (December, 1818), 120.
[34] Hatley, *The Dividing Paths*, 232.
[35] Mooney, *Myths*, 209.

began to consider acculturation an increasingly attractive alternative, and began to take missionaries more seriously.

Still, when Cherokee leaders decided to admit a permanent mission station in their nation, they did so apparently not out of any interest in converting to Christianity, but rather with the explicit expectation that missionaries would teach their children to read and write and provide them with the skills and knowledge to succeed in an environment increasingly dominated by white American cultural norms. At this stage in their history, Cherokee viewed the Bible not as a book whose cosmology was mutually exclusive to their own, but rather as a book whose learned contents would supplement their own tribal knowledge and bring them technologically up to speed with white people; that is, the Bible—and the inseparable skills of reading and writing—were something which God or the Great Spirit had, for some reason, given to white people long ago. Now the time had come for white people to share this book and its accompanying skills with the Cherokee.

It was in this context that in 1801, Cherokee leaders invited Moravians to establish the first long-term mission in the Cherokee Nation (it lasted until 1833), Springplace in northwest Georgia. The Moravians had sent missionaries to the Cherokee in 1735, 1753, and 1783, but lack of interest and various frontier wars had thwarted these attempts. As the United States stabilized by the turn of the century, the pacifism and apolitical separatism of Moravians, which did not endear them to Revolutionary Americans, was now a boon to their missionary efforts: none of them had ever killed an Indian or broken a treaty. When the Cherokee invited missionaries onto their lands, they chose a group who were not only voluntary outcasts of mainstream American society, but who also understood why Indians were suspicious of whites—who understood that most in the West, as the Moravian Martin Schneider reported in 1783, “would rather like to

extirpate them altogether, take their land themselves; they scarce look upon them as human creatures, which I often could perceive in their conversations."[36] The Moravian agents who initially met with Cherokee leaders regarding Springplace Mission, Abraham Steiner and Frederic de Schweinitz, made it clear that they did not share the view of many frontier whites that Indians were racially inferior. When asked by Chief Kulsatahee of Hiwassee whether they "think that we Indians are too evil and bad to become good people, and that we are too unclean and brown," Steiner and Schweinitz replied, "We do not think so. . . . God too does not think so. He is the Creator and Father of all men, be they white, brown, or black."[37]

Through their conversations with Kulsatahee and another chief, Arcowee of Chota, Steiner and Schweinitz found that the Cherokee had also mythologized God and the Bible's relationship to white and native people. "The whites have indeed advantage," Arcowee explained. "They can make themselves clothes against the cold. The red people can only build the small canoes and cross small water; the whites, on the other hand, build enormous canoes and cross safely over the greatest waters." This was not because whites were racially superior, but rather because they had "the great book from which they can learn all things."[38] The Bible, that is, was the origin of white people's technological power over Native Americans. Explained Arcowee,

> When the Great Father in the beginning created men, he had a great book. This he first extended to the red men and bade them speak to it, but they were unable to do so. Then he offered it to the white people with the same command. As soon as they saw it, they were able to speak to the book at once, and thus it has come about that the white people know so much that is not known to the red.[39]

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[36] Samuel Cole Williams, *History of the Lost State of Franklin* (New York: Press of the Pioneers, 1933), 262.

[37] Abraham Steiner and Frederick C. De Schweinitz, "Report of the Journey of the Brethren Abraham Steiner and Frederick C. De Schweinitz to the Cherokees and the Cumberland Settlements (1799)," in Samuel Cole Williams, *Early Travels in Tennessee Country: 1540–1800* (Johnson City, TN: Watauga Press, 1928), 496–497.

[38] Ibid., 497.

[39] Ibid. McLoughlin notes that though it is "recited as an ancient Cherokee myth," this legend "clearly did not go back before contact with white Europeans. It is, however, similar to a legend among the Ashanti in Africa,

Foremost among the technologies associated with the Bible in this myth is literacy, the ability to "speak to," or read, books. This language of "speaking" or "talking" to books was common enough among Cherokee that it is recorded in several visitors' accounts. A report about the mission schools, for instance, noted that some Cherokee "profess to love to hear the good book talk, as they term reading the Bible."[40] This language may have been borrowed from enslaved blacks (some of the wealthier and more acculturated Cherokee owned slaves), since many early biographies by former slaves utilize this same trope to describe the initial encounter with literacy.[41] On the other hand, this oral description of literate practices may simply have been a regular development in cultural encounters between literate and non-literate people.

However, this tradition of a "great book" of knowledge was also distinctively Cherokee. In particular, the idea of books as means of cultural preservation through memory has some precedent not only among Cherokee, but among Native Americans more broadly. One Cherokee medicine man told missionary Evan Jones that Indians had once "possessed a great deal of knowledge of which the moderns are destitute." This he blamed on the fact that they did not have "the book":

> He said that the book possessed by the whites was first offered to the Indians by the Creator, but they, not being able to read, did not understand it; consequently it was taken away and given to the Whites far to the East, beyond the Great Waters. The whites at first understood but little, but they studied and learned. And having the Book in their possession, were not liable to forget as the Indians were.[42]

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and runaway black slaves may have told their version of it to the Cherokees" (McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 3 n. 8). See also William G. McLoughlin, "A Note on African Sources of American Indian Racial Myths," *Journal of American Folklore* 89 (June–September, 1976): 331–336.

[40] Jones, "Account of the Cherokee Schools," 121.

[41] By 1835, a greater proportion of Cherokees (7.4 percent) owned slaves than did white families in the South (five percent) (William G. McLoughlin, *After the Trail of Tears: The Cherokees' Struggle for Sovereignty, 1839–1880* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993], 125). On the trope of the talking book in slave narratives, see ch. 1.

[42] Evan Jones, journal, April 1, 1828. Cited in William G. McLoughlin, *Champions of the Cherokees: Evan and John B. Jones* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 76.

Jones, like other missionaries, understood "the book" to refer to the Bible, and anecdotal evidence suggests that this was a safe assumption (other Cherokee explicitly linked "the great book" to "the Word of God").[43] There were other potential "great books," however. In the 1760s the Delaware prophet created and promulgated what he referred to as "The Great Book or Writing," a chart on deerskin that depicted the path to heaven. Neolin's chart reflected a vision he had received from the Master of Life in which he followed different paths until the last, the narrowest (echoing Matthew 7:13–14), led to a beautiful city on a mountain top. Neolin's message was filled with imagery that is simultaneously biblical and Indian; before he could ascend the mountain, for instance, Neolin was made to "purify himself by stripping off his clothes and bathing in a nearby stream," an instruction that could reflect either Christian baptism, Native American beliefs about water's spiritual properties, or, most likely, both. Similarly, Neolin's message was Christian in form but pan-Indian in message: his vision of heaven explicitly did not include white people, and the wider paths on his chart were blocked by heavy strokes representing the sins and vices introduced by Europeans, including alcohol, guns, and flint and steel for making fire. When he preached he was often in tears like white revivalists, but told his audiences that "if they followed [his] instructions, they would be able to drive the whites out of their lands."[44] The form of Neolin's "Great Book"—a map—matched his message: Native Americans had divinely sanctioned title to the land on which they lived. Though not Cherokee, Neolin's "Great Book" suggests that the idea of scripture—and, indeed, of books—was broadly adaptable to indigenous interests and cultural forms. That is, Arcowee likely referred to the Bible

[43] Steiner and Schweinitz, "Report," 197.

[44] Lee Irwin, *Coming Down from Above: Prophecy, Resistance, and Renewal in Native American Religions* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 129–131.

when he spoke to the Moravians of the "great book"; but they nonetheless might have differed widely in what they imagined "the Bible" to be.

While Arcowee's tale of the great book may have led the Moravians to believe that he placed the blame for Indian ignorance of the Bible with Indians themselves, in fact, he was arguing that whites had shirked their duty to share its contents: "When the white people first came to this land, they had the great book wherein is the Word of God, but they did not instruct the red concerning it."[45] This had not been right, since "the Father who dwells above [*Utajah*] . . . would have it that all should be brethren."[46] Arcowee was willing to set aside blame, however, and instead celebrate the fact that "the time appears to have come when the red people should learn [the book] too." He greeted Steiner and Schweinitz in impressive dress, including a silver medal from George Washington, with whom he had signed peace treaties, as though to mark the important occasion upon which the whites had been "inspired by the Great Spirit to be willing to come to us and to teach us."[47] Kulsatahee agreed that the time had come for the Cherokee to learn to read the book: "I think that we shall gradually comprehend and learn to know the great words."[48] When the Moravians said that they had come "to acquaint [the Cherokee] with their God and Creator and what he had done and suffered to save them," these two chiefs seem to have interpreted that offer of heavenly salvation to refer to the erosion of Indian ways of life in this world. For them and other Cherokee, the Bible represented not salvation from original sin, a

[45] Steiner and Schweinitz, "Report," 197. This view was shared by the priest who spoke with Alexander Longe: "What is hidden from us is not our fault by reason that we have no other knowledge in learning as reading and writing as you have. If we had, we should be as wise as you are. Moreover you who the great god hath endowed with all sort of knowledge will not take the pains to instruct us and make us wise as yourselves" (Longe, "A Small Postscript," 18).

[46] Steiner and Schweinitz, "Report," 496. Arcowee commented that, "The whites are now called the older brother and the red the younger. I do not object to this and will call them so, though, really, the naming should have been reversed, for the red people dwelt here first."

[47] Ibid., 497.

[48] Ibid., 488.

foreign concept to Cherokee, but rather salvation from the earthly invasion of white people. If the Indians learned to read the secrets of the great book, the balance of power between brothers would be restored.

Significantly, however, even in their state of "cultural disorientation and dysfunction," the Cherokee did not consider literacy to signify a superior mode of discourse or knowledge. According to the myth of the great book, literacy is necessary because God happens to have provided some important knowledge in that form. In some versions of the myth, God offered several gifts to his first people, and the first white man chose the book while the first red man chose the bow and arrow; in other versions, the white man stole the book from the red man.[49] In no version of the myth are white people able to read because God favors them; possession of the book is a gift which they were supposed to share, not something they earned through superiority. Regardless, some missionaries, like the ABCFM's Rufus Anderson, certainly mistook Cherokees' lack of literacy for lack of intelligence: they "had no literature," he wrote, and thus "the fountains of knowledge were unopened. The mind made no progress."[50] The belief that knowledge from books, particularly the Bible, was superior to other kinds of knowledge, such as visionary knowledge, caused Moravian missionaries to overlook or dismiss the rare instances when a Cherokee showed interest in Christianity. For instance, when Chief Big Bear told the Moravians about a vision steeped in both Cherokee and Christian religious imagery, they recorded it as an instance of blasphemy. In Big Bear's vision,

> a tall man, clothed entirely in the foliage of the trees, with a wreath of the same foliage on his head, who was carrying a small child in his arm and had a larger child by the hand, said to him "The child on [my] arm is God. . . . God is not pleased that the Indians have sold so much land to the white people."

[49] See McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 184.

[50] Rufus Anderson, *Memoir of Catharine Brown, A Christian Indian of the Cherokee Nation*, in *Cherokee Sister: The Collected Writins of Catharine Brown, 1818–1823*, ed. Theresa Strouth Gaul (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 172.

Rather than taking this Cherokee vision of the Christ child seriously, the Moravians wrote that "during this silly narration," Big Bear "looked so solemn, as if he were really proclaiming God's will and word." They responded dismissively that they could not judge such a vision, for "we adhere to God's word and in that his will is clear."[51] Chief Chulioah (Shoeboots), who was also present, commented that, "The white people know God from the Book, and we, from other things."[52]

If knowledge "from the Book" was not superior to knowledge "from other things," Christianity was certainly not superior to native traditions. Though Cherokees' attitudes toward Christianity grew increasingly varied and complex as they approached removal, in general during this initial period of long-term mission stations, missionaries were tolerated primarily, if not solely, because they could teach Cherokee children English-language literacy. Since Cherokees' desire for native children to learn English emerged from their need both to defend their way of life and to succeed in an Americanized society, and because accomplishing either of these goals depended to a degree on acquiring the respect of whites, there was some leeway for missionaries to teach Christian virtues and to attempt to eliminate certain Cherokee practices which seemed most uncivilized to whites. But in general, Cherokees did their best to impress upon missionaries that they were concerned only that their children learn English, and did not want them evangelized. Even before the establishment of their mission, the Moravians were informed by those familiar with the Cherokee Nation, such as Superintendent of Indian Affairs David Henley, that the teaching of English would have to be the missionaries' first priority, that

[51] Springplace Diary, February 17, 1812, cited in McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 96.

[52] Ibid. This vision was part of a revival of Cherokee religion following earthquakes in 1811. McLoughlin notes that "it contains some of the syncretic symbolism common to this revival. By 1812 Christian theology had become incongruously mixed with Cherokee religion" (*Cherokees and Missionaries*, 95–96).

"the Cherokees would consent to one or more missionaries among them and would be glad to have their children instructed in Reading, Writing, etc.," and that "they might, after that, be brought to like the preaching of the Gospel."[53] Indeed, insisting that their children had "no ear for religion," the Cherokee National Council demanded that the Springplace missionaries conduct their classes in English, though the Moravians spoke German amongst themselves.[54] Even in 1827, once mission schools had been operating for decades, a Cherokee leader named the Speaker reminded a class of ABCFM students that they were there to learn English: "Remember that the whites are near us. With them we / have constant intercourse, and you must be sensible, that unless / you can speak their language, read & write as they / do, they will be able to cheat you, and trample upon your rights."[55] In the Council's final approval of the Moravian mission, which the Cherokee referred to as "the experiment," they authorized the missionaries only "to instruct us and our children and improve our and their minds and Nation."[56]

The Moravians' failure to align their goals with those explicitly expressed by the Council resulted in disappointment. They had believed that at least the wealthy, mixed-blood chiefs James Vann and Charles Hicks, who had helped them gain the Council's approval, were sympathetic to their evangelistic aspirations, but in fact "neither Hicks nor Vann knew or cared

[53] David Henley, letter to the Moravian missionaries, in Edmund Schwarze, *History of the Moravian Missions Among Southern Indian Tribes of the United States* (Bethlehem, PA: Times Publishing Company, 1923), 47–48. Steiner's politic response to Henley's comment (spoken to his fellow Moravians and not to Henley himself) hints at the Moravians' disagreement with this advice: "We should not think hard of people nor argue with them over the notion that heathen nations can grasp the conception of the Gospel only after they have learned to read and write" (48).

[54] Rowena McClinton, *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees*, abridged ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 2.

[55] "Addresses of Indian Chiefs," *Missionary Herald* 23, no. 12 (December, 1827), in *The Missionary Herald, for the Year 1827, Vol. XXIII* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1827), 381.

[56] Response of Doublehead on behalf of Little Turkey, in Schwarze, *History of the Moravian Missions*, 55.

much about Christianity."[57] Both were sons of white traders who had married Indian women; their fathers had not raised them to be pious, but they did believe that schools would benefit their townspeople. But the Moravians did not build a school. They would not allow the unconverted to live among them; instead, they expected adult Cherokee to attend worship at their mission station, convert to Christianity, and then build new homes for their families at the mission compound, which would expand to encompass more and more converted Cherokee. They would not found a school until there was a sufficient number of children living at the mission station to justify the expense. Had the Council known the missionaries' true intentions, "the establishment of such a Christiani *imperium in imperio*," they would likely not have approved the mission.[58]

But it little mattered, since the Moravian plan proved immediately untenable. The few Cherokee who attended a Sunday service at Springplace soon lost interest; services were conducted in English, which few natives in the vicinity understood, and the missionaries could not afford an interpreter. Under pressure from the chiefs, the Moravians finally agreed to instruct students who would come several hours each day, but only a couple of James Vann's young female relatives attended in this manner, and they received little attention as the missionaries were preoccupied with getting their buildings and farm up and running. Thus, for years, the missionaries at Springplace preached the gospel almost exclusively to each other and taught no children. Though thoroughly warned, they were discouraged by Cherokees' lack of interest in Christianity. The Cherokee, meanwhile, saw a group of white people doing nothing but building an elaborate farm on lands belonging to the Nation. They began to suspect the missionaries were connected to the United States government's plan to build a federal road through their lands, a

[57] McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 46.
[58] Ibid., 44.

plan supported by the Moravians' principal Cherokee benefactor, James Vann. The Council revoked its support for the Moravian mission.[59]

Others repeated the Moravians' mistakes. Presbyterian minister Gideon Blackburn, whose alternative plan for educating Cherokee children (combined with the Moravian experiment's failure to launch) led the Council to turn away from the Moravians, arrived in 1803. He impressed the Council with his promise to board and teach Cherokee students free of charge, something he could afford due to the financial support of Thomas Jefferson and Presbyterian churches throughout the United States.[60] More importantly, he told the Council he did not plan to preach or build churches; he wanted only permission to build schoolhouses and provide an American curriculum. Blackburn himself was a pastor, but he insisted his role would be merely supervisory; he would continue to lead his congregation at home, and his teachers would be secular.[61] Blackburn's schools were a moderate success. He never opened the number he had planned, only one boarding school and a second day school. Most of his students were mixed-blood and already spoke some English.[62] Nonetheless, Blackburn claimed that in the seven years his schools operated, they had taught 300 to 400 Cherokee to speak English, a highly

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[59] The Moravian mission did not die, however. Distracted by Blackburn's plan, the Cherokee Council seem to have forgotten the Moravians, leaving them alone to slowly build a little school according to their own vision (see McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 49–53).

[60] They may also have been impressed with his renowned oratory power, a skill which the Cherokee valued highly. According to family records, he was

> tall of stature, of military carriage, dramatic in delivery, possessed of a melodious silver-toned voice, with facial expression and brilliant eye following every passionate phase of his theme, he captivated his hearers. He excelled in the power to dramatize his subject with vivid word-pictures and imagery, so that people thronged to hear him and forgot time and fatigue under the spell of his eloquence even though he was wont to speak for two hours at a stretch. (W. A. Challacombe, "Gideon Blackburn," in *The Benjamin Blacknurn Family* [Carlinville, IL: self-published, 1942], 76)

[61] McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renascence*, 74. Blackburn believed his plan was completely different from that of the Moravian's, since he thought that "civilization should precede (or at least be concomitant with) Christianization" (74).

[62] McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 58: "Because missionary schools preferred children who already knew some English in order that they might help the teachers with non-English-speaking students) the numerical predominance of the mixed bloods was evident in every mission school." Mixed-blood parents were also the most likely to embrace American schooling for their children.

unlikely figure, "though he doubtless improved the English of the children from mixed-blood families."[63]

In spite of Blackburn's promises, his schools were hardly secular. Though the teachers were technically not ministers, their lessons were suffused with Christianity. Children were taught to read from the Bible, sang Christian hymns, and opened and closed every school day with prayer. Whatever he told the Cherokee, Blackburn and his teachers viewed English-language literacy as a means to their Christian ends. In the missionary magazine *The Panoplist*, Blackburn wrote that his "design was to introduce Christianity as the young mind should be capable of receiving it."[64] For the Presbyterians, as for their students, literacy was inseparable from the Bible and Christianity. Young Cherokee learned Calvinistic words and the theological concepts behind them simultaneously. A letter to Blackburn ostensibly from a group of students (though no doubt heavily influenced by their teacher) illustrates the Bible's role in their newly acquired literacy:

> The moment we open our eyes in the morning we bless and thank God we did not open them in that hell which we now read of in the Bible. . . . After this we all together sing a hymn of praises to that blessed Jesus who, as we can now all read, died for us; then attend to public prayer; then we read over our spelling lessons three times; afterwards repeat the same to our master off the book; then until noon we read the Bible and other history.[65]

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[63] McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renascence*, 76.

[64] Gideon Blackburn, letter to Rev. Dr. Morse, in *The Panoplist, for the Year Ending June, 1808*, vol. 3 (Boston: Lincoln & Edmands, 1808), 85. Blackburn goes on to discuss the strategic nature of this method; in particular, "the acquisition of songs of praise was also useful in assisting to open the minds of the parents to hear the truths designed to be communicated to them" (85). According to Blackburn, the children were to be "*beacons*, by which the parents might gradually be conducted into the same field of improvement" (letter to the editor, in *The Panoplist*, 323). The Moravians also hoped to see Christianity spread through the Nation via their students:

> Our George wrote a letter to his mother in which he also told her something about our Creator and Redeemer. The Chief gave this letter to Mr. Charles Hicks who, surrounded by chiefs, had it read aloud at Vann's and translate it . . . . Doesn't that mean, dear Brother, that the Gospel was preached? O, yes . . . . The young people will do it. It is the children who are to proclaim the death of the Lord . . . . In these bad times the Lord will probably bring in His Kingdom through their children . . . even though the adults have no desire for it. (John Gambold to Reichel, December 3, 1808, cited in McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 67)

[65] Students to Gideon Blackburn, in ed. William P. Farrand *The General Assembly's Missionary Magazine; or Evangelical Intelligencer*, vol. 4 (Philadelphia: William P. Farrand, 1808), 43. The letter continues:

In addition to this religious instruction, Blackburn's students were forbidden to speak Cherokee, and were taught to dress and behave in the manner of whites.

While mixed-blood parents, whose children constituted a majority of the school, did not object to this curriculum (though none of the children or their parents converted to Christianity), full-blood parents viewed Blackburn's school as another deal broken by whites. Conservative Cherokee had long suspected the missionaries of being in league with the United States government, and though the missionaries did not see themselves that way, it would be difficult to prove the full-bloods wrong. Not only did Blackburn fail to deliver on his promise of secular schooling, but during his tenure in the Cherokee Nation, he operated openly as an agent of the federal government, making regular reports in return for an annual subsidy for his schools.[66] Even the apolitical Moravians eventually agreed to make reports and advise the government on Cherokee relations in exchange for a $100-a-year subsidy. Like Blackburn, they told the government "that the fullbloods were the backward element in the nation and that it was necessary to stamp out all traces of Cherokee culture."[67] Though Blackburn, like the Moravians,

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> Then we get a spelling lesson and repeat it as before, off the book; read our lesson in the above way until the evening, then get a spelling lesson and say it off the book to our master; afterwards all sing a hymn of praises to our ever blessed Redeemer and attend to public prayer; then . . . we generally read the Shorter Catechism once over . . . then attend to public prayer; afterwards, before we lay down . . . we all go to our knees and pray, all one after the other, and so go to rest.

[66] The scheme of using missionaries as the eyes and ears of the United States in Indian territories had been designed by George Washington and his Secretary of War Henry Knox as part of the very foundation of the federal government. In his very first letter advising Washington on Indian affairs, Knox wrote:

> Missionaries of excellent moral character should be appointed to reside in their nation, who should be well supplied with all the implements of husbandry and the necessary stock for a farm.
>
> These men should be made the instruments to work on the [I]ndians—presents should commonly pass through their hands or by their recommendations—They should in no degree be concerned in trade, or the purchase of lands to rouse the Jealousy of the [I]ndians—They should be their friends and fathers. (Henry Knox to George Washington, 7 July 1789, in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Thomas Childs Cochran, part 2, vol. 6 of *The New American State Papers* [Washington, DC: Scholarly Resources Incoporated, 1973], 66).

