

CHAPTER ONE

African-Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel

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*Canaan land is the land for me,
And let God's saints come in.
There was a wicked man,
He kept them children in Egypt land.
Canaan land is the land for me,
And let God's saints come in.
God did say to Moses one day,
Say, Moses, go to Egypt land,
And tell him to let my people go.
Canaan land is the land for me,
And let God's saints come in.*

—SLAVE SPIRITUAL

In the encounter with European Christianity in its Protestant form in North America, enslaved Africans and their descendants encountered something new: a fully articulated ritual relationship with the Supreme Being, who was pictured in the book that the Christians called the Bible not just as the Creator and Ruler of the Cosmos, but also as the God of History, a God who lifted up and cast down nations and peoples, a God whose sovereign will was directing all things toward an ultimate end, drawing good out of evil. As the transplanted Africans reflected upon the evil that had befallen them and their parents, they increasingly turned to the language, symbols, and worldview of the Christian holy book. There they found a theology of history that helped them to make sense of their enslavement. One story in particular caught their attention and fascinated them with its implications and potential applications to their own situation: the story of Exodus. What they did with that ancient story of the Near East is the topic of this essay. I begin by surveying the history of evangelization among the slaves in order to situate and define the Christianity that confronted them in North America. Then I describe what slaves and free blacks made of Christianity by focusing on

their interpretation of the Exodus story, an interpretation which differed drastically, as we shall see, from that of white Americans.

CONVERSION

From the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, Europeans claimed that the conversion of slaves to Christianity justified the enslavement of Africans. Yet the conversion of slaves was not a high priority for colonial planters. British colonists in North America proved especially indifferent, if not downright hostile, to the conversion of their slaves. At first, opposition was based on the suspicion that English law forbade the enslavement of Christians and so would require slaveholders to emancipate any slave who received baptism. Masters suspected that slaves would therefore seek to be baptized in order to gain freedom. These fears were quickly allayed by colonial legislation declaring that baptism did not alter slave status.

With the legal obstacles aside, slaveowners for the most part still demonstrated scant interest in converting their slaves. According to the common wisdom, Christianity spoiled slaves. Christian slaves thought too highly of themselves, became impudent, and even turned rebellious. Moreover, Anglo-Americans were troubled by a deep-seated uneasiness at the prospect that slaves would claim Christian fellowship with white people. Africans were foreign; to convert them was to make them more like the English and therefore deserving of better treatment. In fact religion, like language and skin color, constituted the colonists' identity. To Christianize black-skinned Africans, therefore, would confuse the distinctiveness of the races and threaten the social order based upon that distinctiveness. Finally, the labor, not the souls of the slaves, concerned most slaveholders. Peter Kalm, a Swedish traveler in America from 1748 to 1750, perceptively described the colonists' objections to religious instruction for slaves:

It is . . . to be pitied, that the masters of these negroes in most of the English colonies take little care of their spiritual welfare, and let them live on in their Pagan darkness. There are even some, who would be very ill pleased at, and would by all means hinder their negroes from being instructed in the doctrines of Christianity; to this they are partly led by the conceit of its being shameful, to have a spiritual brother or sister among so despicable a people; partly by thinking that they should not be able to keep their negroes so meanly afterwards; and partly through fear of the negroes growing too proud, on seeing themselves upon a level with their masters in religious matters.¹

A concerted attack on these obstacles to slave conversion was mounted by the Church of England in 1701 when it established the Soci-

ety for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts to support missionaries to the colonies. The first task was to convince masters that they had a duty to instruct their slaves in the truths of the gospel. In tract after tract, widely distributed in the colonies, officers of the Society stressed the compatibility of Christianity with slavery. Masters need not fear that religion would ruin their slaves. On the contrary, Christianity would make them better slaves by convincing them to obey their owners out of a sense of moral duty instead of out of fear. After all, Society pamphlets explained, Christianity does not upset the social order, but supports it: "Scripture, far from making an alteration in Civil Rights, expressly directs that every man abide in the condition wherein he is called, with great indifference of mind concerning outward circumstances."² To prove the point, they reiterated ad nauseam the verse from Ephesians (6:5): "Slaves be obedient to your masters." The missionaries thus denied that spiritual equality implied worldly equality; they restricted the egalitarian impulse of Christianity to the realm of the spirit. So, in effect, they built a religious foundation to support slavery. As the historian Winthrop Jordan aptly put it, "These clergymen had been forced by the circumstance of racial slavery in America into propagating the Gospel by presenting it as an attractive device for slave control."³

