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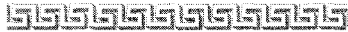
CHAPTER 10

"No Modern Joshua"

Nationalization, Scriptures, and Race

Vincent L. Wimbush



> There is *no modern Joshua* who can command this resplendent orb of popular discussion to stand still. As in the past, so in the future, it will go on. It may be arrested and imprisoned for a while, but no power can permanently restrain it.
>
> —Frederick Douglass, "The United States Cannot Remain Half-Slave and Half-Free," Washington, D.C. April 16, 1883

With the United States as primary context and point of reference, this essay aims to show how inextricably the modern world phenomena of nationalization, scriptures, and race have been inextricably woven together in the United States. The rhetorics and ideological and political orientation of Frederick Douglass offer an analytical wedge. A speech Douglass delivered in Washington, D.C., in 1883 was part of the celebration of the twentieth year of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, an event seen as an appropriate and meaning-charged occasion to take stock of the plight of black peoples in the country. His assessment that in the aftermath of the Civil War, black peoples, especially in the South, faced even more challenges with the establishment of new forms and styles of social, economic, and political slavery led Douglass to rail against the nation's conspiracy of "silence" around the "race" question.

Douglass called on the country to accept Lincoln's challenge to decide whether it would tolerate a society half slave and half free. Douglass imaged the United States after the Civil War as a nation needing to be re-founded and re-defined; he likened it to the Jews wandering in the wilderness—and without Moses, that is, without a supreme charismatic leader. This frustrating and challenging situation represented an opportunity to re-make the nation, but on the basis of racial integration and equality. So, Douglass argued, the nation can and should be rebuilt, but only through serious and honest grappling with the poison of slavery and the racialism that is associated with it, and only if it is recognized that there is "no modern Joshua" to take the onus from the people of interpreting, deciding, and acting for themselves.

Douglass's ideology of nationalization highlights the challenge that a mode of discussion located in the public square and focused on the Bible may pose. It is in relationship to the Bible that the most sensitive, even haunting, public policy issues can be addressed.

Introduction

About four years ago, as I walked on one of the campuses of the Claremont Colleges, a white middle-aged woman—I assume she was a visitor, but cannot be sure about this—accompanied by a younger white female, approached me from the opposite direction. Just as we passed each other, the older woman turned my way and commented, "You look just like Frederick Douglass!" I was taken aback, approaching befuddlement if not shock, but without slowing down, I turned back in her direction and responded with something approaching, "Oh, yes, seen him around lately?"

I am not Douglass. My beardedness notwithstanding, I do not look like Douglass. Douglass does not walk among us today. I never knew Douglass. Douglass was not a playmate of mine in the days of my youth. All of this I know with firm conviction. Yet, there is something about this encounter that I must address. I cannot help thinking about it-not so much about what was going on with the woman who addressed me (how could I really ever know what was going on there?), but about *my* reaction, *my* quickness, *my* sharpness. Did I think that the woman was somehow oddly touching upon some strange truth about me, or about Douglass, that I could not grasp? And why Douglass? Was this

experience a type of haunting—by Douglass and other "ancestors"? And what might their haunting of me be about?

I wonder—and wander—in this essay about the matters that come from that disturbing experience. I suspect that my having been then, and finding myself even now, on a college campus and a member of (a particular little corner of) the academy has something to do with the sense of a haunting. The discursive houses in which I find myself in the academy, including but going far beyond religious/biblical/Christian Scripture studies, constantly reverberate with questions and issues about the ongoing meanings of "the past," about centers and canons and authorities and their continuing power. And, of course, my being a dark man with a voice in those discursive houses in the early part of the twenty-first century adds more sound and fury to the reverberations. How could I not be persistently haunted by the invented and invoked pasts—"antiquity," "early Christianity," "the West," "America," and so forth—that define the discursive houses in which I find myself in relationship? How could I escape being haunted by (the invocation of) a dark man of a dark past?

It is likely that Douglass is a representative—a powerful one, indeed—of the "ancestors" who accompany me so much these days, some familial in the narrow sense, others in the broad sense. They help me not to forget some things, and to remember some other things. Almost all of these things are disturbing. For me, as for many others, no one has done this more pointedly than Douglass.

Douglass's 1883 Speech in Washington, D.C.