[67] McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 75.

believed that this policy was in the Cherokees' best interest, his failure to make any effort to meet the desires of the full-bloods probably contributed to the closing of his schools in the face of multiple scandals after just seven years.[68]

Even though these initial missionary experiments ended in disappointment and betrayal, some Cherokee still sought literacy and education for themselves and their children in the hope that conscious acculturation could be a viable path to rebuilding independence and stability. In spite of the profound losses they had incurred, the constant threat of removal, and the bottomless duplicity of Americans with regard to Indian affairs, Cherokees continued to be self-determined. They wanted the great book—its knowledge, its literacy, the sovereignty it granted—without religion; education, not Christianity. Missionaries who respected Cherokee needs and wants found a far more receptive audience than those who did not. The Baptists, for instance, who had been successful among enslaved populations relative to other denominations as well, made greater initial strides in Christianizing Cherokee largely because they took the desire for English-language literacy seriously: unlike any other missionary groups, they built their schools in the poorest, most conservative towns in the Nation, where virtually no English was spoken, read, or written. White Baptist missionaries like Evan Jones, unlike the Moravians and Prebysterians, learned to speak Cherokee. Baptism was also more attractive to some Cherokee because its central rite syncretized with the Cherokee view of water as a purifying agent. Though Baptist exhorters met with opposition from supporters of Cherokee traditional religion, Jones's practice of employing Cherokee converts as itinerants helped make his message palatable to others. The

[68] Namely, the assassination of the warrior Doublehead in the barn of Blackburn's schoolmaster Jonathan Blacke, and the illegal transport of over 2,200 gallons of whiskey belonging to Blackburn, a one-time large-scale dealer in liquor, through the Cherokee and Creek nations. For more on the demise of Blackburn's missionary efforts in the Cherokee Nation, see Dorothy C. Bass, "Gideon Blackburn's Mission to the Cherokees: Christianization and Civilization," in *Journal of Presbyterian History (1962–1985)* 52, no. 3 (Fall 1974): 203–226; and William G. McLoughlin, "Parson Blackburn's Whiskey and the Cherokee Indian Schools, 1809–1810," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 57, no. 4 (Winter 1979): 427–445.

Baptist emphasis on preaching from the heart also coincided with Cherokees' oratorical tradition. By "opening their missionary ranks to young Cherokee men who possessed the talent and earnestness to preach from the Great Book," Baptists created "a new avenue for advancement and influence" that maintained Cherokee values (of good public speaking) in a community that was increasingly governed by the norms of white America.[69] While the way grew ever narrower as the call for removal intensified, Cherokees continued to bend biblical literacy to their particular cultural needs.

A CHRISTIAN CHEROKEE NATIONAL IDENTITY: THE BIBLE AND MISSION SCHOOL GIRLS

By the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, while the effort to Christianize the Cherokee nation was for the most part floundering, in most other respects—population, legal sophistication, administrative structure, education, resources, productivity, and enterprise—the Cherokee were rapidly recovering strength and sovereignty according to white measures of "civilization," as McLoughlin sums up neatly:

> Statistical measurements of economic growth are available by comparing the censuses of 1809, 1826, and 1835. The censuses reveal an astonishing though incomplete picture of advances in numerous aspects of Cherokee life. . . . In addition, the codified laws of the nations from 1808 to 1827 reveal the rapid elaboration of their executive, legislative, judicial, and administrative structure, especially after 1819, culminating in their constitution of 1827. The number of schools and churches in the nation grew rapidly after 1819 and so did enrollments; literacy increased. In addition, less precise but more dramatic indices are available from the development of important new institutions, such as the capital town of New Echota, the first printed Cherokee book of laws, and their bilingual newspaper. Visitors to the nation in the 1820s wrote admiringly of their prosperity and good order, making the Cherokees the prime example in the public mind of Indian progress—"the most civilized tribe in America."[70]

[69] McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 160.

[70] McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renascence*, 279. Of course, these incredible accomplishments, though they more than proved the Cherokees' ability to thrive according to American standards of industry and politics, only made their land more desirable:

> The primary and persistent goal of the white people was to dispossess the Cherokees of a generation of hard-won farms, plantations, roads, ferries, orchards, pastures, trading stores, mills,

Ironically, the preconditions necessary for the Cherokee to earn that title—"most civilized tribe in America"—may have derived from the cultural trait that most alarmed missionaries and other visitors: Cherokee women had a high degree of power and autonomy not only relative to Euro-American women, but relative even to other Native Americans.[71] Women were at the forefront of the "economic self-sufficiency and political self-determination" that marked what McLoughlin refers to as the "Cherokee renascence" of the early nineteenth century, the first to embrace new farming techniques, industries like cloth manufacture, and American trade goods.[72] At the same time, the transformation of gender roles was one of the most important components of the United States government's civilization plan, as well as being a crucial step in missionaries' efforts to turn Cherokee into proper Christians. For these reasons, Cherokee women's responses to the Bible and Christian education are particularly significant factors in understanding this chapter of the Bible's history. Namely, when Cherokee women and girls adopted Christianity or assented to be Christianized (for instance, by attending mission schools), this generally entailed a serious reduction in their degree of personal power relative to men; at the same time, by embracing the Bible, Christianity, or missionary education in the knowledge that their people were, in Catharine

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> cotton gins—all the features of a thriving frontier community, not to mention their still untapped timber and mineral resources in the woods, hills, and mountains surrounding their settled towns and villages. Frontier politicians . . . who persisted in describing the Cherokees as "hunters" and "savages" did so in order to sustain a stereotype in the public mind that would excuse their seizure of the Cherokees' farms and towns. The frontier whites complained that these "savages" were not making the most of the tremendous resources of their region, yet the more rapidly the Cherokees succeeded in doing so, the more eager the whites became to take it from them. It was the achievements, not the failures, of the Cherokees that had continued to haunt white Americans all these years. (278)

[71] See Theda Perdue, "Southern Indians and the Cult of True Womanhood," in *The Web of Southern Social Relations: Women, Family, and Education*, ed. Walter J. Fraser, Jr., R. Frank Saunders, Jr. and Jon L. Wakelyn (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 38. Although all southern Indians were matrilineal and matrilocal, "Cherokee women had the highest degree of power and personal autonomy. . . . In fact, Cherokee women were probably as far from the 'true women' of the early nineteenth-century ideal as any women Anglo-Americans encountered on the continent."

[72] Mcloughlin, *Cherokee Renascence*, 277.

Brown's words, "on the brink of destruction" (in the form of removal from their ancestral lands), Cherokee women and girls retained their traditional roles as tribal leaders, doing what they could to preserve the sovereignty of their people. The unique place of women in both Cherokee society and in the Christianization and civilization plans of white Americans gives us cause to view their religious responses as simultaneously Cherokee and Christian.

If the reactions of white Americans are any indication, gender roles marked the Cherokees' most serious departure from white Christian norms. Christian Americans, generally speaking, firmly endorsed patriarchy, and Cherokee, though men and women had gender-specific roles and generally occupied separate spheres, viewed men and women as equals in terms of personal autonomy—freedom being one of the highest values in Cherokee society. Relative to white society, Cherokee women enjoyed considerable sexual freedom. Both men and women were free to choose their own sexual partners as long as they did not violate exogamy and avoided taboos around engaging in intercourse at inappropriate times or in inappropriate places. Cherokee norms condoned premarital sex and divorce, which were equally male and female prerogatives. Cherokee inheritance was strongly matrilineal; for instance, the mother's brother, not the biological father, was the most important male relative in a child's life. Residence patterns were matrilocal—that is, husbands lived in the homes and among the clans of their wives. In the event of divorce, women retained their property and men returned to the homes of their mothers. Marriages required the approval of both clans in the form of consent from older women: the groom obtained permission from his clan grandmother, the bride from her mother's sister, or a grandmother or great aunt. Women were influential in political as well as social and familial affairs, voting and participating actively at council meetings, and occasionally even fighting alongside men in war.

Most significant for Cherokee—and particularly shocking to white visitors—was the fact that women farmed in a society whose livelihood was dependent on harvests. Women performed almost all the manual labor of farming (men assisted in clearing fields and planting corn), while men focused on hunting and warfare.[73] The associations of men and women with particular kinds of labor was so strong, as Perdue explains, that nineteenth-century Cherokee would ask upon the birth of a child, "Is it a bow or a sifter?":

> A bow, the weapon of war and implement of hunting for centuries, epitomized masculinity; the sifter, essential to making bread, was woman's most important tool. . . . The primary function of these loosely woven baskets was processing corn. Women were intimately associated with corn—the same Cherokee word, selu, means both woman and corn—which they planted, tended, and harvested. . . . For the Cherokees, sifters, like women, represented both production and sustenance.[74]

Selu was also the name of the Corn Mother, honored during the Green Corn Ceremony for, according to tradition, sacrificing her life so that her sons, and through them all Cherokee, could be fed. Selu's ability to provide food and sustain life had been passed on to all Cherokee women.

While Cherokee women may have regarded farming as a privilege and an honor, missionaries and other white visitors to Cherokee country, however, saw them working in fields and assumed they had been forced into manual labor by men. William Medill, the commissioner of Indian Affairs, viewed the farming native woman as "the drudge and the slave," and hailed the civilization process that brought her to her "true position": "her labor is transferred from the field to her household—to the care of her family and children."[75] Others mocked the degree of power

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[73] On gender roles in Cherokee society and Euro-American efforts to transform them, see Perdue, "Southern Indians and the Cult of True Womanhood." As Carol Johnston notes, "survival depended on the balance of male and female contributions" ("Burning Beds, Spinning Wheels, and Calico Dresses," *Journal of Cherokee Studies* 19 [1998]: 4).

[74] Perdue, "Introduction," in *Sifters*, 3.

[75] William Medill to W. L. Marcy, Secretary of War, "Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs," in *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Transmitted with the Message of the President at the Opening of the Second Session of the Thirtieth Congress* (Washington, DC: Wendell and Van Benthuysen, 1848–1849), 5.

Cherokee women held in their own tribe, as when the trader James Adair commented that the Cherokees

> have been a considerable while under a petticoat-government, and allow their women full liberty to plant their brows with horns as oft as they please, without fear of punishment. On this account their marriages are ill observed, and of a short continuance; like the Amazons, they divorce their sighing bed-fellows, at their pleasure, and fail not to execute their authority, when their fancy directs tem to a more agreeable choice.[76]

Missionary Jeremiah Evarts was stunned by the apparent lack of shame in Cherokee children: "Boys and girls in their teens would strip and go in to bathe or play ball together naked. They would also use the most disgusting indecent language without the least sense of shame. But when better instructed, they became reserved and modest."[77] Over and over, traders, government agents, and missionaries interpreted Cherokee women according to a Euro-American standard as either the slaves of Cherokee men, because they performed farm labor, or their masters, because of their degree of sexual and political power.

But the interpretations of these visitors may have been motivated by more than cultural differences: the transformation of gender roles would turn out to be key to dispossessing the Cherokee of their land. The Cherokees' livelihood depended on a balance of provisions from women's communal farming and men's hunting. The majority of land held by the Cherokee were these hunting grounds, owned in common by the Nation. Converting Cherokee to the cult of domesticity and true womanhood, then, was about more than assimilation with American social standards; when Cherokee men became farmers, and when Cherokee women moved their focus from the community to their households, it became much easier for the United States to buy or incorporate their land. The United States needed to convert the Cherokee to free market

[76] James Adair, *The History of the American Indians* (London: E. & C. Dilly, 1775), 146.

[77] Jeremiah Evarts, memoranda relative to the Cherokee Mission, no. 1, April and May, 1822. Cited in Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 165.

capitalism and private property. While some Americans wanted to simply remove or exterminate any tribe on land the United States wanted, President Washington and his Secretary of War Henry Knox, who also wanted the land, thought that treating tribes as sovereign nations and slowly civilizing them would be a less costly way to get it. Before he had even entered the office of Secretary of War, Knox wrote to Washington about his plan to "gain the affections" of the Indians and "attach them to the interest of the Union": "Were it possible to introduce among the Indian tribes a love for exclusive property it would be a happy commencement of the business."[78] Land held privately by individual Cherokee was not only easier for the United States to control, it also eroded the power of Cherokee who still viewed land communally to maintain their lands held in common.[79]

Both the government and the missionaries it subsidized played a part in this effort to teach Cherokee men to be landowners and Cherokee women to be housewives. The government provided Cherokee men with plows and taught them to clear fields, till soil, and build fences. President Washington, apparently ignorant of traditional gender roles, advised Cherokee men that they could increase their yield of corn using plows, and still have time to grow wheat and other grains. "To these," he continued, "you will easily add flax and cotton which you may dispose of to the White people, or have it made up by your own women into clothing for

[78] Henry Knox to George Washington, July 7, 1789, 66. A few years later, Knox commented solemnly on the effectiveness of this strategy: "It is a melancholy reflection that our modes of population have been made more destructive to the Indian nations than the conduct of the conquerors of Mexico and Peru. The evidence of this is the utter extermination of nearly all the Indians in the most populous parts of the Union. A future historian may mark the causes of this destruction of the human race in sable colors" (Henry Knox to George Washington, 29 December 1794, in Third Congress, *The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States* [Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1849], 1401).

[79] On Indian diplomacy during Washington's presidency, see Michael P. Riccards, "The Tribes and the Long Knives," in *A Republic, If You Can Keep It: The Foundation of the American Presidency, 1700–1800* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 114–127. On Cherokee understanding of property, see McLoughlin, "Cherokee Anomie."

yourselves."[80] Appropriately for this scheme, Cherokee women were sent cotton cards, spinning wheels, and looms.[81] But the United States was "not able to accomplish a shift in gender roles merely by introducing the tools and techniques of Western culture."[82] Because farming was considered women's work, Cherokee men were required to radically alter their views of masculinity in order to take up farming. Instead, women continued to do most of the farming. Some used the plows sent by the government to plant new crops, including cotton, and many even raised livestock. In addition to these new agricultural tasks, women also eagerly embraced cloth manufacture. In 1810 a Cherokee man noted that "the females have however made much greater progress toward civilization than the males; they now manufacture a great quantity of cloth; but the latter have not made proportionate progress in agriculture."[83] Another Cherokee account recalled that while the men had (correctly, it turned out) regarded the agricultural instruction of the United States government as "some refined scheme calculated to gain an influence over us," the women had been given cotton seeds, cards, wheels, and looms, and had "acquired the use of them with great facility, and now most of the clothes we wear are of their manufacture."[84] Women did not uncritically adopt these implements and industries, however; just as they did not give up farming, as the spinning wheels were meant to induce them to do, they adapted other American goods to their own specifically Cherokee needs—for instance,

[80] George Washington, "Washington and the Cherokees" [reprinted address], *Cherokee Phoenix*, March 20, 1828, https://www.wcu.edu/library/DigitalCollections/CherokeePhoenix/Vol1/no05/washington-and-the-cherokees-page-1-column-4-5-and-page-2-column-1.html (accessed January 8, 2019).

[81] In a speech soliciting funds for a printing press, typesets, and a national academy in the Cherokee Nation, founder and editor of the *Cherokee Phoenix* Elias Boudinot listed "467 looms," "2,488 spinning wheels," and "2,943 ploughs" in a catalogue of the implements of civilization owned by the Cherokee ("An Address to the Whites," in *Cherokee Editor: The Writings of Elias Boudinot*, ed. Theda Perdue [Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983], 72).

[82] Perdue, "Southern Indians and the Cult of True Womanhood," 40.

[83] Report from Willstown, October 10, 1828, American Board Papers. Cited in Perdue, "Southern Indians and the Cult of True Womanhood," 40.

[84] John Norton, *The Journal of John Norton, 1816*, ed. Carl F. Klinck and James J. Talman (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1970), 36.

rather than replacing pottery with cast-iron trade pots in cooking, they broke up the iron pots and used the fragments to make hoes.[85]

Like the government, the missionaries had little luck in affecting gender roles on a large scale. Cherokee women's association with Selu and farming may have rendered Christianity even less attractive to them than it was to Cherokee men. Cherokee gender roles emphasized balance between men and women, just as Cherokee traditional religion emphasized balance within the community and balance with the natural world, equilibriums to which women, being responsible for harvests, might have been particularly attuned. Christianity, as expressed by antebellum missions to Native Americans, offered little control over physical phenomena (harvests, but also weather and illness, for example), emphasized dominion and submission rather than balance, and, in general, regarded the individual rather than the community as the primary unit of spiritual endeavor. Perhaps most significantly for Cherokee women, the Christianity proffered by missionaries seemed to regard men as the default form of human being (the articles of faith adopted by the ABCFM's Brainerd Mission in the Cherokee Nation read, "We believe that God created man holy in his own image"), and blamed women for the introduction of sin.[86] ABCFM missionary Sophia Sawyer wrote of her ministry to Cherokee women, "I pointed out the first deviation from virtue, & set a bad woman [Eve] before them in the most horrid light I was capable."[87] The concept of original sin, let alone women's responsibility for it, had little parallel in Cherokee mythology. A Cherokee man who related the biblical story of the fall to one missionary dealt with this by eliminating Eve so that the blame

[85] For examples of Cherokee "substitutions" of trade goods, see Michael A. Harmon, *Eighteenth-Century Lower Cherokee Adaptation and Use of European Material Culture*, Volumes in Historical Archaeology 2, ed. Stanley South (Columbia: South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, 1986).

[86] Articles of Faith and Covenant adopted by the Church of Christ at Chickamauga, September 28, 1817, ABCFM. Cited in Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700–1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 171.

[87] Sophia Sawyer to Jeremiah Evarts, October 19, 1827, ABCFM. Cited in Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 171.

lay exclusively with Adam: "The first man plucked the fruit of the forbidden tree; he looked on it—it was fair; he smelt it—it was fragrant; he tasted—and was ruined."[88] In light of its comparatively negative portrayals of women, scholars have wondered what use or meaning Cherokee women could have found in the Bible; as Perdue asks, "Selu gave people corn and beans; Eve took an apple and gave them sin. Why would anyone want to abandon the Corn Mother?"[89]

As the removal crises multiplied and intensified, however, the Bible, literacy, and Christianity could be extremely useful to Cherokee women and girls.[90] Peggy Scott Vann Crutchfield, maternal niece of the second principal chief of the Cherokee Nation and the first Cherokee converted by the Moravians at Springplace, was both a staunch nationalist and cultural progressive—she longed equally "for the Cherokee people to accept Christianity, and for the Cherokee Nation to retain its homelands."[91] As principal speaker for the Beloved Women (*Ghigau*, highly respected elder Cherokee women)[92] of the Cherokee Nation, Scott used Christian language to agitate for Cherokee rights, as when she rebuked US officials for ratifying an 1817 removal treaty:

> Our neighboring white people seem to aim at our destruction. They have not the fear of God before their eyes; they seem not to believe in a Savior; they set wicked examples before the poor, ignorant Indians; they insult our poor people

[88] Cited in Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 171.

[89] Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 171.

[90] McLoughlin identifies at least four distinct removal crises, 1808–1810, 1817–1819, 1828, and 1835–1838 (*Cherokee Renascence*, 146–162, 411–427. On the conditions which led to the second removal crisis, see McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 107–108. On women's response to the second removal crisis, see Tiya Miles, "'Circular Reasoning': Recentering Cherokee Women in the Antiremoval Campaigns," *American Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (June, 2009): 221–243.

[91] Miles, "'Circular Reasoning,'" 228.

[92] Along with War Women, Beloved Women maintained a powerful influence in the Cherokee Nation into the early nineteenth century. Their political power was still considerable during the second removal crisis. As Miles writes, "In 1817, when representative Cherokee women wished to speak on political matters, Cherokee men in power still listened" ("'Circular Reasoning,'" 225).

> who bear it patiently. I cannot help but cease from weeping to our merciful Savior to show mercy to us, and help from the land of our oppressors.[93]

This appeal to Christian morality was a relatively new but powerful tool in the kit of some Cherokee activists. The ability to use white Americans' own "great book" against them to argue for the rights of Cherokee and the guilt of white people—as when Scott subtly compared the Cherokee to the Israelites and implored her audience on behalf of "the dear crucified Savior, who shed his blood for the red, as well as white people"—proved a worthwhile incentive for some Cherokee women and girls to risk parlaying their high standing in Cherokee society into Christian womanhood.[94]

Several girls found their Christian Cherokee voices at the ABCFM's Brainerd mission school, established in 1817 by Cyrus Kingsbury. Supported by influential American business and political leaders (some of the Board's members were congressmen), the ABCFM were vocally anti-removal, with the clout back it up. Their monthly journal and annual report were read by a wide audience of American voters. They were also well funded and organized compared to previous missionary efforts, and thereby better equipped, it seemed, to provide an education to the Nation's children, which was still the primary concern of Cherokee parents and the National Council. In the midst of a second removal crisis, however, and perhaps enticed by the ABCFM's influence in the United States, many Cherokee were by this point more willing to accept that English-language literacy would not be taught without Christianity. The ABCFM missionaries were relatively free to teach children according to their own standards. The school day lasted from 5:30 am until 9:00 pm, and the curriculum included English, geography, arithmetic, history, and constant religious instruction. Boys "chopped wood and plowed fields, and the girls milked,

[93] [Peggy Scott Vann Crutchfield] to Honored Sir [likely Thomas McKenney], January 15, 1818, in *The Missionary Herald at Home and Abroad*, vol. 15 (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1819), 75.

[94] Ibid.

set tables, cooked meals, washed dishes, sewed clothing, knitted, quilted, did laundry, and cleaned the houses."[95]

Students at schools like Brainerd thus bore an inordinate amount of pressure from Cherokee, missionaries, and the United States government to prove that their people could become "civilized" and should not be removed from their lands. Girls in particular bore the responsibility of demonstrating Cherokee's potential to "civilize" and their right to retain their ancestral lands. Though boys consistently outnumbered girls in mission schools, girls were missionaries' featured examples, and their ability to emulate missionary conceptions of "true womanhood" gave particular testament to the school's success. The transformation of native girls in terms of their clothing and acquisition of skills associated with domesticity, especially sewing, seems to have been for missionaries the best evidence of the change they were effecting. As one missionary at Brainerd wrote, the Brainerd girls were destined "to elevate the families in some degree, with which they are connected."[96] In addition to the positive influence the girls' enacted via educational and domestic achievements, the missionaries "clearly believed that the female students in mission school were more serious about religion than were the male students."[97] However, female students may also have taken to the missionaries' efforts more readily than boys because of the tradition of women's leadership in their tribal communities. That is, the acculturation of Cherokee girls should not be seen as passive capitulation to a dominant culture, but rather potentially active participation in brokering between two cultures, and in defining a new literate Christian Cherokee culture.

[95] Perdue, "Southern Indians and the Cult of True Womanhood," 41.
[96] Lucy A. Butler to Daniel Green, September 29, 1832, ABCFM. Cited in Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 165.
[97] Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 167.

Annual examinations at Brainerd, which often spotlighted female students, were public events aimed at demonstrating both the missionaries' success and the Cherokees' willingness and ability to learn and acculturate.[98] They were attended by parents, visitors, and members of the American Board, and were even covered by the press. A reporter for the *Cherokee Phoenix* rode forty-five miles to report on one such examination. The reporter entered to find that "the girls were reading part of the tenth chapter of Acts," in which Peter receives a vision that is often interpreted as initiating the mission to Gentiles—a fitting parallel, perhaps, for the mission to the Cherokee. "Nearly all the girls read fluently," he continued, "and answered promptly to the questions proposed by the teacher on the leading facts contained in the chapter." Next, "after a prayer," all the children "were examined in spelling [and] reading, in which, in point of correctness, they excelled in a remarkable degree. We do not recollect of having heard a single mistake in spelling, and in reading they were equally correct, except in pronunciation one would discover, that some had not yet mastered the English language." The article's only truly critical note is directed toward the boys, who "gave their visitors specimens of their oratorical powers." In this area so valued by the Cherokee, the *Phoenix* found the boys "deficient," but blamed this, counterintuitively, on their "possessing too much the common diffidence of Indians." The highest praise the reporter reserved for the girls, who closed the show, so to speak, "by repeating an original dialogue . . . and by singing a Hymn":

> It was a feast to hear them sing. The most interesting sight to us was the exhibition the little girls made to their parents and friends of their womanship. According to our very feeble judgment, the improvement made by them in this department of their education was worthy of the highest commendation. The smallest girls, hardly three feet high, produced a fine quilt, which they had made

[98] Mission schools of various denominations held similar public performances of students' progress. Blackburn exhibited the students several times a year and often conducted the examinations himself, issuing prizes to those who performed best.