The success of missions to the slaves depended largely on circumstances beyond the missionaries' control: the proportion of African-born to Creole slaves, the geographic location and work patterns of the slaves, and the ratio of blacks to whites in a given locale. Blacks in the North and in the Chesapeake region of Maryland and Virginia, for example, experienced more frequent and closer contact with whites than did those of the lowland coasts of South Carolina and Georgia, where large gangs of African slaves toiled on isolated rice plantations with only limited and infrequent exposure to whites or their religion. Even if a missionary gained regular access to slaves, the slaves did not invariably accept the Christian gospel. Some rejected it, according to missionary accounts, because of "the Fondness they have for their old Heathenish Rites, and the strong Prejudice they must have against Teachers from among those, whom they serve so unwillingly."⁴ Others accepted Christianity because they hoped—colonial legislation and missionary pronouncements notwithstanding—that baptism would raise their status and ensure eventual freedom for their children, if not for themselves. One missionary in South Carolina required slaves seeking baptism to swear an oath that they did not request the sacrament out of a desire for freedom.⁵ (Apparently he missed the irony.) Missionaries complained that, even after instruction and baptism, slaves still mixed Christian beliefs with the traditional practices of their African homelands.

Discouraging though the prospects were, colonial clergymen had established a few successful missions among the slaves by the early eighteenth century. When the Bishop of London distributed a list of questions in 1724 requiring ministers to describe their work among the slaves, several respondents reported impressive numbers of baptisms. The great majority, however, stated vague intentions instead of concrete achievements. During the first 120 years of black slavery in British North America, Christianity made little headway in the slave population.

Slaves were first converted in large numbers in the wake of the religious revivals that periodically swept parts of the colonies beginning in the 1740s. Accounts by George Whitefield, Gilbert Tennent, Jonathan Edwards, and other revivalists made special mention of the fact that blacks were flocking to hear the message of salvation in hitherto unseen numbers. Not only were free blacks and slaves attending revivals, but they were also taking active part in the services as exhorters and preachers. For a variety of reasons Evangelical revivalists succeeded where Anglican missionaries had failed. Whereas the Anglicans had depended upon a slow process of indoctrination, the evangelicals preached the immediate experience of conversion as the primary requirement for baptism, thereby making Christianity more quickly accessible. Because of the centrality of the conversion experience in their piety, evangelicals also tended to de-emphasize instruction and downplay learning as prerequisites of Christian life. As a result, all classes of society were welcome to participate actively in prayer meetings and revival services, in which the poor, the illiterate, and even the enslaved prayed, exhorted, and preached.

After the Revolution, revival fervor continued to flare up sporadically in the South. More and more slaves converted to Christianity under the dramatic preaching of evangelical revivalists, especially Methodists and Baptists. The emotionalism of the revivals encouraged the outward expression of religious feeling, and the sight of black and white converts weeping, shouting, fainting, and moving in ecstatic trance became a familiar, if sensationalized, feature of the sacramental and camp meeting seasons. In this heated atmosphere slaves found a form of Christian worship that resembled the religious celebrations of their African heritage. The analogy between African and evangelical styles of worship enabled the slaves to reinterpret the new religion by reference to the old, and so made this brand of Christianity seem less foreign than that of the more liturgically sedate Church of England.

