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WILLIAM FAULKNER'S HEBREW BIBLE:  
EMPIRE AND THE MYTHS OF ORIGINS

A Dissertation

presented in partial fulfillment of requirements

for the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy

in the Department of English

The University of Mississippi

Scott T. Chancellor

06 May 2011



## ABSTRACT

I propose that William Faulkner's literary imagination is charged by a Jewish sensibility rooted in reverence for the Bible as a text that is as vital and relevant in his time as in any since its composition. The Hebrew Bible's narrative method of compiling, redacting, doubling, and retelling, and its attention to curses, genealogies, covenants, and nation-building, reverberate in Faulkner's time as resoundingly as in any preceding it. There are myriad links in Faulkner's work between the Hebrew Bible, Southern Christianity, and American colonialism that merit our attention within ongoing discussions of Faulkner, empire, and nation-building, the Bible and colonialism, and Faulkner and the Bible in order to situate a postcolonial reading of Faulkner and scripture. I suggest that William Faulkner, raised Methodist and on record as considering himself a "good Christian" is, ontologically speaking, Jewish. That is, Faulkner, as his texts bear out and his many comments on the Hebrew Bible, Christianity, God, morality, and Messianic time substantiate, is imbued by a Jewish sensibility.

Within a framework informed by Mieke Bal's "counter-reading" approach to the Hebrew Bible, Walter Benjamin's "constellation of events," and Susan Handelman's conception of literary theory as rabbinical, I want to consider Faulkner's interrogation of US imperialism and his dismantling of the authority of origins. I begin by locating Faulkner within a Jewish, text-based tradition, and then canvass Faulkner's historical moment—the rise of US imperialism at

home and abroad—to suggest why the Hebrew Bible, itself an account of empires and nation-building, echoes so poignantly in Faulkner.

Close readings of *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Light in August*, and *Go Down, Moses* follow, with an emphasis on a Hebrew Bible dialogue between ancient Israel and modern America as negotiated by William Faulkner. The ethical imperative, intones Faulkner, is to recognize that oppressive behaviors are no progress at all but rather contemporary realizations of the originary Exodus enslavement, upon which America's imperial assault marches onward.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Jessica Stock, who led me to Judaism.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my director, Jay Watson, who has patiently read hundreds of pages of drafts, and has provided me invaluable feedback, insights, and counsel. Jay has challenged and encouraged me every step of the way to become a better reader, thinker, writer, and critic. His help has been immeasurable.

I would like to thank Colonel James R. Kerin, Professor and Head, Department of English and Philosophy, United States Military Academy, for enabling me to pursue doctoral studies at the University of Mississippi.

I would like to thank my committee, Annette Trefzer, Ethel Young-Minor, and Willa Johnson. Annette gently suggested the theoretical framework for this project, Ethel advised me to take a friendlier approach, and Willa introduced me to “ontologically Jewish,” upon which this study centers. I am also indebted to Don Kartiganer, who helped me situate Faulkner and Judaism, and who led me to any number of illuminating texts.

I thank Ivo Kamps, Jay Watson, and Annette Trefzer for nominating me for the Frances Bell McCool Fellowship in Faulkner studies. I thank Campbell McCool for establishing the Frances Bell McCool Fellowship, and for his support and enthusiasm.

Thanks to Susan Goodman at the University of Delaware for recommending me to the University of Mississippi and to USMA. Thanks to Mary Stewart, who first taught me the novels of William Faulkner at Shippensburg University.

I want to thank my father, Joseph E. Chancellor, who read all of Faulkner's published works, even *A Fable*, simply because I asked him to. I thank my mother, Judith M. Chancellor, for her love and support, and for entrusting me to remember my grandfather, Oliver Paul Thompson.

Most of all, I wish to thank my wife, Jessica Stock, for everything. She has taught me more than I can ever repay.



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## INTRODUCTION

*Is there anybody who knows the Bible here?*

William Faulkner held the post of Writer-in-Residence at the University of Virginia from February 1957 to June 1958, during which he participated in a number of question and answer sessions with students and community members. Faulkner fielded queries whose topics ran the gamut from national to global politics, from gambling to American race relations, to a range of theme and character-based inquiries into his work. He was also asked to name his literary influences, to rank American writers, and to “give us some of the titles of these books [that you reread] ... these books you’ve read before” (*Faulkner in the University* 50). Faulkner replied that “I read *Don Quixote* every year. I read the Old Testament. I read some of Dickens every year, and I’ve got a portable Shakespeare ... that I carry along with me. ... [Y]ou find new things in old friends” (50). Faulkner’s Biblical reference is hardly surprising: both he and his students return to the Bible throughout, with scriptural analogies, Christian symbolism, and southern religious culture preeminent topics in seven of the first twelve sessions. The epigram to this Introduction is one such example, as Faulkner responds sardonically to the earnest if shortsighted, “Why is it that Mrs. Compson refers to Benjy as having been sold in Egypt? Wasn’t that Joseph in the

Bible? Is the mistake yours or hers?” (18).<sup>1</sup> But if the Bible itself, as one of Faulkner’s recurring reads, stands shy of revelatory, the pointed reference to the Old Testament is, on the other hand, curious. Why, might we ask, would Faulkner specify the Old Testament? Why would Faulkner, a Christian southerner, privilege the Hebrew Bible over the New Testament, and count it among the handful of texts with which he regularly reacquaints?

In the same conference that Faulkner notes his returns to the Old Testament, he addresses the failure of Gail Hightower to uphold “his Christian oath as a man of God” (45), and mentions the looting by Thomas Sutpen of “his Caribbean father-in-law’s plantation” (46).<sup>2</sup> Moving from fiction to current events, Faulkner calls segregation and race discrimination a “constant outrage” (54), and remarks that African Americans have “got to be freed of the curse of [their] color” (53). He concludes the session by noting that “when [Herman] Melville becomes Old Testament, Biblical, that seems *natural* to me” (emphasis added, 56). So in one seminar with a group of undergraduates, Faulkner declares the regularity with which he reads the Hebrew Bible, observes that *Light in August*’s reverend fails his Christian congregation, alludes to America’s (or at least one man’s) imperial ventures into the Caribbean Islands in *Absalom, Absalom!*, and holds forth on US race relations. On the latter point I do not want to overstate the case; Faulkner is on record as advocating a gradual absolution of the “curse of slavery,” which he calls “an intolerable condition ... [that] the South has got to work ... out and it will, if it’s left alone. It can’t be compelled to do it” (*University* 79-80). That the South was “left alone,” so to speak,

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin Compson recalls his mother (presumably) having said “Benjamin the child of mine old age held hostage into Egypt” (170). The student is correct on the point of Joseph’s enslavement rather than Benjamin’s enslavement. Benjamin, however, who is Joseph’s younger brother, stands on the brink of becoming enslaved, as well, in Genesis 44.

<sup>2</sup> Session seven, March 11, 1957. There were thirty-six sessions at the University of Virginia.

from the end of Reconstruction (1877) to the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) may well have exacerbated the “intolerable condition” to which Faulkner refers, as many have argued, and as Faulkner elsewhere acknowledged, as well.<sup>3</sup> But Faulkner is acutely aware of the “outrage” elicited by racially motivated bigotry, and that *something* is going to be done about it, albeit on the time and terms of the South’s choosing. And he refers, in two different sessions, to a “curse” originating in slavery and perpetuated by legal and cultural race discrimination.<sup>4</sup>

The Hebrew Bible, southern Christianity, American imperialism, and the curse of slavery and racism: why was William Faulkner preoccupied by these concerns on March 11, 1957? Are there moments of intersection, points of relation, amid them? Do these topics make up points in a constellation? I propose that they do: there are, in fact, links between and among them meriting intervention within ongoing discussions of Faulkner, colonialism, and nation-building, the Bible and colonialism, and Faulkner and the Bible in order to situate a postcolonial reading of Faulkner’s employment of the Hebrew Bible. My study premises that William Faulkner’s literary imagination is charged by a Hebraic sensibility rooted in reverence for the Bible as a text that is as vital and relevant in his time as in any since its composition. The Hebrew Bible’s

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<sup>3</sup> In *Making Whiteness*, Grace Elizabeth Hale bookends the segregation era by the Supreme Court decisions authorizing (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896) and ending (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954) public segregation (288-289). Susan Gillman refers to the “solidification of segregation” (*Blood Talk* 85) in the late 1890s, concurrent with the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling. Gillman posits that neither Reconstruction nor sanctioned segregation had a definitive end, although *Brown v. Board of Education* is one point to consider. Leigh Anne Duck refers to the segregation era as one of “Southern Apartheid” in *The Nation’s Region*. Implicit in each critic’s argument is that the South should not, in fact, have been left alone. In an essay in *Harper’s* in 1956, meanwhile, Faulkner wrote that “[i]f we had given [African Americans] ... equality ninety or fifty or even ten years ago, there would have been no Supreme Court ruling about segregation in 1954” (*Essays, Speeches, & Public Letters* 105).

<sup>4</sup> Session seven, as noted earlier, and session nine (April 13, 1957).

motifs—its attention to genealogies, in how they are recorded and constructed, and why; its characters who strive, fail, and then try again to uphold the law of God; its wrestling, be it with God, His angels, or with manifold “Curses”; its narrative method of compiling, redacting, doubling, and retelling; its account of nation-building, of countries torn asunder and reunited, of exile, return, conquest, imperial marches—reverberate in Faulkner’s century as resoundingly as in any preceding it. I want to suggest that William Faulkner, raised Methodist and on record as considering himself a “good Christian” (*University* 203), is ontologically Jewish. That is, Faulkner, as his texts bear out and his many comments on the Hebrew Bible, Christianity, God, morality, Messianic time and the past’s “presence” substantiate, is imbued by a Jewish aesthetic. I do not wish to dispute whether Faulkner was a Christian. This proposal takes Faulkner as he declares himself to be: a “good” Christian. Nor will I attempt any argument with respect to Faulkner’s lineage (he was of Scottish descent and has no record of Jewish ancestry). I will propose, however, that Faulkner’s Jewish sensibility—his Hebraic style, essence of being, and ethical approach—is fully compatible with his professed faith. “Christian” Faulkner of “Jewish” ontology is not synonymous with “Judeo-Christian” Faulkner, or with a Faulkner emerging (which he does) from Judeo-Christian customs. Rather, the Jewish traditions that Faulkner discovers and claims, and the ideologies of Christianity that he distinguishes from them, render him a Jewish-minded Christian instead of (or in addition to) a Christian of Judeo-Christian origin.

I begin locating Faulkner in a Jewish, text-based tradition by considering the import of Gavin Stevens’ “serious vocation,” his classic Greek Old Testament translation project. I then look at Faulkner’s rabbinical conception of Messianic time, as well as his lifelong return to the

Hebrew Bible, to frame his Judaic imagination and sensibility. Next, I review Faulkner's historical moment: the rise of US imperialism, at home (the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court Case, 1896) and abroad (the Spanish-American War in Cuba, 1898) to suggest why the Hebrew Bible, itself an account of empires and nation-building, echoes so poignantly in Faulkner. An analysis of the southern Protestant tradition from which Faulkner emerged, and of Faulkner's stance towards Christianity as story and point of faith, follows. Included is a canvassing of scholarship on Faulkner and the Bible, which suggests why scriptural studies of his work have mostly abated. I then bring in contemporary theories of—and scholarship on—scripture to put forth how we may apply their tenets to a postcolonial reading of Faulkner and the Hebrew Bible. Hopefully, doing so will spark an energizing of the scriptural component within an ongoing dialogue on Faulkner, empire, and nation-building to illuminate how the Hebrew Bible stands as a model for so many of Faulkner's explorations, and by which we might rethink him going forward. The Introduction concludes with synopses of subsequent chapters on Faulkner and redaction, the Curse of Ham, and genealogies.

### **Faulkner's Jewish Ontology**

#### *Gavin Stevens' "Serious Vocation"*

My proposal will require some explanation, and I would like to begin by considering the chosen profession(s) of Yoknapatawpha's famous lawyer, Gavin Stevens, who appears in *Light in August*, the Snopes trilogy, *Go Down, Moses*, *Knight's Gambit*, and *Requiem for a Nun*. In *Requiem*, taking place in 1937 but situated mid-century by its 1951 publication, Stevens responds to Temple Drake's "Temple Drake is dead" by declaring that "[t]he past is never dead. It's not even past" (80). Stevens, we are told in *Go Down, Moses*, has an affinity for the past:

even though he is a lawyer, his “serious vocation was a twenty-two year-old unfinished translation of the Old Testament back into classic Greek” (353).<sup>5</sup> Stevens’ desire to translate the Old Testament “back into classic Greek” is technically problematic, as the Septuagint, the first Greek edition of the Hebrew Bible, was translated into Koine Greek rather than classic Greek. The Koine era spanned from 300 BCE to 300 CE; Koine was something of a dialect that emerged out of classic Greek. So it may be more accurate to say that Stevens was translating the Old Testament “into classic Greek” rather than back into it.<sup>6</sup> But the lawyer Stevens has devoted more than two decades (those between the World Wars, 1919-1941) to an updated retranscription of the Old Testament, or the *law* of God, back into its oldest extant tongue.<sup>7</sup> While his law practice and translation project may appear diverging enterprises, we are reminded that he is “more like a poet than a lawyer” (*Requiem* 43). He is, as Jay Watson has suggested, undertaking a charge fundamental to rather than tangential from his chosen profession: Stevens brings a poetic or psalmist sensibility to the lawyerly or Levitical task of translating and reinscribing

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<sup>5</sup> According to Charles Mallison, Stevens returned from Europe in 1922: “I remembered he had been away since 1914 which was eight years ago now” (*The Town* 131). He had come home once before, after serving as a YMCA secretary in “France with the first American troops” (*The Town* 104). Mallison notes that Stevens arrived in France in April; he is presumably referring to the 1918 troop buildup. He would have begun his translation project, then, in Europe in 1919, if we are to reconcile Mallison’s chronology with that of the narrator of “Go Down, Moses” (1941), who notes that Stevens had been at work twenty-two years.

<sup>6</sup> For more on Koine Greek, see <http://www.biblicalgreek.org/>.

<sup>7</sup> There are no known copies of the Septuagint, or the Hebrew Bible’s first Greek translation. The oldest Greek Bible in existence is the Codex Sinaiticus, transcribed in the 4th century CE (<http://www.codexsinaiticus.org/en/>) from the Septuagint, containing portions of the Hebrew Bible and all of the New Testament. The oldest Hebrew Bible in Hebrew rather than Greek is the Masoretic text, which dates from the 7th to the 10th centuries CE ([http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/31\\_masorite.html](http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/31_masorite.html)). There are older, fragmentary texts, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls in Hebrew and Aramaic, which date from the third century BCE to the first century CE (<http://www.ibiblio.org/expo/deadsea.scrolls.exhibit/Library/library.html>). The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1949 in Qumran, postdating Stevens’ project.



Hebrew poetry and prose that has always already been fixed, from the first set of stone commandments, as law.<sup>8</sup>

But Stevens' "serious vocation" has not, as Barbara Ladd notes in "Faulkner and Translation," "been taken very seriously" (3). Cleanth Brooks, for one, has remarked that Stevens' project "has no scholarly value," while Michael Grimwood deems it "quixotic and doomed to failure" (qtd. in Ladd 3-4). Ladd, however, counters Brooks and Grimwood, writing that "one might ... ably complicate this conclusion ... by reminding ourselves that the idea of a pursuit of an original perfection, always beyond reach, is not infrequent in Faulkner's corpus" (3-4). The "original perfection" that Stevens pursues is a modern translation—one that he has been working on since his return from Heidelberg, Germany, where he earned his doctorate—of the Hebrew Bible "back into classic Greek."<sup>9</sup> The folly, if there is one in Stevens' project, would seem to be of purpose: if the oldest extant Bibles are already in classic (or rather Koine) Greek, a dead language, then there would appear to be little or no value in a retranslation.<sup>10</sup> Bible scholars study classic Greek precisely because it is fixed, because it no longer evolves, because it is "original." Stevens' new translation would not meet any of those criteria, nor would it qualify as classic. We can presume, furthermore, that Stevens already knows classic Greek, that he has already read the Bible in it, or is at least aware that copies of such Bibles are in circulation. For

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<sup>8</sup> Watson writes in *Forensic Fictions* that "Gavin's 'poet' side connotes a healthy respect for language as a creative, evocative, and coercive force, a respect that compliments rather than undermines his forensic side" (180), which led me to think of how Stevens corroborates his poetic and professional interests, or if they are one and the same.

<sup>9</sup> Faulkner was interested in the Greek Old Testament as early as 1926. In *Soldiers' Pay*, Januarius Jones notices that there was an "Old Testament in Greek in several volumes" in Mr. Mahon's office (62).

<sup>10</sup> Stevens' ambition rivals that of Pierre Menard in Borges' "Pierre Menard," who aims to translate *Don Quixote*, or one of the books that Faulkner reads regularly. Menard wants to create

as the narrator observes in *Knight's Gambit*, Stevens “was back there in the old time when the Old Testament had first been translated or even written,” reciting classic Greek in his office (207-208). The best he could hope to accomplish would be to produce a new copy of the same old text with which he is already acquainted. Hence, Brooks’s “no scholarly value” and Greenwood’s “quixotic.” I would like to second Ladd, however, in taking seriously Stevens’ serious vocation, but for corresponding reasons by which we might further complicate existing readings.

The length of Stevens’ project may first appear to confirm the absurdity of it. He is one man attempting work first undertaken by hundreds over a span of generations.<sup>11</sup> That it is “unfinished,” then, should hardly rest as a point of contention. No “scholarly value,” meanwhile, presupposes that “back into classic Greek” stands as an exercise in redundancy, a recycling of work long conducted. There are, however, no known copies of the *original* Greek translation (Septuagint, 132 BCE) of the Hebrew Bible, but only copies of later transcriptions, the oldest of which (Codex Sinaiticus, 4th century CE) post-dates by five hundred years the original and is itself incomplete, containing all of the New Testament but only sections of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>12</sup> Stevens, it would appear, has done his homework, and is diligently undertaking the “serious work” of a complete facsimile of the Hebrew Bible in a language as faithful as he can render it to

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a text that is “verbally identical” to Cervantes’ original, but that is somehow “infinitely richer” than *Don Quixote* (*Ficciones* 52).

<sup>11</sup> The Septuagint was commissioned in Alexandria during the reign of Ptolemy II (283-246 BCE), in which seventy to seventy-two Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Bible into Koine Greek for the Hellenistic world. By most estimates, the task took several generations; after the first set of scholars completed their work, subsequent scribes continued the task over parts of two centuries, delivering the Greek Hebrew Bible in 132 BCE (<http://www.septuagint.net>).

<sup>12</sup> See footnotes 7 and 11.

the first Greek translation. He is trying to restore something that has been lost, as we learn in *Knight's Gambit*. Charles Mallison, Stevens' nephew, avoids interfering with

that ritual of Translation which the whole family referred to with a capital T—the rendering of the Old Testament back into classic Greek into which it has been translated from its lost Hebrew infancy—which his uncle had been engaged on for twenty years now. ... [He would speak] again in the old Greek, and even to him [Charles] who couldn't understand the Greek, it sounded a lot stronger, a lot more like whoever was saying it meant exactly that, even to the ones who couldn't understand it or at least hadn't understood it until now. And this was one of them and neither did this sound like anything that anybody had got out of the Bible, at least since the Anglo-Saxon puritans got a hold of it. (207, 209)

Stevens aims to reclaim Biblical meanings that, since the time of “Anglo-Saxon puritans,” or of white Americans, had been obscured or lost. Classic Greek also connotes a pre-Christian context, as the first Greek Bible was published in 132 BCE, while “lost Hebrew infancy” indicates awareness by Faulkner of Biblical origins and beginnings.

Stevens' choice of language might appear “quixotic,” or anachronistic, if we take at face value that classic Greek is, in fact, dead, and that it lies outside the realm of renewal. But as we know from his oft-quoted line from *Requiem*, Stevens refuses to recognize that the past, which includes the “dead” language of his “serious vocation,” ever, in fact, dies: it isn't even past, but is right here, right now informing, shaping, haunting. And there is a precedent for Stevens' linguistic revival, one which, based on his education at Heidelberg, he would have known about: Hebrew. Stevens, in all likelihood, would have learned of the late nineteenth-century revival of

Hebrew as an evolving, written and spoken language rather than a static one that had been preserved in Talmuds and rabbinical exegesis since the second century CE.<sup>13</sup> Jews had already restarted the “lost Hebrew” language to which Faulkner refers.

To call Hebrew a “dead language” prior to the nineteenth century would not be accurate—it was more precisely dormant—but it shares with classic (or rather Koine) Greek a set of parallels. Hebrew ceased as a spoken language in the second century CE, Koine Greek in the third; Hebrew Bibles of antiquity were written in Hebrew (and Aramaic) and Greek; once each language became inactive they were maintained in written form by their respective liturgies. The onset of modern Hebrew, however, is where Hebrew diverges, where it becomes contemporaneous, where speakers of it are now linked to their second-century brethren, where they read new translations of the Hebrew Bible in revived Hebrew. Whether Stevens aims a like-minded cultural revival of Koine Greek is more than I am willing to speculate. What is clear, however, is that he had a ready-made template for his linguistic project, and that he, like the Jews in Europe and Palestine, strove to reclaim the ancient tongue(s) of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>14</sup> His efforts, then, are no more “quixotic” than that of the Hebrew Bible’s *new* native speakers,

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<sup>13</sup> See [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/ben\\_yehuda.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/ben_yehuda.html).

<sup>14</sup> Willa Johnson has suggested that I may be giving Gavin Stevens too much credit with respect to what he would have known about modern Hebrew, and that he may not have valued it (or that Heidelberg University would not have focused on it from 1919-1921) even had he been made aware of it. Johnson has recommended a number of texts that might help me better ground Stevens’ project relative to Greek and Hebrew translations. For references concerning the history of languages and the discussion of the history of Hebrew particularly as it relates to biblical languages, see James Barr’s *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament with Additions and Corrections* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1987). For a further discussion, see Eduard Y. Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Leiden: Brill, 1982). For an understanding of the Septuagint and its relationship to the underlying Hebrew, see Emmanuel Tov, *The Text-Critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research* (Jerusalem: Simor, 1988). See also Seth Schwartz, “Language, Power and Identity in Ancient Palestine” (*Past and*

whose *law* text he wishes to resituate Hellenistically, as did the commissioners of the Septuagint more than two thousand years before him. We should well take seriously Stevens' serious vocation, and also pay heed to what that Heidelberg degree signifies. For Faulkner positions his lawyer at modern philosophy and Biblical scholarship's Ground Zero, and then returns him to Jefferson, Mississippi with a doctorate in philosophy to translate the Hebrew Bible into classic Greek. Stevens would have learned of philosophers such as Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, who altered how the Western world conceived itself, and of Bible scholars such as Graf, Vatke, and Wellhausen, who set the course for modern Bible studies that is followed to this day.<sup>15</sup> So just what was Stevens studying at Heidelberg?

The Septuagint, Codex Sinaiticus, the revival of Hebrew: without the Heidelberg degree, the evidence would be fairly speculative that Gavin Stevens knew of or was impacted by them. What we do know, however, is that Jefferson's lawyer spends (as of 1941) twenty-two years on a Hebrew Bible translation in which he reclaims a dormant language *after* taking a Heidelberg doctorate. In addition to being seated at the epicenter of modern philosophy, where the thinkers noted above launched what was nothing less than a revolution in thought, Stevens is placed at the hub of modern Biblical scholarship in which influential hypotheses about the dating, origin, and

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*Present* 148 (1995): 3-47). See also Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism* (Hoboken: KTAV, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> See Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860*, and Jones, *Kant and the Nineteenth Century* for a canvassing of German idealism and intellectual thought. As Pinkard notes, "German philosophy came for a while to dominate European philosophy and to change the shape of how not only Europeans but practically the whole world conceived of itself, of nature, of religion, of human history, of the nature of knowledge, of politics, and of the structure of the human mind" (2). This change in conception emerged out of Kant's view that "objects are constructs in which the activity of minds plays an essential part, [or] ... that minds [are not] passive contemplators of independently existing objects" (Jones xx). Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche all responded to, and expanded upon, "the role of mind in the construction of reality" as thought of by Kant (Jones xx-xxii).

authorship of the Hebrew Bible had been put forth in the decades preceding his arrival. Stevens would have learned of the Documentary Hypothesis, in which Julius Wellhausen, writing from Göttingen in 1885, “succeeded in constructing the classical picture of [the Hebrew Bible] and of the history of Israel” (Knight 64). Wellhausen, building on the work of his predecessors, puts forth that there were four principal writers of the Hebrew Bible, and that it was compiled in the form handed down to us at some point after the return to Israel from Babylonian exile in 538 BCE. Scholars such as Karl Heinrich Graf, Wilhelm Vatke, and Wellhausen, working in Germany and Scandinavia in the nineteenth century, drew on Hegelian principles of civilization development and applied them to the Hebrew Bible in an attempt to construct its historicity, determine its authorship, and refigure the theologies of ancient Judaism (Friedman, *Who Wrote* 24-25; Knight 64). By the time of Stevens’ arrival in Heidelberg in 1919, the course of modern Biblical scholarship had been set: to situate it historically, and then, from that vantage point, reconsider the contemporary applications of the ancient text.

Wellhausen, for one, argues that much of Jewish history is a mirage. He is unwilling to accept that a pre-compositional or pre-literary tradition existed prior to Babylonian exile, or that many of the Biblical narratives were written before the fall of the first Temple. Rather, the Biblical writers of the sixth century BCE fabricated or “Israelitized” (Knight 67) their historical and theological origins to fix a national narrative that would appear old and divinely inspired; they invented their own tradition. This conclusion affords Wellhausen the latitude to account for the “persistency of the [Jewish] race. ... [Their constructed narrative has given them] an internal solidarity ... which has hitherto enabled them to survive all the attacks of time” (Wellhausen 486). The exposure of Jews as something of frauds “must inevitably lead to the extinction of

Judaism”; stripped of their narrative, and with their religion long since subsumed by Christianity, Jews will have no choice but to assimilate (486). So much for a writerly agenda.

Wellhausen’s text is fiercely anti-Semitic: it aims to invalidate Judaism and Jewish culture by “proving” that Jewish history is a fiction. He misses completely the power of narrative to shape, inform, and enliven cultures. While he made a career of studying the Hebrew Bible, Wellhausen’s prejudices, which approached fanaticism, prevented him from understanding much of it. Having said that, his *method* of identifying the multiple writers and sources of scripture has “dominated the field ever since. To this day, if you want to disagree, you disagree with Wellhausen. If you want to pose a new model, you compare its merits with those of Wellhausen’s model” (Friedman, *Who Wrote* 26-27). In spite of his venomous opinions, and the calamity that they invite—in spite of what Wellhausen would *want* us to do with his text—his finer work has helped us to better appreciate the miracle that is the Hebrew Bible, and the treasure that was, is, and will continue to be Jewish culture and religion.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Willa Johnson has recommended a number of texts that will aid me in more firmly situating Wellhausen, and responses to him, as I revise this project going forward, such as Jon Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville: WJKP, 1993), and *Sinai and Zion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987). For a discussion of the role of Jewish thinkers and the Documentary Hypothesis, see Naomi Cohen, “The Challenges of Darwinism and Biblical Criticism in American Judaism” (*Modern Judaism* 4 (1984): 121-57). Cohen notes that there was divisiveness within the American Reform Jewish community in the late-nineteenth century regarding the Documentary Hypothesis. Isaac Wise, the president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Central Conference of American Rabbis, “reiterated on many occasions that there could be no Judaism without the belief that the Torah was genuine and Mosaic” (Cohen 127). On the other hand, Emil G. Hirsch, rabbi of Sinai Temple in Chicago, stated in 1895 that he “did not believe that one single line of the Pentateuch was written by Moses in its present form” (qtd. in Cohen 127). The debate signals that Reform Jews were claiming an authoritative position (thus implicitly negating Wellhausen’s assertion that Judaism was fossilized) in response to modern Biblical criticism, regardless of whether they agreed or disagreed with the Documentary Hypothesis. As Cohen notes, “the Reform rabbis . . . were reiterating once again that their brand of religion, an evolutionary Judaism, harmonized well with the spirit of the age” (126). For an analysis of the relationship between Jewish and Christian

The source theory approach to the Hebrew Bible, in fact, anticipates that of Faulkner's: careful attention to scripture, interrogation of nation-building, consideration of how and why theologies are constructed and deployed, and a synthesis of how traditions are invented. Only it is not for the lie of Jewish history (as Wellhausen would have it) that Faulkner reads the Hebrew Bible; he makes no such ideological move. Rather, he reads it "for the pleasure of watching what these amazing people did, and they behaved so exactly like people in the 19th century behaved. ... [T]he Old Testament is some of the finest, most amusing folklore I know" (*Lion* 112). And it is the nineteenth century, of course, where so much of Faulkner's fiction takes place, and that gives rise to the critical apparatus by which twentieth-century thinkers recast Hebrew scripture.

By sending Gavin Stevens to Heidelberg, Faulkner equips his Hebrew Bible translator with the education commensurate to his task. Stevens returns, if the Heidelberg doctorate is worth the paper it is printed on, fully conversant with the histories and customs of ancient Israel, with modern Biblical scholarship interventions therein, with theories for rendering the Hebrew Bible relevant, and with a sense of the plausibility and utility of returning to (or even reviving) Biblical-era language. The lawyer-poet, whose chosen vocation(s) place him in the Levitical, or law code, and Psalmist, or poetic, traditions, appears ideally suited for the unfinished business of a twentieth-century return to the Hebrew Bible on a stage—Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County—where "[t]here isn't any time. ... There is only the present moment, in which I include both the past and the future" (*Lion* 70).<sup>17</sup>

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thinkers from the Protestant Reformation forward, see Frank E. Manuel, *The Broken Staff: Judaism through Christian Eyes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992).



The latter quote is Faulkner's, not one of his characters, but it reads as an expansion of Stevens' famous line from *Requiem*. Here is where we might move away from Stevens, for as much as the evidence compels us to take the lawyer's chosen vocation seriously, it does not of itself substantiate that Faulkner is ontologically Jewish, although it does invite inquiries into why the lawyer sets to work on the Hebrew rather than Christian Bible. Stevens' preference, as suggested earlier, may be a utilitarian one; there are already complete New Testaments in classic Greek. With Faulkner, however, we need not guess. Time and again, primarily in interviews and conferences from 1955-1962, he reiterates and qualifies his preference for the Old Testament to the New, and indicates how often he reads it. In the quotation above, Faulkner proffers his conception of time, a theory rooted squarely in Messianic, rabbinical tradition rather than in Christian belief of original sin (and thus investments in origins), future return, and revelation.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Leviticus contains the bulk of God's 613 commandments, or the laws that He gave to Moses at Sinai. As the Jewish Study Bible notes, "[t]he study of the laws in Leviticus [stands] at the center of rabbinic learning" (205). Psalms consists of 150 poetic prayers, whose authorship has traditionally been attributed to David, although "none can be dated on linguistic grounds to the tenth century BCE, the period of David" (JSB 1282). Unless otherwise noted, scriptural passages are taken from the Jewish Study Bible throughout this project.

<sup>18</sup> Inherent within the moral imperative to uphold Torah is the Jewish theory of Messianic time. The Messiah, for Jews, has not yet come, while as Joseph Telushkin notes, "their Christian neighbors ... believe, of course, that the Messiah came two thousand years ago in the person of Jesus" (601). The coming of the Messiah is both all-important and unimportant: he has not yet come, therefore we must prepare for his arrival, as it may be imminent. To prepare is to be just, to uphold Torah, to keep covenant, which can only be done *presently*. Conversely, he has not come, and since we do not know when he will, in fact, come, the "when" of the matter is largely irrelevant—what matters again is the keeping of Torah. There is an adage which dates to the first century CE, whereby "[i]f you should happen to be holding a sapling in your hand when they tell you that the Messiah has arrived, first plant the sapling and then go out and greet the Messiah" (Telushkin 600). The Messiah, it seems, has been a long time coming, and can wait for you to complete your *present* work.

### *Messianic Time*

Messianic time, above all, is concerned with the present, and with its ethical prerogatives. Faulkner is interested in the moral sense that God has instilled in man, one whose application must be carried out “in the present moment.” This “here-and-now,” as Walter Benjamin refers to Messianic time in “On the Concept of History,” and as Faulkner and the rabbinical sages I align him with agree upon, includes all history leading to it from the original covenants in Genesis and Exodus. Faulkner refers to time as a fluid space in which the past and future coalesce in the now, the present moment, and remarks that “time can be shaped quite a bit by the artist; after all, man is never time’s slave” (*Lion* 70). In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Quentin Compson and Shrevlin McCannon, sitting in a dormitory at Harvard University in 1910 while they re/construct the Thomas Sutpen saga, become conjoined by the narrator, in time and space, with Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen:

So that now it was not two but four of them riding the two horses through the dark over the frozen December ruts of that Christmas eve: four of them and then just two--Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry, the two of them both believing that Henry was thinking *He* (meaning his father) *has destroyed us all*. ... Four of them there, in that room in New Orleans in 1860, just as in a sense there were four of them here in this tomblake room in Massachusetts in 1910. (267-268)

Quentin and Shreve thus occupy two present times simultaneously: 1860 and, in a linear reading of chronology, 1910. Henry and Bon, likewise, coexist in the (past) now of 1860 and the (future) now of 1910. Past and future collapse into, become indecipherable from, a present that is in a sense *always* now, ethically if not metaphysically. The past isn’t even past because, as Faulkner

notes, “[t]here isn’t any time. ... There is only the present moment.” Quentin has become indistinguishable from Henry: when Henry thinks that Sutpen *has destroyed us all*, it is Quentin’s thought as well. Thomas Sutpen of 1860 “destroys” Quentin Compson of 1910; Quentin is no more in Sutpen’s future than is Sutpen in Quentin’s past.

Faulkner’s bending of time, in which 1860 and 1910 occupy one “present,” completes a conceptual move that rabbis have been making for centuries. Susan Handelman writes in *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory* that in

Jewish historiography ... the ancient rabbis used the interpretive technique of compression and anachronistic simultaneity ... to give meaning to ... history. ... As [historian Yosef Haim] Yerushalmi puts it, the rabbis ‘seem to play with Time as though with an accordion, expanding and collapsing it at will ... with [rampant] and seemingly unselfconscious anachronism.’ (150)

This technique has its origins in the covenant between God and Moses, or the giving of laws, both oral and written, that bind Jews to God. For each generation “receives” this covenant annually at Passover dinner (Seder), when Jews recite Exodus; the present generation is therefore linked to its predecessors in an ongoing, contemporary conversation that ensures a passing on of collective memory and a renewing of the laws of Sinai.

Central to rabbinical (and Faulknerian) thinking is the belief that the present time, ethically linked by covenant to the past, is, in essence, the *only* time; the past remains always present. Jacob Neusner makes clear this temporal distinction of Judaism from Christianity in *Rabbinic Literature*. He notes that for Christianity the goal of the church in the first centuries of the Common Era was to “put down in written form ... the record of God incarnate in Jesus

Christ” (xxv). The goal of Judaism, likewise, was to “set down [in the first six centuries CE] in writing the oral part of the record of the Torah that God gives in two media, written and oral, to Moses” (xxv). The religions shared the common goal, then, of documenting their faiths, whether that “record of God” consisted of the laws of Moses, the story of the Son, or, in Christianity, both. Where Judaism diverges from Christianity, however, is in its belief that God continues to proffer the Torah “through the masters and disciples [rabbinical scholars] in the chain of tradition ... every day since [Moses]” (xxv). The oral component of the Torah, according to Jewish beliefs, consists of analyses, explanations, interpretations, and commentaries (or a form of verbal literary criticism) on the written Torah; both the oral and written Torahs were given to Moses by God at Sinai, but God prohibited Moses from recording the oral Law. Instead, the Jews were charged, from Moses to following generations, with memorizing, passing on, and performing (and thus reenacting to keep alive) the oral Torah. This gave rise to a “living” Torah, in which the laws of Judaism remained in constant renewal—every cohort reimagining its covenant with God through “conversation” with their ancestors in the oral Torah continuum.<sup>19</sup>

Each generation receives, participates in, and propels forward an ongoing theological dialogue, reinterpreting Moses, discovering facets of the covenant that may have not been revealed at Sinai, or that had not as yet been considered. The present time, then, always includes the past: Jewish literature, law, history, and religion remain intertwined, inseparable from one another, with the upholding of Torah serving as the moral imperative in the now, as it has always been.<sup>20</sup> So while the early Christian Church was fixing the text of the New Testament, to include

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<sup>19</sup> Paraphrased from several sections of Rabbi Joseph Telushkin’s *Jewish Literacy*, with an emphasis on “Oral Law/Torah” (148-150).

<sup>20</sup> The oral Torah was transcribed by Jewish scholars from the second to the seventh centuries CE, first in the Mishnah (200 CE), and then in the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds (600-700

the historical crucifixion of its Messiah, as in, “this is what happened, *then*,” Hebrew scholars were reinterpreting Torah to show that “this is what is happening, this is how we keep covenant, *now*,” which, of course, includes *then*. Faulkner’s “[t]here isn’t any time. ... There is only the present moment” secures him within this tradition, in which the moral imperative is always in the now, where in *Absalom*, Rosa Coldfield wants Quentin to “remember this” and, as the rabbis of the early era did before him, “write about it” (5). He will redact, also like the rabbis of late antiquity, who deployed a “process of formation and redaction ... as the editors of the compendium” (Neusner xxiii).<sup>21</sup> Quentin will take Rosa’s recollections, and those of his father, who recalls his father before him, and transport the Rosa/Mr. Compson (and General Compson) account to Boston, where Shreve, along with Quentin, will reconsider and reinterpret the Sutpen tragedy of the nineteenth century in their twentieth-century dormitory room.

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CE). The oral tradition continues as a mode of inquiry, a means by which to interpret the Bible and the Talmud, or to “give ... a *drash* [to investigate, or study] on this week’s Torah portion” (Talushkin 159).

<sup>21</sup> I want to be clear that the early rabbis had a fully realized conception of themselves, of the function of “history” and of the role of the Messiah, and of their role as stewards of Jewish religion, culture, and traditions after the destruction of the Second Temple. As Neusner notes, the rabbis’ “intention [was] to create nothing less than a full-scale Israelite government, subject to the administration of sages” (108). As does Faulkner, the writers of the Mishnah view “[h]istory as an account of a meaningful pattern of events, making sense of the past and giving guidance about the future. ... Their conception of Israel’s destiny in no way called upon historical categories ... to describe and account for the future. The small importance attributed to the figure of the Messiah as a historical-eschatological figure, therefore, fully accords with the larger traits of the system as a whole” (Neusner 123-124). The rabbis were acutely aware of the crises of exile, and of the need to, in effect, record the oral tradition, or to codify the laws and commentary that complement the written Torah. Willa Johnson provided me with a number of titles that will help me in more fully synthesizing the import of the early rabbis. In addition to the Neusner text cited, see his translation of the Mishnah: *The Mishnah* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988). For more on the role and function of the early rabbis, see Gary Porton, *Understanding Rabbinic Midrash: Text and Commentary* (Hoboken: KTAV, 1985). See also H.L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress P, 1991).

Rosa and Mr. Compson's passing on of the Sutpen saga mirrors the rabbinical model of reimagining the past and of ensuring that succeeding generations perform likewise, which Quentin and Shreve do at Harvard. "Memory can be progressive," writes Handelman; "it becomes ... the prime agent in the recontextualization, citability, and 'transmissibility' of the past. ... [This belief is] specifically Jewish" (*Fragments* 149-150).<sup>22</sup> When Handelman notes that memory can be progressive, it is a way of saying that by remembering we might progress, that by retelling the Sutpen drama, we will hopefully unearth the tragedy of his grand design. Ongoing collaborative redaction thus emphasizes process (and participation in that process) over product. Rosa Coldfield summons Quentin because, as he thinks, "*she wants it* [the Sutpen story] *told*" (5). She wants the events leading up to and including Sutpen's insult of her in 1866 reconsidered in 1909 by a young man forty-five years her junior. Her preface then, of the "people and events you were fortunate enough to escape [from] yourself" (5), is but a rhetorical turn: having now been told, escape from the "past" is impossible. And as Mr. Compson surmises, she probably thinks that Quentin, by virtue of being a descendant of General Compson, Sutpen's confidant, already participates in the collective memory that Rosa propels forward.

#### *Faulkner's Rabbinic Imagination*

Simultaneity of times past and present, the unbroken chain of collective memory, and a lawyer hard at work on his Old Testament translation come together to show a Faulkner charged by a rabbinical imagination, one rooted, as to be expected of any Jewish (or Hebrew Bible-informed) perspective, in mankind's moral and ethical responsibilities. In the same interview in which Faulkner advocates Messianic time, he asserts that "God is. It is He who created man. ...

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<sup>22</sup> Handelman references Deuteronomy 32:7 to qualify the Hebraic particularity of "progressive memory": "Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past" (149).

Man comes from God. ... Man is important because he possesses a moral sense. ... I have tremendous faith in man, in spite of all his faults and his limitations” (*Lion* 70-71). God is; God made man; God imbued man with a moral sense; man will prevail. It would be a challenge for William Faulkner to sound any more rabbinical than he does here. His conception of God (“God is”), for one, comes directly from the Hebrew Bible, in which the Lord’s name, Yahweh, translates as “I am,” “I am who I am,” “I am that I am,” “I will be,” or “I will be what I will be” (Exodus 3:14). Faulkner invokes God’s naming in two of his “Hebrew Bible” texts. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, which is a title that alludes to 2 Samuel, Rosa Coldfield mentions “*the central I-Am’s private own*” (112); in *Father Abraham*, which is a title that recalls the patriarch, or the first Jew, he writes that that “[t]he Lord once said to Moses: ‘I am that I am’” (14). God always has *been* and always will *be*; from Him, in Faulkner’s paraphrase of Genesis 1, comes man, who has a “moral sense.” And it is the “moral sense” with which Judaism is imbued: a religion of the text tethering a people’s history to the laws by which they are governed.

While Faulkner’s comments on God and morality align him with Judaism, they do not by themselves distinguish him from Christianity, for Genesis and Exodus make up the first two books of the Christian Bible, as well. Rather, Faulkner’s principle of nonlinear past, present, and future convergence, coupled with his beliefs on God, man, and morality locate him in an Hebraic, rabbinical tradition that invests in collective memory, or a “sacred chain” linking past and present, and in the import of the now in Messianic time.

<sup>23</sup> Lastly, it is Faulkner’s reverence for the Hebrew Bible, and the frequency with which he returns to it, that centers him as a Jewish-minded thinker, and that suggests how he came to embrace the rabbinic method of textual engagement, criticism, and analysis.

Faulkner noted at the University of Virginia that he reads the Hebrew Bible “all [the way] through over the course of every ten years” (150), while during his state-department visit to Japan he remarked, “I read the Old Testament, oh, once every ten or fifteen years” (*Lion* 110). He reads parts of it, however, annually: he listed it among the titles that he reads “some of ... every year” (*University* 50), which he reasserted in his final interview.<sup>24</sup> By his estimation—whether “regularly” means ten or fifteen years in its entirety, or annually in sections—Faulkner regularly rereads the Hebrew Bible. Faulkner’s yearly return to the Hebrew Bible is consistent with the Jewish method of Bible studies, in which the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy) is read annually, a cycle that starts anew each year.<sup>25</sup> While we cannot assert that Faulkner read the Torah every year, we do know that he read *some* of it annually and *all* of it over time, cyclically. The lifelong return to the Bible is a defining characteristic of Judaism, or a retaking of the covenantal oath through a rereading of the Mosaic text. Interpreting the Bible, as “Embracing the Torah” notes, is a pursuit that “never ends,” as one vows to uphold “Talmud Torah,” or the study of scripture, for their entire life.<sup>26</sup> It is a vow that William Faulkner, in Jewish fashion, upheld with his “old friend” the Hebrew Bible. So when Faulkner comments that “when Melville becomes Old Testament, that seems natural to me” (*University* 56), he reveals as much about himself as he does about the other. Faulkner possesses an affinity for Hebrew scripture,

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<sup>23</sup> Norman F. Cantor, *The Sacred Chain: A History of the Jews*.

<sup>24</sup> On May 6, 1962, Faulkner remarked that “[e]very year I read Don Quixote, the Bible, an hour of Dickens” (*Lion* 284). One month earlier, at the United States Military Academy, Faulkner noted that “I read in and out of the Old Testament every year” (*West Point* 61).

<sup>25</sup> Laypersons actively participate in Torah study: at weekly services, it is common for a member of the community (someone other than the Rabbi) to lead a discussion and analysis on that week’s Torah reading, which often turns into a spirited debate. Jews around the world are “united” in this conversation, as they all read from the same Torah portion each week.

<sup>26</sup> “Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah” website: <http://www.jewfaq.org/holiday6.htm>.



which he returns to—whether to read, to recast in his fiction, to look for in the works of others, or to orient us to in his speeches and interviews—as do the Jewish teachers whose traditions he boldly claims.

How Faulkner came to embrace such a tradition, other than by reading the Bible, is another matter. Nowhere on record does he invoke the Talmud, or rabbinic debate, or Jewish aestheticism. He did, however, appeal to the moral sense inherent in Judaism in a letter he wrote to Malcolm Franklin at Warner Brothers in 1943, noting that “[d]uring the times when I would be broke, year after year sometimes, I had only to write [Random House vice president Robert Haas] and he would send me money—no hope to get it back, unless I wrote another book. He’s a Jew” (*Selected Letters* 175). Haas would forward him money, according to Faulkner, because as a Jew he would do the right thing. He goes on to note that both of Haas’s children, a son and a daughter, “[a]ll Jews,” serve as pilots, one in the Pacific and the other in the “Womens’ Ferry Squadron” (175). In the same letter, Faulkner invokes the Hebrew “shibboleth,” which is a word or signifier for inclusion in a group. Male circumcision, for example, or the marking by which Jewish boys enter the covenant, is a form of shibboleth. US politicians, according to Faulkner, “glibly talk about freedom, liberty, [and] human rights” while discriminating against African Americans (176). He notes that a “change will come out of this war. If it doesn’t, if the politicians and the people who run this country are not forced to make good the shibboleth ... then you young men who live through it will have wasted your precious time, and those who don’t live through it will have died in vain” (176). The US, in other words, excludes African Americans from the *national* shibboleth. Faulkner deploys a Hebrew word to critique US discrimination policy, or to invite social reform, which is an implicitly Jewish gesture. He also

champions the patriotism of two Jewish pilots and the generosity of a Jewish executive which, I think, further suggests his own Jewish sensibility, or at least his admiration for Jews.<sup>27</sup>

During his formative years, Faulkner's interaction with Jews centered on his relationship with the Friedmans of Oxford, Mississippi, as Ilse Duso Lind writes in "Faulkner's Relationship to Jews: A Beginning." Faulkner was friends with Florrie Friedman, daughter of Hyman Friedman, who settled in Oxford from Eastern Europe at the turn of the century (Lind 134). He was friends with Florrie's cousin Rosalie, as well. And "shortly after Louis [Friedman, Hyman's nephew] arrived in Oxford ... Faulkner said to him with strong emphasis, 'You have ancestors!'" (Lind 135), as if proudly celebrating Jewish heritage and genealogy, as indicated by the exclamation mark. So Faulkner did circulate among Jews in Oxford; we can say, as Lind argues, that Jews "were part of his web of existence. ... [T]hey were not abstractions to him. ... It could not have failed to be obvious to him that they were a close, mutually supporting family, ... that they were devoted to learning and the arts, ... and that they were ethically conscientious in the extreme" (135).

Admittedly, Faulkner's relationship with one family of Jews in Oxford, coupled with one letter in which he speaks highly of another Jewish family, hardly makes Faulkner Jewish, nor does it explain how he came to think rabbinically. But it does point to his familiarity with

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<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that Faulkner is elsewhere critical of Jews. In a 1932 letter, he remarked that "I certainly made a better contract with those Jews than [film producer Myron Selznick] seemed able to" (*Selected Letters* 66). Of course, it could be that Faulkner expected Selznick, who was also Jewish, to be savvy enough to broker a better deal, which is a form of compliment in its own right: as a Jew, he should have been a competent negotiator. For Faulkner and anti-Semitism, see Dobkowski, *The Tarnished Dream* (1979), and Kutzik, "Faulkner and the Jews" (1965).

Jewish culture and his fondness for the ethical dimensions of that culture.<sup>28</sup> There is not, however, a defining moment or episode that indicates that Faulkner read rabbinical commentary or the Talmud. On the other hand, if we think about his admiration for the Jews that he knew or knew about, and consider how frequently he reads (and returns to in his work) the Hebrew Bible, we might begin to see his Jewish, or Jewish-minded, orientation.

Foremost, Faulkner reads the Bible as a Jew; he does not read Christ back into it, or as anticipating Christian salvation. His reading is messianic but does not anticipate the messiah, which is a crucial distinction. Christian readings, it might be said, anticipate the messiah but are linear rather than messianic. And as Robert Alter argues in *Pen of Iron*,

Faulkner understood far better than all but a few biblical scholars three fundamental aspects of the David story: the moral ambiguity of the character of David; David's tragic fixation on sons, which notably exceeds even the patriarchal norms of the Hebrew Bible; and, above all, the central, painful paradox that the narrative of the founding of the Davidic story is also the story of the fall of the house of David. (80)

Alter also notes that "Ecclesiastes ... encourage[s] his predilection ... for emphatic repetition and incantation [which Faulkner used in *Absalom, Absalom!*] to express an analogous vision of futile cyclical movement" (113). A renowned Bible scholar (Alter teaches Hebrew at Berkeley) writes that Faulkner's synthesis of the Davidic narrative is more nuanced than *any other twentieth-century writer*, or perhaps even thinker, save for a handful of trained experts. By reimagining

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<sup>28</sup> The only mention of rabbis in Faulkner's fiction is made by adolescent Charles (Chick) Mallison. As Lind points out, Chick remarks in *The Town* that "We had ... two Jews [in Jefferson], brothers, with their families who ran two clothing stores. ... [O]ne of them had been trained in Russia to be a rabbi and spoke seven languages including ancient Greek and Latin and worked geometry problems for relaxation" (qtd. in Lind 135-136). The rabbi, in learned fashion, speaks the language in which Gavin Stevens aims his translation.

the Davidic narrative in nineteenth-century America, Faulkner makes an inherently rabbinical move, one that is predicated on his yearly or constellational reading of the Bible. He operates on a larger Jewish register which is inclusive of the rabbinical, Talmudic commentary method that emerges out of *reading* the Bible. Faulkner picked up the rabbinical tendency to read out of Ecclesiastes a critique of progress because, he, like the rabbis, close reads Ecclesiastes for what it asks rather than for what it declares.

