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Moses and the Egyptian: Religious Authority in Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*

From the first image that greeted readers of his book, Olaudah Equiano presented the self of his 1789 autobiographical narrative as a pious Christian, one whose religious conversion meant a kind of freedom as significant as his manumission from slavery. In the striking frontispiece portrait Equiano sits with biblical text in hand, insisting—in his visual as in his textual presentations of himself—that the Christianity he embraces is the defining feature of his life-story. He responds, as Susan Marren has suggested, to two paradoxical imperatives: one, to write himself into creation as a speaking subject and, two, to write an anti-slavery polemic (94). At the same time, the text speaks straightforwardly of a third authorial imperative as well. Within the religious tradition of Protestant Christianity, Equiano seeks to tell the story of his soul's spiritual journey, to testify to God's actions in his life.¹ Contemporary readers have sometimes seen the author's piety as something of a maneuver: The savvy African, knowing what his British and American audiences need in order to accept him as a credible narrator, uses religion as a mask for social critique. Others see him as wholly devoured (just as he feared he would literally be devoured when he saw the slave ship) by Western culture, losing his voice and himself to Christianity.² Attempts to recognize the formidable forces of acculturation—of which religion is a profoundly important component—that take place over the course of Equiano's *Narrative* have oversimplified and occasionally dismissed Equiano's Christianity.

If we take the facile view that he is simply using religion to manipulate readers, or if we see him as simply manipulated by religion, we ignore the earnest and consistent piety that sets the tone and establishes the purpose of the narrative. To be sure, the self that Equiano presents in the *Narrative* is, indeed, a complicated one, as almost all of the literature on this text suggests. Contemporary readers are disposed to appreciate the complications of his racial identity, but also to see his own racial awareness and social critique as most probably at odds with his religious piety. This is not an entirely new problem for Equiano's readers. Contemporary readers who dismiss the religiosity of this text follow the argumentative course and aesthetic sensibilities established by earlier respected readers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, who, in a 1789 review, admired many of the qualities of Equiano's text, most particularly his gripping account of his enslavement and his journey toward freedom, but ultimately judged the text inferior, primarily because of the author's piety and his "tiresome" account of his religious conversion.³ Sidestepping the religious meaning and purpose—central for the autobiographer himself, a source of discomfort for some critics—

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causes one to overlook some of the most intriguing conflicts in the text, however. As William Andrews, Susan Marren, Angelo Costanzo, Vincent Carretta, and Adam Potkay have argued, Equiano's *Narrative* ought to be understood in the context of several genres, including, notably, the tradition of eighteenth-century spiritual autobiography. Moreover, reading his religious perspective as an earnest expression of his self leads to an appreciation of the complexities of that religious self, to the way piety informs, empowers, and limits Equiano's social criticism.

Certainly, the *Narrative* presents contemporary readers with problems. Like many historical texts that directly address issues of race, Equiano's *Narrative* reveals its author's shifting, occasionally paradoxical racial self-identification and ideology. Despite, for instance, his progressive polemical intentions, his apparent desire to have the autobiography provide a vehicle for a moral argument against slavery (seen most obviously in repeated, straightforward appeals to the reader), the *Narrative* is not an unequivocal anti-slavery polemic. Rather, Equiano expresses specific opposition to the violence of slavemasters. And while there is textual evidence to suggest that he writes his way into a more sweeping anti-slavery position by the end of the text, the uncertainty of his response to slavery remains.⁴ On the one hand Equiano repeatedly and directly confronts the racism of his readers by arguing against the racial violence at the heart of the practice of slavery, identifying the profound contradiction among religious values of compassion, mercy, and justice—which he believes his readers share with him—and slavery. But on the other hand the anti-slavery argument is severely compromised by his description in the *Narrative* of his own participation in the "Peculiar Institution" as an overseer and trader of slaves after his manumission. At least in the context of his own immediate experience, he con-

demns not slavery, but certain kinds of slavery (Carretta xxi). He certainly opposes all forms of physical abuse as he witnesses it, but it is only long after his return to England—and, perhaps, as a result of his writing the *Narrative*—that he comes to an anti-slavery position that impels him to seek an appearance before Parliament.⁵

Religion may be viewed as at the heart of the matter in Equiano's shifting, conflicted perspective, as the shaping force in his now acquiescent, now critical stance. More specifically, his engagement with the scriptures, read through the lens of his own experience, informs the voice of social criticism that appears in the *Narrative*, the voice that emerges out of Equiano's growing sense of the liberatory power of the biblical text for oppressed peoples. At the same time, his Christian piety, and his admiration for the Christian colonizing work of the West, places limits on that critical stance, causing him to espouse viewpoints that now seem to us patently contradictory, viewpoints that, ironically, empowered him with a sense of both integrity and survival. I will focus in this discussion on Equiano's presentation of himself and his text to readers, and on what I see as a number of the most potent interpretive moments in the autobiography, most notably the catalog of violence in chapter five. I am most interested, finally, in examining the voice of social criticism that emerges here, and the way that voice seems valenced by Equiano's experiences of the biblical texts he uses.

Equiano's own Christianity is shaped by a range of actual experiences with Christians. In order to gain the conversion experience he seeks, the experience that seems to give him the authority to tell his story, Equiano must account for the consistent hypocrisy that he has seen and experienced at the hands of actual Christians.⁶ His experiences of racial

violence require him to find a way to condemn those actions within a framework of Christian authority or to abandon Protestantism altogether as a source of meaning and power. He chooses the former path and then, by way of the authority of biblical texts, establishes a set of touchstones that allow him to condemn the Christianity of his experience and to affirm in its stead an idealized Christianity, a biblical reality in which justice and compassion triumph.⁷

Christianity is central to Equiano's conception and presentation of himself in the *Narrative*; he takes pains throughout his story to establish his credentials as a true Christian. (Indeed, the *Narrative* may accurately be viewed not only as a spiritual autobiography, but as a conversion narrative.⁸) He cites his credentials variously: He is, for instance, a sea captain, and then a British gentleman. But he returns throughout the text to his religious self, the bedrock of his authorial voice. By telling his spiritual autobiography he establishes a bond of common humanity and religious belief with his largely Christian audience, assuming, as would most of his readers, that any individual life-story has meaning within a larger supernatural paradigm (Carretta xx). As he establishes the authority of his Christian self, so too he establishes the authority of a particular kind of Christianity, distinguishing that "true" Christianity from the Christianity of slaveholders, and requiring readers to make that same distinction.