The rise of the evangelical denominations, particularly the Methodists and the Baptists, threatened the established Anglican church in the South. Because they appealed to the "lower sort," the evangelicals suffered persecution at the hands of the Anglican authorities. Baptist

preachers were jailed, their services were disrupted, and they were even roughed up by rowdies such as those in Virginia who thought it humorous to immerse the Baptists in mud. They were thought of as different in an unsettling sort of way. "There was a company of them in the back part of our town, and an outlandish set of people they certainly were," remarked one woman to the early Baptist historian David Benedict. "You yourself would say so if you had seen them. . . . You could hardly find one among them but was deformed in some way or other."⁶ The evangelicals seemed to threaten the social as well as the religious order by accepting slaves into their societies. An anti-Baptist petition warned the Virginia assembly in 1777 that "there have been nightly meetings of slaves to receive the instruction of these teachers without the consent of their masters, which have produced very bad consequences."⁷

In the 1780s the evangelicals' implied challenge to the social order became explicit. Methodist conferences in 1780, in 1783, and again in 1784 strongly condemned slavery and tried "to extirpate this abomination," first from the ministry and then from the membership as a whole, by passing increasingly stringent regulations against slave-owning, slave-buying, and slave-selling.⁸ Several Baptist leaders freed their slaves, and in 1789 the General Committee of Virginia Baptists condemned slavery as "a violent deprivation of the rights of nature."⁹ In the South, these antislavery moves met with strong, immediate, and, as the leadership quickly realized, irreversible opposition. In 1785, the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Church suspended the rules passed in 1784 by the Methodist General Conference. Methodist leader Thomas Coke explained, "We thought it prudent to suspend the minute concerning slavery, on account of the great opposition that had been given it, our work being in too infantile a state to push things to extremity." Local Baptist associations in Virginia responded to the General Committee's attack on slavery by declaring that the subject was "so abstruse" that no religious society had the right to concern itself with the issue; instead, each individual should be left "to act at discretion in order to keep a good conscience before God, as far as the laws of our land will admit."¹⁰ As for the slaves, the goal of the Church should be the amelioration of their treatment, not their emancipation.

Thus, the evangelical challenge to slavery in the late eighteenth century failed. The intransigence of slavery once again set the limits of the Christian egalitarian impulse, just as it had in colonial days for the Anglican mission. Rapid growth of the Baptist and Methodist churches forced an ineluctable accommodation to slaveholding principles rather than the overthrow of slavery. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Robert Semple, another Baptist historian, described the change that came over the "outlandish" Baptists after 1790: "Their preachers' became

much more correct in their manner of preaching. A great many odd tones, disgusting whoops and awkward gestures were disused. . . . Their zeal was less mixed with enthusiasm, and their piety became more rational. They were much more numerous, and, of course, in the eyes of the world, more respectable. Besides, they were joined by persons of much greater weight in civil society; their congregations became more numerous. . . . This could not but influence their manners and spirit more or less.”¹¹ Though both Methodists and Baptists rapidly retreated from antislavery pronouncements, their struggle with the established order and their uneasiness about slavery gave slaves, at least initially, the impression that they were “friendly toward freedom.” For a short time, revivalist evangelicalism breached the wall that colonial missionaries had built between spiritual and temporal equality. Converting slaves to Christianity could have implications beyond the spiritual, a possibility slaves were eager to explore.

Methodists and Baptists backed away from these implications in the 1790s, but they had already taken a momentous step, and it proved irreversible. The spread of Baptist and Methodist evangelicalism between 1770 and 1820 changed the religious complexion of the South by bringing unprecedented numbers of slaves into membership in the church and by introducing even larger numbers to at least the rudiments of Christianity. During the antebellum decades, Christianity diffused throughout the slave quarters, though most slaves did not hold membership in regular churches. Those slaves who did attend church generally attended with whites, but some—in greater numbers than historians have realized—attended separate black churches, even in the antebellum South.