The Jewish approach to the Bible, by which it diverges fundamentally from Christianity, has always been a form of literary criticism that privileges questions and disagreements over answers and agreement. And literary theory, as Handelman provocatively argues in *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*, is an extension of the rabbinic model. The rabbis, she argues, have been literary theorists “from the fourth century BCE onwards. ... The rabbinic world is ... one of *intertextuality*. Texts echo, interact, and interpenetrate. ... Interpretation ... [is an] *extension* of the text” (31, 47, 39). As Barbara Johnson similarly notes, the rabbinical orientation to the text has been to “surround [it] with more and more text. ... [T]he text itself is divine, and man’s duty is to interpret it” (65). Faulkner performs such an interpretation, as he comments upon and “surrounds” scripture with his own writing. His texts echo, interact, and converse with scripture as he carries out his own analysis about what the Bible asks, and about the cultural work the Bible continues to perform. William Faulkner’s approach to the Bible is thus implicitly rabbinical, or Jewish-minded, regardless of whether or not he ever read or studied the Talmud, or conversed with a rabbi.

## Faulkner and Nation-Building

In session nineteen of the Virginia conferences (May 16, 1957), an attendee asks Faulkner the following:

Q. Well, I don't mean this to be a carefully rehearsed literary question, but I did notice in the paper where you mentioned that the Old Testament was among your old literary friends, or one of the ones you like to browse in and re-read, and I realize it is a classic, but I was wondering why the New Testament didn't have as much to offer. Is it because it is so narrative or--some of it is--?

A. To me the New Testament is full of ideas and I don't know much about ideas. The Old Testament is full of people, perfectly normal ordinary heroes and blackguards just like everybody else nowadays, and I like to read the Old Testament because it's full of people, not ideas. It's people all trying to get something for nothing or ... to be braver than they are--just ordinary everyday folks, people, that's why I like to read that. That's apart from the fine poetry of the prose. (167-168)

Faulkner's affinity for the Hebrew Bible is in evidence throughout his work. To cite a handful of examples, the title of *Sanctuary* recalls the tabernacle in the wilderness that the Israelites construct on God's command: "let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8). Sanctuary is thus divined from a godly rather than human perspective as a site where God has access to people and vice versa, rather than a site where people can find a haven from other people or from the world. In *Light in August*, African Americans congregate in black churches, but that "sanctuary" does not extend to physical protection: Doc Hines invades their sanctuary to preach the superiority of the white race. In *Sanctuary*, Temple Drake's first name

recalls the Temple in Jerusalem erected during the reign of Solomon as the permanent resting place for the Ark of the Covenant housing the Ten Commandments (1 Kings 8:43).<sup>29</sup> *Absalom, Absalom!* denotes King David's grief (2 Samuel 19:1) over the death of his son, Absalom. *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem's* title comes from Psalm 137 (line 5, King James Version), in which the Israelites lament their homeland, Jerusalem, during exile "[b]y the rivers of Babylon." "Go Down, Moses" evokes black spirituals steeped in the Exodus tradition, while in *The Unvanquished*, African Americans march toward a "homemade Jordan" (101) in flight from the Confederate South that is to them a modern-day Egypt, as may be the North to which they aim to flee. *The Hamlet* began as *Father Abraham* (Blotner 192); the story of Abraham (Genesis), as Faulkner would note in the last Virginia conference was, for him, the most compelling of all in the Hebrew Bible (*University* 285-286). In *Go Down, Moses*, as cousins Isaac McCaslin and Carothers Edmonds carefully read the family's ledgers, they trace their genealogy "on down through the tedious and shabby chronicle of His chosen sprung from Abraham" (246). Faulkner's novels are replete with the "heroes," "blackguards," and "everyday folks" that he finds so compelling in scripture, and as this brief summary has shown, Faulkner made liberal use of Hebrew Bible names, themes, and motifs throughout his career.

There is more to Faulkner and scripture than character or theme-based recasting, however, which both the student, by virtue of her question,<sup>30</sup> and Faulkner hint at in distinguishing the Hebrew Bible from the New Testament. The pupil wants to know why the

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<sup>29</sup> As Glenn Meeter notes, Temple's name also "recalls the allegories of Ezekiel 16 and 23, where Jerusalem, personified as a fallen and hypersexed woman, is carried off to Babylon by the heathen she allowed herself to be promiscuously associated with" (qtd. in Hamblin and Peek 41). There is potential to blame Temple for her plight, which I do not, in following Meeter's argument. The surface allegory is there, nonetheless, between the sacking of the temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and the rape of Temple Drake in *Sanctuary*.

New Testament does not “have as much to offer,” with Faulkner delineating between the ideas of the New Testament and the abundance of characters and stories (as well as the “fine poetry and prose”) in the older Hebrew Bible. On a pragmatic level, Faulkner’s reply stands to reason: the Hebrew Bible is much longer than the New Testament and covers far more historical ground. It contains three times as many pages and a host of stories and narrative threads spanning creation, arks, floods, covenants, and the formation of ancient Israel, traversing more than one thousand years.<sup>31</sup> The New Testament, meanwhile, is concerned exclusively with one “story,” the coming of Jesus and the rise and spread of Christianity in the first and second centuries of the Common Era (CE). And Faulkner is, after all, a storyteller. Faulkner does not count stories, however, in his reply; rather, he distinguishes between the people—the *characters*—of the Hebrew Bible, and the ideas of the New Testament, or the *ideology* of his region’s religion, Christianity.

The wealth of stories and characters populating the Hebrew Bible, as Faulkner notes, separates it from the New Testament’s preoccupation with one principal character whose significance lies in what he incarnates, or the ideology that he embodies, and with those who champion him. Paul, for example, is a fixed historical figure in New Testament linearity: his charge, which he zealously carried out, was to spread the word of Jesus and convert Jews and Gentiles to his (Paul’s) newly Christened religion. The Hebrew Bible, however, as we have seen, functions nonlinearly. To be sure, it is historical—it encompasses the reigns of kings, such as Saul and David, and the exile to and return from Babylon. But the charge within Judaism is to reinterpret scripture *presently*, and what the Hebrew Bible documents, in addition to the many laws and covenants, is the narrative of Israeli nation-building: enslavement and liberation, the

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<sup>30</sup> Faulkner was speaking to “Law School Wives” (*University* 153).

claiming of Judean lands, the splintering into the dual kingdoms of Israel and Judea, the collapse of the northern Kingdom and reconsolidation of its peoples in the South; wars, victory and defeat.

In Judaism, as Handelman notes, “history as the scene of the divine-human drama [is not] the linear flow of empty time” (*Fragments* 151). Dates become “transtemporal, reaching across the millennia” (Roskies, qtd. in *Fragments* 151), creating what Walter Benjamin refers to as a “constellation of events.” This does not mean that history repeats itself on divine or fated anniversaries, but that, for example, the Hebrew Bible’s construction of nationality and its account of nation-building maintain poignancy, as does the exile, as does the return. The present moment, or one’s “own epoch comes into contact with that of an earlier one. ... The entire course of history is in the [present] epoch” (Benjamin 8, 7). The present time, in other words, always remains the originary one: Faulkner’s era, and the Hebrew Bible which serves for him as its backdrop, speak to and refashion each other.

Faulkner’s moment, that which he was born into in 1897, is situated one year after the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court Case, which solidified or even federalized Jim Crow, and one year before the Spanish-American War that propelled the United States onto the global, colonizing stage. Faulkner’s “natural” affinity for the Hebrew Bible stands to reason: in an era of emerging American imperialism, both within and beyond national borders, he turns to an originary narrative of nationhood and nationalism whose characters “behaved so exactly like people in the 19th century behaved” (*Lion* 112). The nineteenth century was dominated, as is scripture, by nationalism and empire, and was something of a US colonial high-water mark.

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<sup>31</sup> The Zondervan King James Reference Bible, for example, is 1000 pages. The New Testament begins on 761.



Faulkner's rabbinically-minded dialogue with scripture doubles as a critical interrogation and commentary on nineteenth and early twentieth-century history, which was an era characterized at the regional, national, and global levels by nationalism, nation-building, imperialism, expansion, and colonization. Like the rabbis before him, Faulkner aims to negotiate with the Bible to share with us what it now returns. And what foremost concerns Faulkner—what his narratives “become”—is an exploration of a country, the United States, and its people; how it and they practice and suffer from (as did ancient Israel) colonizing ventures; how America's actions abroad and at home work in concert, thus reinforcing and propelling forward the nation's imperial march.

Faulkner writes in 1936 of a ruthless entrepreneur, Thomas Sutpen, who in 1833 appears in Jefferson, Mississippi “from the south” and, after vanishing for two months, returns with a “simple wagon load of wild niggers ... his crew of imported slaves” whom he has conscripted to raise his plantation home (*Absalom* 24, 33, 28). The Hebrew Bible, likewise, writes of outsiders who arrive in a land not theirs to forge an empire. Abraham and Sarah leave Mesopotamia for Canaan to fulfill God's command to found a “great nation. ... I am the Lord who ... assign[s] this land to you as a possession” (Genesis 12:2, 15:7). Edward Said, writing on the establishment of the modern Israeli state (1948) in “Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims,” asks why no one thought to ask the Palestinians to consent to the establishment of a new nation in their own land. “Zionism never spoke of itself unambiguously as a Jewish liberation movement, but rather as a Jewish movement for colonial settlement in the Orient” (24), in which it viewed Palestine as an empty space to be populated. So Jewish imperialism, it appears, functions constellationally: the formation (or taking) of modern Israel recalls Abraham and

Sarah's arrival in Genesis, and the Jewish occupation of Canaan in Joshua. Said's question could well be asked of either of those biblical texts. From the Canaanite perspective (either in Genesis, Joshua, or in the twentieth century), it would have been as if the Jews had appeared from nowhere, to occupy a land not theirs, and to exploit that land, and its peoples. The Canaanites may have also wondered whether they themselves were not *already* a great nation, and why they were not given a vote in this inaugural grand design. At any rate, the first Jews (Abraham and Sarah) then leave Canaan on a southward journey, as Sutpen leaves Jefferson, only to return, as does Sutpen, with slaves: "Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid Hagar the Egyptian—after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years—and gave her to her husband Abram as concubine. He cohabited with her and she conceived" (Genesis 16:3-4). The Jews thus exploit Egyptians as well as Canaanites in their ascent to power on Canaanite soil.

I make this analogy not to suggest that white Jefferson is to Sutpen what the Canaanites are to the Jews in scripture, but to point out similarities in these designs: an abrupt arrival, departure and return with slaves, colonization, the forging of an empire. Edouard Glissant even likens Sutpen to the God of the Old Testament (*FM* 194), which is appropriate in light of the power that he wields. Sutpen manages to circumvent law or, it might be said, to "create" his own laws enabling him to acquire slaves in a country—Haiti—that had abolished the institution in 1804. As John T. Matthews writes, "[t]he evidence ... points to Sutpen's having acquired his Negroes through illegal West Indian slave trade" ("Recalling" 250). There are a number of signs pointing to Sutpen's international trafficking. The slaves have been "imported," as Mr. Compson notes; they do not speak English but rather "a sort of French" (27); they are accompanied by an architect from Martinique; and, as we find out later in the novel, Sutpen had

put down a slave insurrection in Haiti around 1827. He appears to have made a career, even, of exploiting the Caribbean. As Matthews suggests (citing Maritza Stanchich), Sutpen returned to the West Indies at least twice after repudiating his first wife in 1831: to retrieve the “gold Spanish coin” he uses to buy one hundred acres, and then to seize his forced labor and “hire” the architect (251). Sutpen’s land is paid for, his mansion built, and his grand design launched, in part, by his harvesting of Haiti or its neighboring islands for the resources requisite to the task.

Sutpen does not act alone; he has for company a community of conspirators. His future father-in-law, Goodhue Coldfield, enters into some sort of illicit business with him, which Sutpen (perhaps) uses as leverage to marry Coldfield’s daughter, Ellen. And Jefferson’s arrest of Sutpen, for returning to town with “chandeliers and mahogany and rugs ... and crystal” (33), is largely symbolic, as if the town has the ability to reprimand him but is helpless, or unwilling, to stand in his way. Furthermore, the town, if it does not approve of Sutpen’s slave acquisition (or his hiring of them if their bondage is a matter of contention), makes no inquiries into its legality. As Matthews points out, America banned international slave trading in 1807 (251), but as far as the town knows, Sutpen has kidnapped his slaves, smuggled them into the country, and set them to work building his home. Whites in Jefferson, then, are anything *but* Canaanites; rather, they are more like fellow Israelites who enable Sutpen’s dynastic rise.

Faulkner’s fictional Jefferson, a rural town in northern Mississippi, is as early as 1833 a locus of American imperialism along national as well as international lines. Jefferson allows Sutpen to appear seemingly from the ether, or by its estimation “from the south,” after engaging in nefarious enterprises abroad through which he exploits human labor and disregards law at home in a setting forth of his dynastic dream. Central to Sutpen’s undertaking is a cashing in on

the entitlements of whiteness, or a form of chosenness that his country bestows upon him, as well as a subjugation of peoples of color granted to him by the institution of slavery. The Jews in Genesis, likewise, take their chosen status as license to settle in Canaan and build a “great nation” even as that land was already settled. And while the Sutpen story takes place in the “past,” it is narrated in 1909 and written in 1936, in what were peak eras of US Jim Crow colonialism. As a Jewish orientation to the past and present shows us, a reading of Sutpen—whether of his time in Haiti (182?-1831), his marriage to Ellen (1838), or his murder by Wash Jones (1869)—will resonate “transtemporally” (Handelman, *Fragments*). Faulkner’s interrogation of US imperialism in *Absalom*, then, is not only an archival upsetting of the antebellum south but also a contemporary deconstruction of the American colonizing model and its deployments, and of how the country stands complicit in oppressions inside and outside its borders.

Faulkner came of age in an era benchmarked by Supreme Court rulings setting conditions and parameters for those subjections. *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) granted states the right to discriminate along lines of skin color, thereby establishing a legal precedent for race-based internal colonialism, while in *Downes v. Bidwell* (1901), as Amy Kaplan notes, the Court confounded definitions on just whom the US deemed foreign, and whom it called domestic, in its global forays on the heels of the Spanish-American War (2).<sup>32</sup> The two rulings in effect codified America’s imperial agenda. Taken in tandem, they show a system in which discrimination of African Americans at home and manipulation of US colonizing interests abroad are not exclusive

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<sup>32</sup> See Haney-Lopez, *White by Law*, for more on US legal rulings during the Jim Crow era that served to reinforce the separate-but-equal charter, and to mark or even “create” blackness. He looks at state and federal cases from 1878-1952 that established prerequisites of race, and that

but reciprocally reinforcing. They are components of a greater move to empire—one signaled in *Absalom* by Sutpen’s plundering of the Caribbean to fuel his rise to power in a country that authorizes and endorses assault on peoples of African descent.

This project takes as given, then, that oppression of African Americans in Faulkner’s South is inside rather than outside the scope of empire, especially during his formative years (1897-1920s).<sup>33</sup> From *Plessy v. Ferguson* and its attendant Jim Crow policies, to US ventures into Cuba and the Philippines, to its participation in World War I, we see a series of intersections, of internal and external colonialisms bolstering and enabling the other. In *Downes v. Bidwell*, for example, after the United States had claimed Puerto Rico, the Court ruled that the

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centered on who could be legally declared white. “[C]ommon knowledge and scientific evidence” were the two rationales most frequently advanced by the courts (5).

<sup>33</sup> A number of critics, in addition to Amy Kaplan, corroborate this assertion. Peter Schmidt’s *Sitting in Darkness* argues that “[i]n the post-1898 United States, expansive imperial power functions not just abroad but internally, as an expression of the proper development of state power. ... Might we discover links between the arguments justifying the rise of Jim Crow white rule in the South and the post-1898 discourses of U.S. colonialism?” (19, 10). Schmidt also notes that the United States’ Reconstruction model for integrating the South, in which the North was in effect an occupying force, “became *the* prime model for U.S. colonial policies abroad” (13) in, for example, the Philippines and Hawaii. It is interesting to note that the US abandoned Reconstruction at home (in 1877) in favor of Jim Crow (1896) while deploying the more (theoretically) progressive integrationist policy abroad. Kaplan alludes to this in her reading of “foreign” and “domestic” in *The Anarchy of Empire*. Leigh Anne Duck, meanwhile, puts forth in *The Nation’s Region* that the US uses regionalism, which in Faulkner’s time would indicate the Jim Crow south, “as a supplement to U.S. nationalism” (33), or that the US endorses oppression at home as parcel to its “international economic and social form[ations]” (158). In “Cuba, 1898: Rethinking Race, Nation, and Empire,” Ada Ferrer suggests that the United States “seemed to require [of Cuba] a disavowal of nationalism” (35) due in part to the threat that Cuba’s desegregated government, army, and society posed to America’s Jim Crow model. And Grace Elizabeth Hale points out that “American nationalism ... as well as American imperialism ... marked a newly narrowed and deepened opposition between Americans and non-Americans; manifest especially in the Spanish-American War” (6), an opposition grounded in US anxieties and prejudices against black and biracial Cubans. See also Aboul-Ela, *Other South*, and Gulick, “We Are Not Alone.” All of these critics assert that there are myriad overlaps (as well as tensions, which were probably most acute after World War II), as in Reconstruction abroad/Jim

island “was merely ... a possession [of the US] ... owned by the United States ... [but] foreign to the United States in a domestic sense” (qtd. in Kaplan 2). As Kaplan puts it, “notions of the domestic and the foreign mutually constitute one another in an imperial context” (4). The Court ruled that Puerto Rico, which the US “owned,” would not become a state within the union’s “domestic” sphere because its people, nonwhite (as Kaplan points out but the Court omits), do not become Americans by the act of the United States’ purchase.

White Americans, as Kaplan argues, are already “domestic” in the sense that they pose no threat to US hegemony; they are the very fabric, in fact, of that dominion. Black Americans, who like Puerto Ricans are nonwhite, are *not* foreign, however, by virtue of having undergone US domestication. But that “domestication”—or to consider some of its synonyms, taming, breaking, house-training—came on the heels of more than two hundred years of slavery, and the freshly minted Jim Crow system. The Court believed that Puerto Rico, if granted the domesticity it had not earned, could come to undermine “the whole structure of the government. ... [A] false step to the development ... of the American Empire ... may be fatal” (qtd. in Kaplan 8, 6). White Americans are domestic, or “fit” citizens; black Americans may not be foreign, but they have been stripped of their rights and must demonstrate fitness for citizenship; Puerto Ricans, nonwhite, are not Americans even though their country is owned by the US. They, too, need to demonstrate fitness for citizenship. The whole problem of demonstrating “fitness for citizenship” linked blacks with people of color within the American empire, whether in Cuba, Puerto Rico, or the Philippines. Between the two Supreme Court rulings, one placing black Americans in a separate coach, and the other (to follow the metaphor) prohibiting Puerto Ricans

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Crow at home, or in the Supreme Court’s declarations of foreign and domestic, in US internal and external colonialisms.

from the American railcar, we see the interplay of the internal and the external within US colonialism. Or to use the Court's words, we see how the *domestic* and the *foreign* interact in the "development of the American Empire." It is from this cultural milieu that Faulkner, Old Testament in hand, emerges: one steeped in subjugations at home, and rulings on "foreigners" abroad.

### **The Christian Legend**

I would now like to consider more explicitly Faulkner's religious upbringing, as well the direction that most Faulkner scholarship on scripture has taken to further situate this project. I stated earlier that I submit no objection to Faulkner's remark that he was a "good Christian"; he may possess a Talmudic style, or a Hebrew Bible-informed moral and ethical awareness, but the fact is he was raised Christian, which he acknowledged.<sup>34</sup> To declare Faulkner a Christian is to use the term as an umbrella covering the religion by which he was raised, and that predominated

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<sup>34</sup> Rather than counting Faulkner a Christian, however, it is perhaps more responsible to state that he was raised Protestant, that he married in a Protestant church, was buried in a Christian cemetery, and that, on more than one occasion affirmed belief in the story of God. In his commencement address to Wellesley in 1953, Faulkner proffered a retelling of Genesis: "In the beginning, God created the earth. He created it completely furnished for man" (*ESPL* 135), indicating an endorsement of the God narrative but falling short of a theological assertion of faith. Similarly, during session nineteen of the Virginia conferences, Faulkner stated that "no writing will be too successful without some conception of God," a marker by which he based his preference for the writing of Albert Camus to that of Jean-Paul Sartre, whose work had "something lacking" (161). Faulkner's "explicit statements suggest he claimed a broad Christianity" (Wilson, "Southern" 26). We know that Faulkner was raised Methodist, and that in his youth attended Methodist Sunday school (Wilson, "Southern" 27). We also know that Faulkner was well-versed in the Bible from the start. As a child, his great-grandfather, John Young Murry, a Presbyterian born in 1829, would force Faulkner to recite scripture, or forego eating: "everybody ... had to have a verse from the Bible ready and glib at tongue-tip. ... [I]f you didn't have your scripture verse ready, you didn't have any breakfast; you would be excused long enough to ... swot one up. ... It had to be an authentic, correct, verse" (qtd. in Blotner 35). At an early age, then, Faulkner was committing scriptural passages to memory, which tells us only that he was reading and rereading Biblical passages, not that he was endorsing or refuting particular brands of Christianity.

in northern Mississippi in his lifetime. Charles Reagan Wilson has referred to the area's Christianity, particularly Evangelicalism, as distinctive within a "Southern religious tradition" (22) shaped as much by regional history (both real and constructed) and cultural mores and beliefs as by theology. That tradition, in which Christianity plays such a crucial role, also includes the racially charged ideologies informing Jim Crow, as discussed. I want to stress here, as a way of acknowledging the particulars of Faulkner's religious heritage, that Southern Protestantism "grew out of Calvinism" (Wilson, "Southern" 23), with its rigid strictures and edicts, and came to consist, primarily, of practicing Baptists and Methodists, many of whom were evangelical, or those who become born again through a conversion experience (Wilson, "Southern" 24-25). Faulkner, growing up in the first two decades of the twentieth century, would have been exposed to and made aware of each of these Protestant threads, as well as of Presbyterianism (from his great-Grandfather) and, later, Episcopalianism.<sup>35</sup>

Faulkner's attendance at a Methodist Sunday school as a child, meanwhile, signals what might be termed a normative Christian upbringing for a white middle-class Southerner in turn-of-the-century Oxford, Mississippi. Faulkner denotes as much at the University of Virginia:

[The] Christian legend is part of any Christian's background, especially the background of a country boy, a Southern country boy. My life was passed, my childhood, in a very small Mississippi town, and that was a part of my background. I grew up with that. I assimilated that, took that in without even knowing it. It's just there. It has nothing to do with how much I believe or disbelieve--it's just there. (*University* 86)

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<sup>35</sup> Faulkner and Lida Estelle Oldham married in June 1929 at College Hill Presbyterian Church, in College Hill, Mississippi, just outside of Oxford (Hamblin and Peek 130). After marrying, Faulkner attended St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Oxford (Wilson, "Southern" 26).



His emphasis on “legend” suggests an attempt to reposition New Testament “ideas” as Old Testament “stories” and “characters,” which is a move also made by twentieth-century black liberation theologians, as I discuss in Chapter 3. He places Christianity in the realm of story, myth, fable, while elsewhere noting that “I’m probably--within my own rights I feel that I’m a good Christian.”<sup>36</sup> Whether or not he professed faith “has nothing to do with” his absorption of the Christian story, one that he would retell in *A Fable*, and that he would make use of in the Christ-like figures of Donald Mahon (*Soldiers’ Pay*), Benjy Compson (*The Sound and the Fury*), and Joe Christmas (*Light in August*).<sup>37</sup> The Christ story is “just there,” as are those preceding it “through the tedious and shabby chronicle” (*GDM* 246) of the Hebrew Bible that Faulkner revered.

Critics have long since noted the Christian legend motif in Faulkner, doing so primarily within the context of James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, and of what T.S. Eliot termed “the mythical method” in his review of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (Hlavsa 20).<sup>38</sup> Readings of Christianity, Christian symbolism, and the “Christian legend” as informed by Frazer and Eliot predominated for more than fifty years of Faulkner criticism. To cite two examples, Joseph Blotner notes that Faulkner “consciously [drew] upon the folklore, legend, and myth—especially that of sacrificial death—which he had probably read about in ... *The Golden Bough*” (234), while Virginia Hlavsa, who implies that Faulkner read Eliot’s essay, makes a host of connections

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<sup>36</sup> Session twenty-three, June 5, 1957 (*University* 203).

<sup>37</sup> Faulkner scholarship is replete with analyses of Christ imagery, themes, and motifs. Joseph Urgo’s “Christianity” and Virginia Hlavsa’s “Religion” in *A William Faulkner Encyclopedia* offer introductions. John W. Hunt’s *William Faulkner: Art in Theological Tension* provides a more comprehensive reading, as does Cleanth Brooks’s chapter on Faulkner in *The Hidden God: Studies in Hemingway, Faulkner, Yeats, Eliot, and Warren*.

<sup>38</sup> Eliot’s essay, “Ulysses, Order, and Myth,” appeared in the November 1923 issue of *The Dial*.

between Faulkner and Frazer in her reading of *Light in August*.<sup>39</sup> There is a wealth of work dating from the late 1930s to the early 1990s reiterating Faulkner's recasting of the Christian legend.<sup>40</sup> So much so that the well may now look dry, and which may explain why (a handful of articles excepting) work has abated on Faulkner and scripture since Hlavsa's *Faulkner and the Thoroughly Modern Novel* (1991).<sup>41</sup> As her title suggests, Hlavsa's is the most thorough study of Faulkner and Frazer undertaken, and functions somewhat as a culmination of the scriptural criticism preceding it.

The tendency in Faulkner scholarship on scripture has been to note influence—that Faulkner quarried *The Golden Bough* extensively in his rendering of the Christ legend and figure. The trend has been to point out Biblical and mythological references, debate Faulkner's Christianity, make theme and character links between Faulkner and scripture, and to assess the in/effectiveness of, for example, “the do-nothing, [Gail] Hightower, as Pilate or doubting

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<sup>39</sup> *Faulkner and the Thoroughly Modern Novel*. Hlavsa references five earlier critics who worked on Faulkner and Frazer: Blotner, Thomas McHaney, Margaret Yonce, Barbara Cross, and Carvel Collins, and cites Lawrance Thompson, who suggested that Faulkner had read “Ulysses, Order, and Myth” (Hlavsa 20-21). In addition to her work on Faulkner and Frazer, Hlavsa argues that Faulkner modeled *Light in August* on The Gospel of John.

<sup>40</sup> A spate of articles and monographs appeared in the 1950s and 1960s, with others published as early as 1939 and as recently as 1991. Emblematic work includes O'Donnell, “Faulkner's Mythology” (1939); Chase, “The Stone and the Crucifixion: Faulkner's *Light in August*” (1948); Holman, “The Unity of Faulkner's *Light in August*” (1958); Rice, “Faulkner's Crucifixion” (1960); Mueller, *The Prophetic Voice in Modern Fiction* (1959); Smart, *Religious Elements in Faulkner's Early Novels* (1965); O'Conner, “Protestantism in Yoknapatawpha County” (1969); Coffie, *Faulkner's un-Christianlike Christians: Biblical Allusions in the Novels* (diss. 1971; published 1983).

<sup>41</sup> See Saunders, Caron, Lackey, and Hagood for recent work (since 1996) on Faulkner and scripture. Saunders places *Absalom* in the “tradition of lamentation” (731) dating back to Samuel in a rendering of the past as present. The Old Testament, in other words, is a storehouse of discourses and generic forms. In *Struggles Over the Word*, Caron looks at the white South's misuses of the Bible in *Light in August*. Lackey has written on “The Ideological Function of the God Concept in Faulkner's *Light in August*”; while Hagood notes the Exodus (and Egyptian) threads in Faulkner in his study of cultural narratives, *Faulkner's Imperialism*.

Thomas” in *Light in August* (Hlavsa 36). There just may not be a great deal left to say on whether the corporal’s sacrifice in *A Fable* signifies the “human capacity for sacrifice and love” (Blotner 588), or if Isaac McCaslin seeks courage within “Christian realism” (Hunt 168), or if Faulkner is a Christian, a humanist, a stoic, or some combination thereof (O’Conner, Smart, Hunt). Any efforts herein to resuscitate the discussion of Faulkner, Frazer (and Eliot), and Christianity would do little more than retread. Instead, we need to reorient Faulkner’s conversations with scripture—whether the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, or both—postcolonially. Doing so, I hope, will shed light on the scriptural component of Faulkner’s interrogation of nation-building, which has gone, for the most part, unremarked upon even as engagements with Faulkner’s imperialisms enjoy currency within the academy.

### **Faulkner, Postcolonialism, and the Bible**

The ideas that Faulkner finds so repellent in the New Testament may well be those put forth by Paul the Apostle. Handelman and Elizabeth Castelli each note that Paul closes debate, or *answers* the Hebrew Bible by claiming that it is now embodied, replaced, or sublimated by Christ. By acquiescing to Paul, rather than by upholding Hebrew Bible covenants, which are now antiquated (according to Paul), one comes closer to God. Castelli argues that to read continuity from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament is to consider the text (the Bible) a mere record of the relentless and singular march of salvation history, which starts with God and ends with Christian salvation. ... This insistence on viewing these notions as continuous with each other ... is rooted in a [Pauline] theological desire to view history itself as a singular, unilateral voyage toward Christian salvation. ... [This view winds up] skirting (or eliding) the question of power. Power becomes unthought or unthinkable. ...

To ignore[] the political aspect of a passage in Paul’s letters ... [is to neglect] to account for the powerful nature of the Pauline discourse itself—its ability to persuade because of the implicit threat of deprivation (of salvation) that exists there. (25-26, 53)

For example, in 1 Thessalonians, Paul writes that through Christ, “you become imitators of us” (1:6); to mimic him is to repudiate difference, disagreement, and debate (and thus the Hebrew Bible), and to become *like* him.<sup>42</sup> As Handelman notes, “[Paul is] antitextual. He is impatient and frustrated with the Jews because they cling to the letter still; that is, they will not read the text Christocentrically” (*Slayers* 88). Faulkner, however, in fine Jewish fashion, makes further inquiries *of* the Hebrew Bible. Christian salvation—and history leading or progressing to it—runs counter to the rabbinic, Benjaminian reading of progress, and of Messianic time. Paul’s closing off of dialogue and discussion is an imperial, anti-Jewish move, and anti-Faulkner.

*Absalom, Absalom!* contains four narrators, all of whom express unique perspectives, and whose points of view, to varying degrees, diverge from one another. *The Sound and the Fury* has four narrators, while section four of *The Bear* famously consists of a debate between two cousins. It is fair to say that, at the novel level, there is not so much as one line in Faulkner that would suggest that he mimics Paul; if Faulkner “thinks” Jewish, he does not, cannot “think” Pauline.

Faulkner does not know about “ideas” in a region (within a nation) rooted in them: in Christian conversion and salvation, in Jim Crow policies demarcating white from black and privileging one over the other. The certainty of Pauline ideology is analogous to the certainty of white Southern ideology in Faulkner’s time. Paul prescribes an imperial reading of scripture that fixates on power (Castelli 92): on who has it, on how to get it, and on how to use it. His

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<sup>42</sup> See 1 Thessalonians 2:14, Philippians 3:17, and 1 Corinthians 4:16, 11:1 for other instances of Paul and mimicry.

approach to the Bible—to close off debate about it—is what renders his discourse so ideological.<sup>43</sup> His letters, which endorse slavery and oppression, have never resonated with African Americans.<sup>44</sup> As Lawrence Levine notes, literate blacks in the nineteenth century sometimes refused to allow their children to read Paul’s letters (43); the “slave spirituals ... were informed not by the Epistles of Paul but by the history of the Hebrew children” (50). In *Light in August*, Joanna Burden and Doc Hines, who are empowered by their “race,” deploy ideological readings of the Curse of Ham as they subjugate African Americans. One suspects that blacks were not reading from Paul when Doc Hines invaded their church to preach his doctrine of fanaticism.

It is here at the intersection of scripture and power that we might rethink Faulkner’s dismantling of the Christian South, and of (mis)readings and manipulations of the Bible in America’s rise to empire. The Protestant tradition that Faulkner came out of shows that his region was well-versed scripturally, whether in the Gospels, in the letters and ideologies of Paul, or in the Hebrew Bible that Christianity appropriates. And it is the Hebrew Bible, with its abundance of stories and characters, and its recounting of imperial and colonial moves, that resonates postcolonially or anti-imperially (as well as imperially) in an era when Christian ideology helped authorize colonial ideologies. As R.S. Sugirtharajah notes in *The Bible and Empire*,

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<sup>43</sup> The Gospels are not Pauline. They contain four versions of one narrative, with a host of unresolved discrepancies and contradictions between them. Jesus criticizes institutional elements of Judaism as practiced in his time. His gesture is thus rabbinical in that he participates in an ongoing dialogue about the Torah; he attests to the continued vitality of Hebraic traditions, and to debates about those traditions.

<sup>44</sup> Ephesians 6:5: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling.” Romans 13:1-3: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. ...[W]hoever resists authority ... will incur judgment. For rules are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.”

Empires [in the Hebrew Bible] are raised as a scourge to punish wicked nations and in turn they themselves are punished for the oppressive measures which affect the subjugated nations. ... The Hebrew scriptures seem to suggest that empires, because of their military strength and the power that comes with it, are more than likely to behave arrogantly. Discrimination, oppression, inhumanity, cruelty, and all forms of barbarity are no less barbarous because they are carried out by nations chosen as God's instrument. (189-191)

The Hebrew Bible is thus imperial *and* postcolonial: ancient Israel provides examples of flawed empires (the "taking" of Canaan in Joshua, David's zeal) and of victims of colonization (defeat by the Assyrians, deportation to Babylon). Faulkner's US, likewise, exploits at home and abroad, while there are those within the nation's borders who fall victim to that abuse.

Faulkner's fictions even manage to anticipate the internal colonialisms of the modern Israeli state, as alluded to earlier. As Ella Shohat documents in "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims," Sephardic (or Oriental) Jews from the Middle East have been exploited by Ashkenazi (or European) Jews since modern Israel's inception; they have been employed mostly as farm workers and day laborers by their empowered "European" brethren. Shohat notes that as the Ashkenazi had been referred to by some Europeans as "Europe's blacks," after the founding of Israel, some Ashkenazi Jews began calling Sephardim *schwartzte chaies*, or 'black animals'" (43). The (perceived) oppression of Jews from the Middle East was such that, in the early 1970s, a Sephardic protest group named itself the Israeli Black Panthers, thereby aligning themselves with their oppressed American brethren (63). Said and Shohat each argue that the Zionist movement to reclaim Israel was informed by a Western

imperial model, one predicated upon the identification and exploitation of an “other,” whether internal (the Sephardim, as Shohat notes) or external (the Palestinians, as Said notes) to Jewish nationalism.<sup>45</sup> Israel looks to have done its American “homework”: its internal colonialisms resemble those documented in Faulkner’s novels. So there appears to be quite the volley between Israel and the US, one that the Hebrew Bible—constellationally—continues to serve. Zionists, emboldened by their own scripture and outraged by the horrors of the Holocaust, repeat a form of Western colonialism that, in the case of the US, was itself indebted to the Jewish master narrative.

The Hebrew Bible, however, is always already subversive of the expansionist energies it endorses. While studies of empire and scripture have focused largely on how the Bible has been deployed as a means of Christian conversion, we see that, time and again, it is the Hebrew Bible which, in a manner of speaking, “responds.” Sugirtharajah, for one, writes of how British missionaries to India and Africa in the nineteenth century grew exceedingly frustrated by the locals’ interpretation of Hebrew Bible passages in their own (Indian, African) historic framework rather than the Christian one being imposed upon them. And Levine notes that “[d]uring a debate in the South Carolina legislature over a bill (ultimately passed in 1834) prohibiting slaves from learning to read and write, Whitemarsh B. Seabrook [stated that] ... anyone who wanted the slaves to read *the entire* Bible was fit for a ‘room in a lunatic asylum’” (47). It is the Exodus liberation narrative that white southerners rightly feared would so empower slaves, and that critiques colonialism. John Dixon Long, a mid-century Methodist minister from Maryland, remarked that “[y]ou must be careful, when slaves are present, how you talk about Pharaoh making slaves of the Hebrews, and refusing to let the slaves leave Egypt. At any rate, you must

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<sup>45</sup> Said, “Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims.”

make no direct application of the subject” (qtd. in Levine 46). The Hebrew Bible is a repository, then, for both the oppressed and the oppressor.

In Faulkner, African Americans may identify with the enslaved Egyptians (*The Unvanquished, Go, Down Moses*), but Thomas Sutpen, as the title of *Absalom* signals, exploits his power much as does God’s chosen, King David. Taken in its entirety, the Hebrew Bible stands as a comprehensive anatomy of power, empire, and nationalism from all sides. The Hebrew Bible’s histories—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles—work sometimes in anxious opposition, even in defiance of the Torah that the Israelites are bound by covenant to uphold. The Bible is, as the collaborators of *The Postmodern Bible* write, “a conflictual site of multiple readings, investments, and historical experiences. ... The effort to ‘decolonize’ the Exodus ... narrative is consistent with the ... aim to recognize the manifold voices and conflicting interests that must enter the exegetical fray” (283-284). Those multiple voices abound, whether they be of David, or of Uriah, whom he kills in 2 Samuel; of Jephthah, or that of his daughter, whom he sacrifices to God in Judges.<sup>46</sup> It is that richness of perspective within Israeli nation-building that the Hebrew Bible continues to provide, which is one reason why postcolonial studies of the Bible are now centering on it, and why Faulkner directs our gaze toward it.

Faulkner’s intervention, in anticipation of the postcolonial movement that is now in its fourth decade, is to focus a critical eye on US imperialism, inside and outside its borders, and to

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<sup>46</sup> Mieke Bal has written on Jephthah’s daughter, suggesting in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women’s Lives in the Hebrew Bible* that readings of Judges which do not consider the daughter’s “voice” are ill-founded. Bal argues that the daughter’s lament (she goes to the mountains to grieve before she is sacrificed) is for herself rather than for her father’s pending loss, and that through her lament she enters into the collective memory of the daughters of Israel: “she makes her fellow-virgins feel that solidarity between daughters is a task, an urgent one, that alone can save them from oblivion” (228). Bal argues that the Hebrew Bible is ripe with the voices of the



rethink how a predominantly Christian America reads and deploys Hebrew scripture and the New Testament within that colonizing context. As noted, scholarship on Faulkner and the Bible has been mostly dormant for two decades. Hlavsa's *Faulkner and the Thoroughly Modern Novel* summed up, for all intents, fifty years of Faulkner and scripture, discussing theme, symbol, his religion, what he read, and how and where he put Christianity to use. As I suggest, though, we should now look at how Faulkner engages scripture to interrogate US imperialism, at home and abroad. To do so, I place the scriptural component of Faulkner in concert with ongoing conversations on empire, nation-building, and race so that, foremost, we might extend the imperial returns of Faulkner and the Hebrew Bible in his modernist America. The conceptual framework will primarily include Walter Benjamin (on Messianic time), Mieke Bal (on reading and counter-reading Hebrew scripture), and Susan Handelman (on rabbinic and literary theory), as well as contemporary Bible scholars R.S. Sugirtharajah and Jon Berquist, who have not yet been linked to Faulkner but who explore, as does Faulkner, the cultural workings and deployments of Hebrew scripture in a postcolonial context.<sup>47</sup>

### **Chapter Synopses**

#### *Redacting the Empire*

Chapter 1 considers the redactive method (first noted by Glenn Meeter) and the Talmudic tradition that William Faulkner employs in *Absalom, Absalom!*, in which Rosa and Quentin, Quentin and Mr. Compson, and finally Quentin and Shreve re/construct, in 1909-10, the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen. Faulkner's technique is grounded aesthetically in the Hebrew Bible, in

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subjected, that it privileges the subject and object simultaneously, and that it shifts perspectives from one to the other.

which the work of four principal writers, referred to as J (the Yahwist, the writer who calls God by that name), E (the Elohist, who calls God Elohim), P (the Priestly writer of Leviticus), and D (the Deuteronomist), was later redacted by R in the formation of the scriptural canon; and in Talmudic commentary, where rabbis interrogate existing readings of scripture. I trace the ramifications of redaction in the codifying of Jewish history, in the establishment of the Israeli nation, and in the propelling forward of collective memory before turning to those same implications in the Faulknerian America of *Absalom*.

As with the Hebrew Bible on which it is styled, *Absalom*, by virtue of its multiple voices and shifting perspectives, exposes the inner workings of its nation's imperialism even while one of its narrators, Mr. Compson, is more or less sympathetic to Sutpen and to "that innocence which he had never lost" (194). It is Quentin, in this case conversing with Shreve, who propels forward the Compson interpretation, made first by General Compson, and now repeated two generations later. In the tradition of Talmudic commentary, however, Shreve, a northerner from Canada, plays something of the foil, calling Sutpen a demon, referring to Rosa as Quentin's Aunt (143), and remarking that "[y]our father ... seems to have got an awful lot of delayed information awful quick, after having waited forty-five years" (214). Shreve, it seems, is willing to probe deeper than Quentin anticipated, questioning chronologies and the motivations behind their constructions, and then taking the mantle of storyteller himself, lest there be any doubt that this is just a Mississippi story told by Mississippians: "No ... you wait. Let me play a while now" (224). This is not a case of Northern intervention but rather a reiteration by Faulkner that the

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<sup>47</sup> Sugirtharajah has edited *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (2006) and has authored *The Bible and Empire* (2005), and *Postcolonial Reconfigurations* (2003). Berquist has written "Postcolonial and Imperial Motives for Canonization" (2006).

Sutpen account was always national, and that from Sutpen's forays into Haiti to the narrative's reconstruction by a Canadian, it was hemispheric, continental, and transnational, as well.

*The Curse of Empire*

Chapter 2 rethinks misreadings and misappropriations of the Curse of Ham by Doc Hines and Joanna Burden, or *Light in August's* Noah-like figures. I begin by situating the Curse (Genesis 9:20-27) within its Hebrew Bible context, and by considering its rabbinical analyses and interpretations. I then trace its intellectual and exegetical history in America: how it evolved in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries to champion slavery and discrimination, to account for constructions and fashionings of racial categories, and to fuel and exacerbate racially-charged anxieties and paranoia. I look next at reenactments of the Curse in *Light in August*, as "staged" by Doc Hines (or rather by Faulkner for Hines) and Joanna Burden. The Curse functions as one of the Benjaminian "constellation of events" that Faulkner reinterprets in his Hebrew Bible return; the curse on Ham and the curse on Joe Christmas circulate in the "here-and-now" or "zero-hour" (Benjamin 8) of present time rather than in chronological procession or in a series of repeated curses. What this means is that the Curse, for Faulkner, becomes a discursive trope by means of which his white characters mark or "curse" their black brethren.

Doc Hines uses the Curse to substantiate white supremacy over African Americans; he sees in the circus man's face the "black curse of God Almighty" (374), from which he takes license to commit murder, and to allow his daughter to die. Hines also plays Ham, unwittingly, when he invades an African American church, and beholds the congregation in its spiritual nakedness (so to speak), just as Ham uncovers his father. In his Noah-like guise, Doc Hines surmises that Joe is part black; the orphanage does likewise, but only after Hines marks him as

such to the dietician. And so by declaration Joe is cursed even though, as Faulkner notes, his skin is not dark but “parchmentcolored” (277). It is the marking, and the meanings invested in it, by which Joe is cast black and judged publicly. Joe Christmas has been “cursed” for as long as he can remember: “I think I got some nigger blood in me. ... I don’t know. I believe I have” (196-197). Joe’s belief has been molded by perceptions of race as projected onto him even though there is no proof, in whatever form that would take, of Joe’s racial origins.

I examine readings of the Curse by Joanna Burden, who stages her own version of the “tent invasion” when she choreographs her rape by Joe Christmas, her black Ham. Faulkner’s whites engineer scripture to justify and fit a system of race tyranny, imprinting onto a set of peoples the originary, textual curse. Undercutting that marking, however, are readings elsewhere in Faulkner (*The Unvanquished*; *Go Down, Moses*) that cast white Southerners as Egyptian oppressors and African Americans as the latter-day Israelites divinely led. The Hebrew Bible, as Mieke Bal argues, serves as a storehouse for the machinations of empire as well as for the instruments of liberation. Turns from one to the other in Faulkner are grounded in ideologies governing how race is constructed and performed; in how texts function and in who (and what) they are made to serve; in reading and misreading; and in how we set the Bible to work, whether mindful or dismissive of Jewish tradition and context. The moral imperative becomes to recognize that even as the Hebrew Bible documents ideologies of oppression it does not always endorse them; rather, it critiques and exploits imperial turns while imploring us, as does Faulkner, to do the same. Faulkner’s postcolonial gesture is to counter-read the Curse. He directs us away from the Ham-like Joe Christmas and toward the patriarchal, Noah-like figures

of Doc Hines and Joanna Burden: to what they—and imperial white America—have to gain by branding or cursing black Americans.

*The Genealogies of Empire*

Chapter 3 turns to genealogies: how in the Hebrew Bible and in *Go Down, Moses* there are diverging branches of them that at turns foster and legitimate “official” national narratives. Through contending lines, genealogies also offer histories that expose and subject the inner workings of empire and colonialism. In the Hebrew Bible, for example, the patriarch Abraham fosters a line of descendants through the Egyptian slave-girl Hagar, who bears him Ishmael before the matriarch Sarah gives birth to Isaac (Genesis 16). While the Bible is ambivalent on just who looks upon God (due in part to the efforts of the redactor), there is no equivocation regarding Hagar: she sees God after Sarah banishes her: “Have I not gone on seeing after he saw me!” (Genesis 16:13). Yahweh instructs Hagar on what to name her son, the same name, we find out, that Abraham also elects to give him, although we are not privy to any similar conversation that God and Abraham, or Hagar and Abraham, may have had. Ishmael, then, is named by both God and the patriarch, and his mother, in the company of Adam, Eve, and possibly Moses, breathes the rarified air of those who look upon the Lord. And even though Hagar must “submit to [Sarah’s] harsh treatment,” her offspring will “be too many to count,” with Ishmael “dwell[ing] alongside all of his kinsmen” (16: 9-16). Using Bal’s template for counter-reading scripture, we can shift our gaze to Ishmael and his descendants (as Thadious Davis has shifted our gaze to Turl and his descendants in *Games of Property*) in a challenge to any assertion that Isaac, whom Abraham names but God does not, is the sole proprietor of an originary genealogical authority.

In *Go Down, Moses* Isaac McCaslin and his cousin Cass Edmonds trace their family's lineage back to the Hebrew Bible (246). They diverge, however, over whether that genealogy entitles them to the family property. Isaac, by virtue of what he uncovers in the family ledgers (the rape of Tomasina by Carothers McCaslin), abrogates his claim to the land. Cass suffers no such crisis, noting that the land rightfully belongs to Isaac as "the only and last descendant [of Carothers McCaslin] in the male line and in the third generation" (245). While the two of them deploy the Bible oppositionally in their interrogation of an originary entitlement, neither their discussion nor Isaac's renunciation elicits a material change, as the land passes from one "official" descendant to another.<sup>48</sup> Isaac does, however, walk away from his own white privilege, thus subverting customs that would otherwise entitle him. He also participates in an "unofficial" genealogy: a covenantal, spiritual line, or a Big Woods family in which he is "fathered" by Sam Fathers. I look at how Isaac begins to approach a Jewish aesthetic that is lacking in his reading of the "official" genealogy (even as he thinks of himself as a chosen figure in both lines).

Isaac and Cass are not the only descendants of Carothers. They have kinsmen (like the Biblical forebear Ishmael) on the Beauchamp side. From the time of Carothers' acquisition of Eunice in 1807, the Beauchamps remind us that if genealogies are a point of license, authority, or inheritance (or lack thereof), then that privileging owes more to how genealogies are manipulated and engineered than to any authority intrinsic to them. The Beachamp line constitutes "the rest of the story which was a piece of the country's chronicle" (*Intruder 7*), a country whose internal colonialisms are propelled forward, but also exposed and subverted, by

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<sup>48</sup> Cass remarks that "you [Isaac] have taken to proving your points and disproving mine by the same text" (250).

its contending and intersecting genealogies. Faulkner interrogates genealogical authority and the origins upon which they are founded. He also suggests that those very origins may be constructions, fabrications set to authorize imperial agendas as well as to turn over the legitimacies that empires claim. Isaac, for example, may consider his family the descendants of Abraham, while Mollie Beauchamp reads them as Egyptian oppressors. She likens Roth Edmonds to an agent of the Pharaoh who “[s]old my Benjamin. ... Sold him in Egypt. ... Sold him to Pharaoh and now he dead” (362). Just who are the “rightful descendants” of the Egyptian or Israeli lines becomes a matter of perspective centered on who has power and who does not, rather than on genealogies of blood or race purity.

I conclude Chapter 3, and this project, by examining Mollie Beauchamp’s *textual* genealogy—how she engages scripture within the Abrahamic and Mosaic traditions that she boldly claims. In support of my reading of Mollie, I look at the slave exodus in *The Unvanquished*, and at the Easter services attended by Dilsey Gibson in *The Sound and the Fury* to propose that Faulkner’s texts participate in the Black Liberation Theology movement, one that gained political momentum when codified in the 1960s. I also (briefly) consider the Exodus discussion as joined by Faulkner’s contemporaries Thomas Mann, Sigmund Freud, and Zora Neale Hurston. Like Faulkner, they each wrote Mosaic texts that deconstruct the myths of origins in the racially-charged milieu of 1938-1942, when persecutions at home and abroad reached a fevered pitch. Moses’ origins, as each of these writers proposes, are obscure: we cannot know if Moses was Jewish any more than we can know if he was black or Egyptian, or for that matter a black Egyptian. To search for an originary genealogical truth or proof is to miss the greater point that genealogy and race are manufactured, constructed to validate oppressive,

discriminatory agendas, such as American race tyranny (Faulkner, Hurston) or European anti-Semitism (Freud, Mann), as well as to unify a people and their resolve in the face of that subjection.