Equiano's authority as a narrator, as a Christian, and as a former slave making an anti-slavery argument resides firmly, he insists, in the Bible. Throughout the narrative he uses strategic appeals to his audience on the basis of biblical text and metaphor. What emerges from careful readings of these appeals clarifies the personal power and the rhetorical usefulness of Christianity and the biblical text for Equiano. Key, of course, to his condemnation of slavery (and to many

other anti-slavery texts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) is the Golden Rule.⁹ Repeatedly accusing readers of failing to enact a bottom-line Christianity, Equiano shames his readers for their refusal to "do unto others," to exercise the most basic human compassion. Equiano's employment of the argumentative appeal of the biblical Golden Rule, his insistence on its obvious incompatibility with slavery, is a cornerstone in the narrative. Without minimizing the power of this aspect of Equiano's religiosity, however, I want to point out that he uses other, perhaps less benign, strategies of appeal to biblical authority to condemn the actions of slavemasters, and to articulate his own, rather more complex, theological location.

Profoundly self-aware in this text, Equiano carefully schematizes the narrative of his experience via biblical texts so that the reader is compelled to experience his perspective, including, quite centrally, his own outsider status. By presenting himself as in line with a biblical tradition of outsiders, Equiano requires the reader to take on that outsider perspective as well. As William Andrews has argued, the reader of Equiano's narrative must "undergo a de-culturation process through which he divests himself of his insider's cultural myopia and accepts the complementary value of the African outsider's perspective . . . the reader is recreated in the image of Equiano instead of the other way around" (57-58). Integral to this process is his use of the biblical text, as he requires the reader to recreate her/himself in his image by way of the biblical outsiders with whom he identifies and to whom he refers. A reader could not have encountered this text and maintained the religious tradition to which text and reader belonged without this kind of identification and recreation. Thus the decentering and reflection inherent in any autobiographical reading, more acute, perhaps, for religious readers of religious texts, is radically intensified here, as the author provides the reader with a

set of selves to try on, selves both new and familiar (and, certainly, religiously authoritative).

The negotiation is accomplished primarily as a result of Equiano's careful and cumulative use of biblical texts and references, each of which deepens the reader's identification with outsiders (like Equiano) who have been victimized by people in positions of power, people precisely such as Equiano's imagined reader: white, Christian, literate, privileged. Always writing through the lens of the converted believer, Equiano presents his readers with a life ordered and interpreted by way of religion. And he assumes religiosity on the part of his readers—that they too will derive meaning from the religious framework of his narrative. All other moral arguments are embedded in the fundamentally religious argument that structures the entire narrative (Orban). And it is a particular kind of religious argument, based almost exclusively on specifically biblical authority. Equiano finds the moral and ethical weight he needs to make his case against Christian complicity with slavery—and, even more broadly, racism—in a subtle and carefully employed presentation of himself within a biblical framework.

In a general way this occurs in Equiano's description of his homeland and in his recurring use of the present tense, by which descriptions of Africa and Africans become immediate, specific, and recognizably familiar for his readers. Equiano's lengthy description of his cultural origins speaks to his understanding of himself vis-à-vis his original identity, his European cultural orientation, and his biblical interpretive paradigm for himself and his experience.¹⁰ Writing as a converted Christian and thoroughly Europeanized gentleman, Equiano honors his Ebo culture, arguing that

Equiano is a hybrid, living at the edge of a religious ideology stretched to the limits by his experience.

readers should do the same, specifically on the basis of the proximity of Ebo and Hebrew biblical culture, as he draws repeated parallels between the two.¹¹ "We practiced circumcision like the Jews, and made offerings and feasts on that occasion in the same manner as they did. Like them also, our children

were named from some event, some circumstance, or fancied foreboding at the time of their birth . . . we had many purifications and washings; indeed almost as many, and used on the same occasions, if my recollection does not fail me, as the Jews" (41). He is, he says, "struck . . . very forcibly" by the "strong analogy [that] . . . appears to prevail in the manners and customs of my countrymen, and those

of the Jews, before they reached the Land of Promise" (43). He goes on to suggest, with the help of the speculations of a number of scholars, that perhaps "the one people had sprung from the other" (44), which then leads him to an extended reflection on possible meanings and origins of skin color.

His strategy in his description of the Ebo is consistent with the biblical hermeneutics employed throughout the *Narrative*. By detailing the proximities of Ebo and biblical Hebrew cultures, he challenges readers' assumptions about "primitive" behavior, asking them, in effect, to recast their favorite Bible stories in a contemporary, specific, African setting. Moreover, he brings African culture near to the reader by way of the biblical text, presenting outsider culture within a paradigm that sets it at the very heart of the dominant religious tradition of his British and American readers. Equiano's Bible here becomes a bridge for readers to understand and appreciate a specific African culture. Building on the way his readers' sacred text had already situated one particular distant culture—that is, early

Judaism—Equiano requires readers to reframe their eighteenth-century understandings of African culture in the context of their own traditional Christian world view. In Equiano's figuring of things, Africans, specifically the Ebo, must be viewed not as various racist versions of Christianity would have viewed them—the fallen sons of Ham, descendants of Cain, the lost tribe of Israel—but, rather, as a parallel to Christians' interpretations of Old Testament Israel, biblical people chosen and favored by God. By drawing specifically and occasionally elaborate parallels between Ebo ways and the early Jewish culture referred to in the Bible, he challenges readers to resituate race and culture. In his refiguring of things, Africa remains in need of the colonizing and missionizing efforts of Western Christians with whom he identifies himself, but with a difference. Here Africans are imaged as the center of Christian sacred history, the bearers of God's promises, the recipients of God's favor.

