

“SEEKING AND HOLDING”:

AFROCENTRIC LIBERATION IN THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH

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Colonialism in the United States was characterized by exploitive and oppressive activities that were justified by the socially constructed notion that White people were closest to divine. Historically, the desire for land, money, and power—and the need for an exclusive unifying group identity—led to the development of the racial “Other” as a means of separating a specific group of European descendents from outside groups. People of African descent were enslaved and brutally utilized as the chief United States labor source; their exploitation was rationalized by the popular assumption that blackness connoted subhuman nature. White slaveholders during this time commonly claimed to believe in the Christian faith, yet faced a complex web of moral dilemmas due to the intersecting nature of that faith with their position in society: enslaved Africans would die as pagans if not taught Christianity, yet baptism might necessitate their emancipation; religious instruction would be time-consuming, and therefore potentially economically detrimental to plantations; if Africans *were* humans, they would be entitled to certain rights, possibly inclusion in religious fellow-

ship with Whites.¹ Each of the slaveholders' fears was brought about by the "threatened...security of the master-slave hierarchy."² Consequently, the Bible became a means of justifying their morally perverted behavior; a Eurocentric interpretation of biblical scripture defended the enslavement of Blacks. Slaveholders' Eurocentric theology then resulted in what Reginald F. Davis refers to as the "misreligion"³ of slaves.

Despite the efforts of slave owners, over 6,000 written personal accounts of slaves' experiences indicate that innumerable people of African descent converted to Christianity during the antebellum period. Slaves could not embrace slaveholders' interpretation of the Bible without effectively endorsing existing power structures. An African American interpretation of biblical scripture was born out of African Americans' need to reconcile genuine Christian faith with a fundamental opposition to the institution of slavery. As race and religious beliefs intersected, Black Christian spirituality emerged from within the context of their unique experiences. That spirituality was also influenced by the legacy of religious traditions of Africa, which withstood the early Transatlantic Slave Trade and the removal of Africans from their continent of birth. Enslaved Africans and their personal testimonies provided the link to an African past that many enslaved African Americans sought.⁴ The history and culture brought by enslaved Africans to the United States via the Middle Passage had—and continues to have—a lasting impact on the religious beliefs, traditions, and practices of African Americans. Socially constructed racial categories justified the enslavement of Africans, and the enslavement of Africans resulted in their transport to the United States; thus, the faith of slaves was shaped by their connection to the African Diaspora and an African past, as well as their oppressed status in society.

¹ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 102.

² Ibid.

³ Reginald F. Davis, "African-American Interpretation of Scripture," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 57/58, no. 2/1–2 (2005): 94. (EBSCOhost).

⁴ Robert E. Reid-Pharr, "The slave narrative and early Black American literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. Audrey A. Fisch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 139.

The Influence of an African Past

In his article "The Middle Passage, Trauma and the Tragic Re-Imagination of African American Theology," Matthew V. Johnson, Sr., claims that the Middle Passage robbed Africans of the "fundamental elements of meaningful human existence."⁵ According to Johnson, a meaningful human existence originates with a common culture and its inherited traditions and practices. He goes on to say that "the African was systematically traumatized, culturally raped, and deprived of the fundamental realities that render human existence stable and meaningful."⁶ While acknowledging that enslaved Africans "were torn away from the political, social, and cultural systems that had ordered their lives," Albert J. Raboteau disagrees with the absoluteness of Johnson's argument and instead suggests that "one of the most durable and adaptable constituents of the slave's culture, linking African past with American present, was his religion."⁷

In reality, enslaved Africans were both seeking and holding: they sought out new worldviews from which they could understand their new realities, all while holding onto cultural traditions and religious practices of the past. Instead of being fully "denuded" of their former identity, enslaved Africans developed a collective identity reflective of their African past *and* their oppressive present.⁸ "Important strands of African consciousness" were maintained in humor, songs, dance, tales, games, etc., shaping the newly emerging beliefs and ideologies of slaves.⁹ Therefore, unlike Johnson's argument, the common culture and inherited traditions and practices of Africans did not die, but instead were integrated with new cultural traditions and practices.¹⁰

"The spread of Christianity among enslaved Africans hastened the development of a common ethnic identity among the ethnically diverse peoples who were the first generations of enslaved Africans on American

⁵ Matthew V. Johnson, Sr., "The Middle Passage, Trauma and the Tragic Re-Imagination of African American Theology," *Pastoral Psychology* 53, no. 6 (July 2005): 545. (EBSCOhost).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 4.