> with their own hands, for the benefit of a benevolent Society organized in the girls' School.[99]

The ABCFM also publicized these examinations through its annual reports. Of one "particularly gratifying" exam, they wrote that "in the school for girls, two of the pupils answered sixty two questions in geography, (many of the answers being very long and complicated,) without any mistake, except in regard to the southern boundary of one of the United States."[100] The girls were somewhat oddly singled out again later on in the report: "The number of pupils here is about fifty; of whom rather more than half are boys. Some of the girls are beginning to show quite a fondness for reading."[101] Perhaps just as adult Cherokee women had outpaced men in adjusting to and adopting (though selectively) the goods and technologies introduced by the US government, young Cherokee girls were at the forefront of selectively adopting missionary education.

Female students not only received the most attention in glowing reviews of Brainerd; they also appear to have been tasked with the responsibility of writing to benefactors. One small collection of letters solicited and copied by Brainerd teacher Lucy Ames suggests that she encouraged her students to write about their positive experiences at the school to their friends and family, donors and potential donors, members of the ABCFM, and even to the President of the United States.[102] These letters provide a window into how young Cherokee mission students

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[99] "Examination of the School at Brainerd," *Cherokee Phoenix*, August 12, 1829, https://www.wcu.edu/library/DigitalCollections/CherokeePhoenix/Vol2/no19/new-echota-page-3-column-1a.html (accessed January 8, 2019). The article opened by noting that the number of "full blood Cherokees" at Brainerd "we believe is greater than in any other School in the nation, excepting, perhaps, the Valley Town School. We were much gratified to notice this . . . for we have always been impressed with the importance of special missionary attention to this class."

[100] "V. Mission Among the Cherokees," in *Eighteenth Annual Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, October, 1827* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1827), 104.

[101] Ibid.

[102] I am indebted to Michael C. Coleman's essay, "American Indian School Pupils as Cultural Brokers: Cherokee Girls at Brainerd Mission, 1828–1829," for alerting me to the existence of this collection of fifty or so letters. Written to white benefactors, Cherokee friends and family, and Choctaws, the letters are copies in the same hand, probably written out by the girls' teacher, Lucy Ames, before she sent them on to their recipients. With their

were influenced by the Bible and the Calvinist theology of ABCFM missionaries, but also into how they interpreted and applied those concepts to their multicultural context.

Recognizing the degree to which these students imbibed and internalized the messages of their teachers regarding religion, civilization, and gender helps us to appreciate the strength it must have taken for them to deviate from those messages in any way, or to direct the lessons they learned toward goals that suited their own needs and desires. Several of the letters express feelings of guilt and sinfulness. Nancy Reece (one of the two girls who correctly answered 62 geography questions at the examination discussed above) wrote that, "Among others the girls of this school have thought more about the Savior and that they were sinners. I have thought more than I did and some times I think that my heart is changed and at other times I am doubtful."[103] Ten-year-old Lucy McPherson realized that her spiritual status was an important factor in donors' sponsorship; in a letter to a "Mrs. Conner," she wrote, "I think you wish to know about my feelings I feel as though I am a great sinner and very wicked sinner. . . . When I sing I always felt very bad it seems that I was mocking God."[104] The girls also learned from the missionaries and perhaps from their acculturated families to be ashamed of Cherokee traditions.[105] Sally Reece, Nancy's sister, claimed that among the Cherokee there were "yet a great many bad customs but I hope all these things will soon be done away. They have thought more about the savior lately. I hope this nation will soon become civilized and enlightened."[106] When Elizabeth

varied voices and different levels of language sophistication, "they are undoubtedly verbatim copies" (125–126). The letter archive is contained in pages 1–62, Box 8, Folder 1 of the John Howard Payne Papers. Many of the letters are not dated, but they were all written between 1828 and 1829. In subsequent citations of these letters I refer to the author, recipient, and page number in the archive.

[103] Nancy Reece to Dear Madam, 1.

[104] Lucy McPherson to Mrs. Conner, 41.

[105] Coleman suggests that "most of these girls were probably from the acculturating 'middle class,' as only the Taylor name appears in McLoughlin and Conser's list of the forty-two elite families in 1835; the great majority of full-blood Cherokees constituted the third 'class' . . . . In July 1828, Nancy Reece claimed that six of twenty-one Brainerd girls were 'what is called full Cherokees'" ("American Indian School Pupils," 126 n. 13).

[106] Sally Reece to Respected Sir, 45.

Taylor's teacher asked her to write a Miss Abigail Parker about Cherokee practices, she understood that her task was to exoticize and entertain by listing practices likely to seem strange to outsiders; she wrote disapprovingly that "the unenlighted [*sic*] parts of this nation . . . keep up their amusements all night," "mutter over talk that cannot be understood," "torture themselves by scratching their bodies with snakes teeth," and "throw a black cat into the water, hang up a serpent &c."[107]

The lines between performance and earnestness are impossible to draw, and somewhat beside the point. Surely these children were influenced by their teacher and other missionaries; however, as Michael C. Coleman notes, "the varied voices and language levels lend credibility to the words."[108] Certainly the girls' religious experiences were instrumentalized by the ABCFM, the United States government, and the Cherokee Nation. But if they were to some degree mimicking the language of the adults around them (as do all children) or parroting back the expectations of the missionaries, they were also altering and extending those materials in unpredictable ways. When Elizabeth Taylor assented to describing traditional Cherokee religion to Miss Abigail Parker, she agreed only "because I think when Christians know how much we need the means of knowledge; They will feel the importance of sending missionaries."[109] Such statements put her goals in line with those of the missionaries, but also demonstrate her concern that other Cherokee have the opportunity to learn the good things she has learned at Brainerd. Her description of Cherokee religion positions her simultaneously as an insider and an outsider: her Cherokee status is what enables her to describe these practices, but her use of "they" suggests that she considers those who practice them to be distinct from herself. Her statement of anxious

[107] Elizabeth Taylor to Miss Abigail Parker, 13–14.
[108] Coleman, "American Indian School Pupils," 127.
[109] Elizabeth Taylor to Miss Abigail Parker, 13.

gratitude for her teachers captures this duel identity well: "I hope I feel thankful for the good that the missionaries are doing in bringing the word of God to this people."[110] The ambiguous "this people" potentially both includes and does not include her, and perhaps parallels her uncertain appreciation for the missionaries. Regardless of Taylor's ambivalence, however, she understood the purpose of her letter to be securing the "means of knowledge" for more Cherokee. Similarly, when Nancy Reece wrote, "I love to think about the Savior and love to pray to Him, and pray that there may be a survival of religion here," what should stand out is the way she situates religion in a particular place, "here," in the Cherokee Nation.[111]

Indeed, in spite of their identification with their teacher and their distaste for "unenlighted" Cherokee practices, in none of these letters do the girls express a desire or an expectation that they will ever live outside the Nation. The anxieties they express speak to the damage being done by racism and the removal crisis, but also evince their equally strong identification with and concern for the Cherokee people and their land.[112] Nancy Reece's concern that two white students "can do well because they are white girls" may have had to do

[110] Ibid., 14.

[111] Nancy Reece to Dear Madam, 1.

[112] Generally speaking, missionaries did not believe that Native Americans were racially inferior to whites, and were disappointed by the racist attitudes of many frontier Americans, which they viewed as unchristian. Missionaries nonetheless misunderstood and denigrated Cherokee culture for the ways in which it deviated from their Christian expectations, and impressed upon young mission school students the need of abandoning their traditional practices. Furthermore, the failure of most missionaries to even attempt to reach the "full-blood" Cherokee who constituted the vast majority of the population may have given the impression that they considered them beyond help. The Moravian minister John Gambold believed that Cherokee who clung to their original culture were doomed: "It seems desirable that their Language, Customs, Manner of Thinking, etc. should be forgotten. To brief, my Object, and I trust the object of all other missionaries, has been to rescue the Aboriginal Man himself from the Destruction that awaits his Race, rather than his History, Language, Customs, etc." (John Gambold to Reichel, July 23, 1809). Many other white people with whom the Cherokee interacted did believe in their racial inferiority. Federal agent Return J. Meigs argued that "the savage character cannot be effaced in the real [full-blood] Indian after he has arrived to manhood" (R. J. Meigs to Benjamin Hawkins, February 13, 1805). He favored intermarriage between white men and Cherokee women because he believed "that by this measure civilization is faster advanced than in any other way—having considered the whole human race as brothers" (R. J. Meigs to Chief Chulio and Chief Sour Mush, March 14, 1808). Like the missionaries, Meigs "was wrestling . . . rather inconsistently with the fundamental issues of racialism and cultural resistance"; functionally, "there was in fact little difference between missionary ethnocentrism and racism" (McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 69). On missionaries' racial understandings and Cherokee responses, see McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 67–72.

with her anxieties over her personal academic performance, but she expressed her hopes in collective terms: Miss Ames had told her that "people in the North think that the Cherokees have as good a genius to learn if it was only cultivated. And I think they have. I feel more encouraged to learn every day."[113] Elizabeth Taylor wrote to a white benefactor that "Many about this station are more civilized. Some come to meeting and appear as well as white people. . . . I have learned that the white people were once as degraded as this people; and that encourages me to think that this nation will soon become enlighted."[114] Ultimately, the girls did not trace their achievements to the influence of whites or to their own "white blood" (the majority of the girls were mixed-blood), but rather to the potential of the Cherokee people. As Lucy McPherson told a correspondent, "My teacher says that I can write as well as the scholars in the North if I try. . . . When Miss Ames first came into the school she said that 'can't' was a phrase which must not be allowed in school. In a short time I felt that I did not wish to use the word."[115]

The girls' belief in Cherokee potential is evinced by the instruction and encouragement they provided to other students and to their friends and family within the Nation. Within the school, older students tutored younger students, a system which provided the girls with fellow Cherokee to look up to and depend on in addition to the missionaries. Lucy McPherson explained that she had received help from another student and was now "writing a fine hand": "I begun about three months ago. First I began long marks. Betsy Taylor wrote it for me and begun it for me."[116] At Brainerd, as in many mission schools, bilingual children acted as interpreters for their teachers. Nancy Reece, who still spoke Cherokee as well as English, used this skill to aid and guide children who spoke no English (probably full-bloods), and thereby became a de facto

[113] Nancy Reece to Miss Electa Steele, 17.
[114] Elizabeth Taylor to Miss Abigail Parker, 13.
[115] Lucy McPherson to Rev. Fayette Shepherd, 48.
[116] Lucy McPherson to Jack and Susan McPherson, 36.

religious instructor herself: "I ask those children who do not talk English if they understood the sermon that was read . . . . I try to tell them how to spend the Sabbath day and tell them where they will go when they die if they are not good. When they first enter school if they are asked these questions they often say that they don't know."[117] Students also turned their influence to their families and neighbors back home. Twelve-year-old Lucy A. Campbell wrote of her aspirations to "take care of my mother's house, and to teach poor children who can not come to missionaries school."[118] Nancy Reece also hoped that Brainerd students could "take care of their houses and their brothers and sisters and perhaps can learn their parents something that they do not understand."[119] Lucy McPherson wrote to her parents, in language perhaps betraying the newness of her own Christian knowledge, "Mother and Father you must talk to my Brothers about God, who lives in heaven."[120] In a letter to her brother, whom she had not seen in five years (he was a student at another school), twelve-year-old Polly Wilson piled on the spiritual and educational advice with a heavy hand:

> Love your God and pray to him and you must not play on the sabbath; think about God, and you must mind your teachers and love your schoolmates. . . . You must not be idle in school. I hope that you are learning fast. You must study diligently, speak up plain and loud when you read. . . . Aunt Peggy McCoy's little boy is bu[r]nt to death by catching fire to his clothes. This is another call for us to repent of our sins. I hope you will think of this. From your affectionate
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> sister Polly Wilson[121]

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[117] Nancy Reece to Rev'd Fayette Shepherd, 22.

[118] Lucy A. Campbell to Miss Jane Speaker, 49. In referring to her family home as her "mother's house," Campbell may have been influenced by the missionaries' association of women and domesticity; however, matrilocal Cherokee maintained an even stronger association between women and dwellings. Indeed, according to traditional Cherokee social organization, women owned all buildings in a clan community. Another female student at Brainerd was thankful that the missionaries had taught them "how to take care of families that when we go home we can take care of our mothers house" (Lucy A. Butler to Daniel Green, 29 September 1832, cited in Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 165).

[119] Nancy Reece to Rev'd Fayette Shepherd, 22.

[120] Coleman notes that these letters demonstrate "the impact of schooling on traditional Cherokee respect for age" ("American Indian School Pupils," 129). However, "despite the challenge to adult authority, the very act of writing home in English must have impressed acculturating families" (ibid.). Students were likely aware of this fact, and their imperious instructions may also be part of the attempt to impress.

[121] Polly Wilson to Master John Wilson, 43.

The focus on school (especially reading and speaking English) and religion reflects, perhaps, that these were the two most important things in Polly's world; however, it likely also reflects her awareness that these two arenas were viewed by the missionaries and acculturating Cherokees alike as the key to proving Cherokees' worthiness to remain on their ancestral lands. The urgent tone of the letter is suggestive of the Calvinistic emphasis on sin and the immediate need of repentance, but also, perhaps, of the need to appear Christian and civilized quickly. Many missionary students, like Polly, emphasize the speed with which religious and academic knowledge must be acquired. Susan Taylor, younger sister of Elizabeth (and the other girl to answer 62 geography questions at the aforementioned public examination), summed up the responsibility many girls felt when she wrote, "We ought to strive to learn very fast, so we can teach our brothers and sisters and other heathn [*sic*] children."[122]

The girls' concern about the possibility of removal and the need to learn quickly is also felt in their letters to people outside the Nation, many of which take up the responsibility of advocating for the Cherokee people. "First I will tell you about the Cherokees," wrote Sally Reece, in words designed to win support for her tribe. "I think they improve. They have a printing press and print a paper which is called the Cherokee Phoenix. They come to meetings on Sabbath days." She offered her own family as the perfect picture of the success of civilization efforts: "My Father works in the field Mother spins and weaves."[123] As Coleman notes, not only did missionaries seize on "the unique impact of letters penned by Indian children to potential supporters," the girls also "could sense their own exotic value."[124] Lucy A. Campbell acknowledged as much when she wrote to a benefactor, "I think that you would be as well

[122] Susan Taylor to Jeremiah Everts, 55.
[123] Sally Reece to Respected Sir, 45.
[124] Coleman, "American Indian School Pupils," 131.

pleased to receive a letter from a Cherokee girl as you would from a child that had been educated better."[125] Many of the letters were written in response to supporters who provided gifts like clothes, books, and sewing supplies, and along with them the students sent their own handicrafts, perhaps out of "what remained of the girls' Cherokee sense of reciprocity," but also to serve as tangible evidence of Cherokee potential.[126] "We have sent many Specimens of our work to different parts of the United States," wrote Lucy A. C. Reece, "and we are very happy to hear that people are pleased with them and that they are convinced that Indians can learn."[127] Christiana McPherson wrote to President Andrew Jackson, it seems, in order to intervene in another group's gift-giving. "We hear the Cherokees were going to send you a mink skin and a pipe," she wrote:

> We thought that would make you laugh; and the Scholars asked our teacher if they might make you a present and she told us that she did not know as there was anything suitable in the whole establishment. Then she looked among the articles of the girls society and told me that I might make you a pocket book. Will you please accept it from a little Cherokee girl aged nine years.[128]

Perhaps McPherson and the other girls were worried that the mink and pipe would seem too exotic, and would fail to demonstrate to President Jackson the Cherokees' potential to civilize. Perhaps they were embarrassed when they heard that such a traditional gift was being sent by members of a group to which they still belonged, and preferred to be represented by a gift that better reflected their own "progress," a gift sewn with materials donated by the civilized North, and sent to a government that had been very concerned that Cherokee women learn to sew.[129]

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[125] Lucy A. Campbell to Miss Sarah Perry, 61.
[126] Coleman, "American Indian School Pupils," 131.
[127] Lucy Reece to the young Choctaw acquaintances of Col. Laflore, 33–34.
[128] Christiana McPherson to the President, 31.
[129] Books and sewing paraphernalia were the most common items donated to the Brainerd mission, according to logs kept by the missionaries. One representative catalog of items received in a charitable shipment lists "79 knots stocking yarn, 72 yds cloth, 161 garments, 38 knots thread, 56 skeins silk, gimblets, needles, combs, pins, awls, knitting needles, ink stand, books, tracts &c &c." Another lists "5 skeins yarn, 45 yds cloth, 36 garments, testaments, spelling books &c"; another, "75 garments, needle books, work pockets, Bibles, other small books &c

Likely both the girls and the Cherokees who sent the mink and pipe both hoped that their gifts would have some effect on President Jackson's attitude toward Native Americans. Jackson had called for removal in his 1829 State of the Union address, and the Indian Removal Act would be passed the next year. The girls wrote letters of support and thanks to missionary Jeremiah Evarts, secretary of the ABCFM and perhaps the foremost white activist on behalf of American Indian rights in the antebellum era. "We heard you was at Washington," wrote twelve-year-old Ann Bush, "and I think you are pleading for the Cherokees that they may stay in their own country."[130] Referring to President Jackson, Nancy Reece wrote to a correspondent, "I do not think that all the people are friends to the Cherokees. . . . Perhaps [the president] does not like the laws of the Indian tribe for he says 'This state of things requires that a remedy should be provided.'"[131] Reece's letter quoted the angry words of younger students (sentiments, perhaps, with which she agreed but wanted to avoid expressing herself): "I have been talking to the children about it and one says 'if the white people want more land let them go back to the country where they came from,' another says 'they have more land than they can use, what do they want to get ours for?'"[132] Reece bookended these frustrations with reminders of the strides Cherokees had made toward "civilization." She wrote that the girls "attend to domestick concerns and learn to make their own clothes and the clothes of the boys," skills which they could use "to assist"—and acculturate—their parents "when they go home." Reece also provided a subtle reminder that removal would end all this progress: "I will tell you something of our

&c." In chapter 3 I discuss the close association between reading and sewing for antebellum women, an association evident materially in these shipments.

[130] Ann Bush to Jeremiah Evarts, 50.

[131] Nancy Reece to Rev'd Fayette Shepherd, 21.

[132] Ibid., 21–22; Coleman, "American Indian School Pupils," 132.

happy school, so you may know how we shall feel if we should be separated from each other, and from our teachers and other missionaries."[133]

It is difficult to read these letters, written on the eve of the Indian Removal Act by such young girls under such extraordinary pressure, without feeling sad for them—that they were taught to be ashamed of their own people, that they ever worried that they were inferior to white children, and that they bore the weight of the removal crisis on their backs. But to view the girls this way, as merely the victims of adults' racism, greed, and arrogance, does them a disservice; to view them simplistically as products of their circumstances is to miss everything they made of those circumstances. Religion and education were the raw materials with which they had to work, but they used those materials in surprising and complex ways. Though in general they shared the missionaries' scorn for traditional Cherokee practices, they remained influenced by them; their determination, for instance, to do what they could to fight against removal was inspired, it seems, as much by their love for their school as it was by their sense that the land belonged to them as Cherokee, as Nancy Reece's letter demonstrates. They combined their identities in other creative ways—for instance, by starting their own missionary organization within Brainerd, in the hope that "perhaps we shall have enough to support a heathen child."[134] They offered Indian children as examples to white children, writing in a letter to their teacher's young sister, "Some of the little girls [at Brainerd] rather have their books to read than to play. I hope you keep to your books and try to learn all you can."[135] They enlisted religious Americans to "pray for the Cherokees," employing all the benefits of their new God on behalf of their old people.[136] Like most children, they tried to please their parents. Sally Reece worked hard at

[133] Nancy Reece to Rev'd Fayette Shepherd, 22.
[134] Nancy Reece to Mrs. Thankful Holton, 29.
[135] Nancy Reece to Elizabeth Ames, 19.
[136] Ann Bush to Rev. Mr. Patter, 44.

school because her father believed it was "a great privilege to learn to read," while Elizabeth Taylor wrote with pride, "Father is very well satisfied with my improvement this last season."[137] Whatever the political implications of their education, they were excited by and grateful for the chance to learn: "If [the missionaries] had not come out to teach us we should not have known any thing about the Bible or any other reading."[138] "I love my school very much," wrote Nancy Reece; "I love it better every year."[139] The girls wrote with enthusiasm and pride of hearing about the wider world ("I can see such things when Miss Ames is telling me about them") and of their own academic achievements ("We understand it better than I expected. . . . I think I will try hard and I shall continue it better after a while").[140]

As Coleman acknowledges, "more than pupils at most white schools and more than Indian children within tribal patterns of education, the girls at Brainerd had to bear heavy responsibilities."[141] But their own words invite us to view them not as tragically caught on the margins between two worlds, but rather as firmly grounded in one "complex world of multiple loyalties," a world they were actively building in their own Christian Indian image.[142] Like many Cherokee (and like many missionaries), they believed that adopting Christian religion and English-language literacy would help them to resist removal. But neither can their cultural work be read entirely in the terms of resistance to domination by white Americans. Neither Cherokee nor Christian identity can wholly capture them. Though the only literacy offered them was biblical (in the sense that it was provided by missionaries, oriented toward the Bible, and taught

[137] Elizabeth Taylor to Miss Flora McDonald, 3.
[138] Lucy A. Campbell to Miss Sarah Perry, 61.
[139] Nancy Reece to Dear Madam, 1.
[140] Nancy Reece to Electa Steele, 17.
[141] Coleman, "American Indian School Pupils," 135.
[142] L. G. Moses and Raymond Wilson, "Introduction," in *Indian Lives: Essays on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Native American Leaders*, ed. Moses and Wilson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 3–4.

through Christian rhetoric and practice), their own literate practices were necessarily and demonstrably not exclusively white, American, and Christian, but also Cherokee.