The particular introduction to himself that Equiano provides readers is as markedly biblical as is his presentation of the context for his cultural origins and racial identity. In the visual and textual images that accumulate at the outset of the narrative, Equiano presents himself to his readers, most centrally, as a Bible reader. Furthermore, in the passages he selects in these self-presentations, we can see Equiano attending to and identifying with narrative situations and characters that speak, occasionally quite directly, to issues of oppression and justice. Equiano's interpretive experience of these texts becomes emphatically relevant here, as we imagine and reconstruct his readerly encounter with the texts he presents.

Returning to the striking frontispiece of the *Narrative*, readers are greeted by a portrait of the author holding an open text, clearly visible with the words "Acts Chap. iv, V. 12"; we also see a title-page epigraph composed of two verses from the book of

Isaiah, chapter 12. These two biblical reference points remain constant in each edition of Equiano's text even as the visual representation of the writer himself undergoes some changes.¹² The textual references form a fundamental part of the authorial portrait provided for readers, announcing the writer's piety as well as purpose. He will show readers his sense of the meaning of the biblical text of Acts 4:12—"Neither is there salvation in any other [than Jesus Christ]: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."¹³ This life narrative, says Equiano, like other spiritual autobiographies produced in this period, will be religiously instructive as well as self-reflective in nature: He means to evangelize his readers. In the epigraph that appears directly below the title and the author's name, Equiano presents biblical texts related to the first—verses 2 and 4 from the book of Isaiah, chapter 12—that declare God's power to strengthen and save the faithful: "Behold God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid, for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation." Further, ". . . in that day shall ye say, Praise the Lord, call upon his name, declare his doings among the people."

All three biblical texts attest in straightforward fashion to Equiano's piety (he has relied on the truth of these biblical passages) and his primary religious purpose (he sets out to convince others of this truth). By linking his authorial purpose here with what the prophet Isaiah commands as a faithful response on the part of God's people, he establishes an unquestionable framework for his text: Here, like the prophet, and in response to that imperative, he will "declare God's doings" to the reader. Further, Equiano's use of the Acts passage, with its emphasis on the saving power of the *name* of Jesus, carries out the ongoing concern with naming throughout the *Narrative* for one who is called Olaudah, then Jacob, then Michael,

then Gustavus Vassa, and now Olaudah Equiano again.¹⁴ Potkay argues that the Acts text “signif[ies] that the chain of nominal substitutions that constitutes his earlier career might now come to a close.” He notes further that the verse was a favorite of George Whitefield’s (whose preaching Equiano experiences later in the *Narrative*), and that the use of this text in the visual representation of Equiano links him to the Evangelical tradition and Pauline theology of salvation that Whitefield represents (687).¹⁵ Certainly, we see the centrality of Equiano’s Christian identity as well as his relationship to a tradition of similarly-minded people of faith here. Moreover his earnest piety here is consistent with that represented in the rest of the narrative.

At the same time, the reference to Acts, as well as those to the book of Isaiah, suggests meanings that, without countering his evangelistic intentions, further complicate and deepen his stance as an anti-slavery writer. Equiano’s sense of the possible meanings of biblical passages that speak to and about oppression and injustice is forcefully highlighted here. The biblical context for the passage in the Acts of the Apostles, for instance, suggests that Equiano’s piety is informed by an awareness of political realities, and that his rendering of his life-narrative is certainly more than that of a pious evangelical who sheds an African identity to gain a conventional British Christian one, complete with laudable but finally fairly tame abolitionist tendencies.

Equiano reads his scriptures through a lens of the literal and spiritual focal point of his life: liberation. Many biblical texts would announce the most straightforward religious meaning he insists he wants to convey at the outset of his narrative; that is, the Christian message of the salvific power of Jesus. At the moment of his description of his actual conversion in chapter 10, for instance, he makes references to more than fifteen biblical passages in approximately two pages of text (190-92). As a practiced and knowledgeable

Bible reader he had a range of texts at hand, dozens of which would have conveyed the religious message of salvation that he announces to his reader here. His portrait connects him to the Acts text, however, a passage spoken by a captive narrator engaged in the act of opposing the power of those who imprison him, revealing a religious agenda that complicates the more obvious (and certainly more acceptable) piety of these selections. The account from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles occurs after Peter and John have been imprisoned for healing a lame beggar. When asked to speak on their own behalf, Peter preaches the words that Equiano cites here, silencing the religious elite, who marvel both at the miraculous healing and at the eloquence and authority of Peter and John, “unlearned and ignorant men” (Acts 4:13-14).

The specific context for the quote seems important both because it shows Equiano attending to a passage in which words of authority and power, words that have resonance for his evangelical tradition, are spoken by captives, and also because this biblical passage depicts first-century Christianity as a radical force counter to and outside of the mainstream, one that invites in, heals, and restores those who have been disenfranchised by their communities: In this particular passage, a lame beggar is healed by uneducated, common men. Further, in this passage the voices of authority that speak from the biblical canon are themselves captive and oppressed by a political system that is revealed to be both unjust and arbitrary. In the Acts passage, Peter and John are imprisoned precisely because of their religion, which challenges established, elite religious authority, and because they use supernatural healing power to identify with and aid another outsider, even further removed from privileges of power and public acceptance than themselves. By tapping the biblical and historical traditions represented by the words of the Apostles at a moment

when those narrators themselves are actually oppressed and imprisoned, Equiano provides readers with a reminder of their own tradition's profound identification with the disenfranchised, highlighting a feature of Christianity that respectable religious readers might otherwise have ignored: the historical legacy of Christianity that features those outside of, and opposed to, established systems of religious and political authority.¹⁶ Furthermore, these imprisoned narrators speak about witnessing the power of God in the context of a situation of oppression that remains unchanged. The larger reality faced by Peter and John, who in the narrative they present are marginalized by their faith, is not transformed. There is no political or social overturning calling the forces that imprison them to account, a fact that Equiano must surely have noted, and which may have shaped his own conflicted political stance regarding slavery. Here he adds his own testimony to biblical textual presentations of narrators like himself, who seek to speak about their experience of God in the context of oppression that remains unchanged.