⁸ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 42.

⁹ Ibid., 444.

¹⁰ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 8.

shores.”¹¹ This common ethnic identity resulted in a sense of shared history that provided the basis for an African American consciousness, and ultimately an African American *Christian* consciousness. The Christianity of slaves that emerged on Southern plantations was shaped by the experiences of enslaved Africans: their suffering during the Middle Passage, confronting the cultures of nations bordering the Atlantic Ocean, and development of a sense of community among other enslaved peoples. The faith of slaves displayed the influence of their particular experience, all while embracing “the symbols, myths, and values of Judeo-Christian tradition.”¹² Because of the African Diaspora, Christianity of slaves in the United States reflected religious traditions from Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and Latin America, as well as the “American evangelical Protestantism”¹³ of White slave owners. However, even with the pervasive nature of Christianity among Whites enslaved Africans “brought their cultural past to the task of translating and interpreting the doctrinal words and ritual gestures of Christianity” so that a unique faith-life among slaves emerged.¹⁴

The Christianizing Efforts of White Slaveholders

Prior to the nineteenth century, few White slaveholders taught their slaves the Christian faith—most either believed Blacks to be animalistic, sub-human, and lacking the souls necessary to convert, or that Christianizing enslaved Africans would necessitate their emancipation.¹⁵ Evangelism was left to European missionaries who sought to “save the souls of the Africans from eternal damnation,”¹⁶ but were little concerned with freeing Africans from slavery. The baptism of slaves would have signified an acknowledgement of their humanity, and thus Whites feared that the Bible’s messages

¹¹ Makungu M. Akinyela, “Battling the Serpent: Nat Turner, Africanized Christianity, and a Black Ethos,” *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 3 (January 2003): 256. (SAGE).

¹² Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 213.

¹³ Marla F. Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 5.

¹⁴ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 126.

¹⁵ Akinyela, 258; Johnson, 543; Albert J. Raboteau, “The Secret Religion of the Slaves,” *Christian History* 11, no. 1 (February 1992): 2. (EBSCOhost); William C. Turner, Jr., “Black Evangelicalism: Theology, Politics, and Race,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 45, no. 2 (Winter/Spring 1989): 44. (EBSCOhost).

¹⁶ Akinyela, 259.

of freedom would incite slave-revolt or demand equal treatment of Blacks as Christian brothers and sisters.¹⁷ The rise of the Great Awakening in Europe in 1750 further exacerbated this moral dilemma, as the growing number of missionary societies and popularity of Christianity led to widespread Christianizing of enslaved Africans.¹⁸ Slaveholders were now compelled to establish a moral position and biblical interpretation that would justify their oppressive actions and inhibit slave revolt.¹⁹ In order to preserve existing power relationships, “African American slaves were taught the Pauline text of ‘slaves be obedient to your masters.’”²⁰ The slaves’ religious education was misleading in that they were only taught “portions of the Bible that talked about the proper conduct of slaves and the rights of masters.”²¹

In terms of biblical history, the Eurocentric interpretation of scripture portrayed “an ancient religious drama of Eurasian Hebrews who once sojourned in Egypt...evolved in an ancient Canaan...and eventually gave rise to the birth of a European Jesus and Christianity.”²² Any geographical connections to Africa were overlooked or ignored, and Black people of the Bible were seen as anomalies to the typically European-cast figures. Slaveholders used the Bible’s story of the curse of Ham to argue in favor of God’s divine will for the master-slave relationship: “Cursed by Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.”²³ “The presumption was that God inflicted blackness as a curse on Ham for his indiscretion; because Ham was cursed for his sinful deed, the pigment of his skin changed to black, making him fall below the norm and doomed for slavery.”²⁴ In reality, the story does not describe the color of Ham’s skin changing as a result of a curse for the maltreatment of his father. However, because Ham is thought to have been a Black man, and because he was one of Noah’s three sons from whom the Bible says all people of the earth dispersed, Whites argued that Africans were cursed with Black skin as Ham’s descendants. Not only

¹⁷ Ibid., 258; Turner, 44.