> Without putting my head to the ground, I can . . . hear the anxious inquiry as to when [the] discussion [regarding] the Negro will cease. When will he cease to be a bone of contention? . . . it is idle, utterly idle . . . to dream of peace anywhere in this world, while any part of the human family are the victims of marked injustice and oppression.[1]

1. "The United States Cannot Remain Half-Slave and Half-Free: Speech on the Occasion of the Twenty-First Anniversary of Emancipation in the District of Columbia, April, 1883," in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, IV: Reconstruction and After*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1955), 359. All subsequent citations of Douglass's speech are taken from this source-text and will be indicated by page number(s) in parentheses in the body of the essay.

These words are part of an address entitled, "The Unites States Cannot Remain Half-Slave and Half-Free," which Douglass delivered in the Congregational Church, Washington, D.C., on April 16, 1883, on the occasion of the twenty-first anniversary of Emancipation in the District of Columbia. The year 1883 was an important commemoration year, but not only in the District of Columbia: throughout the nation, it was an emotional marker of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Black folks were determined—through marches, parades, special forums, special public speaking events—to mark the year so that the nation would not forget what had taken place. It was a difficult chore: the South had begun a poisonous turn toward the reactionary violence of Jim Crowism; the North had turned its back on blacks and its attentions elsewhere.

Douglass's riveting and fiery words quoted above reflect this situation, and they reflect his characteristic intensity and lifelong work in challenging the regime of slavery, racialism, and racial apartheid that had defined and corrupted the United States. These words also register a particular rhetorical and political strategy on Douglass's part that has some implications for social historians and religion critics. Like so many public figures of his time, Douglass used the Bible to think about the shape of the larger world and of the United States in particular. This tendency of speaking the biblical worlds into the contemporary situation was so common in the United States of that time that it was hardly noticed and rarely questioned as a strategy, even by parties diametrically opposed to each other.[2] It is instructive that Douglass, a man who in his mature years tended to keep himself at a critical distance from organized religion, nevertheless continued to the end of his public-speaking life to use biblical rhetorics rather creatively.[3]

The words from the Washington, D.C., speech quoted above open a sort of window onto Douglass's views about the use of one of the

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2. See Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, eds., *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

3. The reader should note what is written about the religious sentiments of another black intellectual, W. E. B. Du Bois, in Edward J. Blum, *Du Bois: American Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); and Phil Zuckerman, ed., *Du Bois on Religion* (New York: Altamira, 2000).

most popular biblical stories in the American culture of his times—the Exodus story. Used even before the founding of the republic to help make the case for the idea of the chosenness of those who had left Europe and who had—to put the matter most euphemistically—"by God's grace" "discovered" and "settled" the land that they would come to call the United States, the Exodus story was made the story by which, with few exceptions, each new theocratic commonwealth, colony, and state, then the new nation as a whole, was first defined and made meaningful and "legitimate." For all the differences between the various colonies (and, later, the states), as reflected in national origins and ethnic-tribal-denominational associations, geography, climate, and local and regional economies, these paled and blurred into insignificance in relationship to the ideological-discursive framework within which almost all the dominant European settlers and their heirs belonged. Within such a framework, the white settlers/colonizers made common assumptions, the most important of which was that their experiences and actions were inscribed in the texts they called sacred. They understood that they had been commissioned by the Divine to take and settle upon the land and build a new world as "God's new Israel." In some places, these ideas even intensified during the decades following the founding of the first Republic into the second founding of the Republic in connection with the Civil War.[4]

The Exodus Story in United States Public Discourse

As an astute public figure and student of United States and world history, Douglass was keenly aware of the history of the uses of the biblical story of Exodus in United States public and political discourse. He understood well the dominant group's use of the story as a moral about the country's chosenness and the divine approval of its actions. He knew well how American deeds were read into the biblical story

4. See Conrad Cherry, ed., *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (rev. updated ed.; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), for the history of developments in the United States; and William R. Hutchinson and Hartmut Lehmann, ed., *Many Are Chosen: Divine Election and Western Nationalism* (Harvard Theological Studies 38; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), for discussions regarding the west in general.