CHEROKEE EXODUS: THE BIBLE ON THE TRAIL OF TEARS

"The Bible story kills the Indian tradition," wrote the ethnographer James Mooney, "and there is no amalgamation."[143] In his study of Cherokee myths, Mooney dismissed all supposed evidence of syncretism between Christianity and traditional Cherokee religion as the product of missionary ignorance and misunderstanding:

> It is hardly necessary to say that stories of a great fish which swallows a man and of a great flood which destroys a people are found the world over. The supposed Cherokee hero-god, Wâsi, described by one writer as so remarkably resembling the great Hebrew lawgiver is in fact that great teacher himself, Wâsi being the Cherokee approximate for Moses, and the good missionary who first recorded the story was simply listening to a chapter taken by his convert from the Cherokee testament.[144]

Mooney was thinking in particular of ABCFM missionary Daniel S. Butrick. Butrick was passionately dedicated to the notion that the Cherokee were descended from one of the lost tribes of Israel; he believed that if he could prove this, it would undeniably demonstrate the injustice of removal, and to that end he conducted interviews with Cherokee informants to discover links between Christian and Cherokee religious traditions. Mooney seems to suggest that in his enthusiasm Butrick mistook, perhaps willfully, Cherokee retellings of biblical stories for independently developed ancient myths. Citing Butrick's *Indian Antiquities*, Mooney notes that one "migration legend . . . is unfortunately so badly mixed up with the Bible story that it is almost impossible to isolate as genuine." In this legend, the aforementioned Wâsĭ—whom Butrick identifies as the Cherokees' "greatest prophet" but whom Mooney recognizes is "simply

[143] Mooney, *Myths*, 235.
[144] Ibid., 236.

Moses"—leads a people "in search of a far distant country where they may be safe from their enemies." "Soon after setting out they come to a great water," continues Mooney, summarizing Butrick, "which Wâsĭ strikes with his staff; the water divides so that they pass through safely, and then rolls back and prevents pursuit by their enemies. They then enter a wilderness and come to a mountain, and we are treated to the Bible story of Sinai and the tables of stone." Though this legend plainly exhibits the influence of the Bible (and for the most part, perhaps, represents merely the translation of the Bible into Cherokee thought and language), even Mooney admits the possibility that it has been integrated with older Cherokee myths. In this Cherokee version of the Exodus, Wâsĭ receives not only the tablets, but also "sacred fire from heaven, which thereafter they carry with them until the house in which it is kept is at last destroyed by a hostile invasion." Mooney notes that this last part of the myth "seems to be genuine," relating it to a Cherokee story of an everlasting fire kept burning in a sacred mound at the foundation of a townhouse.[145]

Mooney was frustrated by these instances of syncretism because his interest was in recovering and recording older, pre-contact Cherokee myths which he regarded as "genuine." But the integration of Cherokee and Christian mythology went back at least to the seventeenth century, when sustained contact with traders from Virginia and South Carolina began; even if missionaries were rarely successful in converting Cherokee, the Christian foundations of European culture nonetheless marked interactions between white and Indian people, as did the traditions of native cultures. This influence went back so far that it was impossible even for

[145] Ibid., 428–429. On the mound with constant fire, see 395–397. If Mooney is correct, perhaps this syncretic inclusion was inspired by the pillar of fire provided to guide the Israelites in Exodus 13:21–22. For Butrick's account of this myth, which he believed "could not have been learned from the Bible," see John Howard Payne and Daniel Sabin Butrick, *The Payne-Butrick Papers: Volumes 4, 5, 6*, ed. William L. Anderson, Jane L. Brown, and Anne F. Rogers (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 26–27.

many nineteenth-century Cherokee to separate the two. Editor and founder of the *Cherokee Phoenix* Elias Boudinot, attempting to convince white Christians that the Cherokee shared many of their basic beliefs, told them that

> they believed in a Supreme Being, the Creator of all, the God of the white, the red, and the black man. They also believed in the existence of an evil spirit who resided, as they thought, in the setting sun, the future place of all who in their life time had done iniquitously. Their prayers were addressed alone to the Supreme Being, and if written would fill a large volume and display much sincerity, beauty and sublimity. When the ancient customs of the Cherokees were in their full force, no warrior thought himself secure, unless he had addressed his guardian angel; no hunter could hope for success, unless before the rising sun he had asked the assistance of his God, and on his return at eve he had offered his sacrifice to him.[146]

But as McLoughlin points out, this description of Cherokee beliefs reflects "Boudinot's own amalgamation of traditional and Christian concepts. He was depicting what during his youth (he was born in 1803) was already a syncretic position, a century beyond its precontact form."[147] The idea, for instance, that the Great Spirit was "the God of the white, the red, and the black man" marked a dramatic reorientation of Cherokees' religious self-understanding, an accommodation similar to Joseph Smith's extensions of Christian scripture to explain the existence of Native Americans. Like most if not all religious beliefs, syncretic beliefs develop in response to events which are difficult to explain and questions which are difficult to answer. The context of Cherokee traditional religion had been to some degree Christianized for well over a century by the 1830s; why should religious responses and traditions of the post-contact period be considered less authentically Cherokee than those prior to contact?

The Indian Removal Act and especially the Treaty of New Echota in 1835 catalyzed revivals of Cherokee religion and bitterness toward missionaries, the Bible, and Christianity. The

[146] Boudinot, "An Address to the Whites," 73.
[147] McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 346.

rift between acculturated and conservative Cherokee deepened as these identities came to line up with pro- and anti-removal positions. This bitterness culminated in the 1839 assassinations of those who had taken part in the Treaty of New Echota, including Boudinot, by anti-removal supporters of Principal Chief John Ross. These events would inspire years of violent conflict on the Cherokees' new lands. Conjuring garnered renewed interest in the 1830s as, among other important functions, a way "to clearly identify oneself as a Cherokee," even among some of the more acculturated people.[148] For the first time, medicine men wrote down their rituals and myths in an effort to preserve them, but they didn't use English-language literacy to do it. Rather, they used the invention of one of their own, Sequoyah, whose writing system accomplished with virtually no effort or infrastructure what missionaries had been trying to do for decades by spreading literacy throughout the Nation, especially amongst the full-blood majority.[149] Resentment against the missionaries and Christianity was spreading as well. Sequoyah was "bitterly disappointed when his syllabary was appropriated by the missionaries to translate the Bible and other Christian works," and he was not alone.[150] Most damaging was the missionaries' adoption of a politically neutral policy after 1832. Like many of their fellows ministering to

[148] McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 342.

[149] McLoughlin estimates that two-thirds of Cherokee quickly became literate in Sequoyah's syllabary (*Cherokee Renascence*, 353). For data on the number of literate Cherokee, see William G. McLoughlin and Walter H. Conser, Jr., "The Cherokees in Transition: A Statistical Analysis of the Federal Cherokee Census of 1835," *Journal of American History* 64, no. 3 (December, 1977): 678–703.

[150] Other traditionalist Cherokee were displeased with the chiefs' 1824 decision to use money from the Cherokee National Treasury to translate the Bible into Sequoyah's syllabary (McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renascence*, 379). The missionaries were themselves ambivalent about this. In the end, however, "the grand consideration in favor of printing in Guess's alphabet," summed up ABCFM missionary Samuel Worcester, "is this[:] If books are printed in Guess's character, they will be read; if in any other, they will lie useless" ("The Syllabic Cherokee Alphabet," *Missionary Herald* 23, no. 7 [July, 1827], in *Missionary Herald, for the Year 1827*, 213). Worcester and eleven other missionaries were arrested in 1831 for their protest of a Georgia law that violated Cherokee sovereignty. All the missionaries were convicted and sentenced to four years of hard labor in state prison; nine of them accepted pardons and were released, but Worcester and Elizur Butler refused their pardons so that the Cherokee could appeal the case to the Supreme Court. The court ruled in favor of the Cherokees, and Worcester and Butler were released. However, Worcester's decision shortly thereafter to contract the pro-emigration Boudinot to help him translate the Bible into Sequoyan seemed to align him against Ross's anti-removal party.

enslaved blacks around this time, the missionaries in the Cherokee Nation reversed their more radical positions in favor of that perennially useful old evangelical chestnut about simply wanting to save souls.[151] In addition to the betrayal of many missionaries, the despair of the removal crisis also caused some Christian Cherokee to lose their faith. The Moravian Henry Clauder wrote of one of that group's few converts in 1837, "The troubles of this present time seem to destroy his enjoyment of Christ."[152]

As we have already seen, however, Christianity and Cherokee nationalism were far from mutually exclusive.[153] Ironically (or perhaps not), once the missionaries had abandoned their stations; once the adoption of Christianity had become a politically moot point, at least with regard to relations with the United States; once removal was an unavoidable reality, the Bible became a source of comfort and hope even for some of those previously uninterested in it. Christian Cherokee had once prayed for salvation in this life from the threat of removal; now, as they were forcibly expelled from their earthly home, some began to imagine that they would only truly be at home in the next life. The Cherokee minister Jesse Bushyhead wrote to his congregation from Washington, DC of the melancholy consolation he found in the fact that through this tragedy and injustice "many are now manifesting their love to God": "These troubles teach them that this world is not their home; these make them look forward to that city which hath foundations, and whose builder and maker is God; these teach them that they are but

[151] As McLoughlin puts it in the case of the ABCFM, the Board "had more far-ranging goals than it wished to stake on the Cherokees" (*Cherokee Renascence*, 331). On Southern evangelicals' reversal of their egalitarian and anti-slavery policies, see Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

[152] Henry Clauder, journal, May 4, 1837, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, PA. Cited in McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 342.

[153] Indeed, though the acculturated, Christianized Cherokee who constituted the so-called Treaty Party were viewed as traitors by many conservatives, they saw themselves as the nationalists and Ross's supporters as hypocrites.

strangers and pilgrims in this world."[154] A Choctaw account of that tribe's own forced migration west published in the *Cherokee Phoenix* in 1831 gave voice to the horror wrought by removal as well as providing instruction should the Cherokee soon face the same fate: "As the gospel has come into my heart I am happy. Although I leave my country and go away, my mind is to follow my Lord Jesus Christ wholly. . . . It will be long before we see each other; but our separation will not be eternal. Sometime we shall be seeing each other at the right hand of Jehovah our beloved Father."[155] In an 1832 Fast Day proclamation, John Ross wondered whether there might still be some hope that "an all wise Being" would "avert the dreaded evil," and asked all to pray, being "a rational and Christian community," "that the people may be united in sentiment and action for the good of the nation." In its introduction to Ross's request the *Cherokee Phoenix* spoke of the "need to go to the Ruler of the Universe in this day of deep affliction. We have been too long trusting to an arm of flesh, which has proved to be but a broken reed." It cited Psalm 136:3–5, "Put not your trust in Princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help."[156]

After 1832, Ross became something like an Old Testament prophet to his people as well as their chief. One-eighth Cherokee, a staunch nationalist, lieutenant under General Andrew Jackson in the Creek War, neither a committed Christian nor a practitioner of Cherokee traditional religion, Ross may seem an unlikely candidate for religious leadership.[157] Perhaps his

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[154] "Extract of a Letter from Mr. Bushyhead, Native Preacher at Amohee, Dated Washington City, May 3, 1836," in *The Baptist Missionary Magazine*, vol. 16 (Boston: John Putnam, 1836), 202.

[155] "The Choctaw Indians," *Cherokee Phoenix*, July 2, 1831, https://www.wcu.edu/library/DigitalCollections/CherokeePhoenix/Vol4/no02/the-choctaw-indians-page-1-column-3b-page-2-column-2a.html (accessed January 8, 2019).

[156] Proclamation of John Ross, *Cherokee Phoenix*, July 7, 1832, https://www.wcu.edu/library/DigitalCollections/CherokeePhoenix/Vol4/no49/cherokee-phoenix-page-2-column-1a.html (accessed January 8, 2019).

[157] It is impossible to say exactly where Ross stood with regard to religion. As McLoughlin explains,

> He never went through an evangelical conversion experience; it is not known whether he was ever baptized. He was clearly not a practitioner of the traditional Cherokee religion, for his family brought him up to be a whiteman, yet his marriage to a fulblood was apparently happy and she never joined a mission church or Methodist society . . . . She became something of a patriotic symbol after her death, for she died on the Trail of Tears.

position as someone who could have lived—and in many ways did live—as a white man, but instead chose to marry a full-blood Cherokee, to fiercely defend Cherokee sovereignty, and to lead the Cherokee people to the new Indian Territory accounts for his success compared to the missionaries. He spoke English much better than Cherokee, and so, like Moses, when he delivered his message to his people he did so through an interpreter. His message was, like him, ambiguously Christian and Cherokee, "a syncretic adaptation of Christian symbols and ideals to Cherokee needs and understandings."[158]

In a speech probably given in 1832 after an unsuccessful negotiation with President Jackson, Ross relates to his audience the story of Job.[159] "This good man," he said, "was unfortunate enough to lose all his property—in one day—taken from him by his enemies." Throughout the speech, Ross switches between different words for the supreme being—God," "Great Spirit," "Lord"—that were variously Christian and Cherokee in inflection:

> This man, Job, said he came naked into the world and he must return naked; what he had, had been given to him by the Lord and it was taken away, and blessed be the name of the Lord. His misfortune did not bring him to make use of any violent language, nor did he blame the Great Spirit; for he was never known during his existence to sin against the Great Spirit. The Great Spirit, in consequence of his cheerfulness, cause him to gather again double the amount of property he had lost.[160]

He called for the Cherokee to remain united in this spirit of resilience and gratitude, for (perhaps alluding to Mark 3:25), "when the people of a nation divides itself, then their national existence becomes destroyed." Ross then connected his parable explicitly to the plight of the Cherokee:

> If the President of the white people should cease to protect us and our rights and should rob us of our rights, then I say to you, as Job said, 'My mother brought me

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Some years later, when Ross chose a second wife, he chose a white Quaker from Philadelphia. (*Cherokees and Missionaries*, 349).

[158] McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 349.

[159] Ibid. McLoughlin notes that in the tradition of Cherokee oratory, the story of Job takes the form of a parable on the theme of the talk (350). Ross's speech is in the John Howard Payne Papers, vol. 2: 147–155.

[160] Because Ross wrote in English we can be certain that these are terms he used. This is often not the case in Cherokee speech recorded by missionaries and others.

> naked into the world, and I must quit it naked.' Such is the bidding of the great Creator. 'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord.' This is what Job said when he was robbed. Bear like Job. Like Job may you be rewarded.

By choosing an Old Testament story, Ross invoked not the individual salvation of Jesus but "the injustice of a powerful (but wicked) people toward a weaker (but upright) people."[161] "The people of the world are rejoicing at our misfortunates," he said, "and we are left to grieve and be sorrowful." By comparing the Cherokee to Job—"perfect" and "upright," "none like him in the earth" (Job 1:8)—Ross made clear both the attitude that they were to maintain in their suffering, as well as the fact that their sin had not been the cause of it. Their collective tragedy was not proof that God had forsaken them; rather, he continued to abide with them, to maintain a special covenant with them. They were still the *a-ni-yn-wi-ya*, "the true people" or "the real people"—or, perhaps, in a new biblical idiom, the chosen people.[162]

Though Ross may not have been a Christian according to the prevailing definition of his time, like many people in the antebellum period he used a verse from the Bible to serve as a personal motto. His choice, Isaiah 35:1, seems to have been selected to express his hope for the Cherokee people in their new home: "The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose." He built a new house in Oklahoma called Rose Cottage, and bordered it with rose bushes.[163] Though the first years in Indian Territory were marked by factious violence, peace eventually returned. Together, the Cherokee turned the Great American Desert into a Canaan. They had experienced widespread religious revival (though not of the orthodox Protestant variety missionaries' had longed to effect), and they were now more broadly acculturated than they ever had been when living up against white

[161] McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 350.
[162] See Michael Joyner, *Cherokee Language Lessons* (self-published, 2014), 43.
[163] See Gary E. Moulton, *John Ross, Cherokee Chief* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1978), 144.

neighbors. Between 1846 and 1861, the Cherokee enjoyed sovereignty and stability, while black slaves tended to John Ross's roses. The new religion, both Christian and Cherokee, which had held them together through the Trail of Tears, bloody political infighting, and the cultivation of their new homelands could not keep them from being torn apart by an American Civil War. Half the Cherokees fought for the North and half for the South; both read the same Bible, and prayed to the same God.

CHAPTER THREE

PRETENDING TO READ: NEWSPAPERS, KNITTING, AND THE DOMESTICATED BIBLE IN *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*

In the first authorized biography of Harriet Beecher Stowe, published seven years before her death, Stowe's son Charles wrote that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "sets forth those principles of the Declaration of Independence that made Jefferson, Hamilton, Washington, and Patrick Henry anti-slavery men."[1] Charles surely meant to elevate his mother's abolitionist legacy by linking her to these four slaveholding founding fathers; but at least with regard to their stagnant ambivalence about the slavery issue, these men had much more in common with some of Stowe's characters than with the author herself. The moral weaknesses of Stowe's understudied white male characters are often revealed and explored through their reading practices. For decades scholars have analyzed the novel's schemes of gender and race and their relationship not only to Stowe's vision for the end of slavery, but to her story's legacy in American culture. What has been missing from these analyses is attention to reading as a recurring theme in the novel. In stark contrast to Uncle Tom's studious, labored Bible-reading, Stowe depicts white men pretending to read or idly reading newspapers while ignoring injustices only they have the power to stop. On the ship upon which Uncle Tom and other human cargo are carried down south in chains, Stowe tells us, "Men talked, and loafed, and read, and smoked. Women sewed, and children played, and the boat passed on her way."[2] Just as Tom's Bible-reading connotes his compassion, white men's newspaper-reading (and their reading of other secular texts) is emblematic of their stunted capacity to "feel right" about slavery (404). Stowe constructs several

[1] Charles Edwards Stowe, *Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1891), 154.

[2] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Norton, 2010), 114. Future citations appear parenthetically in text and refer to this edition.

domestic scenes in which white men attempt to shield themselves—often literally holding papers in front of their faces—from having to acknowledge their complicity in slavery by reading or pretending to read secular texts; in each, the posturing man is coupled with a woman who knits or sews, champions the Bible over the "sophistries of worldly policy," and sees through his act (405). In these scenes, Stowe argues that slavery continues as a direct result of a separate spheres ideology that excludes feminized biblical values from influencing public life, especially by devaluing biblical literacy in favor of the political and economic literacy that is the exclusive domain of white men. The novel criticizes the veneer of authority these latter forms of literacy provide its male characters, who are, in fact, often willfully ignorant of slavery's practical realities. Women and black people, according to Stowe's essentialist views, are truly literate because they read the Bible correctly and earnestly seek to live according to its commandments. Scholarship on gender in the novel has been dominated by the terms of sentimentality (namely, motherhood and domesticity); this has overshadowed the role of the Bible in Stowe's understanding of gender and its relationship to slavery and abolition. The feminization of Uncle Tom limits the threat he might pose to a white audience, but by casting a man as her novel's hero, Stowe also questions why the biblical qualities which make him heroic—compassion, faith, and selflessness—do not mark the exploits of white men, or influence political and economic realities in the United States.

LITERACY, THE BIBLE, AND EVANGELICAL WOMEN'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

In order to understand how Stowe and other antebellum women utilized and theorized literacy in their quests for social change, it is necessary to explain why literacy was so central to their arguments. As Stowe recognized, literate blacks (as well as women writers) were a threat because of the association between the ability to read and intellectual potential, moral depth,

personal rights, and citizenship in the early nineteenth century. As Barbara Hochman has noted, the ability to read "was the linchpin of moral and economic self-improvement in the antebellum United States; it was a crucial component of citizenship."[3] This was all the more true as an Anglo-Saxon brand of whiteness and maleness came increasingly to be defined against African Americans, immigrants, and women in the nineteenth century. The ratification of the Constitution marked the acceptance by a majority of Americans of the concept of rule by the people; but who "the people" were remained unclear. At first, women and black people were "naturally" excluded from the rights of full citizenship by the decision of nearly every state to grant suffrage only to those who owned property. By the early nineteenth century, however, the emergence of a new market society meant that property was no longer a chief or stable marker of the kind of virtue and independence that qualified one to vote. Thus, definitions of American citizenship, still undergoing transformation in the wake of the Revolution, became tied up with new justifications for restricting the vote to white men. With the vote no longer tied to property, the rights of full citizenship came to be associated with the capacities of persons. John R. Cooke of Virginia argued in 1829 that men and women had naturally different capacities which made only one of them fit for political participation. Using the Enlightenment rhetoric of the Revolution, he argued that "the framers"

> did not *express* the self-evident truth that the Creator of the Universe, to render woman more fit for the sphere in which he intended her to act, had made her weak and timid, in comparison with man, and had thus placed her under his *control*, as well as under his protection. . . . They did not say, *in terms*, that the exercise of political power, that is to say, of the right of suffrage, necessarily implies *free-agency* and *intelligence*. . . . That nature herself had therefore pronounced, on women and children, a sentence of *incapacity* to exercise political power. They

[3] Barbara Hochman, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution: Race, Literacy, Childhood, and Fiction, 1851–1911* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 53.

> did not say all this; and why? Because to the universal sense of all mankind, these were self-evident truths.[4]

In the absence of a tangible basis for suffrage, Cooke naturalized gendered notions of capacity as, in the language of Thomas Jefferson, "self-evident" standards for defining full citizenship. Increasingly, both responsible citizenship and masculinity became associated with the ability to play a role in the free market, either by generating wealth or acting as a disciplined employee.

At the same time, Americans came to view literacy as a check on the threat of a poorly educated electorate. The Protestant Reformation had established literacy as a moral necessity, but in early nineteenth-century America one's ability to read became "a simple test of both moral and economic worth."[5] By the 1840s it had become a popular pastime to collect data on the relationship between literacy, crime, and poverty.[6] The presumed effects of literacy on moral development came to be viewed as a convenient method for disciplining a future (white male) labor force, as well as a means of bringing up thoughtful (white male) voters. Controlling access to literacy, as Stowe recognized, was also a convenient method of maintaining and justifying the enslavement of black people. As she wrote in her *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "It has been foreseen that the result of education would be general intelligence; that the result of intelligence would be a knowledge of personal rights; and that an inquiry into the doctrine of personal rights would be fatal to the system." Stowe concluded that laws designed to prevent slave literacy were "more cruel than any which ancient and heathen Rome ever knew."[7]

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[4] Statement of John R. Cooke, *Proceedings and Debates of the Virginia State Convention of 1829–30* (Richmond: Samuel Shepherd, 1830), 55–56. It is worth noting that by replacing the word "women" with blacks or Africans and the word "men" with white men, his argument became a familiar justification for slavery.

[5] Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, *The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the United States: A Socioeconomic Analysis to 1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 86.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Stowe, *A Key To Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Book, 1998), 110–111. During Reconstruction, Stowe worked to establish integrated schools with black teachers in the South (see Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1994], 341).

Literacy was also important to activist women like Stowe, however, because of the Bible—though early scholarship on antebellum women often ignored or discounted their religious beliefs. In her 1998 book *The Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimké*, Gerda Lerner, to her great credit, admits that her 1967 biography of Grimké did not grasp that "Sarah's argument for the emancipation of women was almost entirely theological; her language was biblical; her images were derived from Christian iconography. I was not trained in theology and had only a cursory knowledge of Christian thought; thus I found it difficult to comprehend her arguments."[8] In a 1978 book, Barbara Epstein argued that female religious activism was "motivated to a large degree by women's anger over their subordinate status"; Sarah Evans suggested more than a decade later that "women found an outlet in religion for suppressed anger and anxiety."[9] More recent scholarship has attended more effectively to antebellum women's faith; in one such work on female preachers, Catherine Brekus explains that

> many historians have been so interested in examining women's social radicalism that they have ignored their theology, implicitly dismissing their beliefs as insignificant. The "real" importance of female preaching, they have suggested, lay in its symbolic challenge to class or gender hierarchies. In the eyes of these women themselves, however, their *faith* was what defined them most clearly.[10]

Feminist scholars are largely responsible for the much-needed critical reevaluation that reintroduced *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to the American literary canon in the 1970s. Their work explored and in many ways redeemed the important themes of domesticity and sentimentalism in the novel, and in so doing revived interest in other female authors of the nineteenth century.