The other passages that Equiano uses to introduce himself to his readers, the two verses from Isaiah, function in somewhat similar ways. Both texts direct the reader to attend to the saving and comforting power of God; both also provide ostensive biblical legitimization for Equiano's autobiography. As Isaiah directs, he will "praise the Lord, call upon his name, [and] declare his doings among the people." At the same time, and like the reference to the passage from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, the context for these verses from Isaiah enriches a reader's sense of appreciation for Equiano's choices here as they emphasize his strategic attention to biblical texts that speak directly to issues of oppression and justice. Again, he might have chosen from a myriad of biblical texts that assert the saving power of God as well as a command

that the faithful proclaim God's power. His particular selection, however—the twelfth chapter of Isaiah—occurs in between two chapters consisting of dramatic descriptions of God's judgment against injustice, particularly God's destruction of the wicked. In these texts God shows mercy to the poor and meek (11:4) but destroys the wicked, whose vice is specifically defined by their oppression of the poor and meek (11:4; 13:11). These passages depict God as a righteous judge who overturns the injustice of cruel political situations. Equiano's attention to the scriptural passage underscores his concern for justice, just as surely as it does his piety. If readers are to believe the implications of his use of the scriptural literature throughout the narrative, they must understand him as a Bible reader quite aware of the contexts of the passages he chooses and of the implications of these texts and contexts for the circumstances of his specific experience, and for the experiences of all enslaved Africans.

Equiano's identification with biblical narrators—in particular, with captives—becomes especially prominent in his description of his manumission, where he can tell of his experience only with the aid of biblical texts, only by appealing to scriptural narratives of liberation. He recalls, first, words of thanksgiving from Psalm 126: "I glorified God in my heart, in whom I trusted." These words, he claims, have been "fulfilled and verified" by his own specific experience of liberation. In a typological interpretive move—typical of spiritual autobiographies in the Protestant tradition—he imagines himself and his experience as reenacting the truth of the biblical text. In a similar fashion he moves to a New Testament text, likening himself to Peter: "My imagination was all rapture as I flew to the Register Office: and, in this respect, like the Apostle Peter, (whose deliverance from prison was so

sudden and extraordinary, that he thought he was in a vision), I could scarcely believe I was awake" (136). No matter that Equiano had already presented himself as striving toward and being duped out of his freedom for most of his life—he declares a need for the Apostle Peter's story here to convey a sense of "suddenness," nonetheless. Given his repeated attempts at freedom and the lens through which Equiano consistently reads his experience, we understand his narrative need for a biblical account of literal bondage and freedom. But Equiano's rhetorical need for Peter as exemplar here has little to do with the feature of suddenness, as he straightforwardly asserts. By way of the biblical reference, Equiano insists that Peter, like himself, was a captive—Peter, the central apostle, the figurehead for early Christianity. In order to explain his experience of freedom and, by forceful implication, of captivity as well, Equiano here brings his outsider experience into the mainstream of the religious tradition of his readers and claims an apostolic authority by his identification with Peter.

Moreover, the profundity of his experience of achieving his liberation and the biblical parallel for this experience are underscored by the beautiful and moving passage that adumbrates this notion that he can not, finally, express his emotional response to the experience of freedom:

Who could do justice to my feelings at this moment? Not conquering heroes themselves, in the midst of a triumph—Not the tender mother who has just regained her long-lost infant, and presses it to her heart—Not the weary hungry mariner, at the sight of the desired friendly port—Not the lover, when he once more embraces his beloved mistress, after she had been ravished from his arms!—All within my breast was tumult, wildness and delirium! My feet scarcely touched the ground, for they were winged with joy, and, like Elijah, as he rose to Heaven, they "were with lightning sped as I went on." (136)

All four examples, says Equiano, are inadequate to the intensity of emotion that he experiences in response to manumission. Each metaphor, descriptive of circumstances conjuring extreme human emotion, works only by negation. The answer, clearly, to his rhetorical question of who can "do justice" to his feelings at this moment is emphatic: no one, save the biblical narrator describing the great prophet's gaining not earthly liberation, but liberation from earth and entrance into heaven. Equiano seeks the most extraordinary metaphor possible within his frame of meaning here, choosing to equate his experience of the end of his enslavement with Elijah's magnificent entrance into heaven in a supernatural whirlwind. He dismantles the familiar line of Christian conciliation in the face of slavery that would have counseled slaves to wait for heavenly justice to end earthly troubles. Reversing the familiar terms, he says to readers that his earthly deliverance must be viewed in the context of heavenly liberation. Further, his use of the figure of Elijah affirms the centrality of biblical meaning and story for Equiano. But the assertion underlying the image—that earthly liberation has no adequate analogue other than the gaining of heaven—entirely undercuts the line of argument so familiar to Christian slaves and their masters, that freedom would come "by and by" in heaven for those who would wait for it.

By linking his release from slavery with the spiritual and dramatically supernatural events of the Elijah story, Equiano asks readers to conflate spiritual liberation with liberation from slavery in order to understand the latter. He is released, he says, "suddenly," surprisingly, dramatically. Those readers who have had dramatic conversion accounts may call upon these spiritual experiences in order to understand Equiano's actual liberation from actual bondage, which they must see here, he insists, in a biblical context.