By returning to Exodus, Faulkner, as with his contemporaries, maintains the “secret protocol between the generations of the past and that of [their] own” by which he might “explode the continuum of history” (Benjamin 2, 8), or call out that race subjugation is no progress at all but rather the contemporary reenactment of the Exodus enslavement. There is no first white, or black, or Jew, but only a first moral imperative, whereby a people pledged a covenant to God—which in practice means to themselves—or to aspire towards righteousness in their communities. Moses’ authority is not grounded in his racial identity; it is grounded in his reception of the Law. The ethical ancestry that Moses establishes *is* the text: fidelity to the word, covenant, Torah. Only by surrounding the Torah with more text, with more discussion, do we begin to discover the real basis of genealogies, and to propel forward the living document and ongoing dialogue that the Hebrew Bible has always been.



## CHAPTER 1

### REDACTING THE EMPIRE

As Rosa Coldfield relates to Quentin Compson the return of Thomas Sutpen to his plantation home after the Civil War in *Absalom Absalom!*, she notes the following exchange between Sutpen and Judith: “*Well, daughter ... Henry’s not—? ‘No. He’s not here.’ —‘Ah. And—?’ ‘Yes. Henry killed him [Bon]’*” (128). Rosa then remarks that Sutpen “*looked at Clytie and said, ‘Ah, Clytie’ and then at me ... and no recognition in the face at all until Judith said, ‘It’s Rosa. Aunt Rosa. She lives here now’*” (128). Four months later, as Quentin and his Harvard roommate, Shrevlin McCannon, reconstruct Sutpen’s return, the narrator, who is perhaps summarizing some of Quentin’s dialogue, proffers an alternative version to that rendered by Rosa. “‘*And—?’ ‘Yes. Henry killed him’*” remains consistent with Rosa’s account, as does “*Ah, Clytie*” (223). In the Quentin/Shreve adaptation, however, Sutpen follows his nod to Clytie with “*Ah, Rosa.—Well, Wash. I was unable to penetrate far enough behind the Yankee lines to cut a piece from that coat tail I promised you*” (223). The January 1910 version thus places Wash Jones in proximity to Judith, Clytie, and Rosa, although in the earlier account he is not present as Sutpen greets his family. Sutpen’s response to Rosa, meanwhile, has undergone a transformation of both cognition and tone. Where he had, by Rosa’s assertion, *no recognition in the face*, and nothing by way of a greeting for her, Sutpen now requires no clarification from

Judith: he knows precisely who Rosa is, and is as affectionate towards her (“Ah, Rosa”) as he is to his daughters. The return, then, begs more questions than it answers.

We have by multiple authorities that Sutpen asks Judith of the whereabouts of Henry, and by extension of the fate of Bon, before acknowledging Clytie, and so upon those points we can rest. But we cannot, with any sureness, declare that Sutpen either did or did not greet Rosa, or that Wash Jones was or was not present. His remarks to Jones seem unlikely—Sutpen is nowhere else sentimental, and a promise to gather a souvenir for Wash Jones, or anyone, for that matter, looks out of character. We must accept it as plausible, though, or at least that Quentin, Shreve, and Mr. Compson believe it. For in the narrator’s retelling through Quentin and Shreve, we learn that Mr. Compson corroborates the presence of Wash Jones; according to Mr. Compson, after Sutpen gestures to Jones, Jones returns the salute with his oft-repeated “Well, Kernel, they kilt us but they aint whupped us yit, air they?” (223). Further unsettling matters is the somewhat sobering realization that the story of Sutpen’s return that we read as being constructed in the Harvard dormitory is not necessarily a verbatim recording of the actual dialogue that takes place between Quentin and Shreve. Much of what we read comes from the narrator, who refers to Quentin’s father as Mr. Compson, which Quentin would not do. But Quentin has parlayed some version of the return, which includes the presence of Wash Jones, as signaled by Shreve’s interruption of him: “No, ... you wait. Let me play a while now. Now, Wash” (224). Finally, it should be noted that Rosa by no means omits Wash Jones; in fact, she notes that “*We hardly ever saw [Sutpen]. He would be gone from dawn until dark, he and Jones*” (130). Each account of Sutpen’s return, then, substantiates the circulation of Wash Jones on the plantation, although his attendance at the initial greeting remains speculative.

Whether or not Wash Jones stood beside Judith, Clytie, and Rosa as Sutpen returned to his plantation may not by itself carry a great deal of meaning: if he was not at the greeting proper, he was likely close at hand, and Sutpen soon enough sought him out. The point is, however, that even on such a trivial matter, we have competing accounts, upon which we can no more than speculate, or debate likelihoods. We are forced into conjecture by virtue of the myriad perspectives that both overlap and contradict.<sup>49</sup> Of the various narrators, Rosa was the only one actually present at Sutpen's Hundred, which would suggest that her telling may contain greater authority than the others. As Deborah Cohn notes, Rosa "is in the best position to illustrate how Sutpen's life was the one constant of the past, the axis around which all other lives organized themselves," and to illustrate what it felt like to live thus (54). But Rosa's disdain for Jones may color her account, and might explain her refusal to place him on equal footing with her, Judith, and Clytie. She suffers from what Cohn refers to as "the participant's handicap as a narrator of historical discourse" (54), or an inability to provide an objective separation or distancing from the events of which she has taken part.

We are left, then, with the difficulty of sifting fact from fiction, of sorting through biases and subjectivities, and with bringing into balance the points of view of Rosa, Mr. Compson (and his father), Quentin (as informed by Rosa and Mr. Compson), Shreve, Quentin and Shreve, and of a narrator less inclined to clarify than to fuel further speculation, as the endless parade of "perhaps," "evidently," and the doubt-generating "doubtless" substantiates.<sup>50</sup> The reliability of

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<sup>49</sup> For a detailed reading of conjecture in *Absalom, Absalom!*, see Cleanth Brooks, "What We Know about Thomas Sutpen and His Children" (*William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* 429-436).

<sup>50</sup> Edouard Glissant discusses Faulknerian "doubt" in *Faulkner, Mississippi*: "[i]n the Faulknerian text, *not only ... but* and *perhaps ...but* are the most common devices of Faulknerian suspense which divides the real and sometimes reverses its logic. ... Faulkner enters into the realm of the

the four principals, or even of the narrator, remains in question, as do the “facts” that elude us: we do not *know* if Charles Bon has black blood, but that Sutpen comes to believe that Eulalia was of mixed ancestry.<sup>51</sup> Nor do we know for certain if there truly is a lawyer working for Eulalia, and orchestrating Bon’s enrollment at the University of Mississippi, but only that Quentin and Shreve surmise such a scenario. And so the guesswork, the hypotheses, the prejudices, the uncertainty; and the shifting, diverging, and blurring of vantage points are as constitutive of the story as any of the story’s particulars. We may never know if Sutpen greeted Wash Jones upon his return to Sutpen’s Hundred but, as Mr. Compson remarks, “perhaps that’s it: they dont explain and we are not supposed to know” (80). That Quentin and Shreve (and/or the narrator) imagine Jones present as Sutpen utters his “Ah, Clytie,” while Rosa does not, will stay in tension, unresolved, in perpetuity.

As I mentioned in the Introduction and as Glenn Meeter has argued in “Quentin as Redactor,” Faulkner’s usage of multiple narrators who build upon one another and redact as they re/construct the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen and his descendants has for a stylistic model the Hebrew Bible from which Faulkner takes his novel’s title. Where in *Absalom*, Rosa narrates chapters 1 and 5, Mr. Compson chapters 2 through 4, and Quentin and Shreve chapters 6 through 9, the Hebrew Bible likewise consists of four principal sources: J, E, P, and D.<sup>52</sup> Sometime after

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worldly conjectural” (206-207). See also Albert Joseph Guerard, *The Triumph of the Novel*, for an extended discussion of “conjectural narration.”

<sup>51</sup> In the Chronology to *Absalom*, Faulkner writes that “Sutpen learns his wife has negro blood” (305), which, I would argue, makes clear only that Sutpen thinks it, and repudiates her based on that knowledge. The genealogy does not mention African ancestry, stating just that Eulalia is the “child of [a] Haitian sugar planter of French descent” (307).

<sup>52</sup> The distinctions I am making in *Absalom* would best be described as “more or less” accurate. For if Rosa is the principal narrator of the first chapter, she is not the only one. There is a parenthetical insertion on pages 7-8 which takes place later in the evening, while Quentin discusses with his father what he has learned. The chapter also contains Quentin’s interior

the return to Israel from Babylonian exile (538 BCE), the redactor, or R, collected each of these texts, as well as an assortment of additional documents, and edited, spliced, and combined them together to produce the definitive chronicle of Jewish history, and of the Jewish religion. The text that R created, however, is replete with internal contradictions, with uncertainties that go unresolved, and with tensions resulting, like *Absalom*, from diverging points of view.

To cite what is arguably the most famous of these, Genesis consists of two creation stories. In the first, Genesis 1:1-2:3, which is attributed to the Priestly source, P, God takes six days to populate the earth and the skies, crafting humans—men *and* women—on the sixth day, after he has filled the earth with sea creatures, birds, and land animals. The second creation story lists God by name, Yahweh, which P does not.<sup>53</sup> In addition, all of creation appears to occur on one day, or “the day that YHWH made earth and skies” (Genesis 2:4, trans. Friedman), and then, in succession, one man, vegetation, the Garden of Eden (not mentioned in P), animals, and then, finally, one woman to accompany first man. J also specifies the exact location of the Garden: near the Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates rivers. Where *Absalom* looks to be ambivalent, for example, on the precise whereabouts of Wash Jones when Sutpen returns, or respecting Sutpen’s greeting of Rosa, the Hebrew Bible, in the first two chapters of its first book, declares that contradiction, paradox, and disagreement will power it. On the one hand (J), God is named, and man is created before woman, in Mesopotamia. On the other hand (P), an unnamed God

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monologues, such as “*she dont mean that*” (5), of which Rosa would not have been made aware. The Hebrew Bible, meanwhile, is not solely the work of J, E, P, D, and the redactor. Genesis 5, for example (with the exception of line 29, which was added by the redactor), originated independent of the four primary sources that the redactor later edited and combined (Friedman Bible 32-41).

<sup>53</sup> P was written after J. How long after—whether a few years, or several hundred—remains a subject of Biblical inquiry (Friedman Bible 4, Jewish Study Bible 5), although the consensus places P shortly after J and E were combined.

populates the earth with men and women in tandem, in an unspecified location. Both accounts stand, however, in the redacted text.

I take a three-pronged approach to the redactive technique in scripture and in *Absalom*. I first look at Biblical narrative strategy to show convergences between the J, E, P, and D sources of scripture, and Quentin Compson, Shreve McCannon, Rosa Coldfield, and Mr. Compson, while discussing what Faulkner likely would have known about redaction and the Documentary Hypothesis. Where Meeter notes that “we should not look for such specific sources for the book’s narrators as ... J, E, D, or P” (116), I propose to do just that. Meeter argues that Quentin, whom he conflates with Faulkner, is *Absalom*’s primary redactor who, exiled to Boston from his Mississippi home, laments the loss of an idyllic, regional South. I see instead a refusal by Faulkner to privilege one narrator over the other. In the likening of *Absalom*’s narrators to specific scriptural counterparts, and of the Faulknerian narrator to the Biblical redactor, I read a transnational rather than regional (Meeter) accounting of Sutpen’s rise and fall.

Next, I turn to the Hebrew Bible redactor and the historical moment in which he was situated to suggest that his deployment of redaction (or compilation) was in direct response to the imperial leanings of Israel’s colonizing neighbors, be they Egypt of antiquity, Assyria, Babylon, or Persia. By giving rise to a series of voices and histories, the redactor rejects any singular, monolithic claiming of past and memory, and as such forces meaning to remain unforclosed. Instead, he lauds ambivalence, contradiction, and difference in a move anticipating the Talmudic and rabbinic traditions of commentary and critique that his delivery of the Torah ushered in. The redactor also makes the Walter Benjaminian move of infusing the present with an ongoing moral and ethical imperative to resist linear, causal readings of history, and to declare anew the crisis,

or emergency, that is the threat of imperial subjugation. I conclude by shifting the gaze back to *Absalom* to suggest that Faulkner, like his predecessor who compiled the Hebrew Bible, has in the redactive and Benjaminian tradition declared nonlinearity, debate, and a resistance to historical “progress” as fundamental to the cultivation of collective memory, and to a continuing interrogation of the internal and external impulses charging America’s rise to empire.

### **Faulkner and the Redactive Method**

In “On the Concept of History,” Walter Benjamin questions the constructions of historical narrative and linear declarations of progress, while imploring us to think about the crises of our enduring moment, or the “constellation of events” that all ages experience. The present generation, Benjamin argues, maintains a “secret protocol” with the past by which its “own epoch comes into contact with that of ... earlier one[s]” (18). Benjamin’s essay, crafted at the outset of the Second World War, invoked the “real state of emergency” that was his present moment: threats of fascism (Mussolini), totalitarianism (Stalin), and the New Order that Nazi Germany aimed to establish, including the Holocaust. Benjamin’s essay concludes with the following:

Surely the time of the soothsayers, who divined what lay hidden in the lap of the future, was experienced neither as homogenous nor as empty. Whoever keeps this in mind will perhaps have an idea of how past time was experienced as remembrance: namely, just the same way. It is well known that the Jews were forbidden to look into the future. The Torah and the prayers instructed them, by contrast, in remembrance. This disenchanted those who fell prey to the future, who sought advice from the soothsayers. For that

reason the future did not, however, turn into a homogenous and empty time for the Jews.

For in it every second was the narrow gate, through which the Messiah could enter. (18)

Benjamin calls upon a return to the Torah, to prayer, and to remembrance in a warding off of “empty time”; the Messianic Age, which he discusses elsewhere, is one in which the “Angel of History” sees all events as occurring transtemporally, with no distinction between what *was* and what *is*, or past from present. Only through a reinvestment in memory, which Susan Handelman refers to in her reading of Benjamin, do we mediate the “break[s] in tradition, the shocks and ruptures of modern life” (*Fragments* 150). Handelman places Benjamin in the rabbinical and Talmudic traditions of scriptural reinterpretation, likening him to the “ancient rabbis [whose] ... greatest development [occurred during a time] of exile, historical catastrophe, and ruin. ... Benjamin understood the purgative and redemptive power of citation” (150). The development to which Handelman refers is that of Midrash: scriptural exegesis harkening back to the Babylonian exile, the era in which the Biblical redactor assembled his composite text.

By his appeals to collective memory and the rabbinical commentary tradition, Benjamin provides the conceptual framework within which I link the Biblical redactor and William Faulkner. Benjamin denounces historical progress as the domain of “the victor” (7), citing instead “constellations of meanings between past and present events” (*Fragments* 151) as the impulse for contemporary reform that “deliver[s] tradition anew” (Benjamin 6). Both the redactor, who inaugurates the commentary tradition, and Faulkner, who also redacts, employ Benjamin’s reading of chronology, his espousal of present-day reform, and his appeal to remembrance. The redactor and Faulkner resist what Homi Bhabha refers to as “the transparent linear equivalence of event and idea that historicism proposes” (*Location* 292). In so doing, they



give rise to a series of voices and histories, privileging none, in their unraveling of nation-formations and empires.

What, if anything, might Faulkner have known about contemporary theories of Biblical composition and formation? My reading of Gavin Stevens, of his Old Testament translation project and his overseas education at the epicenter of modern Biblical source theory, in which a series of nineteenth-century German scholars established and placed into circulation the Documentary Hypothesis, suggests that a Faulknerian character knew of it, if not the writer himself. I state categorically that we have no direct evidence that Faulkner ever studied or, to be exact, was explicitly aware of the J, E, P, and D sources, or of a redactor who embarked upon a nationalist (yet also anti-imperial) project of compiling and codifying a definitive account of Jewish religion and history. There is, however, substantiation that Faulkner at the least intuited, and was likely familiar with, scriptural source theory. As already noted, Faulkner read the Hebrew Bible regularly, and carefully. Faulkner would have picked up on the abrupt shifts in style and tone in places where the redactor cuts from one writer to the other, and in doublings or retellings of the same story by multiple writers. In Genesis, for example, there are two versions of the covenant between God and Abraham, two namings of Isaac, two instances in which Abraham tells a neighboring King that Sarah is his sister and not his wife, two accounts of Jacob venturing into Mesopotamia, two revelations given to Jacob, and two points in which God renames Jacob (Friedman, *Who Wrote* 22). The redactor moves from P to J to E throughout Genesis, allowing each of his sources to repeat one another in their respective (re)tellings. It is implausible—absurd, even—to think that Faulkner did not notice the differences between them, ones that, as Friedman notes, are plainly evident to any serious reader of the Bible, as which

Faulkner qualifies.<sup>54</sup> Faulkner made use of doubling in his fiction, as well: Quentin and Shreve “return” to New Orleans, with Henry and Bon, four months after Mr. Compson tells of Henry accompanying Bon on his Christmas visit. And as discussed, Faulkner did not send Gavin Stevens to Heidelberg by accident.

Faulkner may not have read Julius Wellhausen’s *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*, or subsequent scholarship extending the discussion on Bible source theory, but he read those who did. We know that Faulkner read James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, the exhaustive 1890 study into the origins of religions.<sup>55</sup> In addition to having read Frazer, Faulkner knew well the works of Thomas Mann, whom he ranked as one of the world’s greatest living writers, and whose *Joseph and his Brothers* synthesizes modern source theory (Meeter 113).<sup>56</sup> Faulkner would likely have been familiar with John Crowe Ransom’s *God Without Thunder*, which makes specific reference to the J, E, and P sources (Meeter 114).<sup>57</sup> Finally, Glenn Meeter

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<sup>54</sup> Friedman notes in *Who Wrote the Bible* that “no serious student of the Bible can fail to study” the Documentary Hypothesis (28), a sentiment expressed by James George Frazer decades earlier in the opening sentence of his three-volume *Folk-Lore in The Old Testament* (see footnote 55).

<sup>55</sup> Frazer cites Wellhausen in *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament* (1923), and notes that “[a]ttentive readers of the Bible can hardly fail to remark a striking discrepancy between the two accounts of the creation of man. ... [T]hey are derived from two different and originally independent documents, which were afterwards combined into a single work by an editor” (1-2). As Robert Frazer notes, “in the [nineteenth-century], ... especially in Germany, a painstaking examination of Holy Writ led to ... a recognition of its textual instability. ... Frazer’s work [carried] this enterprise ... to its logical extreme” (*Golden Bough* xvii), which is to say that where Wellhausen focused on the ancient Hebrews’ motivations for constructing their Bible and religion, Frazer widened the gaze to look at commonalities across a range of religions and customs.

<sup>56</sup> *Joseph and his Brothers* was published in four volumes, the first of which, *The Tales of Jacob*, was translated into English in 1934. Joseph Blotner notes that, when asked in 1932 to name the best living writers, Faulkner responded, “Ernest Hemingway, Willa Cather, Thomas Mann, John Dos Passos, and myself” (310). Faulkner later remarked that “[James Joyce], Thomas Mann, were the great writers of my time” (*University* 280).

<sup>57</sup> Ransom writes of “the authors of the Hebrew Scriptures—J, E, and P ... however they be named and dated” (qtd. in Meeter 113).

argues for a number of signs all pointing towards Faulkner's familiarity with the Documentary Hypothesis, two of which I would like to emphasize. Faulkner refers to the Hebrew Bible as folklore, which "implies both multiple sources and an extended process of transmission" (Meeter 114). In *Go Down, Moses* Faulkner tips his hand, through Isaac and Cass, to the multiple writers at work in Hebrew scripture:

Because the *men* who wrote his Book for Him were writing about truth and there is only one truth and it covers all things that touch the heart.' and McCaslin

'So these *men* who transcribed His Book for Him were sometimes liars.' and he

'Yes. Because they were human *men*.' (emphasis added, 249).

Isaac and Cass are not referring to the many writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul) of the New Testament, but to those who wrote the "shabby chronicle of His chosen sprung from Abraham ... [to those] Dispossessed of Eden. Dispossessed of Canaan" (246-247). They are each clear that the Hebrew Bible collects a number of sources that, combined, make up the "shabby chronicle" upon which their debate is grounded. We may have no direct confirmation that William Faulkner studied modern Biblical scholarship, but there is, I believe, strong evidence to suggest his familiarity with it, his synthesis of it, and, in *Absalom*, an adaptation of the redactor's technique.

The redactor of the Hebrew Bible functions much like the narrator of *Absalom*, taking four primary threads and weaving them together, ambivalence, speculation, and all, in the formation of a composite text. I would like to consider the distinctiveness of the Bible's four principal writers, as well as those of *Absalom*'s four narrators, ahead of situating the redactive method within a broader discussion of empire and nation-building in Faulknerian America.

Meeter began this work, focusing on Quentin as the chief redactor, and likening him to the Biblical R, whose experience in exile sparked the nationalist project that the Hebrew Bible became. Like R, Meeter argues, Quentin has been exiled, in his case to Boston: as a “Southerner [from the] defeated South” he is akin to the “Hebrews after the destruction of Jerusalem” (109-110). Meeter reads Quentin as something of a fictional companion to the twelve writers of *I’ll Take My Stand*, the 1930 agrarian manifesto by the Vanderbilt aggregate defending an idealized Southern regionalism and attacking the “progress” that was Northern-led industrialism and urbanization. Instead of reading Quentin as the primary redactor, I locate him alongside Rosa, Mr. Compson, and Shreve in a role that is secondary to the Faulknerian narrator.

Shreve, meanwhile, is the only narrator who stands to propel forward the Sutpen saga: Rosa passes away in January 1910, Quentin commits suicide in June 1910, and Mr. Compson dies in 1912. By arguing that “Quentin’s (and Faulkner’s) ‘final redaction’” (122) stands in sympathy with the Southern Agrarians, whose work Quentin would not have read, and whose 1930 vantage point would have been unavailable to him in 1910, Meeter risks implying that *Absalom*, at the textual level, stands in like sympathy, as his parenthetical pairing of Faulkner and Quentin indicates. The Agrarians are nothing if not regionalists, and if we think of Quentin and Faulkner in league with them, we may wind up short-selling *Absalom*’s national and transnational problematics.<sup>58</sup> For the Agrarians proffered a sympathetic—even defiant—accounting of southern regionalism, which Faulkner does not; they disregard the plight of black

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<sup>58</sup> Along with a host of scholars (Leigh Anne Duck, Hosam Aboul-Ela, John T. Matthews, and others), I distance Faulkner from the Southern Agrarians. As Aboul-Ela writes, “the emphasis on the landscape [in *Absalom*] seems less about reclaiming (and in this we can distinguish Faulkner from the Agrarians) and more about acknowledging the marks on the land that implicate it in networks of coloniality” (148).

Americans while refusing to recognize white complicity in race subjugation.<sup>59</sup> And the Faulkner narrator maintains a full range of source access that is simply not available to all of the novel's characters. Shreve, for example, does not hear Quentin's panicked "*I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*" but the more reserved "I dont hate it ... I dont hate it," lacking exclamation (303). That access is one that the Biblical R maintains, as well, and that points toward the nationalist imperative at the root of his post-exilic assembly of the J, E, P, and D sources.

The J and E texts are considered to be the oldest of the four principal Hebrew Bible source documents. They were each composed between 922 and 722 BCE, while the Jewish nation was a divided kingdom—Israel in the north, and Judah in the south. J (referred to as such for calling God Yahweh or Jahwe) is believed to have hailed from Judah, while E (who initially called God Elohim) composed his or her narrative in the north (Friedman Bible 18).<sup>60</sup> Of the four principal sources, there is more overlap among J and E than in any of the others; there are

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<sup>59</sup> Robert Penn Warren's "The Briar Patch" is an exception to this rule in that he considers the role that African Americans will take in the evolving southern economy, writing that "if [southern white men hope] to maintain ... integrity in the face of industrialism ... [they] must find a place for the negro" (*Stand* 263). His essay is elsewhere, however, charged by racial biases, such as "the Southern negro has always been a creature of the small town and farm. That is where he still chiefly belongs" (260). Warren also glosses over slavery: "the negro became a free man in the country which long before he had *decided* was his home" (emphasis added, 247).

<sup>60</sup> Elohim, which means "powers," and which translates as God in classical Hebrew, is not technically a proper name, while Yahweh, or YHWH (I am) is proper in that J makes God's name known to man before revealing what the name means. Moses tells God that the Hebrews will ask him (Moses) what to call God. "God said to Moses, 'I am who I am'" (Exodus 3:13). The translation, Yahweh/I am, is more accurately a reconciliation of a name and its definition. The "I am" as declared in Exodus 3 (E text) comes to signify God's name even though J had already "revealed" the name in Genesis 2. In other words, J names God from the start, while E and P qualify its usage until God reveals the name's meaning: "[a]nd God spoke to Moses and said to him, 'I am YHWH. And I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El Shadday [Elohim; God], and I was not known to them by my name, YHWH'" (Exodus 6:2-3, trans. Friedman). Virtually all English translations, to include that in the Jewish Study Bible, attempt to do away with the ambiguity by referring to God, in all cases, as God (Friedman Bible 4, Jewish Study Bible 15).

portions of the Bible, even, whose composition is attributed to a fused JE. The post-exilic redactor likely had a JE text at his disposal in addition to the J, E, P, and D threads, which suggests a tradition of redaction preceding the work of R by several hundred years.

The JE line brings together northern and southern perspectives after the consolidation of Israel, which suggests that the Israelites and Judeans were eager to re/claim shared histories.<sup>61</sup> JE also embraces difference: while J and E relate similar narratives, that of Israel's prehistory, its selection by God, and its Moses-led march out of Egypt, they diverge on a number of particulars. E, for example, contains a law code, which J does not, for the likely reason that the majority of Levitical priests resided in Israel while the Kingdom was halved; the priests would have exerted a greater influence on E than on J (Friedman Bible 19). And J always refers to God as Yahweh, while E does not call him Yahweh, or "I am," until God utters the "I am" to Moses. Once conjoined, however, the JE text has it both ways. God is called Yahweh, but also Elohim, until Exodus 3, when the E thread learns "Yahweh," and takes up that name, as well. Genesis and Exodus thus contain a naming contradiction until the revelation at Sinai: JE declares God's name in Genesis 2 (via the J thread) while simultaneously withholding the name until Moses' inquiry (in E).

The naming paradox signals one of the Hebrew Bible's political imperatives. The Jews refuse to agree that God has "only" one name (in addition to God, Yahweh, and Elohim, He is also referred to as El Shadday or Adonai), while also refusing to agree on if He has a name at all. He is rather a verb (to be, I am) that cannot be named: He simply *is*. Perspectives on what to call

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<sup>61</sup> The Assyrians conquered Israel in 722 BCE, after which the surviving northern Israelites, those not driven into exile, fled southward into Judea. The Israelites are believed to have brought with them their E text, which a Judean redactor combined with J as part of Israeli

Him that prevailed during the united Kingdom era (signaled by J, E, and JE), during the divided kingdom era, in reunited Israel, and in the post-exilic state all circulate within the redacted text. The Jewish national narrative, then, is inclusive rather than exclusive. It anticipates the postcolonial mandate to “hear” other voices—whether of the defeated northerners of the eighth century BCE, or of the returning captives from Babylon—and to resist a monolithic privileging of the “victor.” The Hebrew Bible does not sanction any one name or chronology; to do so would be to silence those who dissent. Faulkner’s *Absalom* is also predicated on what goes unresolved, and on an endorsement of *histories* rather than of history, as noted in the reading of Sutpen’s return, the greeting of Rosa, and the presence or absence of Wash Jones. At the novel’s core is a celebration of contradiction, a rejection of tidy conclusions, and a “refusal to endorse a single interpretation of the past” (Cohn 54). The redactor of the Hebrew Bible, by virtue of multiple sources that at times contradict and diverge, offers a schematic for the narrative move Faulkner makes, wherein conjecture, disagreement, and ambiguity share space with convergence, accord, and conviction, and where “facts” do not reveal inherent truths but merely particular beliefs, however charged, in the shaping of historical narrative.

A merging of the southern J and the northern E, meanwhile, has its *Absalom* equivalent in Quentin Compson, from Mississippi, and Shreve McCannon, from Canada, who at times blur into one: “joined, connected after a fashion ... [by a] geologic umbilical. ... [I]t might have been either of them and was in a sense both: both thinking as one ... the two of them creating between them” (208, 243). As *Absalom* has its disparate Q (Quentin) and S (Shreve) threads, it also, like its Hebrew Bible JE antecedent, has an intertwined QS line. This line, as with JE, also contains a

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reconsolidation (Friedman Bible 4). The Kingdom had last been unified during the reign of Solomon (967-926 BCE).

naming contradiction: Miss Rosa (Quentin) and Aunt Rosa (Shreve). And while they may appear at odds, as when Shreve asks, or rather goads Quentin with, “*What do they do there* [in the South]. *Why do they live there. Why do they live at all,*” (142), they are nonetheless joined by the geologic—and thus geopolitical—umbilical which declares *Absalom* to be far more than a regional (Southern) account. It extends from West Virginia to the West Indies, from Mississippi to Massachusetts, and by its QS line contains a southerner and a northerner who meet in neither Mississippi nor Canada but in a city that claims its own storied history within the annals of American nation-building: Boston may even be the intellectual capital of US nationalism.

Quentin Compson may feel exiled, on the banks of the Charles River rather than by the rivers of Babylon, in what is one point of intersection between Faulkner and the Hebrew Bible, as Meeter has pointed out. But Faulkner’s relationship with scripture is more provocative than a recasting of psalms, or an updated lament for a lost homeland, or a yearning for a return.

Quentin’s “exile” is but one component of a much larger national (and transnational) narrative signaled, in part, by the Quentin-Shreve conjoining in which “[t]hey both bore [the cold] ... as though in deliberate flagellant exaltation of physical misery” (275), extending back, the narrator tells us, into a further fusing with two young men in the 1860s, one from Mississippi and the other from Haiti via New Orleans, who are preparing to fight a war that will rip the American nation asunder. The meeting of Quentin and Shreve, like the pairing of J and E, may come to signal a reconciliation as much as it does an exile, a northerner (or Canadian) and southerner convening to retell, to recreate, the hemispheric narrative of Thomas Sutpen’s rise and fall, as well as the aftermath and legacy of the United States’ antebellum past, and the present-day repercussions of that past.



Scripture's priestly source, P, was likely composed sometime after the fall of northern Israel (722 BCE) and after the merging of J and E, but before the Babylonian exile (586 BCE). Like J, P writes of creation and the origins of man, and as with J and E, details the prehistory of the Israelites ahead of his reading of Moses and the march out of Egypt. But P has particular concerns. The "vengeful God of the Old Testament," as the God of the Hebrew Bible is so often referred to, is (in most instances) God as described by P rather than J, E, or D. While both J and D describe a jealous God, the God of P is more threatening, has little use for mercy, and is concerned primarily with the fealty that he demands of His people.<sup>62</sup> Both J and P, for example, tell of the flood that God brings upon the world. In J, God "regretted that He had made man on earth" (Genesis 6:6), which is a sentiment that God in P does not share. Rather, P focuses on particulars, such as the construction of the ark, and the series of commands which Noah must obey: "You shall make a window ... you shall finish it ... you'll come to the ark ... you shall bring two of each [living creature]" (Genesis 6:16-19, trans. Friedman). J personally closes the ark for Noah (7:16), and recedes the flood waters after forty days (8:6), while P keeps the earth submerged nearly four times as long (7:24). The P text also limits access to God to the priests of the Aaronid tribe, for the likely reason that P was constructed by an Aaronid priest who believed that only direct descendants of Moses and Aaron were endowed with such privilege (Friedman Bible 11-12).

Meanwhile, in *Absalom* Rosa Coldfield seems to believe that she understands God's will. She is also a relation to Thomas Sutpen: she is his sister-in-law, was once engaged to him, and is

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<sup>62</sup> Passages attributed to J, E, and D that approximate rather than differ from P's depictions of God include Exodus 34:14 (J): "YHWH: His name is Jealous, He is a jealous God"; Deuteronomy 4:24 (D): "YHWH, your God: He is a consuming fire, a jealous God"; and Genesis 22, in which God tests Abraham's loyalty by demanding the sacrifice of Isaac (Friedman Bible).

the daughter of Sutpen's father-in-law. Rosa is the most heated of the four narrators, possessing "impotent and static rage ...[and] indomitable frustration," and referring to the "inevitable day when ... [the town] must rise against him in scorn and horror and outrage" (3, 9). As with the retributive God of P, Rosa "saw herself as an instrument of retribution," which Mr. Compson surmises (48). Rosa also shares with P an affinity for directives: she summons Quentin to her parlor, instructs him to escort her to the Sutpen home, and orders Jim Bond to "[h]elp me up!" after she has fallen (297). Rosa's father, Goodhue Coldfield, may be likened to an Aaronid priest, clutching fast to his Bible while reciting from it "passages of the old violent vindictive mysticism" as Rebel troops march past the family store (64); the scriptural excerpts, as "old violent" signals, would in all likelihood have originated in P. Finally, reading Rosa as *Absalom's* "priestly" source further illuminates why she launches the narrative, for the redactor begins the Hebrew Bible with his priestly source (Genesis 1-2:3). As Lois Zamora has noted, "[i]t is Miss Rosa, sister-in-law of Sutpen, embittered and aged spinster, who initiates the narration, and it is her cataclysmic vision that dominates the novel" (120). And it is P who provides the Hebrew Bible with its threads of cataclysm, as when, in Genesis 6, God declares that "I'm bringing the flood ... to destroy all flesh in which there is the breath of life from under the skies. Everything that is in the earth will expire" (Freidman Bible 6:17). P and Rosa will have their vengeance.

Likening Quentin, Shreve, and Rosa to the J, E, and P writers of scripture is not to suggest that, in all cases, *Absalom's* narrators and their Hebrew Bible counterparts share uniform, replicating agendas. P, for example, focuses on God's laws and commandments, while there is no evidence in any way suggesting that Rosa is similarly motivated. She is, however, preoccupied with "sin" and broken covenants, or the insult that was Thomas Sutpen's obscene

proposal: Sutpen transgressed (according to Rosa) against decency laws and the virtues of Southern white womanhood, however fabricated those may have always been. Rosa also remarks upon “the threatful portent of the old” (126), and who, as some arbiter of justice, summons the ambulance to “carry Henry into town for the white folks to hang him for shooting Charles Bon” (299). And it is Rosa who, according to Quentin, believed that “*God let us lose the War: that only through the blood of our men and the tears of our women could He stay this demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth*” (6). So there are patterns running through the narrative threads of scripture and in *Absalom* that indicate a fully realized appropriation by Faulkner of the redactive technique of which also is a likening of the Deuteronomist to Mr. Compson.

D, who functions somewhat as the historian of the Hebrew Bible, crafted most of his work before the Babylonian exile, probably during the reign of the Judean king Josiah from 640-609 BCE (Friedman Bible 24).<sup>63</sup> The D writer is believed to be responsible for Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, although he redacted, as well, from a set of independent sources.<sup>64</sup> *Absalom*'s Mr. Compson also relies on an “independent source,” General Compson, as he relays to Quentin the history of Thomas Sutpen: his upbringing in West Virginia, his realization of the American racial system on the Tidewater plantation, his foray into Haiti, his arrival in Jefferson, the launching of his grand design. Mr. Compson's narration spans the range

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<sup>63</sup> While much of the Deuteronomistic books may have been composed before the exile, some of them post-date the destruction of the Temple (586 BCE). 2 Kings chronicles the fall of Jerusalem and exile into Babylon: “Thus Judah was exiled from its land. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon put Gedaliah son of Ahikam son of Shaphan in charge of the people whom he left in the land of Judah” (25:21-22).

<sup>64</sup> The Jewish Study Bible notes that “Gad and Nathan ... are mentioned together with Samuel as the authors of a history of David [in 1 Chronicles 29:29]. ... In the book of Samuel ... one source

of *Absalom*'s chronology, from 1807 to the announcement of Rosa's death in January 1910; Rosa fixates on events in her lifetime (primarily those from 1849-1869), while Quentin and Shreve focus on the Sutpen legacy from 1859 forward, or from the meeting of Henry and Bon.

Where Meeter reads in *Absalom* a character, Quentin, functioning as the primary redactor, I see a more dynamic interplay at work between four characters who are structurally indebted to their Hebrew Bible antecedents in moves that situate Faulkner's text hemispherically and transnationally rather regionally. Rosa Compson, directly linked to Sutpen as the Priestly source is to Aaron; Quentin Compson and Shreve McCannon, southerner and northerner "connected after a fashion" (208) as are JE; Mr. Compson, resident historian, the "Deuteronomist" of the Sutpen saga. And a narrator analogous to the post-exilic redactor, who takes the accounts of witnesses, and sons and grandsons of witnesses (and grandsons who become participants), and roommates of witnesses; southerners, and a northerner; men, women; young, middle-aged, old; and melds them together in spite of their contradictions, postulations, and biases.

*Absalom, Absalom!* is structurally indebted to Hebrew scripture, to the redactive technique of narratology in which perspectives shift and interlock, coalesce and contend. In both scripture and *Absalom*, redaction signals a national (or transnational, in the case of divided Israel, and in the commentary of a Canadian and the participation of Haitians) rather than regional impetus, in which R and "Faulkner" give voice to an array of perspectives, to the constitutive sources comprising nation-formation rather than a privileging of a like-minded few, or a singular one. I would now like to turn to the Judean redactor, to the historical locality fueling his editing,

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is mentioned: the Book of Jashar, from which David's elegy for Saul and Jonathan was taken" (560).

splicing, compilation and delivery of the Hebrew canon on the heels of more than four centuries of internal strife and colonial subjugation. The redactor's project is predicated on an endorsement of difference, on a celebration of contradiction and paradox that rejects any decisive (read: imperial) vantage point. In so doing R, or the legacy of redaction that R joins and codifies, anticipates the Talmudic and rabbinic traditions, at the heart of which is an investment in commentary, a reinterpretation and critique of scriptural passages in the present moment. The redactor thus intrinsically espouses a postcolonial mode of interpretation. Central to such an assessment is an inquiry into the machinations of empire, whether internal or external: from how and why Israel divided to defeat by the Assyrians, from deportation to Babylon to return as vassals of Persian reign. Situating the redactor in his moment of crisis, in which the turns of empire place the survival of the Judean nation in jeopardy, will hopefully shed light on why the redactive method held such appeal 2,500 years later for Faulkner in his interrogation of the workings of nation-building, of the American rise to power, and in his participation in the Talmudic, commentary tradition.

### **Empire in Ancient Israel**

In Genesis 42:27, as Jacob's sons are returning to Canaan with the grain sold to them by Joseph, one of the brothers discovers that, to his chagrin, "[his] money has been returned!" This leads the brother to fear that Joseph suspects deception on their part. The brothers, in this instance, discover their money before returning to their father. But upon arrival, they find the money, again, for a second "first" time: "As they were emptying their sacks [in front of Jacob], there, in each one's sack, was his money-bag! When they and their father saw their money-bags, they were dismayed" (42:35). As Robert Alter has noted, "to our understanding of narrative

logic, it is ... impossible that the brothers could discover the hidden money twice. ... Biblical scholarship essentially explains this duplication as a clumsy piece of editing” by the redactor (*Art* 137-138). In Genesis 42, the redactor moves back and forth among the J and E narratives eight times, letting the contradiction stand between J’s finding of the money in verse 27 and E’s in verse 35.

In a linear reading of the account, attempting to resolve the discrepancy would prove hopeless; hence, the deduction that the redactor must have been inept, not very attentive, or both. But to categorize the redactor as such would be a misstep. As Alter argues,

the Hebrew writer was perfectly aware of the contradiction but viewed it as a superficial one. In linear logic, the same action could not have occurred twice in two different ways; but in the narrative logic with which the writer worked, it made sense to incorporate both versions available to him because they brought forth mutually complementary implications of the narrated event, thus enabling him to give a complete imaginative account of it. (*Art* 138)

Alter goes on to note that the redactor is “resistant to linear formation,” that he embraces contradiction and “purposeful ambiguity,” and that the incorporation of “multiple perspectives [is] characteristic of the Biblical method,” which he likens to the Cubist technique of “juxtapos[ing] and superimpos[ing] ... profile and frontal” vantage points (145, 153-4, 146). The Bible, as Alter has shown, was thus an anticipatory modernist text. A number of critics have noted the cubist and surrealist influence on William Faulkner, to which I would add that the

Hebrew Bible, as well, stands as a signpost by which to read his manipulations of multiplicity, contradiction, and ambiguity.<sup>65</sup>

The redactor's opposition to linearity is a sentiment shared by Faulkner, and is not merely a by-product of competing perspectives, in which, for example, J and E's timelines are set at odds, or in which Wash Jones is both present and not present at a Sutpen reunion; it is a refusal to accept, or to offer, that any one version of history, of "facts" uncovered, carries more weight, or blots out, any other. J and E render two accounts whose differences the redactor embraces rather than reconciles because, as Alter notes, he reads truth as "multifaceted" rather than monolithic. Both the redactor and Faulkner "refus[e] to provide a final explanation"; they each "pose[] alternatives to causality and chronological order [in which] ... the reader is ... left to piece together the tale from [several] ... narrators" (Cohn 51). The redactor destabilizes "fixed," unproblematic accounts, while rejecting a smoothing over of his sources. A consistent or harmonious account would reflect the perspective of the victors, or of the dominant who would erase from the narrative the voices of the vanquished.

The redactor, as noted earlier, assembled disparate sources to craft the Hebrew canon sometime after the Judeans began returning from exile (538 BCE), as indicated by the inclusion of the Deuteronomistic history, which chronicles the fall of the Temple. Richard Elliott Friedman places the redactor, whom he believes to be Ezra, in the fifth century BCE, while the Jewish Study Bible locates Ezra a century later. Determining whether or not Ezra was the redactor most responsible for combining J, E, P, and D may prove elusive. What we do know, however, is that Ezra is credited with delivering a redacted Torah to the returning exiles, and that

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<sup>65</sup> Branch, "Darl Bundren's "Cubistic Vision" (1969); Lind, "The Effect of Painting on Faulkner's Poetic Form" (1978); Broughton, "Faulkner's Cubist Novels" (1980); Marling,

his “importance ... for the creation and formation of ... rabbinic Judaism cannot be overestimated” (JSB 1669).<sup>66</sup> The Hebrew nation stood on the brink of annihilation during the exilic era: the Babylonians had destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, and had driven the Jews out of their homeland. As Abraham Cohen notes, the “crisis, from the national standpoint, was intensified by the circumstance that a century and a half earlier, in 722, the Northern Kingdom ... had been overrun. ... If the disaster to Judea met with a like ending, the entire nation would be obliterated and the name of Israel blotted out of existence” (xxxiii). It was a time of homelessness, self-questioning, exile, and of living under an oppressive, imperial regime. The Jews were permitted to return home—to Canaan from what is now Iraq—only after the Babylonians were, in turn, defeated by their imperial neighbor, Persia. The redactor, then, assembled what became the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, in response to the trauma of captivity and the threats posed to Jewish nationhood and culture. Without a chronicle of Jewish laws, traditions, beliefs, and histories, Judaism and the Israeli nation may have ceased to exist.

The Jews’ post-exilic return to Judah was predicated on the benevolence of Persia and Cyrus the Great, who defeated the Babylonians (540 BCE), declared Judah a Persian province, and licensed the captives to return to their homeland so that they might “identify with and revere

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“Words and Images in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*” (1988).

<sup>66</sup> Nehemiah 8:1-2: “the entire people assembled ... in the square before the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the scroll of the Teaching of Moses with which the Lord had charged Israel. ... Ezra the priest brought the Teaching before the congregation, men and women and all who could listen with understanding.” Contradictions in Nehemiah and in the Torah (such as the presence of women at an oration, which is consistent with Deuteronomy 1 but at odds with Exodus 19) indicate that the teachings delivered by Ezra had already undergone multisource redaction: Ezra teaches women a text that prohibits their presence at his sermon (JSB 1699).



their past textual history” (JSB 1666).<sup>67</sup> As the redactor embarked upon his nationalist, (post)colonial project, he did not endorse any authoritative version of Jewish history. The redacted Bible permits a multiplicity of recountings: one favoring a priestly narrative, which traces lineage back to Moses and Aaron; one sympathetic to the north, and another to the south; and a fourth proffering an account from their entry into Canaan to the present day while also “challeng[ing] and revis[ing] earlier law,” such as that of the invading Assyrians (JSB 357). Each source remains always current in the redacted text. The upper kingdom may have fallen to the Assyrians, but the inclusion of the E document refuses a textual silencing, or a historical “blotting out” of Israel’s northern heritage. Even though contending creation narratives circulated among the Israelites, when the redactor assembled the “unified” national history, he gave voice to both origins—which is to say, to both cultural traditions of understanding origins and their meanings—in an invitation to debate, question, and critique.

The destruction of the Temple and the calamity of exile underscore the nationalist, imperialist, and postcolonial dimensions of scripture, as the redactor strove to empower his people by reclaiming their histories and traditions in the wake of imperial subjugation. Regardless of how Hebrew scripture may have been collated before the fall of the Temple, the redactor deemed its assembly imperative upon return from deportation. In the process, the redactor claimed competing accounts as constitutive of Israel’s past, thereby establishing “Israel” as a contested national identity. What Ezra delivered was a composite history (or composite histories) of Israel, including documents written centuries apart, chronicling pre-history, the march out of Egypt, and acceptance of monotheism. It included the unification of the kingdom,

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<sup>67</sup> For a close look at the imperial ramifications of Persia’s initiative, see Jon L. Berquist, “Postcolonialism and Imperial Motives for Canonization.” Berquist argues that Persia stood to

its subsequent split, the fall of Israel, the ransacking of Judah, exile and return. Ezra gives the *people's histories* to the people for reflection, dialogue, and debate. And by his refusal to gloss over or write out the ambiguities among his sources, Ezra (or at least his redacted text) asserts the vitality of argument and difference within Hebrew scripture, and in “recorded” versions of history, and launches, or rather propels forward, the tradition of commentary that would become the hallmark of rabbinic discourse and Talmudic inquiry.<sup>68</sup> The redacted text invites debate over why the deluge in Genesis lasts both forty and one hundred and fifty days; and into the ramifications of Samuel first introducing David as a court musician (1 Samuel 16), then debuting him, a second time, as he prepares for his battle with Goliath (1 Samuel 17).<sup>69</sup> The stage is set, then, for endorsement and refutation, for the long line of examination and cross-examination that the Bible's uncertainties invite.<sup>70</sup>

By embracing a broad range of perspectives, the redacted Bible resists the monumentalizing of history.<sup>71</sup> It also subverts monolithic readings of theology—J

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benefit from the formation of a Hebrew canon that would depict Cyrus and Darius as liberators.<sup>68</sup> Ezra, or the redactor of the Torah that he delivered, was not the first redactor. As noted, J and E had undergone redaction sometime after the fall of Israel (722 BCE), which suggests that Ezra's Torah codified rather than inaugurated, by virtue of its numerous contradictions, the centrality of textual commentary to Hebrew discourse.

<sup>69</sup> Alter suggests that the redactor includes both introductions to accentuate the tensions between David's public and private personae, and to give voice to varying perceptions of theological “fitness”: as a lyre player, David is anointed, while as a soldier he must earn his exalted standing (*Art* 148, 150).

<sup>70</sup> As Martin Goodman notes in “Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period,” upon return from Babylonian exile, “the biblical text took a form resembling that of the present day and acquired something close to its later authority. Alongside the formation of a canon (or something like it), and building upon it, went biblical interpretation, the evolution of new religious ideas by commentary. ... The rabbinic tradition ... preserved the biblical texts” (38), while inviting discussion on the authority of those texts as definitive versions of history.

<sup>71</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche discusses the “monumentalizing” of history in *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*. Nietzsche writes of three types of historians—the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical, and discusses abuses committed by each type. Nietzsche argues that “[h]istory

anthropomorphizes God, while P does not—even as it champions monotheism. The modalities for rendering “the past,” or the accounts of empire, subjugation, and colonization, remain contested, thus enabling alternative, subjugated ways of historical knowing. That “past” includes critiques *and* celebrations of internal imperialisms.<sup>72</sup> While King David is revered by God, the Books of Samuel include a cautionary tale. After David manipulates Uriah the Hittite and takes his wife, God declares that “I will make a calamity rise against you [David] from within your own house” (2 Samuel 12:11). The Lord then kills David’s son, which subverts David’s “imperial” genealogy; this a move that Faulkner will later emulate in *Absalom*. The Bible thus chronicles nation-building and its vicissitudes: Israel celebrates its own rise to power while documenting the rise to power of its imperially-minded neighbors. The redacted text has a telling message, as R.S. Sugirtharajah notes in *The Bible and Empire*: “misuse power and you will be punished” (189). The misuses of power that the Hebrew Bible documents are not only abuses directed at the Israelites by foreign powers but that of Israeli “arrogance,” whether of

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belongs, above all, to the active and powerful man” (17), or to those who would monumentalize it.

<sup>72</sup> Abba Hillel Silver describes Israeli imperialism as modest in scope. He suggests that Israeli nationalism is not fueled by imperialist motives, writing in *Where Judaism Differed* that “unlike Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, Persia, Greece, or Rome, Israel never built an empire. Its national character was never on fire for conquest or victory. At no point did its dominion extend beyond Hamath in Syria to the north and Ezion-geber on the Gulf of Aqabah to the south--a modest empire, indeed” (40-41). Silver focuses on external colonialisms projected onto Israel, while a more balanced approach might consider the nation’s imperialisms as well. The Bible is replete with accounts of ancient Israel’s imperial leanings. Bradley L. Crowell provides a detailed accounting in “Postcolonial Studies and the Hebrew Bible.” In his reading of 2 Samuel, Crowell notes that “Uriah the Hittite was a foreigner, but still a native of Jerusalem. ... He is doubly marked as a foreigner who serves both Yahweh and the king. ... David does not hesitate to act against Uriah [whom he sends to the front lines to be killed] because Uriah is not an Israelite” (229). In the classical era, however, Israel’s expansionist endeavors did not go beyond Israel and Judah, while Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Rome aspired to far greater (or larger) empires.

familial strife (Cain and Abel; Jacob and Esau), or the overreach of kings (David), or of infighting among their descendents (David's sons).