Thanks to the willingness of the evangelical churches to license black men to exhort and preach, during the 1770s and 1780s a significant group of black preachers had begun to pastor their own people. Mainly Baptist, since the congregational independence of the Baptists gave them more leeway to preach than any other denomination, the black preachers exercised a ministry that was mostly informal and extraecclesial. It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of these early black preachers for the development of an African-American Christianity. In effect, they mediated between Christianity and the experience of the slaves (and free blacks), interpreting the stories, symbols, and events of the Bible to fit the day-to-day lives of those held in bondage. And whites—try as they might—could not control this interpretation or determine its “accuracy.” Slave preachers, exhorters, and church-appointed watchmen instructed their fellow slaves, nurtured their religious development, and brought them to conversion—in some cases without any active involvement of white missionaries or masters whatso-

ever. By nurturing Christian communities among slaves and free blacks, the pioneer black preachers began to build an independent black church.

We tend to identify the development of the independent black church with free blacks in the North, but the spirit of religious independence also created separate black churches in the South. Several "African" churches, as they were called, sprang up before 1800. Some of these black congregations were independent to the extent that they called their own pastors and officers, joined local associations with white churches, and sent their own delegates to associational meetings. However, this early independence of black preachers and churches was curtailed during the antebellum period when, in reaction to slave conspiracies, all gatherings of blacks for whatever purpose were viewed with alarm. For slaves to participate in the organization, leadership, and governance of church structures was perceived as dangerous. Nevertheless, unlikely as it may seem, black churches continued to grow in size and number in the slave South. Though nominally controlled by whites, these separate congregations were frequently led by black ministers, some free and some slaves. Often the black congregations outnumbered the largest white churches in the local church associations. Although never numerous in the South, the separate black churches were extremely important, if limited, institutional expressions of black religious independence from white control.

In the North, the abolition of slavery after the Revolution gave black congregations and clergy much more leeway to assert control over their religious lives. Federal and state disestablishment of religion created an environment of voluntarism in which church organization flourished. Between 1790 and 1820, black Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians founded churches, exercised congregational control where possible, and struggled with white elders, bishops, and associations to gain autonomy. Among the first to succeed in doing so was Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. Founded in 1794 by Richard Allen, a former slave who had become a licensed Methodist preacher, Bethel was organized after discriminatory treatment drove black Methodists to abandon St. George's, the white church they had supported for years. When the white elders of St. George's tried to take control of the Bethel church property, the black congregation went to court to retain their rights to the church they had built themselves. They won.

Conflicts elsewhere between black Methodists and white elders prompted Allen to call for a convention of African Methodists to meet in Philadelphia in 1816. There, delegates organized an independent black denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, and

elected Richard Allen as its first bishop. Two other African Methodist denominations had organized by 1821. Though the black Methodists were the first to take independent control of their church property, finances, and governance on the denominational level, northern blacks in other churches also demonstrated their spirit of independence. In all denominations, the black churches formed the institutional core for the development of free black communities. Moreover, they gave black Christians the opportunity to articulate publicly their own vision of Christianity, which stood in eloquent testimony to the existence of two Christian Americas.

Of course, independent religious institutions were out of the question for the vast majority of black Americans, who were suffering the system of slavery in the southern states. If they attended church at all, they did so with whites or under white supervision. Nevertheless, slaves developed their own, extraecclesial "invisible institution" of religious life. In the slave quarters and brush arbors, they held their own religious meetings, where they interpreted Christianity according to their experience. Conversely, they also interpreted their experience by means of the myths, stories, and symbols of Christianity. They were even willing to risk severe punishment to attend forbidden prayer meetings in order to worship God free of white control. A former slave, Lucretia Alexander, explained why:

The preacher came and . . . he'd just say, "Serve your masters. Don't steal your master's turkey. Don't steal your master's chickens. Don't steal your master's hawks. Don't steal your master's meat. Do whatsoever your master tell you to do." Same old thing all the time. My father would have church in dwelling houses and they had to whisper. . . . Sometimes they would have church at his house. That would be when they want a real meetin' with some real preachin'. . . . They used to sing their songs in a whisper. That was a prayer meeting from house to house . . . once or twice a week.¹²