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[8] Gerda Lerner, *The Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimké* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5.

[9] Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978), 4; Sarah Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 74.

[10] Catherine Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 207.

However, this scholarship often neglected arguably more central Christian themes, and thus missed important elements of Stowe's moral and political philosophy.

For instance, in response to Ann Douglas's negative assessment of "the drive of nineteenth-century American women to gain power through the exploitation of their feminine identity as their society defined it," Jane Tompkins reversed sentimental fiction's reputation as mere consolation and consumerism by arguing that it was instead a radical discourse of power that sought "to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view."[11] While the role of domesticity and female moral suasion in Stowe's work should not be overlooked, Stowe's model for the reorganization of culture, I argue, was at least as biblical as it was domestic or feminine. In her article "Heroines in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," Elizabeth Ammons makes the important point that, in the world of the novel, women and other "feminine" people—black slaves, children—are "still alive to natural feelings because they are untrained in the masculine discipline of automatically subordinating emotion to reason, the discipline responsible in Stowe's opinion for legalized slavery." But Ammons mistakes the feminized for the feminine, arguing that for Stowe "lowly feminine feeling can revolutionize man's world"; arguably more pertinent for Stowe was the fact that Jesus and his Word, the Bible, feminized in an American public life that subordinated emotion to reason, could "revolutionize man's world."[12] As Cynthia Griffin Wolff has pointed out, "Jesus united all virtue, both male and female"; slavery had been allowed to flourish, according to Stowe's logic, not because society needed to be feminized but because Christ had been feminized, banished from influencing the "rational" domain of public men.[13] By

[11] Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 8; Jane Tompkins, *Sentimental Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 124.

[12] Elizabeth Ammons, "Heroines in Uncle Tom's Cabin" (*American Literature* 4, no. 2 (May 1977): 178.

[13] Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "'Masculinity' in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (*American Quarterly* 47, no. 4 [December, 1995]: 595–618. Wolff interprets Stowe as arguing for the radical transformation of men to better fit the model of Christ, but I find Stowe at best ambivalent about the degree to which men can change (see footnote 27).

failing to properly account for the role of the Bible in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the historical and literary critical reassessment of the novel overemphasized domesticity and sentimentalism—closely related to nineteenth-century religion through the ideology of republican motherhood—to the exclusion of biblicism.[14]

The Bible is deeply important to two main targets of critique in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: the excessive emphasis on self-interest in American public life, which was influenced by the political theory of Stowe's sister, Catharine Beecher; and the "separate spheres" organization of society, insofar as morality and the Bible were relegated to the private sphere. As for the former critique (the latter I address in subsequent sections), attention to Beecher's 1841 work, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*, provides helpful context. A home economics textbook, "but one that addresses the central questions of political theory in a sustained and intelligent manner," Beecher's *Treatise* was extremely popular, running through fourteen editions, with re-printings annually from 1842 to 1857. (It was later the basis for *The American Woman's Home*, of which Stowe was coauthor.) The book makes extensive use of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*; Beecher was especially interested in Tocqueville's "diagnosis of democracy's weaknesses and . . . his promotion of the institutions of

[14] Republican motherhood is effectively summarized by the words of an anonymous 1790 letter to the Virginia Gazette: "However flattering the path of glory and ambition may be, a woman will have more commendation in being the mother of heroes, than in setting up, Amazon-like, for a heroine herself" (Philanthropos, letter, *Virginia Gazette and Alexandria Advertiser,* April 22, 1790). Women in the early national and antebellum periods who openly sought a place in the public and political spheres were usually met with hostility and ridicule. Those who played the role of republican mother avoided this fate by embracing a domestic role for women and a separation between the domestic and public spheres. Yet while this ideology ostensibly accepted an exclusively domestic definition of womanhood as motherhood, it also identified an "intersection of the woman's private domain and the polis": husbands and sons (Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980], 283). By claiming that women as mothers and wives could and should perform a political function through their moral influence over male citizens, republican motherhood ideology maintained naturalized differences between the private sphere of women and the public world of men while simultaneously suggesting that feminine influence played an important role in a democracy.

civil society as a solution to many of its problems."[15] Her understanding of these civil institutions differed from Tocqueville's, however, because of her evangelical Christianity; morality, for Beecher, derived from biblical teachings, especially "the Divine precept, which requires us to do to others as we would that they should do to us." "In order to be perfectly happy," Beecher argued, "man must attain that character, which Christ exhibited," namely, his "*self-denying benevolence*."[16] Though Beecher approved elements of republican motherhood, her moral philosophy was not the product of a sentimental cult of domesticity, but rather of the Bible; the call to self-denying benevolence applied equally to all Christians, regardless of their gender.[17]

Yet in America, Beecher wrote, "a great many even of professed Christians, seem to be acting on the supposition, that the object of life is to secure as much as possible of all the various enjoyments placed within reach."[18] Mark David Hall suggests that Beecher's principal contribution to antebellum political thought (and I suggest it is her principal contribution to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) "is her challenge to the excesses of liberalism and individualism that were beginning to dominate." According to Hall, Beecher "rejected what she understood to be liberalism's view that society is merely a collection of individuals who contract together for

[15] Mark David Hall, "Beyond Self-Interest: The Political Theory and Practice of Evangelical Women in Antebellum America," *Journal of Church and State* 44, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 485. Hall contends that "Beecher should be considered America's first female philosopher and theologian" (484 n. 28); see Hall, "Catharine Beecher: America's First Female Philosopher and Theologian," *Fides et Historia* 32 (Winter/Spring 2000): 68–80.

[16] Catharine Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, revised ed. (Boston: Thomas H. Webb, 1843), 136–137, 169.

[17] Beecher believed that men and women had different, biblically ordained roles in society, and that in particular "the formation of moral and intellectual character of the young is committed mainly to the female hand" (*Treatise*, 37). She also disapproved female suffrage and certain other of women's public activities for most of her life. However, she argued that women "have an equal interest in all social and civil concerns"; that "no domestic, civil, or political, institution, is right, that sacrifices her interest to promote that of the other sex"; and that women had "equal rights with the other sex" (27, 34). As Hall shows, "she engaged in direct political activity such as organizing and speaking at public meetings, circulating petitions that were delivered to Congress, and writing a widely distributed essay . . . when opposing the removal of Cherokees from their land in Georgia" (Hall, "Beyond Self-Interest," 487).

[18] Beecher, *Treatise*, 168–169.

essentially selfish reasons."[19] Instead, Beecher argues, "the principles of democracy . . . are identical with the principles of Christianity":

> The great maxim, which is the basis of all our civil and political institutions, is, that "all men are created equal," and that they are equally entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."
>
> But it can readily be seen, that this is only another mode of expressing the fundamental principle which the Great Ruler of the Universe has established, as the law of His eternal government. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself;" and "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them," are the Scripture forms, by which the Supreme Lawgiver requires that each individual of our race shall regard the happiness of others, as of the same value as his own; and which forbid any institution, in private or civil life, which secures advantages to one class, by sacrificing the interests of another.[20]

Beecher's work has been dismissed by some as hopelessly conservative (Douglas called her "the self-designated feminine apologist for the view that women had no business in politics").[21] Her critique of rampant self-interest and individualism, however, went against the grain of much antebellum American social thought. Her appraisal of the "capitalists at the East," for instance, who exploit poor women "at prices that will not keep soul and body together" and then sell "the articles thus made . . . for prices that give monstrous profits to the capitalist," was a far cry from the praise her own brothers offered to capitalists.[22] Her thoughtful consideration of the complementary roles played by the various members of a democracy, and her concomitant belief in the equality of all people before God, may have helped her to create an environment at her

[19] Hall, "Beyond Self-Interest," 487.

[20] Beecher, *Treatise*, 25.

[21] Douglas, *Feminization*, 69. Douglas goes on to claim that Beecher "suffered from hysteria and occasional paralytic afflictions," speculating that "one hardly needs recourse to psychoanalysis to sense that she was suppressing a massive hatred of the male world" (143).

[22] Catharine Beecher, *The Evils Suffered By American Women and American Children: The Causes and the Remedy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1846), 6; see, for instance, Henry Ward Beecher, "Poverty and the Gospel," *Plymouth Pulpit* 6, no. 12 (June 27, 1883), 235.

schools that better embodied "the libertarian rhetoric of the American revolution" than did the public square of the United States, for all its unspecific pretentions to egalitarianism.[23]

Beecher's schools were built on a system of mutual instruction in which the best students became assistants to teachers and counselors to other students. This system rejected "the principles of 'competition and emulation' in favor of 'moral influence' further enhanced by the mutuality of relations between students and teachers." One of Stowe's responsibilities as an instructor at Hartford and later at her sister's school in Cincinnati was the spiritual care of her students, to whom she wrote many letters of advice and encouragement. Joan D. Hedrick argues that in these letters "we can see the emergence of a non-judgmental and non-hierarchical value system . . . fundamentally different from the male pastoral model in that it relied not on authority but on experience." Implicit, perhaps, in the sisters' system of mutual instruction was a reproof of their father's patriarchal model of ministry, which relied on authority rather than sympathy, abstract reason rather than personal feeling and experience. Lyman Beecher, writing to his daughter Catharine after the death of her fiancé, spoke of her "mourning process as an exercise in right thinking," admonishing her to set aside her feelings, to focus on submitting to God's will, and to count her considerable remaining blessings.[24] Lyman buried the personal nature of his daughter's loss beneath generalizations about the human condition. In her letters to her students, Stowe took a different tack, endeavoring in her own words to be a "near and confidential friend" who "listens with sympathy to the tale of every changing feeling."[25] Taking exception to her brother Edward's reply to a letter she had written him in a moment of low

[23] Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 187.

[24] Hedrick, "The Ministry of Harriet Beecher Stowe," 309.

[25] Harriet Beecher Stowe to Elizabeth Bates, December 12, 1832, Stowe-Day Memorial Library, Hartford, CT. Cited in Hedrick, "The Ministry of Harriet Beecher Stowe," 310.

spirituality, Stowe reminded him, "Your speaking so much philosophically has a tendency to repress confidence. We never wish to have our feelings analyzed down, and every little nothing that we say brought to the test of mathematical demonstration."[26] Stowe's pastoral critique of her brother's response is also, potentially, an epistemological one: perhaps through her own pastoral experiences as a teacher at Catharine's schools, she developed a sense, reflected in her most famous novel, that reason alone was an incomplete form of knowledge, and that it was intellectually weak not to take the particular feelings, experiences, and contexts of individuals into account.

NEWSPAPERS AND KNITTING

Though the white male characters of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* wield their supposed rationality like a weapon against the moral inquiries of their wives and slaves, they are, to a man, confused, paradoxical, or paralyzed with regard to slavery. In the more than a century and a half since the publication of the novel, much has been said about Stowe's depictions of black characters. In more recent decades, scholars have also attended to her depictions of female characters. Much less attention has been paid, however, to white men in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.[27] Nonetheless, the

[26] Harriet Beecher Stowe to Edward Stowe, August, 1828, in Charles Edward Stowe, ed., *Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1890), 40.

[27] In "'Masculinity' in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," Wolff argues that Stowe sees as the key to abolishing slavery a redefined masculinity not based on conquest, but cites Tom and George as the primary examples of this new manhood. She does not discuss the way white men serve in the novel as a means of critiquing prevailing notions of masculinity. I argue, by contrast, that Stowe is at best ambivalent about the degree to which white men can transform; she seeks not a new masculinity but rather the influence of feminized biblical values in the public sphere. Ammons ("Heroines in Uncle Tom's Cabin") agrees with Wolff that Tom is the example of "Stowe's belief that a man can live admirably in accord with her nineteenth-century maternal ideal" (175). This claim elides the complex question of whether Stowe's racial essentialism precludes Tom from standing for all men. Ammons does note that Stowe uses the novel's white male characters to indict masculine ethics, but suggests that Stowe "does not condemn white men for themselves but for the exploitive and inhumane values they live by and enforce as the ruling class in America" (176). Again, however, I argue that Stowe seems unsure about whether white men can be reformed; she gives us no example of a white man willfully giving up mastery (save, arguably, for the very young George Shelby, who has only just inherited his father's slaves). John Allen (*Homelessness in American Literature: Romanticism, Realism, and Testimony* [New York: Routledge, 2004]) claims similarly that the novel argues for the transformation

novel's representation of white men is key to understanding Stowe's moral philosophy. Secular reading is the action by which Stowe signifies her male characters' pathological disengagement from the suffering they perpetuate, even as this same reading provides them with a veneer of respectability, rationality, and political and economic know-how. Knitting and sewing play a complementary role in her depictions of women, signifying their "self-denying benevolence"—that is, their biblical mode of being.

The connection between the reading practices of men and their indifference toward slavery is established in an early scene between Mr. and Mrs. Shelby, Uncle Tom's owners. When Mrs. Shelby begins to question her husband about his dealings with the slavetrader Haley, he is "lounging in a large easy chair, looking over some letters that had come in the afternoon mail" (28) (fig. 6).[28] As his wife's interrogation intensifies, Mr. Shelby keeps "his eyes fixed on a letter" as he lies to her about Haley's occupation as a "negro trader" and evades confessing that he has sold Tom and Harry, the young son of enslaved heroine Eliza (29). Stowe notes that as the conversation continues, Mr. Shelby remains "quite intent upon" the letter, "not perceiving that he was holding it bottom upwards" (29). Whether Mrs. Shelby realizes that her husband is merely

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of white men: "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* insists that what white men do to black people can be changed if men can be brought to feel what any mother feels" (35). While Senator Bird is moved to act on behalf of escaped slaves in part by the memory of his deceased son, St. Clare, though utterly devastated by the loss of his daughter, not only does not free his slaves, but seems not to connect Eva's death to their plight at all. If the transformation of white men is Stowe's proposed solution to the problem of slavery, then she seems notably unconvinced about the possibility of such a change.

My thinking is more in line with that of Eric J. Sundquist ("Stowe's Dream of the Mother-Savior: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and American Women Writers Before the 1920s," in *New Essays on* Uncle Tom's Cabin [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986]), who argues that Stowe posed a "radical challenge to the emerging industrial-based definition of community in the nineteenth century as something organized by work, ruled by men, and measured by productivity (of things, ironically called 'goods'). In place of that ideal there is posited . . . an alternative and matrifocal concept: an ideal of community as something defined by family rather than work), measured by relationships (rather than products), and ruled by women (rather than men)" (157). Sundquist fails to note, however, that in addition to motherhood Stowe consistently identifies biblical literacy as something which separates women from men. The Bible, not merely motherhood, is the source of Stowe's "ideal of community."

[28] Mrs. Shelby is "standing before her mirror, brushing out the complicated braids and curls in which Eliza had arranged her hair" (28). It is possible that Stowe saw fit to provide Mrs. Shelby with an activity, the unraveling of braided hair, which parallels knitting but is more suited for the bedtime hour of the scene.

pretending to read is unclear; the letter remains a shield against his wife's inquiries until he is forced to admit what he has done, with the caveat that he "can't help himself" (30). Mrs. Shelby bargains with him, offering to "make a pecuniary sacrifice" and insisting that she is "willing to bear my part of the inconvenience"; "I can't help myself," Mr. Shelby repeats (30). Frantically considering what she could sell to save Tom and Harry, Mrs. Shelby declares dramatically,

> This is God's curse on slavery!—a bitter, bitter, most accursed thing!—a curse to the master and a curse to the slave! I was a fool to think I could make anything good out of such a deadly evil. . . . I thought I could gild it over,—I thought, by kindness, and care, and instruction, I could make the condition of mine better than freedom—fool that I was! (31)

Faced with his wife's impassioned grief, Mr. Shelby offers the flippant comment, "Why, wife, you are getting to be an abolitionist, quite!" (31). But Mrs. Shelby refers, potentially, to more than the myth of benevolent mastery; her lament is also aimed, it seems, at the limits of sympathy. Amy Schrager Lang has written of Stowe's scheme of moral suasion that "since the identity of the woman at home is subsumed in the identity of her husband and since her moral qualities are contingent upon her dependent state, the system of values she embodies, however admirable, cannot readily be translated into public form."[29] But this scene, which sees Mrs. Shelby realize the trick of the domestic sphere in making her foolishly content to be apolitical with regard to slavery, demonstrates Stowe's understanding that a woman's system of values cannot even be translated into private form if her husband disagrees. Compassion for the suffering of the enslaved is ultimately futile if one cannot do anything to end the institutional source of their suffering. Mrs. Shelby's curse is that she is rightly concerned with all the

[29] Amy Schrager Lang, "Slavery and Sentimentalism: The Strange Career of Augustine St. Clare," Women's Studies 12 (1986): 35. Enslaved characters, too, cannot live up to the standards of either the domestic or the public spheres since, as Allen argues, "they *belong* to both. They cannot own property, and thus cannot own houses or homes. They *are* property, and thus become commodities in the capitalistic marketplace. George and Eliza 'escape' slavery, but return to their 'real' home—Africa; Tom . . . goes home only through death" (*Homelessness*, 35).

members of her household, but the cause of their misery lies beyond the edges of her sphere, traditionally understood. Her husband, on the other hand, whose gender entitles him to direct political and economic engagement, fails to act in the best interest of his human property not because he is ignorant of the cruelty of his choice (he knows enough to lie and shield himself from questions), but rather because it is too inconvenient, and perhaps too overwhelming, to acknowledge the extent of his sin.[30]

Indeed, while Mrs. Shelby is willing to take responsibility for her role in the tragedy even though she actually has little control over the situation, Mr. Shelby is concerned only with absolving himself. "I don't know why I am to be rated, as if I were a monster, for doing what every one does every day," he exclaims, protesting too much, since his cowardice in the beginning of the scene suggests that he knows he has acted wrongly (31). Mrs. Shelby repents the fact that slavery has made her a hypocrite in spite of her efforts to treat their slaves like family, "as a Christian woman should" (30). Her husband notes condescendingly that "we men of the world must wink pretty hard at various things, and get used to a deal that isn't the exact thing," and that they "don't quite fancy, when women and ministers come out broad and square, and go beyond us in matters of either modesty or morals, that's a fact" (31). Mr. Shelby paints his wife's morality as a luxury afforded to naïve women, but not to "men of the world"; in ways both literal and figurative, then, he employs the trappings of his masculine public role to guard against an examination of his own actions. Mrs. Shelby responds to the (admittedly late) realization that her lifestyle is irrevocably at odds with her values by expressing deep despair, but

[30] Sundquist notes that Stowe's white male characters often show distaste for the cruelties of slavery; rather than ceasing to induce these cruelties, however, they seek instead to avoid seeing them: "Haley prefers to threaten slave mothers into submission or to sneak children off in the dead of night, a strategy that Shelby, who sneaks off to avoid seeing Tom led away in chains, has already mastered" (161). Mrs. Shelby, on the other hand, decides to "go and see poor old Tom, God help him, in his distress!" (32). White male characters' desire to hide from the consequences of their actions is further indicated by their pretending to read and using text to shield their faces.

also by immediately volunteering to correct the disparity. Mr. Shelby, however, has already long since accepted that hypocrisy is inescapable for public men; all his effort goes toward preventing himself from feeling too bad about that. Mrs. Shelby, disgusted by her husband's unwillingness to even be sorry for what he has done, declares that Eliza and Tom "shall see . . . that their mistress can feel for them and with them" (32). But while Stowe skewers Mr. Shelby for his selfishness, she also suggests that he has deliberately stunted his ability to feel right in order to do the things which make him a "man of the world." A planter in Stowe's next novel, *Dred*, states the problem in a slightly different way: "As matters are going on now in our country, I must either lower my standard of right and honor, and sear my soul in all its nobler sensibilities, or I must be what the world calls an unsuccessful man. There is no path in life, that I know of, where . . . a man can make the purity of his moral nature the first object."[31] If Mrs. Shelby's tragedy is her inability as a woman to penetrate the public sphere that is the source of suffering in her household, then Mr. Shelby's tragedy is that his idea of white manhood necessitates the death of his "nobler sensibilities," rendering him a villain in his own home.

Just as the falseness of Mr. Shelby's innocence with regard to Tom's sale is indicated by his pretending to read an upside-down letter, Stowe signifies his complacency once Tom is gone by a lack of genuine activity, especially compared to his wife. Though he promises Mrs. Shelby and Tom's family that he plans to buy Tom back as soon as he raises the funds, those plans evaporate, along with his sense of guilt, as soon as Tom is literally sold down the river. A subsequent scene sees him lazing in his parlor on a summer afternoon, "leisurely tipped back on one chair, with his heels in another, . . . enjoying his after-dinner cigar" (231). In contrast to her idle husband, Mrs. Shelby is "busy about some fine sewing," thinking of ways to save Uncle

[31] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Dred, A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (Boston and New York, 1856), 18.

Tom. When she asks her husband when he expects to have the money for Tom's redemption, his response exposes his paper-thin qualifications as a business man:

> "I'm sure *I* don't know," said Mr. Shelby. "Once get business running wrong, there does seem to be no end to it. It's like jumping from one bog to another, all through a swamp; borrow of one to pay another, and then borrow of another to pay one,—and these confounded notes falling due before a man has time to smoke a cigar and turn round,—dunning letters and dunning messages,—all scamper and hurry-scurry." (231)

Once again, Mr. Shelby employs the textual paraphernalia of "men of the world"—notes and dunning letters—in an attempt to convince his wife that he "can't help himself" when it comes to Tom. Beginning to doubt her husband's intent to buy Tom back, Mrs. Shelby again suggests things they could sell in order to free up some cash. Mr. Shelby waves her off: "O, ridiculous, Emily! You are the finest woman in Kentucky but still you haven't sense to know that you don't understand business;—women never do, and never can" (231). Mrs. Shelby "is not only excluded from the transaction between her husband and the slave trader, but when she protests the sale of Uncle Tom and Harry, she is given to understand that only her complete ignorance of the financial position of the family permits this indulgence of feeling"—this in spite of the fact that Mr. Shelby has just admitted that he himself can scarcely grasp his financial troubles.[32] When she offers to begin teaching music in order to raise money for Tom's release, Mr. Shelby declares that he could never allow her to "degrade" herself (232). "Would it degrade me as much as to break my faith with the helpless?" she replies, to which he answers dismissively, "Well, you are always heroic and transcendental . . . but I think you had better think before you undertake such a piece of Quixotism" (232). The standards of middle-class white womanhood, which preclude Mrs. Shelby from either earning money through work or acting against the wishes of her husband, prevent her from fulfilling even her limited domestic role, and even

[32] Lang, "Slavery and Sentimentalism," 37.

encourage her to disobey the Bible.[33] Middle-class white manhood, on the other hand, entitles Mr. Shelby to be master of his wife and his slaves regardless of his lack of business acumen, morality, and sense.

These scenes imply that slavery, either as a matter of necessity or convenience, has insulated Mr. Shelby from moral considerations that threaten his own sense of well-being. Business and running his estate become barriers to his moral action, while his wife's "busy" sewing is associated with both productive thought and productive action. Mrs. Shelby, although she has no real power over the handling of her estate or her slaves, is much more persistent and active than her husband; even as his "discouragements thickened around her," she remains committed to saving Uncle Tom (232). As she persists in suggesting ideas, her husband yells at her, insinuating that if Tom and Chloe have not already moved on, then it is her fault for "burden[ing] them with a morality above their condition and prospects. I always thought so" (232). Mrs. Shelby counters, "It's only the morality of the Bible, Mr. Shelby" (232). While Mrs. Shelby is guided by the Bible, Mr. Shelby does not seem to be guided by anything but self-interest—as he is authorized to be by his position as a public man, who must not let feeling or religion interfere with his economic and political duties.

The marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Shelby demonstrates that the domestication of the Bible and virtue are terrible for the domus. Stowe can hardly be said here to depict the home as a paradise with the power to reform the world and end slavery. While it might be argued that slavery is the cause of the Shelby's domestic strife, in toto Stowe's domestic scenes suggest the reverse: that the continuation of slavery is rather a symptom of the Shelby's compartmentalized

[33] Mrs. Shelby does disobey her husband, however, intervening directly in his transaction by stalling so that Eliza can escape with her son before he is sold. That Stowe approves of these actions further indicates her unease with cultural norms that valorize women's submission over and above their biblical ethics.

lives, which separate virtue and action into separate spheres and associate them with different genders. Through scenes between another couple, Senator Bird and Mrs. Bird, Stowe demonstrates that the domestication of the Bible and virtue is equally bad for the public sphere. In a chapter entitled "In Which It Appears That a Senator Is But a Man," Stowe pits "abstract systems of civil and religious justice (created by men) against the concrete realities of human life (which women were assigned the task of nurturing)."[34] Senator Bird's public senses of identity and duty are divorced from his private experience and morality; as he argues with his wife about his role in passing the Fugitive Slave Law and considers what to do about the fugitives at his doorstep (Eliza and Harry), his private and public roles meet and clash, calling into question an American system of law and order that does not take into account the need to "feel right." Though he attempts to distract and shield himself from his feelings by reading the newspaper, the Senator ultimately cannot maintain the compartmentalization of his biblical heart from his political head.

Before the arrival of the fugitives, the Senator is dismissive of his wife's protests against the piece of legislation and his support for it. Echoing Mr. Shelby, he responds patronizingly to the very idea that his wife knows about the law: "Why, Mary, you are getting to be a politician all at once" (71). Identifying a conflict between the law of the state and the ethical commands discerned by biblical common sense, Mrs. Bird replies, "I wouldn't give a fip for all your politics, generally, but I think this is something downright cruel and unchristian" (71). Continuing to patronize her, Senator Bird states explicitly that feelings have no role in setting public policy:

> Your feelings are all quite right, dear, and interesting, and I love you for them; but, then, dear, we mustn't suffer our feelings to run away with our judgment; you must consider it's not a matter of private feeling,—there are great public interests

[34] Hedrick, "The Ministry of Harriet Beecher Stowe," 327.

> involved,—there is such a state of public agitation rising, that we must put aside our private feelings. (72)

When the Senator argues that following the Bible would in this case "involve a great public evil," his wife interrupts him and confidently asserts, "Obeying God never brings on public evils. I know it can't" (73). Though it is quickly apparent which of the two Birds is Stowe's mouthpiece, it becomes even more obvious when the narrator interjects that both the Senator and his wife know that he would be incapable of "turning away anybody that was in trouble" (73). Even knowing that his wife is correct, Senator Bird implies that her feelings are irrational: "My dear, let me reason with you," he implores. "I hate reasoning," she replies. Though it is tempting to laugh at the down-to-earth folksiness of Mrs. Bird's anti-intellectual declaration, her contention that she "hate[s] reasoning" gives voice to Stowe's frustration with highfalutin male rhetoric that deliberately obscures simple moral truths. Mrs. Bird goes on, "There's a way you political folks have of coming round and round a plain right thing; and you don't believe in it yourselves when it comes to practice" (73). While the Senator employs "sophistries of worldly policy" to protect his political duty from the influence of his private feelings, Mrs. Bird penetrates to the heart of the matter, bringing to light the irrational and immoral nature of the public-private divide.

When the Birds' servant Cudjoe calls Mrs. Bird away, the Senator is relieved from the burden of pretending to take his wife seriously. Immediately he takes up a newspaper, perhaps with the intention of driving their argument completely from his mind. Only moments later, he confronts the arrival of a fugitive mother and child at his doorstep, a fortuitous illustration of his wife's point that the law which he has just helped to pass is diametrically opposed to his sense of Christian duty. After providing Eliza and Harry with a makeshift bed, the Birds return to their parlor, where Mrs. Bird "busied herself with her knitting-work, and Mr. Bird pretended to be

reading the paper" (75). Although his wife makes no reference to their preceding conversation, the Senator cannot help making several suggestions about how they might aid the fugitives; his newspaper is not an adequate distraction from the presence of his better half.

Stowe suggests that the Birds do what any good Christians would when they clothe the fugitives, comfort them, and aid in their escape. But by doing the Christian thing, Senator Bird creates a discrepancy between his private and public identities: "What a situation, now, for a patriotic senator, that had been all the week before spurring up the legislature of his native state to pass more stringent resolutions against escaping fugitives, their harborers, and abettors!" (80). He had been "bold as a lion about it, and 'mightily convinced' not only himself, but everybody that heard him" (80). Before the arrival of Eliza and Harry, Stowe argues, the Senator had maintained only an abstract notion of the people who would be most affected by his law: "but then his idea of a fugitive was only an idea of the letters that spell the word,—or, at the most, the image of a little newspaper picture of a man with a stick and bundle, with 'Ran away from the subscriber' under it" (80) (fig. 7). Stowe underscores the difference between the Senator's abstract "idea of a fugitive," informed by the desensitizing influence of newspapers, and the "real presence of distress" which taps into powerful responses from his own experience (80). By forcing the Sentor to unite his public and private life, Stowe puts him into a biblical mode of being, so that he can say with his wife, "I don't know anything about politics, but I can read my Bible; and there I see that I must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the desolate; and that Bible I mean to follow" (72). Readers can be sure that the Senator's conversion to the biblical mode of action is complete when he suggests to his wife that they pass on to Harry the contents of "that drawer full of things—of—of—poor little Henry's" (79). Like Stowe, Senator Bird links the plight of the enslaved to the loss of his own son, and breaks the law of the land in

favor of the Golden Rule by donating the clothing of his Henry, perhaps knit with a mother's love by Mrs. Bird.[35]

The knitting and sewing women of the novel are complementary to its men who pretend to read, and just as important to Stowe's gendered understanding of the problem of slavery. One reason this theme, despite its consistent deployment, has received little to no scholarly discussion is that the link between women and sewing has been taken for granted for centuries (Carolyn J. Lawes has called it the "quintessential feminine labor").[36] In 1852, however, sewing was also likely associated for some of Stowe's readers with abolition, nascent feminism, and reading. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, many women—perhaps simultaneously inspired by the post-Revolutionary zeal for self-improvement and frustrated about how little had changed for their gender in the new republic—began to form reading circles. Describing her own literary society to a friend in 1838, student Mary Peacock explained that members "are to meet at each other's houses once a week—one reads to the company while the rest employ themselves in sewing, knitting, etc."[37] On the one hand, then, these reading circles were continuous with the sewing circles of the colonial and Revolutionary periods, in which women engaged in communal labor in order to perform such services as quilting bedcovers for their neighbors or clothing a

[35] Stowe was famously inspired to write Uncle Tom's Cabin by the loss of her infant son Charlie in 1849. "It was at his dying bed and at his grave," she wrote to the abolitionist Eliza Cabot Follen, "that I learned what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn away from her":

> In those depths of sorrow which seemed to me immeasurable, it was my only prayer to God that such anguish might not be suffered in vain. There were circumstances about his death of such peculiar bitterness, of what seemed almost cruel suffering that I felt that I could never be consoled for it unless this crushing of my own heart might enable me to work out some great good to others. ("Letter to the Abolitionist Eliza Cabot Follen," in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 444)

[36] Carolyn J. Lawes, *Women and Reform in a New England Community, 1815–1860* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 48.

[37] Mary Peacock, "8 January 1838," *The Journal of Mary Peacock: Life a Century Ago as Seen in Buffalo and Chautauqua County by a Seventeen-Year-Old Girl* (Buffalo: privately printed, 1939).

militia.[38] On the other hand, such societies took on a new role in the nineteenth century as a forum for republican mothers (and future republican mothers) to pratice, in the words of early feminist Margaret Fuller, "building up the life of thought upon the life of action."[39] In an era when women were increasingly expected to be educated but were still restricted from applying their education to matters public, reading circles provided an outlet for those looking to discuss their literary pursuits, as well as an opportunity to negotiate with other women appropriate avenues for influencing society. In the antebellum period the lines between literary society, sewing circle, and reform organization were usually impossible to draw. In bodies like the Female Reading and Charitable Society and the Worcester Anti-Slavery Sewing Circle, women discussed politics, raised money for missionaries, recited biblical passages, read *The Liberator* aloud, and, of course, sewed. Even when alone, women often did not read without simultaneously completing some other task. Some learned to knit and read at the same time. A woman named Mary Pierce Poor wrote in 1842 that after "play[ing] one game of chess with [her husband] Henry before he went to his offce," she "sewed till nearly dark, then took a book and knit and read."[40] Another, mourning the death of her father, captured the often lonely office of women's reading when she noted repeatedly in her diary over the course of the grieving period that she "sewed and read," and that "no one came."[41] Thus, in Stowe's time sewing and knitting

[38] Lawes, *Women and Reform*, 54. On black women's anti-slavery literary and sewing societies, see Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), esp. 41–45.

[39] Margaret Fuller, letter to Sophia Ripley from 27 August 1839, *The Letters of Margaret Fuller*, vol. 2, ed. Robert N. Hudspeth (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983–1994), 87.

[40] Mary Pierce Poor to Jon and Lucy (Tappan) Pierce, 30 Jan. 1842. Cited in Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, "Books, Reading, and the World of Goods in Antebellum New England," *American Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (December, 1996): 601.

[41] Diary of Calista Billings, 2 October 1849, and esp. entries throughout late September and October of that year. Cited in Zboray and Zboray, "Books, Reading," 601.

were associated not only with motherhood and domesticity, the "sentimental" terms in which many scholars have discussed gender in the novel, but also with women's literacy.

Although Stowe makes no direct reference in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to reading circles, their contemporaneous popularity and similarly peculiar combination of sewing, reading, and activism suggests that they may be a helpful model for interpreting her images of sewing and knitting women in the novel. Stowe was certainly familiar with the close relationship between sewing and literacy broadly speaking. She often pursued letter writing and darning in quick succession: "Having finished the last hole on George's black vest," she once opened a letter to a friend, "I stick in my needle and sit down to be sociable."[42] For her literary society the Semi-Colon Club, Stowe once wrote a mock advertisement for the products and services available from the Beecher women, including "V*a*rses written & hairdressing executed gratis—also / Bonnets made & trimmed & the English language instructed in."[43] For Stowe, as Hedrick concludes, "the needle and the pen were not that far apart."[44]

But why did sewing and knitting go hand-in-hand with reading in the antebellum era, and why only for women? Men of comparable status certainly did not feel the need to accomplish chores while engaged in academic pursuits, so why did women? One possible answer is that the reigning ideological conception of women, republican motherhood, demanded that virtually all of their activity be confined to a narrowly defined domestic sphere. Both academic pursuits and political engagement occurred at the edges of those domestic boundaries; the incorporation of a quintessentially domestic activity perhaps helped to characterize even the academic and political

[42] Harriet Beecher Stowe, letter to her sister Mary, in Charles Edward Stowe, *Life*, 62.

[43] William Greene Letters, box 5–753, Cincinnati Historical Society. Cited in Joan D. Hedrick, "Parlor Literature: Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Question of 'Great Women Artists,'" *Signs* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 297.

[44] Hedrick, "Parlor Literature," 297.

aspects of literary societies as appropriately feminine and unpretentious.[45] While the women who participated in these reading circles were often serious about promoting women's education and championing women's influence in social causes, the form of their efforts suggests that they were nonetheless concerned about living up to the contemporary ideal of womanhood, which required constant sacrifice on behalf of others and little time spent on personal edification for its own sake. Unlike men, respectable women could only read and engage in intellectual discussion if they practically applied their knowledge and the time spent acquiring it to the care of others.

Stowe's white female characters are held to this same standard. Although I conceive of them as readers—and they all clearly revere the Bible—we hardly ever see these women reading in the novel. While male characters read idly in ther leisure time, their female counterparts sit next to them knitting and sewing—enjoyable work, perhaps, but work nonetheless. Like their contemporaries in reading circles, Stowe's female characters engage in moral debates and social critique only while they simultaneously complete distinctly feminine work for the benefit of others in their households. The women in the novel, like the women in Stowe's real world, must never be idle as their male counterparts are permitted to be. Male ministers and moralists since the eighteenth century had adjured women to "fill up your leisure hours" with "needle-work, knitting and such like" to guard against a supposed feminine propensity for frivolity and

[45] Women sometimes sold the goods they sewed or otherwise crafted at anti-slavery fairs to raise money for their societies and other abolitionist causes. This practice tested the bounds of the public-private divide. As Julie Roy Jeffrey notes, "Items produced at home assumed a political and public purpose":

> Like petitioning, fair work raised all sorts of questions about propriety. Should middle-class women be engaged in what was clearly a commercial activity? Should they make and sell frivolous goods that encouraged people to waste their money? When black and white women cooperated in producing good for a fair, as they did in the New York Anti-Slavery Society sewing circle in 1842, other questions about interracial cooperation in both home settings and public spaces came to the fore. In the name of duty, abolitionist women demonstrated a propensity to stake out areas for action that confounded notions of public, private, male, female, white and black. (*Great Silent Army*, 109)

suceptibility to corruption.[46] Miss Ophelia heeds one such counselor by having in her pocket at all times "about a yard and a quarter of stocking, which she kept as a specific against what Dr. Watts asserts to be a personal habit of Satan when people have idle hands" (157). Even during what is ostensibly leisure time with their male partners, these female characters do the work of caring for their families while they think about how best to care for slaves.[47]

Stowe's knitting women, then, also accomplish a great deal of work for their author. First, their constant knitting helps to establish them as ideal women—that is, women whose example should be followed and whose opinions about slavery are the right ones. Second, their industriousness and sacrificial domestic work serve as a contrast to the idleness of the men in their lives, idleness which is symptomatic of the pursuit of self-interest that defines the public sphere and allows for slavery's continuance. Third, their knitting illustrates a union between women's biblical morality, practical productivity, and primary role in the world: they believe they have a religious duty to care for others, and they spend their time on activities that

[46] Dr. John Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (Dublin: 1774), 30; Rev. John Bennett, *Letters To a Young Lady* (London, T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, 1803), 226. See also Clive Edwards, "'Home Is Where the Art Is': Women, Handicrafts and Home Improvements 1750–1900," *Journal of Design History*, 19.1 (2006): 11–21; and *No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting* (New York: Random House, 2010), esp. ch. 3, "Knitting in the Circle of Domesticity."

[47] Some scholars have claimed that separate spheres ideology afforded women more leisure time, which they used to read sentimental novels, advice books, and other "light" fare. For instance, Colin Campbell writes in *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) that women as the primary readers of novels fostered an "imaginative hedonism" that ushered in consumerist culture (see for example 173–179 and 224–226). However, Ronald J. Zboray, in his study of books borrowed from the New York Society library, found that antebellum American women did not primarily choose to read sentimental fiction; they read widely, as did men, in many genres including history, science, and philosophy ("Reading patterns in Antebellum America: Evidence in the Charge Records of the New York Society Library," *Libraries & Culture* 26, no. 2 [Spring 1991]: 301–333). Furthermore, many antebellum women

> possessed little leisure time to devote solely to private, silent reading. In the child bearing and early rearing years especially, few women mention in their letters or diaries having read many books. The sewing machine had not yet arrived to relieve women of the arduous task of hand stitching long, voluminous dresses and repairing male relatives' clothes. Many of these women found seamstresses too expensive or bothersome; the call of the needle competed with the lure of the book. (Zboray and Zboray, "Books, Reading," 599)

accomplish that duty. This union highlights the disjunction between men's public and private roles, a rupture perhaps best illustrated by the case of Senator Bird.

Finally, these women's knitting evinces their biblical literacy, and in so doing links them to Uncle Tom. On the one hand, the constant knitting of Stowe's white women demonstrates that, like Tom, they lack free time even for the noble pursuit of Bible-reading. Like Tom, perhaps, Mrs. Bird and Mrs. Shelby must, in a manner of speaking, steal the time they spend reading—an hour here after the children have gone to bed, an hour there when the day's work is complete and they ought to be resting for tomorrow. For both Tom and the novel's good wives (and the women of nineteenth-century reading circles), influence on others is won at the price of perfectly performing the gendered and racialized expectations imposed by dominant ideologies. Although Mrs. Bird does argue with her husband about the treatment of slaves, it is while she knits silently by his side, her better example needling him to decide to care for the fugitives in his home as his wife would. On the other hand, women's knitting, like Tom's less skillful reading, demonstrates not a lower but a higher degree of biblical literacy: true biblical literacy is demonstrated not through the amount of time one spends reading the Bible or the ease with which one reads the Bible, but rather through biblical action. The novel's white men pretend to read newspapers and fail to understand debt letters, and are yet regarded by society as qualified political and economic actors. In contrast, its biblically literate characters may never be seen reading the Bible or may struggle to read it, but undeniably they know and understand it; their self-denying benevolence and faith in the evil of slavery, according to Stowe's logic, demonstrate this fact.

That we find this same scheme of things amongst Stowe's enemies suggests that frustration with white men's reading practices, especially as they pertained to social reform, was

somewhat widespread in the antebellum era. Though Stowe included Southern slaveholding among her sympathetic portrayals of "good" wives and mothers, Southern and proslavery women comprised some of her most vocal and prolific detractors. Several utilized their opponent's medium to make their cases: around twenty to thirty proslavery "anti-Tom" novels were published before the trend petered out in 1860, many of them written by women. Just as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made its case by depicting the institution of slavery as hopelessly at odds with the values of Christian society, anti-Tom novelists sought to vindicate Southern life via illustrations of harmonious plantation households, both slave and free, and through scathing critiques of life in the North. These authors apparently shared many of Stowe's values and utilized many of her argumentative strategies. Particularly relevant here is their use of literacy and its associated activities to diagnose their problem—abolition—and identify its causes.

On the surface, in fact, the domestic scenes described by anti-Tom authors look remarkably similar to those in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: men read, women sew. A particularly detailed sketch from *The Ebony Idol* (1860) by "Mrs. G. M. Flanders" sets the typical scene:

> The firelight gleams out invitingly through the muslin curtains, and as we catch glimpses of the group within, we loiter at the window to muse over and enjoy the domestic tableau. Mr. Cary is sitting in his armchair, with an open manuscript in his hand, from which he has apparently been reading. Mrs. Cary, for any appearances to the contrary, may have been occupying her sewing-chair since the first evening we made her acquaintance. . . . The knitting, too, lies upon the table, while the form of little Lucy, in the graceful repose of childhood, half in shadow, and half in the bright, warm hearth light, forms a pretty picture in the space between the chairs of the two. Lucy's head, true to the instincts of nature, seeks the mother's lap, while the soft, silken curls steal out from beneath the caressing hand of the mother, and glimmer upon the dark cloth, like ripples of water kissed by the silvery moonlight.[48]

In a similar tableau from *The Planter's Northern Bride* by Caroline Lee Hentz, the hero, Moreland, visits the parlor of the Hastings, where the men read while the women sew:

[48] G. M. Flanders, *The Ebony Idol* (New York: D. Appleton, 1860), 60.

> He [Moreland] was invited into the family sitting-room, and welcomed with great cordiality. There was a delightful home-atmosphere diffused around every object. Mr. Hastings was sitting, with a book, in which he seemed earnestly engaged, in his right hand, while his left arm was thrown round Dora, who was enthroned on his knees. Reuben, the student youth, was bending over a heavy and venerable-looking tome that was spread open before him; his head was leaning on his hand, which was half buried in a mass of dark red, glowing curls. Mrs. Hastings was busily engaged in knitting, that most cosy and domestic of all occupations; and Eulalia's hand held a roll of snowy linen, in which her threaded needle was brightly glittering. The graceful paraphernalia of woman's industry was round her. Her dress was the perfection of neatness and taste; she rose at his entrance, while her soft yet thrilling eye beamed with the welcome her modest lips dared not think of uttering.[49]

While these descriptions are so similar to each other and to Stowe as to seem procedural rather than substantive, there are subtle deviations from the reading men and sewing women of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. First, the men in these examples read actual books (though, notably, not the Bible) rather than newspapers and other disposable texts. Second, rather than pretending to read in order to shield themselves from their wives and thereby from moral considerations, the men of anti-Tom novels are actually reading. Mr. Cary has "apparently been reading," and Mr. Hastings is "earnestly engaged" with a book, while Reuben studies another. In fact, in each scene the women seem to be the less focused members of the group. Mrs. Cary's knitting is out, but she is actually resting, stroking her child's hair; Eulalia is holding some fabric and a needle, but does not seem to be sewing, and thus, perhaps, is she the first to notice and acknowledge Moreland's entrance.

Finally, the families in these scenes are Northerners. These men who read earnestly are, at best, objects of ridicule, at worst, the villains of their stories. Their reading is too passionate, too selective, and too isolating. Mr. Cary, a Northern reverend, becomes suddenly converted to the cause of abolition and invites a fugitive slave to live in his entirely white town. His devotion to abolitionist reading and preaching prevents him, in the novel's view, from recognizing the

[49] Caroline Lee Hentz, *The Planter's Northern Bride* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson, 1854), 92.

wild impracticality of his charity and the rampant chaos it introduces to the formerly peaceful village. Just after the passage quoted above, his wife attempts to dissuade him from preaching anymore about abolitionism, but he accuses her, echoing the husbands of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, of "reason[ing] like a woman" and dismisses her concerns.[50] Staunch abolitionist Mr. Hastings bitterly opposes the marriage of his daughter to Moreland, a slaveholding Southerner. Mr. Hastings is essentially a scholar, though "he cannot be said to have any exclusive profession. He prepares young men for college, edits a paper called the 'Emancipator,' writes essays, delivers public lectures on all the leading topics of the day, and, among these . . . slavery, or rather anti-slavery, occupies a very conspicuous place." Hastings's preoccuptation with anti-slavery reading, writing, and lecturing leads him into absurdity that borders on cruelty: "I heard him say once," relates one character, "that if wife or child of his were languishing in a consumption, and he knew he could add ten years to their lives by sending them to the milder climate of the South, his conscience would not justify the act, so utterly does he abhor its institutions."[51] Just as Stowe's domestic scenes were unsettled by the constant presence of slavery, the peaceful households of anti-Tom novels are threatened by abolitionism. As in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, this threat is signalled by white men's reading practices. Like the Southern men of Stowe's novel, the Northern men of anti-Tom stories are cut off from reality; but rather than stunted, their moral senses are overgrown and run amok. Obsessed with reading and lecturing about the South, their lofty politics leave them unable to recognize the areas of need right in front of them. Good Northern women, who remain engaged in and responsive to the world, are vulnerable not, like Stowe's heroines, because their husbands and fathers care too little about the morality of slavery, but because they care too much.

[50] Flanders, *The Ebony Idol*, 65.
[51] Hentz, *The Planter's Northern Bride*, 39–40.