The redacted text provokes an inward and outward critique of imperial motives, and of shifts from colonizer to colonized. To go further, it invites “interpretations that illuminate the colonial and colonizing tendencies of the text’s production and subsequent interpretations, while at the same time ... suggest[ing] contemporary interpretations that have an effect of decolonizing the present world” (Berquist 88). The Hebrew Bible’s production, of course, was largely the work of a redactor maneuvering in a post-exilic present, while his inclusion of disparate sources invites a continued inquiry. The narrative constructed as a redaction acknowledges a resistance to the role of narrative itself as an imperial or colonizing discourse, or the complicity of narratives and histories made monolithic by empire and colonization. The Hebrew Bible resists any homogenizing of its history; rather, it functions as a site of “discourses ... and tense locations of cultural difference” (Bhabha, *Location* 212). As Jon Berquist has noted, the redacted Bible “is a bricolage that presented and presents multiple views and ideologies. ... [The] redact[ed] ... canon ... represents and contains a variety of viewpoints, languages, geographies, [and] classes ... [that render] coherence [within it] impossible” (89-90). A “coherent” history, like the one that Sutpen attempts to put forth in Chapter 7 of *Absalom*, is one that only an oppressor would endorse, as both Benjamin and Bhabha have put forth.

Bhabha, like Benjamin, resists linear, progressive history. Bhabha writes that “[h]istorians transfixed on the event and origins never ask ... never pose, the essential question of the representation of the nation as a temporal process. ... It is only in the disjunctive time of the nation’s modernity ... that questions of nation as narration come to be posed” (*Location* 203-

204). He proposes that we read the “nation” as a temporal, disjunctive narrative *construction* that contains slippages into counter-narratives, or into the “discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples” (*Location* 212). The redactor does just that in his privileging of multiple histories and identities, however contested they may be, over any one version or voice. Those histories give rise to a chorus of voices—the oppressors and those of the oppressed. This has the political value of situating local, or as Foucault says, “disqualified” knowledges alongside those of the victor, which suggests that the Bible has always been a post/colonial text.<sup>73</sup>

The Bible will not allow a triumphant nationalism to wipe the slate clean, or to substitute a monolithic story or origin for the multitude of stories, versions, and perspectives circulating “from below.”<sup>74</sup> Hebrew history remains a palimpsest of subjugated histories, narratives, and knowledges; of the narratives of the empowered; and critiques of those narratives. And in response to their many subjugations, the Jews *write* their nation as a form of “social and textual affiliation ... [that] provides a theoretical position and a narrative authority for marginal voices or minority discourse” (Bhabha, *Location* 201, 216). Its hold on the Holy Land may be tenuous, and it may be subjected to the whims of empire, but the Jewish nation, and all of its voices, will

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<sup>73</sup> Michel Foucault refers to the “knowledges that were disqualified by the hierarchy of erudition. ... [T]hrough ... disqualified knowledge people have contained the memory of combats. ... And so we have the outline of what might be called a genealogy, or of multiple genealogical investigations. These genealogies are a combination of erudite knowledge and what people know. They would not have been possible—they could not even have been attempted—were it not for one thing: the removal of the tyranny of overall discourses, with their hierarchies and all their privileges” (“Society Must be Defended” 8). The redactor and Faulkner seek to recover those disqualified knowledges by deploying a multi-source approach.

<sup>74</sup> Marcus Rediker writes in “The Poetics of History From Below” (2010) that “the recovery of voices has been a central purpose of history from below from the very beginning, but storytellers were way ahead of us” (<http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2010/1009/1009art1.cfm>).

endure in the redacted text. The redactor's post-exilic project has the net result of tethering a people's history to its religion and of linking nationalism to a text rather than to a homeland, even though the quest to claim (or reclaim) that homeland remains paramount.

The Hebrew Bible, then, invites each generation to participate in a textual dialogue as an expression (or perhaps an interrogation) of Jewish nationalism, and of Jewish histories; through renewed inquiry and analysis, Jews gain "access to God [and] the covenant" (Jewish Study Bible 362). This debate is ongoing in the redacted text in which J, E, P, and D do not always cohere. The exilic experience and the threat of cultural annihilation mandate each generation's attention, one that the Bible demands as it turns "the weapon[s] of imperialism," including history itself, "into a bid for freedom" in which fealty to any overlord, be it Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, or Persian, is usurped by "loyalty ... to their divine sovereign" (JSB 358). Perils to the Israeli nation are fixed as enduring points of crisis, which is to say that exile and the threat of defeat, or the loss of one's homeland, are renewed by the Bible as ongoing states of emergency. The pitfalls of imperialism, be they internal (the divided kingdom) or external (exile, enslavement), circulate in a Benjaminian "constellation of events" that each generation (re)experiences. Benjamin writes that it "is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation" (qtd. in "Reading the Arcades").<sup>75</sup> Conquest by the Assyrians and exile to Babylon are indistinguishable: they are "one in the same" (Benjamin 6) calamity that the redacted Bible, and its tradition of commentary, calls for each generation to reengage in an ongoing renegotiation of "nation's" meanings.

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The redactor's inclusion of J, E, P, and D suggests that he emblemizes the "history from below" storyteller.

The redactor also invites us to renegotiate the authority of origins and the technology of foundationalist narratives. *When the Jews were chosen* remains contested, as does the order of creation, and thus the origins of the Bible's "originary" narrative. Contending creation accounts fissure any possible agreement of who or what "came first," of order in a causal sequence, thus subverting any originary monolithic authority. J and P's creation stories are even placed in reverse order by the redactor: P's creation, written several hundred years after J's, precedes J's in Genesis. Put another way, Genesis does not begin "in the beginning," in spite of beginning with "IN THE beginning" (KJV Genesis 1). So from the "beginning," in what is perhaps a play of irony by the redactor, Genesis is rendered anti-foundationalist. Faulkner's "beginning," meanwhile, or the origins of Yoknapatawpha County as described in *Requiem for a Nun*, appears twenty-two years after Faulkner's first published foray into the county in *Sartoris*; he does not "begin" first, either.<sup>76</sup> And *Absalom*'s Chapter 2, which presumably takes place after Quentin has spent the day with Rosa in September 1909, begins with "[i]t was a summer of wisteria. ... [F]ive months later Mr. Compson's letter [would arrive in] Quentin's sitting-room in Harvard" (23). Quentin receives the letter in January 1910, which would seem to indicate that the "summer of wisteria" refers to August 1910; or, Chapter 2 begins one month *before* Chapter 1.

Faulkner appears in dialogue with the redactor in *Requiem*, as he ends "The Courthouse" by writing that "instead of merely adding one puny infinitesimal more to the long weary increment since Genesis, [the striking of the courthouse clock] had shattered the virgin pristine air with the first loud ding-dong of time and doom" (41-42). No matter how many times the "sparrows and the pigeons" (41) hear the clock strike, it is, for them, the "first time," even as we

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<sup>75</sup> <http://arcadespromenades.wordpress.com/tag/convolute-n/>.

think that not to be the case. The “long weary increment since Genesis,” or the linear march from the “beginning” to now has no meaning for the birds, according to the narrator: there is only the here and the now, or the (new) “*first* loud ding-dong” (emphasis added). While it is the birds that seem to experience this new beginning, it is the narrator who makes the observation, and who appeals to Genesis as he undercuts the authority of that origin.

Neither Faulkner nor the redactor thinks linearly, nor does either of them read history as progressive. The redactor thus anticipates the rabbinic and Talmudic traditions of thinking and writing asynchronously, a tradition in which Faulkner participates. “One single catastrophe” remains perpetually catastrophic in the rabbinic model, the “emergency situation” an enduring one, that if arrested would mean only that an oppressed people had been defeated, that a conqueror had declared, from their conqueror’s stance, victory. The subjugator then stands situated to write the past as “it really was ... [to] take control of memory,” to force conformism upon the vanquished (Benjamin 6). Such is a move that the redactor refuses to make, privileging neither J, E, P, or D; celebrating, instead, variance while rendering anew the continuing emergency, the ongoing crises of exile, suppression, and imperial oppression. It is a move that William Faulkner makes, as well, in his redacted reengagement; his contemporary commentary; his postcolonial critique of “progress,” the role of origins, and the technology of foundationalist narratives in *Absalom, Absalom!*

### **Empire in Faulknerian America**

From the outset, *Absalom, Absalom!* signals its kinship with the Hebrew Bible, and with scripture’s textual starting point, Genesis. In Genesis 1, we are told that “God said, Let there be

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<sup>76</sup> *Flags in the Dust* was published in abridged form as *Sartoris* in 1929. It was not published in unabridged form until 1973. *Requiem for a Nun* was published in 1951 (Hamblin and Peek).



light, and there was light” (1:3), while in *Absalom*’s second paragraph, we read of “Sutpen’s Hundred, the *Be Sutpen’s Hundred* like the oldentime *Be Light*” (4). *Absalom*, like the redacted Bible preceding it, rejects declarations of linear progress, of causal, sequential linkages upon which we build or propel forward. Mieke Bal writes in *Narratology* that a “ruling misconception ... [of] chronological and causal connections ... is that what happens first is therefore better ... that chronological priority entails a qualitative priority. The poetics of the Bible, however, does not at all allow such an interpretation” (42). Neither does the poetics of Faulkner, as alluded to above in the discussion of *Requiem*. *Absalom* is replete with vertigo-inducing moves backwards and forward in time, from the “present” day of 1909-10, to the Civil War and its aftermath; from Sutpen’s childhood, to his time in the Caribbean; from antebellum and postwar Jefferson to antebellum and postwar New Orleans. *Absalom* contains, as Hosam Aboul-Ela writes in *Other South*, a “repetition of beginnings ... that undercuts linearity and progressivism. The reader never really advances to another stage, but rather always move forward to yet another beginning” (144). *Absalom*’s undercutting of linearity is echoed by Edouard Glissant, who writes in *Caribbean Discourse* of the “‘chronological illusion’ of colonial discourse,” one that Faulkner’s texts reveal as they combat the “erasure of ... collective memory” (13, 62).<sup>77</sup>

By his attention to collective memory and to the recovery of nonlinear histories, which are so crucial to the redactor, Glissant implicitly links Faulkner and the Biblical compiler. As Glissant notes in *Poetics of Relation*, the Hebrew Bible is “the beginning of something entirely different from massive, dogmatic, and totalitarian certainty. ... [It is a book] of errantry, going

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<sup>77</sup> Amy Kaplan remarks that “[c]olonial discourse is not coherent in itself as it ‘answers’ the voice of the native, but is itself *constituted* by contending voices and its own contradictions” (102). The collective memory that Glissant engages consists of just those contending voices that, as Kaplan suggests, colonial discourse would otherwise silence.

beyond the pursuits of rootedness required by the evolution of history. ... [Faulkner's works are] somehow theological. This writing is about digging up roots in the South. ... But the root begins to act like a rhizome; there is no basis for certainty" (15-16, 21). If Faulkner's roots are, in fact, rhizomes, then his origins will remain impossible to reduce, or to singularly isolate. Those roots or beginnings take the form of both narrator and narration in *Absalom*. We "start" with Rosa, begin anew with Mr. Compson, and then shift to Boston, where Quentin and Shreve commence their narration. There are also several "beginnings" within the story itself: Sutpen's "trip down from Appalachia; the affront at the door of the Tidewater plantation; ... the journey to Haiti" (Aboul-Ela 144). And it is in Haiti, as Ramon Saldivar notes, that Sutpen's ideology of racial purity crystallizes, that his grand design for an unblemished white line "begins," even as, I would add, it had already "started" once before, at the Tidewater plantation.<sup>78</sup> *Absalom*, in other words, does not endorse any one point of origin; there are no absolute beginnings to which we can refer.

Faulkner's rejection of absolutes—of roots, beginnings, and the authority of origins—renders his texts nonlinear, and thus anti-foundational, even as those texts are "rooted" themselves in the (nonlinear, anti-foundational) Hebrew Bible. As Glissant writes, "Faulkner knew full well that the word in the story ... was not inherited from an idea of Genesis but, on the contrary, was organized based on an opposite paradigm (which he set against the consuming dream of establishing a Foundation): one of listing and accumulating, repeating and going in circles—methods that work on a theoretical level, so contrary to a prophetic, decisive, and resolute act of creation" (*FM* 194). Glissant compares Thomas Sutpen to the God of Genesis

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<sup>78</sup> Saldivar writes in "Looking for a Master Plan" that the "category of the racially mixed mulatto [held no] ... context [in] American southern racism, where one drop of African blood makes one

(*FM* 194), while noting that “[e]choes of the Old Testament—Faulkner’s most common point of reference ... are heard throughout [*Absalom, Absalom!*]” (*FM* 42). Glissant proposes, then, that Faulkner, though indebted to the Genesis narrative, mines that very narrative to undercut what “Genesis” implies: first, origin, beginning, which the redactor of Genesis had already done. In *Absalom*, we cannot, with any certainty, declare the narrative’s “true” beginning, except to say that the *novel* starts, forty years after the death of Sutpen, “in what Miss Coldfield still called the office” (3), or in a merchant’s workplace, which situates the narrative firmly within capitalist and expansionist energies. Yet “beginnings” and “origins” so preoccupy its characters. The “Jefferson women ... had agreed never to forgive [Sutpen] for not having any past” (40), even though it is precisely the past he has, rather than the absence of one, that makes him so quintessentially American in his leveraging of whiteness as an empowering origin. And Sutpen, who repudiates his first wife and son for their alleged mixed ancestry, tries repeatedly to “begin” his dynastic line, first with Eulalia Bon, and then Ellen Coldfield, both of whom he marries, and then Rosa, with whom he aims a trial gestation in hopes of a son, and finally with Wash Jones’ granddaughter, Milly.

As discussed, Genesis begins in contradiction (contending creation stories), while containing doublings, perspective shifts (P to J), and chronological ruptures (such as the money sack discovery). *Absalom* likewise contains manifold tellings (Sutpen’s return after the war; the boys’ time in New Orleans), multiple vantage points, and sequential disruptions which, as Bal has noted, signal far more than literary convention.<sup>79</sup> Bal reads Gabriel Garcia Marquez’ *One*

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totally black, as later [in Haiti] Sutpen ... will decisively understand” (105).

<sup>79</sup> Bal writes that in “many experimental novels, we find ... that matters are intentionally confused, the chronological relations expressly concealed. ... [W]hat is striking ... is that the chronological chaos ... is often ... quite meaningful. ... Playing with sequential ordering is not just

*Hundred Years of Solitude* as an “astonishing game with chronology” (*Narratology* 52); as several critics have noted, Marquez’ work is rooted in the Faulknerian tradition of nonlinearity, and of undercutting equations of history with progress, suggesting that Bal’s study of *Solitude* applies aptly to *Absalom*.<sup>80</sup> Bal writes that the “effect of Marquez’ novel is to let people, generations, social contexts succeed each other in rapid turmoil in the course of a hundred years which seem to contain a history of mankind” (*Narratology* 52), with approximately one hundred years (1807, the birth of Sutpen, to 1910, Rosa’s death, and Quentin and Shreve’s last reconstruction) spanning *Absalom*’s chronology, as well.<sup>81</sup>

Faulkner brilliantly makes the moves that Bal defines: manipulation of sequence, a multiplicity of interpretations, the “rapid turmoil” by which social contexts are uncovered, with a set of generations in a given century positioned as emblematic of any, or of all. And his narrative strategy, which is fundamentally (and perhaps ideologically) aligned with that of the Hebrew Bible redactor, places all events within the text on a contemporary continuum where

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a literary convention; it is also a means of drawing attention to certain things, to emphasize, to bring about aesthetic or psychological effects, to show various interpretations of an event, to indicate the subtle difference between expectation and realization, and much else besides” (*Narratology* 51-53).

<sup>80</sup> Aboul-Ela writes that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* “continually moves forward in time but then circles back at the end, as ... the linear history that has been presented collapses,” while *Absalom* embarks upon a “comprehensive textual attack on linearity” (107, 145). Edouard Glissant refers to *Absalom*’s “aborted progress” (42), and to *Solitude*’s “dizzying circularity, forming or closing again and again around itself like a calamitous parchment” (*Faulkner, Mississippi* 42, 254-255). Leigh Anne Duck has also commented on Faulkner and nonlinearity, writing in “From Colony to Empire” that “in Faulkner’s work [there is] not a linear progression so much as a shifting set of vortices, forces, and incidents which reach across periods to transform consciousness and society” (27).

<sup>81</sup> Bal engages Faulkner directly in her reading of *The Sound and the Fury*, which she cites as an “experimental novel [that postures] ... *real repetition* [in which] ... an event occurs only once [but] is presented a number of times” (*Narratology* 78). *Absalom* employs this technique, as well (the return of Sutpen as adduced by Rosa, and then by Quentin and Shreve), as does the Hebrew Bible (P’s creation account, followed by J’s).

past and present appear indistinguishable, in which Henry and Bon of 1859-1860 fuse with Quentin and Shreve of 1910, and where “America” remains in a state of perpetual emergency. The adjoining of the four, and the boomeranging that occurs across the novel’s century, exemplifies “much [more] besides” literary convention. Rather, what is at stake is an interrogation of the nation’s imperial leanings, both internal and external; a repudiation of history as evolution or progress (Aboul-Ela 18); the preservation of cultural and collective memory (Glissant, *CD* 62); the recognition of oppression as an ongoing crisis (Benjamin); an endorsement of variance, of contestation, and of collaboration; and a mandate for inclusion rather exclusion as hailed by both *Absalom* and the Hebrew Bible’s redactive technique.

Where *Absalom*’s formal dimensions—nonlinearity, shifts in vantage points, contradictions—appear aligned with the redactor, so does its substantive, (post)colonial critique of nationalisms and empire. Thomas Sutpen, the white plantation owner who ruthlessly stakes his claim on land and peoples in North Mississippi and Haiti, is driven by dynastic impulses that emerge out of and are licensed by monolithic conceptions of whiteness, ownership, and power. As he tells General Compson,

I had a design in mind. Whether it was a good or bad design is beside the point; the question is, Where did I make the mistake in it, what did I do or misdo in it, whom or what injure by it. ... I had a design. To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family—incidentally of course, a wife. I set out to acquire these, asking no favor of any man. (212)

To hear Sutpen tell it (or to hear the Quentin-Shreve reconstruction of a conversation between Sutpen and General Compson, as relayed from Compson to Compson to Compson, and as

transported from Jefferson to Boston), the narrative is straightforward, even linear. Sutpen discovers the American plantocracy, realizing that it is predicated upon whiteness, and on the exploitation of black slave labor. He wants to rise within this economy, and overcome his “obscure origin” (212), to ensure that he will never again be turned away from the Big House front door, as he was as an adolescent, by a slave whom he likens to a “child’s toy balloon with a face painted on it” (186). He then goes to Haiti, on an acquisitions expedition, where he marries but renounces his wife and son. A few years later, he settles in Jefferson, with slaves and architect in tow, builds *his* plantation home, remarries, and begets. But his first son one day returns, presumably prompting Sutpen’s conversation with General Compson in which he tries “to explain ... the logical steps by which he had arrived at a result absolutely and forever incredible” (212), or by which his deposed son, Charles Bon, had become entangled with his “legitimate” children, Henry and Judith.

Sutpen aims to “explain ... the logical steps,” as if, by placing the events in sequence, he can somehow pinpoint the flaws in his design. But he fails to account for slippages in his narrative, or for the “voices” that his version wants to silence. For even as Sutpen converses with (or more accurately talks at) General Compson, he withholds far more than he reveals. Sutpen is remarkably vague about Haiti. As John T. Matthews and others have noticed, there is much that Sutpen has not recalled about the West Indies.<sup>82</sup> Just how did he put down that “slave” uprising? What were slaves doing in Haiti, more than twenty years after the Haitian Revolution? What form did the “proof” of Eulalia’s mixed ancestry take? How many times did Sutpen go to Haiti? Did he engage in return ventures, for wives, slaves, booty, and an architect

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<sup>82</sup> Matthews, “Recalling the West Indies”; Duck, “From Colony to Empire”; Maritza Stanchich, “The Hidden Caribbean ‘Other’ in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*” (1996).

in some transnational, decade-long imperial mining of the Caribbean, with New Orleans as a port of embarkation? Not all of these questions are asked by the novel's principal narrators. As many critics have pointed out, no one in the novel is particularly concerned about the impact (or lack thereof) of the Haitian Revolution on Sutpen's plundering expedition. This may signal a degree of shared ambivalence to empire on the part of the narrators, an ambivalence that circulates within Hebrew scripture, as well. The narrators do, however, attempt to fill in some of the gaps. Shreve, for one, remarks to Quentin that "[y]ou said he didn't remember how he got to Haiti, and then he didn't remember how he got into the house with the niggers surrounding it. Now are you going to tell me he didn't even remember getting married?" (205). Sutpen's version of the narrative may well strive for a "logical" reconstruction, but it is as monolithic as the grand design itself.

The Faulknerian redactor, however, does not permit Sutpen, or any of *Absalom's* narrators, to render a singular, authoritative story. In the passage noted above, the redaction of Sutpen's history goes through a series of iterations spanning forty-seven years, from 1863 to 1910, seventy-seven years if we include Sutpen's first conversation with General Compson in 1833. The number of perspectives we are afforded in the novel is dizzying: Sutpen's (via redacted dialogue), General Compson's, Mr. Compson's, Quentin's, Shreve's, and Quentin's and Shreve's, while Quentin and his father had already put the story through some form of redaction in September 1909, as had Quentin and Rosa. These perspectives enable us to hear voices that would otherwise have remained silent, be they those of Clytie, or Charles Bon, or Jim Bond, whose screams torment Quentin. As George Handley has noted, and as Faulkner and the Biblical redactor intuited, "there is always the need to hear someone else tell us how the same

story happened differently” (39). The commentary of Rosa, and of Quentin and Shreve, does just that: it functions as a decolonizing “technology” where history (that of Sutpen and the elder Compsons) is otherwise colonialist and monumental.

Thomas Sutpen, as Handley remarks, aims to “isolate ... those cultural ‘offspring’“ who impede his grand design” (136). Bon, of course, is just that offspring—he metonymically stands in for the “colony” that is Haiti in relation to the imperial United States (Handley 140). Haiti, furthermore, is one of the “postslavery cultures of the Caribbean and the U.S. South [that] are left as bastard children condemned to live in solitude and without a recognized genealogy” (Handley 136). But Faulkner will not allow Charles Bon’s contested genealogy to go unrecognized. Through the narrations of Rosa, Quentin, and Quentin and Shreve, Faulkner lays bare the hemispheric reach of US colonialism, while also establishing that there is no “ahistorical escape from the legacies of slavery and the plantation” (Handley 133) that undo the Sutpens. But if we follow Sutpen’s “biographers,” General Compson and Mr. Compson, Sutpen has committed no such wrongdoing. In spite of the calamity that he has wrought, Sutpen has, according to them, harmed *no one*.

Sutpen, we are told on a number of occasions, possessed an “innocence which he ... never lost” (194). But it is General Compson and his son, not the Faulknerian narrator or redactor, who declares Sutpen’s “innocence,” by which they appear to mean that Sutpen *had been* innocent before being turned away from the Tidewater plantation home front door; or, he had been unaware of the race and class dynamics charging the slave economy, and of his standing within it as a poor white. And even though Sutpen “discovered the innocence,” at which point it should have been rendered always already lost, he somehow, according to the Compsons, manages to



maintain it. It is this innocence that accounts for the flaw in his grand design, and which enables him—and note the romantic appeal to imperial royalty and lineage—to “put his first wife aside like eleventh and twelfth century kings did” (194). But that “innocence” may reveal more about who declares it, General Compson and Mr. Compson, and about the ideologies informing them, than it does about Sutpen. For the novel’s other narrators, Rosa, Quentin, and Shreve, think of him in terms far less forgiving. Rosa notes that Sutpen “[t]ore violently a plantation. ... Without gentleness. ... He wasn’t a gentleman. He wasn’t even a gentleman” (5, 9).

In Rosa’s first conversation with Quentin, Sutpen emerges as anything *but* innocent. We learn that “he took [his land] from a tribe of ignorant Indians” (10), and that he built his plantation with “those negroes of his ... that ... may have come ... from a much older country than Virginia or Carolina” (11). With the aid of “that French architect who looked like he had been hunted down and caught” (10), Sutpen and his slaves forged a home on an estate that, to Rosa, appeared rather “the stronghold of an ogre,” and into which her sister, in Poe fashion, “had vanished” (16). Sutpen’s Hundred attracted “scum and riffraff” to watch him stage “wild ... fighting” in his stable, with Sutpen and his slaves “naked to the waist and gouging at one another’s eyes” (20). We learn also that “two Sutpen faces” watched the bouts from the loft, those of his daughters Judith and Clytie, and that a dying Ellen later asks Rosa to “[p]rotect [Judith]. Protect Judith at least” (10). It is surely not Sutpen’s “innocence” from which Judith needs protection.

General Compson and Mr. Compson narrate from Sutpen outward. They fixate on Sutpen’s “innocence,” as if some tragic flaw proved his undoing. Even though Sutpen kidnapped an architect and imported slaves a quarter-century after the US had abolished

international human trafficking, the Compson men do not interrogate Sutpen's assertion that he asked "no favor of any man" (212).<sup>83</sup> General Compson was the closest person to a friend or confidant of Thomas Sutpen, which may well color his (and his son's) depictions of him. And neither General Compson nor Mr. Compson thinks that Sutpen was injurious to them. As white men in the antebellum era, as in the case of General Compson, or during the US Jim Crow years, as with Mr. Compson, the tale of a fellow white man forging ahead has less to do with those who lie in his wake, or with those he uses, abuses, and discards, than with his grand design, and the "innocence" by which he is undone. Rosa, however, fixates on characters that Sutpen exploits: the Native Americans whose land Sutpen seizes, the slaves he imports, the architect, Judith, Clytie, and herself most of all. Rosa's narrative is replete with "other voices," or with histories "from below" that of Sutpen and his Compson biographers. It is from Rosa, for example, rather than from Mr. Compson, that we "hear" Clytie, the daughter of Sutpen and a slave woman, unnamed and thus anonymous to history, during Rosa's extended dialogue in the fifth chapter. Clytie is a central actor in Rosa's narrative, but in Mr. Compson's she occupies a voiceless, peripheral role of "fetching and carrying" (158).

Mr. Compson declares that "if [Sutpen] had misused or injured anybody, it was only old Ikkemotubbe, from whom he got his land--a matter between his conscience and Uncle Sam and God" (33). Sutpen, then, according to Mr. Compson, is accountable to no man, only to God and to the nation—a nation that enables his dynastic rise. But there are scores of foreign men accountable to Sutpen, from the French architect to the "wild negroes," all of whom (the architect and the slaves) Sutpen indentures. The slaves, as Mr. Compson has it, are the stuff of

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<sup>83</sup> The US lawfully ended the international slave trade in 1807, while Sutpen imports his slaves, presumably from the West Indies, in 1833. See Matthews, "Recalling the West Indies" for more

“legend” (27), while the pursuit of the fleeing architect, which Quentin relays to Shreve, brimmed with the “spirit of sport and sportsmanship and no rancor or hard feelings on either side” (206). Albert Guerard has even argued that “the hunting of the architect ... undercuts the seriousness of Sutpen’s story, but with fabulous humor and extravagance rather than any real sense of cruelty” (59); he seems to agree with Mr. Compson (or with Quentin’s retelling) that the chase was a contest of mutual goodwill even though Rosa tells us that the architect “looked like he had been hunted down and caught” (10). The architect, like the slaves, has been, in a sense, “stolen” from the Caribbean in a US colonial raid, and held captive by Sutpen.<sup>84</sup> The chase may well be “humorous,” but one suspects that the architect was not doing the laughing. Just when did General Compson come to learn that the architect held no hard feelings? Was it when Compson gave him a new hat after his discharge from Sutpen?

The history that General Compson and Mr. Compson construct is one of game, intrigue, heroism, adventure, romance, and turmoil. Rebellions in foreign lands are thwarted by Sutpen’s courage and will; Sutpen, of unremarkable origin, forges an empire, while asking no favor of any man; octoroon wives are tucked away in discreet corners. Henry and Bon enter into some probationary period of contest (which is concurrent with the nation’s probationary contest, the Civil War), the prize of which is Judith, the awarding of whom is within Henry’s jurisdiction, provided Bon repudiate that tucked-away octoroon. It is Shreve and Quentin, not General Compson or Mr. Compson, however, who suspect that Sutpen told Henry that “*it was not until*

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on the origins of Sutpen’s slaves.

<sup>84</sup> Faulkner reinforces the architect’s captive status in his return to the Sutpen narrative in *Requiem For a Nun*: “he [Sutpen] had even brought with him a tame Parisian architect—or captive rather, since it was said in Ratcliffe’s back room that the man slept at night in a kind of pit at the site of the chateau he was planning, tied wrist to wrist with one of his captor’s Carib slaves” (32-33).

after he [Charles Bon] was born that I found out that his mother was part negro,” and that Bon told Henry that “*I’m the nigger that’s going to sleep with your sister*” (283, 286). Shreve and Quentin provide the counter-history to that recorded by Quentin’s father, or to the one that Thomas Sutpen would have “officially” recorded; they remind us that the nation’s miscegenated roots cannot be excised, however much Sutpen would will it.

Mr. Compson, as with the Sutpen that he and his father construct, selectively edits Sutpen’s history. The Faulknerian redactor, however, rebukes any such monolithic accounting through the narrations of Rosa, Shreve, and Quentin. Shreve, the Canadian, interrupts Quentin, tells him to slow down, interjects “the demon” (meaning Sutpen) into Quentin’s narration, and insists on narrating as well. Shreve refuses to allow the story as told at Harvard—an imperial/nationalist center in its own right, arguably the capital (or metropolis) of US cultural imperialism—to be one that merely parrots Mr. Compson’s. Mr. Compson’s Sutpen account presumably ends with the letter he writes to his son; the letter functions as a notification of closure in its announcement of Rosa’s death and funeral. Mr. Compson even notes the “deeper clods” (302) of earth that were dug for Rosa’s grave, as if the story itself is now dead and buried. But the text’s redactor follows the letter with additional commentary from Quentin and Shreve. We still have Jim Bond, whose screams torment Quentin, and whose descendants, according to Shreve, will one day “conquer the western hemisphere” (302) in some revolt of “the wretched of the earth.”<sup>85</sup> That “other voice” of Bond, however, is not one that Quentin’s father, empowered by both his gender and his whiteness, seems to hear. If Mr. Compson’s was the *only* history afforded us, our access would remain limited to those who stand to gain by and who implicitly

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<sup>85</sup> See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (2004).

endorse the US's rise to empire, externally in its plundering of the Caribbean, and internally in its exploitation of African Americans and Indians.

Shreve's attention to the descendants of Jim Bond reminds us that the legacies of US imperialism will far outlast the young men who sit in a dormitory in 1910. Those "heirs," of course, are not just the literal continuation of the Sutpen line, which may well die off with Bond. Rather, they are *all* of those subjected to US tyrannies who will one day demand an accounting: the wages of US imperialism remain to be paid out to its victims. The ledgers, as Shreve notes, have not been cleared by the discovery of Henry Sutpen, or by the death of Rosa, or by the burning down of Sutpen's plantation home. In 1936, in fact, the year of *Absalom*'s publication, US imperialism was a thriving enterprise, while there was no shortage of "descendants" still under its thumb. Matthews and Leigh Anne Duck have noted that the 1930s was a peak era of US Jim Crow colonialism, with Matthews referring to the US South of the segregation era as a "colonial-style regime," and Duck coining it "southern apartheid."<sup>86</sup>

US ventures abroad, meanwhile, continued full ahead, whether in the Caribbean or the Pacific (Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands, the Philippines, and Hawaii were US colonies in the 1930s).<sup>87</sup> These internal and external colonialisms were no more independent of one another than they were in the 1830s of Thomas Sutpen. Amy Kaplan and Peter Schmidt have argued, in fact, that the US exported its internal colonial model—whether through racialized analogies of colonial subjects or through deployments of Reconstruction-era policies in US territories—with Schmidt noting that in "the post-1898 United States, expansive imperial power functions not just

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<sup>86</sup> Matthews, "This Race Which is Not One" (204); Duck, *The Nation's Region*.

<sup>87</sup> Spain ceded Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Philippines, and Guam to the United States in the Treaty of Paris of 1898. All but Cuba were US colonies in the 1930s, although the US held diplomatic

abroad but internally, as an expression of the proper development of state power” (19). Jim Crow practice and race tyranny may have been concentrated primarily in the southern states, but the crisis was far from localized: Jim Crow was one component of an expansive imperial network, one that had been in place since the time of Sutpen.<sup>88</sup>

The US endorsed segregation by refusing to abolish it, even if that practice was regionally “confined” or “contained.” As Duck notes, “at the local level, the United States maintains precisely the kind of cultural particularities that the state ideology of liberalism disavows” (*Region* 33). By condoning Jim Crow segregation, the nation “looks away” from Southern “apartheid”; the country keeps its regions placated by granting them measures of autonomy under the guise of cultural tradition and heritage. The historical era in which *Absalom* was composed, then, was as riddled with racial divides, economic strife, and class conflicts among wealthy and poor whites as that detailed in the novel. Internal divisions that plagued the country on the eve of the Civil War still resonated. The crises of empire do not abate; they remain always already current and contemporary, whether in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries of *Absalom*, or in the Israel and Judah of antiquity.

By virtue of Sutpen’s plundering of the Caribbean, and of Jefferson’s collusion with him (whether tacit or passive), *Absalom* unravels America’s early and mid nineteenth-century rise to

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sway over that country, as well. Hawaii (since 1898) and the Virgin Islands (since 1927) were also US colonies in 1936. See <http://www.ushistory.org/>.

<sup>88</sup> Schmidt further notes that “Jim Crow Colonialism describes how so-called progressivist reforms in the New South and the Federal Government created a new system of racial stratification and labor control at home and abroad that was even more profoundly a global capitalist system than the plantation slave economics that it replaced” (33). Kaplan, referring to the US occupations of Cuba and Puerto Rico, notes that “[d]omestic metaphors of national identity are intimately intertwined with renderings of the foreign and the alien” (4). Cubans and Puerto Ricans were foreign to the United States in that they were not white, and thus, like African Americans, not entitled to the full rights of citizenship.

empire, revealing it to be a thriving enterprise well before, say, the nation's sanctioned forays at the close of the century into Cuba and the Philippines.<sup>89</sup> Sutpen's sojourn into Haiti, meanwhile, signals America's participation in an already mature Atlantic imperial network.<sup>90</sup> While his design is predicated on the exploitation of black slave labor in the antebellum era, the mistreatment of African Americans continues in the "present day" of *Absalom* (Rosa's abuse of Clytie, whom she pushes down, and Jim Bond, whom she berates, in September 1909), and in the Jim Crow 1930s. What the text suggests, then, is that while America may have attained a degree of social reform by the abolition of slavery, the system of race exploitation remains stable: declarations of historical "progress," whether from 1827, 1909, or 1936 appear dubious.<sup>91</sup>

Although Rosa does not bemoan racial injustice, she tellingly remarks that, "*I know this: if I were God I would invent out of this seething turmoil we call progress something ... which would adorn the barren mirror altars of every plain girl who breathes*" (118). Rosa equates progress with "seething turmoil," as does Benjamin who, grounded in rabbinical analysis, notes that concepts of historical progress do "not hold to reality. ... [They are] ... document[s] ... of barbarism" (13, 7). And it is the barbarism of Thomas Sutpen that fuels her "indomitable frustration" (*Absalom* 3), from which she implores Quentin to "remember this and write about it"

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<sup>89</sup> On America's colonial intervention into Cuba, see Ada Ferrer, "Cuba, 1898: Rethinking Race, Nation, and Empire" (1999). On the Philippines, see Schmidt, *Sitting in Darkness*.

<sup>90</sup> As Anne W. Gulick notes, the Haitian Revolution of 1804 was in response to "a period of Atlantic history marked by the rise and proliferation of imperialism, slavery, and racial ideologies," and more than two hundred years of European transatlantic colonization (801).

<sup>91</sup> My reading of social reform rather than historical progression recall's Benjamin's "On the Concept of History," as well as Abba Hillel Silver's *Where Judaism Differed* and Morris Adler's *The World of the Talmud*. Silver argues that the moral imperative in Judaism has always been for present-day progressive social reform, while it is less interested in declarations of historical or chronological development. To do so would stand antithetical to the rabbinic and Talmudic traditions of reinterpreting the Torah of antiquity, and to glean from it evolving contemporary

(5). Rosa, in the tradition of Talmudic commentary, propels forward collective memory and the “secret protocol between the past and [the present]” (Benjamin 2) in her introduction of Thomas Sutpen and his ruthless agenda. America’s imperial design, with which internal colonial moves interlock, proceeds onward, whether we recall Thomas Sutpen of the nineteenth century; or the “one thing” [Jim Bond] disrupting the boys’ accounting at novel’s end (302); or Depression-era America. And any blaming or taunting of the South (Shreve’s “*Tell about the South*” ...) is to try to contain regionally what is, and always has been, a larger network of national, transnational, and hemispheric frictions. But *Absalom*, with its four narrators spanning three generations and two ends of the continent, like its Hebrew Bible forebear, which also boasts four narrators over a range of eras, unsettles any clean sectioning of the country, or clear marking of one age from another.

Quentin Compson cannot clear “the whole ledger” of Sutpen any more than he can siphon off the nineteenth century from his own, or past from present. He is caught in something of a Mr. Compson/Shreve cross-fire: he is the steward of the “official” Sutpen of the Compsons, which is a narrative that Shreve, Quentin’s coeval, will not accept. Quentin must also account for Rosa’s “counter-narrative,” which she tells, as mentioned earlier, in a merchant’s office, albeit one that has been “closed” since the Civil War. And Shreve invokes a ledger, which is used, of course, for the recording of transactions. *Absalom* thus opens in an office and concludes with a ledger not cleared; the novel is bookended by capitalist allusions, by transactions and exchanges, and by the fallout from Sutpen’s (the US’s) “commerce.” Jim Bond, the multiracial great-grandson from Sutpen’s “repudiated” family line, lingers at novel’s end, reminding

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meanings. Adler writes that “Rabbinic teaching [is informed by] a deep social consciousness ... the Torah abounds in legislation marked by social concern and obligation” (101).



Quentin, and us, that the “past is never quite past. ... [It is] strangely edifying and channeling the present” (Cartwright 182). It is in the “iron New England dark” that Quentin sits, the myth of any Southern or agrarian ideal overturned, in collaboration with his Northern roommate, more than 1,300 miles from his Jefferson home.

At the textual level, south and north (as signaled by Quentin and Shreve) come together underneath an imperial, transnational umbrella, whether in the nineteenth century that the boys reconstruct, in the present-day of 1910, or in 1936, the year of *Absalom*’s publication. The “geologic umbilical” joining Quentin and Shreve links them to Jim Bond and to the country’s colonizing heritage, or to one “genealogy” in which Sutpen is *the* imperial, American ancestor. The boys are also tied to the Caribbean, or to the “American Mediterranean” that the US has long since exploited.<sup>92</sup> Quentin thinks that “*maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us*” (210), intuiting that Sutpen has “made us all,” that they each make or comprise the other. There is, as Walter Benjamin notes, only the “here-and-now” (18) containing past and present; or, in *Absalom*’s case “*all of us*,” young, middle-aged, elderly, southern and northern, alive and deceased.<sup>93</sup>

I conclude by emphasizing that *Absalom* and the Hebrew Bible conduct their imperial inquiries within Benjamin’s Messianic framework, and by locating Faulkner and the scriptural

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<sup>92</sup> Matthew Guterl refers to the Caribbean as the “American Mediterranean” that Sutpen turns to “for knowledge of slavery on a vast, spectacular scale” (2). Guterl proposes that a “master class of slaveholders” links the US and the Caribbean in a hemispheric imperial network, and that Sutpen uses Haiti to enter into the master class in the US (8-9). Sutpen, then, has it both ways: he learns how to exploit in Haiti, but then plunders Haiti to ascend in the US.

<sup>93</sup> Keith Cartwright similarly remarks in *Reading Africa into American Literature* that “Quentin feels the full burden of southern/national history. ... [A]lthough Clytie ... is identified as ‘the one

redactor on an ever-present ahistorical continuum. Messianic time unfolds in one unbroken moment: when the “Angel of History,” or the Messiah, (or redeemer) looks upon the world, his face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. ... [This] storm drives him irresistibly into the future. ... That which we call progress, is *this* storm. ... History is the object of a construction. ... [Our task is] to explode the continuum of history. (9, 16)

The redactors of both the Hebrew Bible and *Absalom*, as I have tried to show, “explode the continuum of history” through their refusal to endorse any one perspective, and by their granting of agency to a multiplicity of histories and to histories from below. Contending accounts, no matter how biased or subjective, circulate within a larger national narrative fueling the redactors’ respective textual projects. The redactive method ensures that we reconsider the past presently; that we propel forward collective memory; that we rethink catastrophies as the continuing emergencies that they have always been.

In R’s case, this meant using J and E, north and south, and the splitting of the kingdom; D, the fall of the north, the destruction of the south, exile, and return; P, the more theologically grounded source, and the one most responsible for placing Israel’s transgressions within a context of self-assessment. The Talmudic and rabbinic traditions of reinterpretation that R set in motion ensures that these “historical” calamities, the internal and external imperialisms populating scripture, remain ever current, “charg[ing] .. the here-and-now ... [insuring that] the future [does] not ... turn into a homogenous and empty time for the Jews” (Benjamin 14, 18).

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who owns the horror,’ we know that it is finally Quentin, the south, the thought-ridden nation that all own it” (206, 217).

The Jewish tradition is one in which transition and progress are not read chronologically; time is not measured by historical building blocks in which eras are transcended, or epochs set at past removes. As Abba Silver notes, Judaism's "reverence for the past and for the written Torah ensure[s] ... an essential unity" (4); Judaism refigures the past continuously rather than progressively.

In *Absalom*, Rosa remarks that "*living is one constant and perpetual instant*" (114). Mr. Compson notes that "events and occasions took place without chronology" (49), and refers to time as "the fluid cradle of events" (51). And Quentin and Shreve "each look burdened with youth's immemorial obsession not with time's dragging weight but with its fluidity" (240). Each of the four narrators, as well as the textual redactor, appears attuned to (and seems to endorse) Benjaminian nonlinearity, in which past and present coalesce. And Sutpen is undone by his failure to see how his past, or his repudiation of Eulalia and Bon, should in any way impact upon his present. Sutpen believed that the whole ledger, to use Shreve's phrase, should have been cleared when he paid off the "two persons whom I might be considered to have deprived of anything I might later possess" (213). Sutpen is thus emblematic of the Faulknerian characters who, as Duck notes, "damage themselves and others by avowing an absolute split in time ... [and by] refusing to engage in ... nuanced investigation of the relationship between past and present" (*Region* 159). He thinks that his catastrophe has been contained, once and for all; Sutpen has no sense that his emergency, like his nation's, is perpetual.

I place the redactor and Faulkner, then, on the same Benjaminian continuum: surveying their nation's histories, accounting for disparate voices while excluding none, refiguring imperial motives, cautioning against the dangers of forgetting, warning of the perils of blotting out the

past. Only through remembrance, whether of a people's pledge to their God, or through faith in their Torah, or of the "people and events you were fortunate enough to escape yourself" (*Absalom* 5) do we ensure that the past remains vital. The emergencies of empire change shape and scope, be they Babylonian captivity or American colonialism and imperialism, but they do not abate. History is no progress, as both the Bible and *Absalom* warn. Rather, it is an ongoing struggle to infuse our present with the lessons of our past, be they the obsessive reach of a King David or a Thomas Sutpen, or the desires of those in power to "establish ... patrilinear line[s]" (Aboul-Ela 150) that propel forward systems of oppression at the expense of justice, critique, or reform. It is only by the persistence of commentary, be it Talmudic or rabbinical, or the manifold reconstructions of Sutpen's rise and fall, that we pay our past forward, and ensure that it reverberates still. Like the redactor of old, Faulkner "sought dialogue with the ghosts of the land that produced him" (Cartwright 218), while challenging us, as Benjamin would later write, to brush history against the grain.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE CURSE OF EMPIRE

In the preceding chapter I considered how William Faulkner modeled *Absalom, Absalom!* on the Hebrew Bible's redactive method. Like the redactor before him, Faulkner accounts for a series of narrative voices that do not always cohere but that, at the textual level, expose the internal and external colonialisms propelling forward a nation's rise to empire. I examined Faulkner's emulation of redactive strategy while looking broadly at Biblical events, such as the naming of God by the J and E writers, and Ezra's post-exilic return to Canaan. I would now like to focus on one scriptural episode in particular, and on Faulkner's interrogation of it in the Jim Crow United States: Noah's cursing of his son, Ham, shortly after the world's flood waters receded. While the Curse of Ham occupies only eight lines of scripture in the ninth chapter of Genesis, it has been deployed by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike for, in some cases, nearly 2,500 years to foster and legitimate colonial conquest. In the US, the Curse was set to work to authorize slavery in the antebellum era, and then to "explain" black male sexual depravity during the postbellum segregation age.

The Curse of Ham has proven both durable and elastic, displaying a "capacity to adapt to changing ideological demands" (Haynes 173) up to the present day. Fundamentalist Pat

Robertson<sup>94</sup> alluded to the Curse in a January 2010 interview to explain why Haiti endured a devastating earthquake, suggesting that Haitians continue to suffer for overthrowing the French two centuries ago in their fight for emancipation. During the Rwandan genocide of 1994, Hutu extremists labeled their victims “‘Hamite’ Tutsis” (Haynes 173) to justify state-sanctioned slaughter. The Curse is routinely referenced in contemporary racist propaganda, whether to campaign against Barack Obama or, in the case of Louis Farrakhan, to point out the “Jewish Origin of the Curse of Ham” as a means of fostering anti-Semitism.<sup>95</sup> However extreme these examples may be, or however disreputable may be their claimants, they all speak to the power of the Hamitic myth, to the Curse’s continued resonance, and to the catastrophes, in the case of Rwanda, that can result from deployments of it. The scope of Ham’s proponents, meanwhile, affirms its ideological flexibility: from right-wing Christians to black Muslims, and from white supremacists to Rwandan nationalists, the Curse maintains utility and allure. Whether to rouse racist feelings, disparage political candidates, find cause for national disasters, or license mass

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<sup>94</sup> Referring to the Haitian revolution of 1791-1804, Robertson noted that “[s]omething happened a long time ago in Haiti, and people might not want to talk about it. They [black Haitians] were under the heels of the French ... and they got together and swore a pact to the devil. ... Ever since, they have been cursed by one thing or another” (<http://www.jackandjillpolitics.com/2010/01/pat-robertson>). Several commentators have mentioned the Hamitic connotations of Robertson’s remark, and have pointed out the colonial and racist implications inherent in suggesting that Haitians have been cursed for defeating white slaveholders. See the website noted above, as well as <http://www.juancole.com/2010/01/pat-robertsons-racist-blaming-of.html>. A number of political blogs have also noted that Robertson’s use of “cursed” is grounded in a racially motivated reading of the Curse of Ham.

<sup>95</sup> During the 2008 Presidential campaign, “Republican Faith Chat: Conservative Christians ONLY” predicted that Barack Obama would not be elected because he suffered from the Hamitic Curse. See <http://baptistsforbrown2008.wordpress.com/2007/07/19/the-curse-of-ham-why-barack-hussein-obama-will-never-be-president/>. “Blacks and Jews Newspaper” is an unofficial Nation of Islam website which claims that global anti-black sentiments have their origins in Talmudic interpretations of the Curse of Ham. See <http://www.blacksandjews.com/Welcome.html>.

killings, Ham continues to inspire those who look to scripture and exegesis for originary cause, and for incitement to hate and oppress.

The Curse of Ham has flourished within imperial systems of conquest and oppression. From the beginning, or from Israel's accounting of nation-building in the Hebrew Bible, the story has been linked to questions of nation, empire, and colonial expansion. These questions, which center on who is cursed in Ham, who is cursing, and why, are asked by William Faulkner in his seventh novel, *Light in August*. Two of his characters, Joanna Burden and Doc Hines, appeal to the Curse of Ham as they ruminate and act upon white supremacist leanings. Faulkner's use of scriptural material from the Hebrew Bible enables him to critique US colonialism, nationalism, and empire through an interrogation of the regional, national, and hemispheric networks that are embroiled in the Hamitic myth. In so doing, Faulkner exposes the power and authority that is US whiteness by examining the imperial figure rather than the subjected one; he performs a Hamitic counter-reading by implicating the Noah-like figures who espouse the myth rather than the Ham-like figures who suffer because of it.

To situate *Light in August* in the long-standing Hamitic tradition, I begin by looking at the Curse in its Biblical context, in which the episode, while portraying Ham's "wrongdoing," also exposes Israeli designs on the territory of Canaan, or Israel's colonizing move towards empire in the classical era. In the United States, however, Ham did more than authorize colonization: it justified enslavement of peoples of African descent, and then legitimated Jim Crow race relations as a safeguard against black male sexual "predators." I explore the cultural and ideological work accounting for shifts in Hamitic deployments, tracing its historical arc from the fifth century BCE to the nineteenth and twentieth-century US. Regardless of how the Curse

has been set to work, though, it has consistently functioned as a rationale to oppress within a broader framework of empire and expansion, and Ham in the US has proven no exception. By examining the Curse from the Biblical era to Faulkner's time, I hope to show why the story resounded for Faulkner as he explored the colonizing leanings of his country, one that made ready use of the myth to subjugate within its own Hamitic context.

*Light in August* is not the only text in which Faulkner explores the Hamitic myth. In *Go Down, Moses*, as Isaac McCaslin and his older cousin, McCaslin (Cass) Edmonds, discuss what their family's ledgers reveal, Isaacs refers to "His [God's] lowly people," (248), to which Cass replies, "[t]he sons of Ham. You who quote the Book: the sons of Ham'" (249). In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Rosa Coldfield remarks that Charles Bon's son was attired in "that burlesque uniform and regalia of the tragic burlesque of the sons of Ham" (160). In "Wash," which Faulkner would later rework in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the narrator notes that "[i]t would seem to [Wash Jones] that that world in which Negroes, whom the Bible told him had been created and cursed by God to be brute and vassal to all men of white skin, were better found and housed and clothed than he and his" (*Collected Stories* 538). And in *Requiem for a Nun*, the narrator remarks that white men "had grown from infancy among slaves, breathed the same air and even suckled the same breast with the sons of Ham" (36). It is fair to say that the Curse of Ham was firmly entrenched in Faulkner's imagination.