Furthermore, even the form of his rhetorical question—posed, ostensibly,

to confront the reader with the inexpressibility, the extraordinary quality of the emotional rapture corresponding to freedom—asserts both Equiano’s voice of protest and his profound connection with biblical texts as essential both to the narrative of his experience and to his anti-slavery argument. By asking “who could do justice” he raises for readers multiple issues. First, he identifies their distance from his experience; this is, he says, emphatically not like what readers (here imagined as conquering heroes, tender mothers, weary mariners, and bereft lovers) know about deprivation or the excesses of joy. Rather, he insists, his experience exceeds readers’ paradigms of the pain of loss and the ecstasy of reunion. Second, he provides readers with a familiar biblical story, an alternative context, to make his alien experience meaningful despite the inhering unfamiliarity that he argues for here. The argument, then, is that readers both can and cannot approach this experience. The only way into his story here, he says to the reader, is to look beyond personal experiences to another textual one, the supernatural event of Elijah in the heavenly whirlwind. Here, as elsewhere in the text, the Bible provides Equiano with a familiarized other. In this context a known (and thus familiar) story of extraordinary (and thus other) events provides a paradigm for Equiano’s account.

And, finally, the text suggests the political protest that is woven into these biblical parallels throughout the narrative. By forming his question in terms of “justice,” Equiano asserts that, in fact, the reader can not do justice to his feelings or, by implication, to him, to his identity, to his experience. The accumulated negations provide a framework for an argument that he stops short of fully developing: that readers must reach the limits of Christian sympathy here; they cannot, in fact, adequately appreciate the complexities of Equiano’s identity and experience here.

At another moment Equiano appeals to the power and authority of the biblical text for his readers by interpreting Jesus’s own declaration of his mission in the Old Testament prophetic tradition in the immediate context of slavery: “[Jesus] tells us, the oppressor and the oppressed are both in his hands; and if these are not the poor, the broken-hearted, the blind, the captive, the bruised, which our Saviour speaks of, who are they?” (108). Here Equiano taps the biblical literature of social justice at one of its most rhetorically potent moments. To appreciate fully Equiano’s vision of biblical justice here and the way that this vision empowered his own sense of his position and authority as a religious person who was both faithful to the tenets of conventional Christianity and aware of the contradictions presented by practicing Christians around him, we must consider the specific and immediate provocation (within the *Narrative* itself) for Equiano’s interpretive move, as well as the context of the biblical passage to which he appeals. Equiano cites this passage as he reflects not only on his own horrific experience, but on the sexual violence inflicted on female slaves. Obliquely referring to rape, he asks, “Is not this one common and crying sin, enough to bring down God’s judgment on the islands?” (108). Here, in line with the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, he imagines God as judge and liberator, envisioning a moment when he will witness a final, dramatic putting to right of all the horrors he has experienced and witnessed. And he records his hope for such a vision in chapter 5, in which a kind of catalog of violence structures the other events of the narrative.

He thinks here of a passage from the book of Luke, which addresses the situation of the oppressed and abused, those whose experiences have dominated this section of Equiano’s narrative: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to

preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4: 18-19). At the same time he recalls the more extensive declaration from the book of Isaiah (read by Jesus in the Luke passage) in which the prophet describes a complete overturning of reality for those who have been oppressed by established systems of power. This, says Isaiah, will be the day of God's retribution and punishment. Jesus's identification with this prophetic vision of a God of justice who will right wrongs and reverse fortunes clearly inspired hope in Equiano for earthly justice, despite all that he had seen and experienced.

Equiano continues in chapter 5 to chronicle the regular, horrific exploitation he has witnessed, from systematic sexual violence to discrete acts of personal humiliation: a French planter who regularly rapes his female slaves in order to procure more slaves (his own children) without incurring further financial costs, slaves sold by the pound and the lump, children torn from their mothers, a slave who tries to gain a small bit of independence by fishing only to have his fish regularly stolen by whites. As he describes this final incident, Equiano records the injured fisherman's philosophy, a familiar strain of Christianity that provides heavenly—and only heavenly—hope for those with earthly injuries: The response to injustice in this world must be to look beyond, to cast one's hope on heavenly authority. When he is injured, he must "look up [for justice] to God Mighty in the top . . .," says the slave. Equiano recounts that he is moved by his fellow's "artless tale," vaguely suggesting that he endorses the theological perspective here, one that reinforces the way Christianity has frequently worked in concert with political systems that enslave and oppress by urging earthly patience and heavenly hope as a response to immediate injustice (110).

Despite this model of and even reflection upon acquiescence as a Christian virtue, however, Equiano's encounter with his fellow leads him to contemplate religious justification for an altogether different course of action: "I could not help feeling the just cause Moses had in redressing his brother against the Egyptian" (110). Rather than consider the score of biblical examples of individuals who silently or otherwise suffered political and personal oppression, Equiano thinks of one who did the opposite—of Moses, the great biblical liberator of slaves. And the biblical story he refers to here challenges the terms by which his readers would have understood racial hierarchies in general and slavery in particular. By recalling a biblical narrative in which Israelites were enslaved by Africans, Equiano challenges the sympathies of white readers. First, they must identify themselves with slaves and with the situation of enslavement. More, they must image Egyptians (rather than whites) as enslavers. Such a reference interrogates readers' assumptions about power and race, underscoring the fundamental concern of social justice at the heart of Equiano's emerging argument with slavery.

Even more important is the particular biblical moment he refers to in his reference to the Moses story, an instance of biblical violence in the context of his response to the catalog of violence against enslaved Africans. He recalls the story in Exodus 2: Moses, raised under the protection of Egyptians, walks among his enslaved Hebrew fellows and witnesses an Egyptian beating a Hebrew.¹⁷ He responds with immediate, violent revenge, quickly murdering the Egyptian and hiding his body. When others, including Pharaoh, learn of his act, he flees. Equiano's use of the Bible here entirely contradicts his half-hearted endorsement of his friend's philosophy to look for justice only in spiritual terms—to God who is "in the top," suggesting instead the rightness, per-

haps the necessity, of personal agency, even when it means engaging in acts of violent resistance or retribution. Equiano does not choose the certainly more well-known, dramatic, and religiously appropriate account of Moses's central role in the supernatural Passover and Exodus, where humans participate in God's liberatory action; rather, he selects a story featuring human agency, an individual act of violent retribution. Equiano's comment on the account of Moses as murderer—that he had “just cause”—underscores his interpretive work and personal connection with the potentialities of the passage, potentialities that subvert the most facile notions of longsuffering Christian mercy, and patience in the face of terrible distress. Later in the *Narrative* Equiano shows the same impulse for a theology of retributive violence when he longs for God to strike his captors dead (118). What is important here is that Equiano attends to a biblical passage in which the oppressor is struck down by a human, rather than a divine, hand of judgment.