Inevitably the slaves' Christianity contradicted that of their masters. For the slaves knew that no matter how sincerely religious the slaveowners might be, their Christianity was compatible with slavery, and the slaves' was not. The division went deep; it extended to the fundamental interpretation of the Bible. The dichotomy between the faiths of black and white Christians was described by a white Methodist minister who pastored a black congregation in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1862:

There were near fourteen hundred colored communicants. . . . [Their] service was always thronged—galleries, lower floor, chancel, pulpit, steps and all. . . . The preacher could not complain of any deadly space between himself and his congregation. He was positively breast up to his people,

with no possible loss of . . . rapport. Though ignorant of it at the time, he remembers now the cause of the enthusiasm under his deliverances [about] the "law of liberty" and "freedom from Egyptian bondage." What was figurative they interpreted literally. He thought of but one ending of the war; they quite another. He remembers the sixty-eighth Psalm as affording numerous texts for their delectation, e.g., "Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered"; His "march through the wilderness"; "The Chariots of God are twenty thousand"; "The hill of God is as the hill of Basham"; and especially, "Though ye have lain among the pots, yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her feathers with yellow gold." . . . It is mortifying now to think that his comprehension was not equal to the African intellect. All he thought about was relief from the servitude of sin, and freedom from the bondage of the devil. . . . But they interpreted it literally in the good time coming, which of course could not but make their ebony complexion attractive, very.¹³

What the preacher is describing is the end of a long process, spanning almost two hundred and fifty years, by which slaves came to accept the gospel of Christianity. But the slaves did not simply become Christians; they fashioned Christianity to fit their own peculiar experience of enslavement in America. The preacher, like many white Christians before and since, thought there was no distance between him and "his people," no possible loss of rapport. He learned belatedly that the chasm was wide and deep. As one freedman succinctly stated, "We couldn't tell NO PREACHER NEBER how we suffer all dese long years. He know'd nothin' 'bout we."¹⁴

EXODUS

No single symbol captures more clearly the distinctiveness of Afro-American Christianity than the symbol of Exodus. From the earliest days of colonization, white Christians had represented their journey across the Atlantic to America as the exodus of a New Israel from the bondage of Egypt into the Promised Land of milk and honey. For black Christians, the imagery was reversed: the Middle Passage had brought them to Egypt land, where they suffered bondage under a new Pharaoh. White Christians saw themselves as the New Israel; slaves identified themselves as the Old. This is, as Vincent Harding remarked, one of the abiding and tragic ironies of our history: the nation's claim to be the New Israel was contradicted by the Old Israel still enslaved in her midst.¹⁵

American preachers, politicians, and other orators found in the story of Exodus a rich source of metaphors to explicate the unfolding history of the nation. Each section of the narrative—the bondage in Egypt, the

rescue at the Red Sea, the wandering in the wilderness, and the entrance into the Promised Land—provided a typological map to reconnoiter the moral terrain of American society. John Winthrop, the leader of the great Puritan expedition to Massachusetts Bay, set the pattern in his famous “A Modell of Christian Charity” sermon composed on his ship in 1630. Having elaborated the covenantal obligations that the settlers had contracted with God, echoing the Sinai covenant of Israel with Yahweh, Winthrop concluded his discourse with a close paraphrase of Moses’ farewell instruction to Israel (Deuteronomy 30):

Beloved there is now sett before us life, and good, deathe and evill in that wee are Commaunded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walke in his wayes and to keepe his Commaundements and his Ordinance, and his lawes, and the Articles of our Covenant with him that wee may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may blesse us in the land whither we goe to posses it: But if our heartes shall turne away soe that wee will not obey, but shall be seduced and worship . . . other Gods, our pleasures, and proffitts, and serve them; it is propounded unto this day, wee shall surely perishe out of the good Land whither wee passe over this vast Sea to possesse it. . . .¹⁶

Notice the particular application that Winthrop draws from the Exodus story: possession of the land is contingent upon observing the moral obligations of the covenant with God. It is a mark of the greatness of Winthrop’s address that the obligations he emphasizes are justice, mercy, affection, meekness, gentleness, patience, generosity, and unity—not the qualities usually associated with taking or keeping possession of a land. Later and lesser sermons would extol much more active and aggressive virtues for the nation to observe.