¹⁸ Akinyela, 261–262.

¹⁹ Ibid., 262; Davis, 94.

²⁰ Davis, 94.

²¹ Akinyela, 262.

²² Cain Hope Felder, “Afrocentrism, the Bible, and the Politics of Difference,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 50, no. 1/2 (Fall 1993/Spring 1994): 46. (EBSCOhost).

²³ Genesis 9:25, New International Version

²⁴ Davis, 94.

were slaves taught that “whiteness [was] synonymous with morality and purity,” but they were also taught to “accept their existential reality because it [had] ontological credence.”²⁵

The Reconciliation of Religion and Reality

While White missionaries and slaveholders are thought to have been responsible for introducing Christianity to many slaves, the religion had long been influential in Northern and Central Africa. Makungu M. Akinyela claims that most of the Africans taken captive to America already commonly believed in one God who created all things and was “directly involved with humanity.”²⁶ Culturally, religion was an important component of day-to-day life; “there was no distinction between the spiritual and the material worlds.”²⁷ Kelly Brown Douglas and Ronald E. Hopson add to his argument by stating that the typical African worldview “equated balance and harmony with God.”²⁸ Any aspect of life that did not reflect balance and harmony could not have been divine, or of God—including interpersonal relationships. “The master-slave relationship was, therefore, impugned as evil. Such a noncomplementary relationship was not considered as being of God.”²⁹ Attempting to reconcile long-held beliefs formed by the cultural systems of Africa with Bible-based Christianity, Africans had little choice but to reject the idea that God authorized slavery.³⁰

Reginald F. Davis asserts that “many African Christians knew that something was inherently wrong with an interpretation of Scripture that supported slavery and inequality before God.”³¹ The God that the slaves had known in Africa “was one of power and justice who had embraced the wholeness of their being—a God who was not aloof in their every-

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 94–95.

²⁶ Akinyela, 257.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Kelly Brown Douglas and Ronald E. Hopson, “Understanding the Black Church: The Dynamics of Change,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 56/57, no. 2/1 (Spring–Fall 2001): 100. (EBSCOhost).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*; Turner, 51; Vincent L. Wimbush, “Biblical Historical Study as Liberation: Toward an Afro-Christian Hermeneutic,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 42, no. 2 (Fall 1985/Winter 1986): 18–19. (EBSCOhost).

³¹ Davis, 96.

day existence.”³² This understanding of God was supplemented with a growing knowledge of biblical scripture resulting from several factors: attending slave owners’ church services; increased literacy among slaves; the emergence of slave preachers; and the transmission of the Christian gospel through oral tradition and slave songs.³³ African Americans came to believe that—contrary to what Whites had taught them—slavery and racial exclusion contradicted Christianity as God had intended it.³⁴ Realizing the hypocrisy of their slaveholders’ professed religious beliefs, many slaves “came to the conclusion that the Christian slavemasters’ God was not their God.”³⁵

African American Christian Consciousness and Liberation Theology

Slaves experienced inner-tensions as they attempted to live according to Christian principles that were defined by Whites.³⁶ While enslaved Africans wanted to believe in the messages of the Bible, they could not consign themselves to religious obedience that would threaten their well-being. Sharon Carson points out that “the existential repercussions of [precepts like] submission would raise doubts about white slaveholding Christianity for slaves struggling to survive the physical, psychological, and spiritual abuses of slavery.”³⁷ Slaves’ obedience was divided between their earthly masters and their Divine Master, their desire to please and their self-respect. The brutal treatment of slaves demanded that they reinterpret and reexamine the Bible from a perspective reflective of their particular experiences.³⁸ As Christian beliefs and experiences of oppression were reconciled, what emerged was an Afrocentric interpretation of biblical scripture that

³² Ibid.

³³ Akinyela, 260; Raboteau, “The Secret Religion,” 4; Wimbush, 10–11.

³⁴ Davis, 97; John Holder, “The Issue of Race: A Search for a Biblical/Theological Perspective,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 49, no. 2 (Winter 1992/Spring 1993): 52. (EBSCOhost); Albert J. Raboteau, “Fire in the Bones: African-American Christianity and Autobiographical Reflection,” *America* 170, no. 18 (May 21, 1994): 3. (EBSCOhost).

