

The African American Bible: Bound in a Christian Nation

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At the 2015 National Prayer Breakfast, President Barack Obama delivered a sermon from his bully pulpit that garnered the ire of the Christian Right.¹ In retrospect, there were many moments from the speech that could have caused concern. The president's conciliatory gestures toward the Dalai Lama might have opened a diplomatic Pandora's box, for even the slightest bow of acknowledgment could tax relations with the Chinese government. Ultimately this hardly proved newsworthy, nor did Mr. Obama's description of the Islamic State as a "death cult." His denunciation of Islamicized violence in Paris, Pakistan, and the Middle East was as expected as his recitation of words attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, "None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself."² At the time, "the golden rule" was a party line feigned by Democrats and Republicans alike.

Any contention from these statements paled next to this controversial presidential parable:

So how do we, as people of faith, reconcile these realities—the profound good, the strength, the tenacity, the compassion and love that can flow from all our faiths, operating alongside those who seek to hijack religion for their own murderous ends? Humanity has been grappling with these questions throughout human history. And lest we get on our high horse and think this is unique to some other place, remember that during the Crusades and the Inquisition,

¹Juliet Eliperin, "Critics Pounce after Obama Talks Crusades, Slavery at Prayer Breakfast," *Washington Post*, 5 February 2015, <http://wapo.st/1ugu8JG>.

²The Companion Anas ibn Malik is said to have heard this according to Sahih al-Bukhari, vol. 1, book 2, Hadith 15, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/2>.

people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ. In our home country, slavery and Jim Crow all too often was justified in the name of Christ.³

Much could be said about the identity politics at play in Mr. Obama's statement—the limits of his religious pluralism, his signification of 9/11, his social location of theodicy. But in this moment, I'd like to suggest that this event was proof positive that Americans are *bound in a Christian nation*.

To be clear, the United States of America is not made up solely of Christians, nor is it a theocracy. But America is a Christian nation. Those who protest with song of “the separation of church and state” forget that its refrain comes after a verse *not about whether* but *how* the one may operate in the other. Put differently, Americans would not argue about church–state relations were it not a central concern.

In terms of the “anthropology of Scriptures,” I contend that black people's relationship with the Bible testifies to two aspects of the Christian nation paradox.⁴ America is a strange new world in which some are *bound in* (i.e., the enchained, the castigated, the conquered) just as it can be the promised land where others *are bound for* (i.e., the invigorated, the cheered, the conquerors). In theorizing about an African American Bible, members of the Society of Biblical Literature might recognize the category of Scriptures as indicative of the stories not only that we read but that also read us back.⁵ Within their binding, the astute begin to make sense of their worlds.

The following reflective essay recounts some of the lessons learned in studying the tension between the Bible and the very constitution of African American identity. There we see the ambivalence of this nation's Bible readers to the matter of black life—namely, that its import is far from sacrosanct according to America's hermeneutical posturing.⁶

In the Beginning

At the crossroads of the “genetic turn” and the post–civil rights era, inclusion-minded Americans began to profess that we are all just part of one race, the human

³Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the National Prayer Breakfast” (Washington Hilton, Washington, DC, 5 February 2015), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/05/remarks-president-national-prayer-breakfast>.

⁴The name for this approach comes from Wilfred Cantwell Smith's study of Scripture as a “human activity ... human propensity, and potentiality” (*What Is Scripture: A Comparative Approach* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993], 237).

⁵My thesis regarding critical examination of Scripture is heavily informed by the work of two scholarly circles, the Institute for Signifying Scriptures and the Society for Comparative Research on Iconic and Performative Texts.

⁶Shannel T. Smith's “hermeneutics of *ambivalence*,” suggests that scriptural engagement can simultaneously “signify victimization by, and ... participation in” dominance (*The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire: Reading Revelation with a Postcolonial Womanist Hermeneutics of Ambivalence*, Emerging Scholars [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014], 12).

race.⁷ The Christian Pop/Rock/Rap group called DC Talk (Decent Christian Talk) made the statement into a creed.

We're colored people, and we live in a tainted place.
 We're colored people, and they call us the human race.
 We've got a history so full of mistakes.
 And we are colored people who depend on a Holy Grace.⁸

The racial sentiment also reflects the scientism of the zeitgeist. The “Mitochondrial Eve” discourse has given moderns sufficient license to remark that we are all African from a certain point of view.

But we would be remiss if we forgot that scientific talk of primitive Africa convinced more than a few Europeans that Africans needed to be saved from themselves, by the hand of either a more civilized master or a more knowledgeable helpmate.

To recover the missing link, the African American Bible records the curse of Canaan, son of Ham, son of Noah (Gen 9:18–27 NRSV). After the flood, Noah is said to have planted a vineyard. After drinking the fruit of his labor, he falls into a naked, drunken stupor. When Ham stumbles upon Noah, this youngest son goes to his elder brothers, who cover Noah with a garment while backing away, eyes averted. After Noah comes to consciousness, he praises the discretion of the older brothers but, for whatever reason, stands ashamed of Ham, cursing the youngest's son, Canaan—“lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers” (Gen 9:25).