The female authors of anti-Tom novels tended to be much more conservative than Stowe with regard to gender, race, and class. Sarah N. Roth has shown, for example, that women in anti-Tom novels are passive bordering on incompetent: "Without white men to guide and take care of them, these women could barely survive, let alone devise effective ways of turning their dire circumstances around."[52] Nonetheless, though they utterly affirm Southern white patriarchy, anti-Tom novels manifest a certain anxiety over white male power, and the potential for men to throw the world into utter chaos against which women had little recourse. While this anxiety is most commonly expressed in anti-Tom novels by the overzealous reading of abolitionist men, at times the threat comes, as in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, from men who pretend to read. One such scene in *The Planter's Northern Bride* depicts a villainous reverend pretending to read the Bible:

> But, perhaps he is studying passages to give sanctity and effect to his incendiary addresses. Like Belshazzar, he may be purloining the golden vessels from God's temple, to gratify his own unhallowed passions.
>
> There is one passage of Scripture on which his eye glances; then he hastily turns over the leaf. We wonder he does not commit it to memory, for it is a most eloquent denunciation. The arrows of divine indignation are quivering in every word.
>
> "Woe unto you, Pharisees! for ye tithe mint, and rue, and all manner of herbs, and pass over judgment and the love of God: these ought ye to have done, and not leave the other undone.
>
> "Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are as graves which appear not, and the men that walk over them are not aware of them."[53]

Hentz calls attention to the reverend's deceptive appearance—"Ah! he must be a good man, or he would not read his Bible so earnestly"; in so doing she follows in a sentimental tradition that viewed the world as a product of the "actively willed duplicity of men."[54] G. J. Barker-Benfield, in his work on the "culture of sensibility" in eighteenth-century Britain, suggests that unease

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[52] Sarah N. Roth, *Gender and Race in Antebellum Popular Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 162.

[53] Caroline Lee Hentz, *The Planter's Northern Bride* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson, 1854), 458.

[54] Hentz, *The Planter's Northern Bride*, 458. G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 221.

over men's duplicity, "the variety of representations of selfhood, controlling feelings and manipulating features," was encouraged by "the increasing numbers and complexity of commercial transactions." Duplicitous men, Barker-Benfield argues, posed a particular threat to women in cultures that separated the public and private spheres because of "women's exclusion from the world," their "sheer lack of experience."[55] The helpless women of anti-Tom novels adhere to this sentimental model, but Stowe's women do not. Similarly, the bad men of anti-Tom novels are not, like Stowe's men, paralyzed by ambivalence, but rather spellbound by their own perceived righteousness, condemned for their willfulness and overactivity: "But, alas! the Abolitionist will not reflect. He lives in a whirlpool, whither he has been drawn by his own rashness."[56] Though both Stowe and female anti-Tom authors take white male reading practices to be representative of their respective social problems, for Stowe the dynamic union of thought and action is precisely what white men are missing.

AUGUSTINE ST. CLARE, (OVER-)CRITICAL READER

Although St. Clare is one of Stowe's most fully realized, complex, and self-aware characters, he and his slaves are ultimately doomed. Senator Bird is eventually persuaded by his wife's persistent moral voice to break his own law and help a fugitive, and Mr. Shelby is at least wise enough to leave his estate to his wife and son so that they can clean up his financial mess and free his slaves. St. Clare, however, dies in a state of inaction and indecision, the fate of his slaves and his soul uncertain. Despite being one of Stowe's most skillfully drawn characters, St. Clare remains understudied in scholarship on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, perhaps because his inertia when it

[55] Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, 221.

[56] Mary Henderson Eastman, *Aunt Phillis's Cabin; or, Southern Life As It Is* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1852), 206.

comes to slavery is somewhat baffling: he is extremely intelligent; he acknowledges and occasionally rails against the evils of slavery; he is well-versed in and emotionally responsive to Christianity, although not a professed believer; and he is provided by the narrative with three surrogate maternal influences—his cousin Miss Ophelia, his daughter Eva, and Uncle Tom.

St. Clare has been a problem for scholars of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* who struggle to identify exactly what is wrong with him—why doesn't he act on his beliefs, whatever they are? He is also a problem, some have argued, for his author. No character poses a greater threat, so it has been said, to Stowe's faith in moral suasion than the wise, sensitive, kindly, and ultimately passive St. Clare—hence, perhaps, his unceremonious death.[57] He has baffled many theories about Stowe's proposed solution to the problem of slavery. Wolff, for example, has claimed that Stowe argues, like many abolitionists, that only by reforming a manliness based on conquest and colonization into a manliness marked by the (wrongly) feminized attributes of affection, feeling, and mutuality would slavery come to an end.[58] Yet Lang has contended that St. Clare is such a man as Wolff describes, possessing the greatest balance of attributes of any character in the novel. Nonetheless, he remains politically impotent:

> Endowed with feminine sensibility and a masculine ability to negotiate the world of affairs, able to feel and to think, equally fluent in the language of religion and that of politics, having the benefits of both North and South. . . . The two sides of his character, one feminine, the other masculine, rather than working in tandem to produce the ideal reformer, instead pull in opposite directions and immobilize him. His noblest ambitions are thwarted by an acute ethical sense. His knowledge reveals not solutions but still more problems. The sense of duty he admires and in part shares with his Northern cousin is undermined by his Southern indolence.[59]

[57] See for example Faye Halpern, "Why St. Clare Must Die," in *Sentimental Readers: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of a Disparaged Rhetoric* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013), 128–133.

[58] Wolff, "'Masculinity,'" 601–602.

[59] Lang, "Slavery and Sentimentalism," 45–46.

While I agree with Lang that St. Clare casts doubt on any solution to slavery that relies on transformations of individual men, her assertion that St. Clare is "more blatantly feminine than even Uncle Tom" falls down if attention is paid to depictions of literacy in the novel.[60] If reading practices are taken to be central to Stowe's characterizations of men and women, then St. Clare is arguably the novel's most masculine character. He is incapable of believing in the Bible—and for Stowe there can be no greater concession to the masculine norms that perpetuate slavery than lack of faith in scripture.

Furthermore, St. Clare is the novel's most disgraceful reader of newspapers—he even dies because of his devotion to them. While Mr. Shelby and Senator Bird merely pretend to read secular documents in a futile effort to distract themselves from their wives' moral influence, St. Clare seems actually able to read them. When Miss Ophelia discovers that a slave from a nearby plantation has been whipped to death, she finds her cousin lying around reading the paper and asks him if he is "going to do anything about it," whether he has "any selectmen, or anybody, to interfere and look after such matters" (201). St. Clare replies, "going on with his paper," that he "didn't do it" and "can't help it," and that "there would be no use in interfering" (201). He concludes that "the best we can do is to shut our eyes and ears, and let it alone," and leaves Ophelia to furiously and helplessly knit (201). Later, when Ophelia pleads desperately with him legally to sign Topsy over to her, he says he will do it later and unfolds a newspaper to read. Once she finally gets him to sign the paper, she takes up her knitting and asks him whether he has "made any provision" for his slaves in the event of his death (283). He replies that he means to, but has not yet, and she suggests that he might die before he gets to it. He is fatally stabbed that evening at a café in which he stopped "to look over an evening paper" (289) (fig. 8).

[60] Ibid., 42.

Fig. 6: Illustration of Mr. and Mrs. Shelby drawn by George Thomas and T. R. Macquoid, and engraved by William Thomas, for a pirated English edition of the novel from 1853. Mr. Shelby pretends to read a letter while his wife questions him about the slave-trader Mr. Haley. These illustrations were later included in an 1888 authorized printing by Houghton Mifflin. Image courtesy of Uncle Tom's Cabin & American Culture, an archive hosted by the University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/sitemap.html

$10 REWARD.—Ran away, on the 28th December last, from my place on Red River, opposite the mouth of Black River, the griff man DICK GRIFFIN, about 30 years old, thick lips, open good countenance, always laughs or smiles when spoken to, about 5 feet 9 inches high, rather clumsily built; was dressed in a short coatee and coarse white striped pants; he was bought of Mr. Mark Davis about a month ago, and is just imported from Virginia. The above reward will be paid as soon as he is secured so I get him again. J. B. MAILLET, or at No. 18 St. Ann street, New Orleans.
Routh's Point, 30th Dec., 1844. j5—1md&W*

Fig. 7: Runaway slave ad from the January 15, 1845 issue of New Orleans' *Daily Picayune*, a typical example of Senator Bird's "idea of a fugitive," "the image of a little newspaper picture of a man with a stick and bundle, with 'Ran away from the subscriber' under it." Image courtesy of Freedom on the Move.

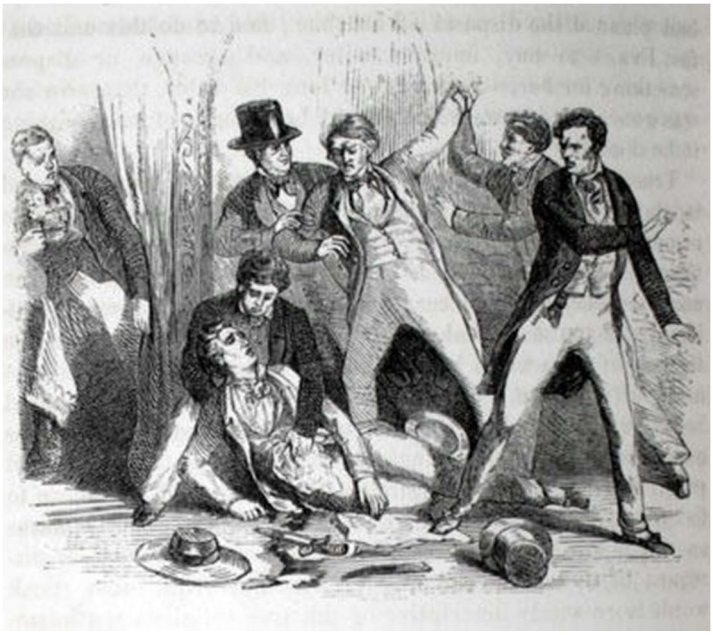

Fig. 8: Illustration of the mortally wounded St. Clare, with his hand on his rumpled newspaper, drawn by Hammatt Billings for the 1853 "Splendid Edition" by John P. Jewett & Company. Image courtesy of Uncle Tom's Cabin & American Culture, an archive hosted by the University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/sitemap.html

Scholars of sentimentalism have dealt with the St. Clare problem by interpreting his inaction and lack of redemption as a testament to Stowe's conception, on the one hand, of the corrupting influence of slavery and its accompanying aristocratic lifestyle, and, on the other hand, of the absolute need of a good wife or mother in every man's life.[61] But although the St. Clare household is marked by tragedy, he appears to be an excellent father, if Eva is any testament. Furthermore, St. Clare treats his slaves so well—preferring to "have them to help spend money" rather than make it—that Miss Ophelia accuses him of over-indulging them (212). As for his lack of a good wife, it speaks volumes that in a novel populated by slaveholders, slavetraders, and slavecatchers, Maire St. Clare is one of Stowe's least-likable characters. Indeed, she is so delinquent in her duty to provide a strong moral influence for her family that, unlike any other woman in the novel, she pretends to read. Stowe skewers Marie's self-indulgence in a scene that sees her "reclin[ing] on a sofa . . . languidly holding in her hand an elegantly bound prayer-book. She was holding it because it was Sunday, and she imagined she had been reading it,—though, in fact, she had been only taking a succession of short naps, with it open in her hand" (255). Not only does Marie pretend to read, but Stowe identifies her obliquely as a poor sewer, unable, in response to a brokenhearted St. Clare, "to mend the broken threads of life, and weave them again into a tissue of brightness" (140). Unfortunately for her husband and her slaves, Marie is not "a whole woman" (140). St. Clare and Marie do less than any other white couple in the novel when it comes to providing for the freedom of the slaves in their household; indeed, St. Clare is capable in several key moments of a convincing nonchalance with regard to

[61] Some scholars have interpreted St. Clare's inaction as a critique of Catholicism. To Sundquist, for instance, St. Clare represents "the South's spiritual enervation" ("Introduction," in *New Essays*, 27). Others, however, have noted Catholicism's influence on the novel, especially in its portrayal of St. Clare's daughter Eva, "a spiritual martyr in the tradition of the confessor saints" (Anthony E. Szczesiul, "The Canonization of Tom and Eva: Catholic Hagiography and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *ATQ* 10 [1996]: 65). St. Clare's cultural Catholicism (he is not a professed Christian) may be a contributing factor to his angst, but I do not find the promotion of anti-Catholicism to be his primary function in the novel.

slavery, even in the absence of the financial and political pressures that plague Shelby and the Senator.

Paradoxically, St. Clare also seems to be more tortured than any other white male character by his complicity in slavery. His ability to be, at times, completely blasé about the peculiar institution is self-consciously cultivated to combat his "morbid sensitiveness and acuteness of feeling" (206). His conversations with Ophelia parallel the conversations between the other white couples in the novel, but their conflicts do not seem to result primarily from a division between public and private identities; rather, St. Clare and his cousin seem to butt heads when her pragmatic optimism meets his nihilistic skepticism. When Miss Ophelia asks him why he continues to own slaves if he can't defend the institution, St. Clare counters, "Are you such a sweet innocent as to suppose nobody in this world ever does what they don't think is right? . . . Didn't you ever keep on doing wrong, after you'd repented?" (202). Although St. Clare justifiably disparages Ophelia for her naive and racist brand of Northern abolitionism, he is ready to view slavery as an inevitable fact of life, something which he simply inherited from his parents, as though slavery is in his blood: "My servants were my father's . . . and now they are mine, they and their increase, which bids fair to be a pretty considerable item" (205). St. Clare suggests that Miss Ophelia affords her optimism and abolitionism not only because of her position as a Northerner but also because of her freedom, as a woman, from the inheritance of slavery. Like the other ineffectual men of the novel, Senator Bird and Mr. Shelby, St. Clare feminizes the biblically informed stance that endorses abolition. Unlike the Senator and Mr. Shelby, however, St. Clare does not dismiss or deny the biblical point of view, and indeed has nothing but contempt for those who contend that slavery is "*right*—according to Scripture," or for any talk "about slaves *enjoying* all this!" (210, 209). St. Clare *feels right*: he knows that

slavery is a "cursed business, accursed of God," and he feels he is in a deep "state of sin and misery" (204).

That he nonetheless remains "a piece of driftwood . . . floating and eddying about," and not an "actor and regenerator in society," cannot be a tragic consequence of the lack of maternal influence in his life, nor is it a result of slavery's corrupting effect on the domestic sphere (212). Contrary to the sentimentalist view, St. Clare's story actually suggests that moral suasion and feminine influence are subject to profound limitations. St. Clare practically worships his mother, whom he describes as "a direct embodiment and personification of the New Testament" (205). He recalls hearing her reason with his father about slavery, "endeavoring to excite his sympathies," and his father's consistent reply that "all government includes some necessary hardness" (207). "After he said *that*," St. Clare relates to Ophelia, "he commonly drew up his feet on the sofa, like a man that has disposed of a business, and betook himself to a nap, or the newspaper" (28). If such a woman—"*she was divine!*" breathes St. Clare; "there was no trace of any human weakness or error about her" (205)—can fail to induce either her husband or her sons, all of whom love and respect her deeply, to give up their slaves, what hope is there for women of definitively "mortal birth" (205)? As awful as Marie is, St. Clare is otherwise surrounded by good, even saintly influences—his mother, Eva, Uncle Tom, Miss Ophelia—all of whom encourage him, in their own way, to embrace the Bible and free his slaves. But their influence never results in action.

On the contrary, St. Clare's conviction that slavery is wrong appears to paralyze him with dread of its inescapability. He won't become a Christian because he would feel morally compelled to take on the huge weight of the abolitionist cause:

> St. Clare had never pretended to govern himself by any religious obligation; and a certain fineness of nature gave him such an instinctive view of the extent of the

> requirements of Christianity, that he shrank, by anticipation, from what he felt would be the exactions of his own conscience, if he once did resolve to assume them. For, so inconsistent is human nature, especially in the ideal, that not to undertake a thing at all seems better than to undertake and come short. (278–279)

St. Clare knows in his heart that Christianity has real force and that slavery is wrong; but he fears the difficulty of acting on his convictions. On the subject of his procrastination, St. Clare himself says that "the apathy of religious people on [with regard to slavery] . . . ha[s] engendered in me more scepticism than any other thing." He acknowledges, however, with characteristic discernment and wit, that he has "only had that kind of benevolence which consists in lying on a sofa, and cursing the church and clergy for not being martyrs and confessors. One can see, you know, very easily, how others ought to be martyrs" (286–287). St. Clare is in fact surrounded by Christians who are active in their responses to slavery: Ophelia adopts Topsy, Eva treats the slaves in her household with Christ-like compassion, and Tom is able to act on and even die for his moral beliefs because his faith in the Bible allows him to imagine a world where black virtue is rewarded. But even in the wake of Eva's death, when St. Clare's lack of religious conviction is more inconvenient than ever, he laments to his friend, "Tom, I don't believe,—I can't believe,—I've got the habit of doubting . . . . I want to believe this Bible,—and I can't" (275).

Attention to St. Clare's reading reveals that his problem is neither a lack nor surplus of femininity; not his Southernness or his Catholicism; not the absence of courage, a mother, or a good wife. His problem is, rather, complexity itself, the endless interpretability of text. As Faye Halpern notes, "the absence of a text that is immune from complex interpretation leads to his passivity. He finds it difficult to act because no text and by extension no belief can warrant so much trust as to assure him that he is not mistaken in acting upon it."[62] His "habit of doubting" the Bible is a direct result of this ironic view of the world. When Miss Ophelia asks whether he

[62] Halpern, *Sentimental Readers*, 133.

thinks the Bible supports slavery, he answers by imagining a sudden permanent drop in price of cotton that makes slavery economically nonviable: "Don't you think we should soon have another version of the Scripture doctrine? What a flood of light would pour into the church, all at once, and how immediately it would be discovered that everything in the Bible and reason went the other way!" (168). For St. Clare, the Bible, like all texts, is polyvalent; he is thus intellectually suspicious of those who commit to any one interpretation. Newspapers are perhaps a comfort to him precisely because their meaning is never finished, and never claims to be—what he reads tomorrow will affect how he interprets what he reads today, and so on forever.

St. Clare's error lies in regarding the Bible as a text like any other in a novel that views it as set apart and eminently clear in its meaning. (Even St. Clare admits that he "want[s] to believe this Bible.") In his cotton hypothetical, he mistakes, according to Stowe's logic, economically motivated readings of the Bible for true biblical literacy. Like Senator Bird and Mr. Shelby, St. Clare's position on slavery is subject to economic and political uncertainty. As Halpern writes, "we need to be moved as well as convinced in order to be driven to political action, but we also need to know that we can safely foreclose our interpretations."[63] Women's exclusion "from the white masculine 'success' ethic" helps them to denounce slavery, in Stowe's words, "with that straight-out and generous indignation which belongs to women, who, generally speaking, are ready to follow their principles to any result with more inconsiderate fearlessness than men."[64] In a culture that devalues and domesticates biblical literacy, only the "lowly"—women, slaves, the "unsuccessful man"—can be certain. St. Clare's inaction and death are a testament to the dangers of feminizing this certainty.

[63] Ibid.
[64] Ammons, "Heroines," 176; Stowe, *Dred*, 563.

Stowe's literary abolitionism turns on her ability to draw black characters who are profoundly sympathetic and fully human, but ultimately nonthreatening. Over time, readers have become increasingly sensitive to the latter goal and to the racist stereotyping by which Stowe attempts to accomplish it. It has been argued frequently and persuasively that Tom's religion is a main way in which Stowe establishes his essentially docile nature, a nature which many have said leads him to act irrationally against his own interests and the interests of others of his race. What has been lost, to a degree, is the radical nature of the effort to endow slave characters with voices, feelings, and subjectivity. This effort, like almost every aspect of the novel, is also marked by racist assumptions, but we fail to appreciate the novel's originality and daring if we write it off for its racism without taking into account its context. As Wolff notes,

> In approaching Uncle Tom's Cabin, perhaps the single most important thing to remember is that, contrary to what we might suppose today, in the America of 1850, abolition was an unpopular, minority cause; its proponents were generally regarded as a dangerous, unsavory fringe group-trouble-making radicals who were not "received" in polite social circles. . . . Today's readers may trivialize [her] strategies (and may be inclined to pay more attention to the novel's undeniable traces of sentimental racism). However, at the time, these were bold, radical innovations—experiments that enraged many readers and even fellow abolitionists.[65]

Beatrice Anderson writes similarly that "Stowe was fighting to convince her audience not only that black men and women should be granted freedom but that they were in fact *human*

[65] Wolff, "'Masculinity,'" 596. For example, Charles Dickens admired the novel, but told Stowe she had gone "too far" in "seek[ing] to prove too much": "The wrongs and atrocities of slavery are, God knows! case enough. I doubt there being any warrant for making out the African race to be a great race, or for supposing the future destinies of the world to lie in that direction; and I think this extreme championship likely to repel some useful sympathy and support" (Charles Dickens to Harriet Beecher Stowe, July 17, 1852, in *The Writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, vol. 1 [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1896], lxvii.

beings."[66] I want to establish the relevance of Tom's Bible-reading for Stowe's project—that is, the internal logic that makes Tom's literate religiosity necessary to the story and its author's hoped-for effect on her readers. Two of the novel's most important characters, Uncle Tom and George Harris, are physically strong, literate black men, each with a powerful sense of personal identity and unyielding moral conviction—not exactly unintimidating to the nineteenth-century white establishment. Though it may have ultimately contributed to a harmful stereotype, Stowe's choice to place Bibles and other texts in the hands of black characters was not without risk, and for several reasons the role of reading in Tom's essentially docile nature may not have been immediately apparent to Stowe's white contemporaries.[67]

Stowe's depictions of black readers offer white readers a comforting image of pious and peace-loving slaves while challenging them with the radical notion that black people were fully human. On the one hand, Uncle Tom's harmlessness is one of his defining characteristics. Although Stowe could not accept the cruelty of preventing slaves from learning to read, she did perceive the necessity of limiting the disruptive potential of literacy within her narrative in order to make abolition more palatable to her white audience. In the case of Tom, the "dangerous excitement" of literacy is subsumed beneath his peaceful religiosity. The converted Tom is both childlike and maternal; his Christian beliefs and scripture-reading have given him a saintly tenderness and innocence. It seems that all Tom wants in the world is a room in which he might read his Bible in peace.

On the other hand, white readers confronted with images of black reading were forced to consider the reality that slaves, too, experienced privacy, subjectivity, and moral autonomy.

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[66] Beatrice Anderson, "Uncle Tom: A Hero at Last," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 5 (June, 1991): 106.

[67] On historical characterizations of African Americans as naturally religious, see Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Given that Stowe so often depicts Uncle Tom as a reader, it seems likely that she considers his desire to read his most sympathetic quality. That we so often encounter him alone with a book demonstrates that he enjoys a rich life of the mind. That the Bible is the only book he cares to read suggests that he does not view literacy as a means to self-cultivation for its own sake or as a way to gain power or even independence, but rather as the key to heaven and a guide for doing God's will on earth. Uncle Tom's Bible-reading simultaneously demonstrates his subjectivity and directs it toward a selfless, nonviolent end.

Indeed, whenever we meet Tom in the narrative—from the moment we first see him to nearly every subsequent time we return to him from scenes with other characters—he is struggling over a text. When we are introduced to Tom he is "very busily intent . . . on a slate lying before him, . . . carefully and slowly endeavoring to accomplish a copy of some letters" (19). We leave him for a while, rejoining him as he prepares to depart from his cabin for the last time, "with his Testament open on his knee, and his head leaning upon his hand" (85). After getting acquainted with the St. Clares, we return to Tom in "a little loft over the stable," his Bible and hymn book nearby, "his slate before him, intent on something that seems to cost him a great deal of anxious thought," which turns out to be a draft for a letter home (215). Despite the physical torture Tom endures under Legree, we know that he has arrived at his lowest point when he can no longer read his Bible: for "after the cruel treatment he received, he used to come home so exhausted, that his head swam and his eyes failed when he tried to read; and he was fain to stretch himself down, with the others, in utter exhaustion" (354).