³⁵ Davis, 96–97.

³⁶ Sharon Carson, “Dismantling the House of the Lord: Theology as Political Philosophy in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 51, no. 1 (Summer/Fall 1994): 53. (EBSCOhost).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Wimbush, 11.

placed African people as the center of focus in history.³⁹ Enslaved Africans' faith could be "parallel to, but not replicative of the slaveowners' Christianity from which they borrowed."⁴⁰

"The faith of enslaved Africans was not just a slave religion but a genuine and indigenous faith forged out of the experiences of Africans in slavery."⁴¹ Slaves learned about God through biblical scripture, but it was personal conversion experiences that *affirmed* enslaved Africans' inherent value as bearers of God's image and *formed* their identity as products of God's creative workmanship and investment.⁴² The God whom African Americans proclaimed to first encounter during their conversions to Christianity "was the source of transformation and the new sense of worth."⁴³ Slaves trusted their own experiences of God and knowledge of biblical scripture over White slaveholders' insistence that God unconditionally loved, but also sanctioned slavery.⁴⁴ Instead of despairing and rejecting the God of the Bible, "the enslaved were able to see that something more than ideas must be engaged for an adequate appreciation of God's revelation; they were able to affirm the primacy of their experience, the experience of the oppressed."⁴⁵ The context of African Americans' bondage and oppression brought about their distinctive theology.⁴⁶

Reflective of the syncretism of the slave experience and the Christian faith, "enslaved Africans particularly focused on the Old Testament stories of liberation from cruel slave masters...the promises of release for the oppressed Israelites and the destruction of the oppressors."⁴⁷ Just as God had done with biblical Israel, slaves believed that God was acting and would continue to act on their behalf.⁴⁸ African American Christians maintained

³⁹ Felder, 47.

⁴⁰ Rupe Simms, "Christ is Black with a Capital 'B': African-American Christianity and the Black Studies Project," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 101. (EBSCOhost).

⁴¹ Akinyela, 278.

⁴² Davis, 100; Holder, 45; Raboteau, "Fire in the Bones," 6.

⁴³ Turner, 46.

⁴⁴ Douglas and Hopson, 108; Turner, 53.

⁴⁵ Douglas and Hopson, 108.

⁴⁶ Davis, 97; Melissa V. Harris-Lacewell, "Righteous Politics: The Role of the Black Church in Contemporary Politics," *Cross Currents* 57, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 3. (EBSCOhost).

⁴⁷ Akinyela, 264.

⁴⁸ Raboteau, "The Secret Religion," 5.

that they had a “preferred perspective” of God as a result of their marginalization and oppression: not only did slaves believe that God could relate to their suffering by way of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion, but the Bible also stated that God’s “chosen people” were the enslaved Israelites rather than the enslaving Egyptians.⁴⁹ Because slaves had little memory of home and no common “historical/cultural reservoir,” these stories of liberation, struggle, and oppression “began to serve as the unifying collective memory for the enslaved Africans...as the mythical source of meaning to the community’s existence.”⁵⁰

Community and the Black Church

As a “response and expression of a people oppressed on the basis or race,”⁵¹ Christian slaves began to gather illicitly or informally in order to hold their own worship meetings.⁵² African Americans could not support a religious doctrine tied to racial injustice, and so emerged a “black social space independent of white institutional and ideological control.”⁵³ Often referred to as “invisible institutions” or “hush harbors” due to their covert nature, these gatherings “provided physical and psychological relief from the horrific conditions of servitude,” granted dignity and self-esteem, and reaffirmed slaves’ intrinsic worth as human beings.⁵⁴ By having their own church services, African Americans could reject oppressive interpretations of the Bible and Eurocentric understandings of Christian precepts, and instead “[preach] from an African cultural context and through the experience of being an enslaved people.”⁵⁵ The Black Church was representative of “black people’s resistance to an enslaving and dehumanizing white culture, even

⁴⁹ Akinyela, 265; Rufus Burrow, Jr., “Who Teaches Black Theology?” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 43, no. 2 (Fall 1986/Winter 1987): 8–9. (EBSCOhost); Davis, 98; Douglas and Hopson, 107

⁵⁰ Akinyela, 271.