Already in Winthrop’s address there is an explicit notion of reciprocity between God’s Will and America’s Destiny: God has made a contract with us; if we live up to our part of the bargain, so will He. This pattern of reciprocity between Divine Providence and American Destiny had tremendous hortative power, which Puritan preachers exploited to the full over the next century and more in the jeremiad. In sermon after sermon, a succession of New England divines deciphered droughts, epidemics, Indian attacks, and other misfortunes as tokens of God’s displeasure over the sins of the nation. Unless listeners took the opportunity to humble themselves, repent, and reform, they might expect much more of the same.

Implicit in this relationship of reciprocity there lay a danger: the danger of converting God’s Will into America’s Destiny. Winthrop was too good a Puritan to succumb to this temptation. Protected by his belief in the total sovereignty of God, he knew that the relationship between

God's Will and human action was one-sided and that the proper human attitude was trust in God, not confidence in man. God's Will was the measure of America's deeds, not vice versa. Of course, no American preacher or politician would have disagreed, but as time went on the salient features of the American Exodus story changed. As the actual experience of migration with all its fear and tenuousness receded, Americans tended to lose sight of their radical dependence upon God and to celebrate their own achievements as a nation.

We can catch sight of the change by comparing the tone of Winthrop's "A Modell of Christian Charity" with the mood of an election sermon entitled "The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor," preached by Ezra Stiles in 1783. Flushed with excitement over the success of the Revolution, Stiles dwelled at length on the unfolding destiny of the new nation. Quoting, like Winthrop, from the book of Deuteronomy, Stiles struck a celebratory rather a hortatory note:

"And to make thee high above all nations which he hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honour; and that thou mayest be an holy people unto the Lord thy God. . . ." I have assumed [this] text as introductory to a discourse upon the political welfare of God's American Israel, and as allusively prophetic of the future prosperity and splendour of the United States. Already does the new constellation of the United States begin to realize this glory. It has already risen to an acknowledged sovereignty among the republics and kingdoms of the world. And we have reason to hope, and I believe to expect, that God has still greater blessings in store for this vine which his own right hand hath planted, to make us "high among the nations in praise, and in name, and in honour."¹⁷

Stiles went on at great length to identify the reasons for his optimism about America's present and future preeminence, including the fact that "in our civil constitutions, those impediments are removed which obstruct the progress of society towards perfection."¹⁸ It's a long way from Winthrop's caution to Stiles' confidence, from an "Errand in the Wilderness" to "progress towards perfection." In Stiles' election sermon we can perceive God's New Israel becoming the Redeemer Nation. The destiny of the New Israel was to reach the pinnacle of perfection and to carry liberty and the gospel around the globe.

In tandem with this exaggerated vision of America's Destiny went an exaggerated vision of human capacity. In an increasingly confident and prosperous nation, it was difficult to avoid shifting the emphasis from divine sovereignty to human ability. Historian Conrad Cherry has succinctly summarized the change in perception of America's destiny: "Believing that she had escaped the wickedness of the Old World and the guilt of the past, God's New Israel would find it all too easy to ignore her vices and all too difficult to admit a loss of innocence."¹⁹

Among the realities this optimistic vision ignored was the presence of another, darker Israel:

America, America, foul and indelible is thy stain! Dark and dismal is the cloud that hangs over thee, for thy cruel wrongs and injuries to the fallen sons of Africa. The blood of her murdered ones cries to heaven for vengeance against Thee. . . . You may kill, tyrannize, and oppress as much as you choose, until our cry shall come up before the throne of God; for I am firmly persuaded, that he will not suffer you to quell the proud, fearless and undaunted spirits of the Africans forever; for in his own time, he is able to plead our cause against you, and to pour out upon you the ten plagues of Egypt.²⁰

