

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: EXODUS: LITERARY MIGRATIONS OF  
AFRO-ATLANTIC AUTHORS, 1760-1903

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Doctor of Philosophy, 2007

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This dissertation analyzes Afro-Atlantic Exodus narratives that challenged slavery and racism throughout the African diaspora. Although many scholars have examined black writers' Exodus stories, none has explored the early development of these narratives from the mid-eighteenth to early twentieth centuries. My study of the extent to which Exodus stories pervade black literature supports my contention that their use is more complex than scholars have acknowledged.

Tracing the origins of American Exodus narratives to the Puritan tradition, I explore how Afro-Atlantic people from Briton Hammon who invokes the Joseph story in his 1760 *Narrative* to W. E. B. DuBois who appropriates the Joshua story in his 1903 *Souls of Black Folk* decenter and rewrite white Christians' Exodus narratives, characterizing themselves as one of God's people deserving of freedom and equality. Detailed examinations of the Joseph and Joshua stories are two of the missing components of this discussion; they provide the essential bookends of the story. Quite

simply, without an analysis of these narratives and the Moses story, any critique of this topic is incomplete and perhaps even misleading.

In contrast to white writers who create linear narratives that chart the Puritans' transatlantic Exodus from European communities to the promised land of the New World, black authors develop multi-layered, sophisticated stories to advance their cause for freedom and equality. I demonstrate this complexity through an analysis of the literary strategies they rely on to develop their Exodus stories. Afro-Atlantic writers include fissures—breaks in the chronology of the biblical story—to depict their many varied experiences. Women writers are responsible for some of the major fissures. Afro-Atlantic writers also conflate biblical and secular/republican discourse as they demand their rights as citizens. Rather than recapitulate the entire Exodus story, they select specific episodes to support their arguments. Finally, in their search for a safe home, they represent their promised land, both in America and abroad, as unstable. Ultimately, Afro-Atlantic writers create Exodus narratives that reflect their persistent, diverse, and competing efforts to achieve their racial uplift goals but the stories do not fulfill the promise of freedom and equality.

EXODUS:  
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By

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
2007

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Doctor of Philosophy

Dedication

For my parents

Earle B. and Naomi Williams Robinson

my first teachers

## Acknowledgements

I became interested in studying black Exodus narratives while reading Pauline Hopkins' *Winona* (1902) in "Racial Discourse at the Nadir," a seminar that Carla L. Peterson offered during my first semester of PhD studies. Hopkins' representation of Bleeding Kansas as a battle for a contested promised land piqued my interest and impelled me to research black Exodus stories in early African American literature. As I begin the process of transforming an idea into a dissertation, many scholars, family members, and friends offered support, advice, and encouragement. Professor Peterson, my advisor, taught me how to think like a literary scholar. Mary Helen Washington and John Ernest became mentors whose professionalism inspired me and commitment to my success sustained me. Robert S. Levine and Vincent Carretta, members of my oral exam and dissertation committees, posed questions that helped me refine my thinking and strengthen my perspective. Alfred Moss encouraged me during the early stages of my journey and offered his expertise in African American religious history to my project. Family, friends, and classmates believed in me and my work, and listened patiently as I talked out ideas. I am particularly grateful for my sister-friends Miki, Madeleine, and Margaret. And all along the way, William, my best friend and soul mate, enabled me to endure by sharing his wit, intellect, and joy.

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## Introduction: From Egypt to Canaan: An Afro-Atlantic Journey

And the LORD said, I have surely seen the affliction  
of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry  
by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows;  
And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand  
of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land  
unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing  
with milk and honey.  
—Exod. 3:7-8

Born into slavery in 1849, Jacob Stroyer grew up on the Singleton plantation near Columbia, South Carolina. After gaining his freedom at the end of the Civil War, Stroyer moved to Salem, Massachusetts, and eventually became a minister for the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. In *Sketches of My Life in the South, Part I* (1879), Stroyer details his experiences with slavery and describes the brutalities he witnessed. As he recalls how he obtained freedom, he invokes the story of Exodus to assert that the emancipation of American slaves came through divine intervention:

. . . thanks that the voice of the Lord was heard in the North, which said, “Go quickly to the South and let my prison-bound people go free, for I have heard their cries from cotton, corn and rice plantations, saying, how long before thou wilt come to deliver us from this chain?” and the Lord said to them, “Wait, I will send you John Brown who shall be the key to the door of your liberty, and I will harden the heart of Jefferson Davis, your devil, that I may show him and his followers my power; then shall I send you Abraham Lincoln, mine angel, who shall lead you from the land of bondage to the land of liberty.” Our fathers all died in “the wilderness,” but thank God, the children reached “the promised land.” (47)

Like the enslaved Israelites who pleaded with God to liberate them, enslaved African Americans prayed for divine deliverance in Stroyer’s black Exodus narrative. Instead of anointing a Mosaic leader for American slaves, however, Stroyer contends that God sends a white abolitionist and a US president to lead blacks to the border of the promised land. John Brown initiates their liberation from Jefferson Davis, whose strong

commitment to slavery compels Stroyer to characterize the Confederate president as a devil rather than as Pharaoh. Abraham Lincoln spearheads African American's wilderness journey, a Civil War in which thousands die while fighting for freedom. In both of these biblical and black Exodus narratives, however, the children of slaves enter the promised land.

Stroyer's reliance on the biblical story of Exodus exemplifies how Afro-Atlantic people embraced the story of God's emancipation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to chart their journey to freedom in the New World. The Exodus narrative, the central cultural narrative of the Afro-Atlantic community, resonated because it encouraged Afro-Atlantic peoples to remember the story and re-imagine themselves as free citizens in their adopted homelands. When the Israelites' departed from Egypt, God instructed them to commemorate their miraculous deliverance in an annual celebration called Passover. This feast reminded them that the Lord had passed over their blood-splattered doorposts on the night that He slew the first-born in every Egyptian household. During the Passover meal, the Jews ate bitter herbs that symbolized their oppressive Egyptian bondage, unleavened bread that recalled their hasty exit from Egypt, and roasted lamb that foreshadowed the sacrifice the Savior would make for their sins. In so doing, they affirmed their faith that God could deliver them from all troubles. Once each year, they paused to remember the event that enabled them to re-imagine themselves as a Jewish nation.

The book of Exodus does not refer only to this moment of liberation, however. It focuses on the Israelites' emancipation from slavery in Egypt, their wandering in the wilderness, and arrival at the border of the Promised Land. The books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy provide additional details about their forty-year journey.

Pinchas Lapide argues that Exodus “is the core of the entire Jewish tradition” (48). Old Testament writers mention this narrative more than any other event in Jewish history, and New Testament writers frequently reference the story as well. In *The Bible and History: How the Text Has Shaped the Times*, David W. Kling asserts, “According to biblical theologians, so central is the grand narrative of Exodus that the rest of the Bible is but commentary on this event” (199).

Yet the term “exodus” encompasses a broader story. Most scholars locate the beginning of this narrative in the first chapter of Exodus. I suggest that several verses, “And all the souls that came out of the loins of Jacob were seventy souls: for Joseph was in Egypt already. . . And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them. Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph” (*Study Bible*, Exod. 1:5-8), encourage us to begin with the Genesis account of Joseph’s enslavement in Egypt. Several verses in the last chapter of Deuteronomy, particularly “And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom; for Moses had laid his hands upon him: and the children of Israel hearkened unto him, and did as the LORD commanded Moses” (Deut. 34:9), bid us to consider Joshua’s recollections of Israel’s settlement in Canaan. Joseph’s story explains how the Israelites became slaves in Egypt; Joshua’s narrative recounts the Israelites’ entry into and conquest of the Promised Land.

Afro-Atlantic people appropriated the Exodus story to articulate their spiritual journey and advance their socio-political struggle. In *The Bible and African Americans: A Brief History*, Vincent L. Wimbush contends, “[The Bible] quickly came to function as a language-world, the storehouse of rhetorics, images, and stories that, through a complex

history of engagements, helped establish African Americans as *a circle of the biblical imaginary*” (4). Wimbush reminds us that the Bible was one of “the books,” a significant text that most Europeans were familiar with in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the New World, it was also a text that many knew, claimed as their own, and used to define themselves and others. As Afro-Atlantic people became acquainted with *the Book* and understood its importance, authority, and power, the Exodus story captured their attention. They did not see Exodus as a Jewish story; rather, they viewed it as a narrative that depicted God’s love for all oppressed populations and His willingness to intervene on their behalf. Afro-Atlantic people did not need a preacher to explain how the story related to their lives. They believed God not only performed miracles, but gave humans such as Joseph, Moses, and Joshua access to divine power to accomplish His will. The Exodus narrative reflected their struggles in the New World and revealed a way to shift the direction of their lives from slavery to freedom.