*Go Down, Moses, Absalom, Absalom!*, "Wash," and *Requiem For a Nun* are not the focus of this chapter, but the Hamitic references in them suggest that Faulkner's engagement with the Curse goes well beyond *Light in August*, as he turns to Ham in two other major novels, in one of his more significant short stories, and in the formally experimental *Requiem*. *Light in August*,



however, contains Faulkner's most subversive reading of the myth. Where Cass Edmonds, Rosa Coldfield, and Wash Jones each mention the Curse on one occasion, Joanna Burden and Doc Hines engage in extended Hamitic dialogues, both appealing to Ham in their subjections of Joe Christmas, and in their claiming of racial superiority to blacks. *Light in August* unravels national race constructions in which white Americans read, misread, and appropriate the Curse of Ham to foster and legitimate ideologies of oppression. The Curse, for Faulkner, functions as a discursive trope by means of which his white characters interpret an existing "mark" of blackness or of race. As Jay Watson has argued, "[s]ocial relations ... create race by means of the mark. ... [T]he mark creates race" ("Writing Blood" 75-76). Race, in other words, is not essential, nor is it somatic, or "of the body"; it is a marking projected onto a set of peoples, out of which characteristics of race are then read.<sup>96</sup> In *Light in August*, Joanna Burden and Doc Hines interpret this marking as an originary "curse" that is predicated on racial investment, on constructions of whiteness and blackness that manipulate Hebrew scripture to engineer and propel forward race-coded laws, customs, and performances.

Curses in Faulkner may also appear to extend beyond, or to be linked to something other than, deployments of the Hamitic episode. In *Light in August*, Gail Hightower, Jefferson's deposed reverend, falls victim to a regional, landed curse in his allegiance to the Confederate Lost Cause. While for Hightower the curse is not racial but historical, it is still the privilege of whiteness that enables his particular blending of Christianity and the Civil War. A curse may even cover the entire South, as Rosa Coldfield postulates: "Yes, fatality and curse on the South

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<sup>96</sup> In addition to Watson's "Writing Blood," see Colette Guillaumin, *Racism, Sexism, Power, and Ideology*. Guillaumin writes that the "idea of race. ... [is] a material phenomenon" (133) which translates into markings—projections of race, or of racial characteristics. "Color" is thus constructed, or imagined; it is in no way fixed or immutable.

and on our family as though because some ancestor of ours had elected to establish his descent in a land primed for fatality and already cursed with it” (*Absalom* 14). The region’s “landed” curse, though, as Robert Alter notes in *Pen of Iron*, “is firmly established by [Faulkner] because it is the interpretative frame in which the history of the South is seen. ... [T]he historical crime of slavery ... bring[s] down ... the implacable curse” (95). Any variation on curses, then, whether on the land, on black southerners or their white brethren, branches out from, and can be traced to, America’s history of race bondage, its legacy of discrimination, and Faulkner’s Jim Crow present, where color-inscribed terror is ceaselessly revisited. And it is the historical crime of slavery, and the segregation era that emerged out of it that depended so heavily on the Curse as declared by Noah (the patriarch) in Genesis.

While there is no literal mention of Ham’s complexion in scripture, Joanna Burden and Doc Hines, who each assume Noah’s authoritative position, fix Genesis 9 along a white and black axis that traces race origins and definitions back to “the sons of Noah, [from which] the whole world branched out” (Genesis 9:19). Such racial markings, though, are never so convenient. As Thadious M. Davis argues in *Faulkner’s Negro*, Joe Christmas is at times white, and at others black; he is simultaneously a part of, but alienated from, “the worlds of blacks and whites” (135). Joanna Burden and Doc Hines, however, espouse monolithic, binary readings of race in which the Curse of Ham “marks” Joe Christmas. They project onto Joe Christmas blackness as originating in, and authorized by, American Christian exegesis of Genesis 9. The scriptural justification that Burden and Hines claim grants them leverage from which to subjugate, and to act as agents in the nation’s onward move to empire that, at the textual level, is destabilized rather than endorsed. As emblematic of white America, Burden and Hines render

the Curse of Ham an originary, ethnological marker of sin that Genesis stamped upon the black or Canaanite body.

The cursed black body functions as a site of meaning in *Light in August*; conceptions of whiteness and blackness, meanwhile, encompass far more than color complexion. Joe Christmas's "parchmentcolored face" (123) and "white chest" (225) undermine notions of skin color as a definitive indicator of blackness. And Joanna Burden, who is white, "seemed to exist somewhere in physical darkness itself" (262). But it is the "black" Joe Christmas that Jefferson kills to avenge the honor of white Southern womanhood for the murder and rape of a Northerner whom, in death, the town comes to finally embrace: the Curse helps mark or make Christmas "black" enough to kill, and in turn to be killed. Christmas is labeled black by a host of gauges, be they fabricated or invented by the town, projected onto him, or performed by him. Suppositions about his past, denotations of his name, eating habits, dress, and musings on white, black, and mixed blood swirl within the novel to mark Joe Christmas. He pays for this marking bodily when he is castrated and murdered; his mutilation, meanwhile, carries as much signification with respect to the "curse" as does his murder, for Ham's misstep, obscure though it may be, is likely a sexual affront, whether he raped, castrated, or merely looked upon his naked father.

### **The Curse of Ham**

The Curse of Ham occurs as Noah and his sons emerge from the ark after the great deluge.

Noah, the tiller of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw

his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a cloth, placed it against both their backs and, walking backward, they covered their father's nakedness; their faces were turned the other way, so that they did not see their father's nakedness. When Noah woke up from his wine and learned what his youngest son had done to him, he said,

“Cursed be Canaan;  
The lowest of the slaves  
Shall he be to his brothers.

And he said,

“Blessed be the LORD,  
The God of Shem;  
Let Canaan be a slave to them.  
May God enlarge Japheth,  
And let him dwell in the tents of Shem;  
And let Canaan be a slave to them.” (Genesis 9:20-27)

Ham's offense, as the Jewish Study Bible notes, is “murky” (JSB 26). Leviticus 20:11 asserts that to uncover one's father's nakedness is to lie “with his father's wife,” in which case Ham has committed incest. To “see” nakedness, meanwhile, suggests carnal knowledge (Leviticus 20:17), or perhaps the rape of the father. According to Midrash, however, which consists of commentary on the Torah dating back to the fifth century BCE, Ham does not rape either of his parents but has castrated Noah to prevent him “from ever having a fourth son. ... Just as Ham prevented Noah from ever having a fourth son, so will his own fourth son, Canaan, be cursed”

(JSB 26). What is not unclear is the status of Canaan and the Canaanites: Genesis explicitly identifies Ham as the father of conquered peoples, and of a conquered territory. Those peoples are thus “cursed” to remain conquered in perpetuity.

Another reading of the Curse suggests that Ham’s offense is quite literal: he violated the tenets of bodily modesty, so “highly stressed in both the Tanakh and rabbinic Judaism” (JSB 26), of looking upon and defiling the honor and privacy of his parents. In fine Hebrew fashion, there are at least four interpretations of Ham’s misdeed, with no agreement among them. What seems clear is that by some measure Ham has sexually humiliated his father. In *Light in August*, Joanna Burden eroticizes a similar humiliation in her affair with Joe Christmas, which she sometimes choreographs as interracial rape; she stages a reenactment of Ham’s entering of the tent as Christmas enters her bedroom. Joanna compels Joe Christmas, then, to perform the Hamitic role in which, as cursed (by her), he has been cast.

Ham’s action also invites commentary on the ocular. Whatever he is doing, it involves a lot of gazing, of fetishizing, or of looking around, at or for that which he should not be looking at, or for. Perhaps Ham would have been better served outside the tent discussing the newly-minted covenant with his brothers, as God had just declared that “I now establish My covenant with you [Noah] and your offspring to come” (Genesis 9:9). Genesis 9 makes evident that Ham descends from Noah, and is thus not foreign or alien to him, and that God’s covenant extends from the beginning to Ham, as well as to Ham’s brothers. Lastly, if anything is certain in the episode of the Curse, it is this: Ham’s skin color, or that of his father or brothers, is not mentioned.

The Jews of antiquity, as David Goldenberg argues in *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, placed little to no stock in skin color or complexion. They were concerned, foremost, with matters of faith, in which ethnicity rarely factored. As I will also stress in my next chapter, the Jews did not invest in hierarchies of race or origin. Moses, as was famously supposed by Faulkner contemporaries Sigmund Freud, Zora Neale Hurston, and Thomas Mann, could have been Egyptian, black, or both, while his wife, Zipporah, was Ethiopian; the matriarchs Rachel and Leah came from “the land of the Easterners,” or Mesopotamia (Genesis 29:1); Queen Sheba is likely African. There is little evidence, as Goldenberg puts forth, that Ethiopians or dark-skinned peoples were discriminated against or enslaved because of their skin tone in the Biblical era. It appears, rather, that later Christians “interpolated the assumptions and prejudices of their time into the biblical text” (Goldenberg 22). One such grafting of later views back into Hebrew scripture concerns Moses’ wife, who is alternately referred to as a Kushite, Midianite, or Ethiopian, and whom Aaron and Miriam despise. Goldenberg notes a line of scholarship which assumes that “because Moses’ wife was a black African (as they think), she was therefore a slave. ... Or, if Moses’ wife is not actually black, Aaron and Miriam mean to insult her by characterizing her as one” (27). The Bible, however, never mentions Zipporah’s skin color, nor does it note that she is, or ever was, a slave. As Barbara Johnson notes, Zipporah’s ethnicity remains ambivalent; Aaron and Miriam may well have chided Moses for “going outside the Israelites” (24), or for marrying a non-Jew rather than for marrying a dark-skinned woman. Christian exegesis, though, conflates geography with Aaron and Miriam’s objection to conclude that, as an Ethiopian, Zipporah must have been black, that her blackness denoted slavery, and that criticism of her emerged from racial biases.

Christian thinkers have even argued that Moses' "black" wife was not Zipporah at all, but a second wife with whom Aaron and Miriam had taken umbrage (Goldenberg 27-29). Each of these suppositions, however, posits conditions and "events not provided by the narrative. ... [T]hey are the product of modern assumptions read back into the Bible" (Goldenberg 29). Zipporah's blackness, her status as slave, the legitimacy of her marriage, and the insult of her that these conditions justify are each products of modern, Christian assumptions that purport complexion to be a curse when, according to Goldenberg, "no negative evaluations of real blacks were found either in biblical or postbiblical sources" (196). This is not to suggest that rabbinic literature fails to comment upon blackness and/or what it may signify, when it remarks upon just about everything. Blackness circulates in rabbinic commentary as a form of moral imagery. Goldenberg, for example, notes that "[u]se of the color black as a [marker] of evil is found in all periods of Jewish literature" (196), while Stephen Haynes writes in *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* that the "modern association with black servitude is adumbrated in works by church fathers and rabbis alike" (7). But color as a sign of evil that translated bodily, or the metaphorical move to judgment upon and "antipathy toward[s] black Africans ... is not found in Jewish literature" of the classical era (Goldenberg 196).

There is no consensus to be gleaned from the Midrash or Talmud that because Ham violated his father, Noah cursed his descendants with black skin. It is merely a supposition in some of the commentary that, as Haynes notes, suggests a theme "that would resonate through the history of interpretation" (25). In other words, Ham did not sin as a result of his blackness, nor is blackness a somatic badge of his sin. At most, Noah "denigrates" his fourth son by relegating him to slavery, with some rabbis, as Jacob Neusner argues, remarking that Ham's

“seed will be ugly and dusky ... [because Ham is] the one who stopped me from doing something in darkness” (qtd. in Haynes 25). It would be a far reach to attribute Atlantic slavery and the Jim Crow US to Jewish exegesis, when the Bible does not condemn based on skin color. The Jews were far more concerned with what Ham had done wrong, with how he had broken covenant, than with whether or not he procreated ugly, dusky seed.

While the Curse of Ham may not have signified a “blackening” of skin in the biblical era, it functioned imperially by anticipating Israel’s covenantal destiny to condemn Canaan. The Biblical writers twice emphasize that Ham is the father of Canaan *before* he transgresses, the import of which would have been realized by any Genesis reader of antiquity. An Israelite studying Torah in, say, the third century BCE would have well known that the defeat of the Canaanites in their own land was as much a part of Jewish history and lore as was the Curse of Ham, or God’s destruction of the inhabitants of the Cities of the Plain (Genesis 10). Noah’s naming of Ham’s unborn son metonymically signals Jewish imperial destiny. Canaan, fated to become a slave, will occupy the land of Canaan, or the “territory extend[ing] ... as far as Sodom [and] Gomorrah” (Gen 10:19), whose inhabitants, like their forefather, will commit egregious sexual offenses. The narrative of the Curse, then, justifies empire: Israel will drive the Canaanites out of Canaan. But the redacted Bible also exposes the perils of empire, as the Israelites, or new Canaanites, will later be driven out, as well, into Babylonian exile. Hebrew scripture revisits the trope of exile repeatedly, from expulsion out of the Garden of Eden, to Cain’s banishment for murdering his brother, to the Jews’ long enslavement in Egypt. The Curse of Ham, which authorizes Canaanite defeat and exile, is hardly originary; it is one in a constellation of episodes that functions to reinforce scripture’s exilic preoccupation. That



justification, furthermore, is perhaps retroactive. As discussed earlier, strands of what became Genesis were written by J, E, and P between the ninth and seventh centuries BCE, and redacted in either the fifth or fourth century BCE. The Ham episode was written by J (Friedman, *Who Wrote 47*), in Judah, as many as five hundred years *after* the Canaanites were driven from their land, and before either Israel or Judah had been overthrown. Ham was composed, therefore, during the peak or near-peak of Israel and Judah's imperial age, or the time between the Jews' defeat of Canaan and their subsequent defeat at the hands of the Assyrians (722 BCE) and Babylonians (586 BCE). So the story may well have been fabricated by J to provide mythical "good reason" for later conquests.

From the beginning, the Curse of Ham has been ripe for readings and counter-readings. Within the context of Ham's disobedience, the story demonstrates or reinforces that backsliding, or failing to uphold covenant, is wrought with grave consequence. At the same time, it speaks to the power of myth in an imperial framework, as a "murky" offense, constructed or recorded several hundred years after an invasion and takeover, becomes the grounds for condemning a people to slavery, as well as for reinscribing a Noah-like patriarchy. But in either a reading (implicating the Ham-like Canaanites) or counter-reading (implicating the Israeli colonizers), the Curse of Ham in the Biblical era would not have registered as the "root cause" of black skin, nor would it have equated blackness with slavery. Neither the Hebrew Bible nor early rabbinic commentary supposes that Ham's affinity with sin is unique, that his descendants are black, or that skin color determines status or behavior. More than one thousand years elapsed, during which two world religions, Christianity and Islam, emerged, before the non-black world began to

take from Ham the authority to enslave Africans, and before Ham's misstep transformed into a bodily marking.

Slavery and blackness were first conjoined as reciprocal cause and effect, and then linked to Ham via Noah's curse, between the seventh and tenth century CE in "Arabia ... after the Islamic conquest of Africa," although earlier Arabic and Christian sources had begun constructing "counterbiblical tradition[s]" to that effect (Goldenberg 170, 172).<sup>97</sup> Goldenberg and Haynes each note that while blacks had long been enslaved, there is little evidence to suggest that, before the seventh century CE, slavery was seen as a consequence of blackness. With the expansion of the Muslim world, however, we begin to see justification for slavery based specifically on complexion. Where there had been blacks in Rome, for example, whose status was that of slave, skin color had not been a precondition for their enslavement. But this began to change after the rise of Islam, whose exegesis "first consciously combined ... the so-called Hamitic myth [with] race and slavery" (Haynes 7). From the Islamic conquests of Africa and Asia forward, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish commentary began to label the world's population by skin color, with white, black, and red denoting descent from Noah's sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth. From the seventh to fifteenth centuries, the meanings of color began to shift from "indications of relative complexion [to] ... ethnic markers" (Goldenberg 186) by which blacks were deemed *essentially* different from non-blacks.

This is not to suggest a clean, linear expansion of Ham's "blackness" from Islamic exegesis into Jewish and Christian commentary, or that there was, necessarily, an explicit Hamitic dialogue among the three Abrahamic religions. There was certainly no coming together

of religious scribes from the three faiths to deem Ham “black” from a given point forward. Rather, Goldenberg and Haynes appear to argue that there were lines of influence, whether cultural, geographic, or economic, among the three religions, as there were Jews, Christians, and Muslims circulating wherever Islam spread. As a case in point, Midrash *Tanhuma*, which was redacted in Babylonia sometime after the Islamic conquest, attributes Ham’s eye color, lip shape, hair type, phallus size, and penchant to go naked to God’s punishment of him on behalf of Noah (Goldenberg 187, 390). While the Midrash does not discuss the color of Ham’s skin, it “clearly seem[s] to refer to the black African,” in concert with descriptions “also found in Arabic writings and later Christian literature” (Goldenberg 188). So there is a departure in the Midrash from earlier Hebrew commentary, or from that which preceded Islam, by its reading of bodily signification. This indicates that Islamic readings of Ham had begun to inform Jewish thought. By the seventh to tenth centuries, then, ethnicity theories, or conceptions of a “black” Ham, were beginning to take shape in a context of empire that would have lasting global consequence, and that efforts were underway to tether these scripturally, whether in Muslim, Christian, or Jewish quarters. Where the Arab world first placed Ham into the imperial service of enslaving Africans, the Christian world gradually followed suit.

By the early sixteenth century, Spain, Portugal, and then England and France began feverishly pillaging Africa for slave labor, an enterprise coinciding with Europe’s exploration of the New World. Slavery in the Americas was not initially restricted to blacks: Spain and Portugal imported Arab captives in addition to their attempts to place Native Americans in servitude (Thomas 92-93). Throughout the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century, however,

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<sup>97</sup> Haynes argues that the conjoining of Ham, blackness, and slavery occurred in Arabia in the seventh-century, while Goldenberg argues that the conjoining took place in the ninth and tenth

America's white settlers began relying upon perceptions of blackness rooted in the Hamitic curse to further their imperial exploits. Winthrop Jordan notes the evolution to "whiteness" and "blackness" on American soil, where "Englishmen tended to set Negroes over against themselves, to stress what they conceived to be radically contrasting qualities of color, religion, and style of life, as well as animality and a peculiar potent sexuality. ... On every count, the Negroes qualified [for slavery]. ... Slaves were infidels or heathens. ... Slavery ... was God's punishment upon Ham's prurient disobedience" (43, 56). By the time of American colonization, the myth of Ham had been read as a signifier of black skin, which justified slavery, for as many as nine hundred years.

European settlers were well disposed to read character traits, behavior, and licentiousness off of complexion: dark skin signaled the infidel or heathen status that, refracted back through Christian readings of the Hamitic Curse, licensed servile status. What English and European settlers wanted above all was slave labor, as Hugh Thomas, Winthrop Jordan, and George M. Fredrickson have noted.<sup>98</sup> And Africans appeared to fit that bill. There was a flourishing trade that would provide blacks in great supply, they possessed fortitude, according to whites, to survive forced work, and by Biblical "marking" they were cursed as different and disobedient. Blacks were also servile, by virtue of the Curse, and thus fit for enslavement. The Biblical marking, however, shows as much about how religions are shaped by imperial motives, and by economics, as it does about the moral or ethical imperatives those religions espouse.

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centuries. They both assert, however, that Muslims first linked Ham, blackness, and slavery.

## Ham in America

The evolution of Ham in America is curious and sordid. While Ham first gained traction as a means to enslave during the rise of Islam from the seventh to the tenth centuries, Muslims captured Christians and Jews as well. In North America, however, the exclusivity of black servitude soon took hold. Native Americans, who may have been read as infidels but did not suffer from a *curse*, resisted enslavement but were otherwise subjected to genocide. In the North American colonies and then the United States, the conjoining of the Curse of Ham and black enslavement reached its full maturation, with Ham commented upon and debated by writers, clergymen, scientists, politicians, abolitionists, slavery advocates, and segregationists alike. The distinctions made by white Americans differentiating themselves from Africans conveniently centered on the Hamitic curse even as existing indicators of difference otherwise collapsed. At first arrival, English settlers referred to themselves as Englishmen and their captives as African. The utility of that marker, as Jordan notes, soon dissolved, since upon settlement both groups became American.

The reseating of dissimilarity during the seventeenth century, then, turned Biblical, with the English envisioning themselves Christians and their African counterparts heathens, or infidels. Christian custom, though, “demanded acceptance of Negroes into the community of men” (Jordan 201); in colonies settled largely to practice Protestantism, and to escape religious persecution, the impetus to convert African “infidels” ran high. There was in English, and then seventeenth-century American clerical discourse an “assumption that common brotherhood in Christ imparted a special quality to the master-servant relationship” that should have rendered

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<sup>98</sup> Thomas, *The Slave Trade*; Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*; Jordan, *White Over Black*.

enslavement of fellow Christians problematic (Jordan 56). African Americans, however, remained beyond this pale in the Anglo imagination. Where the Christian/heathen dichotomy no longer resonated, Anglo-Americans began perceiving the division as one of captive and free, or of African Americans as “servants unto [their] brethren” (KJV Genesis 9:25). The captive/freedmen designation proved legally unsound, however, as it failed to account for manumitted African Americans. By the late seventeenth century, English and European Americans settled on yet another set of terms by which to subjugate: white and black. Blacks were thus rendered ontologically servile (and whites ontologically free) by a color designator that, in effect, “naturalized” slavery as an embodied condition.

The turn to color as an ethnic signifier was wrought with implication; the body became fixed as a site of meaning and morality in which blackness encompassed wantonness, avarice, and debasement. Whiteness and blackness became the basis upon which America established its social hierarchy, one rooted, at least in part, in the Hamitic curse. The ascription of blackness to Ham required “extraordinarily strenuous exegesis” (Jordan 73), continuous reengineering of scripture and, as we move into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a reconciliation with science and evolutionary theory. Genesis does not describe Ham’s complexion; to circumvent this textual absence, white Americans read out of Ham and Canaan *indicators* of blackness, such as modes of behavior, an affinity with dishonor, and a state of arrested adolescence. Because Ham sinned against his father, for which Canaan was exegetically marked black, black skin visually signified “black” transgressions. Virginia planter William Byrd, for example, noted in 1736 that “[w]e have already at least 10,000 men of these descendents of Ham, fit to bear arms. ... [Who might] kindle a Servile War. Such [men] might be dreadfully mischievous” (qtd. in

Jordan 111). Byrd makes the Hamitic link to establish a genealogical legacy of black “mischievousness” which whites must guard against. Byrd also employs scripture to justify the imperial exploitation of blacks: a slave uprising would threaten the hierarchy of white power, but must be considered possible because of their Hamitic past. White southerners, in particular, zeroed in on Ham’s failure to honor his father to justify racism, to account for Noah’s curse, and to enslave black Americans.<sup>99</sup> *Whom* black Americans were to have dishonored was neither here nor there; rather, as offspring of Ham, they merited their subjected status.

The patriarchal South invested in a culture of honor in which fatherly fealty held singular import. Noah, of course, is the postdiluvian father of all men; the dishonoring of him by his son “so appealed [to an] ... Old South romanticism” for the reason that white Southerners assumed that Noah, like them, was a man of honor whose utterance of condemnation held particular sway (Haynes 81). As Haynes points out, Noah was both privately and publicly stripped by his obdurate son: Ham saw his father disrobed, and then broadcast the exposure. And in honor-fixated cultures such as the plantocratic south, appearances were paramount. Bertram Wyatt-Brown writes that “the fear of public humiliation,” particularly when it centered upon “bodily appearance ...[as] an outward sign of inner merit,” created tremendous anxiety among white Southerners (qtd. in Haynes 79). Ham’s exposure of his father thus signaled both private and public disclosures that Shem and Japheth stood duty-bound to conceal. This resonated deeply in the imaginary of the white South, where to discuss what transpired “in the tent,” so to speak, as did Ham, would have signaled both indecency and a lack of filial deference. For violating

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<sup>99</sup> Matthew Estes and Josiah Priest are two nineteenth-century writers who made such claims. Fredrickson notes that the “virulently racist use of the curse of Ham was most strikingly manifested in Josiah Priest’s *Slavery, As It Relates to the Negro* (1843) ... [and in] Estes, *Defense of Negro Slavery*” (61), which was written in 1846.

Noah's appearance, Ham and his line *appear* black; Ham's humiliation of Noah functions to remind whites of their obligation to uphold honor within their own patriarchy, while blacks suffer enduringly for an "original" exposure. The African American slave thus becomes *the* paradigmatic figure without honor in the antebellum South.

Whether antebellum readings of Ham focused on disobedience of the patriarch, on dishonoring the father, or on an aptitude for revolt, above all else, the Curse of Ham was deployed to license slavery. As it had been done in ancient Israel, and as it had been done during the Muslim conquests, the Curse of Ham legitimated oppression and authorized colonization in the antebellum US. The trope's elasticity, however, would soon be tested. The Civil War led to abolition, stripping slavery of its legal sanction. So where the Curse no longer provided a Biblical imperative for enslavement, Ham would need to "explain" something else. Contending theories of evolution, meanwhile, those of polygenesis and Darwinism, took hold in the mid nineteenth century that threatened to discredit the scriptural justification for Ham's "black" marking. If proponents of the Curse aimed to continue deploying Ham to oppress blacks, they would have to reconcile scripture with emerging scientific thought. By 1865, then, Ham risked becoming antiquated.

As the US continued its march towards empire, defenders of the Curse found a ready point of intersection between scripture, science, and law by which to renew Ham, and by which to propel the myth into the twentieth century: black male sexual depravity. The rapacity of the black male, the threat to white women that black men posed, and the perils of miscegenation would be safeguarded against by white America, with the Curse of Ham reengineered to accommodate both abolition and evolution in a new legal paradigm. Readings of Genesis in the



antebellum South focused primarily on Ham's immaturity, on his penchant to dishonor, and on his "permanent ... inferiority" to whites (Pollard, qtd. in Fredrickson 187). From the 1860s forward, however, evaluations of blackness, which Genesis was made to sanction, turned explicitly to the imagined dangers that black men posed to white women, and to the need to protect "white" blood from miscegenation.

Concurrent with the shift towards Hamitic readings that centered on black male sexuality, white America began to make scientific appraisals that reinforced on biological and ethnic grounds the right to exploit blacks. Polygenesis theory, or the belief that whites descended from Adam and Eve, while blacks did not, circulated in the mid-century works and comments of South Carolina Governor Benjamin Perry, writers Buckner Payne, Dominick M'Causland, and Alexander Winchell, Louisianans John Fletcher and Samuel Cartwright, US Senator Jefferson Davis, and Dartmouth President Nathan Lord, all of whom campaigned against miscegenation in their endorsements of white tyranny.<sup>100</sup> Polygenesis (also called pluralism) threatened to discredit the Curse of Ham, for if blacks were not descended from Ham or Canaan, then one could not take from the episode the authority to oppress blacks.

To solve this problem, pluralists tried to reconcile Genesis and polygenesis. Buckner Payne, for example, argued that "because some of the sons of Adam intermarried with this inferior species, ... God ... sent the flood as a punishment for human wrongdoing" (Fredrickson 188). Canaan is thus the postdiluvian offspring of these originary blacks, while miscegenation was the specific sin inciting God's wrath. Canaan was even described by Samuel Cartwright as not being Ham's son; rather, Ham was merely Canaan's overseer, or the first slaveholder

appointed by Noah to rule black Canaanites (Fredrickson 188). Jefferson Davis, meanwhile, zeroed in on Ham's licentiousness, arguing that he "sunk by debasing himself and his lineage by a connection with an inferior race" (qtd. in Fredrickson 89), through which he fathered Canaan. However creative their efforts were to make evolutionism and creationism agree, pluralists shared an agenda of promoting white superiority to blacks. They cited the Curse of Ham, as well as the deluge, to reseat white supremacy scripturally and scientifically, or to raise "prejudice to the level of science" (Fredrickson 89). For if blacks as a separate race were inferior, then procreation with them would prove abhorrent, as Genesis, by their reasoning, affirmed.

Charles Darwin countered polygenesis in *The Origin of Species* (1859) by leaving "no doubt that all human races belong[ed] to a single species" (Gossett 67). Darwin put forth that while all races shared one origin, evolutionary changes had come about through reproductive selection, whereby differences in skin color, hair type, and other "[s]light changes in body conformation" had led to the "different races" now populating the earth (Gossett 68-69). Darwinism threatened to antiquate the Curse of Ham because it proposed that, rather than becoming black from a scriptural marking, the black "race" (and all others) had gradually developed the features by which it might be considered unique. Instead of discrediting the Hamitic myth, however, Darwinism was set to work by white supremacists to further credit it. While ignoring the problems of the first marking or blackening raised by gradual evolution, proponents of Ham focused on the social ramifications of Darwinism. They claimed that the theory showed how whites were more evolved than blacks, to which scripture attested. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, perhaps the most preeminent nineteenth-century Southern minister,

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<sup>100</sup> Haynes discusses the works of M'Causland and Winchell (15), Fredrickson discusses Cartwright, Payne and Perry (86-90, 188-189), and Werner Sollors discusses Davis, Lord, and

adhered to a Darwinian theory of race evolution within a Christian rubric, arguing that whites, blacks, and Native Americans were the descendants of Noah's sons, Japheth, Ham, and Shem. According to Palmer, the line of Shem, Native Americans, had largely died out due to their failure to evolve, or to accept the word of God. Blacks, or the line of Ham, had not evolved beyond their "native condition of fetishism and barbarism. ... [T]he whole history of God's dealings towards [them has] ... lead to the conclusion that the Negro's 'true normal position' is as a servant of servants" (qtd. in Haynes 135). Palmer invoked Genesis 9:25, Noah's declaration of Ham's servitude, while appealing to Darwinism to affirm that neither Native Americans nor blacks had evolved, as had the white descendants of Japheth. A number of Darwinists even predicted that blacks would become extinct after emancipation, arguing that they were unfit to survive outside of slavery (Fredrickson 239).<sup>101</sup>

Polygenesis advocates and Darwinists made appeals to science before and during the Civil War to accentuate the innate inferiority of blacks, to defend racial subjugation, and to warn against miscegenation. The Curse of Ham served as the scriptural component of that campaign even as evolutionary theories endangered the credibility of the episode. After the Civil War, bolstered by scientific "proof" of black inferiority, white supremacists started to focus on black sexuality, and to emphasize more concertedly the perils of racial amalgamation. Palmer began referring to blacks as "naked savages" (qtd. in Haynes 141), while claiming that the Bible mandated race purity. Dr. Edward Gilliam's words teemed with sexual connotation when he

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Fletcher in *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both* (100-101).

<sup>101</sup> Joel Williamson similarly remarks in *William Faulkner and Southern History* that "so many white people believed for so long and for so deeply that black people were becoming bestial. ... Freed from slavery for a full generation, black people in the 1890s—especially young black people—were falling over the edge of civilization and, hence, must eventually disappear from the American scene" (156).

noted the “remarkable fecundity of ... African[s]” who made up a “dark, swelling, muttering mass” (qtd. in Fredrickson 240). And Dr. Paul Barringer predicted that “all things point to the fact that the Negro as a race is reverting to barbarism with the inordinate criminality and degradation of that state” (qtd. in Fredrickson 252). The Hamitic myth, meanwhile, was already primed to accommodate this turn to barbarity and sexuality. Between 1852 and 1861, Thornton Stringfellow had referred to Ham’s sin as one of “beastly wickedness”; Nathan Lord had called Ham’s act an “obscene ... unnatural crime”; James Sloan had focused on Ham’s indecency; and John Fletcher had blamed Ham for the sin of miscegenation (qtd. in Peterson 78). After abolition, then, white supremacists could claim both scriptural and scientific license to reinscribe race terrorism on the grounds that blacks were unevolved, that they were prone to obscenity and wickedness, and that they were at fault for the blight of miscegenation.

Where blacks had been perceived by whites as occupying a state of arrested childhood during slavery, black men, now in the adulthood of freedom, had become menacingly sexual. Even though white men had been raping black women for nearly three centuries, after emancipation the black man was imagined as a predator desirous of “not just equality but sex with white women”; he had become, as Grace Elizabeth Hale notes, the “black beast rapist” who would “unleash black barbarity” (79). The history of lynchings and castrations of black men in the post-Reconstruction South has been well documented. I want to stress that the manufactured hazard posed by blacks was always tethered sexually, whether to the threat that black men posed to white women, or to the contamination of whiteness that would stem from interracial pairings. To counter this threat, the US established an “absolute color line” (Hale 46) through the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling, in which whiteness and blackness were fixed unconditionally in spite

of America's long record of miscegenation. White power or supremacy was thus re-secured, with the continued subjection of blacks justified by what they were deemed prone *to do* as free Americans.

The Curse of Ham, fittingly, came to focus behaviorally, or on what Ham's descendants were thought to be likely to do in the emancipated South. Before the Civil War, Ham had explained what blacks had done, while slavery had been seen as necessary to keep blacks in check. Where their behavior had been potentially abhorrent, slavery had controlled them; once freed, black men, according to white rhetoric, would become barbaric. After abolition, the Curse reasserted its elasticity as proponents of it drew on existing interpretations of the myth that warned against black behavior, and against black Americans' affinity for the amoral. Readings of the "naked savage" (Palmer) who disavowed his white or aracial father comingled in the white Southern imaginary with an awareness of "fecund" (Gilliam) free blacks who were "beastly wicked" (Stringfellow), and with changing conceptions of race theory, to warn against miscegenation and to legitimate Jim Crow race relations.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> The Curse was deployed, primarily, to legitimate an internal colonialism that subjected black Americans, although the Curse was not confined domestically. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, for example, "punctuated his sermons with frightening references to the slave insurrection in Santo Domingo (Haiti)" (Haynes 154). As noted earlier, allusions to Ham continue to circulate within the context of Haitian turmoil and political unrest. There is no evidence to suggest, however, that the US also used Ham to "mark" nonblack peoples, such as those in Hawaii or the Philippines, who were exploited by US expansion nonetheless. But race and Ham cannot be excluded from discussions of that expansion. As James Ivy drily writes in the April 1945 issue of *The Crisis*, in which he reviews *Sex and Race, Vol. III* by J.A. Rogers, "Kamchameha II of Hawaii, shown on page 7, who is classified by the anthropologists as Polynesian, is actually more Negroid in appearance than Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., classified by the scientists as *Negro*. Mrs. Ida B. Wells Barnett, shown on page 11, is much more caucasian in appearance than the black fuzzy-haired Filipino" (118). Ivy also notes that the appendix to *Sex and Race* discusses the "source of the curse of Ham legend" (118). His article points to the tenuousness of any racial designations; it suggests that the US (or at least Rogers) discarded some of its own markers of "blackness" as it ventured abroad. Ida Wells, who was deemed "black" in the US,

This post-war shift from deed to behavior roughly follows the arc that Michel Foucault traces in *The History of Sexuality* from an emphasis on deviant sexual acts to an emphasis on sexual deviance as an identity. Foucault points to a transformation in nineteenth-century thought, in which sodomy moved from “a category of forbidden acts” to “a personage ... a life form. ... Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by him. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle” (43). With respect to the Curse, if Ham had been guilty of an act, such as raping his father or mother, his freed male descendants now fully personified sexual avarice. In order to reassert white power after abolition, whites drew on scientific and scriptural “evidence” to mark blacks as inferior to whites, and less evolved, and to label black men as beastly, as desirous of white women, and as behaviorally deviant. Ham was thus recast to accommodate evolutionary theory and abolition, and to justify the nation’s continued exploitation of African Americans in the twentieth century of William Faulkner’s *Light in August*.

### ***Light in August***

Joe Christmas, according to a number of white characters, embodies black male behavioral deviance in *Light in August*. Gavin Stevens, attributing Christmas’s behavior to his “black” blood, puts forth that white and black blood had been waging war within him (449). Percy Grimm shoots and castrates Christmas before stating that “[n]ow you’ll let white women alone, even in hell” (464). The mutilation is justified by Christmas’s intimacy with and purported rape of a white woman, Joanna Burden. Joanna, who has an affair with Christmas,

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could have potentially passed as “nonblack” in the Philippines, and would thus no longer have been subjected to the Hamitic curse. The US, in other words, changed its own “race rules,” so to speak, to accommodate its expansionist policies, which further undermines the authority of any originary marking.

urges him to perform blackness during sex, calling out “Negro! Negro! Negro!” (260). She directs her own play of the white woman and the oversexed, menacing black male in which it “was almost as though she were helping him” (236) to perform his part of inflicting sexual humiliation upon her. As John T. Matthews notes in *William Faulkner: Seeing Through the South*, “Joanna insists on rendering Southern phobias actual: she casts Christmas as the ‘black beast rapist’ and herself as the ravished virgin secretly lusting after a negro lover” (166). And Doc Hines, Joe’s grandfather, is hardly surprised that Christmas “did that killing up at Jefferson last week” (344). He believes that Joe is black, and thus “a pollution and a abomination” (386) who should be hung “right then and there” (351). Hines would even have “white folks ... turn out and kill them all [blacks]” (378). The novel is replete with references to Christmas’s behavioral deviance, as well as to white anxieties over miscegenation, while Joe’s racial marking is invoked to “explain” his predilection to rape and murder.

Each of the comments noted above alludes to Joe Christmas’s behavioral disposition to rape, to murder, or to commit both crimes. These remarks are consistent with the tendency by white supremacists during the Jim Crow era to mark black men as licentiousness and threatening, while also in step with appeals to science and evolutionary theories that “proved” black inferiority and warned against miscegenation. The Curse of Ham, meanwhile, circulated within white American thought as the scriptural component of a webbed cultural offensive to explain black behavior, to mark black men, and to subjugate all African Americans. It is a trope that Joanna Burden and Doc Hines deploy as they collude, as do so many of the novel’s characters, in the continued subjugation of blacks, in white America’s investment in its seat of power, privilege, and authority, and in the nation’s imperial designs.

*Joanna Burden*

In Joanna Burden's case, we receive three generations of Hamitic exegesis, as performed by her grandfather, her father, and her. Each of these readings is filtered through Joanna, who relays second-hand the Curse as synthesized by her grandfather Calvin, whom John Sartoris murdered before she was born. Her father Nathaniel's commentary, which she cites as though recalling it verbatim, was handed down to her when she was four, hardly an age when one could make sense of either Genesis or Jim Crow America, let alone commit long speeches to memory. I want to suggest that the Burden analyses of Genesis 9 are in fact just one, colored and constructed by Joanna Burden for her audience of one, Joe Christmas. This is not to negate or in any way diminish either the Burden legacy in Jefferson or the impact of the Burden family history on Joanna, for as her grandfather's and half-brother's deaths did before her, Joanna's death results from the Burden confrontation with race, myth, and Ham in the Deep South. But as Joanna speaks for her grandfather and father, I do not aim to look at her reading of Ham as one that is three-tiered, or layered, or at all distinct from generation to generation. Rather, Joanna as spokesperson delivers a consolidated Burden reading of the Curse. When she speaks for Calvin and Nathaniel, she is at times in accord with them, at other times in revision of them, but always, and this is the salient point, acutely aware of the object she aims to mark with the Hamitic curse. In addition, Joanna's standing as resident Northerner suggests that the novel's disrobing of the Ham myth may take place in Mississippi, but the North and South stand as cohorts in collusion within a national entanglement of terrorism and race oppression that is enabled both legally and scripturally even as, in Joanna's case, her aims, and that of her family's, may otherwise appear progressive.



Joanna's great grandfather, Nathaniel Burrington, hails from New England. As he did three years previously in *The Sound and the Fury*, and as he does later in *Absalom, Absalom!*, where he has Quentin Compson attend Harvard, Faulkner links Yoknapatawpha County to a geographic locus of US nationalism, patriotism, and religious zeal. The Faulkner narrator refers to "the religion of [Calvin Burden's] New England forbears," to the "interminable New England Sundays," to Calvin's "pale New England eyes," to "the abject fury of the New England glacier," to "the fire of the New England biblical hell," and to "the hell of [Joanna's] forefathers" (242, 246, 258). Faulkner's engagement with the Calvinist tradition has been much remarked upon, as has the Calvinist burden that Joanna inherits.<sup>103</sup> As compelling, however, is the North American trajectory that delivers the Burdens from Calvinist New England to rural Mississippi. Joanna's grandfather Calvin runs "away from home at the age of twelve" (241). He travels by ship "around the Horn to California" (241), and moves to Missouri, where he marries Evangeline, the "daughter of a family of Huguenot stock which had emigrated [to Missouri] from Carolina by way of Kentucky" (241). He then moves westward, where his son, Nathaniel, like his father before him, runs away as a youth: to Colorado, Old Mexico and Santa Fe, Texas, Kansas, Missouri, and finally to a point further west, where he returns to his father and sisters with his Mexican wife, Juana, whom Calvin refers to as "[a]nother damn black Burden" (247). The Burdens then move southward and eastward to Jefferson, or at least travel there in support of black voting rights, where Joanna's grandfather and brother are murdered for "[s]tirring up the negroes to murder and rape" (249). After Juana dies, Nathaniel sends for a new bride from "New Hampshire, where some of [the family's] people still live" (249).

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<sup>103</sup> O'Connor, "Protestantism in Yoknapatawpha County"; Barth, "Faulkner and the Calvinist Tradition" (1972); Wilson, "Faulkner and the Southern Religious Culture."

By the time Joanna is born, the Burdens have navigated from the Northeast to the Midwest, the Southwest, and the South, with crisscrosses, zigzags, stops, starts, and returns from one point to the other, as well as forays seaward, and into Mexico. The family, in effect, is diasporic, in what is another Faulknerian nod to Hebrew scripture and tradition. This is not just to highlight Joanna's outsider status, which hardly needs restating. But Joanna is one of two who espouse the Curse, and her reading is far more nuanced than that put forth by Doc Hines. It bears noting, then, the geographical, national, and multicultural dimensions of her Hamitic reading. Where Hines preaches of Ham from an ideology of regional white supremacy in the tradition of Benjamin Morgan Palmer, Joanna delivers a national, even hemispheric brand of Ham. The Burden itinerary from New England westward and southward tracks the nation's own continental expansion. The family's continued rendering of scripture and race, meanwhile, underscores the exploitative underpinnings of that growth that rely upon and manipulate the Hamitic myth.

Joanna first proffers her grandfather Calvin's reading of Ham's blight. Calvin opposes slavery; he and his son Nathaniel make careers of raging against it, while Joanna promotes racial uplift in the segregation era. The Burdens act, however, within the confines of the Hamitic myth. They take as given that blacks are "lowbuilt," that they suffer under the wrath of God, and that by that wrath their skin and blood are marked or stained. So while Calvin tells his son, Nathaniel, that "I'll learn you to hate two things ... hell and slaveholders" (243), it is the "black look" that Nathaniel's son must overcome, as inherited from his Mexican mother (247). The Burdens, who are white supremacists, do not espouse racial equality, nor do they interrogate the imperial implications of maneuvering within a Hamitic paradigm in which blackness is a God-

ordained handicap. The grandson Calvin will “be as big a man as his grandpappy” in spite of his “black dam”; as Joanna notes, “he was as big as grandpa, even if he was dark like father’s mother’s people and like his mother” (248). The Burden family contests slavery, promotes African American voting rights, and works for the betterment of black schools, which posits them as Northern interventionists in the Deep South. But they promote racial uplift under the premise that God has marked blacks as inferior. The Burdens, in fact, seem to be performing or miming imperial expansion even as they crusade for racial justice: a peculiarly American contradiction.<sup>104</sup> Calvin Burden, furthermore, alludes to the amalgamation or biological assimilation of African Americans when he notes that blacks will “bleach out now. In a hundred years they will be white folks again. Then maybe we’ll let them come back into America” (248). He assumes white agency to speak as the nation’s race representative, deeming who is suitable for inclusion, who might be excluded, and what the color-coded rules are by which they might one day be readmitted. Calvin campaigns against the institution of slavery but for black Americans he reserves little or no regard.

Joanna’s grandfather, Calvin, provides the Hamitic rubric within which the Burdens engage slavery and racial uplift, while it is her father, Nathaniel, who considers the Curse’s cross-race impact, or how it affects both blacks and whites. He tells Joanna,

Your grandfather and brother are lying there, murdered not by one white man but by the curse which God put on a whole race before your grandfather or your brother or me or you were even thought of. A race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race’s doom and curse for its sins. Remember that. His doom and his curse.

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<sup>104</sup> As George Handley writes in *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas*, “the United States’ particular problem is that it understands itself as both postcolonial and neoimperial” (131).

Forever and ever. Mine. Your mother's. Yours, even though you are a child. The curse of every white child that ever was born and that ever will be born. None can escape it. ... [E]scape [the black shadow] you cannot. The curse of the black race is God's curse. But the curse of the white race is the black man who will be forever God's chosen own because He once cursed him. (252-253)

Where Calvin had briefly alluded to the "white curse" in his observation that "we done freed them now, both black and white alike" (247), Nathaniel adds detail, fleshing out the Burden reading for Joanna to take forward. Nathaniel's Hamitic commentary is an exercise in exegetical creativity and misreading: he reads out of Genesis a litany of curses rather than the one declared by Noah, he attributes the Curse to God, when in fact God had nothing to do with it, and he establishes no coherent causation from curse to curse. God places a curse on a "whole race," presumably blacks, the reasons for which Joanna's father does not attest. The white race, meanwhile, suffers its own doom and curse, for the vague yet all-encompassing trespass of "sin." This sin is (perhaps) compounded, ironically, by the myth of the Curse of Ham itself, and by its historical and ideological uses. The white race, furthermore, is plagued doubly to suffer the curse of the cursed black race that, by virtue of its (the black race's) cursing, has been enduringly marked as God's chosen, the reward for which has been to, as cursed, curse whites for their (the black race's) first curse. With that logic, it is hardly any wonder that Joanna prays to "be damned a little longer" (264); if she is already damned by an inescapable curse, the prayer amounts to a staving off of confronting it rather than a warding off of damnation. But even as the Burdens declare blacks to be God's own or chosen, they do so within a network that reinscribes race hierarchy. To the Burdens, as Davis notes, blacks "remain inferior to whites, yet

they are the means by which whites work out their own expiation” (*FN* 144). That penance, however, will remain elusive; as whites must enduringly suffer their sins, blacks must serve as the instruments enabling whites to confront their own originary curse.

For Joanna Burden, African Americans are the objects by which whites work out their own atonement: “I seemed to see [blacks] for the first time not as people, but as a thing, a shadow in which I lived. ... I wanted to tell [my father] that I must escape it, get away from under the shadow. ... ‘You cannot,’ he said. ‘You must struggle, rise. But in order to rise, you must raise the shadow with you. But you can never lift it to your level’” (253). Blacks remain for the Burdens but things, or shadows; the Burdens may subscribe to theories of racial uplift, but to white supremacist theories nonetheless. The Burdens champion abolition, suffrage, and education—on their terms. Joanna even offers Joe sex with a white woman; that “liberty,” however, is more of a fetishizing or objectifying of Joe than it is a treatment of him as a coeval. Burden racial “uplift,” then, still manages to reinscribe white hegemony even as it is otherwise progressive.

The Burden claiming of Biblical authority—and here is where their continental, white *national* vantage point appears so imperial—performs what Homi Bhabha calls the “Western tradition [of imposing a] demand for a literary tradition, a history, [that is] put exactly in ... historicist and realist terms—the familiar quest for an origin that will authorize a beginning” (“Representation” 96). The Burdens cite Genesis as that literary tradition and origin, grafting onto it conceptions of race hierarchy as filtered through their brand of American Calvinism that reads blacks as “lowbuilt,” and fated to a status beneath that of whites. Genesis is set to work as that first license, as the historical “truth” upon which the Burden mission rests, while Joanna,

unwittingly or not, acts as a US (rather than strictly Southern) Jim Crow activist. By aiming for Christmas to embrace his “blackness,” Joanna champions the one-drop rule. In addition, she advocates the segregation of schools, and of law practices, and she urges Christmas to perform Hamitic blackness, whether during sex or while eating. She stages Hamitic scenes in which Joe invades her “tent,” looks upon her nakedness, and sexually humiliates her. Furthermore, Joanna aims for Christmas to follow her by taking on black missionary work that would propel forward US segregation law and policy. Like the *Plessy* ruling preceding her, Joanna declares an exclusive binary of white and black as set forth by white dictate, rendering Joe “Negro” in spite of his otherwise “white” look. There is no accounting for miscegenation—no granting to Joe the latitude to choose to identify as white, as black, as neither, or as both—but for Joanna there is full liberty to cast or curse Joe as black.

As noted in the Introduction, Leigh Anne Duck, Amy Kaplan, and Peter Schmidt have argued that the Jim Crow US was in effect a form of internal colonialism predicated on the subjugation of African Americans in which the entire nation, rather than just the South, stood complicit. This does not mean a Northern-led imperialism within American borders but an exploitation of African Americans that was tolerated by the country, perhaps even encouraged, in the Southern states as a means of setting regional affinities to work for national gain. As Duck notes in *The Nation’s Region*, the US was not averse to encouraging regionalist platforms, such as segregation in the South, to foster a larger, nation-wide move to empire at home and abroad (33, 158). Both the 1877 Compromise, which ended Reconstruction, and the *Plessy* ruling corroborate that, exemplifying how federal ruling and law granted the South autonomy to segregate and to reassert white tyranny. In consenting to Jim Crow, the Burdens, by virtue of

their New England, Calvinist roots and relative outsider status, lend the text a national rather than regional underpinning that takes as given Biblical as well as legal and cultural consent. The Burdens appear progressive relative to their Southern counterparts, who are quick to condemn Joe Christmas for his “blackness,” and to pin the charges of rape and murder upon him. But the Burdens are white supremacists who bring with them the “fire of the New England biblical hell” to carry out their race-inflected missionary Calvinism in the Deep South.

Each Burden inscribes the myth of Ham without interrogating it, projecting it outward onto blacks as “God’s curse,” and inward onto themselves as “the curse of the white race [which] is the black man” (253). In their reckoning, the “white” curse emerges out of “God’s curse”; blacks are God’s “chosen own” who cast a shadow “in the shape of a cross,” while whites “must struggle ... [to] raise the shadow” (253). The Burdens expand upon Ham and reinvest in it, from Nathaniel’s “wrath of God” (247), to Calvin’s fantastical exegesis, to Joanna’s “I seemed to see [blacks] ... as a thing” (253). The Burdens place the Curse in context of racial hierarchies in which they, by virtue of a declared or assumed whiteness, hold the preeminent position in spite of their own “black look,” or their own color-coded entanglements which would otherwise upset the white and black binaries to which they ascribe. Joanna uses whiteness, finally, to impose her will and deliver Joe Christmas to God. She wants Joe to embrace the Curse and her misuses of it, she pressures him to accept Jesus, and she cajoles him to perform God’s work as dictated by her. She also implores him to kneel before God *and* before a white master or superior. Joanna repeatedly casts herself as the Noah figure whose tent has been invaded; she choreographs Joe’s final “entrance” in order to deliver him to God as a penitent Ham who would pray for deliverance, which Joe, of course, finds humiliating.