This would be insignificant to the plight of black peoples had not slave masters found etiological value in denoting the origin of Ham's sons in the people of “Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan” (Gen 10:6).⁹ The Dark Continent had scriptural grounds to receive the Enlightenment; Africa was an Eden waiting to be subdued by those made in God's image. In historicizing origins in Africa, the slave institution had further evidence for rendering black peoples as the “lowest of slaves.”

Indeed President James Madison likened slavery to America's “original sin,” but African Americans would long be made to sow the garden's seed without a taste of free will's fruits.¹⁰ One might grant that all humans come from an Edenic Africa,

⁷Christopher Shea, “The Nature-Nurture Debate, Redux,” *Chronicle Review: A Weekly Magazine of Ideas* 55, no. 18 (2009): B6–B9.

⁸DC Talk, “Colored People,” lyrics by Toby McKeehan and George Cocchini, on *Jesus Freak*, Gotee Records, 1995.

⁹Emerson B. Powery and Rodney S. Sadler Jr., *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 83–111.

¹⁰James Madison, “Letter to Marquis de Lafayette, November 25 1820,” in *The Writings of James Madison*, vol. 9, 1819–1836 (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1910), 37, <https://books.google.com/books?id=e5M5AQAAMAAJ&lpq=PA35&ots=D90wmycleE9&dq=james%20madison%20to%20lafayette%20november%2025%201820&pg=PA37#v=onepage&q=original%20sin&f=false>.

though in my reading of the African American Bible, there is a qualifying clause—a paraphrase of George Orwell’s famous riff in *Animal Farm*: “All humans are created equal, but some more equal than others.”¹¹

Let My People Go

National lore need not depend on primeval pasts. Americans also take solace in deliverance from civil wars and emancipation from slavery. Working but a few miles from Gettysburg, I grow convinced of the country’s haggadic memory of Lincoln’s address, “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”¹² As quick as we are to follow this New World Moses, the African American Bible would have us remember that Moses, too, worked in the court of Pharaoh. And, like Moses, Lincoln needed encouragement to proclaim release to the captives.

We should not struggle to imagine nineteenth-century black people envisioning the trappings of Washington, DC, as Egypt. Lest one think I exaggerate, the National Archives and Records Administration holds receipts in testament to the blood, sweat, and tears shed by the slaves who built the White House.¹³ And in his 1829 “Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,” freedman David Walker bluntly commented, “In all probability, Moses would have ... been seated on the throne of Egypt. But he had rather suffer shame, with the people of God, than to enjoy pleasures with that wicked people for a season.” Walker’s words stand in stark contrast to America’s self-understanding as a chosen, freedom-loving people.

Frederick Douglass similarly denounced the nation’s Independence Day as a grotesque “Passover for the emancipated people of God.”¹⁴ The abolitionist’s famous jeremiad of 5 July 1852 condemned the Christian nation with prophetic fury.

I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July! ... America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly *binds* herself to be false to the future. Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is *fettered*, in the name of the constitution and the Bible, which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the

¹¹ George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (1945; repr., New York: Mariner Books, 2009), 192.

¹² Abraham Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address,” 19 November 1863, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/gettyb.asp.

¹³ Dennis Lewis, “The White House Was, in Fact, Built by Slaves,” *Smithsonian.com*, 26 July 2016, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/white-house-was-fact-built-slaves-180959916/>.

¹⁴ Frederick Douglass, “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro” (Rochester, NY, 5 July 1852), http://masshumanities.org/files/programs/douglass/speech_complete.pdf.

emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery—the great sin and shame of America! “I will not equivocate; I will not excuse”; I will use the severest language I can command; and yet not one word shall escape me that any man, whose judgment is not blinded by prejudice, or who is not at heart a slaveholder, shall not confess to be right and just.¹⁵

Abraham Lincoln could only stand tall as Moses because of the backbreaking rhetoric that challenged America to no longer be Egypt.

In national memory it is Lincoln’s tragic denouement that brought the commandments of freedom to this people. His Mosaic actions are retold with the gravity and mourning held together in (often in Paul Robeson’s timbre) the words of the Negro spiritual:

Go down, Moses,
'way down in Egypt's land.
Tell ol' Pharaoh,
Let my people Go!¹⁶

In the African American Bible, Lincoln is remembered not simply for demonstrating the inalienability of freedom from the condition of black humanity but also for knowing the price for insisting so—“the last full measure of devotion.”¹⁷

Thy Kingdom Come

Still, why would African Americans follow a text that says “slaves obey your earthly masters” (Col 3:21)? Dr. King was “ashamed to affirm that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, when we stand to sing ‘In Christ there is no East nor West,’ is the most segregated hour [in] America.”¹⁸ How could black people put their faith in the way of so many of their oppressors?

Because of the African American Bible, we know that this same faith gave black people a vocabulary for talking back to America. King called the nation to repent and to hear the good news, the fulfillment of what Lincoln had wrought. The dream he proclaimed baptized America into a land awaiting opportunity, where “every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain made low, the rough places will be made plains, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all the flesh shall see it together”

¹⁵ Ibid. (emphasis added).