as antitype in relationship to type—how, for example, the country was understood as a privileged people, a new Israel, having escaped the Egypt that was Europe; how such people were ordained to settle new lands, subdue the people on them, and enjoy liberty and prosperity; how George Washington, especially, but also some other white, landed male figures of the Revolutionary War era were considered "founding fathers," especially commissioned to lead the people in the tradition of Moses; and how divine providence continued to guide and approve the new Israel in its settlement and expansionist projects and most importantly, in preserving its unity, especially following the trauma of the Civil War.[5]

This sort of biblical hermeneutics functioned as part of a civil hermeneutics heard throughout Douglass's lifetime in public forums on the lips of politicians and public figures, and printed in books and newspapers. It represented an ideologizing of the nation as a biblical nation by sacrificing, erasing, or rendering invisible nonwhite settlers, first native peoples, then black peoples. The latter were not considered part of the story the nation told about itself. The text that was one of the most important sources for nationalization, the Bible, was (indeed, had to be) made into the white Bible. The epic stories in it were understood to be about the elevation and progress of white peoples. Others—nonwhites, especially black peoples—were either ignored or assumed to play minor or marginal and dependent roles in the epic story as spun by the popular hermeneutic.[6]

In light of the continuing racial apartheid, social, political, and economic inequality and violence directed against blacks in the United States, the aged but stalwart Douglass decried this civil-nationalist biblical hermeneutics. He unsparingly denounced the hypocrisy of Bible-believing, Bible-toting American Christians who actively participated in the enslavement and the continuing repression of black people. And the silence on the part of the non-slave-holding others was considered even worse.

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5. See Francois Furstenberg, *In the Name of the Father: Washington's Legacy, Slavery, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 53, 57, 87, 88, 176.

6. Ibid., 51, 63, especially regarding discussion of the Bible as "model" for reading civic texts.

In response to this situation, Douglass's rhetorical strategy involved spinning around the nationalist hermeneutical spin. He took white Americans' use of the Exodus story—likening the Jews' oppression by the Egyptians with their own struggles against British oppression—and went a step further than the typical strict inversion found in the popular black interpretation of the story, according to which the United States was viewed as the oppressive Egypt in relationship to black folks.[7]

The 1883 address was given at a time when Douglass had hoped that his faith in the war effort and in the political process would pay off and usher in a new era in race relations and in advancements for black folks. But he had to face the reality that, in the 1880s, little had changed, and in many respects life was as harsh, if not harsher, for most black folks. His address expressed the exasperation he felt in the face of the persistence of problems, challenges, and virulent opposition. Yet, it was also an expression of hope that the persistence of the widespread—worldwide—discussions about, even clamor over, the situation of black peoples in the United States would lead to the radical changes for which he and so many others had long hoped. This led Douglass to a different sort of play—signifying play—with the biblical story of Exodus: it was not enough to invert directly the dominant American identification of the brutal Egyptians and the long-suffering people of Israel. Douglass signified on this interpretation, not by switching the roles of those featured in the biblical story, but by transforming the story from one about liberation through progress, to be realized through the offices of an anointed charismatic leader, Joshua, to another type of story altogether.

7. See Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and William Jeremiah Moses, *Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), for discussion regarding larger historical backdrops and engagements of the story.

Douglass's Rereading of the Exodus Story

The new story Douglass presumed is one in which the United States was enthralled in and transfixed by discussion and debate about the presence of black peoples. What to do with them? How to think about them? How to talk about them? How to address or engage them? Given the subjugation, humiliation, and violence that such people had endured and yet survived, there was no wonder, Douglass argued, that they had made themselves "the most prominent and interesting figures . . . of the world" and had inspired a "resplendent orb of popular discussion." They represented a haunting:

> Men of all lands and languages make [black people] a subject of profound thought and study . . . an object of intense curiosity . . . Of the books, pamphlets, and speeches concerning [them], there is literally no end . . . [They are] the one inexhaustible topic of conversation at our firesides and in our public halls. (356)

Of course, given the fact that Douglass traveled in some pretty heady company all over the country and throughout Europe, his characterization of the widespread nature of the situation very likely reflected a status-inflected reality.