As Afro-Atlantic people embraced the Exodus narrative to retell their life stories, a distinct literary tradition emerged. This study argues that Briton Hammon’s appropriation of the Joseph story in his *Narrative of the Uncommon Experiences and Surprising Deliverances of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (1760) inaugurates the tradition and W. E. B. DuBois’s examination of Booker T. Washington as a potential Joshua in *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) marks the end of its initial phase. Although many scholars have examined Afro-Atlantic Exodus narratives, none has provided a comprehensive analysis of the early development of these stories. Most critical discussions omit the Joseph and Joshua narratives, which, I contend, provide the essential

bookends of Exodus. Quite simply, without an analysis of these two stories, any critique of the topic is incomplete, and perhaps even misleading.

While scholars have considered John Marrant's invocation of the Joseph story in his narrative, they have not yet fully explored it in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works such as Quobna Ottobah Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1787) or Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859). Studies of black authors' pre-twentieth century Joshua narratives are nonexistent. Critics have also neglected many lesser-known writers that I include in my dissertation, for example, black abolitionist Robert Harlan and Ebenezer James, a contributor to the *North Star*. A critique of these texts illustrates a greater depth and intricacy of Afro-Atlantic Exodus narratives that cannot be fully accounted for by focusing solely on major writers such as Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, Frances E. W. Harper, Absalom Jones, Maria W. Stewart, and David Walker. My examination of the pervasiveness of black Exodus stories in the mid-eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries supports my contention that their use was far more complex than scholars have acknowledged.

By appropriating the Exodus story, Afro-Atlantic people posit themselves as protagonists in a major narrative of the New World. As Wimbush asserts, "[T]he Bible was the single most important *centering* object for social identity and orientation among European dominants" (4, my emphasis). White Christians repeatedly turned to the Book of Exodus as they traveled to the New World to escape religious persecution in England, fought for civil liberty during the American Revolution, engaged in a civil war over states' rights and slavery, and finally sought ways to integrate European immigrants into

American society. When Afro-Atlantic writers appeal to Exodus, they *decenter* the narrative by giving different roles to Europeans and new meanings to English and American Exodus experiences. In using the word “decenter,” I follow the lead of George Aichele and other scholars who argue that “ideological critique serves as an important critical tool for *decentering* the reading subject and the subject matter being read. This means first recognizing the privileged identification made between the reader’s interest and the narrative and then deliberately shifting that identification to allow for the text to be a text ‘for’ another reader and reading experience” (286). Through the reading of literary texts, ideological critique challenges binary definitions of oppressed-oppressor and uncovers power structures by exposing authority figures and bringing once marginalized people into view.

As I examine the ways that Afro-Atlantic authors decenter and rewrite Europeans’ and white Americans’ Exodus narratives, my first concern is to understand the influences of historical, political, and religious events and experiences on their embrace of the Exodus story from the mid-eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. As Afro-Atlantic people moved from slavery to freedom, their experiences mirrored the varied events of Exodus, particularly the Israelites’ forty-year wilderness journey.

In the Bible, however, Exodus is a linear story: slavery in Egypt, sojourn in the wilderness, and settlement in Canaan. New England Puritan writing follows a similar linear pattern: God had rescued them from religious bondage in England, protected them during wilderness wanderings on their transatlantic journey, and then enabled them to establish lasting communities in the New World, their promised land. In contrast, given their forced transportation to the New World as slaves, most Afro-Atlantic people viewed

America, Europeans' promised land, as Egypt. As they invoked the Exodus narrative to transform their Egypt into Canaan, they discovered that their experiences exceeded the representational boundaries of white Exodus narratives. Their writings raise and attempt to answer a series of questions. Could they have a Joseph experience? Would any slaves receive favor from their captors as Joseph and Moses had from the Egyptians? Who was Pharaoh? Were slave states their only Egypt? Would a simple Moses figure arise to lead all slaves to freedom? Could a woman be Moses? What role would women play in their Exodus stories? Would they become undisciplined and disobedient like the liberated Israelites after they were emancipated? Could Mosaic laws be used to justify slavery? Would they have to cross a Red Sea to leave Egypt and a Jordan River to enter Canaan? Where was their promised land? Would they need a Joshua when they reached their Canaan? If they reached their promised land, would they experience freedom and equality? Who would write their Exodus stories? Would writing their Exodus narratives help them accomplish their goals?

\* \* \*

### **The American Exodus Story: God's New and Old Israel**

As Europeans colonists and enslaved and free Afro-Atlantic people embraced the Exodus story, two distinct narratives emerged. In "African Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel," Albert J. Raboteau asserts that

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 New Israel; slaves [and free blacks] identified themselves as the Old. (81)

Historical, cultural, and political events encouraged “New Israel” and “Old Israel” to create distinct Exodus narratives that reflected each community’s yearning for freedom and a place to call home. In *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity*, Sylvester A. Johnson argues, “From being the American ‘city on a hill’ to the decidedly white supremacist notions of Manifest Destiny to black antislavery themes of Exodus toward freedom, the social forms of participation in American religious identity have been overwhelmingly contingent upon self-understanding tied to the Israelitic narrative of being people of God—God’s Israel” (1).

White authors seldom recognized blacks as participants in their national Exodus narratives. Puritans who traveled to the New World prior to the advent of the Atlantic slave trade had left England to escape religious persecution. They undertook their journey into the wilderness to establish a model Christian society in a new promised land. Their embrace of the Exodus story is not surprising since British Puritans had earlier invoked the biblical narrative to inspire their citizenry to political action: Oliver Cromwell to justify overthrowing the monarchy during the British Civil War, and John Dryden to encourage British subjects to support their king during the Restoration (Schwartz 58). For their part, New World Puritans believed their journey was providentially ordained and trusted God to enable them to build prosperous colonies from which they could spread Christianity throughout the world (Cherry 26). From the moment they entered the New World, Europeans constructed their identity through the creation of “official stories,” narratives that identified them as God’s people. In *Constituting America: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form*, Priscilla Wald argues that these stories “surface in the rhetoric of nationalistic movements and initiatives—legal, political, and literary . . . .

Neither static nor monolithic, they change in response to competing narratives of the nation that must be engaged, absorbed and retold: the fashioning and endless refashioning of ‘a people’” (2).

John Winthrop, leader of their Massachusetts Bay colony, wrote one of the first “official stories, “A Modell of Christian Charity” (1630), a sermon he composed on the *Arbella* during his transatlantic journey. Winthrop admonishes his passengers to enter a covenant with God in which they pledge to exhibit love, charity, and justice in a promised land that rich and poor will inhabit. In the closing paragraph of the sermon, he invokes Moses’ farewell address to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 30 to teach his brethren what they must do to build their new “City upon a Hill”:

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 keep his Commaundements and his Ordinace, 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 go to possesse it; But if our heartes shall turne away soe that wee will not obey, but shall be seduced and worship . . . other Gods . . . wee shall surely perishe out of the good Land whither wee passe over this vast Sea to possesse it. . . . (41)

Moses had encouraged the Israelites to obey God as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. Similarly, Winthrop warns his brethren that love and faithfulness are the only means of obtaining God’s blessings for their new community. Because the Puritans were familiar with the tragic consequences of the Israelites’ unfaithfulness to God, they had a greater incentive to follow Winthrop’s admonitions.

Within thirty years, however, the colonists began to exhibit traits that many writers interpreted as a betrayal of their covenant. In “God’s Controversy with New England” (1662), Michael Wigglesworth laments that “Pride, and Luxurie/ Debate, Deceit, Contention, and Strife/False-dealing, Covetousness, Hypocrisie/(With such like

Crimes) amongst them are so rife” that God sends a drought to punish the colonists, the same punishment the Israelites had experienced after they worshiped other gods (47). During the First Great Awakening (1730-80), prominent Protestant ministers such as Jonathan Edwards, Theodorus Frelinghuysen, Gilbert Tennent, and George Whitefield renewed the colonists’ vision of themselves as occupants of a promised land and models of Christianity for the world to emulate. Whitefield encouraged his listeners to imagine themselves as Israelites liberated from “. . . Egyptian bondage, and marching under the conduct of our spiritual Joshua, through the wilderness of this world, to the land of our heavenly Canaan” (qtd. in Potkay and Burr 10).