Once Joanna turns to Jesus, her conversion may appear to indicate that she is no longer preoccupied with Christmas's perceived black heritage. Thadious Davis acknowledges this potential reading by noting that Joanna's "object is not to get Joe to become a 'nigger'" but to get him to accept God (144). Davis goes on to argue, however, that Joanna believes that God ordains Joe to accept his marking, as well as to work in a black law office and champion black schools. Joanna's conversion, in other words, is predicated on the family's conflation of race and religion, and on the white cause of black race uplift. Both before her conversion and after it, Joanna reinforces the Jim Crow mandate of separate but equal, as well as the white right to implement it. Hers is an impassioned appeal to racist ideology that, coupled with her family's steadfast, uncritical adherence to the Hamitic myth, and to their Noah-like status in that paradigm, propels forward white authority and power, the exploitation of blacks, and US colonization and empire.

### *Doc Hines*

The other of the novel's characters who deploys the Curse of Ham is Joe Christmas's biological grandfather, Doc Hines. Hines invests in a regional brand of white supremacy, and he relies on scripture to authorize it. As Timothy Caron notes in *Struggles Over the Word*, Hines "has fully absorbed the white South's racial gospel, particularly its Old Testament-like predilection for pronouncing curses" (69). Hines takes license to curse, or at least to speak as God's agent in the damning. "I have put the mark on [Christmas] and now I am going to put the knowledge" (371), mutters Hines in words he attributes to God, with whom he converses directly and often. The gospel that Hines delivers to blacks is of "humility before all skin lighter than theirs, preaching the superiority of the white race, himself his own exhibit A" (343). Like the



Burdens, who advocate white supremacy in spite of their own mixed-race entanglements, Hines is, as Faulkner notes, unconscious of his own sermonizing paradox (343). Hines and his wife live in the black section of Mottstown, they are almost entirely dependent on the benevolence of blacks, and their daughter, Milly, may have given birth to a multiracial child. Yet Hines preaches white supremacy, perhaps in retaliation for his own family's brush with miscegenation.

Doc Hines adheres to a racist and religious ideology akin to that of Benjamin Morgan Palmer, and sets Genesis 9 to work to condemn his grandson. By these counts he is merely Southern, white, and of his time—a regionalist where Joanna Burden appears more hemispheric. And while early twentieth century, Southern, white, and male is a volatile, even terrorizing mix, Hines is also a fanatic, and thus all the more explosive. He brings a prophet-like fervor to his rendering of sin, "[b]itchery and abomination!" (370), and to his outbursts on the battle that God wages with the devil over the matter of black blood. Hines envisions his grandson as the "devil's walking seed" (383), and himself as the steward that will rid the earth of the "pollution and ... abomination [of that] ... bastard" (386). He thus enters an extra-textual element into the Ham story: the Curse as Satan's work, which Genesis does not suggest. Hines's conviction is such that the judgment of blackness, however he reads it off of Joe's father, or Joe, is a condemnation without recompense. That judgment, furthermore, is directed onto Hines; the sin of blackness is in part his own, as it *his* progeny (or his daughter's) that is "still walking [God's] earth" (386). Hines has thus been chosen as overseer of God's will precisely because he is complicit in the "pollution" that he must combat: "I have set you there to watch and guard My will. It will be yours to tend to and oversee" (371). Joanna, for her part, offers Joe the black missionary option, followed by the turn to salvation. Joanna's proposition may fit squarely within a white

hierarchy, but she is striving for her and Joe's deliverance, however problematic and damaging that may be. Such is not the case with Doc Hines, who would have whites kill all blacks, whom he views as the "Lord God's abomination" (380). They both, however, have been chosen—Joanna to lift Christmas up, and Hines to serve as His "chosen instrument" (386).

The vengeful God, the "Lord God of wrathful hosts" (383) with which Hines converses is the God of the Hebrew Bible, as his rhetoric recalls that of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. Robert Alter notes that the Bible's "old violent vindictive mysticism" [*Absalom* 64] refers to an "unswerving devoutness or theological thinking, ... [a] stubbornness of character, ... violence, ... unforgiving sentiments transfer[ed] readily enough from the marked pages of Mr. Coldfield's Old Testament (it is surely the Old Testament) to the world of the novel" (*Pen* 97). A like-minded transfer occurs in *Light in August*, from Hebrew scripture to Hines. When Mrs. Hines notes that her husband "would sit and read out of the Bible, loud, without nobody there to hear it but me" (381), we can be reasonably assured that he was reciting from either the prophets or from the Torah's Priestly source. But where Doc Hines is well aware of Hebrew scripture, his fanaticism and penchant for scapegoating, as Caron has argued, "is not tempered by a New Testament grace" (80). While the tempering effects of grace, whatever those may be, seem more the domain of conversion dogma than of dialogue on Faulkner, Caron has something of a point: he is right to remark upon Hines's Southern, Christian relationship with Hebrew scripture. Hines's gospel of color intolerance is fueled by a regional imperialism that tethers race, history, and religion within a Southern mythology predicated on the subjugation of African Americans, on a reading of blackness as a biblically declared contaminant, and on a fetishizing of the black male as a predatorial threat to white womanhood, as represented to Hines by Milly's

impregnation. Hines preaches an ideology of exclusion that leaves no room for inclusion; he sees blacks as already condemned, as pollution, as abominations lying beyond the pale of redemption. Doc Hines's reading of the Hamitic myth is intractable and monolithic, devoid of New Testament grace, to be sure, but devoid, more importantly, of the Old Testament exegetical mandate to resist such singular readings.

Charles Reagan Wilson writes in "William Faulkner and the Southern Religious Culture" that "[Doc] Hines is twisted by race and religion" in a region that "promoted a wild blending of violence and spiritual struggle" (29, 32). Wilson discusses elsewhere the appropriation of Hebrew scripture by post-bellum whites, some of whom harbored a "self-image of a chosen people" (*Baptized* 7), while others turned to the Old Testament prophets to make sense of Confederate defeat (*Baptized* 52-53). White supremacists such as Benjamin Morgan Palmer were also determined to uphold "the purity of Southern blood" (*Baptized* 167), an agenda in which the Curse of Ham was enlisted. Wilson tends to downplay the import of race in the Southern "gospel," arguing that white Southern identity should be considered apart from race (*Baptized* 14) even as he notes that Hines is "twisted" by his beliefs. But Wilson also cites a number of preachers who "suggested that the South was quintessentially American" (*Baptized* 167) because of the region's adherence to the sanctity of "white" blood lines, or to a racialized nationalism. And Doc Hines, who preaches to African Americans, is "himself his own exhibit A" that white identity is predicated upon conceptions of race rather than separated from them. I would like to suggest, then, that race (and blackness) and Southern whiteness are indelibly linked rather than distinct from one another, as Faulkner makes clear in *Light in August*.

In addition, Southern appropriations of Hebrew scripture may have had as much to do with empire building as with celebrating the Confederate past. The Old Testament appealed to white Southerners based on their confluences of “chosenness,” which is a foundational tenet of Hebrew scripture, and “whiteness.” Nowhere is this more evident than in the ranting of Doc Hines, whose rhetoric teems with echoes of the prophets as he preaches “the superiority of the white race” (343), as he converses with God, and as he deploys Genesis 9 by (according to him) God’s authority. Hines, like Joanna, plays the role of the humiliated Noah who suffers an invasion of the tent when Joe Christmas looks upon his daughter’s nakedness, although Hines does not stage the affair. And though Hines may well be insane, his region, the South, grants him the latitude to kill, exonerating him for the murder of Christmas’s father on the grounds that he may have been part black. That same region, furthermore, believes that Joe Christmas is black, and thus guilty of the rape and murder of Joanna Burden.

Where the Burdens signal the nation’s continued complicity in the propagation of white supremacist doctrine within a context of empire-building during the Jim Crow years, Doc Hines emblemizes the regional particularities of that context. Burden and Hines function as national and regional representatives, respectively, who make use of the Curse of Ham, whether to explain why blacks are “lowbuilt” or to account for the “teeth and the fangs of evil!” (386) that so torment Hines. Joanna Burden and Doc Hines take scriptural license to objectify Joe Christmas, turning to the Hebrew Bible through a Christian lens by which they deploy the Curse of Ham to reaffirm racist creed. In doing so, they strip the text of nuance, difference, and ambiguity while burdening it with extratextual biases and intolerance. The end result, of course, is a set of murders that, with the exception of Joanna’s, go unpunished in spite of the novel’s

many bloodlettings. More importantly, white power is reseeded by the quelling of the threat that is the “black” Joe Christmas. By his castration and murder Christmas has been doubly punished, and the blacks of Jefferson have been doubly warned. The patriarch, the empire builder, the authority that is US whiteness has its position reaffirmed regionally and nationally, in part by a manipulation of scripture that licenses whites to declare blacks to be the descendants of Ham. That same scriptural material, however, has its own patriarch, the figure of Noah, and he, like those who appropriate him, has much to gain by the myth that he engineers. As an outraged father, Noah with his curse can direct attention away from his own shortcomings: drunkenness, failure of paternal responsibility, lapse of self-discipline. And it is the Noah-like figure of US whiteness that the Hamitic myth rebounds back upon in Faulkner’s counter-reading of the Curse, which performs a postcolonial critique of American nationalism, expansion, and empire.

### **Counter-Reading the Curse**

If the Curse of Ham has a long-standing tradition of “explaining” transgressions, and punishments of them, it has also, from the beginning, exposed the figure of the patriarch. Noah, not God, curses Ham’s son, while Doc Hines, not God, curses Joe Christmas. By doing so, Noah reclaims the authoritative position that Ham “exposed” when he opened the tent, or that, seen another way, Noah abdicated in retreating in his drunkenness to the tent. As Stephen Haynes argues, “[i]f we can resist the textual and interpretative forces that lead us to associate Noah with God, it may be possible to perceive Ham’s role as victim” (206). Haynes further notes that the tendency to side with the vanquished is a current running throughout the Hebrew Bible, from Cain and Abel, to Joseph and his brothers, to Job, Psalms, and Isaiah (214). To counter-read the Curse, then, is to establish foremost who is cursing, and why, and to critique the imperial figure,

Noah, rather than the subaltern one. This critique is one that the Hebrew Bible invites even as it celebrates Israeli victories. Readings that focus on Noah's drunkenness, that "temper [his] reputation for righteousness," and that resist canonizing him reach "back to the [early] rabbis" (Haynes 177), and may be extended to any of Ham's deployments, whether in ancient Israel, Arabia of the Middle Ages, or the Jim Crow US. And two and half millennia of exegesis have shown that Genesis 9 invites both readings and counter-readings, even if proponents of the Curse have unwaveringly identified with Noah in a reinscription of patriarchal power.

By critiquing the Noah figure rather than the Hamitic one, whether in the Biblical era or in the twentieth century of *Light in August*, we expose the colonizing dimensions of the Curse, while showing that the episode functions to resituate power and patriarchal authority. The specifics of Ham's transgression have always been "murky." What has at all times been clear, however, is that those who espouse the Curse, starting with Noah, do so to reinforce an authority that has already been questioned. In Genesis, God charges Noah with the somber task of repopulating the world. Noah's abuse of that power is immediate: he over drinks, exposes himself, and curses his grandson, Canaan, to a life of servitude. Ham's disclosure of his father's inebriated condition, when read with an eye towards Noah's misstep rather than Ham's, may have been to warn his brothers that his father was not fit to lead. His brothers, fearing a crisis, banded with their father to vilify Ham, with Noah then cursing Ham's descendants to fortify the lines of Shem and Japheth against the threat of future breakdowns in familial order (Haynes 207-210). And so from the moment the postdiluvian family strikes dry land, they have a subjected figure whom to oppress, at whose expense the Israeli nation will one day claim its God-willed, expansionist destiny in Canaan.

In *Light in August*, Joanna Burden and Doc Hines claim Noah-like authority even as they brush with miscegenation and come in contact with African Americans. Joanna's grandmother "was dark" (248), and her father's first wife was Mexican. As Michael Wainwright notes in *Darwin and Faulkner's Novels*, "a miscegenate ambiance surrounds baby Joanna" (105). And as an adult, Joanna does not seem to associate with anyone who is *not* black. Doc Hines relies "on the bounty and charity of negroes for sustenance" (343), while his grandson, Joe Christmas, may be part black. Joanna and Hines, however, are each fully invested in whiteness, and in deploying the Curse to reinstate their patriarchal (or matriarchal) positions. In Joanna's case, her grandfather, her father, and she propel forward the myth, whether as white supremacist abolitionists, as Reconstruction-era voting activists, or as proponents of black schools and law offices. But even as they encourage racial uplift, the Burdens do so from their preeminent standing of whiteness, from which they forbid themselves to lift the black shadow to their level (253). And as mentioned, Joanna explicitly "plays" Noah in a reenactment of the myth. Whether by staging the tent invasion so that Christmas might "rape" Joanna, or so that he might join her in prayer, Joanna's choreography is an intentional manipulation of Genesis 9 designed for her enjoyment. The play also reseats her empowered position and his subjected one.

The turn to prayer is a new wrinkle in Faulkner's counter-read. Joe finds the prayer invitation personally humiliating, for reasons long since established by Simon McEachern's humiliation of Joe when the latter was a child. McEachern aimed to "beat" the catechism into Joe, while also withholding his food. McEachern acted impersonally, "strick[ing] methodically, with slow and deliberate force, still without heat or anger" (149-150). Joanna shares with McEachern an icy detachment from her disgracing of Joe. Joanna's "eyes did not waver at all.

They were still as the round black ring of the pistol muzzle. But there was no heat in them, no fury” (282). Joe, then, is reduced to an object or thing by Joanna who, like McEachern, aimed to deliver Joe to God without “heat.” By restaging the Hamitic episode to hasten this deliverance, Faulkner reorients the Hamitic paradigm. Where Joanna had compelled Joe to reenact the rape of the patriarch/matriarch, it is she who is now willfully disgracing him. The humiliation of the Noah-figure, then, has been turned upside down. Noah is the degrader of Ham: it is Joanna who compromises Joe’s personal standards in her imperial-minded orchestration of the Curse.

Doc Hines, like Joanna, assumes a Noah-like position of authority from which he aims for blacks to show “humility before all skin lighter than theirs” (343). Joanna and Hines, however, misread the Curse. Joanna notes that the “curse of the black race is God’s curse. ... [T]he black man ... will be forever God’s chosen own because he once cursed him” (253), while Hines says to Christmas, “Do you think you are a nigger because God has marked your face?” (383). They fail to register, or choose to ignore, that it was Noah, not God, who marked Canaan. They do not question how assuming Noah’s patriarchal posture (by which they, like him, brand Hamitic figures) winds up branding them as colluders in the nation’s continued subjugation of African Americans. The parallel implication is that they, not God, are putting this particular curse on African Americans; they, like Noah, are doing it themselves.

As with Joanna, there is a new wrinkle to Faulkner’s counter-reading of Ham via Doc Hines. While they each claim Noah’s privileged position of power, only Joanna actively *restages* the myth. In Hines’s case, it is really Faulkner doing the staging, whereby the circus man invades Hines’s tent, after which Hines, emboldened by whiteness and by regionally coded theories on curses and sin, plays Noah. Hines, like Noah, even manages to curse his own



grandson. But Hines is hardly the director of his own drama. His position as actor rather than as creative mastermind is amplified by his own performance in a Ham-like role. The Ham part is one that Hines critiques when he recognizes its performance by others (or its embodiment in others, as he surmises), yet he cannot see that act when played by himself. Hines, we are told, “was going singlehanded into remote negro churches and interrupting the service to enter the pulpit and in his harsh, dead voice and at times with violent obscenity” (343) preach white supremacist doctrine. He, like Ham, invades the tent: he barges into African American churches, exposes them in their spiritual nakedness, and humiliates them in the one place where they might otherwise enjoy sanctuary from those of his ilk.

Faulkner’s counter-readings of the Curse of Ham implicate the Noah figures of Joanna Burden and Doc Hines, as well as the Noah-like structure of power that is US whiteness, rather than the Hamitic figure of Joe Christmas. Faulkner’s subversive reading, which suggests an ontologically Jewish (inquisitive) orientation to scripture, places Hines in contending roles. Hines curses his grandson for the sin of blackness resulting from the circus man’s invasion, yet also participates in his own raid. So Hines is the one judging, critiquing, and cursing, whether as Ham or Noah. In either case, Hines is cast in a restaging of the Ham myth in which African Americans, or those thought to be black, are subjected to white terror. Joe’s “curse” is that which is projected onto him by those who stand to benefit from investments in whiteness, and by those who take from scripture the authority to oppress. As the ancient Israelites forged their nation by exploiting Canaanites, white America built its nation, in part, on the backs of the African Americans whom they cursed. In *Light in August*, Joanna Burden and Doc Hines are emboldened by scripture to work as agents in that exploitation. Burden appropriates Noah’s

power to curse Joe precisely so she can then uplift him; her rendering of the Curse serves her aims rather than his own. Doc Hines, empowered by his own “whiteness,” murders Joe’s father, allows his daughter to die during child birth, and urges the men of Mottstown to lynch his grandson, much as Noah curses his grandson, Canaan.

The power that Burden and Hines claim is constructed by white Americans to reaffirm their hierarchical position over African Americans. Blackness is likewise the product of construction, wherein racial “markings,” such as those that designate Joe Christmas and his father black, are based on innuendo. The state corroborates this conjecture repeatedly. A jury exonerates, or rather excuses, Doc Hines of murder based on the circus owner’s testimony that Joe’s father “really was a part nigger instead of Mexican” (377). After learning that Joe is part black, the matron at what is presumably a state-run orphanage notes that she must either send him to a black orphanage or “place him at once” (135) with adoptive parents who will not question his ethnicity. Joe Brown, Christmas’s roommate on the Burden property, is a suspect in Joanna’s murder until he reveals that Christmas is black. Brown, who otherwise has no credibility, cashes in on whiteness for an alibi. By marking Christmas black, Brown convinces the sheriff and his deputies, who are agents for the state, that Christmas is guilty of murder.

Percy Grimm, an officer in the National Guard who believes “that the white race is superior to any and all other races” (451), aims to “show these people right off just where the government of the country stands on such things” (452), which in this case may indicate the government’s favoring of due process, which Grimm soon abandons.<sup>105</sup> Grimm is deputized by

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<sup>105</sup> For more on Percy Grimm and the role of the National Guard in *Light in August*, see Chuck Jackson’s “American Emergencies.” Grimm’s Army commission—he is a captain in the Mississippi National Guard—grants Joe’s murder federal sanction. Even if Grimm was not called upon or mobilized specifically to seize Christmas, it “was the new civilian-military act

the Jefferson sheriff as the town mobilizes for what amounts to a demonstration of white power even though Joe Christmas is already in custody. And Gavin Stevens, a District Attorney and as such a state official, believes that Joe Christmas's miscegenated blood contains a "stain" (448); the black element of it "swept him by his own desire beyond the aid of any man ... into that ecstasy out of a black jungle" (449). So where a Northern activist for racial uplift and a poor Southern white supremacist invoke the Curse of Ham to reinstate a racial authority, that basis of power extends well beyond Burden and Hines, whether to a small-town jury, to an orphanage, to a local sheriff, to an Army captain, or to a Harvard-educated lawyer who also "translates" the Old Testament in his spare time.

By recasting the Curse of Ham in the Jim Crow US, William Faulkner returns us to the Old Testament that so occupies his lawyer. The Hebrew Bible, which white America appropriates for its scriptural authority, may celebrate Israeli conquests, but it also, like Faulkner, provides the basis for a critique of the machinations of empire enabling those colonizing moves. Scripture tells us that for Noah there is the subjugated Ham, for Israel there is the defeated Canaan, for Assyria there is the vanquished Israel, and for Babylon the exiled Judah. Faulkner tells us that for every Joanna Burden or Doc Hines there is a Joe Christmas, for every white patriarchal oppressor there is a black victim who suffers, as have the subjected for time immemorial. The postcolonial challenge issued by both Genesis 9 and *Light in August* is to

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which saved him. ... [He maintained] a belief that the white race is superior to any and all other," and asks the local American Legion, "[w]hat does your legion stand for, if not the protection of America and Americans?" (*LIA* 450-451, 454). While that protection ostensibly extends to Joe Christmas, Grimm, an agent of the State, withholds it from him during the novel's castration sequence. A federal act, a federal commission, an American legion, an appeal to America and to Americans: the murder of Christmas is indeed, as Jackson argues, an American emergency rather than some regional peculiarity.

recognize that networks of oppression have far less to do with God than with the maneuverings of those who claim the authority to oppress, and to curse, and who write, manipulate, or deploy scripture to sanction those same networks.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE GENEALOGIES OF EMPIRE

In the preceding chapters I have examined William Faulkner's emulation of Hebrew Bible redactive strategy in *Absalom, Absalom!*, and explored his postcolonial counter-reading of the Curse of Ham in *Light in August*. I would now like to turn to Faulkner's engagement with genealogies and origins, with which Genesis is so preoccupied, and to his applications of the Exodus narrative. *Go Down, Moses* bears the title of an African American spiritual that "was first printed in 1861 in the *New York Tribune*, when its ... narrative of a destined delivery from enslavement took on ... immediacy at the onset of the Civil War" (Davis 21).<sup>106</sup> It is also the title of the novel's seventh and concluding story, in which Mollie Beauchamp, an African American woman, equates Roth Edmonds, a white landowner, with an agent of the Pharaoh who, according to Mollie, enslaved Jacob's youngest son, Benjamin, in Genesis.<sup>107</sup> And "Go Down, Moses" is likely one of the spirituals that slaves sing in *The Unvanquished* as they flee the South "to cross [the] Jordan" (91) and (they believe) enter the emancipated North. In *Go Down, Moses* and *The Unvanquished*, black characters imagine themselves as descendants of scripture's chosen people. Some of Faulkner's white characters, however, identify with those same chosen

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<sup>106</sup> Thadious Davis references in this chapter are from *Games of Property*.

<sup>107</sup> Joseph, not Benjamin, is actually sold (Genesis 37:28).

people. Cousins Isaac McCaslin and McCaslin (Cass) Edmonds trace their family lineage back to “the tedious and shabby chronicle of His chosen sprung from Abraham” (*GDM* 246). The Hebrew Bible is thus deployed by characters in *Go Down, Moses* to follow “white” lineage back to Abraham, to conflate whites to agents of the Pharaoh, and to link blacks to Abraham’s great-grandson, Benjamin.<sup>108</sup> If blacks and whites have claims on Abraham, then the patriarch appears to have “fathered” them both, as has *Go Down, Moses*’ Abraham-like figure, plantation owner L.Q.C. (Carothers) McCaslin.

While Mollie Beauchamp alludes to Genesis, the novel’s title evokes Exodus. The chorus of the spiritual, “Go down, Moses/ Way down in Egypt’s land/ Tell ol’ Pharaoh/ Let my people go” is an adaptation of God’s instructions to Moses to go “to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt” (Exodus 3:10).<sup>109</sup> And in *The Unvanquished*, the slave march recalls that of the Jews who must cross the Red Sea to escape their Egyptian pursuers (Exodus 15:19), and who must cross the Jordan River to enter Canaan (Joshua 3:14). The story of the slave exodus was first published as “Raid,” which Faulkner wrote in 1934 before revising it for inclusion in the novel (*Uncollected Stories* 682). The Moses narrative was thus vitally situated in Faulkner’s imagination from 1934 to 1942, while as early as 1926 he was writing *Father Abraham*.<sup>110</sup> When Random House prepared to reissue *Go Down, Moses* in 1949, Faulkner urged his editor to drop “*and Other Stories*” from the title that they had originally used,

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<sup>108</sup> Abraham fathered Isaac, who fathered Jacob, who fathered Benjamin.

<sup>109</sup> Authorship of “Go Down, Moses” is not known. For the complete lyrics, see <http://my.homewithgod.com/heavenlymidis2/moses.html>.

<sup>110</sup> Faulkner later incorporated elements of the *Father Abraham* manuscript into “Spotted Horses” (1931, published in *Scribner’s*) and *The Hamlet* (1940). “Raid” was published in 1934 in the *Saturday Evening Post*, *The Unvanquished* was published in 1938, “Go Down, Moses” was published in 1941 in *Collier’s*, and *Go Down, Moses* was published in 1942 (Hamblin and Peek).

*Go Down, Moses, and Other Stories*. *Go Down, Moses* was “indeed a novel,” noted Faulkner (qtd. in Hamblin and Peek 149), suggesting that the title resonated for all of the stories in it, and that motifs shared by the seven stories, Exodus, and the slave spiritual linked the text at the novel level.

The importance that Biblical genealogies and counter-genealogies (primarily those in Genesis and Exodus) held for Faulkner is my concern herein. I want to consider genealogical authority in its Biblical context and in *Go Down, Moses* to suggest that Faulkner, like the ancient Hebrew writers before him, deconstructs origins within a (post)colonial context to show them to be, in some cases, fabrications. Neither Isaac McCaslin nor Mollie Beauchamp descends from Abraham so much as they both appeal to scripture to, in turn, license or resist systems of colonization. Furthermore, when genealogies are cited for claims on legitimacy, such as McCaslin Edmonds’ appeal to Isaac that he (Isaac) is the rightful heir to the family land because he is the patrilineal grandson of Carothers McCaslin, there are, in both scripture and Faulkner, counter-genealogies disrupting or qualifying those claims. Abraham has sons by his wife, Sarah, as well as by the slave-girl Hagar, while Carothers McCaslin fathers white and black children. Faulkner and the Hebrew writers assert that their respective cultures were always already hybrid, or composite, and attempts to distinguish, for example, white from black, or legitimate from illegitimate, invariably collapse, while investments in “uninterrupted lineage from father to son” (Glissant, *FM* 114) have more to do with ideologies of oppression than with originary, genealogical proofs.

I continue studying Faulkner’s interrogation of origins and genealogical authority by placing *Go Down, Moses* within the tradition of Black Liberation Theology, while also looking

at episodes from *The Unvanquished* and *The Sound and the Fury*. As Dwight Hopkins and Frederick Ware have noted, while black theology was not codified as a formalized methodology until the 1960s, it began long before that. Hopkins writes in *Down, Up, and Over* that “a Christian black faith of liberation” emerged during the antebellum era, arising “out of the haunting testimony of the enslaved African American poor and the cries of the biblical witness. In the exodus drama, Yahweh proclaims to [help] those in bondage” (138-139, 160-161). African Americans, as Hopkins notes elsewhere, have overwhelmingly identified “with the freedom stories ...in the book of Exodus” (*Black Theology* 6). The slave-era spirituals, which blacks sing in *The Unvanquished*, and which Faulkner mined for a book title, were songs of social protest, or nascent liberation theology in which blacks “saw their own situation as [analogous] to that of the Hebrews in bondage in Egypt” (D. Matthews 8). I examine, then, the intellectual uses of the Hebrew Bible by vernacular and scholarly black liberation theologians, while considering how Faulkner’s texts participate in that movement. I hope to show that liberation theologians, with whom I align Faulkner, argue that an engagement with scripture which promotes ethical behavior and social reform stands as the Hebrew Bible’s genealogical legacy, and that attempts to ground that legacy in race or ethnicity function as manipulations of scripture within imperialist paradigms.

To look closely at that system of ethics, I explore why, and when, Egypt and the Moses narrative held such appeal for Faulkner. In addition to the occasions noted, Faulkner turned to Egypt in a 1955 screenplay, *Land of the Pharaohs*, while mentioning Moses at the University of Virginia three years later. An audience member asked him, in the context of US segregation policy, if there was a “historical precedent for your statement ... that no nation can exist with



second-class citizens” (*University* 219). Perhaps encouraged by (or in rebuttal to) the question, Faulkner linked the black American experience to Moses:

[Faulkner]: In our economy it’s pretty hard for the Negro to get very far.

[Student]: In Egypt many thousands and tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of workers were held in slavery, and they could not get out. ...

[Faulkner]: True, but some of them broke out. You know Moses led a big gang of them out himself. (219)

Faulkner was not alone in his fascination with Egypt and Moses. Zora Neale Hurston, who wrote *Moses, Man of the Mountain* in 1939, situates Moses and Exodus in African, African American, and Haitian traditions, recasting him with a black dialect and suggesting that he may have been a black Egyptian rather than a Hebrew. Thomas Mann, who fled Germany in 1933 when the Nazis came to power, also joined the Mosaic debate, writing in “Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me” (1943) that Moses’ “father was not his father, nor was his mother his mother. So disorderly was his birth” (6). And Sigmund Freud, who fled Nazi persecution, as well, by moving to England, published his controversial *Moses and Monotheism* in 1939, in which he, like Hurston, postulated that Moses was not Jewish but Egyptian. So while focused on Faulkner, I briefly consider Hurston, Mann, and Freud to contextualize the cluster of appeals to Egypt and Moses during Nazi terror abroad and Jim Crow terror at home. Faulkner, like his contemporaries, redefines and reappropriates Moses in order to deconstruct myths of origins and the discriminations that they are made to license. For if Moses’ beginnings are obscure, as each writer suggests, then terrorisms predicated on absolutes, such as the persecution of blacks because, in the words of the deputy sheriff in “Pantaloon in Black,” “they aint human” (*GDM*

149), have no factual, scriptural, or ethical basis. Moses' authority, which the twentieth-century writers and the writers of scripture assert, is text-based and law-based; it is grounded in his reception of the Torah, not in his ethnicity or racial identity. The real basis of genealogies, or the links between the present and the past that so concern Faulkner, his colleagues, and Hebrew scripture, is participation in a system of ethics, or in an engagement with the words and laws of the Mosaic text.

This chapter, then, has three objectives. I want to show that Faulkner looks to Hebrew scripture for the interpretive framework to explore the constructions and deployments of genealogies and counter-genealogies, as well as the blurring of contending genealogical lines. Next, I consider how *Go Down, Moses* functions within the black liberation theology tradition as a textual benchmark of an ethical genealogy rooted in an ongoing conversation with Hebrew scripture that was inaugurated by the Torah, or the five books of Moses binding a people to a text, to each other, and to God. God is not "universal," liberation theologians argue. He is the God of the oppressed, be they the Jews of antiquity or blacks in white supremacist America. Black theologians suggest a rereading of scripture with that edict in mind (Cone 85). That approach, put another way, is to read the Bible Hebraically, or to identify with the Bible's ethical mandates and calls for liberation, as does Faulkner, and to reengage and make current its precepts with each generation. Finally, I look at the Mosaic tradition that Faulkner (and his fellow writers) participates in to further show how he calls for a genealogy of dialogue and textual engagement rather than one of race or ethnicity at a time, circa 1940, when theories of origins predominated, and were set to work to justify oppression, tyranny, and even annihilation.

## Hebrew Bible Genealogies

### *The Ambivalence of Empire*

The writers of the Torah display a preoccupation with establishing and recording the legitimate patrilineal line of Jewish ancestry. “This is the record of Adam’s line,” notes Genesis 5, from which Noah descends in the ninth generation, followed by his sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth. From Noah’s sons, “the nations branched out over the earth” (Genesis 10:32), with Abram, whom God renames Abraham, descending in the ninth generation from Shem. God selects Abram to “make of [him] a great nation” (12:2), and by the covenant God establishes with him, Abraham becomes father of the Jewish people who “shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and [who] shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years” (15:13), a length of time also suggestive of African slavery and oppression. At the same time, the Torah displays a patrilineal ambivalence. Moses, who leads his people up from Egypt and to the cusp of Canaan, has for parents a “certain man of the house of Levi ... and ... a Levite woman” (Exodus 2:1), which establishes, ironically, that we have of Moses *no* patrilinear or matrilinear certainty. While we can trace the first Hebrew, Abraham, back to Adam, we are not able to trace Moses’ origins further back than to “the house of Levi,” or to one of the twelve tribes of Israel. And where Moses’ parents go unnamed, we are elsewhere provided the family names of eighteen generations of men from Adam to Abraham.

The house *of* Levi looks vague when we consider how genealogically preoccupied the Hebrew Bible typically is; Moses could have belonged to the Levites while not being a Levite himself. That the Jews were enslaved in Egypt may well signal the break in undisputed lineage, or point to the cause of Moses’ contested pedigree. For it is in Egypt, while the Jews are

subjected to the whims of an imperial oppressor, that their genealogies become untidy. There is, in fact, an “inattention to historical details [in Exodus that] has left historians grasping at bits of incidental information” (JSB 103). Genesis concludes, for example, by recording that “Joseph and his father’s household remained in Egypt. Joseph lived one hundred and ten years” (50:22), which is a fairly exact accounting. But in Exodus, chronologies and details appear unclear. Moses observed “his kinsfolk ... [s]ome time after [he] had grown up. ... A long time after that, the king of Egypt died. ... (2:11, 2:23). “Some time” and “a long time” are considerably removed from the precision of Genesis. The length of time that the Jews are enslaved is also difficult to sort out. Genesis 15 asserts that the enslavement will last four hundred years, which is a claim that Exodus 12 corroborates.<sup>111</sup> Exodus 6, however, records that there are only three generations from Levi to Moses, or four generations from Jacob to Moses, which would not account for four hundred years, much less four hundred and thirty.<sup>112</sup> As Jacob Gebhart argues, one hundred and thirty years might be more accurate.<sup>113</sup> In any case, the trauma of slavery suggests that the Jews did not “own” their genealogy or history during their sojourn in Egypt. The Egyptian king even ordered the murder of Jewish boys (infants), while allowing Jewish girls to live.<sup>114</sup> By that logic, there would soon be no Jewish men with whom Jewish women could mate, so any future Jewish “offspring” would be part-Egyptian. It is no wonder, then that Moses is of disorderly birth, as Thomas Mann proposes.

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<sup>111</sup> Exodus 12:40: “[t]he length of time that the Israelites lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years.”

<sup>112</sup> Exodus 6 notes that Levi, one of Jacob’s sons, fathered Kohath, who fathered Amran, who fathered Moses.

<sup>113</sup> See [http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/39\\_exodus.html](http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/39_exodus.html).

<sup>114</sup> Exodus 1:16: “When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.”

Abraham, meanwhile, had already fathered legitimate and illegitimate children. Sarah, Abraham's wife, gives her husband an Egyptian concubine, Hagar. Both the J and P writers, as well as the redactor, attest that Hagar was Egyptian; by her, Abram fathers Ishmael, who will later marry a woman "from the land of Egypt" (Genesis 21:21).<sup>115</sup> The man thus selected by God to receive the covenant fathers his first child with an Egyptian slave, to whom he is not married, while his first act after receiving the "everlasting covenant" (Genesis 17:19) is to circumcise his illegitimate son: "Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised on that very day; and all his household, his homeborn slaves and those that had been bought from outsiders, were circumcised with him" (Genesis 17:26-27). This helps emphasize that membership within the covenant is neither racial nor even lineal but a matter of ritual or practice. Only after Hagar gives birth does Sarah give birth to Abraham's "legitimate" son, Isaac, whom Abraham circumcises, as well, eight days after his birth.

The writers of Genesis thus stress authoritative, patrilineal descent, while providing counter-genealogies that cast doubt over such legitimacy. For the act that binds Abraham to God is the circumcision ceremony: "Such shall be the covenant between Me [God] and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. ... And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days" (Genesis 17:10-12). Ishmael, by several measures, precedes his half-brother. He is the first born, the first son to be circumcised, and the first son to enter into the covenant. Ishmael is also multicultural, as the son of an Egyptian and of the first Hebrew. He will go on to marry an

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<sup>115</sup> The J writer notes that Sarai "had an Egyptian maid, and her name was Hagar" (Genesis 16:1), while the P writer notes that "Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar, the Egyptian ... and gave her to Abram" (Genesis 16:3). The redactor included both sources, thus reinforcing Hagar's status as an Egyptian (Friedman Bible 55).

Egyptian and become “the father of twelve chieftains,” while God “will make of him a great nation” (Genesis 17:20). But if Ishmael has his own claims on the line, or on one line, of Abraham, so does Isaac. God states that “My covenant I will maintain with Isaac” (Genesis 17:21), while Ishmael receives only God’s blessing (Genesis 17:20). Isaac is also circumcised on the day that God prescribes, making him the first son to receive the eighth-day marking. And Isaac grandfathers the twelve tribes of Israel in the Chosen Land, while Ishmael’s twelve tribes settle “close to Egypt” (Genesis 25:18).<sup>116</sup> The brothers would thus both appear to have valid inheritance claims, but it is Isaac, the youngest, whose son, Jacob, will one day bear the name Israel.<sup>117</sup>

There is, perhaps, a historical precedent for the Hebrew Bible’s penchant for favoring younger sons. In primordial history, God favors Abel over his older brother, Cain (Genesis 4:4-5). In the time of the patriarchs, Isaac’s descendants, not Ishmael’s, will become the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob takes Esau’s birthright (Genesis 25:34), and Jacob’s favorite son is Joseph, whom he “loved ... best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age” (Genesis 37:3).<sup>118</sup> The Jews, as Marc Brettler notes, were late arrivals to nationhood in the Near Eastern world. The earliest recorded reference to the Israelis, which was discovered on an Egyptian statue, alludes “to events of 1207 BCE,” during which Egypt was in its New Kingdom (16th to 11th centuries BCE), and long after Babylonian, Sumerian, and Hittite “empires of earlier eras ... had

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<sup>116</sup> In the Islamic tradition, Ishmael is believed to be the father of the Arab peoples (<http://nabataea.net/12tribes.html>).

<sup>117</sup> After Jacob wrestles with a divine being, the messenger of God states that “[y]our name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed” (Genesis 32:29). Israel’s recognition by God is less a matter of who he is than of what he has done.

<sup>118</sup> In Jacob’s case, he appears to favor his two youngest sons, Joseph and Benjamin, more than their ten brothers.

collapsed” (Brettler, “Early History” 21, 15). Brettler argues that “Israel felt an inferiority complex compared to [its] ancient, populous, and culturally advanced neighbors; this may be reflected in the biblical motif of a younger brother usurping the rights of the older” (“Early History” 15). In a greater Near Eastern narrative, then, or one that is inclusive of Israel’s “older” brothers, Israel’s own history may be read as a type of counter-genealogy to that of the Egyptians, Mesopotamians, or Canaanites. A “chosen” people (and line of descent) of power and authority emerges out of a dynamic Near Eastern contact zone, one that US and Southern nationalist histories will one day parallel. But as the Bible reminds us, time and again, the lines between Near or Middle Eastern peoples often blurred. Abraham and Sarah were from Mesopotamia; Abraham’s consort, Hagar, was Egyptian; Ishmael married an Egyptian; Esau, born in Canaan, marries a Hittite woman (Genesis 26:34); Jacob returns to Mesopotamia from Canaan “to take a wife from among the daughters of [his Uncle] Laban” (Genesis 28:2). Moses is born to parents of the “house of Levi,” but he is raised as an Egyptian, and he goes on to marry a Cushite woman, or a woman from Northeast Africa (Numbers 12:1).

Biblical genealogies, then, are something of a mess. There are no “pure” lines of descent by which Jews are partitioned off from their Near and Middle Eastern neighbors. At best, one could argue that the Jews became Near Eastern after their migration from the Middle East and that, during the Biblical era, they lived, moved about, and were at times exiled to or enslaved in the Near East, the Middle East, and Northern Africa. Within the web of genealogies there are intermarriages among different peoples, sons who are legitimate and illegitimate, and origins both declared (the line of Abraham) and obscured (that of Moses). There is also a predilection to usurp the eldest son, which may signal a Jewish, anti-imperial tendency to disrupt genealogical

claims that would otherwise be staked on inheritance, or on the rights of the first-born. And the fact that Hebrew “homelands” and national territories were already occupied—even within the Israelites’ own historical narratives—suggests a shared anxiety among the Biblical writers that the Jews are, and have always been, in this sense, late arrivals (like both Europeans and Africans in the New World), which is compensated for by divine chosenness. Finally, there is an acknowledgment that the sons of slaves have their own claims on familial legitimacy. Abraham binds Ishmael to the covenant by circumcising him, while four of the twelve tribes of Israel descend from Jacob’s liaisons with slave women.<sup>119</sup> As Barbara Johnson notes, “the Bible is full of ‘unofficial’ families” (24), or of descendants of the patriarch who do not, necessarily, come from either of Jacob’s “legitimate” pairings with the matriarchs Leah and Rachel.

Regardless of how muddled Biblical genealogies are, though, what is clear is how pivotal they are to the work of Israeli nation-building, or to the work of reproduction as framed in nationalist terms. God tells Abraham that “I will give you a son by [Sarah]. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations” (Genesis 17:16). As Rebekah prepares to give birth to the twins Esau and Jacob, God informs her that “[t]wo nations are in your womb” (Genesis 25:23). And when God metonymically changes Jacob’s name to Israel, He declares that “[a] nation, yea an assembly of nations, / Shall descend from you” (Genesis 35:11). The writers of the Torah deploy genealogies to legitimate Jewish nation-building even as counter-genealogies, such as the lines of Ishmael or Esau, threaten to undermine the authority of those claims. What emerges, rather than genealogies predicated on race or ethnicity, are genealogies whose license originates

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<sup>119</sup> The twelve tribes of Israel descend from Jacob, who fathered twelve sons. Dan and Naphtali are born to Jacob and Bilhah, who is Rachel’s concubine. Gad and Asher are born to Jacob and Zilpah, who is Leah’s concubine. The remaining eight tribes of Israel descend from Jacob and Leah, and from Jacob and Rachel.



in the taking of the covenant, or in fealty to the religion of Abraham: affiliation rather than filiation, or consent rather than descent.<sup>120</sup> Nation-building thus proceeds by hybrid affiliations that incorporate ethnic “outsiders” into the covenant

The bulk of Biblical genealogies, finally, may well be constructed. The author of Chronicles, for example, “creates genealogies to solve problems in his sources,” thus resolving discrepancies in Samuel and Kings (Brettler, *How to Read* 130). There is no historical evidence that the patriarchs existed, or that there was a man named Moses, or that there was a mass exodus up from Egypt.<sup>121</sup> So if much of Israeli history—that which precedes the monarchic period (before 1000 BCE)—is fabricated, then claims upon the authority of those genealogical blood lines are further undermined. The possibility that Israeli genealogies may have been manufactured also speaks to the nation’s imperial leanings, or to genealogy as a form of imperial technology. By “creating” patriarchs and matriarchs who have been selected by God, and then authoring their own descent from them (Jacob fathers the twelve tribes, from whom all Jews branch out), the Jews take license to occupy Canaan on the grounds that the act is genealogically and spiritually ordained. But by narrating counter-genealogies, such as Ishmael’s descent from Abraham, or Esau’s from Isaac, the Torah exposes the very colonialisms that its covenant legitimates, while acknowledging that genealogies, whether official or unofficial, will remain in a contested space. Contending genealogies also signal that Jews have been, from the time of

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<sup>120</sup> See Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (1986).

<sup>121</sup> As Brettler writes, not a single “extant nonbiblical source explains how this people Israel arrived in [Canaan]. There is little if any evidence in Egyptian sources for an Israelite sojourn in Egypt. ... It is therefore not ... wise to assume the authenticity of various biblical figures associated with the early history of Israel, such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, [or] Moses” (“Early History” 21). There are many who argue that there was never any occupation of Canaan at all, but that the Jewish religion and Israeli nationhood gradually “developed out of the indigenous

their first family, receptive to ethnic and cultural difference; they ascribe to an absorptive mode of nationalism that extends power by incorporating difference. This is to acknowledge, though, that difference can be appropriated, or used within a scheme of power in addition to being recognized by it; Jewish nationalism, in other words is imperial *and* postcolonial.

### *The Allure of Egypt*

Where Biblical genealogies are not historically verifiable, we do know that the Bible was first composed during Egypt's New Kingdom era. As Brettler and Richard Friedman have noted, the earliest biblical passages were likely composed in the twelfth century BCE.<sup>122</sup> Biblical composition, and thus the construction of Israeli nation-building and Jewish history, ancestry, and genealogy, are more or less concurrent with a recorded episode (as documented by the Stele artifact) in which Egypt, during its New Kingdom era, conducted some sort of colonizing campaign in Israel, perhaps attempting to annihilate the Jewish people. The Bible originated as a response to Egyptian empire, so there are imperialist and anti-imperialist energies in the same text. And time and again, Egypt plays a crucial role in the Biblical imaginary. Much of Genesis and Exodus takes place, in fact, in Egypt. The writers of the Bible (particularly the J source) seem to relish in the return engagements of the patriarchs and matriarchs westward and southward—from Abraham and Sarah, to Joseph, his brothers, and his father, and finally to the twelve tribes. The intertwining of Egyptian and Israeli histories suggests that the Jews may have used genealogy, or invented a chosen Hebrew genealogy, as a strategy to redirect a national

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Canaanite population when Egypt's hold over that land weakened" (Brettler, "Early History" 21).

<sup>122</sup> Brettler, "The Hebrew Bible and the Early History of Israel" and *How to Read the Bible*, editors' notes to the Jewish Study Bible; Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed* and *Who Wrote the Bible*.

history and identity away from Egyptian sources, and as a means of legitimating a specifically Jewish accounting of those shared histories.

Egyptian culture helped to shape that of Israel, whether by the rearing of Moses, or by Joseph's tenure as an interpreter of the Pharaoh's dreams, or by the numerous intermarriages that Ishmael inaugurated. So while Egypt is often cast by the writers of the Bible as the imperial oppressor, its impact on Israel extends well beyond that of subjugating neighbor. Israel turns to Egypt for relief from famine; Egypt raises the son who will one day lead Israel out of slavery; Egypt provides Israel with the "other" that it measures itself against, as God's people who are destined to cross the Red Sea. And Israel wages its own colonial agenda against Egypt when Abraham and Sarah take Hagar, force her into concubinage, and then drive her and Ishmael out of Canaan. As Joseph is later sold to the Ishmaelites, who take him to Egypt, Israel, by virtue of Ishmael's descendants, manages to stand genealogically complicit in its own future enslavement. Egypt thus plays a crucial role in the defining of Israeli nationhood, whether as an older, imperial "brother," or by its cultural influence, or by the knotted genealogies linking it to Israel.

Those genealogies, tangled though they may be, shift from the untidy to the meticulous. Where the writers of the Bible display a genealogical ambivalence, they also demonstrate a colonial ambivalence in their depictions of Israeli and Egyptian imperialisms. For when Israel stands to benefit from its powerful neighbor, by gaining relief from famine, or by exploiting it for a surrogate matriarch, or by "emerg[ing] in charge of the land of Egypt" (Genesis 41:45), as Joseph does, the writers oblige. So as the Torah writers denounce their Egyptian oppressors, they also sanction what R.S. Sugirtharajah calls in *The Bible and Empire* a "theology of empire based on God's special relationship with the people he has chosen" (189). The Bible does not

condemn all forms of imperialism, just those that impede Israel's covenantal/imperial destiny. Resistance to empire proliferates in the Torah, but so do endorsements of empire where it serves the Jews.

The Israeli kingdom (from the tenth to the eighth centuries BCE, or from the Davidic era to the fall of Northern Israel), however, could hardly be called just one in a number of Near or Middle Eastern empires from the classical era. The modest geographic scope of Israel's reach, which did not extend beyond Canaan, was far eclipsed by that of the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires. And as noted in earlier chapters, much of the Bible was written in response to the colonizing and destructive leanings of Israel's larger neighbors. While the Bible lauds Israel's rise to power and the exploits of King David, it also serves to warn against empire's perils, be they those of Israel or of her enemies (Sugirtharajah 190-191). Israel's failings are often placed by the Torah writers within a context of imperial arrogance, most notably that of King David, while their God emerges as the God of the oppressed. He will lead them up from Egypt, or out of Babylon, provided that they uphold the covenant. The Jews, led by Joshua after Moses' long march, will then become the conquering oppressor as they establish their imperial hold on Canaan. Exodus defers the Jews' arrival in a way that emphasizes and prolongs the sense of the people as an escaping oppressed group. Four hundred years of enslavement is followed by a forty-year journey: even though the Jews are now imperial agents themselves, their history as a subjugated people is as vital to their identity as is God's covenantal decree. They are chosen as *the* oppressed people, and as such, chosen *for* imperial greatness.

My reading of Genesis and Exodus has attempted to build the case that Biblical genealogies, which account for both official and unofficial families, shift from the precise to the obscure, revealing an investment in familial lines as well as ambivalence towards them. This is most evident in the cases of Abraham, the first Hebrew, and Moses, the adopted son of an Egyptian princess who leads the Israelites out of bondage. Genealogies wind up having less to do with race, place, or ethnicity than with the culture of a text, and a covenant, in which a people are bound to the Bible, to each other, and to God. As Genesis and Exodus were written from the ninth to the seventh centuries BCE, and redacted several hundred years later (as I discuss in Chapter 1), it bears noting that there is no pre-Mosaic “Bible” or Bible tradition to which we might refer.<sup>123</sup> At best, we might say that some pre-Exilic poetry circulated among the Jewish peoples (or among the people who became Jews), and that this poetry was later included in the Bible. The exodus is thus paramount to the defining of Jewish identity: Jewish pre-history may well have been created to “fit” the narrative arc leading up to the march out of bondage.

Egypt, meanwhile, holds an enduring allure for the Biblical writers, as Israeli and Egyptian genealogies are enmeshed from the start. While Egypt is principally cast in the role of the oppressor, Israel exploits Egypt, as well, perhaps in mimicry of its older, colonizing brother.<sup>124</sup> The Bible is imperially ambivalent where it is also genealogically ambivalent, endorsing Israeli colonization while condemning the subjugation of Israel. The caveat, however,

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<sup>123</sup> “The Song of Deborah” (Judges 5) is believed to be the oldest document in the Hebrew Bible, perhaps written in the 12th Century BCE (<http://www.mazzaroth.com/ChapterThree/HistoryOfTheBible.htm>). There is no mention of Moses or of the exodus in the song. The Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32), by comparison, is believed to have been written between the eighth and fifth centuries BCE (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=967&letter=S>).