Douglass understood the widespread and intense preoccupation with black peoples as a mixed blessing; it was exhausting, annoying, sometimes humiliating: "It is a sad lot to live in a land where all presumptions are arrayed against [the black person], unless we except the presumption of inferiority and worthlessness" (357). Yet, he understood that it was ultimately better to be the subject of ongoing discussion than not to be discussed at all:

> One ground of hope is found in the fact [that] the discussion concerning the Negro still goes on. . . . Without putting my head to the ground, I can even now hear the anxious inquiry as to when this discussion concerning the Negro will cease. When will he cease to be a bone of contention. . . ? Speaking for myself I can honestly say that I wish it to cease. I long to see the Negro utterly out of the whirlpool of angry political debate. (358–59)

Then Douglass makes the main point in the speech by registering the strongest possible adversative: "But it is idle, utterly idle to dream of peace anywhere in this world, while any part [*sic*] of the human family are the victims of marked injustice and oppression" (359). This strong statement, in turn, rhetorically sets the stage for the rereading and restructuring of the Exodus story:

> In America, no less than elsewhere, purity must go before tranquility. Nations, no more than individuals, can reverse this fundamental and eternal order of human relations. There is *no modern Joshua* who can command this resplendent orb of popular discussion to stand still. As in the past, so in the future, it will go on. It may be arrested and imprisoned for a while, but no power can permanently restrain it. (359; italics added)

There are several issues in this statement that beg consideration and comment. First, Douglass assumes that the United States is to be identified with the stories of the Bible. This reflects Douglass's acknowledgment of his sociocultural location and his participation in its discursive-rhetorical framework. The United States and the colonies and states that predated the founding of the United States were for the most part biblical formations.[8] Second, it is assumed that identification with the story in the Bible about ancient-world wandering bands of people in the wilderness is an appropriate and compelling reading of the nation that is the modern-world United States. This also reflects Douglass's acknowledgment of his location and the dominant sociocultural psychology. Michael Walzer has captured what I think Douglass noted:

> Since late medieval or early modern times, there has existed in the West a characteristic way of thinking about political change, a pattern that we commonly impose upon events, a story that we repeat to one another. The story has roughly this form: oppression, liberation, social contract, political struggle, new society. . . . We call this process revolutionary. . . . This isn't a story told

8. As already indicated above in note 4, see Cherry, *God's New Israel,* 11.

> everywhere . . . it belongs to the West, more particularly to Jews and Christians in the West . . . its source, its original version, is the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. . . .
>
> We still believe what the Exodus first taught, or what it has commonly been taken to teach, about the meaning and possibility of politics and about its proper form:
>
> —first, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt;
>
> —second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land;
>
> —and third, that "the way to the land is through the wilderness."[9]

Third, it is assumed by Douglass that the Exodus-reading of the United States as a wilderness-wandering people must be recast, redefined. Nothing short of a second founding of the nation is required. That Exodus-reading nation is now in Douglass's time promiscuous in social—that is, racial and ethnic—composition. Here, Douglass seems to depart most radically from traditional readings, black and white.[10] His view was shared at certain dramatic moments by only thin segments of the populations on both sides of the North Atlantic.[11] He obviously thought the nation should be radically, that is, racially, pluralistic.

Fourth, it is assumed that the situation in which the United States actually finds itself is not so much in forward progress toward any sort of "promised land," but instead "in motion" about issues having to do with racial inequality and oppression and thus a "resplendent orb of popular discussion." According to this interpretive framework—a

9. Walzer, *Exodus*, 133, 149.

10. Glaude, *Exodus!*, especially part two regarding Exodus Politics; Moses, *Golden Age*; and Cherry, *God's New Israel*.

11. For more information and perspective see Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1975); Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History 1740–1830* (New York: St. Martin's, 1987); Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (Boston and New York: Houghton and Mifflin, 2005); and David A. Bell, *The Cult of Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, [2001] 2003).

signifying on reigning interpretive traditions with a vengeance—Egypt, then, is *not* the imperial British. King George is *not* Pharaoh. And those wandering in the wilderness are *not* simply or exclusively black or white; they are the mixed rabble that had always constituted the nation and that, in Douglass's view, should properly so constitute and define the nation. They are now recognized for what they are.

Fifth, it is assumed that in such a situation, with Lincoln having been assassinated, and the North and the United States Congress having betrayed black peoples, there is no "Moses" to lead the people forward. Perhaps Douglass mused about Lincoln having approached the status of Moses, or thought that had Lincoln not been assassinated, he would have developed into a "Moses." The reality was that there was at the time no one who could be thought of in such terms. And there was no prospect—certainly not in the White House!—of the appearance and offices of a "modern Joshua," a successor to Moses to lead the rabble onward and upward in the exercise of dominance and possession.