As the American settlements grew into a loose federation of colonies, however, writers dramatically shifted the focus of the national Exodus narrative from a story rooted in Christian love and trust in divine power to one motivated by arrogance and self-confidence. The success of the American Revolution inspired colonists to adopt “more active and aggressive virtues” and “celebrate their own achievements as a nation” (Raboteau, “African Americans” 82). Colonial orators turned to the Exodus narrative to posit themselves as Israelites enslaved to King George III, their English Pharaoh. The American victory over England prompted Benjamin Franklin to suggest a drawing of “Moses lifting his hand and the Red Sea dividing, with Pharaoh in his chariot being overwhelmed by the waters, and with the motto in great popular favor at the time, ‘Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God’” for the US Seal. Thomas Jefferson recommended “a representation of the children of Israel in the wilderness, led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night” (qtd. in Cherry 65). Prominent New England preachers Ezra Stiles and Samuel Langdon contributed to this national exodus narrative

by characterizing the nation as “God’s American Israel” and “God’s New Israel,” and boasting that the young republic had become the most prosperous nation in the world. Cherry concludes, “Believing that it 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 its own shortcomings and all too difficult to admit a loss of innocence” (66). The nation’s shortcomings and loss of innocence included its decision to allow the institution of slavery to flourish. As white Americans continued to experiment with “democracy” in their promised land of the United States, they increasingly oppressed black Americans, confining them to an Egypt experience in the young republic.

While most Europeans arrived in the New World with some knowledge of the Exodus narrative, few Africans had heard the biblical story and they were initially uninterested in the Christianity that missionaries sought to impose on them. In *Black Yankees: The Development of An Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England*, William D. Piersen asserts that planters had originally opposed and discouraged the proselytizing of slaves. Some believed that Africans were not intelligent enough to grasp biblical concepts that were essential for salvation, while others looked upon slaves as inferior beings unworthy of redemption. A few feared that the education and status that accompanied Christianity would make slaves proud, shrewd, and rebellious (50). Even if slaveholders had supported these evangelistic efforts, the early version of Christianity offered by missionaries did not necessarily appeal to enslaved men and women. According to Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood in *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830*, slaves were extremely suspicious of missionaries, who frequently positioned themselves as

racially and spiritually superior to their converts. Furthermore, language barriers prevented effective communication between slaves and missionaries, as well as among slaves who often did not share the same dialect (80-83).

The First Great Awakening introduced slaves to the language-world of the Bible and changed many slave owners' and Africans' attitudes toward Christianity. Believing that religion would make bondsmen and women better servants, and assured by church authorities in England that religion could save slaves' souls but not free them from bondage, masters encouraged their slaves to accept Christianity (Mitchell 26). Prominent Protestant evangelists embarked on emotionally charged preaching tours, promising converts that hierarchies based on social standing, wealth, and power were irrelevant for Christians: “. . . From the religion of the slaveholders itself, slaves were discovering a faith that, in the midst of involuntary servitude, gave a measure of purpose to their lives” (Noll, *History of Christianity* 103-08). For example, Whitefield broke with the conventional preaching style of his day by instituting altar calls at the end of his sermons and encouraging the laity to perform tasks such as Bible studies normally reserved for ministers (Noll, *America's God* 76). Whitefield's message of a personal experience with God resonated with blacks, especially as evangelists shifted emphasis from the intellectual catechisms of Calvinism to the emotional expressions of evangelical Christianity offered by Methodists and Baptists. In *Black Church Beginnings: The Long Hidden Realities of the First Years*, Henry H. Mitchell argues, “The ecstasy experienced in traditional slave worship could now be publicly affirmed as authentically Christian at the same time” (37).

In the 1790s, Presbyterian ministers and itinerant Baptist and Methodist preachers issued an open appeal for everyone to experience spiritual conversion and laid the groundwork for a new spiritual revival that further would transform the lives of black and white Americans. In 1801, they reaped the reward of their labor when more than 10,000 believers gathered at the Cane Ridge, Kentucky, camp meeting to listen to black and white preachers electrify crowds with stirring sermons. The camp meeting helped inaugurate the Second Great Awakening, whose impact would last until the Civil War (Noll, *History of Christianity* 166-67). This religious revival reintroduced an evangelical form of Christianity to the nation that gave blacks even greater access to the biblical language-world, while simultaneously strengthening the rhetoric for biblically based, pro-slavery arguments and racism that presented slavery as a divinely ordained institution.

Renewed interest in Christianity led blacks to biblically based social activism. Before 1800, some slaves had begun attending church with their masters, while others worshiped in separate “African” churches or participated in secret religious services led by itinerant black preachers. As early as 1764, congregations were established in the South for or by slaves and free blacks, but slaveholders or white governing boards often exerted a strong influence over their operation (Mitchell 62-66). In the late 1700s, black Christians in the North began to establish Episcopalian, Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches and exercise autonomy over their congregations (Raboteau, “African Americans” 79). African American churches grew even faster after Richard Allen led black Methodists and Episcopalians to organize the first black denomination in 1816, the AME Church, to address the spiritual and political needs of blacks who white Christians had forced out of their churches.

In England, the reception of Christianity by Africans was markedly different from that of black Americans. The First Great Awakening extended to England, but people of African descent who lived in Great Britain did not need a religious revival to make Christianity and the Exodus story attractive to them. Indeed, Africans transported to England as slaves or servants embraced Christianity more readily than did their American counterparts. Often Afro-British slaves learned to read and write, and received some formal education. They found Great Britain's religious community more welcoming than the one Afro-Atlantic people encountered in the Americas, although this did not necessarily guarantee freedom or alleviate oppression. In *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century: Living the New Exodus in England and the Americas*, Adam Potkay and Sandra Burr maintain: "During the period in which [Afro-British writers] Gronnoisaw, Marrant, Cugoano and Equiano lived and composed, Methodism remained a movement and society within the Church of England, and . . . it generally stood fast in its opposition to slavery and in its acceptance of Black participants" (5). Two of the first rituals that many newly freed Afro-British Christians underwent were baptism and adoption of an English name. Like white converts, they were required to testify of their conversion before a congregation who determined if the new believers had experienced true religion.

As Afro-Atlantic people began accepting Christianity during the eighteenth century, nearly everyone underestimated the far-reaching effects their conversion would have on their communities and the institution of slavery in American and European colonies. When African Christians entered the biblical language-world, they discovered the Exodus narrative, a story that revealed how God had liberated slaves and provided a

safe home for them. Identification with the Israelites brought Afro-Atlantic people the promise of emancipation and elevation through divine intervention. As they invoked the Exodus narrative, however, no Moses appeared to unite slaves and free blacks, and demand that British kings and American presidents outlaw slavery and lift slaves from degradation. And no promised land loomed on the horizon where former slaves and their brethren could enjoy freedom and equality.

Nevertheless, from 1760 to 1903, Afro-Atlantic authors appropriated the Exodus narrative to demand freedom and civil rights in the New World and England. Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, Maria Stewart, and Harriet Tubman joined hundreds of lesser known writers and activists in anointing themselves or others as Moses figures who would guide their brethren to various promised lands. Early nineteenth-century activists like Gabriel and Absalom Jones embraced the biblical story to build free black communities in the United States, while others, among them Mary Ann Shadd, Daniel Coker, Martin Delany, and Denmark Vesey, invoked the story as a call for an exodus to foreign Canaans. David Walker appropriated the narrative in his radical 1829 *Appeal* to urge blacks throughout the world to unite and fight their oppressors. Somewhat later, Frances E. W. Harper embraced Moses as a model for all Americans to emulate in order to build an inclusive society. These and other prominent black authors and activists represent only a fraction of the writers who appropriated the Exodus story in their works.

Scholars studying the Exodus story still have a limited perception of its complexity of the Exodus narratives in the writings of Europeans, white Americans, and Afro-Atlantic people. Those who have examined national Exodus stories confine their

focus mostly to white writers. In *God's New Israel*, Cherry traces the development of the stories from the sermons of Puritan John Winthrop to the contemporary feminist teachings of Rosemary Radford Ruether. He argues that colonists laid the foundation for national narratives in which white Christians constituted themselves as Israelites, and entered into a covenant with God that required obedience, benevolence, and evangelism as conditions for prosperity. Cherry fails fully to address the development of black Exodus narratives in American history, however, and only includes excerpts from the writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X in his discussion.

Other scholars have stressed how the Exodus narrative can fuel a people's desire for conquest. In *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, Regina M. Schwartz argues that the Exodus story offers two perspectives: a dispossessed people who long to inhabit a land filled with milk and honey through the divine intervention of God, or a conquering people who displace and destroy others, and take their land under the guise of divine will (57). She joins George Aichele in reminding us that scholars who analyze Exodus narratives often omit certain social groups from their discussions: Native Americans and Palestinians who identify themselves as Canaanites, and poor people of Latin America and blacks in South Africa whom liberation theologians identify as enslaved Israelites (153).