⁵¹ Allison Calhoun-Brown, “The Images of God: Black Theology and Racial Empowerment in the African American Community,” *Review of Religious Research* 40, no. 3 (March 1999): 197. (JSTOR).

⁵² Raboteau, “The Secret Religion,” 1.

⁵³ R. Drew Smith, “Black Religious Nationalism and the Politics of Transcendence,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 534. (JSTOR).

⁵⁴ Simms, 101.

⁵⁵ Akinyela, 263–264.

as it testified to God's affirmation of freedom and blackness."⁵⁶ African Americans "[reworked] Christian frameworks into an autonomous and profoundly 'resisting' African American liberation theology."⁵⁷

The values of African American Christians and the early Black Church developed as a result of slaves' experiences as they "navigated life in a world hostile to their blackness."⁵⁸ Though they understood that the color of their skin was not a curse, blackness became a source of justification for African Americans' oppression.⁵⁹ As a result of slaves' unique experiences and resultant interest in the Bible's stories of oppression, "blackness became associated with Christ and viewed in the context of a human struggle for liberation."⁶⁰ African Americans saw biblical examples of Jesus' compassion for the poor and God's determination to free his people as "divine approbation" to oppose slaveholders' faith and the institution of slavery.⁶¹ And not only did slaves believe that God was in favor of their "quest for freedom," but the belief that they were created in the image of God and therefore deeply valued by him meant that they did not have to become White before converting to Christianity.⁶² By affirming blackness as a reflection of God's image, African Americans were able to defy the oppressive parameters set by Whites and support the claim that to deny blackness would consequently be to deny God.⁶³

⁵⁶ Douglas and Hopson, 96.

⁵⁷ Carson, 54.

⁵⁸ Douglas and Hopson, 100.

⁵⁹ Davis, 97.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶¹ Turner, 49.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 49–50.

⁶³ Davis, 100.

Conclusion

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the land of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

— *Deuteronomy 7:6–8, English Standard Version*

In a world attempting to invalidate their humanity, the Christian faith and early Black Church offered slaves identity and belonging, a common history, and refuge from a White, racist society.⁶⁴ The shared experiences of African Americans provided them with a—once-lacking—common worldview, and ultimately acted to sustain their community.⁶⁵ Christian slaves' knowledge of God and understanding of biblical scripture was confirmed and affirmed by other Christian slaves, therefore granting African Americans a sense of legitimacy beyond the parameters set for them by the dominant, White society.⁶⁶ Instead of allowing their faith to be shaped by the Eurocentric biblical interpretations of slaveholders, African Americans “created a self-preserving belief system by Africanizing European religion.”⁶⁷ The emergence of an African American Christian consciousness and a Christian slave community gave Blacks the courage to oppose their oppressive conditions and advocate a theology centered on God's relationship to the oppressed and his desire to liberate all people.⁶⁸

Reginald F. Davis claims that it was because of their faith in God and his goodness that African American Christian slaves were able to endure

⁶⁴ Douglas and Hopson, 102; Johnson, 555; Raboteau, “Fire in the Bones,” 2.

⁶⁵ Turner, 47.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Simms, 101.

⁶⁸ Turner, 47.

their profound oppression.⁶⁹ Much like biblical Israel, while slaves' "faith in God was often tested by the appearance of evil and suffering, the faithful still would not negate Yahweh's justice and divine righteousness in human history."⁷⁰ African Americans endured suffering because they were fully confident in the Bible and in it God's promises to deliver his people.⁷¹ In believing that liberation was the "essence" of the Christian message, "African-American Christians [shared] the belief that [they had] been chosen by God to suffer with and for God in the liberation of humanity."⁷² Their unique struggle was simply seen as part of a much larger struggle between the powers of good and evil, a fight that was necessary to take on as children of God who identified with the "toil and trial" of Jesus.⁷³ Slaves' hope rested with the Bible's claims of God's ultimate victory and his ability to "bring good out of evil" and "make a way out of no way."⁷⁴ It was this faith that allowed African Americans to "survive, with meaning, the non-affirming, de-humanizing forces and structures of American society."⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Davis, 102.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Turner, 48.

⁷⁴ Davis, 102.

⁷⁵ Wimbush, 12.

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