Douglass imagines the entire mixed-rabble nation—not only black peoples—to be situated in a type of wilderness, that is, in the aftermath of the long, ugly, and brutal experience of slavery, the entire nation was thrown into utter confusion and so lacked direction and moral purpose, somewhat traumatized. Most interestingly and paradoxically, Douglass assumes the wilderness to be both problem and salvation. The rabble is depicted as being in the wilderness of incessant debate, chatter, and shouting about black peoples, presumably without coming to any conclusion or resolution about what to do next. Such debate, chatter, and shouting easily could be understood as preventing the people from forward movement out of the wilderness. But the "wilderness" of conversation and debate is for Douglass the only way forward: there can be no going forward, no progress, until the race question is addressed. Not merely talked about, but addressed—with the necessary sociopolitical, structural, and cultural transformation of a mixed rabble into an ideologically monogenetic or racially unified nation. So although the "popular discussion" about race that rages all around can be exasperating, it is the only way out. For Douglass, the nation's fate—whether the way of destruction in or liberation from the wilderness—depends upon staying in motion, that is, continuing

the "popular discussion" around and resolution of the problems and challenges having to do with black enslavement, oppression, and the achievement of racial justice.

This is the reason a "modern Joshua" is not needed: Douglass understood such a figure to represent an effort to lead the people out of the "wilderness"—that is, away from focus upon the race question. But only in that place, with earnest and honest focus upon the race issues, can the mixed-race nation of justice and equality for all begin to emerge. A "modern Joshua" is really a threat, a problem: such a figure would make an attempt to get the people ironically and poignantly to "stand still," to go silent, regarding racial conflict. This may mean being oriented so as to forget, to ignore, to erase, to render black folks and the race issues invisible. It may mean a return to framing the nationalization project in nonracial but nonetheless decidedly racist terms, only to make the majority dominant white race into the default unspoken sociopolitical template or baseline. This would mean a "fall" back into the confounding and dishonest language of universals—ironically, through such terms as "man," "men," "mankind," "people"—while meaning only (or sometimes mostly) white men and (perhaps, some of) the women associated with them. It may entail a going forward out of the wilderness with deadly silence—the type of silence that represents denial of the problem, a glossing over the roughness of the pain and deep humiliation of the enslaved and the corrosiveness of the enslaver with obfuscating exegetical practices. The latter may sometimes represent bold efforts to provide divine legitimacy for the brutal order; at other times, they offer the cover of silence about everything having to do with such an order.

But Douglass did not accept "standing still" on the part of the people of the nation. The ramifications were too negative. He remained hopeful that the "resplendent orb of popular discussion" would lead ultimately to nationalization of a different type.

> The voice of popular complaint, whether it is heard in this country or in other countries, does not and cannot rest upon dreams, visions, or illusions. . . . The Negro is now, and of right ought to be, an American citizen in the fullest sense of the word. . . . The amendments to the Constitution of the United States mean this. . . . What Abraham Lincoln said in respect of the United States

> is as true of the colored people as of the relations of those States. They cannot remain half slave and half free. You must give them all or take from them all. Until this half-and-half condition is ended, there will be just ground of complaint. You will have an aggrieved class, and this discussion will go on. (360)

What Douglass thought to be important was that there be no lull, no quiet, no peace in the meantime, that is, while racial justice remains elusive. The clatter, the talk, the debates must rage on; the speeches, the sermons, the writing of essays and books must continue as a type of "movement" of the people. It should be plain to all that this represented an exegetical tour de force regarding the Exodus story, essentially rewriting and recasting it for the sake of the welfare of the people with whom he was in solidarity, and for the sake of making Jewish-Christian scriptural traditions compelling.

Over a period of many decades, Douglass was himself one of the most widely known and regular participants in the national debates about the "racial problem." He remained open to engaging almost anyone and any issue in connection with the matter. He tended to respond to any critic raising any sort of question about the ultimate goal or hope. And he also tended to draw upon many different sources and perspectives in order to facilitate and make compelling his stand on the issues. For example, although he obviously entered into partnerships and campaigns with religious people—lay and clergy—in his mature years, he grew wary of and came to distance himself a bit from organized religion. Yet, as his interpretive spin on the Exodus story makes clear, he drew heavily upon the religious language and symbolism that marked the "Christian" nation in which he lived in order to make his case about issues of the day, most especially the issues having to do with racial injustice.