<sup>124</sup> See Homi Bhabha, “Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse” (*The Location of Culture*).

is that the Bible critiques Israeli imperialism even as it celebrates the taking of Canaan. Israel's primary national identity fuses chosenness (via divine covenant) and subjugation (via its long history of oppression). This particular fusion evokes both African American and Southern Nationalist/Lost Cause histories, which feature importantly in *Go Down, Moses*. So while Israel's covenantal promise depends upon the subjugation of others, the God of Israel still favors those who are oppressed. This is best exemplified by Hagar, the Egyptian slave who is cast out by Sarah and Abraham, and whom the angel of God orders to "Go back to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment," while also telling her that "the LORD has paid heed to your suffering" (Genesis 16:9, 16:12). Within the framework established herein, I would now like to turn to William Faulkner, and to his postcolonial engagement with genealogies, with the God of the oppressed, and with Moses and Egypt.

### **Faulknerian Genealogies**

#### *Isaac's Official Genealogy*

In *Go Down, Moses*, just who the descendants are of the Abrahamic "chosen" line remains contentious. Isaac McCaslin and McCaslin Edmonds imagine themselves as within the direct line of Abrahamic genealogy. While they debate the meanings revealed by the family's commissary ledgers, which record the rape of Tomasina, a slave, by her father, Carothers McCaslin, Isaac remarks that God

used a simple egg to discover to them [early modern Europeans] a new world where a nation of people could be founded in humility and pity and sufferance and pride of one to another. And Grandfather ... owned the land nevertheless and notwithstanding because He [God] permitted it, not impotent and not condoning and not blind because He ordered and

watched it. ... He chose Grandfather out all of them He might have picked. ...

Grandfather would have descendants, the right descendants, maybe He had foreseen already the descendants Grandfather would have, maybe He saw already in Grandfather the seed progenitive of the three generations He saw it would take to set at least some of his lowly people free. (247-248)

Isaac McCaslin believes that Carothers, like Abraham, had been chosen by God to found “a nation of people,” and that Carothers’ offspring, like Abraham’s, would serve as the “right” or chosen descendants who would work out a providential plan for history. They would emancipate the oppressed (African Americans), while regenerating the very land that they (white Americans) corrupted by bringing the sin of ownership into it. But by virtue of the “sin” of land ownership, and of ownership of people, the McCaslins are chosen *and* scourged. Or, they are scourged because they are chosen—chosen to be scourged or cursed so that they might one day lift that curse. The McCaslins’ God has thus mandated imperial and sinful energies: He has elected whites to own or possess the land, yet He has punished them for their abuses of that chosenness. Carothers, according to Isaac, was chosen to bring the sin of ownership into the land so that Isaac, as the third-generation McCaslin, could function as something of a liberator or redeemer. The US South becomes, then, a New Canaan on American soil, or a “new world” for those who had been “[d]ispossessed of Eden. Dispossessed of Canaan” (247). Isaac traces the historical arc from Canaan to New Canaan by referring to the “five hundred years of absentee landlords in the Roman bagnios, and the thousand years of wild men” (247) who ruled between the time of Canaan’s old and new.

Isaac McCaslin subscribes to a Lost Cause ideology in which he has been selected to be defeated by God; he, like his fellow Southern whites, descends from those who were destined to lose the Civil War by virtue of their chosenness (chosen to be scourged). But Isaac is by no means obsessed with the Civil War, like Gail Hightower in *Light in August*. Nor is he preoccupied with Southern defeat, or with romantic notions of antebellum chivalry, or with a likening of Northerners to Babylonian captors, all of which, as Charles Reagan Wilson has argued in *Baptized in Blood*, were emblematic Lost Cause sentiments (63). Isaac, in fact, differs from most Lost Cause advocates. As Wilson notes, many “[s]outherners refused to admit that God’s displeasure with the peculiar institution [of slavery] was the cause of Confederate defeat. ... Most church councils and assemblies did not identify specific reasons for the calamity [of Southern defeat]” (68). But Isaac views ownership—of land and people—as just that cause. He and Cass’s discussion turns directly to the war, to “Lee’s battle-order” and to “Jackson on the Plank Road,” with God, according to Isaac, willing the South’s defeat so that the lowly people would go free: “Apparently they [white southerners] can learn nothing save through suffering, remember nothing save when underlined in blood—” (*GDM* 273). The South had to blunder into defeat to produce the revolution in consciousness necessary to regenerate the land. Isaac, it might be said, is the Lost Cause ideologue we would want our Lost Cause advocates to be. He is well-versed in scripture, he looks for specific meanings in it to explain Southern defeat, and he accepts, with sober acuteness, the burdens and responsibilities of chosenness. Like his Hebrew Bible “forebears,” Isaac is imperial and (post)colonial: he is the descendant of an oppressor who, in turn, has been selected to liberate those who are oppressed.



Isaac's brand of ideology, while rooted in standard or typical Lost Cause conceptions, such as the South as a New Canaan, Southern whites as God's new chosen people, and defeat as punishment for that chosenness, moves closer to a postcolonial discourse than one that nakedly champions race imperialism. He sincerely believes that he has been selected to redeem the sins of his family's past; he possesses none of the arrogance or defiance that otherwise marks Lost Cause dogma. As with his Hebrew Bible "ancestors," Isaac's ancestors played the dual role of oppressor (of blacks) and oppressed (scourged because chosen, and for abuses of that chosenness). And Isaac, as a white man, or as one who has been chosen and empowered within an imperial race network, is the "right" descendant who might, in a postcolonial gesture, "set at least some of His lowly people free." Those lowly people are the African Americans whom Carothers McCaslin enslaved and abused, many of whose descendants remain on the McCaslin land.

Isaac's notion of chosenness, with respect to the official genealogy he constructs, diverges, however, from that established by the Hebrew Bible "ancestors" from whom he claims descent. Where the patriarchs invested in a genealogy of the covenant, Isaac thinks of himself and Cass as New Canaanites based on their "white man's blood" (248). Isaac remarks that "only by voiding the land for a time of Ikkemotubbe's blood and substituting for it another blood, could He [God] accomplish His purpose. He knew already what that other blood would be, maybe it was more than justice that only the white man's blood was available and capable to raise the white man's curse" (248). Isaac's whiteness and chosenness are thus synonymous: he is the "seed progenitive" in the third generation because he is white, which distinguishes him from his black relatives, whom Isaac acknowledges. When he discovers that Carothers willed one

thousand dollars to Turl, his son by Tomasina, Isaac thinks, “*I reckon that was cheaper than saying My son to a nigger*” (258), thus recognizing Turl’s McCaslin lineage. Isaac’s black relatives remain, however, the “lowly people” that the “right,” or white, descendants, must “set ... free.” He cannot recognize African Americans as agents of historical change even as African Americans used Exodus to understand themselves as those very agents. Fonsiba’s husband tells Isaac that the curse “has been voided and discharged. We are seeing a new era, an era dedicated, as our founders intended it, liberty and equality for all, to which this country will be the new Canaan—” (267). He appeals to the Hebrew Bible (to Exodus and Joshua, as indicated by his New Canaan reference), as does Isaac. But Isaac is at best doubtful, at worst dismissive, of the agency and Biblical authority that Fonsiba’s husband claims, as he replies with, “Freedom from what? From work? Canaan? ... What corner of Canaan is this?” (267).

Isaac reinforces a genealogical hierarchy and scriptural inheritance predicated on race, or blood, in which he, as the patrilineal, white grandson of Carothers McCaslin, is the “right” or official descendant. For even as Isaac renounces ownership of the family land (two years after his encounter with Fonsiba and her husband) as a means of distancing himself from the legacies of the McCaslin past, he does not think to give the land to the patrilineal, black son/grandson of McCaslin, Turl. Instead, Isaac passes on the family plot to his white cousin, Cass, which elicits no real change. The land repudiation is an empty, private gesture that may appease Isaac’s sense of shame, but does not “set ... some of His lowly people free.” Rather, the gesture liberates Isaac: as he tells his cousin, “I am free” (286). But Carothers’ black descendants remain on the land as itinerant sharecroppers with no legal ownership claims in spite of Isaac’s land abdication.

Isaac also differs from his Hebrew Bible “forebears” by his fixation on redemption and the Fall, or Adam and Eve’s original sin, which is, in a sense (according to Isaac) reenacted by Carothers when he buys land and thus violates the covenant of land stewardship, as did the first couple when they ate from the tree of knowledge (Genesis 2:17). While Isaac’s chosenness springs forth from his understanding of a covenant, as well as from his understanding of seed, race, and blood—and note his attention to reproduction or to chosenness as a white inheritance—his beliefs are also expressly Christian. This is to be expected, for Isaac *is* a Southern Christian; he may know Genesis, but that hardly imbues him with a Hebrew-minded system of ethics. Original sin and redemption are Christian concerns that have little to do with Judaism, but everything to do with Isaac McCaslin. I make this distinction because my project is predicated upon the supposition that William Faulkner is ontologically Jewish—that he approaches the Bible Hebraicly (and thus rejects original sin), and that, at the textual and theoretical levels, so does his fiction.<sup>125</sup> Jews do not invest in original sin; they believe, rather, that humans are born innocent, but flawed. As Alfred J. Kolatch writes in *The Jewish Book of Why/The Second Jewish Book of Why*, “[t]he doctrine of original sin is totally unacceptable to Jews. ... Jews believe that man enters the world free of sin, with a soul that is pure and innocent and untainted. ... The dominant view by far [is] that man sins because he is not a perfect being, and not, as Christianity teaches, because he is inherently sinful.”<sup>126</sup> Jews do not believe that mankind’s sins originated in

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<sup>125</sup> Virginia Hlavsa similarly notes that Faulkner “did not [believe in] a Calvinistic sense of Original Sin ... [but instead] that human beings could choose to be decent and courageous” (qtd. in Hamblin and Peek 322).

<sup>126</sup> See [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/Original\\_Sin.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/Original_Sin.html). See also Joseph Telushkin’s *Jewish Literacy*: “[i]n Christian theology this story [Adam and Eve] of disobedience became the Original Sin with which all of mankind was permanently stained. But Jews have never regarded it with the same seriousness. It was an act of defiance, to be sure, and because it

the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve erred because, like all humans—God’s creation—they were imperfect, and thus prone to error. They did not break the covenant because of their inherent sinfulness; if God did not want them to eat from the tree, then perhaps He should not have planted it. The Hebrew Bible is replete with patriarchs, matriarchs, and Jewish leaders who abuse power, misstep, connive, or otherwise come up short. Those same characters (and Jews from time immemorial) also complain to God: they did not ask to be chosen, to suffer His wrath, or to uphold His 613 commandments.

Isaac McCaslin, however, is convinced that the land is tainted or cursed because of the original sin that his grandfather repeated upon it, even as he remarks that “the land [was] already accursed” when Ikkemotubbe and his ancestors owned it (248). As Isaac tells his cousin, “on the instant when Ikkemotubbe discovered, realised, that he could sell it for money, on that instant it ceased ever to have been his forever, father to father to father, and the man who bought it bought nothing” (246). The claiming of private property, which breaks the stewardship covenant, is thus the (new) original sin for Isaac. Isaac constructs a genealogy in which a savior figure, himself, will emerge from northern Mississippi to deliver the region from the broken covenant, or from sins against the land, and the sins against the “lowly” people on it. If Carothers “bought nothing” when he purchased the land, then there is no land for Isaac to inherit, or to own in his turn. God permitted Carothers to own the land so that Isaac would repudiate it: He allowed Carothers to sin, thus enabling Isaac’s arrival as a New Canaanite Christ-like redeemer. So while Isaac’s orientation to oppression, nationalism, and power is both imperial (a form of white chosenness) and postcolonial (he wants to set “some of His lowly people free”), it is also

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transgressed God’s command, it was a sin. But the idea that every child is born damned for that sin is alien to Jewish thought” (7).

Southern and Christian, modeled on Jewish strategy but lacking a Jewish center, even as his land forfeiture is an ethically centered move. He follows the Hebrew Bible in the letter of chosenness but not in spirit.

As Jean Radford proposes, the “vital presence of Judaism ... is what has been missing from [Christianity]” (103), and this vital presence is what Isaac lacks. At its best, Judaism is an ethics-based religion that invites dialogue, and that calls for social reform. Isaac, however, walks away from the very chosenness with which he (by his accounting) is imbued. The championing of a redeemer figure is predicated on an acceptance of original sin, or on the pinpointing of a root, historical cause that renders Isaac a linear rather than constellational, or Jewish, thinker.<sup>127</sup> The ledgers may haunt Isaac McCaslin, but his land abdication is less a confronting of the past, and of what it means now, than an aggrandizing (if anguished) gesture that absolves *him* of the guilt of “original sin,” and that fashions him as that sin’s redeemer. Isaac recognizes systems of injustice and hears the call for social reform, but opts out of hard community work in favor of a personal absolution.

Isaac may recognize the Hebrew Bible’s inside/outside approach to imperialism, but by giving the family land to his cousin, Isaac reinscribes imperialism even as he aims to subvert it. He is a spectacular failure who means well, and whose moral stance is admirable; his grief is manifest when he wishes or hopes that “*there must have been love. ... Some sort of love*” (258) between Carothers and Tomasina. His regional, race-informed application of scripture, however, renders his Lost Cause rhetoric more white Christian imperialist than Jewish. The Jewish approach would have been to spend less time fretting over “what happened,” or in trying to

forget, and more time on what is happening now, which is *always already* inclusive of what did happen: the disenfranchisement of African Americans, whether in 1888, when Isaac renounces the land, or in 1940, when Isaac tells the young black woman from “Delta Autumn” to “forget all this, forget it ever happened” (340).

But Isaac’s abdication does signal a personal rejection of the imperialist system. Within the three-generational schema he has invented, Isaac tries to make amends for his family’s transgressions. His grandfather, in the first generation, brought sin into the land. His father, Theophilus (Buck), and his uncle, Amodeus (Buddy), made the initial move towards reparation in the second generation when they moved out of the Big House and into a cabin, while moving their slaves into Carothers’ plantation home in an exchange of domestic spaces that was both real and symbolic. Isaac, then, walked off of the plantation altogether, leaving the Big House and the slave cabin behind. Isaac, his father, and his uncle also question the authority of genealogy by putting off or running from marriage (Buck marries late in life, Buddy never marries, and Isaac “loses” his wife by repudiating the land), which would ostensibly produce an heir, or by remaining childless (as do Buddy and Isaac). The official genealogy to which Isaac subscribes is thus nuanced with respect to the progressive gestures that Buck and Buddy, and then Isaac, make: they reject their entitlements to home, plantation, and offspring, thus undermining, to a degree, their own white privilege.

#### *Isaac’s Covenantal Genealogy*

Isaac’s renunciation, as well as the three-generational design that he endorses, is all the more nuanced when we consider that he, like his Hebrew Bible forebears, constructs unofficial

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<sup>127</sup> As discussed in the Introductory and *Absalom, Absalom!* chapters (and as alluded to in Chapter 2), William Faulkner espouses a Hebrew Bible, and Benjaminian, approach to history,

as well as official genealogies. If his white line constitutes the official genealogy, then his spiritual and ecological filiation with the Big Woods, the mystical Buck (of “The Old People”), and Sam Fathers makes up a covenantal multigenerational scheme that challenges the legitimacy of the imperial McCaslin bloodline. Sam Fathers—part Chickasaw, part black—is every bit as much a father to Isaac as Theophilus or Cass, who at “sixteen years his senior ... [was] more his brother than his father and more his cousin than either” (*GDM* 158). Isaac’s land repudiation is informed, in large part, by the lessons imbued to him by Sam, who “taught the boy the woods, to hunt, when to shoot and when not to shoot, when to kill and when not to kill, and better, what to do with it afterward” (164). Sam thus emphasizes *practice* in this “family”: it is not a blood line binding its members but a covenant line organized around an absorptive ritual (the initiation rite of the blood marking in “The Old People”). From Sam, Isaac learned to treat the land and the creatures inhabiting it as inviolable; Carothers’ abuses were thus irreconcilable with Sam Fathers’ Big Woods instruction. As John Matthews notes in *William Faulkner: Seeing Through the South*, “Ike welcomes his initiation into the alternative ethos of the wilderness, one that regards the land and all its creatures as belonging to all, and so belonging to none. ... Ike clearly takes the wilderness ethic as the inspiration for repudiating his patrimony. ... It is Sam’s Native American ancestry that bestows on him the authority to re-imagine the land apart from a surrounding history of colonial possession, plantation economy, and slavery” (212-213).<sup>128</sup>

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and to the ways in which the past remains vitally present.

<sup>128</sup> Matthews’ emphasis on Sam’s Native American ancestry as the site of his authority is somewhat reductive. Native Americans, like whites, fall short of the wilderness ethic in *Go Down, Moses*, as evidenced by Ikkemottubbe’s ownership of land. Sam, however, does not own land. It may be more accurate to say that Sam’s hybridity, as well as his marking (by whites) as a nonwhite, disposes him to recognize the colonial dimensions of plantation economies, as well as his subjugated status in them, and that his gravitation to the Big Woods is a form of liberation from the plantocracy, and from the encroachment of industrialization.

From this kinship and values-driven covenantal genealogy, Isaac begins to approach the Jewish aesthetic lacking in his reading of the official, white McCaslin line. The Big Woods family is multicultural and multiethnic, with a hybridity that is inclusive of the land, its animals, and some of the peoples inhabiting it.

Isaac's covenantal line is, on the surface, not tethered to the regional, race-inflected mores that so plague his conception of the chosen McCaslin genealogy.<sup>129</sup> The covenantal line is also environmentally sensitive. Isaac gravitates towards the Hebrew Bible creation story (Genesis 1) that anticipates ecocritical awareness, and man's responsibility to the land, when he remarks that "He [God] made the earth first and peopled it with dumb creatures, and then He created man to be His overseer on the earth and to hold suzerainty over the earth and the animals on it in His name" (*GDM* 246). And the blood of the buck, with which Sam Fathers marks Isaac, ties him spiritually and ecologically to his Big Woods ancestors. This marking recalls the covenantal marking of circumcision (although Sam does not literally circumcise Isaac), which is a blood ritual rather than a commemoration of blood inheritance that involves cutting and spilling blood, and that culminates in initiation. This marking also reworks the blood sacrifice in Genesis, in which Abraham kills a ram in lieu of Isaac. The patriarch Isaac enters into a union that includes him, his father, and the ram, anticipating the three-generational (or three-creature) schema on which Faulkner's Isaac fixates. The imperialism that voices itself in Isaac's chosenness rhetoric is thus tempered by his participation in an inclusive, ethics-based, spiritual or covenantal genealogy. In this covenantal line, however, Isaac still emerges as the chosen

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<sup>129</sup> African Americans function as domestic servants to the white hunters in the Big Woods. So even if the Big Woods invites a counter-genealogy that is inclusive of difference, and that is not bound by bloodline, that counter-genealogy otherwise "mimic[s] ... white plantation society"



figure: he is singled out as the third-generation redeemer, and is endowed with unique wisdom as inherited from the “grandfather” buck, and from Sam Fathers.

Isaac’s fixation on the “third generation” in official and unofficial genealogies is revealing. Within the framework of his Biblical analogy, wherein Isaac McCaslin’s grandfather is “Abraham,” as he and his cousin, Cass, have at least rhetorically agreed upon, the third generation would be akin to Jacob (and Esau). Isaac’s fixation also suggests a twentieth-century eugenics context—recalling the Darwinian reading of Ham by white supremacists, as discussed in the preceding chapter—in which a lineage reveals its integrity or degeneracy in the third generation. But for all of the focus on patrilineal lines in Faulkner, it is revealing that Isaac McCaslin fathers no one, whereas the patriarch Jacob fathers the Jewish nation. The narrator declares that Isaac is “uncle to half a county and father to no one” (3), an observation he later amends with “*still* father to no one” (286). What this means is that Isaac, who does not set some of God’s “lowly people free,” has no offspring to carry on that good work. But by Isaac’s logic, the business of lifting the curse is a Godly mandate bestowed upon the McCaslins; Isaac’s line (from Carothers to Theophilus to him) was chosen for that purpose. I would like to suggest, then, that we follow the other white McCaslin line—that of Isaac’s cousin, Cass, who takes ownership of the land upon Isaac’s abdication of it—to see if, in fact, the text in any way corroborates Isaac’s belief that the McCaslins are God’s chosen, or to see if any of the McCaslins perform that “chosen” work. For it is Isaac who establishes the typological focus oriented on the role of offspring, and thus the importance of having them, and Isaac who, by virtue of his inability to (or decision not to) reproduce, abdicates from that responsibility. But

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(Matthews 213). Isaac is even attended to by an African American named Isham in “Go Down, Moses,” which reinforces the Isaac/Ishmael hierarchy that Faulkner constellationally revisits.

Cass's line does reproduce, from him to Zack to Roth.<sup>130</sup> Roth Edmonds is thus the third-generation "descendant" of Isaac's decision to repudiate the land. And it is in the Big Woods of 1940 where Isaac, who had long ago taken up genealogies as a tool to think with, is confronted by an unnamed woman whom Roth has rejected, and who is excluded from the imperial McCaslin bloodline *and* from the ethically oriented covenantal line.

*Isaac's Genealogies Converge*

By virtue of the shift from Isaac to Cass as head of the McCaslin family, Faulkner further undermines investments in the authority of the white patrilineal line (and Isaac's espousal of it), which he renders a dead end through Isaac's failure to father a son. Cass is descended from Carothers matrilineally, which we learn in the novel's opening sentence: "McCaslin Edmonds [was] grandson of Isaac's father's sister and so descended by the distaff" (*GDM* 3). And when we follow the line of Cass, we arrive at Zack Edmonds, who in 1898 summons Mollie Beauchamp, the wife of Zack's black cousin Lucas Beauchamp, to care for his baby, Roth, after Zack's wife dies in childbirth. Zack Edmonds, like Carothers before him, appropriated black women for whatever use he may have drummed up. In "Delta Autumn," Roth continues the cycle of exploitation by discarding an unnamed African American woman, to whom he is related, after she has given birth to his son. She is the granddaughter of Tennie's Jim, the son of

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<sup>130</sup> As Cass points out, Isaac's three-generational schematic, in which he is the chosen third, was problematic from the start: "although you admitted three generations from old Carothers to you, there were not three. There was not even completely two. Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy. And they not the first and not alone. A thousand other Bucks and Buddies in less than two generations and sometimes less than one in this land you so claim God created and man himself cursed and tainted. Not to mention 1865" (250). In addition to noting the tenuousness of Isaac's accounting logic, Cass intuits that there is much more plaguing the South than what the McCaslin ledgers reveal, from the "thousand other" families who bear responsibility for crimes such as those committed by Carothers, to a nation's war and the repercussions of it. At any rate, Cass becomes the head of the family in the fourth generation, as he is Carothers' great-grandson.

Turl and Tennie; she and Roth both descend from Carothers. Faulknerian genealogies become as muddled here as they are in scripture, making a McCaslin family chart something of a necessary reference.<sup>131</sup> But intersecting and jumbled genealogies may well be the point, which Isaac, now in his seventies, misses as he tells the woman to go “back North. Marry: a man in your own race. That’s the only salvation for you—for a while yet, maybe a long while yet. We will have to wait. Marry a black man” (346). Isaac has lived his life surrounded by black family members, and he meets another one in “Delta Autumn.” But he insists on declaring African Americans a race, or rather lineage, separate from his own: despite his discoveries in the ledgers, it’s as if he thinks that he can disentangle and hold apart these inextricably mixed lines. It is a black woman whom Isaac asks to leave the Big Woods hunting camp, or to leave the spiritual and ethical covenantal space.

The young woman from “Delta Autumn” throws doubt on the legitimacy of Isaac’s constructed genealogies. Isaac, whether in his white family or in his gendered Big Woods counter-line (or his ecological covenant line), desires what Edouard Glissant calls an atavistic culture, or “a Genesis, a creation story in which there is uninterrupted lineage from father to son, with no illegitimacy” (*FM* 114). Yoknapatawpha County is, according to Glissant, instead a “composite culture that suffers from wanting to become an atavistic one and suffers in not being able to achieve that goal” (*FM* 115). That atavistic ideal extends to the Big Woods, as well. The covenantal space had up to now been all male, yet here is a woman disrupting the “atavism” of the Big Woods. Southern racist ideologies also circulate in the Big Woods. As Matthews writes,

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<sup>131</sup> Cleanth Brooks provides a McCaslin genealogy in *The Yoknapatawpha Country*, as do Nicholas Fargnoli and Michael Golay in *William Faulkner A to Z*.

[t]he most disquieting feature of the wilderness ethos as celebrated in *Go Down, Moses* proves its compatibility with Southern racism. In “Delta Autumn,” when he is an old man, Ike speaks less guardedly, and so more offensively, about the mongrelization of America. In his ugly remarks about “Chinese and African and Aryan and Jew, all breed[ing] and spawn[ing] together until no man has time to say which is which nor cares” (*Go Down, Moses*, p. 347), Ike seems to be laying the corruption of the “ruined woods” to racial promiscuity. ... It’s as if the social discourse of Southern plantation society and the succeeding Jim Crow regime are being sanctified [in the Big Woods].<sup>132</sup>

That Southern racist discourse would extend into the Big Woods is appropriate enough, as the hunts for old Ben (the bear) took place on land that had once been part of Sutpen’s Hundred. The land had been owned—which to Isaac is the (new) original sin—by a man who “[t]ore violently a plantation” (*Absalom* 5) to build a slave-era empire. Where once Isaac had lamented that “*there must have been love*” (258) between Carothers and Tomasina, he now derides the “*breed[ing] and spawn[ing]*” (347) with which he is newly confronted. Isaac’s desire for atavism, whether of race or gender, is an imperialist impulse designed to control “*what is to come, what is going to be conquered, and what is going to be discovered*. ... [T]he community tries to keep itself pure from any outside assault” (Glissant, *FM* 114-115). But the young woman—or doe in counterpoint to Isaac’s mystical buck—reminds us that Yoknapatawpha was never pure, or atavistic, and that “assaults” came from within the community rather than from outside of it. From at least the time of Carothers’ acquisition of Eunice, whom he bought in New Orleans in 1807—which is sixty years before Isaac’s birth, or roughly three generations—the McCaslin family was already composite or hybrid, as was the first family in Genesis from the

time of Abraham's liaison with Hagar. It is only fitting, then, that Roth Edmonds, according to Isaac, shoots a doe at the conclusion of "Delta Autumn," in disregard of Isaac's reverence for the Big Woods. As Roth's girlfriend has shown, those woods (or the men who inhabit them) are as indecent as the plantation that Isaac has renounced, and as exclusive as the genealogies that Isaac has constructed. Those woods are, in fact, the very plantation itself, as the original Big Bottom is now a timber "farm."

The young woman reminds us, finally, that *all* of the McCaslin genealogies overlap. In the Big Woods, she recalls for Isaac how she descends from Carothers (and thus Eunice) while holding a child fathered by Roth. Faulkner's attention to intersecting genealogies enables him, as a postslavery writer, to, as George Handley notes, "point to the [nation's] miscegenated roots ... and thereby expose the unnatural marriage between slave owning and nationalism" (16), or here between slave owning and imperialism. Isaac McCaslin, who as a young man gives land to his white cousin but not to his black relatives, and who, as an old man, screams at the mother of Roth's child to "Get out of here! I can do nothing for you! Cant nobody do nothing for you!" (344), participates in and propels forward systems of oppression and imperialism that are predicated upon a privileging of one genealogy over another—even as those genealogies have always blurred—and upon a claiming of Biblical chosenness in spite of the "miscegenated roots" that should compromise any such claim.

Isaac does, however, make a gesture to include the woman's son in the covenantal line. He gives her a horn that "General Compson had left him [Isaac] in his will, covered with the unbroken skin from a buck's shank and bound with silver" while remarking that "[i]t's his. Take it" (347). Isaac, albeit uncomfortably, confers upon the boy a Big Woods inheritance, which

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<sup>132</sup> Matthews, *William Faulkner: Seeing Through the South* (216).

suggests that the boy's entitlement to it is not compromised by his "blackness." The gesture also signals the boy's inclusion in the (atavistic: male) community of woodsmen, if only ceremonially, and functions somewhat as a counterpoint to the cash payoff. The money both acknowledges and disavows the boy's McCaslin bloodline, while the gift of the horn welcomes the boy, by means of a covenantal ritual, into the Big Woods. So Isaac unincorporates the boy from one genealogy while incorporating him in another. One wonders, however, if Isaac will invite the boy to future hunts.

*Mollie Beauchamp's Genealogy*

Roth Edmonds, we learn in the novel's concluding story, "Go Down, Moses," is equated by Mollie Beauchamp with an agent of the Pharaoh, the Egyptian oppressor of the Hebrews in Genesis and Exodus. Edmonds, who in 1940 owns the McCaslin land, had ordered Mollie's grandson, Samuel (Butch) Beauchamp, off of the property for stealing from the commissary, after which, sometime later, Samuel moved to Chicago and was convicted of murder. And "going north" is what Isaac advised the young woman to do in "Delta Autumn," which solves nothing. Jefferson cannot begin to reform itself by sending its problems northward; there is no "freedom" in exile. Before being expelled from the plantation, Mollie's grandson had been *on* the land, if we follow the Beauchamp genealogy, because of the rapacity of Carothers, which the commissary ledgers had long since shown. As Mollie tells Gavin Stevens, Jefferson's District Attorney, "'It was Roth Edmonds sold him. ... Sold him in Egypt. I dont know whar he is. I just knows Pharaoh got him. And you the Law. ... I wants you to find my boy. ... Sold him in Egypt and now he dead'" (353-354, 363). The white McCaslins, then, have not set some of "God's lowly people free." According to Mollie Beauchamp, they have further enslaved them, while it

is she, and her family, who are the Abrahamic descendants. Both Isaac and Mollie claim to be, in a sense, the Biblical Jacob. Jacob is the third generation in the patriarchal line, as is Isaac McCaslin, while Jacob is also the parent of Benjamin. And even though Mollie is Samuel's grandmother, her lament for Samuel, whom she calls Benjamin, evokes Jacob's lament for his son, Benjamin: "Me you have bereaved. ... Benjamin you would take! It is I who bear it all. ... [I]f I must be bereaved, I will be bereaved" (Genesis 42:36, 43:14, trans. Alter). So just who are the "rightful" descendants—the white McCaslins, or their black brethren?

For whites, "rightful" descent has as much to do with power, wealth, ownership, and law (hence Stevens, the district attorney, standing in for the absent Isaac and Roth in "Go Down, Moses") as it does with a chosen or legitimate Abrahamic line. Attempts to pay off Eunice and Carothers' descendants, which the McCaslin and Edmonds men repeatedly make, whether by carrying out Carothers' instructions in his will, or by leaving money for the woman in "Delta Autumn," expose the economic motivations fueling their history of genealogical accounting. Roth and Isaac believe that an envelope of money should suffice in silencing the young woman, whose "black" child Roth refuses to legitimate by marrying the mother. She may be descended, as is Isaac, from Carothers, but she is not, like Isaac, a "rightful" descendant. Isaac McCaslin is only "chosen" in the sense that his declaration of chosenness is reinforced by ownership of the family land, which he transfers to his white cousin, while Mollie Beauchamp, who also identifies with the descendants of Abraham, has no such land ownership claim.<sup>133</sup> Neither Mollie nor her

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<sup>133</sup> Faulkner complicates Roth's eviction of Samuel Beauchamp in *Intruder in the Dust*. We learn in *Intruder* that Mollie and Lucas own ten acres on the "two-thousand acre plantation" (8). Roth's eviction of Samuel Beauchamp thus calls into question the lawfulness of the Beauchamps' ownership of the land that Zack Edmonds "had deeded to his Negro first cousin and his heirs into perpetuity" (*Intruder* 8). If the Beauchamps did, in fact, own that land, which

husband, Lucas, have any recourse to prevent Roth from expelling their grandson from the plantation, even though Lucas and his grandson are descended from Carothers, as is Roth, and even though Roth and Samuel are cousins.

Faulkner's black characters acutely understand these power and property dynamics, as Thadious Davis emphasizes. Davis, bucking the trend to read *Go Down, Moses* expressly as the "tale of the ledgers," with Isaac and the fourth section of *The Bear* at its proverbial center, focuses instead on Turl, Carothers' black son/grandson. Davis thinks of Turl "as a subject struggling to assert the rights denied him by his material condition as property," while noting that "images of power are embedded in the specific rights Tomy's Turl seeks to recapture" (19). In Davis's reading, Turl is legitimate; he and his descendants do not make up a counter-genealogy to the "sanctioned" white McCaslin family tree. When he marries Tennie Beauchamp, Turl validates his genealogy by aspiring towards an "official" pairing. His run to the Beauchamp plantation in "Was," which takes place in 1859, "constitutes the willful institution of a legally recognized black family with an economic stake in the social order and with a traceable genealogy. This founding of a legal black family is an unexpected outcome of investing Turl with agency and will" (Davis 70). Turl's marriage to Tennie thus empowers him and his wife, while rendering "traceable" their genealogical line, which extends back to Carothers on Turl's side. By thinking of Turl's marriage to Tennie as a rightful genealogical enterprise, Davis reads the black McCaslin line as official or legitimate even if it is not legal (in 1859). The marriage functions as a covenant that forms a line which whites must recognize in spite of laws that do not recognize it.

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they pay taxes on (*Intruder* 25), then Roth would not have had the legal authority to evict Samuel from it.



Mollie Beauchamp's appeal to chosenness is also a validating genealogical move. Her authority is divorced from notions of race or skin color, or of property rights or inheritances; it is grounded, instead, in conceptions of community, ethical behavior, and scriptural commentary. She equates Roth Edmonds with an agent of the Pharaoh who, in Genesis, employed Joseph, one of Jacob's sons. And while the Pharaoh favored Joseph, the latter's status, as a Jew in Egypt, was always tenuous: Joseph was at times a "Hebrew slave" (Genesis 39:17), while at others he was "in charge of the land of Egypt" (Genesis 41:45). Mollie's understanding of scripture is not as literal as that of Isaac McCaslin, who thinks of his grandfather as an American Abraham, and who traces genealogies from Genesis to his family. Her reading is instead associative, as she *likens* her grandson, Samuel, to Benjamin, whom she believes to have been sold in Egypt, even though it was Joseph, not Benjamin, who was sold "for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt" (Genesis 37:28). But Mollie's understanding of scripture is more nuanced than it may appear by her Joseph/Benjamin conflation. By noting that "Roth Edmonds sold him" (362), she implies, if we follow the Biblical analogy, that Roth and Samuel are related, which they are. As Glenn Meeter has pointed out, Samuel and Roth function somewhat as brothers: Mollie raised Samuel as her own son, and she "had been the only mother he, [Roth] Edmonds, ever knew" (*GDM* 113).<sup>134</sup> Mollie takes from Genesis, then, the story of a family betrayal, as does Isaac when he discovers Carothers' incestuous act. But she is in no way concerned, as is Isaac, with the "seed progenitive" (248) that produces white, "rightful" descendants, or with the "simple egg" that might hatch a New Canaan, in which whites are God's chosen, and blacks are "His lowly people." Mollie is concerned, rather, with participating in a dialogue on ethics—hence, the emphasis on choral "strophe and antistrophe" (*GDM* 363)

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<sup>134</sup> Meeter, "Lost Cause Ideology and Genesis in *Go Down, Moses*."

between Mollie and her brother, Hamp—and on the conduct of community behavior, which is a conversation that the Bible invites.

Mollie’s substitution of Benjamin for Joseph may indicate a fully realized appreciation for the Hebrew Bible’s favoring of younger sons, or its rejection of the imperialist “rights of the first born.” Mollie thinks of her grandson as Benjamin, or the youngest son of Jacob. And while Benjamin is not literally sold in Genesis, his brothers fear that he will be, so the threat of slavery looms. The liberties she takes with the details of scripture are perhaps less a misreading than a close reading. Mollie, like the writers of the Bible, “usurps” the elder in her privileging of the younger Benjamin.<sup>135</sup> Isaac McCaslin, on the other hand, reinscribes the entitlements of the first born (as well as the privileging of those with offspring) by forfeiting his “birthright” to his older cousin, McCaslin Edmonds. In Genesis, Joseph winds up almost as powerful as the Pharaoh, or the “enslaver” of Mollie’s grandson; he enjoys the Pharaoh’s trust, patronage, and protection. Likening her grandson to Joseph would thus not carry the impact of an analogy with Benjamin. As the brothers in Genesis believe, Benjamin would be endangered if left to the mercies of the all-powerful Joseph, who flaunts his power by appearing to threaten his younger brother. Joseph plants a goblet in Benjamin’s bag, then tells his brothers that “[t]he man in whose hand the goblet was found, he shall become my slave” (Genesis 44:17, trans. Alter). Judah, one of the brothers, then tellingly remarks that “you [Joseph] are like Pharaoh” (Genesis 44:19, trans. Alter). The way Mollie *correctly* sees it, then, Roth—Samuel’s older “brother”—is the Pharaoh-like agent who has endangered her grandson.

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<sup>135</sup> As Susan Handelman observes in *The Slayers of Moses*, “[t]he underlying theme of the usurping brother ... counters the strong narrative [Biblical] genealogies. ... Rabbis assume, in a sense, the role of [younger] brother interlocutor to God through their interpretive powers” (143). Or, Moses never has the *final* word; there is always room for more commentary.

Mollie is also attuned to the geographic contexts of scripture, or to what Biblical “Egypt” signaled for the writers of the Torah, and for African Americans in the Jim Crow United States: imperialism, oppression, and enslavement. As Taylor Hagood notes in *Faulkner’s Imperialism*, “[f]ew places so thoroughly and flexibly represent imperialism in Western history as Egypt. ... Much like the rest of the nation, the South was constructed on the powerful narrative significance of ancient Egypt as expounded by the Bible. ... The presence of Egypt as a trope of imperialism and hybridity in Faulkner’s cosmos was ... vivid and very much alive” (119, 121, 125). The specific location of “Egypt” is contested in Faulkner, according to Hagood. For Mollie, Jefferson is Egypt “in relation to the Edmonds’ plantation” (146). It is the McCaslin estate, however, that resembles Egypt for Fonsiba, Mollie’s sister-in-law, who flees the plantation, as Fonsiba’s husband notes, for the “New Canaan” (*GDM* 267) that is their Arkansas home. So leaving the plantation is both exile (Mollie) and liberation (Fonsiba). And while blacks march out of the South, or up from “Egypt” in *The Unvanquished*, they are turned around by their Northern liberators, who blow up the bridge that blacks aim to cross to enter into their new Canaan. George Van Devender has even argued that the North is thus the Egypt from which blacks are led away by Rosa Millard (cited in Hagood 138).

Declaring Egypt to be the McCaslin plantation, or Jefferson, or the Mississippi Delta, or the North—or whether any of those locations might otherwise be thought of as Canaan—may prove problematic. As Hagood writes, “[g]o down in Egypt and let my people go—but what people? African Americans on the plantations? Native Americans in the Delta? The white people equally enslaved to their slaves and imprisoned by the curse of their oppressive heritage? Faulkner’s answer, tortured as it is, seems to be yes, all of the above” (147). But if Faulkner’s

answer appears ambivalent, that may signal readerly or critical frustration with his texts' "shifting" Egypt rather than a tortured reply by the artist. "Egypt," in other words, may look to be a contested space, but I think that Faulkner's title, and Mollie's chant that "Roth Edmonds sold my Benjamin. Sold him in Egypt" (353) tips Faulkner's hand. While the exploitation of African Americans, the vanquishing of Native Americans, and the "curse" on white Americans are all concerns of Faulkner, he selected for his title an African American spiritual that places Egypt in a specific imperial context. And the only character who expressly references Egypt in *Go Down, Moses* is Mollie Beauchamp, a black woman who has been exploited by the white descendants of Carothers McCaslin for more than forty years. That "shifting" Egypt, meanwhile, renders the entire nation complicit in a greater imperial network than any one plantation, town, state, or region: it is *all* Egypt for African Americans.

We do not know how Mollie Beauchamp finds out that her grandson will be executed, or where that execution will take place. As Mollie tells Gavin Stevens, "I dont know whar he is. I just knows Pharaoh got him" (354), which is to say that she knows that Samuel is in the US. Mollie wants her grandson's body to be returned to Mississippi for a proper burial, but that hardly equates the McCaslin plantation with a New Canaan. For if Roth Edmonds "sold" his cousin to the Pharaoh, then that transaction began on the family plot, indicating the "Pharaoh's" or "Egypt's" imperial dominion over it. Roth Edmonds first banishes Samuel from the plantation, after which he spent a "year in and out of the [Jefferson] city jail for gambling and fighting" (354). Jefferson thus offered no reprieve; no one in the town thought to question Roth's authority in evicting his cousin from their shared familial land, while the only opportunities afforded Samuel in Jefferson were that of vice. And where Isaac McCaslin had

thought that the white McCaslin line contained the “seed progenitive [that would] set some of His lowly people free” (248), Gavin Stevens thinks that Samuel emerged from “some seed not only violent but dangerous and bad” (355). That seed, of course, generates from outside the McCaslin line, as Butch is the son of Mollie’s daughter; Butch’s father is not a descendant of Carothers. Gavin Stevens, like Isaac, thus exonerates the McCaslin line.

Stevens blames the young man’s plight on an innate condition inherited from his father who, like Samuel, has been incarcerated for manslaughter, rather than recognizing the systems of oppression that conspire against them. Stevens and Isaac thus invest in essentialized readings of “seed” that appear grounded in inflexible conceptions of race. For Isaac, white men (at least the line resulting in him) possess the “seed progenitive,” while for Gavin, the seed of a black man, and non-McCaslin, predisposes Samuel to violence and crime.<sup>136</sup> In either case, Jefferson—with its league of white men who own the land or give it to their fellow whites, as does Isaac, who pontificate on race, and who set, enforce, and interpret law—is no promised land for Samuel in relation to the “Egyptian” McCaslin plantation. The town is instead the imperial center or metropolitan “core” that enables and legitimates Roth Edmonds’ banishment of his black cousin. Jefferson’s whites do not consider, as Davis points out, that “the duality of economic conditions compounded by legal, racial, and moral codes ... which persistently dehumanize blacks ... may be ... responsible for what [Samuel] becomes” (228), nor do they initially regard themselves as responsible for Samuel’s plight. But Mollie knows full well that they are accountable, which explains her desire to bring Samuel’s body home in a public way. The town, in a sense, has no choice but to confront what it has done when Samuel’s body returns. Jefferson pays a grudging

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<sup>136</sup> Stevens’ ruminations on the white and black blood battling within Joe Christmas in *Light in August* also suggest that he essentializes race.

tribute to him when the train bearing his casket arrives, which suggests that Mollie has, in fact, forced the town's hand, or forced it to own up to its complicity in the death of one its own. And Samuel's funeral is paid for by the "merchants and clerks and barbers and professional men" (364), to include a lawyer, which signals the law's culpability, and a newspaper editor. "I wants hit all in de paper" (365), Mollie tells the editor. Even though she cannot read, Mollie makes sure that Jefferson will read about what it has done.

As a small town in northern Mississippi, Jefferson is situated as a local or regional hub within an expansive imperial network. It is also the city from which Samuel makes his escape from jail, or the "Egypt" from which he flees. He commits murder, however, in Chicago, one of the principal destinations for blacks during the Great Migration, the exodus of African Americans out of the South and into the North that gained momentum after the first World War.<sup>137</sup> Between 1916 and 1970, more than 500,000 blacks sought opportunities in Chicago that were denied them in the South during the segregation era.<sup>138</sup> But Chicago is no New Canaan for Samuel Beauchamp; rather, it winds up as the site of his death, as Egypt is for Jacob's sons. Samuel had attempted to rob Rouncewell's store in Jefferson, and then had assaulted a policeman—felonies, to be sure, though not capital offenses. Once in the larger, Northern city, however, the range of criminal "prospects" afforded Samuel increases. Where he had tried to rob a florist in Mississippi, which by no accounting would have made him rich, he states that his Chicago occupation was "[g]etting rich too fast" as he lies on a prison cot in "fine Hollywood clothes" (352). And where he had hit a policeman in Jefferson, he now murders one in Chicago. Samuel goes from banishment to imprisonment to the electric chair as he "migrates" along his

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<sup>137</sup> See James Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora* (2005) for a comprehensive study of the movement.

route from the plantation to Illinois, which suggest any number of continuities between ostensibly antithetical “regions.” Chicago finishes what Roth Edmonds starts, with assists provided by the federal government, nationwide communications systems, movie industry illusions, and a continental transportation network.

National networks of knowledge and power coalesce in the execution of Samuel Beauchamp, and in the return of his body to Jefferson. Samuel had taken an alias in Chicago, which may be read as a self-reinvention in the North designed to distance him from his criminal past. While in prison, however, a census-taker discovers Samuel’s true identity. By virtue of the year the story takes place, 1940, we can assume that the census-taker is a federal worker conducting the population survey for the new decade. If he were taking a local poll, he likely would have said, “That’s not the name you were sen—lived under *here*” rather than “lived under in Chicago” (352). Jefferson is notified of Samuel’s pending execution, meanwhile, by a Joliet, Illinois press release. Gavin Stevens and the Joliet prison warden then coordinate by telephone to arrange for the return of Samuel’s body (at a cost) via a railway system that links the US from town to town, from region to region, and from North to South. So Taylor Hagood is astute to call Faulkner’s Egypt “flexible.” In “Go Down, Moses,” Egypt is Roth Edmonds’ farm, it is Jefferson, it is Chicago. Its inhabitants are counted every ten years, while its people and towns are connected by telegraph and telephone, by the press, and by railways. But Faulkner is neither tortured nor ambivalent, nor is Egypt a contested space. Egypt is wherever imperial America extends its reach. There is nowhere in the US that is not Egypt for African Americans, which again belies Isaac’s advice to the young woman in “Delta Autumn” to “[g]o back North. ...

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<sup>138</sup> <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/545.html>.

That's the only salvation for you" (346). The North was no salvation for Samuel Beauchamp, nor will it be for the "doe."

As the above reading has attempted to show, Mollie Beauchamp has, perhaps, the most realized conception of the Bible, and of how to interpret it within US Jim Crow imperialism, of any character in Faulkner. Faulkner frames section two of "Go Down, Moses" by juxtaposing Mollie, an elderly black woman who is probably illiterate (the text suggests as much on its last page), with Gavin Stevens, who has a law degree and a doctorate, and who has been "translating" the Old Testament for twenty years. Their comments begin and end the section. But it is Mollie, rather than Stevens, who recognizes the Biblical resonance of Samuel's pending execution, which was set in motion the moment Roth Edmonds evicted him. Stevens, however, focuses again on Samuel's inborn propensity for crime, remarking that he "was in a business called numbers, that people *like* him make money in. ... He is a murderer. ... A bad son of a bad father" (emphasis added, 357). When he finds out that Mollie Beauchamp and Hamp Worsham, with whom Mollie is staying in Jefferson, are siblings, Stevens is not surprised. As the narrator tells us, blacks "were like that. You could know two of them for years; they might even have worked for you for years, bearing different names. Then suddenly you learn by pure chance that they are brothers or sisters" (354). In a novel that compels us to pay attention to the genealogies of empire, and that implores us to rethink what genealogies mean, now and in scripture, Gavin Stevens learns "by chance" that Mollie and Hamp are related.

Not only are Mollie and Hamp siblings, but the black and white Worsham lines look to be as intertwined as that of the McCaslins (in addition to being entwined with the McCaslins via Mollie's marriage to Lucas Beauchamp, who is Carothers McCaslin's great/grandson). Miss



Worsham, who is white, acknowledges as much when she tells Stevens that “Mollie’s and Hamp’s parents belonged to my grandfather. Mollie and I were born in the same month. We grew up together as sisters would” (357), or more precisely, as half-sisters would. Mollie even named her grandson after Miss Worsham’s father, Samuel Worsham. So if Jefferson, Mississippi—and Genesis—should have taught Stevens anything, it would be that there are no such things as “chance” relations, nor are these relations revealed by “chance.” Mollie Beauchamp understands this acutely. She thinks that Roth Edmonds has betrayed *his* cousin, Samuel Beauchamp, just as Benjamin’s (or rather Joseph’s) brothers betrayed him, and as Joseph, as representative of an imperial oppressor, threatens to betray Benjamin. But Stevens, who refers to Mollie as “the old nigger” (360) and calls her “Aunty” (353), thus reinforcing an imperial race hierarchy, thinks that Mollie is mistaken. After Mollie again says that “Roth Edmonds sold him. ... Sold my Benjamin” (362), Stevens replies, “[n]o. ... No he didn’t, Aunt Mollie. It wasn’t Mr Edmonds. Mr Edmonds didn’t—” (362). While his retrieval of Samuel’s body is laudable, his dismissal of Mollie’s scriptural analogy compels one to wonder just what Genesis Gavin Stevens has been translating.

### **Faulkner and Black Liberation Theology**

#### *Black Genealogical Authority*

Mollie Beauchamp references Genesis, but her depictions of the Pharaoh as one who enslaves, and of Egypt as the site of that enslavement, echoes instead Exodus, as underscored by Faulkner’s title, “Go Down, Moses,” and as reinforced by his selection of that title for the novel. Rather than recasting one episode from scripture without considering it in the context of others, as does Isaac, Mollie blends, “juxtapose[s] and condense[s] several biblical stories” (Meeter,

“Lost Cause” 279), approaching biblical texts as a combined narrative while fashioning them anew in the present day. Hers is an ontologically Hebraic move, as well as one that blacks have been making since the slave era. As Lawrence Levine notes in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, “[a]lthough Jesus was ubiquitous in the [slave] spirituals, it was not invariably the Jesus of the New Testament of whom the slaves sang, but frequently a Jesus transformed into an Old Testament warrior whose victories were temporal as well as spiritual. ... Much of their inspiration [was] drawn from the events of the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation (43, 50). Two episodes in Faulkner, in addition to the one in “Go Down, Moses,” support Levine’s assertion that blacks weave Biblical narratives together to make them contemporaneous.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, Reverend Shegog asynchronously navigates from Revelation to Exodus, starting with “I got de ricklickshun en de blood of de lamb!” and then turning to the Egyptian bondage story (295).<sup>139</sup> During Shegog’s sermon, meanwhile, Dilsey Gibson, the Compson housekeeper, remarks that “I’ve seed de first en de last” (297), suggesting a synthesis of Genesis and Revelation. Dilsey places Biblical texts in dialogue within the context of what she has seen, whereas her employer, Caroline Compson, does not—Mrs. Compson’s Bible lies “face down” (300). Her eyes remain closed as she orders Dilsey to “hand me my bible,” indicating that she is not seeing, reading, or synthesizing any of it. The shades are also closed in her room. As Dilsey notes, “You cant see to read nowadays” (300), which emphasizes the contrast between oral and literate scriptural experiences. Mrs. Compson uses the Bible, which liberates Dilsey at the sermon, as a device to restate the imperial hold she has on her housekeeper. “Dont put [the Bible] there again,” she said, without opening her eyes. “That’s where you put it before.