In turn, scholars who analyze black Exodus narratives rarely acknowledge the existence of parallel white Exodus stories. In "'Go Down, Moses': Exodus in the African American Experience," a chapter in *The Bible in History: How the Texts have Changed the Times*, David Kling provides an overview of black Americans' appropriations of the biblical narrative from the eighteenth century to the present, but focuses on canonical

texts and reinforces traditional themes, for example, the recurrence of Exodus imagery in Negro spirituals. In *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans*, Albert J. Raboteau follows a similar path, while emphasizing the centrality of the Exodus narrative in helping black Christians see themselves as God's people and claim equal access to the rights and privileges that white Americans enjoy. In *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*, Wilson Jeremiah Moses examines Mosaic leaders, but restricts his in-depth analysis to Booker T. Washington. In *The Talking Book: African-Americans and the Bible*, Dwight Callahan includes a chapter on Exodus in his discussion of important biblical narratives in African American culture from slavery to the present. He offers several new insights, suggesting, for example, that blacks did not embrace the Joseph story because none could experience a similar elevation from slave to government official in European and American slave societies. Callahan also suggests the idea of failed Exodus narratives but provides little analysis of texts. Other scholars have examined the writings of eighteenth-century Afro-Atlantic authors who employ the Exodus story. In *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century: Living the New Exodus in England and the Americas*, a collection of works by Cugoana, Equiano, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, and John Marrant, Adam Potkay and Sandra Burr briefly analyze these authors' identification of themselves as Israelites seeking a place within Christian communities in the New World and England.

A few scholars have conducted more in-depth studies of black Exodus narratives, but they have limited their focus to manifestations of the Moses tradition in specific periods omitting consideration of non-American writers. In *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*, for example, Eddie S. Glaude, Jr.,

examines the political ramifications of blacks' embrace of Exodus for community building in the mid-nineteenth century. Glaude explains, "My intention is to explore the ways the [Exodus] story became a source for a particular use of nation language among African Americans as well as a metaphorical framework for understanding the Middle Passage, enslavement, and quests for emancipation . . ." (1). Glaude embraces Wimbush's concept of a biblical language-world, expanding its use to encompass the nation building that took place in the black community during the 1830s and 1840s, and arguing that this has been absent from conversations about African American nationhood. He also acknowledges the extent to which black writers challenged the national Exodus narrative during this period. Although Glaude's work is an important contribution to this discussion, his focus reinforces the common linkage of Moses leading the Israelites in their miraculous departure from Egypt to African Americans seeking various male "Moses" figures to lead them in their quest for nationhood in the United States, their promised land. While Glaude acknowledges Maria W. Stewart's contributions, he does not adequately address the influence of black women on the development of Afro-Atlantic Exodus stories. Nor does Glaude address black writers' embrace of the Joseph narrative, particularly in the work of Episcopal minister Absalom Jones, whose 1808 *Thanksgiving Sermon* Glaude discusses.

### **Afro-Atlantic Exodus Stories**

Scholars traditionally locate the origins of Afro-Atlantic Exodus stories in the First Great Awakening. In contrast, I argue that an analysis of Atlantic Creoles' experiences enables us to place black Exodus stories within a wider historical and cultural framework. Atlantic Creole life in European colonies clearly mirrors the Joseph

experience, yet scholars have not found any texts in which a member of this group embraces the Joseph story. This is due, in part, to the fact that many Africans who were transported to the Americas were uninterested in Christianity, a religion that viewed Africans as a cursed people best suited for servitude.

Ira Berlin and other historians define Atlantic Creoles as children born of relationships between European traders and African women in settlements established by the Dutch and Portuguese along Africa's Gold Coast in the early seventeenth century. In *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves*, Berlin describes Atlantic Creoles as Euro-Africans ". . . whose swarthy skin, European dress and deportment, acquaintance with local norms, and multilingualism gave them an insider's knowledge of both African and European ways but denied them full acceptance in either" (25). Despite their tenuous status, however, some became wealthy and powerful by substituting skill and savvy for ancestral heritage.

Although their encounters with Europeans in Africa enabled Atlantic Creoles to carve out a space for themselves, like Joseph in Egypt their positions in European settlements did not protect them in the volatile world of slave trading. Joseph's master, Potiphar, imprisoned his faithful slave when his wife falsely accused Joseph of rape. Similarly, "debt, crime, immorality, or official disfavor [meant] enslavement" for Atlantic Creoles (Berlin 29). Yet, those who fell into disfavor seldom ended up West Indian or South American plantations, for their intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the slave system rendered them likely insurrectionists. Instead, European merchants traded them to early settlers in British colonies such as Virginia and New York. According to Berlin, the names of these Atlantic Creoles provide evidence that they were

not subjected to the “seasoning” that thousands of Africans experienced when they arrived in colonial slave societies. Atlantic Creoles with names like Anthony Portuguese, Van St. Thomas, Carla Criole, Jan Creoli, Jan Angola, Anthony the Turk, and Christofel Crioell were among the earliest colonial residents (32-33). Just as Joseph retained a connection to his culture by keeping his Hebrew name throughout his Egyptian experience, these Atlantic Creole names suggest a distinct Afro-European heritage rather than a master’s sign of ownership or dehumanization conveyed by names such as “Pug” or “Caesar” that were given to later slaves. After completing their requisite years of service, some Atlantic Creoles became prosperous property owners and wed European women in the colonies, echoing the experience of Joseph who married an Egyptian woman after Pharaoh freed him from prison. Neither Joseph nor the Atlantic Creoles were powerful enough, however, to prevent their descendants from being enslaved.

Like Joseph of biblical times, who acted as an intercessor for his people when they moved to Egypt, these outcasts of Africa eventually emerged as the primary multi-lingual intermediaries between African merchants and European traders. They not only bridged the gap between two disparate worlds but worked as sailors, shipboard servants, interpreters, and even as emissaries to foreign lands (Berlin 24). These “charter generations” were men and women “. . . who did not arrive in the New World as deracinated chattels stripped of their past and without the resources to meet the future” (32). Familiarity with both the language and the lifestyle of European slave traders and explorers eased the Atlantic Creoles’ transition into colonial life and created a space for members of future generations to have a Joseph experience in the New World.

After blacks embraced Christianity during the First Great Awakening and began to record their Exodus narratives in writing, however, they adapted popular literary genres and responded to important historical moments. In the eighteenth century, writers like Equiano and Cugoana model their narratives on hybrid texts that emphasize spiritual and personal growth through captivity, forced migration, and travel. Afro-Atlantic authors in the United States reflect on the phenomenal growth and changes that are occurring in the young republic. In the mid-nineteenth century, for example, black authors write Exodus stories that advocate temperance and women's rights reform. In England and America, the underlying Exodus theme of God liberating His people from slavery and oppression and providing a home in a promised land repeatedly compels black writers to embrace the biblical story to articulate their desire for freedom and a safe home.

In contrast to the biblical account, however, Afro-Atlantic authors were unable to develop a cohesive Black Exodus narrative, for they were confronted with obstacles and challenges in the New World experiences. While the British began discussing elimination of the slave trade and slavery throughout the empire in the late eighteenth century, Americans only offered gradual emancipation to slaves living in northern states after the Revolutionary War. Thus, black Americans found themselves fighting a dual battle for abolition and civil liberties. In the early nineteenth century, white Americans revived the colonization movement, forcing a wedge between blacks who advocated joining transatlantic expeditions to West Africa, and those who labeled the movement racist and vowed never to abandon their American promised land. By the mid-nineteenth century, a series of laws inaugurated by the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act made transforming

the United States into a home for blacks increasingly difficult and deepened the rift between emigrationists and assimilationists. After the Civil War, emancipation did not diminish black Americans' struggles; Reconstruction failed and plunged the community into a nadir during which black leaders alternately rejected and embraced the Exodus story. Their fragmented narratives sustained their struggles, but did not enable them to accomplish their goals.

Pivotal historical events contributed to the fragmentation of Afro-Atlantic Exodus narratives by influencing authors to choose specific episodes of the biblical story to represent specific needs at any given time. The book of Exodus narrates the Israelites' journey from slavery in Egypt to the border of the Promised Land; Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy provide additional details about their journey through the wilderness. In their narratives, Afro-Atlantic writers characterize their people variously as enslaved or emancipated Israelites, or as in Egypt, the wilderness, or Canaan. In the early 1800s, for example, free blacks and slaves envision themselves as emancipated Israelites who have attained the promised land. In his *Thanksgiving Sermon* (1808), Absalom Jones portrays free black Philadelphians celebrating Passover and the festival of first fruits in Canaan to commemorate the 1808 legislation outlawing the transatlantic slave trade. Twelve years later Daniel Coker published a *Journal* in which he characterizes himself as a Moses mediating disputes between black emigrants and American Colonization Society agents on their transatlantic Exodus to West Africa. By the mid-nineteenth century, many activists had begun to invoke the Moses story to anoint themselves or others as Mosaic leaders. Scholars like Robert S. Levine in *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass and the Politics of Representation* have analyzed the rivalry between Frederick Douglass and

Martin Delany for Mosaic leadership; Mary Ann Shadd, Henry Highland Garnet, James T. Holly, and others also aspired to be the black community's Moses in the 1840s and 1850s. During the Civil War, some black writers characterized Abraham Lincoln as a Mosaic figure while others identified him as Pharaoh because of his initial support of colonization, prohibition of blacks in Union Army service, and refusal to emancipate the slaves. Focusing on specific episodes of the Exodus narrative allows black authors to articulate the individual and collective struggles particular to their time and place.