Douglass's Reading Practices and Racial Justice

What can be seen in Douglass's treatment of the Exodus story in the 1883 Washington, D.C., speech is a type of reading practice in which he interpreted the nation in light of Scriptures (as he created and used them) and Scriptures in light of the nation (as he envisioned

and structured it). This reading practice was obviously informed by Douglass's own experience as a slave and—even when he was not fully apprised of the facts on the ground about others' experiences—his continuing solidarity with those who remained enslaved and who continued to suffer from brutal racist policies. Douglass's reading practice foregrounded the plight of black folks and forced the nexus of the religious and the political in a particular way. He read the religious as a registration of the political and the political as a registration of the religious. There was no attempt to separate the two. Such reading practice was understood to be important as part of the campaign to effect racial justice. Two examples are in order:

First, Douglass seemed fascinated by a book written by a British cleric turned American missionary named Morgan Godwyn. In 1680, Godwyn had published a little book with one of those typically labored but, in this case, most arresting titles—*The Negro's and Indian's Advocate, Suing for their Admission into Church: Or a Persuasive to the Instructing and Baptizing of the Negros and Indians in our Plantations. Shewing That as the Compliance therewith can prejudice no Man's just Interest; So the willful Neglecting and opposing of it, is no less than a manifest Apostasy from the Christian Faith.* Douglass saw the publication as a provocative and important example of the use of Scriptures:

> This [publication] was . . . the starting point, the foundation of all the grand concessions yet made to the claims, the character, the manhood and dignity of the Negro . . . a book to prove the Negro's right to baptism seems ridiculous, but so it did not seem two hundred years ago. Baptism was then a vital and commanding question, one with which the moral and intellectual giants were required to grapple.
>
> . . . Slaveholders of that day were sharp-eyed and keen-scented, and snuffed danger from afar. They saw in this argument . . . the thin edge of the wedge which would sooner or later rend asunder the bonds of slavery. . . . They contended that [baptism] could only be properly administered to free and responsible agents . . . who in all matters of moral conduct, could exercise the sacred right of choice. . . . Plainly enough, the Negro did not answer that description . . . [he was] no more fitted to be admitted to the fellowship of the saints than horses, sheep, or swine. . . . But deeper

> down . . . there was a more controlling motive for opposing baptism. Baptism had a legal as well as a religious significance. By the common law at that time, baptism was made a sufficient basis for a legal claim for emancipation. . . . I should have been baptized if I could have gotten anybody to perform the ceremony.
>
> For in that day of Christian simplicity, honest rules of Biblical interpretation were applied. The Bible was thought to mean just what it said. When a heathen ceased to be a heathen and became a Christian, he could no longer be held as a slave. Within the meaning of the accepted word of God it was the heathen, not the Christian, who was to be bought and sold, and held as a bondman forever. (363–65)

What Douglass does with Godwyn's biblically inflected argument—"a literary curiosity and an ethical wonder" (363)—is important: he argues that for Godwyn and for himself, biblical interpretation is or should be transparently and consistently used to support the cause of the oppressed, the outsider, the marginalized. Godwyn reminded Douglass that the Bible could be used to scramble traditional lines of identity, positionality, status, and association. Drawing directly from Godwyn, and indirectly if not directly from the Christian Scriptures[12]—possibly Galatians and Philemon; perhaps also the book of Acts—in support of racial justice, Douglass plainly made the point that Christian baptism nullified slavery and racial oppression. It was a leveling force. He makes an astounding argument that ensued as part of the exegetical exercises within a particular "reading formation":[13]

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12. Many black rhetors and white abolitionists of the time in Europe and the United States did so.

13. For the concept of "reading formation," see Tony Bennett, "Texts, Readers, Reading Formations," *MMLA* 16, no.1 (1983): 1–17; and "Texts in History: The Determinations of Readings and Their Texts," *MMLA* 18, no.1 (1985): 1–16. For discussions regarding ideologies of race and literacy, see Dana Nelson Salvino, "The Word in Black and White: Ideologies of Race and Literacy in Antebellum America," in *Reading in America: Literature and Social History*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 140–56; Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 326–31; and Grey Gundaker, *Signs of Diaspora, Diaspora of Signs: Literacies, Creolization, and Vernacular Practice in African America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), esp. 3–13.