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<sup>139</sup> Revelation 12:11: “they have conquered him by the / blood of the lamb / and by the words of their testimony” (Oxford Bible).

Do you want me to have to get out of bed to pick it up? ... Go on and fix Jason something to eat” (300). The timing of this exchange, which follows Shegog’s Easter service, accentuates Dilsey’s participation in scriptural dialogue, or in communal orality, and Mrs. Compson’s lonely literacy, or her exclusion from that discourse. What is all the more remarkable is that Dilsey, like Mollie Beauchamp, may be illiterate. Whites may control access to education, but African Americans “read” the Bible fully, teasing out its abuses of power, its critique of empire, and its empowerment of the oppressed.

In *The Unvanquished*, black characters allude to a host of Biblical passages as they remark that they are “[g]oing to Jordan. ... Going to cross Jordan” (91). The appeal to Jordan, within the context of the slave march to freedom, and the river that they will need to cross, summons up Exodus, and the parting of the Red Sea. It also recalls the Book of Joshua, in which the Jews cross over the Jordan River to enter Israel (4:15-24). “Going to cross Jordan” carries New Testament connotations, as well, as the Gospels of Matthew (19:1) and Mark (10:1) note that Jesus crossed the river while spreading his ministry. One of the slaves even mentions Jesus by name: “Hit’s Jordan we coming to. ... Jesus gonter see me that far” (*Unvanquished* 85). Dwight Hopkins discusses the centrality of Exodus and Moses to Christian black culture, noting that “for African Americans, to be a Christian is to identify with the freedom stories (e.g., in the Book of Exodus) of the Hebrew slaves fleeing from Egyptian bondage” (*Black Theology* 6), while Levine writes that the Moses narrative has been greeted with “intimacy and immediacy” (37) by African Americans.

By placing the Gospels in dialogue with Exodus and Joshua, the slaves purport that Jesus continues the work of emancipation begun by Moses; liberation is thus not merely metaphysical,

as it is in the New Testament/Christian emphasis. In so doing, the slaves practice Black Liberation Theology. As James Cone, who helped inaugurate the study of the black theology movement, writes, “by unraveling new meanings in old tales ... the past may emerge as an instrument of black liberation. If the oppressed are to preserve their personhood, they must create a new way of looking at history independent of the perspective of the oppressor. ... Jesus ... did not destroy the Old Testament; he fulfilled it” (13, 67). The slaves in *The Unvanquished*, and Dilsey and Shegog in *The Sound and Fury*, find “new meanings in old tales,” be they from Genesis, Exodus, or Joshua, or the Gospels or Revelation. Faulkner’s black characters envision Jesus as standing alongside Moses in a constellational fight for the oppressed. Jesus is not a substitute for the Old Testament; his narrative is a continuation of it, with the Bible a site of conversation in which African Americans freely join.

Ongoing textual engagement, and investment in a system of ethics that the Bible generates, are foundational to the scriptural experience of Faulkner’s black characters. They synthesize biblical narratives, place them in dialogue with one another, and then take up that discussion. The genealogical authority, then, whereby African Americans are linked to the sons of Jacob, or to Moses, Joshua, or Jesus—which is to say, linked to a text—is not granted by claiming the “seed progenitive,” as does Isaac McCaslin, but by participating in the scriptural commentary tradition, as do the slaves marching to freedom during the Civil War, as do Reverend Shegog and Dilsey Gibson on Easter Sunday, 1929, and as does Mollie Beauchamp in 1940.<sup>140</sup> Faulkner’s black characters make the Bible “new” as they connect its texts to the

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<sup>140</sup> In a forthcoming essay, Jay Watson suggests that Nancy Mannigoe’s discussions with Gavin Stevens and Temple Drake, while awaiting execution in *Requiem for a Nun*, cautiously anticipate Civil Rights-era sit-ins and arrests, as well as King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963). I do not address Mannigoe because her dialogue does not seem to invite a Hebrew Bible inquiry. Her

present-day trials of US race tyranny and imperialism. African Americans read, envision, and experience the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, and from Moses to Jesus, as a freedom story in which they function as active participants in God's liberation narrative. Exodus is, of course, the most inspirational of the Bible's freedom narratives. Jews read Exodus aloud every Passover to study its present meaning, while African Americans, as Levine, Cone, Hopkins, and Ware have remarked, also reinterpret Exodus and Moses. And as mentioned, Faulkner turned to Exodus four times between 1934 and 1942, turns which situate him in the Black Liberation Theology tradition.

The black theology movement gained political momentum during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras, or from the 1950s to the 1970s, emerging "as an effort to relate the gospel to the experiences of the African American freedom struggle and the particular challenge of black power. During this time, black churches and community activists met a God of Liberation working closely with those black folks who dared fight for their natural and God-given human rights" (Hopkins, *Black Theology* 15). Of utmost concern for black theologians was the empowerment of their congregations in the fight against white oppression. As Civil Rights activists sought legal, social, and economic emancipation for African Americans, black theologians emphasized scripture's emancipatory tropes. They focused on stories that stressed God's favoring of the impoverished, such as Exodus and the Gospels, while calling for a rereading of scripture informed by the conviction that the "basic mistake of our white opponents

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comments of "Yes, Lord" (45), "All you need, all you have to do, is just believe" (234), and "He will save you" (238) are, to me, expressly Christian, and frustratingly uninquisitive. I think that her passive acceptance is what leads Watson to describe *Requiem* as something of a missed opportunity, at least with respect to how progressive the text appears within the Civil Rights conversation. That said, a reading of *Requiem* as participating in the Black Liberation Theology

is their failure to see that God did not become a universal human being but an oppressed Jew” (Cone 85). Black theologians thus orient their Christian congregations to Jesus’ Hebraic roots, whereby God is ontologically the “GREAT I AM” (Hopkins 163). As Hopkins writes in *Down, Up, and Over*,

When Yahweh responded to the cries of the oppressed Israelites, Yahweh announced the ontology of God in the following proclamation: “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM’” [Exodus 3:14]. ... The I AM God is a verb, to be. ... Thus, the I AM God is both present, in the sense that the divinity exists here and now, and future present, in the sense that the sacred one will always be I AM WHO I AM. Yahweh not only acts on behalf of the poor, but, moreover, God is a God whose being is I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE. I AM and I WILL BE signify a oneness and eternity in the Spirit of Liberation for us.

(163)

God is thus a verb; He is the action “to be,” to exist. There is no distinction between His presence “then” and “now,” for He has been, is, and always will be the ontological “is”: He who favors the oppressed. And it is Exodus—namely, God’s conversation with Moses—that liberation theologians turn to as they emphasize this point, because it is in Exodus that God introduces himself in these terms or specifically in the context of His continuity.<sup>141</sup> By situating Himself at this pivotal moment in the Exodus narrative, and by claiming an everlasting presence in the fight for liberation, God favors not just the Israelites, but all who will *ever be* under the yoke of tyranny, be they the Jews in Egypt, or blacks in white supremacist America.

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movement—specifically, the New Testament dimensions of that tradition—might complement this study.

The Faulkner texts I discuss were written before the Civil Rights and Black Power eras that have been vital to Black Liberation Theology. But those movements did not inaugurate black theology so much as they empowered theologians and academics to formalize the following principles that already informed black vernacular culture and practice:

1. God is not universal, nor is he color-blind. He is the God of the oppressed.
2. Jesus continues the work of liberation first espoused in the Hebrew scriptures.
3. Theological practice is overtly political. (Hopkins, *Black Theology* 32-35)

And while black theologians identified the tenets of scriptural liberation in the 1960s, the movement began as soon as Africans were stolen from their native continent, enslaved, and introduced to Christianity. As Frederick Ware has observed in the fittingly titled “A Genealogy of Black Theology,” “[i]ntermittently but over centuries, black theology has interpreted Christianity in such a way as to recover from racist distortion Christianity’s transformative message” (*Methodologies* 2).<sup>142</sup> Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), Harriet Tubman (1821-1913),

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<sup>141</sup> As noted in the Introduction, Faulkner nods to God’s naming or being in *Absalom, Absalom!* when Rosa Coldfield mentions “*the central I-Am’s private own*” (112), and in *Father Abraham*, when Faulkner writes that “[t]he Lord once said to Moses: ‘I am that I am’” (14).

<sup>142</sup> Black liberation theology is a Christian practice that, as James Cone, Dwight Hopkins, and Frederick Ware have noted, emerges out of the Exodus, and thus Hebrew Bible, tradition. Islam has impacted the movement, as well. As Rufus Burrow notes in *James H. Cone and Black Liberation Theology*, Malcolm X functioned as a liberation theologian even though he rebuffed Christianity: “[Malcolm X] rejected the negative images of blackness portrayed by white Christianity and claimed that Islam stood for everything positive for blacks, while Christianity proclaimed the opposite” (16). Malcolm X, in effect, claims of Islam what liberation theologians claim of black Christianity: a divinely inspired counterpoint to white Christian hypocrisy. And as Burrow notes, Malcolm X was one of two contemporary figures (the other being Martin Luther King, Jr.) who greatly impacted James Cone when he codified liberation theology (2). As some of the enslaved Africans were Muslim, that religious tradition may have given them an emancipatory orientation to liberation theology before they received their Christian indoctrination. Hamid Dabashi argues in *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire*, that Islam is politically oriented towards combating imperialism, oppression, and corruption, as

and W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), are cited by Ware as proponents of the movement, all of whom predate its codification.

Douglass, for example, writes in his *Narrative* that he fights for two hours with his owner, Covey, in a scene reminiscent of Genesis 32, where Jacob wrestles with an angel of God. In liberation tradition, Douglass blends Genesis and the Gospels, declaring his victory over Covey to be a “glorious resurrection” (Douglass 65). W.E.B. Du Bois links African Americans to the Song of Songs, which is sung at Passover, in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois, as does Faulkner, celebrates the “sorrow songs” that blacks sing, while appealing to the God of the oppressed. He notes that blacks “have found peace only in the altars of the God of Right. ... [I]n His good time America shall rend the Veil, and the prisoned shall go free” (Du Bois 187). Hurston’s *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, meanwhile, is perhaps *the* quintessential novel of black liberation. Hurston spends the bulk of four chapters, or more textual space than the writers of Exodus, on God’s name, I AM WHAT I AM, as if to call attention to His active, existing presence in the African American community. She thus establishes Moses’ “African” or “black” credentials from the outset of the novel. Hurston also has her characters speak in a black American dialect, while aligning Moses and Jesus, as do liberation theologians (Hurston viii).<sup>143</sup> Faulkner, then, participates in an already mature American literary discussion on black liberation theology, one that anticipated the political movement by more than a century, and which

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is the black liberation movement (272). Dabashi, like Cone, celebrates the contributions of Malcolm X to the liberation theology movement (in Dabashi’s case, the Islamic movement).

<sup>143</sup> For more on Hurston’s engagement with the Exodus narrative in the African American tradition, see Barbara Johnson, “Moses and Intertextuality” (1997), and Timothy Caron’s *Struggles Over the Word*.



includes, in addition to the writers mentioned, David Walker, Frances Harper, and James Weldon Johnson, among others.<sup>144</sup>

The song “Go Down, Moses,” as Thadious Davis notes, “has endured in several versions as one of African Americans’ favorite spirituals because of its familiar biblical archetype of relief from oppression and its promise of retribution for the sin of enslavement. ... [B]ecause the spiritual is so closely connected with the experiential reality of black people under slavery, it binds [Faulkner’s] book to blacks and vexed markers of race” (21, 20). By selecting “Go Down, Moses” for his title, Faulkner reiterates the spiritual’s critique of the sources of law and authority that circulate within networks of oppression (Davis 24). Exodus, for example, contains contending sites of authority, as claimed by the Pharaoh and by Moses, in imperial Egypt. The Pharaoh’s efforts to keep the Hebrews in servitude “may be considered appropriate action because it conforms to a civil law and the ethics of custom,” while Moses’ efforts to lead his people out of slavery may be thought of as right and just “because it promotes an ideal—freedom rather than bondage as the rights of human beings” (Davis 24). Where the Pharaoh functions as a legal authority and law maker, he is also a moral or ethical law breaker, as attested to by his maltreatment of the Israelites. And by liberating his people from the clutches of the Pharaoh, Moses asserts his status as God’s “moral representative” (Davis 23). The third level of law in the spiritual is that of God, who selects Moses to enforce His moral authority (Davis 23, 156): “O come along Moses, you’ll not get lost, / Let my people go, / Stretch out your rod and come

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<sup>144</sup> Donald Matthews argues in *Honoring the Ancestors* that “David Walker’s *Appeal* of 1829 [is] probably the first black liberation theology in written form” (33). In Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, Iola remarks that the “characters of the Old Testament I most admire are Moses and Nehemiah” (228). Johnson’s “Go Down Death,” meanwhile, recalls “Go Down, Moses.”

across, / Let my people go.”<sup>145</sup> The spiritual establishes that God is the supreme authority, and that His agent will defeat those who violate moral or ethical law.<sup>146</sup> God, Moses, and the Pharaoh thus function as the spiritual’s “three levels of authority and sources of law” (Davis 156).

The song’s espousal of an ethical authority that transcends civil law reverberates throughout *Go Down, Moses*, starting with a slave marriage that would have no legal standing but is recognized in the McCaslin ledgers: “*Eunice. ... Married to Thucydus 1809*” (255). Mollie Beauchamp’s exposure of the “Pharaoh,” or of the intersecting imperialisms conspiring to defeat her grandson, emphasizes this point. Elsewhere in the novel, Isaac McCaslin “is unable to extricate himself from the competing systems of law and morality signified by the spiritual” (Davis 156), as when he implores the young woman to leave the Big Woods (even though civil law does not necessarily extend to that space). The young woman asks Isaac, “have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you dont remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?” (346). By civil law, or by the “ethics of custom” (Davis 24), Isaac has the authority to pay her to leave. But the young woman’s (and the text’s) indictment of Isaac as one who has “forgotten so much” suggests that he is oblivious to the greater, moral authorities motivating her, as revealed by her dissection of the miscegenated McCaslin line that has confounded Isaac since he first read the ledgers.

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<sup>145</sup> See footnote 109.

<sup>146</sup> See Henry Gates, *Figures in Black* for an analysis of the spiritual “Go Down, Moses” that complements Davis. Gates looks at the African origins of the song, as well as at its Biblical origins: “Yahweh told Moses exactly what to say to ole Pharaoh, ‘way down in Egypt land,’ to ‘let my people go.’ ... ‘[D]own’ also implies the not-so-mythic (but mythically recalled) land from which black people were severed, the Africa of their fathers” (191-192).

Exodus (which may be the liberation movement's Ur-Text), the spiritual, and *Go Down, Moses* perform the political and ideological work of black theology by critiquing the sources of authority of those who are empowered. In the cases of Isaac McCaslin and Roth Edmonds, this authority resides in the whiteness that each claims, and that enables Roth to evict Samuel Beauchamp. Isaac conducts his own sort of eviction, that of the young woman, by giving her Roth's bribe money in the "ruined woods" (347) of the Mississippi Delta. The region has become "*deswamped and denuded and derivered,*" and out of it "*black men ... ride in jim crow cars to Chicago*" (347), one of whom, we find out shortly ("Go Down, Moses" follows "Delta Autumn"), was Samuel Beauchamp. The novel has long since exploded the myths of whiteness by the time of Isaac's rant, and has exposed the hypocrisies of US Jim Crow imperialism that are predicated upon fabricated conceptions of race essentialism. If God is, indeed, the God of the oppressed—as Exodus, the spiritual, and the black theology movement avow, and as Mollie Beauchamp's chant of "[s]old him in Egypt" (362) corroborates—then a Moses-like agent of moral authority will one day, in time, liberate black Americans from white subjugation.

#### *Faulkner's Moses*

That Mosaic agent, however, could be a long time coming. The "official" Civil Rights platform would indicate that Martin Luther King was just that figure, or that voice of a freedom struggle. But Mollie's chant suggests an alternate, non-Mosaic paradigm, or a grass-roots emphasis on the Hebrew Bible's organizing principles (a dialogue on ethics, liberation, and reform). Faulkner's texts do not provide that Mosaic figure, nor do they wax theological on the presence of a God, of the oppressed or else. What distinguishes Faulkner from his contemporaries Freud, Mann, and Hurston, in fact, is that Moses can hardly be called a central

actor in either *Go Down, Moses* or *The Unvanquished*. Moses, the character, figures prominently in the other writers' works. Mann and Hurston retell the Exodus narrative, focusing on Moses, while Freud debates Moses' origins (as do Mann and Hurston), and the invention of monotheism.

In Faulkner's texts, there is no "man" Moses. Glenn Meeter has argued otherwise, writing that "[i]f there is a 'Moses' in the title story of *Go Down, Moses* it must be Gavin Stevens" ("Lost Cause" 292), who pays to have Samuel Beauchamp's body returned to Jefferson for burial. And a case could be made that the US Army—specifically, its commander-in-chief, Lincoln—is "like" Moses: the Army leads slaves to freedom in *The Unvanquished* by defeating Confederate oppressors. As Rosa Millard notes, "Loosh said ... [t]hat General Sherman was leading them all to Jordan" (91). George Van Devender, meanwhile, believes that Rosa Millard "becomes Moses leading the chosen people" (qtd. in Hagood 138) back to their Southern homeland. Taylor Hagood turns to *Intruder in the Dust* for another of Faulkner's Moses. The adolescent Charles (Chick) Mallison "might be the white man who can carry the southern society a step farther than Isaac McCaslin. ... It is Charles, fished out of the icy creek on the Edmonds plantation as Moses was drawn from Egyptian waters, who might be the leader of a new dawn for Yoknapatawpha race relations" (Hagood 150-151). Three critics, then, have collectively identified three Faulknerian "Moses," all of whom are white: a woman who presides over John Sartoris's slaves while he fights to defend his right to own them, a Jim Crow-era attorney who favors a gradualist approach to integration, and the attorney's nephew, who at the age of twelve insults Lucas and Mollie Beauchamp, and shames himself, by dropping seventy cents on their cabin floor to pay Mollie for feeding him and drying his clothes (*Intruder* 15).

While Meeter, Van Devender, and Hagood seek out Faulkner's Moses, it is worth noting that the only characters *in* Faulkner who allude to the story of Moses are black, whether Mollie Beauchamp in *Go Down, Moses*, the slaves marching to freedom in *The Unvanquished*, or Reverend Shegog in *The Sound and the Fury*, who preaches that "[d]ey passed away in Egypt, de swingin chariots; de generations passed away" (295), which, I think, further situates Faulkner in the black liberation tradition. To argue that Gavin Stevens, or Rosa Millard, or Chick Mallison is the Faulknerian "Moses" is thus problematic. Stevens does not liberate African Americans from systems of oppression; he raises money for a funeral. And as Hagood notes, "Gavin Stevens, with his tiresome and endless defense of the South's 'privilege of setting [Sambo] free ourselves' ... cannot conceive of race relations in terms that are not defensive of the aristocratic white South's racist attitudes and past" (Hagood 150). Stevens' remark comes from *Intruder in the Dust*, in which he goes on to say that "we must resist the North. ... [which has] ... been admitting for seventy-five years now that they failed [to free Sambo]" (151). So Stevens is not exactly on the front lines in the fight against race oppression.

Rosa Millard returns blacks to slavery in *The Unvanquished*, a move in which the US Army, ill-equipped to provide for fleeing African Americans, is complicit. One of their officers negotiates with Rosa to take African Americans back to the South, issuing an order "giving" Rosa "[t]en (10) chests tied with hemp rope and silver. One hundred ten (110) mules captured loose near Philadelphia in Mississippi. One hundred ten (110) negroes of both sexes belonging to and having strayed from the same locality" (112). Thinking of Rosa as Faulkner's Moses misses the somewhat salient point that Moses leads his people out of slavery, not back into it, even if Rosa's intentions are to see that blacks return safely "home." The conflation of Chick

Mallison with Moses is likewise a misstep. Moses is not immersed in water; he is discovered in a basket “among the reeds” by the Pharaoh’s daughter (Exodus 2:5). And the baptismal motif that Hagood alludes to—Chick is pulled out of the water by Lucas, and then has his transformation moment, the coin episode—is a New Testament rebirth trope, not a concern of Exodus. If a boy named Chick, who will carry on the “good work” begun by Isaac McCaslin, is indeed Faulkner’s Moses, then the writer’s negotiation with scripture to critique US imperialism would appear far less insightful than I consider it to be.

If Moses is conspicuously absent in Faulkner, his Mosaic texts may, in addition, lack a defining moment of black liberation. His texts are also positioned in a pre-Messianic history, which is further evidence of their Hebrew Bible sensibility—and which underscores how profoundly Isaac errs, for he thinks of himself as a chosen redeemer, and believes that the young woman (or doe) should go north for “salvation” (346). Mollie Beauchamp buries her grandson on familial land, but her appeals to Genesis and Exodus do not affect any material change within the stable system of imperialism and race oppression in *Go Down, Moses*. In *The Unvanquished*, the US Army sabotages the slaves’ efforts to “cross the Jordan” and obtain their freedom. And in *The Sound and the Fury*, Dilsey may enjoy a spiritual renewal while attending Shegog’s sermon, but she must return to her job as the Compson servant. The want of a signal moment of black liberation, or of a tangible Mosaic figure, however, emphasizes that oppression is an enduring crisis, one that will only abate through continued participation in the textual (and ethical) Mosaic *tradition*.

If Mollie has not brought about community reform in Jefferson, it may well be that social reform has just not happened yet. She *has* unsettled the white male representatives of Jefferson’s

(or Jeffersonian) imperialism, or at least given them pause. Her impact on the town, then, may contain a political dimension. She may not be a Faulknerian Moses, but Mollie has deployed the rhetorical force of Genesis and Exodus, and has brought to light the power of those narratives to inspire, unify, and liberate the oppressed, to expose oppressors, and to anticipate change. So if Faulkner's texts do not contain a singular voice or figure in the African American freedom struggle, or suggest that there is such a figure on the horizon, they otherwise contain Mosaic "tropes." It is the narrative, in other words, that acts Mosaicly, or that leads Mollie to demand the return of her grandson. A Moses-like personality may never materialize; the appearance of one, moreover, does not ensure that a people will be prepared to receive him. The Jews are compelled to wander for forty years before they enter Canaan, and it is Joshua, not Moses, who sees them across the Jordan. And where Moses leads the first generation out of Egypt, it is the second (and even the third) generation that the Promised Land welcomes forty years later. What *Go Down, Moses* may tell us, then, is that the oppressed do not have to wait, whether for a Moses or for a Martin Luther King, who galvanized the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. It is the might of the Mosaic trope that energizes Mollie, and that functions so vitally in Black Liberation Theology.

The Moses story inspired Mann, Freud, and Hurston, as well as Faulkner. As discussed, Moses' origins are obscure, which Thomas Mann emphasizes in his opening sentence: "[h]is birth was disorderly" (3). Mann also writes that Moses "was sensual, therefore he longed for the spiritual, the pure, and the holy" (3), as does Isaac McCaslin in his Big Woods retreat, where he begins to approach a Jewish sensibility. Moses may have even been Egyptian, as was famously argued by Freud, and more recently by Jan Assman in *Moses the Egyptian*. Freud cites Moses'

name, which is of Egyptian origin, and his lineage (of Egyptian nobility) to assert that he was, in fact, Egyptian (6-7). Freud also argues that Moses' brand of monotheism, the religion of Aton, began in Egypt, and that he delivered that religion to the Jewish people. Freud also speculates that Aton introduced the Jews to circumcision, or to the covenantal marking: "the origin of circumcision has only one answer: it comes from Egypt" (29).<sup>147</sup> Freud thus renders *all* of Genesis (and its originary authority) a myth or fabrication, to include the circumcision covenant between Abraham and his sons. Moses became Jewish, and inaugurated modern Judaism, by giving the Jews the covenant ritual, and by leading them on their way to Canaan. Moses, so the argument goes, converted by virtue of his delivery of monotheism, which the Egyptians rejected after the death of the Pharaoh Ikhnaton (Freud 32).

Not only may Moses have been an Egyptian, he may also have been black, and anachronistically Christian, which Hurston suggests. Hurston writes as a liberation theologian, noting that "Africa has her mouth on Moses" (vii), while highlighting the "common concept[s] of Moses in the Christian world. ... Some even maintain that the miracles of Jesus are but Mosaic legends told again" (vii-viii). Barbara Johnson argues in *Moses & Multiculturalism* that Hurston ignores Moses' "Judaism ... whenever it can't be a figure for blacks. She associates [instead] ... the image of Moses with Christianity. ... It is the idea of racial purity that Hurston attacks. ... [She believes that there] is nothing specifically Jewish about the Hebrews" (79, 81). And while Moses may not have been Jewish, there may not have been any Moses at all, as Marc Brettler

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<sup>147</sup> See David Gollaher, *Circumcision*, for more on the origins of the practice. Gollaher supports Freud's claim, as he writes that "[i]n the long sweep of history, Egypt first enshrined circumcision and accorded it a place of honor in religious and social practice. ... By the thirteenth century B.C., the age of Ramses II, circumcision had been established in Egypt for thousands of years. Certainly it was well known to Moses" (2).



points out.<sup>148</sup> The lack of “proof” of Mosaic origin, coupled with the lack of “proof” for either Moses or the Exodus, underscores just how adaptive Moses has become. Moses resonates multiculturally precisely because he is of obscure beginnings. He was not exclusively Jewish or Egyptian in the Bible but both, while he appears more the product of ongoing narrative than of static or recorded history. “The story of Moses is at once the most nationalist and multiculturalist of all foundation narratives,” Johnson writes, even as it subverts the authority of those same “foundations” by “positing foreignness as somehow necessary for nation-building. [The Bible] itself says many times that one must respect the strangers in one’s midst” (1, 9). Biblical genealogies, then, and Faulkner’s, suggest that hybridity and multiculturalism are essential to the construction of nationalisms that value, even celebrate, the differences that Isaac McCaslin bemoans in “Delta Autumn.”

At the root of the returns to Moses, and to imperial Egypt, made by Faulkner, and by Freud, Mann, and Hurston, is an interrogation of origins at a time, roughly 1940, when origins were cited to license race terrorism in the United States and in Europe—when the “strangers in one’s midst” were not afforded the respect and dignity mandated by scripture. Freud and Mann offered counter-narratives to the ones prevailing in Nazi Germany regarding the inferiority of the Jewish “race.” The leader of the Jews, and thus, the Jews, were not “racially” Jewish because “race” was a fabrication, invented, more or less in the eighteenth century and codified a century later, to manufacture scientific “proof” (both natural and social, as Colette Guillaumin has argued) by which to enslave, oppress, or annihilate.<sup>149</sup> And while Faulkner and Hurston also

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<sup>148</sup> Brettler, “The Hebrew Bible and the Early History of Egypt.” Gollaher also discusses Moses’ obscure beginnings, and remarks that “Moses remains an almost ungraspable figure” (2).

<sup>149</sup> Guillaumin argues in *Racism, Sexism, Power, and Ideology* that “the idea of classifying according to somatic/morphological criteria and its date can be fixed: the eighteenth century.

interrogate Nazi terrorism, their Mosaic engagements are focused, primarily, on the color-coded race designations charging Jim Crow extremism in the US.<sup>150</sup> Like Freud, Mann, and Hurston, Faulkner converses with an originary narrative to attack originary authority, and to expose as hoax the racial designations which modern imperialisms invoke as they claim their right to plunder.

Faulkner's return to Exodus, like the returns to it by Jews on Passover, situates him in an ongoing "commentary on current events. ... [Passover's] points inhere in what it talks about," or in the renewal of the Mosaic dialogue (Johnson 3). Moses, as an Egyptian, as a Jew, as black, and as Christian, has been, since his narrative was first transmitted, hybrid and miscegenated. He has been ahistorical and constellational, occupying the realm of faith and narrative, of inspiration and renewal, rather than of fact, or of records fixed, past, immutable. Moses has held a foundational role in Judaism, in Christianity, in African American spirituals, and in Black Liberation Theology. The Hebrew Bible makes clear that Moses leads his people on behalf of the God of the oppressed, which liberation theologians, including Faulkner, emphasize. In an era of Jim Crow white supremacy in the US, and of Nazi horror abroad, Faulkner, and Freud, Mann, and Hurston, enjoined the Mosaic narrative to rail against the authority of monolithic readings of origins that were based in "official" genealogies, the discarding or disempowering of

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From a circumstantial association between economic relations and physical traits was born a new type of mark ('colour'), which had great success. ... The slave system was already constituted when the invention of the races was thought up" (140).

<sup>150</sup> As Barbara Johnson writes, "Hurston is writing in part against Hitler in 1939 and speaks often of "secret police" and "protest meetings." She is clearly identifying the plights of blacks and Hebrews, enslaved by an absolute master, both searching for liberation" (77). Isaac McCaslin's invocation of "*Aryan and Jew*" (*GDM* 347), meanwhile, suggests that Faulkner's deconstruction of origins was not limited to American race conceptions. He addresses the Holocaust directly in *Knight's Gambit*: Germany "ruined a continent and ... render[ed] a whole race into fertilizer and lubricator oil" (243).

“inconvenient” genealogies, and the propelling forward of race hatred. The real basis of authority, genealogical or otherwise, which the writers of scripture and Faulkner remind us, is not race or ethnicity, patrilinearity or matrilinearity. Rather, it is in an ongoing participation in a system of ethics, or in the covenants by which we govern ourselves and our communities, as Moses famously taught his people in a narrative of long ago. The Jewish tradition calls for a continued return to that narrative, so that we might reconsider those covenants, and rethink the crises of oppression that plague us still. Faulkner, his fellow writers, and black liberation theologians call for that same return.

## CONCLUSION

### *Faulkner's Judaism*

In Faulkner's first novel, *Soldiers' Pay*, Margaret Powers, a widow of a soldier killed in World War I, accompanies Donald Mahon to his Charlestown, Georgia home. Mahon is dying of wounds suffered in the war; Powers meets him, Julian Lowe, and Joe Gilligan on a train in Ohio. Margaret's powers of attraction, although understated, go to quick work, as Lowe, who returns to San Francisco, writes impassioned letters to her, and Gilligan, who accompanies Margaret to Georgia, falls in love with her. Faulkner seems to relish describing Margaret, on whose body he fixates: "Mrs. Powers lay in her bed aware of her long body. ... Her mind and body warming to the old familiarity of sleep ... she settled her body to the bed. ... She turned feeling sheets like water, warmed by her bodily heat, upon her legs. ... [T]he indication of her covered turning body swelled" (31-32). Gilligan asks Powers to marry him within a day of meeting her (38), while Lowe thinks that "when I first saw you my love for you was like—my love was like—my love for you—God ... my love for you my love is love is like ... (46). Powers, who we learn from Faulkner has "long shanks" (38, 40), appears to cast a spell that would rival Eula Varner's in *The Hamlet*. The narrator, the soldiers, and even the women she meets in Charlestown are all fascinated by Margaret; there is hardly anyone who can resist commenting upon her.

These musings are oriented on Margaret's "blackness." Faulkner writes that "[s]he was dark. ... Her eyes were black (27, 157); Lowe remarks upon her "pallid distinction, her black hair" (28), while noting that "she was ... tall and red and white and black, beautiful" (45); Gilligan notices that "her hair was black"; Januarius Jones is disaffected by "her black stare" (79); Cecily Saunders, who was Mahon's fiancée before the war, thinks about "that long black woman [who] has been making love to him" (80). Cecily and her parents have a protracted discussion, even, about Margaret's "blackness":

"That black, ugly woman finally condescended to let me [Cecily] see him a few minutes. In her presence, of course."

"What black, ugly woman, darling?" asked Mrs. Saunders, with interest.

"Black woman? Oh, you mean Mrs. What's-her-name. Why, Sis, I thought you and she would like each other. She has a good, level head, I thought" [responded Mr. Saunders].

... "What black woman, Cecily? What woman, Robert?" They ignored her. ... "But what woman, Cecily? What is all this about a woman?" (135-136)

Pallid (pale, white) Margaret has black hair, black eyes, a black stare, and as Cecily would have it, a black ugliness, a description that confounds, yet also intrigues, Mrs. Saunders. Cecily and her father make a sport of withholding Margaret's identity, thus keeping her "blackness" suspended and undefined. Mrs. Saunders recognizes the curiosity of her daughter's "coloring" of Margaret, whom she (Cecily's mother) has not met. Margaret's "blackness" is indeed curious, and it may well spark the attraction that Lowe and Gilligan feel towards her.

When John Duvall presented on blackness in Faulkner—on how characters are "marked" black, and thus rendered African American—at the University of Mississippi in 2009, I asked

him where Margaret, who is evidently white, fits in Faulkner's "black" register. Duvall responded that Margaret Powers is the one outlier in Faulkner who does not fit. When Cecily refers to her as "black" (as do so many other characters in the novel), she does not mean that Margaret is African American, but that she is "black" in another "dark" sense. So Margaret's blackness is an odd ball, if I might paraphrase Duvall. That seems fitting, as Jews are often referred to as those odd, funny, "black" whites.<sup>151</sup> While the characters in *Soldiers' Pay* do not wonder if Margaret is Jewish, they do think that she is "darker" than them in ways that are tangible (they notice her blackness) and intangible (her blackness remains something of a mystery). I want to suggest that what the characters adduce without being able to express is that Margaret is one of those funny, "black" whites: Faulkner codes her as Jewish.

Faulkner could well have made Margaret a northerner in order to set her apart from those she interacts with in Georgia. The locals could then have accounted for her "difference" from them by marking her as a Yankee, and by which they could have more readily marked her as Jewish, as Virginia Du Pre does the man who calls on Narcissa in "There Was a Queen." Mrs. Du Pre observes his bald head and "clever face [by which] she knew at once that he was a jew" (*Collected Stories* 736). His "Jewishness" is then magnified when he speaks, for he presumably has a Northern accent. Her "outrage [then] became fury. ... 'Narcissa,' she said, 'what is this Yankee doing here?'" (736). He is therefore doubly offensive by virtue of being Jewish and Northern, which brings into focus and reinforces his dissimilarity from Mrs. Du Pre and Narcissa. Margaret Powers, however, comes from Alabama, which as she tells Gilligan (30).

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<sup>151</sup> Barbara Johnson mentions "those odd whites" (78) in *Moses & Multiculturalism*, while Ella Shohat remarks that Jews were frequently called "Europe's blacks" (43). Richard Godden also links Jews to blackness in Faulkner. He notes that "Faulkner's original and unspeakable term is 'the black,' for whom the unspoken 'Jew' substitutes" (192).

Her difference cannot be so easily quantified; hence, the tendency to shroud her in “blackness.” Alabama has had substantial Jewish populations in Birmingham, Montgomery, and Mobile since the 1870s; it was the first state “to pass a resolution supporting the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine” (*Jewish Virtual Library*) and it is the home of the periodical *Southern Jewish Life*.<sup>152</sup> So Margaret’s “origins” lend credence to her Jewish profile. Her married name, Powers, means Elohim, or God, in Hebrew.<sup>153</sup> And while this project is predicated on upsetting fixed markers of race and ethnicity, Margaret, it must be said, *looks* Jewish. The narrator, as well as most of his characters, cannot stop *looking* at Margaret’s black hair; her pale skin and dark hair suggest that she is a descendant of European (Ashkenazi) Jews.<sup>154</sup>

More compelling, however, than her hair color, or her married name, or that she hails from Alabama, is that Margaret Powers, like her creator, is imbued with a Jewish aesthetic. She is overcome with guilt over the letter she wrote to her husband announcing “that they were better quit of each other” (32). Her guilt stems not from the fact that he read the letter before dying, but that he did not read it, which “in some way seemed the infidelity: having him die still believing in her, bored though they both probably were” (32). She would rather her husband have died knowledgeable rather than ignorant of the (perhaps painful) truth, even if—with respect to the marriage—he may have died happily having not read the letter. Guilt is something of a Jewish

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<sup>152</sup> *Southern Jewish Life* (formerly *Deep South Jewish Voice*) is published in Birmingham. For more on Alabama and the Jews, see <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/usjewpop.html>.

<sup>153</sup> Margaret ends the novel as Mrs. Mahon. For more on Elohim and “powers” see <http://www.messianicjewishtruth.com/plural.html>.

<sup>154</sup> See the “Jewish Women’s Archive” at <http://jwablog.jwa.org/jewish-hair> for more on Jewish women and hair color. See *The Jerusalem Post* for more on skin tones of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews: <http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Features/Article.aspx?id=178028>. The article lends support to Edward Said and Ella Shohat’s arguments (mentioned in the Introduction) that Ashkenazi Jews discriminate against Sephardim.

pastime that is designed to rethink traumas to ensure that they are not forgotten. While guilt is elemental to Jewish humor, it also opens “the door to Teshuva (repentance). ... Guilt motivates us to change,” writes Rabbi Dovid Hochberg.<sup>155</sup> It is thus a cornerstone of the Jewish “command to remember. ... [R]emembrance is always pivotal,” as Yosef Yerushalmi notes in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (5). Margaret’s use of guilt as a way to order and shape her experience reflects the Jewish edict to remember the past in the pursuit of an ethical present; she “plays” this pastime magnificently. Margaret is grounded ethically, in fact, which is intrinsically Jewish. She does not suffer fools, and she does “the right thing” time and again, as Gilligan notices (39). This culminates in her marriage to Mahon so that he might die peacefully.

The marriage gesture further shows how artfully Margaret practices Jewish guilt. As she aims for Mahon to die happily, we might assume that she had wished the same for Richard Powers. So she may have married Mahon to assuage her own guilt over having written the letter, or for the sentiment behind it, even as that letter went unread. The guilt, then, is full of nuance: guilt for writing the letter (it *could* have been read) but also guilt for writing it too late (it *was not* read). As Michael Zeitlin has noted, Margaret marries Mahon to “both ‘undo’ and repeat her original betrayal of Richard Powers” (qtd. in Hamblin and Peek 359). For a second time, she marries a man whom she does not love, but who will die unaware of that betrayal or infidelity. The second marriage thus renews or repeats her sense of guilt, which was already multidimensional, while ensuring that she, at least, will not let the memory of Donald Mahon fade. Guilt is thus the vehicle that Margaret uses to participate in collective memory, which is so important to Jews and to Faulkner. In this case, Margaret will pay forward the recollections of war: the traumas it induces, and the casualties it inflicts. She stands in contrast to Cecily

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<sup>155</sup> See Torah.org: <http://www.torah.org/features/spirifocus/guilt.html>.



Saunders, who feels no such obligation to Mahon—and who seems to have forgotten him *before* he died—even though she had been his fiancée. Margaret is indeed an odd white in Faulkner: oddly “black,” oddly selfless, and oddly Jewish. She is the subject of a “harvest of ... speculation” (206), with her hair and eye color, her clothing, her “nerve,” and her ethical posture commented upon even as she stands as the novel’s ethical and redemptive center.

The above reading of Margaret Powers suggests the direction I want to take this project in addition to expanding and refining my study of Faulkner and scripture. By coding Margaret as Jewish, Faulkner destabilizes the black/white binary that his white (Christian) characters espouse. Margaret may be white, but she is not “like” her Christian counterparts, who are unable to account for white ethnicity, for racial indeterminacy, or for a Jewish system of ethics. What Margaret perceives as a duty—the caring for Donald Mahon—others mistake for promiscuity, or for “living in a house with two young men, one of them a stranger” (206). They “blacken” her to account for her difference from them, or to “explain” how she could openly live with two young men. Only it is not Margaret who is promiscuous but Cecily Saunders, whose criticisms of Margaret rebound back onto her. If blackness is thus synonymous with licentiousness, as so many Southerners believed (as discussed in Chapter 2), then it is the belle Cecily who is the “blackest” character in the text. Faulkner’s dismantling of white Southern hypocrisy and constructions of whiteness and blackness are in plain view in his first novel, as is his negotiation with ethnic, religious, and cultural difference through one of the most powerful and upright characters he would ever conceive—and who is, perhaps, Jewish.

I have been concerned with Faulkner’s Jewish ontology, and with his use of the Hebrew Bible to interrogate US nation-building. Faulkner’s critique of US imperialism within a Jewish

context remains my critical interest. It is time, however, to consider Jewish characters, representations of Jews, and attitudes toward Jews in addition to Faulkner's engagement with the Jewish Bible. The Bible is foundational to Judaism and to any study of it. The Bible is also foundational to Faulkner, and is thus the logical basis for my negotiation with him, as I claim him to be ontologically Jewish. There is, however, a need for a broader canvassing of Faulkner and Judaism than one focused solely on his participation in an ongoing Talmudic discussion. As Ilse Lind argues, "[c]learly a need exists to study Faulkner's attitude toward Jews, in both his work and his life. ... Such a need [is] urgent" (119).

Lind thought the need urgent (in 1983) in response to accusations by Michael Dobkowski and Alfred Kutzik that Faulkner's works were tinged with anti-Semitism, which she counters by noting that Faulkner "stands far clearer of anti-Semitic prejudice than most of his great American contemporaries" (120).<sup>156</sup> Richard Godden has more recently argued that Faulkner's "exploration of the 'the Jew' [is] ... troubled and underarticulated" (202), which suggests that the need is, in fact, still urgent.<sup>157</sup> Faulkner turns to the Bible as a Jewish, post/colonial thinker: his fiction is populated by Jewish characters, by *fully* articulated Jewish signs, and by representations of Jews. Lind notes that "Jewish characters play only minor roles in Faulkner's great Yoknapatawpha fictions" (119), which may be true. But they move about elsewhere—in *Mosquitoes*, which contains the "Semitic man," in "Death Drag" (*Collected Stories*), whose marginalized pilots are Jewish, and in *A Fable* (the airman Levine).

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<sup>156</sup> Dobkowski, *The Tarnished Dream* (1979); Kutzik, "Faulkner and the Jews" (1965).

<sup>157</sup> Godden puts forth that *A Fable*'s corporal is Jewish (as are his followers and his father), that his execution is consistent with the "othering" and mass killing of Jews by the Nazis, and that Jews are a source of anxiety or melancholy for Faulkner (164-165, 195). The latter point is a sentiment that I do not share, as this dissertation has hopefully made evident.

There are characters that are coded Jewish, such as V.K. Ratliff from the Snopes trilogy, as Lind also suggests, or Margaret Powers. Ratliff comes from Russia, as do many Jewish American immigrants; his profession (peddler of sewing machines, which makes him something of a tailor or garment industry worker) is very Jewish, he has the trademark Jewish ethical center, and in fine Jewish or rabbinical fashion, he comments on and debates just about everything. Faulkner, who adored Ratliff, remarked that “[I] created a character I fell in love with: the itinerant sewing machine agent named Suratt. Later a man of that name turned up at home, so I changed my man to Ratliff” (*Portable* 290). Ratliff suppresses his ancestry, however, because as Lind notes, “no man named Vladimir could hope ‘to make a living selling sewing machines or anything else in rural Mississippi’” (139).<sup>158</sup>

Attitudes (namely anti-Semitic ones) toward Jews are revealed by Jason Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*, by Mrs. Du Pre in “There Was a Queen,” and by Isaac McCaslin in *Go Down, Moses*. Lind argues that Faulkner interrogates anti-Semitism rather than endorses it, which I would like to expand upon: he is destabilizing Jewish stereotypes, thus further undercutting the authority of origins, while also projecting some of those same stereotypes back onto non-Jews in an untangling of fixed ethnic signifiers. In *Sanctuary*, Popeye (who is impotent) rapes and kidnaps Temple Drake, and then places her into a house of prostitution. He embodies three stigmas of Jewish men that circulated during the Victorian and Modernist eras: that they participated in illicit sex trades to debase Christian women, that they exploited them for material gain, and that they themselves were sexually deviant.<sup>159</sup> Only Popeye is not Jewish.

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<sup>158</sup> Lind references *The Town* (103). Ratliff conceals his name (Vladimir Kyrilytch) as he would a history “of insanity in his family or illegitimacy” (*The Town* 103).

<sup>159</sup> As Sander Gilman argues in *The Jew's Body*, “[t]he relationship between the Jew and the prostitute [from the 1880s to the Nazi era] ... has a social dimension. ... The major relationship

Faulkner makes a point of providing us with Popeye's Italian surname—Vitelli—in *Requiem for a Nun*, in what may have been a revision designed to distance us from *Sanctuary*'s recycling of anti-Semitic tropes. As Gavin Stevens tells us, Popeye “was of that age of princely despots to whom the ability even to read was vulgar and plebian” (*Requiem* 126). The ability to read has never been vulgar or plebian to Jews; Faulkner's return to Popeye renders the character (retroactively) non-Jewish when he had otherwise resembled the criminal, deviant Jew.

To make this study more comprehensive, then, it is vital that I complement the Jewishness of Faulkner with the Jews in Faulkner. As I revise this project in hopes of getting it published, I see it evolving into *Faulkner's Judaism: Unraveling the Myths of Origins*. In addition to sharpening the existing chapters, I would like to write one on Jewish representations, as outlined above, and that will look at Faulkner's comments on the Holocaust, as expressed by the narrator in *Knight's Gambit*, at Charles Mallison's depictions of Jews in *The Town*, which are generally favorable, and at the import of Linda Snopes's marriage to a Jewish man in *The Mansion*. I want to stress, though, that Faulkner's conversation with scripture will remain the focal point. My reading of the cultural work performed by Faulkner, Freud, Hurston, and Mann, for example, merits greater attention. Revisions of the third chapter of this dissertation will include an opening up of the Mosaic moment circa 1940 (which may become its own chapter), with a closer look at Faulkner's fellow writers. In its iteration thus far, the broader Moses discussion is more of a suggestion than an inquiry.

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... is a financial one; Jews buy specific types of Christian women, using their financial ability as a means of sexual control” (122). Lind also notes the stereotype of the “sexually sinister Jew” (121), and points out anti-Semitic depictions by (among others) Eliot, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Pound.

My analysis of *The Sound and the Fury* is also brief. I look only at the Easter services attended by Dilsey and at how that episode contributes to a more expansive conversation about *Go Down, Moses* and Black Liberation Theology. The genesis for *The Sound and the Fury*, as William Faulkner noted numerous times, was the “picture of the little girl’s muddy drawers” (qtd. in Fagnoli 219). The little girl is Caddy Compson, who aims to peer into the parlor window to see her grandmother’s funeral. As her brother, Quentin, walks the streets of Boston twelve years later before committing suicide, he thinks “[t]hat blackguard, Caddy” (111), which is fascinating when we pair it with Faulkner’s own comment that the “Old Testament is full of people, perfectly normal ordinary heroes and blackguards just like everybody else nowadays” (*University* 167). A blackguard might otherwise be called a scoundrel, of which Quentin is aware: “that blackguard Caddy. ... A liar and a scoundrel” (123). And while Quentin is referring to Herbert Head, Caddy’s suitor, it is to Caddy that he directs the comment—it is Caddy who marries a “blackguard” who did not father her child. Caddy, in other words, is every bit a “blackguard” herself, as the missing comma in Quentin’s stream-of-consciousness suggests: “that blackguard Caddy.” But Faulkner is quite fond of those Old Testament blackguards, as he is fond of his “heart’s darling,” Caddy Compson.<sup>160</sup> Is Faulkner (via Quentin) situating Caddy in a Hebrew Bible context in celebration of her *joie de vivre*, her rebelliousness, her ethical center?

Faulkner is much more akin to the J (incidentally, Southern) writer of scripture than to E, P, or D, even as he is the redactor of his own composite threads, as noted in Chapter 1. Those blackguards of whom Faulkner is so fond are the J writer’s: Abraham, who twice pretends to be his wife’s brother, who takes a concubine, and who prepares to sacrifice his own son; Sarah, who

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<sup>160</sup> *Faulkner in the University*, on-line version:  
<http://people.virginia.edu/~sfr/enam312/wfhp.html>.

laughs at God, who does not object to being taken as King Abimelech's mistress, and who is jealous of Hagar; Joseph, who taunts his brothers with his dreams, who toys with them over the issue of the money bag, and who threatens to have Benjamin enslaved.<sup>161</sup> And the Abraham story, as Faulkner mentioned, was his favorite in all of scripture (*University* 285-6). Harold Bloom writes that "J and Shakespeare resemble one another most in the endless newness of their imaginative worlds. Despite Yahweh's curiosity and his power, his creatures are made free to invent and reinvent themselves constantly. ... J's Yahweh is an imp. ... J's poetic ... centers on disarming us ... helping us to lose the supposed advantage that lies in applying our powers of concentration" (320). While J and Shakespeare may resemble one another, so do J and Faulkner. Faulkner imagines an entire world, as well, and makes a play of disarming and disorienting us.

J's emphasis on invention and reinvention is repeated by Faulkner, who refuses to endorse the authority of origins even as the white South clings to them. Bloom well implies that J's Yahweh (and thus Yahweh's creator, J) is a blackguard when he notes that Yahweh is an imp, as imp and blackguard are both synonyms for scoundrel. But in J and Faulkner, that is hardly much of a critique: it hints at a free spirit and a curious thinker, of which Abraham, Sarah, Joseph, and Caddy Compson—and the writers who conceived them—qualify as in spades. It was mighty Jewish of Caddy (or J-like of Faulkner) to want to peer into that window, muddy drawers and all. I envision, then, a closer reading of Faulkner and J, either in the Introduction or in a separate chapter preceding my reading of *Absalom* and redaction, to more firmly situate Faulkner's Jewish sensibility.

I have been concerned with counter-reading the Hebrew Bible, that is to say, with reading it as a Jew rather than as a Christian: counter-reading Christian appropriations of Hebrew

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<sup>161</sup> Genesis 12:13, 20:2, 16:4, 22:10; 18:12, 12:19, 16:5; 37:8, 42:35, 42:36.

scripture, which Faulkner invites us to do. Shifting of vantage points, contending perspectives, collaboration, argument, contradiction, and the dismantling of origins are modernist turns that Jews have been making since the time of the J writer. These tropes, when set to work to bolster and unite communities, and to make good on ethical, text-based, participatory covenants, define Judaism at its best—at its most post/colonial. But neither Judaism nor Jewish approaches to scripture have entered into discussions of nation-building and empire in Faulkner even as he is so intrinsically Jewish. There are no entries for Jews or Judaism in *A William Faulkner Encyclopedia*, which is otherwise comprehensive. *Faulkner's Judaism* is long overdue, the basis of which *Faulkner's Hebrew Bible* will hopefully become.

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