Afro-Atlantic writers also create fissures—breaks in the chronology of the Exodus story—to represent their communities' diverse experiences and needs. Unlike the Israelites, African Americans did not experience a grand exodus of all slaves from Egypt and migration to a promised land. Before the Revolutionary War, blacks cast the nation as Egypt since it was a slave society. Fissures thus emphasize the difficulties of a journey devoid of divine intervention, clear leadership, and singular goals. In the late 1700s when northern states began emancipating their slaves, most people of African descent viewed the North as a promised land, but some slaves in the South, notably participants in Gabriel's Conspiracy and Denmark Vesey's Revolt, characterize themselves as emancipated Israelites defrauded of their freedom who fight to reclaim their liberty or emigrate to the Canaan of their choice. Other writers locate their black Exodus narratives in the beginning of the biblical story. For example, during Reconstruction William Hannibal Thomas writes an article for the *AME Church Review* in which he describes blacks who are struggling to establish themselves as Joseph figures languishing in the prison of uncertainty, despite their heroic contributions to the Civil War, and needing a Moses-inspired exodus from their difficulties.

Black women writers embrace Moses as a model for female leadership and exemplary citizenship but they also produce fissures in their Exodus narratives. In 1859, Harriet E. Wilson creates a major fissure in *Our Nig* by identifying herself as a Joseph figure at a time when most writers are invoking the Moses story to fuel the assimilation versus emigration debate. During the same period, Frances Harper questions the very existence of Mosaic leaders in her essay “Our Greatest Want” (1859) even though numerous activists have anointed themselves as Moses and attempted to direct community uplift initiatives. Nevertheless, many women writers and activists, for example, Maria Stewart and Harriet Tubman, emulated Moses to liberate slaves and work in their communities. Tubman is recognized as the central female Mosaic figure in black Exodus narratives. Stories about her trips to Eastern Shore Maryland to lead slaves to freedom have mesmerized school children and intrigued scholars. Kate Clifford Larson in *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* and Jean M. Humez in *Harriet Tubman: The Life and Life Stories* provide insight into Tubman’s life as a slave and work as Moses. Other scholars have examined additional women’s contributions to the Mosaic story tradition, notably Harper in her essays, fiction, and poetry, and Stewart in her speeches and writings. But all of them isolate black women from the larger discussions about Afro-Atlantic Exodus stories and thus minimize the significance of their appropriations of the Exodus narrative. My study places black women’s writings and activism within their historical contexts to provide a better understanding of the perspectives of female activists who select male role models from the Exodus narrative, rather than women like Miriam, to make themselves visible in the male-dominated activist community.

Because Afro-Atlantic people's journey toward freedom could not replicate the Exodus story, authors frequently double Exodus figures with other biblical figures, for example, David, Daniel, Christ, or Paul, to represent the complexity of their experiences. In his "Sketch of the Life and Character of David Walker" (1848), Henry Highland Garnet presents Walker as a David figure who slings his *Appeal* at slaveholding Goliaths, and then doubles this figure with the Moses story to posit Walker as a rejected community activist. In "What to the Slave is the 4<sup>th</sup> of July?" (1852), Frederick Douglass presents himself as a Mosaic leader for America and then doubles the story of Moses leading the Israelites with that of Christ chastising hypocritical Pharisees to admonish white Christian Americans who revered colonists because they had revolted for independence but refused to emancipate slaves. By doubling Exodus figures with other prominent biblical figures, Afro-Atlantic writers challenge the simplistic representations of themselves as helpless and undeserving, and whites as God's American Israelites by creating complex characterizations of their experiences as outsiders in the New World.

In their narratives, Afro-Atlantic writers also develop the tactic of conflating biblical and secular/republican discourses to assert black humanity, and demand equality and citizenship. From Quobna Cugoana in his 1787 *Thoughts and Sentiments* in which he cast himself as a Joseph figure who forgives Africans and the British for their participation in the slave trade to W. E. B. DuBois in his 1903 *Souls of Black Folk*, in which he characterizes Booker T. Washington as a Joshua who could spearhead African Americans' struggle for civil rights in the early twentieth century, Afro-Atlantic authors invoke Enlightenment concepts of freedom, equality, and political and civil liberties to reveal how an ancient story illuminates and complicates contemporary issues. But they

were unable to achieve socio-political gains like their oppressors who successfully relied on similar techniques to constitute themselves as God's New Israel, win a revolution, establish their republic, expand their territory, defend or eliminate slavery, and create laws that oppressed blacks.

I examine the early development of Afro-Atlantic Exodus narratives from 1760 to 1903 in the following chapters:

Chapter 1, "Exodus and Afro-Atlantic Josephs: Providence, Performativity, and the Politics of Freedom in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World, 1760-1800," analyzes black writers' revisions of the eighteenth-century Joseph plot that had been popularized by prominent British writers to claim natural and civil rights in the Atlantic world. As Afro-Atlantic authors begin to publish narratives for predominately Christian audiences, they highlight the spiritual component of their experiences to connect with their readers. Briton Hammon in his *Narrative* (1760), Phillis Wheatley in her "Letter to Rev. Samson Occum" (1774), John Marrant in *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* (1785), Quobna Cugoano in *Thoughts and Sentiments* (1787), and Olaudah Equiano in *The Interesting Narrative* (1789) enact the role of Joseph figures who are providentially delivered from sin or slavery and reflect the intellectual and spiritual transformation slaves and free blacks could experience in England and the Americas.

Chapter 2, "Exodus as the Blueprint for Building Free Black Communities in America and Abroad, 1800-1840," explores how the colonists' success in the American Revolution and the emergence of a prosperous young republic leads African Americans to embrace Exodus as a blueprint for building free black communities in the United

States and abroad. Absalom Jones and Gabriel's co-conspirators invoke the story as they work to establish communities in the United States, while Daniel Coker and Denmark Vesey turn to the narrative to advocate emigration to black promised lands. Abolitionists and black newspaper editors publish stories by writers who rely on Exodus to challenge slavery and advocate reform, and promote Mosaic leaders, notably David Walker and Maria W. Stewart. Because the community cannot agree on a common blueprint, Afro-Atlantic Exodus stories exhibit increasing signs of discontinuity.

Chapter 3, "'Where is our promised land?': Mosaic Leaders Advocate Assimilation or Emigration in the First Nadir, 1840-1861," considers how setbacks—westward expansion, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, the 1857 Dred Scott decision, and "scientific" racism—lead to the publication of multiple, competing Afro-Atlantic Exodus narratives as Mosaic leaders separate into assimilationist and emigrationist factions. Some authors reject Mosaic leadership, and instead embrace the Joseph and Joshua stories in order to address the needs of slaves, indentured servants, and everyday citizens.

Chapter 4, "Exodus, the Civil War, and Reconstruction: From Egypt to the Border of Canaan, an American Journey, 1861-1877," analyzes the Civil War's influence on African American activists and their northern supporters, including Henry Highland Garnet, Lewis Hayden, Frances Harper, Owen Lovejoy, John S. Rock, and Joseph A. Seiss, as they create a national Exodus narrative for both white and black citizens featuring Abraham Lincoln as the slaves' emancipator and savior of the Union. The failure of Reconstruction under the leadership of Andrew Johnson leads to the disintegration of this fragile national narrative into parallel black and white Exodus

stories. As a result, African Americans reappropriate the biblical narrative to reformulate blacks' struggle for citizenship and search for new leadership during their protracted journey to the promised land of United States.

Chapter 5, “‘Get away, Jordan, there’s one more river to cross’: African Americans at the Second Nadir, 1877-1903,” analyzes black Exodus narratives in an era when the rise in lynching, legalization of segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and proliferation of black codes unleash a new wave of despair in the black community. Writers produce an array of unstable Exodus stories in which they variously describe the United States as Egypt and/or the promised land, and invoke the Joseph, Moses, and Joshua stories to present leadership models for a people who are losing faith in the power of the Exodus narrative to help them gain equality in a nation that has outlawed slavery but legalized racism.

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In 1879, Jacob Stroyer may have felt as if he had entered the promised land of Massachusetts after enduring the brutality of slavery in South Carolina. But the nation had not yet become a promised land for black citizens. From 1760 to 1903, the Exodus narrative met the varied needs of a community of slaves and free blacks who relied on an arsenal of narrative strategies, rhetorical devices, and practical tools to map paths from slavery and oppression to emancipation and equality. The biblical story of Exodus enabled them to express the complexities of their lives in nations that sought to reduce them to slaves or second-class citizens. They pieced together stories, carefully selecting specific episodes of the Exodus narrative, and then augmenting these with episodes of other stories from the Bible or secular history to articulate their experiences and demands.