> When a heathen . . . became a Christian . . . he could no longer be held as a slave. . . . Within the meaning of the accepted word of God it was the heathen, not the Christian, who was to be bought and sold. (365)

Such radicalism found among religious dissenters and others in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the North Atlantic worlds, especially Britain, had great influence upon Douglass. Indeed, he should be understood as having been one of the leading voices in such company, at least in the informal terms of membership in the discursive circle. It is sad that such a coalition was not sustained.[14]

Another example: In the same speech given in the Congregational Church in 1883, Douglass dismissed the rantings of an insecure writer, a "Professor Gilliam," who reportedly argued with paranoid intensity that eventually black peoples would rise up, seek vengeance, and assume a position of "sovereignty" over white peoples. At this point in his speech, Douglass, in a poignant segue, referenced William Miller, widely known even at that time as the prophet of the imminent end of the world.

When the world did not come to its end as Miller had expected, and after he made adjustments in his prediction and tried to reassure people that the end was indeed imminent, cynics and skeptics weighed in—"What if it does not come?" According to Douglass, Miller's response was, "Then we shall wait till it does come." Miller's exhortation to "wait" riveted Douglass. The latter rightly took the term to be a biblical—specifically, a New Testament or primitive Christian eschatological injunction. But Douglass contradicted the longstanding Western world understanding and usage of the injunction and translated it into Bible-inflected political rhetoric that pointed directly to the plight of black peoples in his own time:

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14. See Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, and Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon, 2000), for discussions regarding histories of radical progressive coalition-building efforts in the early modern period. Some would argue that such efforts were revived in modern civil rights movements. Alas, today they all seem much like far distant echoes.

> The colored people of the United States imitate the wisdom [regarding the expectation of the near end of the world] of . . . [William] Miller and wait. But we should work while we wait. For after all, our destiny is largely in our own hands. If we find, we shall have to seek. If we succeed in the race of life, it must be by our own energies, and our own exertions . . . we must go forward, or be left behind in the race of life. (366)

Here, we have another example of the interpretation of Scriptures as the political, the political in terms of the scriptural. Douglass uses Miller's concept of waiting for the end of the world in reference to the end of slavery and the subjugation of black peoples and the realization of racial justice and socioeconomic and sociopolitical progress—in the world as known and experienced by Douglass. Might Douglass have also thought—most interestingly, after the Civil War!—about a social conflagration as the shape of the end time in the absence of the realization of racial justice?[15] This matter is not so clear. But what is clear is that for Douglass, black folks' expectation of real justice in the United States was understood in terms larger than normal life; it was thought about in terms greatly influenced, if not absolutely determined, by the eschatological and apocalyptic rhetorics of the Bible.

It is also important to note that Douglass drew upon the parenetic traditions that sometimes accompanied biblical eschatological-apocalyptic visions and rhetorics. Wait, yes, Douglass exhorted. But not in passive terms—"We should work while we wait." The immediate source or rhetorical background of this exhortation may have been any number of evangelical preachers, pamphlets, or books. But the ultimate and direct source or background here seems to have been Paul's arguments in 1 Thessalonians regarding waiting and working.[16] The elaboration upon the working–waiting motif in the finding-and-seeking theme seems to have its ultimate origins in the Gospels (Matthew 7). The further elaboration in the race of life theme echoes Paul once again (cf. 1 Corinthians 9).

15. Regarding messianic ideology, David Walker (*An Appeal in Four Articles* [1830]) should be considered and compared to Douglass.

16. See 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11. Also: Matthew 25:13; Mark 13:34–37.

The point of any of these references for Douglass seems to have been to challenge a particular stance in or response to the world among black peoples in late nineteenth century America. He articulates this challenge by demonstrating a particular type of reading or use of the Bible as center-text for the formation of the nation. Douglass engaged the struggle for racial justice as part of the struggle to realize justice for the nation.