So wrote Maria Stewart, a free black reform activist in Boston, in 1831. Her words were addressed to an America that projected itself as the probable site of the coming Millennium, Christ's thousand-year reign of peace and justice. From the perspective of slaves, and of free blacks like Maria Stewart, America was Egypt, and as long as she continued to enslave and oppress Black Israel, her destiny was in jeopardy. America stood under the judgment of God, and unless she repented, the death and destruction visited upon Biblical Egypt would be repeated here. The retribution envisaged was quite literal, as Mary Livermore, a white governess, discovered when she overheard a prayer uttered by Aggy, the slave housekeeper, whose daughter had just been brutally whipped by her master:

Thar's a day a comin'! Thar's a day a comin'. . . . I hear de rumblin' ob de chariots! I see de flashin' ob de guns! White folks' blood is a-runnin' on de ground like a riber, an' de dead's heaped up dat high! . . . Oh, Lor'! hasten de day when de blows, an' de bruises, an' de aches, an' de pains, shall come to de white folks, an' de buzzards shall eat 'em as dey's dead in de streets. Oh, Lor'! roll on de chariots, an' gib de black people rest an' peace.²¹

Nor did slaves share the exaggerated optimism of white Americans about human ability. Trapped in a system from which there seemed little, if any, possibility of deliverance by human actions, they emphasized trusting in the Lord instead of trusting in man. Sermon after sermon and prayer after prayer echoed the words that Moses spoke on the banks of the Red Sea: "Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord." Although the leaders of the three principal slave revolts—Gabriel Prosser in 1800, Denmark Vesey in 1822, and Nat Turner in 1831—all depended upon the Bible to justify and motivate rebellion, the Exodus story was used mainly to nurture internal resistance, not external revolution among the slaves.

The story of Exodus contradicted the claim made by white Christians that God intended Africans to be slaves. It seemed to prove that slavery

was against God's will and that slavery would inevitably end, although the when and the how remained hidden in Divine Providence. Christian slaves thus applied the Exodus story, whose end they knew, to their own experience of slavery, which had not yet ended, and so gave meaning and purpose to lives threatened by senseless and demeaning brutality. Exodus functioned as an archetypal myth for the slaves. The sacred history of God's liberation of his people would be or was being reenacted in the American South. A white Union Army chaplain working among freedmen in Decatur, Alabama, commented disapprovingly on the slaves' fascination with Exodus: "There is no part of the Bible with which they are so familiar as the story of the deliverance of Israel. Moses is their *ideal* of all that is high, and noble, and perfect, in man. I think they have been accustomed to regard Christ not so much in the light of a *spiritual* Deliverer, as that of a second Moses who would eventually lead *them* out of their prison-house of bondage."²²

Thus, in the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt, the slaves envisioned a future radically different from their present. In times of despair, they remembered Exodus and found hope enough to endure the enormity of their suffering. As a slave named Polly eloquently explained to her mistress, "We poor creatures have need to believe in God, for if God Almighty will not be good to us some day, why were we born? When I heard of his delivering his people from bondage, I know it means the poor Africans."²³

By appropriating the story of Exodus as their own story, black Christians articulated their own sense of peoplehood. Exodus symbolized their common history and common destiny. It would be hard to exaggerate the intensity of their identification with the children of Israel. A.M.E. pastor William Paul Quinn demonstrated how literal the metaphor of Exodus could become when he exhorted black Christians, "Let us comfort and encourage one another, and keep singing and shouting, great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of us. Come thou Great Deliverer, once more awake thine almighty arm, and set thy African captives free."²⁴ As Quinn's exhortation reveals, it was prayer and worship that made the identification seem so real. Sermons, prayers, and songs recreated in the imagination of successive generations the travail and triumph of Israel. Exodus became dramatically real, especially in the songs and prayer meetings of the slaves, who reenacted the story as they shuffled in the ring dance they called "the shout." In the ecstasy of worship, time and distance collapsed, and the slaves literally became the children of Israel. With the Hebrews, they traveled dry-shod through the Red Sea; they, too, saw Pharaoh's army "get drowned"; they stood beside Moses on Mount Pisgah and gazed out over the Promised Land; they crossed Jordan under Joshua and marched with him around the

walls of Jericho. Their prayers for deliverance resonated with the experiential power of these liturgical dramas.