Through diverse invocations of a biblical narrative that embodied their hope for civil liberties and a safe home, Afro-Atlantic authors repeatedly confronted obstacles that blocked the paths to their varied promised lands, believing an Exodus experience would one day be theirs.

## Chapter 1: Afro-Atlantic Josephs: Providence, Performativity, and the Politics of Freedom in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World, 1760-1800

But as for you, ye thought evil against me;  
but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass,  
as it is this day, to save much people alive.  
—Gen. 50:20

I may say with Joseph, as he did with respect to the evil intent of his brethren, when they sold him into Egypt, that whatever evil intentions and bad motives those insidious robbers had in carrying me away from my native country and friends, I trust, was what the Lord intended for my good.  
—Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments* (1787)

When the First Great Awakening swept through the American colonies and England in the mid-1700s, enslaved and free Afro-Atlantic people began to hear stories of miraculous deliverances of God's people in the Bible. The Exodus narrative, which chronicles Israel's entrance into Egypt, liberation from slavery, and settlement in the Promised Land, especially engaged their attention, for it provided language that enabled them to articulate their desire for emancipation and equality in an alien land.<sup>1</sup> Others embraced the story of Joseph, the first Israelite to become an Egyptian bondsman, but then who rose to prominence in the land of his captors.

Afro-Atlantic writers found the Joseph narrative a compelling standpoint from which to enter the language-world of the Bible and explore the relationship between piety, politics, and freedom in eighteenth-century European colonies. The story

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<sup>1</sup> A few early converts began to hope for a Moses who would deliver them from slavery. In their book *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830*, Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood cite the story of David Margate, the only black British missionary to work in the American colonies, who in 1775 proclaimed himself to be "Moses" sent to deliver enslaved Africans from sin and slavery, and the experience of a "Black Messiah" known only as Moses who actively proselytized African Americans in Williamsburg, Virginia, against the wishes of local white missionaries around the time of the Revolutionary War (112-115).

particularly attracted them, for just as the Israelites' plight was rooted in an act of betrayal, so theirs began when brethren in Africa sold them to European slave traders, who in turn sold them throughout the Americas. In the Exodus story, Joseph's brothers, jealous of their father's favoritism toward their younger sibling and skeptical of his dreams of greatness, sold him to their distant cousins, Ishmaelite merchants bound for the markets of Egypt. Favor eventually followed betrayal as Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh's guard, purchased Joseph and soon appointed him overseer of his household when he realized God was blessing his Hebrew slave. Similarly, in the Atlantic world, Atlantic Creoles who worked as translators, or enslaved or indentured Africans who labored as valets or sailors, experienced favor from masters who developed paternalistic relationships with them.

Joseph and Afro-Atlantic people learned the dangers of favor, however, as masters often demanded unquestioning obedience in return. Joseph experienced this peril when he was imprisoned after Potiphar's wife falsely accused him of rape. Nevertheless, God continued to bless Joseph, and when his jailer saw that he was favored, he made him keeper of the prisoners. Joseph subsequently earned honor from Pharaoh after he correctly interpreted the Egyptian ruler's dream of a coming famine. Joseph was promoted to second in command of Egypt. When his brothers traveled to Egypt to purchase food, he forgave them, for he believed God had providentially placed him in a position to save his family and ease their transition into his adopted homeland. His family migrated to Egypt, and he convinced Pharaoh to give them Goshen, the best land, for their new community. In the Atlantic world, favored slaves and free blacks similarly mediated between whites and blacks in their struggle for freedom and equality. Some

Afro-Atlantic people even found captivity to be transformative, enabling them to experience a temporary sense of community in European societies through what they believed were the providential workings of God.

This chapter argues that during the eighteenth century, Afro-Atlantic writers invoke the Joseph narrative to challenge their marginal status and make themselves visible to their white oppressors. Briton Hammon in his *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro man* (1760), Phillis Wheatley in her “Letter to Rev. Samson Occum” (1774), which was reprinted in the *Connecticut Gazette*, John Marrant in his *A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* (1785), Quobna Ottobah Cugoano in *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain* (1787), and Olaudah Equiano in his *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789) appropriate the Joseph narrative to present their destines as evidence that Providence intervenes in the lives of Afro-Atlantic people, making them worthy of freedom and acceptance in Atlantic world Christian societies.

\* \* \*

### **Phillis Wheatley: Afro-Atlantic Joseph for Slaves in Colonial America**

During her visit to England in 1773, Phillis Wheatley came to a critical crossroad: should she stay in England where she could experience freedom and receive favor as a Negro poetess, or should she return to Massachusetts where she would remain a slave to take care of her ill mistress? Wheatley had embarked on her trip to London with her master’s consent to regain her health, meet her patron, the Countess of Huntingdon, and

publish her collection of poetry. The trip seemed a natural event for a young slave whose life was much as the biblical Joseph's had been. Joseph and Wheatley had been separated from their families, sold into slavery, and transported to a foreign land of bondage. Neither had faced the worst forms of slavery. Both had obtained favor from benevolent masters who gave them privileges other slaves did not enjoy. Joseph became overseer of his Egyptian master's house and prime minister of Egypt after interpreting Pharaoh's dream. Wheatley received an education that exceeded the training of most New England's youth and published her writings with the assistance of her mistress and patron. Still a slave as she traveled to England, once she disembarked in London, she could have chosen to stay; the Mansfield decision in the Somerset case of 1772 forbade masters from forcing their slaves to return to the colonies.

Wheatley's performance as a revolutionary Joseph during the early stages of the American Revolution and the Massachusetts antislavery movement began when the young poet returned to Boston after spending just six weeks in England. Upon her arrival, colonial newspapers acknowledged the favored young slave's exceptional achievements. The *Boston Post-Boy* (1773) hailed her as "Phillis, the extraordinary Negro Poetress, Servant of Mr. John Wheatley" and the *Massachusetts Spy* (1773) noted that the "celebrated young negro poetess, Phillis" had sailed back to Boston. In September 1773, her master granted her the ultimate favor by emancipating her, "at the desire of my friends in England," according to a letter she wrote to Colonel David Worcester (147). In the letter, Wheatley provides a glimpse of the freedom she had experienced during her short stay in London, where she had visited Lord Dartmouth, Lord Lincoln, Dr. Solander, Granville Sharp, Benjamin Franklin, and Lady Cavendish, and received gifts from her

new friends, incidents that she writes “astonishes me on the reflection” (146). Wheatley seems especially pleased that freedom has placed her “upon my own footing and whatever I get by [selling *Poems*] is entirely mine & it is the Chief I have to depend upon” (147). Within five months of gaining her freedom, Wheatley enacted the role an Afro-Atlantic Joseph—a former slave and well-connected, published, African poet who had eloquently spoken out against slavery to an international audience—as she penned her strongest abolitionist statement in her “Letter to the Rev. Samson Occum.”

Wheatley wrote this letter during the years leading up to the American Revolution when more Africans resided in New England than at any other period in colonial history. They constituted about five percent of the total northeastern colonial population (Greene 74). Colonists were inflamed with anti-British fervor and were more concerned about securing their rights than granting liberty to their slaves. The British *Somerset v. Stewart* case increased colonial interest in issues regarding freedom for blacks although not always for their good. Stewart, a Boston customs official, had taken his slave James Somerset to England in 1769; Lord Mansfield forbade Stewart from selling Somerset to a slave owner in Jamaica a few years later. According to historian William Wiecek, “. . . the precedent had become part of American common law” (2451-52). As a consequence, some colonists in America sought to sever political ties with England for they feared the ruling would become a statute.

Enslaved blacks likely learned of the Somerset case by reading articles in colonial newspapers or listening to their masters and other colonists discuss the ruling. News of the Mansfield decision not only intensified black commitment to the Revolution but it advanced the abolition movement in New England, and even inspired some enslaved

Africans in the colonies to seek refuge in England, which they now envisioned as their promised land (Carretta, *Complete Writings* xxvii). Although Wheatley must have been aware of the Somerset ruling, most likely through abolitionist Granville Sharp, who may have informed her of it during her visit to England, she did not exercise her right to freedom. Carretta suggests that Wheatley's free status ". . . may well have been a concession manipulated by Wheatley from Nathaniel Wheatley in exchange for her promise to return to Boston to care for his mother, her mistress: one promise for another" (xxvi-xxvii).

Wheatley may have been thinking of other opportunities besides obtaining her personal freedom, however. I suggest that she envisioned a larger role for herself in the New England abolition movement after her trip to England. Carretta, Mukhtar Ali Isani, Frank Shuffelton, and other scholars have argued that by 1774 Wheatley was a celebrity, and that colonial and English publications had greatly contributed to her fame. Isani cites six colonial newspapers and several English publications that had printed Wheatley's poetry and letters, notices about her travels, and advertisements for the sale of her poetry collection from December 1767 to December 1774. Wheatley's celebrity placed her in a position to use the colonial media to disseminate her abolitionist message that "in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us." When her 1774 letter to Occum appeared in at least ten colonial newspapers, four included a note describing the letter as a "Specimen of her Ingenuity."