> There is but one destiny . . . left for us, and that is to make ourselves and be made by others a part of the American people in every sense of the word. Assimilation and not isolation is our true policy and our natural destiny. Unification for us is life; separation is death. . . . Our own interests will be subserved by generous care for the interests of the Nation at large. (370)

Apparently keeping the theme of expectation—of the end of the world—in mind, Douglass drew at the end of his speech upon Robert Burns's famous end-of-an-era political song "For a' that" (1795)[17] in order to signal most strongly that the struggle for justice for black peoples is related to justice for the oppressed all over the world:

> It's comin' yet for a' that,
> That man to man the world o'er
> Shall brothers be for a' that. (370–71)

It seemed important for Douglass to make the point that the United States-inflected Christian tradition and its Scriptures were political, that reading practices in connection with Scriptures were and should be fundamentally political, that Scriptures always belong to a nation or a people, and that the reading of Scriptures should always be used to advance a particular liberationist/integrationist/monogenetic agenda of nationalization. This means that for Douglass, a reading of scriptures must be honestly acknowledged to have a public or civic function, and it must have as its primary consideration the position of black folks within the nation. The reading of the Bible is *supposed* to

17. See Robert Crawford, ed., *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), for background information on this poem.

be race-sensitive in the way that Douglass read. Although he did not argue the point in explicit terms, Douglass implied that a reading of Scriptures is virulently and violently racist in antiblack terms when it is not a public-nationalization reading that is based upon, or determined by, the position of dark peoples. That is the meaning of his insistence that there be "no modern Joshua" to make us "stand still" in relationship to the clamor about the black presence. Silence in this sense is deadly.[18]

No, I am no Frederick Douglass. But as this essay suggests, I am haunted by him—haunted, in particular, by his challenge regarding the silence. I am, I fear, too much a part of an order—sociopolitical, academic-intellectual—that is eerily silent and too easily misled by what Douglass tagged as "modern Joshuas," or at least the idea of such as a panacea. Being in solidarity with Douglass's effort and argument requires, it seems to me, not only a different reading of the Exodus and wilderness situation and other stories of the Bible. It means not merely providing the "black perspective" on, or the "black" figure in, the white text, but now reading all things dark-ly, reading the complexity, the luminescence, of the darkness of existence, thereby making of black selves—or other race-d selves—a "text."[19] Here might be the beginnings of a radical (re)signifying (on) scriptures that at the same time reflects a (re)signifying of the nation, and beyond it, a reconfigured world community. At the very least, it means understanding that the discourse of religious and theological studies, including biblical

18. But Houston Baker's concept of "silence" and of the need for a "criticism of silence" in the study of black folks should be considered in relationship to Douglass's challenge. See his *Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), esp. chapter 3, pp. 106–8 ("Lowground and Inaudible Valleys: Reflections on Afro-American Spirit Work").

19. See Ishmael Reed's fascinating work *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996 [1972]). And see my essay, which I think is consonant with Reed's argument insofar as it is an attempt to undermine the agenda of the larger project (commentary!) in which it is found, "'We Will Make Our Own Future Text': An Alternate Orientation to Interpretation," in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, ed. Brian Blount, Cain Hope Felder, Clarice Martin, and Emerson Powery (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 43–53.

studies, cannot be silent about the stains and pollutions of racial-ism[20] and racism and other such ideologies and projects, the purpose and effects of which are to humiliate and subjugate peoples. Douglass's challenge to us was to engage—seriously, deeply, and with patience, persistence, and honesty.

Translated into our early-twenty-first century situation, and more specifically, the very discursive arrangements and project to which this chapter belongs, Douglass's challenge may appropriately be understood to go to the very heart of the matter about how we sustain the discussion about race, ethnicity, gender, and class. Are these issues, for example, to frame and define the academic-intellectual discussion and project, or are they to be taken up as additive approaches to traditional paradigms and projects? More pointedly, should "race," as Douglass understood the matter—that is, as a conscious-raising problematic and analytical wedge—inform and (re)orient the discourse of Biblical Studies? Such change would mean that Biblical Studies would turn not around the exegesis of ancient world texts but the fathoming of modern or contemporary world sentiments, politics, power dynamics, and practices in relationship to ancient texts.

Through these issues Douglass continues to haunt me. He should haunt all of us.

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20. The term *racial-ism* refers to the penchant for dividing people, using race as marker, as in race-baiting, usually with dark peoples greatly disadvantaged. Douglass stood against this penchant as well as virulent and violent forms of racism.