Equiano's appreciation for Moses's action here sets up his subsequent use of Milton's Satan, who voices justification for violent revolt at the end of the chapter. In attending to this observation, Potkay assumes Equiano's disavowal of the young Moses: “[He] knows that he cannot be Moses, because the Christian dispensation has no room for the violent retaliation imagined by his younger self” (688). But, in fact, the mature self of the autobiographer offers no censure, no hint of criticism of the urge for justice here. Further, Equiano does not provide readers with an explanation of the full meaning of his admiration for Moses's act of violence, nor does he examine the paradox that such a reference presents in light of his overall acquiescence to the system of slavery in *The Narrative*.

Equiano's emphatic affirmation of Moses's violent rebellion here is consistent with his inclinations in a number of places in the *Narrative*, both in the

reliance on a biblical text or model and in the undeveloped quality of the reference. For instance, Equiano articulates his Christian piety and submission even as he plans to escape from his master. Expressing his abject repentance at the outset of chapter 5, he weeps; expressing his certainty that God is punishing him for his behavior, he begs God to forgive him, and prays for wisdom and resignation (95). And yet in the subsequent paragraph, he attempts to escape. His radical submission to God does not hinder him from active rebellion against his master, and against the identity conveyed upon him by other Christians.

This particular section of the *Narrative* is quite troubling for other reasons as well. Equiano voices his earnest piety here in response to his enslavement at a moment when, trusting in his master's promises, he had expected to be freed. Rather than cursing his master for betraying his word, Equiano sees his enslavement as God's punishment for a momentary lapse of personal piety, when, anticipating his freedom, he had sworn to celebrate by carousing. He seems at this point to affirm the religious perspective of his enslavers: He condemns himself and assumes that he is unworthy, even as he prays for divine deliverance. The passage is perplexing, in part because of the internal contradiction between a plan to escape and an intention to submit, and because of the larger context in which this contradiction occurs: Equiano condemns himself for the imperfections of his piety at the same time as he records the horrific violence of slavemasters. His religious piety, even his self-critique, seems sincere here. But Equiano's expression of these concerns accomplishes other rhetorical tasks as well, reinforcing for readers his own religious credentials, about which he seems utterly in earnest, and, at the same time, casting severe judgment on slavemasters and traders whose violence dominates the rest of the chapter. Surely he intended readers to note the very problem that

my students consistently observe here—the distressing, even absurd contrast between one Christian who earnestly strives toward an absolute (and, to contemporary readers, peculiarly personal) virtue, castigating himself for a momentary lapse in a narrowly defined piety, and other Christians who consistently enact brutal violence without any sense of shame or self-consciousness.

The piety exemplified in this passage has been seen as a problem, as part of the equivocal self that recurs in the *Narrative*. But rather than simply noting the equivocation that occurs within the *Narrative*, or registering my disappointment, I would like to examine an instance of this equivocation, again with the aim of understanding Equiano's in fact rather remarkable sense of his own authority vis-à-vis the Bible and Christianity. Perhaps the most startling example of Equiano's equivocal voice in this text, what readers have come to see as his failure to come fully to terms with his own experience as a slave and his own relationship with the institution of slavery, is his decision after his manumission to remain with his master, and then subsequently to act as a purchaser and overseer of slaves himself. Throughout the last section of the *Narrative*, we can see examples of the complex self-perception that allow him to make these decisions; and one of the most intriguing instances is Equiano's return to the trope of the Talking Book, which he has used at the beginning of the *Narrative* in describing his own encounter as a young African boy with Western culture.

Called the "ur-trope" of the Anglo-African tradition by Henry Louis Gates, the Talking Book motif, which features an encounter between a non-literate observer and a text, very often the Bible or a prayer book, recurs variously in African American texts with consistently rich results—suggesting

myriad meanings for pivotal moments of contact between an African narrator and European culture, between orality and textuality, and all the accompanying assumed hierarchies. It occurs first in 1770 in Gronniosaw's *Narrative*, and then in four other slave narratives before 1815 (Gates, *Signifying* 130). The trope continues to recur throughout the African American tradition and, as Gates argues, is a site of revision and repetition that demonstrates the extraordinary intertextuality of the tradition. Many readers have commented on Equiano's initial use of this trope, which occurs in the context of his encounters with other icons that indicate his own foreignness and the power of the cultural forces he encounters as a newly kidnaped slave. But no one, so far as I know, has previously commented on the fact that he returns to the trope when he describes his own role as a representative of Western power, civilization, religion, and literacy.

The instance occurs in chapter 11, after his account of his religious conversion in the preceding chapter. After repeated, extensive reflection concerning the injustice of the enslavement and racial violence he has survived, he provides readers with an account of his own attempt to act as a Christian colonizer, the likes of which originally enslaved him. In the company of Mosquito and Ulua (Equiano knows them as "woolwov" or "flat-headed") Indians in what is now Nicaragua, Equiano makes a number of observations concerning cultural practices and traits, including, most notably, both the honesty of the Indians, and their inclination to get drunk on the liquor of Europeans. At one point Equiano is charged by his employer with "managing" a large band of drunken Indians who are engaged in a dispute and becoming increasingly violent. In order to gain control of the group, Equiano recalls his reading of Columbus, and models his own response after the manipulations of the explorer:

I therefore thought of a stratagem to appease the riot. Recollecting a passage I had read in the life of Columbus, when he was amongst the Indians in Jamaica, where, on some occasion, he frightened them, by telling them of certain events in the heavens, I had recourse to the same expedient, and it succeeded beyond my most sanguine expectations. When I had formed my determination, I went in the midst of them, and taking hold of the governor, I pointed up to the heavens. I menaced him and the rest: I told them God lived there, and that he was angry with them, and they must not quarrel so; that they were all brothers, and if they did not leave off, and go away quietly, I would take them to the book (pointing to the bible), read, and *tell* God to make them dead. This was something like magic. The clamour immediately ceased, and I gave them some rum and a few other things; after which they went away peaceably (208)

This instance, and the chapter from which it emerges, is enormously revealing of Equiano's complex sense of his own identity, as it speaks to his cultural hybridity, his profoundly ambivalent relationships both to Western culture and religion and to his own original cultural moorings. Equiano participates—without accompanying comment that would alert us to his self-consciousness about his participation—in the same cultural game that resulted in his long enslavement, exploiting the distinctions between notions of “savage” and “civilized,” the very categories he alerts readers to in his account of his own enslavement as a boy, when he holds a book to his ear in an attempt to hear it speak to him, when he sees snow and thinks it the result of magic, when he believes his white captors seek to eat him. Furthermore, in the context of the descriptions that comprise this entire chapter of the *Narrative*, he positions himself as a civilized Western Christian (which of course he assuredly is), describing indigenous culture with a sense of disdain and disgust, and exploiting the power of his cultural resources (including rum) to manipulate and subdue these “Natives.” He is alarmed at what the Indians eat and

drink; he thinks their music unpleasant, their dancing curious. At the same time that he records his sense of ethnic and cultural distance from and superiority to the Indians he observes, sounding frequently like any other colonizing European, however, he consistently reminds his civilized, Christian readers of his cultural distance from them (his readers) as well, and of his consequent proximity to the less “civilized” people of his *Narrative*: He notes that the Indians' musical instruments resemble those of “other sable people,” like his own, and that they dance not as couples, but in single-sex groups “as with us” (209).

Just after presenting his observations about the Indians, he describes how he is subsequently seized, reenslaved, and tortured by the owner of a sloop who intends to compel him to serve on his vessel no matter his resistance, and to sell him if he will not cease resisting. After narrowly escaping this situation, he is cast into several other similar circumstances, all the while protesting that he cannot rightly be enslaved since he has successfully purchased his freedom. The whites who seek to reenslave him see, however, other facts that conflict with Equiano's sense of reality and identity here. Because of his remarkable competence and experience, Equiano is a tremendously attractive potential member of any crew, made even more valuable because of his sense of responsibility and his personal virtue, which so dramatically separates him, again and again in the *Narrative*, from those (frequently Europeans) around him who carouse, drink, lie, and steal from their employers. But, most importantly, they see that he is an African: enslavable by the obvious fact of his race, just as he was when he was still an innocent young boy on the coast of Guinea, just as obviously exploitable as the central American Indians that Equiano and his European fellows together encounter.

Equiano's resistance to the realities he encounters here are both vigorous

and ineffective, and they speak to the hierarchies that inform his view of himself and others, the hierarchies he frequently notes, but never fully examines. He argues, for instance, that the barbarous behavior of his captors is worse than that of the Turks (among whom he has traveled) even though his captors are Christian (211). He explains that the Indians (to whom, ironically, he goes after the escape noted above) are “more like Christians than those whites” despite the fact that the Indians are unbaptized (214). He is tortured “without any crime committed, and without judge or jury, merely because I was a freeman, and could not by the law get any redress from a white person in those parts of the world” (212).

In some ways it is not at all surprising that Equiano models himself after the legendary conqueror Columbus. Clearly, he sees both the Indians and himself here through what Mary Louise Pratt calls “imperial eyes,” as he assumes his own superiority in terms of education, cultural refinement, and spiritual enlightenment.¹⁸ Still it is difficult to read his encounter with the Indians without thinking of his presentation of his experience as a commentary on his own original contact with Western Christian slavers on the coast of Africa. His references to his own race, to the skin color of the Indians, to his own original culture remind readers of the complexity of his identity, positioning him as distinct, as an outsider, yet as one able to comment on the deficiencies of his Christian British fellows even as he participates in the same exploitive system. The events of the end of Equiano’s *Narrative* reveal the limits and contradictions of his identity as it is constructed for him by those around him, and as he himself imagines it. Free or slave, Christian or not—these distinctions become, in the end, irrelevant. Equiano, at the end of his story is a free, well-educated, Afro-British seaman with an impressive résumé and a list of well-connected ref-

erences. Nonetheless, he is still subject to the violent whim of slaveholders who act on the basis of racial hierarchies. His self and his experience have been predetermined not by the predestinarian God he fervently worships but by those around him who continue to perceive him as enslavable.¹⁹ Even his own proficiency in Western ways, including the appropriation of power and a colonizer’s mind and tricks, does not alter how others see him. He may have, even in the course of this narrative, written himself into existence as a subject for himself. He exists in the narrative, for himself, as an actor—perhaps most importantly for his own view of things, as a Christian who has received God’s grace and experienced God’s transforming power, just as surely as he has experienced his own transformation from slave to free. But his identity for his immediate reading audience was determined entirely by race, remaining unaffected by the transforming religious experience he sees as central to his story.

The limits here—both of Equiano’s sense of his own identity and of his argumentative position, in which he asserts a protest against the brutal aspects of slavery without wholly objecting to all forms of the practice—are underscored further by the news that Equiano receives in the chapter regarding those slaves he had formerly overseen, those with whom he had been so careful and compassionate, those for whom he had been such a conscientiously “good” master. In this chapter he learns that their new master treated them brutally and that they are all dead.