Wheatley strengthened the impact of her antislavery message by addressing her letter to her friend Samuel Occum, a respected Native American minister with whom she had begun corresponding when she was twelve years old. Occum openly supported the American Revolution as an opportunity for marginalized races to obtain freedom in America. He had already received some recognition in the colonies as the first Native American to publish works in English, including sermons, hymns, and an autobiography, despite his lack of “formal” education. The Presbyterian Church ordained Occum to serve as a missionary among his people, the Mohegan tribe. When the church needed money to build a school for Native Americans, they asked him to raise funds by going on England’s lecture circuit. After Occum completed his successful tour, church officials did not allocate the money as they had promised. Instead, they built an educational institution that ultimately became Dartmouth College in 1769. This experience disillusioned Occum; nevertheless, he clung to his faith and worked tirelessly among the Mohegans until his death.

Although Wheatley and Occum enjoyed the praise of many prominent men and women in America and England, they did not forget the plight of their people. Both used their position of limited prominence to thrust themselves into the antislavery cause. In the opening sentence of her letter to Occum, Wheatley exhibits an acute awareness of the opportune moment the American Revolution presents for her to be a savior to her people. Although she addresses her radical antislavery letter to Occum, her message is designed for a larger New England audience. Wheatley begins by affirming Occum’s support of the “vindication of [Africans’] natural rights.” Her words echo the Enlightenment discourse associated with the Revolution, for example, James Otis’ *The Rights of the*

*British Colonists Asserted and Proved* (1764), as well as later texts such as Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776) and Thomas Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence* (1776); and they foreshadow the rhetoric of France's *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789). Wheatley immediately asserts that recognition of the "natural rights" of enslaved Africans should be an integral part of American revolutionary ideas. She goes on to argue that God will enable Africans to enjoy the same "glorious dispensation of civil and religious liberty" that the colonists were seeking when they refused to remain subject to King George III and the Church of England, and formed an independent nation. Wheatley then strengthens her argument by invoking biblical precedence, suggesting that Africans' pleas for liberty are equivalent to ancient Israel's prayers for deliverance from Egyptian slavery.

Colonists had long asserted their belief that they had escaped religious and civil persecution in England, their Egypt, at the hand of King George III, their Pharaoh, to come to America, their promised land. They argued that King George had treated them like slaves by forcing them to adhere to the tenets of the Church of England and pay taxes without representation. Comparisons between colonists and Israelites were common during the American Revolution. In *Liberty and Property Vindicated, and the Stamp Act Burnt* (1765), a pamphlet printed in Hartford, Connecticut, and Boston, an anonymous writer reminds his readers, "First, My brethren, it would be tautology in me to rehearse the history of the patriarch Moses to you, knowing you, or most of you, to be the children of pious parents, well educated and brought up in the fear of the Lord . . . you have read and your parents have told you the many wonders wrought by Moses in bringing his brethren out of the land of Egypt and out of the house of bondage" (590). The author then

draws an analogy between the Exodus narrative and colonial events to protest King George III's taxation policies in the colonies. Such writers clearly expected God to liberate the colonists from their oppressive bondage to England. Many members of Wheatley's audience understood the implications of invoking the Exodus narrative to articulate a desire for freedom and perform a new identity in America.

As she conflates the rhetoric of Revolution and Enlightenment with the Exodus story, Wheatley challenges the colonists' claim that America is God's New Israel, arguing that they reached their promised land only to enslave an innocent race. Wheatley further decenters the colonists' embrace of Exodus to script their New World experience by giving enslaved Africans a major role: ". . . for in every human breast God has implanted a principle, which we call love of freedom; it is impatient of oppression, and pants for deliverance; and by the leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same principle lives in us" (153). By identifying slaveholders, including her former "benevolent" owners the Wheatleys, as "modern Egyptians," Wheatley argues that it is she and her people who should be cast in the role of Hebrew slaves. For them, the American colonies are Egypt, not a promised land. In their American Egypt, Africans seek liberation as fervently as did the ancient Israelites. Enslaved blacks had already begun expressing their "love of freedom" in petitions submitted to the Massachusetts House of Representatives in January 1773 for relief "from their unhappy State and Condition," and in April 1774 for ". . . great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their fellow-men to enslave them" ("Petitions" 6). Wheatley implores her white readers to include the abolition of slavery in their debates over legislation to end the slave trade. Antislavery laws would transform America into a

promised land for enslaved Africans just as the Somerset ruling had made England a Canaan for fugitive slaves.

Wheatley's letter is a plea for the divine deliverance guaranteed by the Exodus narrative. Unlike the colonists who were demanding immediate separation from King George and England, Wheatley does not stipulate the means nor set the time for the establishment of an American promised land of freedom. She trusts God to liberate enslaved Africans on His own terms. She contends:

God grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time, and get him honour upon all those whose Avarice impels them to countenance and help forward the Calamities of their fellow Creatures. This I desire not for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically, opposite. How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree, —I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine. (153)

Wheatley believed God would punish American slave owners in a timely, righteous fashion just as He punished Egyptian slaveholders. Her letter is a warning for those who do not view slavery as evil and a reminder for those who boldly ignore biblically based, moral principles. Even the British wondered how Bostonians could boast about their “principles of liberty” and enslave Africans (*Monthly Review*, qtd. in Wheatley, *Complete Writings* xxii).

Yet Wheatley does not lash out against her former captors. Like Joseph, who forgave his brothers after they intentionally sold him to the Ishmaelite, Wheatley does not express ill feelings toward Englishmen involved in the slave trade. She knows that “avarice” compels men to enslave Africans and build empires based on slave labor. She hopes that the divine judgment meted out to colonial slave traders and owners will convince them of the “Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so

diametrically, opposite.” For Wheatley, it is illogical for American colonists to be as willing to die for liberty as they are determined to keep thousands of innocent Africans enslaved. She insists that Americans do not need the “Penetration of a Philosopher” to help them understand this basic idea. If two marginalized individuals—a recently emancipated African woman and a Native American minister—fully understand and eloquently articulate the human desire for freedom, enlightened colonists can certainly comprehend the concept.

In speaking out against slavery, Wheatley performs her way into the Atlantic world as a revolutionary Joseph. In using the pronoun “we” in her letter, I suggest that Wheatley acts as a Joseph figure, speaking from within the black community as an emancipated African who desires enslaved Africans to experience the freedom she enjoys. Relying on the newspaper, the most effective and popular form of communication in colonial America, she disseminates her radical call for the spiritual and physical emancipation of her people. Having attained literary success, international fame, and freedom, she boldly challenges the colonial slave system and powerfully argues for the emancipation of Africans in God’s time and way. Wheatley asserts that colonial Egyptians can avoid the fate of ancient Egyptians, who suffered devastation and death because they refused to liberate the Israelites, by heeding her warning and becoming as committed to freeing enslaved Africans as they are in seeking independence from England. But Wheatley would learn that American freedom did not ensure freedom for people of African descent in the young republic. “Philosopher” Thomas Jefferson, who had characterized Wheatley’s poetry as unworthy of criticism, later introduced ideas of

scientific racism in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781) that would impede freedom for African Americans well into the twentieth century.

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### **Afro-Atlantic Josephs: from Betrayal to Transformation**

Whereas Wheatley lived a Joseph experience as a favored slave, I suggest that other Afro-Atlantic writers' narratives reflect a Joseph-like experience of betrayal, captivity, favor, and transformation that were integral components of black life in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Through allusions to and invocations of Joseph's story, Briton Hammon, Quobna Cugoano, Olaudah Equiano, and John Marrant draw similarities between their and Joseph's faithfulness to God. In their journeys, unexpected hardships separate them from their loved ones, and force them to rely on their faith, wits, and friends to survive.

Like Joseph, who was taken from a carefree life in the hills of Palestine as the beloved son of the patriarch Jacob and then subjected to a challenging life as a slave in Egypt before eventually becoming a God-fearing public official in one of the greatest empires of the ancient world, many Afro-Atlantic peoples unexpectedly found themselves on a spiritual journey in the New World. They experienced both favor and punishment during their adventurous travels. But God repeatedly intervened, delivering them from false imprisonment or slavery, and strengthening their faith. Unlike Joseph, they never reconciled with their brethren or reunited with their families in Africa. Nevertheless, they, too, credited God's Providence rather than their brethren's and Europeans' malice as the reason for and outcome of their adventures.