¹⁶ Negro Spiritual, “Go Down Moses,” in *The African American Experience: Black History and Culture through Speeches, Letters, Editorials, Poems, Songs, and Stories*, ed. Kai Wright (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal, 2001), 106.

¹⁷ Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address.”

¹⁸ Martin Luther King Jr., Address before the National Press Club, 19 July 1962, in *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1986), 101.

(Isa 40:4–5).¹⁹ King not only knew the Gospel of Luke, for many he would be the Gospel incarnate, turning the page on “Let my people go!” to “Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”

But such an inspiring message and powerful transformation, in light of King’s death, prompts us to wonder who in this nation could go on without knowing this chapter from the African American Bible? Who could see the Lincoln Memorial without recalling King televised in glory before it? I hope these inquiries are beginning to make clear that the African American Bible is not just “texts” but the social forces with which Americans must reckon—regardless of one’s relationship to the color line.

The End-Times

It is also to wrestle with the possibility that we are living in the end-times. Consider the lengths to which Americans have gone to cast Barack Obama as a false prophet, antichrist, Satan, or all of the above. Conservative pundit Glenn Beck saw evidence enough in the History Channel miniseries *The Bible*, linking Moroccan actor Mehdi Ouazanni’s appearance as “the Devil” to the visage of President Barack Obama.



FIGURE 1. Glenn Beck sees “the Devil” in the History Channel’s *The Bible*²⁰

Such racial profiling may not be worthy of attention in our flagship journal. But what of the fact that a white cop swore (on the Bible?) that an unarmed black

¹⁹Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” 28 August 1963, in Wright, *African American Experience*, 531–33.

²⁰Glenn Beck, Twitter Post, 16 March 2013, 9:52 PM, <https://twitter.com/glennbeck/status/313120671297306624?lang=en>.

teenager appeared like a demon who had to be stopped?²¹ I am speaking of Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson's official testimony regarding his 2014 killing of Michael Brown.

Terror is casting a pall over black churches in this country in ways that my generation was only supposed to hear of in the past tense. But activists like performance artist Bree Newsome have used these last days to speak countermessages of hope and agency. In the aftermath of the massacre at Mother Emanuel AME Church, she took it upon herself to bring down the battle flag of the Confederacy from South Carolina's statehouse pole, proclaiming the words of the psalmist.²²

You come against me with hatred, repression, and violence. I come against you in the name of God. This flag comes down today.... "The Lord is my light and my salvation whom shall I fear. The Lord is the stronghold of my life, but whom shall I be afraid" (Ps 27:1)... "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters; He restoreth my soul" (Ps 23:1–3a).

Upon her descent from the heavens she was met by two groups. The principalities of this earth stood at the bottom of the pole, standing ready with chains to put her in her place. And in the distance rang out a throng of supporters reciting the words of the former Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army revolutionary Assata Shakur:

It is our duty to fight for our freedom.
It is our duty to win.
We must love and protect each other.
We have nothing to lose *but our chains*.
Power to the people.²³

For our scholarly body, I see this apocalypse not as a final moment but as an uncovering of a canonical world for view. In discussing the counts on which black lives matter, our situation appears more and more like a "scriptural economy," wherein we use texts to imprint values on our bodies.²⁴ It has never been clearer to me that every human person is a testament to others' God complexes, people's naming of how things are meant to be.²⁵

²¹ Josh Sanburn, "All the Ways Darren Wilson Described Being Afraid of Michael Brown," *Time*, 25 November 2014, <http://time.com/3605346/darren-wilson-michael-brown-demon/>.

²² Bree Newsome, "This Flag Comes Down Today" (Columbia, SC), 27 June 2015. Video recording by The Tribe, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gr-mt1P94cQ>.

²³ Assata Shakur, "To My People," 4 July 1973, <http://www.assatashakur.org/mypeople.htm> (emphasis added).

²⁴ Michel de Certeau, "The Scriptural Economy," in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 131–53.

²⁵ I am thinking here of Christopher Driscoll's reflection on The Last Poets' 1971 song "The

So, going forward, what hermeneutic might the SBL apply to reveal more about these discourses? I am convinced that we need to be as astute as that nineteenth-century black woman who was given the name Isabella Baumfree. Our history books remember her saying, "I can't read little things like letters. I read big things like men."²⁶ Her taking of such texts into her own hands is what has us remember the name she gave herself, Sojourner Truth.

To that end, I ask, what does the African American Bible reveal to you about this Christian Nation, our guild, and the story we are bound in? What future are we bound for? What truths are we bound by? And how might we be bound to each other? In the African American Bible, that is the chapter calling to be written.

White Man's Got a God Complex" in his essay "On the Journey to White Shame," *Marginalia*, 8 December 2014, <http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/mrblog-journey-white-shame-christopher-driscoll/>.

²⁶Harriot Stanton Blatch, *Challenging Years: The Memoirs of Harriot Stanton Blatch* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1940), 17.