Tom's gentle and pious nature does more than limit his potential threat to white audiences. These scenes in which Tom struggles over a text "dramatize the obstacles under which he has labored to become literate": Stowe does not make fun of his dreams or his

capacities, but asks "whether barriers to learning are natural, just, and irrevocable."[68] Tom is in many ways an ideal slave: he works hard; he refuses to lie, steal, or run away; he is quiet, polite, and pleasant to be around; and he seems incapable of violence. These are the qualities that have given the name "Uncle Tom" its long history in American culture, and indeed they are part of a racist agenda by which Stowe hoped to make abolition attractive.[69] But these qualities also make Tom a problem for readers: How could slavery ever, even under ideal circumstances, be morally tolerable—let alone benevolent—when even Tom is made to suffer constantly? In scenes of Tom with his Bible, his desire to learn, and his undeniable capacity to do so, are juxtaposed against the privation and brutality of his condition. That Tom is not a more skillful reader may well be the result of Stowe's understanding of different racial capacities; however, when his labored reading is contrasted with the unremarkable mastery of white male readers, who direct their easily acquired education toward idleness, depravity, and supporting the apparatus of slavery, Tom's struggles, which are aimed at service and piety, become emblematic of the injustice of his world.[70]

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[68] Hochman, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution*, 53.

[69] As Jim O'Loughlin ("Articulating 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,'" *New Literary History* 31, no. 3 [Summer 2000]: 573–597), Beatrice Anderson ("Uncle Tom: A Hero at Last"), and others have pointed out, images of Uncle Tom in American culture have been influenced by the even more popular theatrical productions of the novel, which helped to invent the minstrel tradition. James Baldwin's well known comments on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for instance, appear in a chapter focused not on the novel, but on the plays it inspired. This, of course, does not absolve the novel from its role in creating harmful stereotypes; *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was more than a novel—it was, as O'Loughlin writes,

> a public site within which changing concerns about race, gender, class, and issues of nationhood were brought together and linked, or, to be more precise, coordinated. In its maintenance and transgression of racial categories, its representations of femininity and feminism, its coded discourses of class, and its intersections with nationalism, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* served as both barometer and agent of cultural change for almost one hundred years. (574)

Roth points out that dramatic productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "which remained strongly a province of men," tended to give George Harris "a central role and Tom mainly a supporting one, suggesting that Harris appealed to white northern men more than Tom did" (*Gender and Race*, 137).

[70] If Stowe's depiction of Tom's reading is born of racial assumptions, it also participates in an evangelical tradition of anticlericalism and revival influence that valued humble religious expressions. She would have found much agreement in the antebellum era for her claim that though Tom's Bible "had no annotations and helps in margin from learned commentators, still it had been embellished with certain way-marks and guide-boards of Tom's own invention and which helped him more than the most learned expositions could have done" (132).

Stowe generates sympathy for her main character by contrasting Tom's kindness with the cruelties visited upon him, but she also uses his literacy to bring into relief the corrupt nature of slavery without directly preaching to her readers. In scenes where Tom is the central character, readers often view events from his point of view, and thus adopt to some degree his compassion, sensitivity, and desire for peace. Tom's attitude and bearing are almost always at odds with his environment in slavery. His attempts to read his Bible and write to his family are contrasted with scenes of whites selling human beings, with raving, alcoholic slaves, and with his own whipping. On the La Belle Riviere, the ship which carries him down south, Tom witnesses an enslaved mother's realization that her child is not on the boat with her because he has just been sold without her knowledge. Stowe comments sarcastically that to Tom, the event "looked like something unutterably horrible and cruel, because, poor, ignorant black soul! he had not learned to generalize, and to take enlarged views":

> If he had only been instructed by certain ministers of Christianity, he might have thought better of it, and seen in it an every-day incident of a lawful trade. . . . But Tom, as we see, being a poor, ignorant fellow, whose reading had been confined entirely to the New Testament, could not comfort and solace himself with views like these. His very soul bled within him for what seemed to him the wrongs of the poor suffering thing that lay like a crushed reed on the boxes; the feeling, living, bleeding, yet immortal thing, which American state law coolly classes with the bundles, and bales, and boxes, among which she is lying. (118–119)

In this ironic commentary, Tom's Bible-reading becomes a symbol of his inherent goodness, and of his ability to feel the sorrow which the scene demands, even in a world of characters who either fail to notice or ignore the black mother's anguish. In the backward institution of slavery, Tom's human decency makes him an odd man out; Stowe uses Tom, specifically his Bible-reading, to highlight the ways in which the white men who carry out the "transaction," and even the ministers who preach to them, have adopted a kind of illiteracy by neutering their ability to witness and enact biblical truth in order to participate in slavery (118). Uncle Tom's Bible-

reading often makes him an observer and silent critic of the brutality around him. Tom may struggle to read, and the Bible may be the only book he ever can read, but he is a "true reader" of both the Word and the world. When we see slavery through Tom's biblically attuned eyes, we see plainly that it is wrong.

It might reasonably be asked why, if motherhood inspired the novel and if the separation of mothers from their children is the fundamental crime of slavery, Stowe did not make her central character a woman. Tom is united with the white and black women of the novel in part by his close relationship to the suffering that accompanies motherhood. Throughout his journey, Tom bears witness to and silently grieves the tragedies that befall enslaved mothers—Eliza, Cassy, Lucy, and Aunt Hagar, to name a few. As the title of the book indicates, home and family are the center of Tom's life. When we first meet this "uncommon fellow" in his cabin, he is surrounded by children (2). We soon learn that in spite of his big, strong, masculine physicality, he has "a voice as tender as a woman's" (91) and a "gentle, domestic heart" (85). Tom is torn away from his children, and as he watches them sleep for the last time, we are told, "Sobs, heavy, hoarse and loud, shook the chair, and great tears fell through his fingers on the floor . . . ; such tears, woman, as you shed when you heard the cries of your dying babe" (36). It might be concluded that Tom reacts to slavery the same way the novel's good women do, the same way Stowe herself did, because like them he understands the loss of children.

However, several of the novel's white male characters have, like Tom, lost children. Senator Bird, as we learn once his political defenses are broken down, is mourning the death of his young son; and St. Clare's life effectively ends the moment Eva dies, when he is transformed by grief into "a hollow shell over a heart that was a dark and silent sepulchre" (274). Stowe does not exclude white men from experiencing profound suffering; instead, she places her male

characters in the same position that inspired her to write an anti-slavery novel. What sets characters like Senator Bird and Augustine St. Clare apart from characters like Tom and Mrs. Bird, and from their author, is how they express and respond to their grief. It is with difficulty and "some hesitation" that Senator Bird is able to stutter out his reminder of "that drawer full of things—of—of—poor little Henry's," and he practically runs away after mentioning it. Perhaps the newspapers with which the Senator shields himself are part of a scheme by which he keeps the memory of his dead child away from the forefront of his mind; perhaps if he were more open with his grief, he would be less able to support proslavery legislation, and thereby less effective politically. St. Clare does not appear to be mourning Eva at all—he cannot cry, and he goes on with business as usual, though those close to him know he is distraught. As Eva lies dying, explaining to her father with great joy how she will soon see Christ, the narrator tells us that for St. Clare "it was a feeling which he had seen before in his mother; but no chord within vibrated to it" (266). But this lack of feeling seems to result from a concerted effort not to feel: when Tom asks St. Clare to read John 11 aloud like Eva used to do, St. Clare agrees but "often paus[es] to wrestle down the feelings that were roused by the pathos of the story" (277). St. Clare fights his natural response to reading scripture, but then claims he "can't," rather than won't, believe in the Bible.

Tom is a comparatively open wound throughout the novel. Elizabeth Ammons has gone so far as to declare him "a stereotypical Victorian heroine: pious, domestic, self-sacrificing, emotionally uninhibited in response to people and ethical questions." Tom's feminization, she argues, not only helps render him "unthreatening in any literal way that would play into the hands of belligerently racist whites who maintained that blacks were brutes who must be oppressed," but also inserts him "into the nineteenth-century idolatry of feminine virtue,

sentimentalized in young girls and sacrosanct in Mother." If Uncle Tom is understood as a representative of the feminized virtues on which Stowe rested all her hope for the end of slavery, then, potentially, "the passivity which popular culture chooses to remember is not his dominant attribute."[71] Ammons suggests that Tom's supposed passivity is actually a misrecognition of a feminine mode of action and critique which is frequently dismissed to this day precisely because it is feminine.[72] Whenever possible, she argues, Tom takes action, but that action is consistently patient, nonviolent, and self-sacrificing. Thus, "Tom, like most women but few men in the novel, really tries to live according to the Gospel's injunction to love his neighbor as himself."[73] That Tom is not a woman suggests that Stowe recognized an affinity between white women and black people in general, not just between white and black women. Tom's maleness simultaneously reinforces a comforting depiction of black men as feminized (nonviolent, pious, etc.), but also challenges her readers to see themselves in a strong, literate black man.[74]

But in other ways, Tom better fits the profile of a Victorian hero than heroine, not least of all because he is a man. It is he, not Eva's father St. Clare, who dives off the La Belle Riviere after Eva falls into the water. St. Clare, even here, is ineffectual; he tries "plunging in after her," but is "held back by some behind him, who saw that more efficient aid"—Tom—"had followed

[71] Ammons, "Heroines," 172.

[72] Anderson argues similarly that Tom's "self-sacrifice" signifies not weakness but rather an enactment of social responsibility: "Although it sounds paradoxical, Tom complies with a system that he judges unfair and unreasonable out of resilient strength, keen awareness of his alternatives, and intelligence, not out of blind and passive submission. . . . His actions are animated primarily by his anxiety for his family's welfare, by his concern for his fellow slaves both on Shelby's estate and on Legree's plantation, and always by his wise and practical weighing of consequences" ("Uncle Tom: A Hero at Last," 96–99).

[73] Ammons, "Heroines," 171.

[74] Tom is first described as "a large, broad-chested, powerfully made man, of a full glossy black, and a face whose truly African features were characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense, united with much kindliness and benevolence" (19). Though Stowe's sketch is marred by both exoticism and the groundwork for a persistent stereotype, by describing Tom's features as "truly African" and his skin as "full glossy black," she ensures that readers cannot attribute his heroic or intellectual qualities to white blood. Compare Tom's description to that of anti-Tom heroine Aunt Phillis, "a tall, dignified, bright mulatto woman," whose "well-regulated mind" is attributed to the fact that "the blood of the freeman and the slave mingled in her veins" (Eastman, *Aunt Phillis's Cabin*, 102).

his child" (134). For Tom, "a broad-chested, strong-armed fellow, it was nothing" to rescue Eva (135). Tom also repeatedly sacrifices himself to protect black women. He encourages Eliza to run away with her son, but refuses to run away himself because he realizes that if he does, Shelby will sell many others to earn Tom's price: "If I must be sold," he says, "or all the people on the place, . . . why, let me be sold" (36). Tom gives his cotton to a beaten and exhausted Lucy so that she will not be further brutalized for failing to pick enough (321). When Legree attempts to force Tom to whip Lucy, mistaking his "soft voice" and "habitually respectful manner" for cowardice, Tom stuns him by refusing, declaring that he would rather die, which he almost does after Legree responds violently to his disobedience (324). Indeed, Tom ultimately does die because he refuses to betray Cassy and Emmeline by telling Legree that they have not run away but are, in fact, hiding in Legree's house (375–376). Tom dies not because he is unwilling to inflict violence on his white male captors (an assertion that recalls the ignorant yet persistent suggestion that enslaved blacks should have simply fought back), but because he is willing to sacrifice himself in order to protect black women. He offers a biblically informed masculinity that remains physical, heroic, and active.[75]

Perhaps even the feminized qualities Tom shares with other women in the novel are not essentially or inevitably feminine. What most unites Tom with the good women of the novel—like Eliza, Mrs. Bird, Rachel Halliday, and Mrs. Shelby—is his desire to read the Bible and do the will of God on earth, positive impulses which are constantly compromised or altogether thwarted by slavery, but which ought to be shared by all Christians, male and female. Via her

[75] That scholars have convincingly argued that Tom is both a feminine heroine and a masculine hero owes much to his depiction as a Christ-like figure. More than any other character in the novel, Tom behaves according to the model of Jesus. His defining characteristics—compassion, humility, faith, selflessness, honesty, steadfastness, valor—are not, according to an evangelical worldview, gendered attributes, but rather the attributes that all Christians should strive to embody in imitation of Christ.

male hero who behaves in many respects as women are expected to, via her critique of a white masculinity that fails to act against slavery, Stowe questions the feminization and domestication of virtues—especially faith in the Bible—which can pose real challenges to the slave system. Far from arguing, as Lang influentially interpreted, that women and their virtues only have force in the home, where they are protected from the corrupting influence of political and economic interests, the novel depicts domestic treatments of the slavery problem as ultimately futile: Mrs. Shelby declares herself "a fool" for thinking she could help her slaves, and has to wait for her husband to die before her son can free them; the saintly influences of Uncle Tom and Eva, not to mention Miss Ophelia and a quasi-divine mother, do nothing to sway St. Clare toward manumission before he dies; Legree was raised by a loving and Christian mother, but simply ignored her advice and followed in the footsteps of his coldhearted father; honorable George and pious Eliza must risk their lives and take up arms in order to obtain their freedom; and Uncle Tom's many virtues do nothing to save him from slavery's cruelest abuses. Lang has argued that Stowe "insist[s] on the moral superiority of the disempowered," and that for this reason "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* cannot move beyond the home wherein the powerless are guaranteed their virtue and the virtuous their lack of power."[76] But this is precisely the problem Stowe identifies and deconstructs through her depictions of literacy. As Lang herself concedes, "the very grammar" of Mrs. Bird's riposte to her husband—"I don't know anything about politics, but I can read my Bible"—"makes clear the moral primacy of the Bible. It implies that Christianity and not interest ought to hold sway even in the political world."[77] The problem is not that women's virtue cannot

[76] Lang, "Slavery and Sentimentalism," 51.

[77] Ibid. Lang argues that Mrs. Bird's statement also "suggests . . . that if she did know anything of politics, Christian charity might be overridden by interest" (51). I simply do not see why this is the case. Lang contends that "Mrs. Bird's moral rectitude, like Mrs. Shelby's, is a luxury of dependence; she has no constituency to please, no bread to win" (38). This is the same argument advanced by their husbands, and it is clear Stowe does not agree with them. Mrs. Bird and Mrs. Shelby's dependence is a symptom of the problem (the domestication of virtue), not its cause.

be translated from the domestic to the public sphere; the problem is rather the domestication of virtue, that interest and not the Bible "hold sway" in public life—that there even exists a realm of activity that can only operate as it does because the Bible has no influence there.

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Barker-Benfield has written that "the protagonists of sentimental fiction"—who were most often white women—"were connected to the 'world' by their vulnerable dependence on it"—namely, on white men.[78] But according to the Christian religion all are dependent. The central tenet of Christianity is that humankind is dependent on Christ not only for salvation, but for the ability to do good on earth. Christian faith demands that believers acknowledge this dependency. Dawn Coleman notes that when it comes to religion in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "we feel that we know this book when we have only half read it."[79] The novel's critics have argued that dependence is a fatal flaw in Stowe's "solution" to the problem of slavery: so long as women and slaves gain their moral superiority from their exclusion from the marketplace—their "vulnerable dependence" on white men—they cannot move their morality to the public sphere without losing the very thing that bequeaths it to them. These arguments tend to view the market, and the separate spheres organization it reinforced, as facts which Stowe took for granted. But her model was Christ, not capitalism. Her ideal was not for women to become like men by reforming the public sphere, or for men to become like women by learning how to feel right—schemes which imply that virtuous behavior is possible without Christ and the Bible; if her women were more virtuous, it was not strictly because they were women, but because they had the Bible. Stowe's solution, rather, was for the private and public spheres to more closely resemble one another, for

[78] Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, 218.

[79] Dawn Coleman, "The Unsentimental Woman Preacher of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *American Literature* 80, no. 2 (June, 2008): 266.

public men to admit and submit to their dependency, and allow the Bible to govern their actions—whether it felt right or not.

EPILOGUE
WHAT HATH CONSENSUS WROUGHT?

> It has been often remarked that the people of the United States come nearer to a parallel with Ancient Israel, than any other nation upon the globe. Hence OUR AMERICAN ISRAEL is a term frequently used; and common consent allows it apt and proper.
>
> — Abiel Abbot[1]

> With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan ~~— to achieve and cherish a lasting peace among ourselves and with the world.~~ to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.
>
> — Abraham Lincoln[2]

By the eve of the Civil War, the exacting standards of rational biblical literacy had reached an absurd climax. The plain sense of scripture, untainted by note or commentary, illuminated only by the innate moral faculty with which all (white male) people were born, was crystal clear: slavery was a godly institution, or it wasn't. Both the North and the South believed that they were the city on a hill of Matthew, the Israelites of Exodus. As Harry Stout has shown, both utilized biblical language of atonement to sanctify the war's violence.[3] Their rhetoric was interchangeable. Following the blueprint of both the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the revolutionaries of the War for Independence, and the Jews before them, the South viewed itself as separating from an unchristian and uncivil government that would not recognize its God-given rights. Preaching on a Confederate fast day, New Orleans theologian Benjamin Morgan Palmer

[1] Abiel Abbot, *Traits of Resemblance in the People of the United States of America to Ancient Israel* (Haverhill: MA: Moore & Stebbins, 1799), 6.

[2] Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., https://www.loc.gov/item/mal4361300/ (accessed February 1, 2019).

[3] See Harry Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2006).

enumerated the Yankee sins from which the Confederacy would attempt to purify itself. Chief among these sins was the fact that in the Constitution of the United States "not a word is found from which one could possibly infer that such a being as God ever existed."[4] In fighting for independence, the South claimed to be fighting for an opportunity to create a more biblical nation on American soil. Speaking for the North, influential minister Henry Ward Beecher also appealed to the model of the Puritans, the founders, and the Israelites. In an address entitled "The Battle Set in Array," Beecher argued that the Jews of the Old Testament, the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay, and the framers of the Constitution all had one thing in common: they walked into danger and darkness not because victory was certain, but because their alignment with providence was certain. (It happened to be the case that in each of Beecher's examples, victory had been secured by those on the side of providence.) "When men stand for a moral principle," Beecher said, "their troubles are not a presumption that they are in the wrong."[5] One might expect that in a war during which brother fought against brother, in the name of the same God, in the same language and rhetoric, and appealing to the same history, both sides might be led to a crisis of faith or an erosion of confidence. On the contrary, the conviction of righteousness and certainty of victory was unflinching on both sides.

At least one man was troubled by the fact that "the prayers of both could not be answered." At the writing of his second inaugural address, given on March 4, 1865, when Union victory was certain, Lincoln bore the awful responsibility of reconciling "a house . . . divided against itself" (Mark 3:25). The first half of the speech told a dark American story about slavery and a war in which both sides "read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes

[4] Benjamin Morgan Palmer, "National Responsibility before God," in *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, ed. Conrad Cherry (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 189.

[5] Henry Ward Beecher, "The Battle Set in Array," in Cherry, *God's New Israel*, 165.

His aid against the other." This rehearsal of history was matter of fact in the extreme: Lincoln avoided judgment and made no claim that the right side was about to win. Both Beecher and Palmer strove to make the war part of a divinely ordained narrative; "the war came" was all Lincoln would say. The centerpiece of the speech was his simple conclusion that "the Almighty has His own purposes." While the conflict had caused many Americans in both the North and the South to double down on the certainty of their readings of scripture and knowledge of God's plan, for Lincoln the war had only revealed that God's plans were unknowable. For a man about to win a long, costly, and hard-fought war, Lincoln's words were remarkably humble and uncertain: "With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured."[6]

In a letter written a few days after the inauguration, Lincoln said that he expected the speech "to wear as well as—perhaps better than—any thing I have produced; but I believe it is not immediately popular. Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them."[7] The speech closed with a call to return to a model of Christian charity. Union victory was all but assured, but the survival of the nation was not. It would be necessary to help one another, "to bind of the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan," and for individuals to sacrifice for sake of the community, "to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."[8]

There were, as the preceding chapters have attempted to show, precedents for Lincoln's approach to scripture. His doubt that the Bible could be easily aligned with America's destiny—

[6] Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address," in Cherry, *God's New Israel*, 195–196.

[7] Abraham Lincoln to Thurlow Weed, March 15, 1865, in Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings 1859–1865*, ed. D. E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Library of America, 1989), 689. Frederick Douglass told Lincoln the speech had been "a sacred effort" (Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* [Mineola, NY: Dover, 2012], 266).

[8] Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address," 196.

that there could even be a singular American destiny given the Civil War—was presaged much more emphatically by others. Maria Stewart, a free black reformer in Boston, wrote in 1831: "America, America, foul and indelible is thy stain! . . . I am firmly persuaded, that [God] will not suffer you to quell the proud, fearless and undaunted spirits of the Africans forever; for in his own time, he is able to plead our cause against you, and to pour out upon you the ten plagues of Egypt."[9] Enslaved black Christians had long proclaimed that there was "a difference of purpose between the Almighty" and white Americans; God was continually proving as much by providing means for them to learn to read the Bible for themselves. The Cherokee knew well the experience of invoking God's aid against Christians, and how inevitably "the war came." The jeremiad with which Stowe closed *Uncle Tom's Cabin* left America's fate uncertain, but she was sure that "both the North and South have been guilty before God."[10]

Yet these were apparently "unpopular" opinions during the Civil War, and they continue to constitute a supposed minority in histories of the conflict. That the new nation had been built on a purported consensus regarding the plain sense of scripture made it perhaps uncomfortable for those who had benefited from America's alleged biblical destiny—rather than suffered because of it—to admit that the nation had potentially diverted from the book. That faith in this consensus might have invited civil war must have been unthinkable to many of this contingent. How could the same interpretive methods which had given birth to the United States now lead to its possible destruction?

The self-consciously particular, contingent, and embodied readings of scripture outlined in the preceding chapters certainly did not deny that the Bible had a plain sense, but they did

[9] Marilyn Richardson, ed., *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 39–40.

[10] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Norton, 2010), 408.

honor diverse perspectives on what that plain sense was, who could discover it, and how it should be applied to the distinctive needs and desires of real people. The principal benefit of these readings to their readers is perhaps also their principal legacy in American history: they have provided a much-needed alternative to triumphalist views of American destiny, as well as a correction to the delusion that majority consensus, though ostensibly the rule in a democracy, is inherently just or biblical. (This is all the more true when majority consensus is a fantasy achieved only by excluding particular people from casting a vote.) Embodied biblical literacies questioned the idea that wealth, power, and prominence were evidence of correct interpretations of scripture or of God's favor, as promulgators of the prosperity gospel would explicitly claim beginning in the late nineteenth century; indeed, some embodied readings of the Bible anticipated liberation theology by suggesting that the Word might best be understood from the perspective of the marginalized and oppressed. Though a nationalistic and individualistic form of biblical literacy has tended to take precedence in scholarly narratives of the Bible in the antebellum period, a vigorous and arguably more popular alternative ethic existed alongside it, one which recognized that though America might not be particularly biblical, it was, like the Bible, a product of what its readers did with text.