Although Equiano himself does not move to a sweeping or vigorous anti-slavery position, the arrangement of the narrative, whether purposeful or not, certainly indicates the need for such a position, as it reveals that a merciful slavemaster’s compassionate behavior is, finally, inconsequential for the lives of the slaves; in the context of the slave system, one master’s virtue—or, at least, restraint—is immediately

subject to be overturned by the next master. Moreover, Equiano's own experience of being unjustly, illegally reenslaved is juxtaposed with the fate of his former charges here, underscoring the fact that the slave system simply cannot accommodate restraint, cannot accommodate even its own compromised vision of appropriate limits on brutal behavior. And this argument—as it surfaces in the events, if not in Equiano's comment on those events—resonates with the suggestion made throughout the *Narrative* that, finally, Christianity is utterly incompatible with slavery. Hence, as Equiano repeatedly asserts, the Christian exemplars that he meets are entirely inadequate, indeed vicious, models of the transforming theology he has come to believe, a theology focused on an overturning of power, placing the outsider in the center.

His engagement with larger issues—most notably with the racism upon which any kind of justification of

that slave system was founded—begins to emerge here, but it remains emergent, not fully formed. Equiano is a hybrid, living at the edge of a religious ideology stretched to the limits by his experience, looking for a model of justice and compassion as powerful as the ones he has encountered in the biblical text, models far more powerful than those he cobbles together from the momentary breaks in the brutality of his own experience. Equiano glimpses and moves toward a religious vision that eclipses that of many of his Christian contemporaries, a vision rooted in particular moments and readings in the scriptures, a vision fully informed by his own specific experience of slavery. And the contradictory strains evident in his encounter with Christianity, and even in his own articulation of the same, are part of an old, conflicted conversation about what it means to be a person of faith in a biblical tradition.

1. For an historical sense of the critical discussion of the genre of spiritual autobiography specifically within the English Protestant tradition, see Margaret Bottrall; John Morris; and Dean Ebner. Daniel Shea examined the Anglo-American tradition in *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America*, updated in 1988. Within the burgeoning field of autobiography studies a number of recent critical discussions include examinations of spiritual life-writing within the Protestant tradition. Forms that may be read as spiritual autobiographies include conversion narratives, Quaker journals, Indian captivity narratives, travel writing, and slave narratives. See, for example, Carol Edkins's essay on American Quaker and Puritan women's writing.

2. See Valerie Smith; Chinosole; and Wilfred Samuels as examples of readings that attempt either to dismiss or ignore Equiano's religious perspective altogether, or to present religion as a kind of rhetorical disguise, useful for audience appeal, but either somewhat or wholly inauthentic. Sally Ann Ferguson sees Equiano's religion informing a racial self-hatred consistent with the Christian racism exemplified in many other texts.

3. Vincent Carretta quotes Woolstonecraft's review (from *The Analytic Review*, May 1789) at length (xxvi-ii).

4. A number of readers have taken Equiano to task for the shortcomings of his argumentative response to slavery. For a recent example, see Ferguson.

5. Despite Equiano's address to members of Parliament at the outset of the *Narrative*, and his public offers to give testimony, he was not invited to give evidence at Parliamentary hearings. He did witness the popular response to his *Narrative*, but he did not live to see the abolition of the African slave trade (in 1807) much less the abolition of slavery in British colonies (in 1838). Equiano died in 1797.

6. Concerning Christianity as a shaping force for Equiano's interpretive and narrative authority, Adam Potkay (in opposition to readers who emphasize Equiano's lack of control and loss of his original cultural self) argues that Equiano "wills, guides, shapes, and controls" the transformation he describes by way of religion, specifically by reenacting the biblical narrative move between Old and New Testament (680); Katalin Orban argues that Equiano commands authority specifically on the grounds of Christianity (659); and Susan Marren examines how Christianity, and, more specifically, scripture, allows Equiano to "circumvent the white person's language and its closed categories of meaning" (102).

Notes

7. Angelo Costanzo notes the significance of biblical references and quotations, of biblical types in line with a tradition of Puritan typology, throughout early slave narratives.

8. For critical discussion of conversion narratives see Patricia Caldwell; Mary Cochran Grimes; John O. King; and Jerald Brauer.

9. Forrest Wood discusses the centrality of this particular biblical appeal in eighteenth-century anti-slavery literature, including Equiano's confrontation with readers at the end of chapter 2 in the *Narrative* (62).

10. This occurs not only in the introductory material I discuss here, but also later in the text; in chapter 4 when he becomes a Bible reader Equiano is immediately struck by the proximity of biblical culture and the African culture of his origins.

11. Equiano's "Ebo" have been identified with the Ibo in present-day Nigeria. Wood identifies Equiano's Issaka as Ika (165).

12. Carretta, in "Appendix B: A Note on the Illustrations" in the Penguin edition, observes the way the author's portrait evolves somewhat from earlier to later editions of the *Narrative* (315).

13. Following Equiano's own practice, I use the King James Version of all biblical texts cited in this discussion.

14. The name shifts I refer to here concern both Equiano's narrative as well as the critical literature about it. Early scholarship concerns "Gustavus Vassa," while all more recent discussions refer to "Olaudah Equiano."

15. Carretta suggests that this is one of a number of instances in which Equiano's memory seems to have been mistaken. Given the chronology of travel that Equiano presents, it was more likely that he heard the evangelist in London instead (132).

16. Equiano underscores the centrality of this text and the circumstances of its narrator for his own sense of the meaning of his life when he uses the same passage as the culmination of his poetic rendering of his conversion (197).

17. Carretta's footnote suggests that Equiano refers here to the story of the plagues in Exodus 7. Equiano seems, however, to be thinking rather more specifically of the incident in Exodus 2 that I discuss here.

18. Pratt's acclaimed study of travel writing about Africa and South America since the mid-fourteenth century provides a useful lens for this discussion of Equiano's text, as she examines the dynamics of power and cultural representation that interest me here. Marion Rust examines Equiano's problematic identity in the context of imperialism and, more specifically, "passing."

19. Early in the *Narrative* Equiano describes that he has been a "predestinarian" from his earliest days (119). See also Carretta's note on predestinarianism (275).

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