Identification with Israel, then, gave the slaves a communal identity as a special, divinely favored people. This identity stood in stark contrast with racist propaganda, which depicted them as inferior to whites, as destined by nature and providence to the status of slaves. Exodus, the Promised Land, and Canaan were inextricably linked in the slaves' minds with the idea of freedom. Canaan referred not only to the condition of freedom but also to the territory of freedom—the North or Canada. As Frederick Douglass recalled, “A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of ‘O Canaan, sweet Canaan, / I am bound for the land of Canaan,’ something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the *North*, and the North was our Canaan.”²⁵ Slave owners, too, were well aware that the Exodus story could be a source of unflattering and even subversive analogies. It took no genius to identify Pharaoh's army in the slave song “My army cross ober, My army cross ober / O Pharaoh's army drowned.”

The slaves' faith that God would free them just as he had freed Israel of old was validated by Emancipation. “Shout the glad tidings o'er Egypt's dark sea / Jehovah has triumphed, his people are free!” the ex-slaves sang in celebration of freedom. But it did not take long for the freedmen to realize that Canaan Land still lay somewhere in the distance. “There must be no looking back to Egypt,” a band of refugee slaves behind Union lines were instructed by a slave preacher in 1862. “Israel passed forty years in the wilderness, because of their unbelief. What if we cannot see right off the green fields of Canaan, Moses could not. He could not even see how to cross the Red Sea. If we would have greater freedom of body, we must free ourselves from the shackles of sin. . . . We must snap the chain of Satan, and educate ourselves and our children.”²⁶

But as time went on and slavery was succeeded by other forms of racial oppression, black Americans seemed trapped in the wilderness no matter how hard they tried to escape. Former slave Charles Davenport voiced the despair of many when he recalled, “De preachers would exhort us dat us was de chillen o' Israel in de wilderness an' de Lord done sent us to take dis land o' milk and honey. But how us gwine-a take land what's already been took?”²⁷ When race relations reached a new low in the 1880s and 1890s, several black leaders turned to Africa as the black Promised Land. Proponents of emigration, such as Henry McNeal Turner, urged Afro-Americans to abandon the American wilderness for an African Zion. Few black Americans, however, heeded the call to emigrate to Africa; most continued to search for their Promised Land here. And as decade succeeded decade they repeated the story of Exodus,

which for so many years had kept their hopes alive. It was, then, a very old and evocative tradition that Martin Luther King, Jr., echoed in his last sermon:

We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. Like anybody I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've seen the Promised Land. And I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised land.²⁸

A period of over three hundred years stretches between John Winthrop's vision of an American Promised Land and that of Martin Luther King. The people whom Winthrop addressed long ago took possession of their Promised Land; the people whom King addressed still wait to enter theirs. For three centuries, white and black Americans have dwelt in the same land. For at least two of those centuries, they have shared the same religion. And yet, during all those years, their national and religious identities have been radically opposed. It need not have been so. After all, Winthrop's version of Exodus and King's were not so far apart. Both men understood that charity is the charter that gives title to the Promised Land. Both taught that mercy, gentleness, and justice are the terms for occupancy. Both believed that the conditions of the contract had been set by God, not by man. At times in our history, the two visions have nearly coincided, as they did in the antislavery stance of the early evangelicals, or in the abolitionist movement, or in Lincoln's profound realization that Americans were an "almost chosen people," or in the civil rights movement of our own era. Yet, despite these moments of coherence, the meaning of the Exodus story for America has remained fundamentally ambiguous. Is America Israel, or is she Egypt?

NOTES

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