Some scholars, particularly Phillip Richards in “The ‘Joseph Story’ as Slave Narrative: On Genesis and Exodus as Prototypes for Early Black Anglophone Writing,” argue that eighteenth-century black writers were unable to overcome the limitations of race in appropriating the Joseph narrative to create a space for themselves in European societies. Others, notably Joanna Brooks in *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literatures*, assert that the biblical Lazarus figure best represents the eighteenth-century experience of Afro-Atlantic people. I suggest that we consider the Joseph narrative as *the* primary eighteenth-century narrative plot that both Afro-Atlantic and European authors rely on to create stories of transformation. British writers, such as Daniel Defoe in *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of Moll Flanders*, Samuel Richardson in *Pamela, or, Virtue Rewarded* (1722) and Henry Fielding in *History and Adventures of Joseph Andrews* (1742), invoke the Joseph story to chart the path of their English protagonists from lower class to upper class or from false accusation to favor. Samuel Sewall was one of the first and few writers to establish the story as a compelling paradigm for the examination of slavery and the plight of Africans in the colonies. In *The Selling of Joseph, a Memorial* (1700), Sewall writes that an enslaved African named Adam is a descendant of Adam, the first man God created. He asserts that Adam the African like the biblical Joseph has been illegally sold into slavery; therefore, Adam’s master is obligated to free him. English readers were thus knowledgeable about the Joseph narrative, as well as fictional renderings of the story, and they had certain expectations of how eighteenth-century Joseph stories should unfold, which typically did not include African protagonists.

In their narratives, Afro-Atlantic authors reformulated popular hybrid narrative forms. Hybrid texts incorporated aspects of the spiritual autobiography, travel narrative, sea adventure, captivity narrative, and slave narrative. In *Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic*, Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould add “public epistle” and “economic success story” to this list of hybrid options (1). Hybrid texts intrigued readers for they offered a vicarious experience of exciting journeys and imagination of exotic people and places through a spiritual lens. They eventually dominated the eighteenth-century literary market. Ultimately, the spiritual or conversion narrative became the foundation of the hybrid texts that Afro-Atlantic writers used as models for their eighteenth-century writings.

In the seventeenth century, European Christians, who had faced unpredictable dangers during their travels to and settlement in the New World, wrote stories about God’s providential workings in their lives. Providential tales soon inspired the development of spiritual autobiographies in which the protagonist’s life follows a conventional pattern. He or she indulges in sinful activity during youth and young adulthood, experiences a spiritual awakening, endures a cycle of sin and repentance, finds victory over sin through Bible study, experiences conversion, establishes a personal relationship with God, and finally lives a more peaceful life in Christ. In their narratives, spiritual autobiographers often invoke familiar biblical stories, such as Jonah running from God and being swallowed by a whale, Peter repenting after denying Christ, or Paul experiencing conversion on the road to Damascus. John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) and *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) established this genre and inspired writers like Defoe, who employed the spiritual autobiography format in his

hybrid novels, *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722) (Hindmarsh 36-37, 51-52, 96).

Captivity narratives that included strong spiritual overtones and emphasized the captives' mental anguish and physical suffering comprised one of the most popular types of hybrid texts. Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together, With the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed; Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682) exemplifies this genre. Her book fascinated New England readers and was republished more than thirty times. Rowlandson details how Native American warriors kidnap her from her home in Massachusetts during King Phillip's War. She transforms a hellish experience into a spiritual journey by describing how God answers her prayers and comforts her when she reads a Bible that one of her Native American captors gives her. Rowlandson cites specific biblical narratives, such as the story of Job who lost all his children and possessions, to strengthen herself through her trials. She supplements her own story with accounts of the hardships other colonists suffered in Indian captivity. Although Rowlandson initially describes her captors as "murderous wretches," "barbarous creatures," and "black creatures," she later humanizes them with recollections of how they allow her to use her sewing skills to barter for food. Rowlandson's experiences strengthen her faith in God and her place in her Christian community, for God miraculously reunites her with her husband and children, who have survived the raid, and restores her family to fellowship with believers who lovingly welcome them home. She offers her narrative as edification for seventeenth-century readers warned by ministers of their increased spiritual neglect in the New World.

Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* made spiritual-captivity tales even more appealing by adding a seafarer's travels to intrigue readers. The novel tells the story of a young man who goes to sea against his parents' wishes and is miraculously delivered from an array of near-death experiences. The book enthralled English audiences so much that Defoe's publisher William Taylor issued six editions of the novel, with a print run of at least one thousand copies of Part I, during the first year it was released (Shinagel 221). Defoe's novel highlighted the attractiveness of hybrid texts for eighteenth-century readers. Early in the narrative, Crusoe is captured by the Moors, but soon escapes and is rescued by a Portuguese crew. He then buys a plantation in Brazil, and during a trip to purchase slaves, he becomes a castaway in the West Indies. Readers followed his transformation from a naïve young man to a seasoned sailor who survives twenty-eight years on a deserted island where he experiences conversion and begins to acknowledge providential design in every aspect of his life. Ultimately, he is rescued and returns home to England.

Like spiritual autobiographers and authors of hybrid texts, Afro-Atlantic writers appropriated specific episodes of biblical stories in their works. In *Liberation Historiography, African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861*, John Ernest argues that black writers' "mode of reading history . . . respects the authority of fragmented communities of experience" and the authors' narratives arrange fragments from the Bible to reflect the varied experiences of their communities (18). Cugoano, Equiano, Hammon, and Marrant published narratives in which their lives reflected the experiences of revered, familiar biblical figures in order to connect with their predominately white Christian audiences. They positioned themselves as individuals who

possessed the moral and upright characteristics that their pious readers valued in members of their communities.

Afro-Atlantic authors began to adapt the conventions of spiritual autobiography in their narratives in the mid-1700s after the First Great Awakening. Evangelical Christian ministers introduced black converts to biblical narratives such as Daniel delivered from the lion's den and the Hebrew boys saved from the fiery furnace. These stories helped Afro-Atlantic believers create a shared discourse through which to articulate their spiritual experiences. Moreover, since they hoped that conversion to Christianity would serve as a passport to citizenship, Afro-Atlantic people hoped that dramatic biblically-based testimonies about their conversion would help them achieve this goal. During the early days of slavery, Africans frequently baptized their children to secure their freedom since slave societies often forbade the enslavement of fellow believers. Colonists eventually enacted laws that forbade this practice. For example, an act passed by the Virginia Assembly in 1667 declares, "The baptism of slaves doth not exempt them from bondage." Yet even as late as 1773, after gaining his freedom in England, Cugoano sought baptism at the urging of friends to guard against being remanded to slavery. Colonists usually enslaved foreigners, and religious difference was an easy way to identify outsiders (Carretta, *Thoughts and Sentiments* xiv). But even baptism did not secure freedom or civil rights for enslaved Africans in the mid-eighteenth century. In American and West Indian colonies, Afro-Atlantic people soon discovered that slaveholders invoked the same biblical discourse meant to save white Christians from sin to authorize the enslavement of Africans and restrict the liberties of free blacks. Vincent Carretta explains, "Ethnicity, color, and law became the principle means to alienate those

who had become religiously assimilated and thus likely to claim to have become social insiders” (xiv).

For Afro-Atlantic authors who embraced the hybrid genre, captivity was represented as transformative. I suggest that Joseph’s hybrid slave-travel-spiritual narrative provides a literary model for examining their stories. The biblical narrative did not parallel their experiences, however, for they were unable to reunite with their families, like Rowlandson and Crusoe, or earn acclaim as respected leaders in an Atlantic world where favor did not always lead to freedom, and freedom did not guarantee equality for people of African descent. Rather than reject the Joseph narrative as insufficient to represent their experiences, they double the biblical story with episodes of the narratives of other prominent biblical figures to reveal how they providentially overcome outsider status in oppressive societies. Furthermore, they conflate the Joseph story with political and historical rhetoric to illustrate their complex lives and convey their hope for acceptance by white Christians who would ultimately need more than a few compelling narratives to change their perspectives of Afro-Atlantic people.

**“Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither”:<sup>2</sup>**

### **Betrayal and Captivity**

Betrayal initiated the Afro-Atlantic Joseph captivity experience by separating individuals from family and community. Native Africans betrayed approximately thirteen million of their brethren into slavery (Thomas 804-05). In the New World, Afro-Atlantic people continued to suffer betrayal from friends, family, and foes. Quobna Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano were subjected to both forms of betrayal. Africans kidnapped and sold them into slavery, and European slave ships transported them from their native land to

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<sup>2</sup> Gen. 45:5.

what Equiano calls the “land of bondage”<sup>3</sup> in the West Indies (98). In the opening pages of *Thoughts and Sentiments*, Cugoano posits himself as a well educated Joseph writing a biblically and historically based abolition treatise that refutes many of the myths Europeans devised to justify slavery. For his part, Equiano crafts a more complex approach to his life history by penning a slave-spiritual-travel-sea adventure-economic success narrative that offers a model of an African journey from freedom to slavery, conversion, and finally emancipation.

I suggest that Cugoano and Equiano allude to the Joseph narrative by giving pious readers insights into African life and revealing how both Africans and Europeans are implicated in what Cugoano describes as the “Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species.” In *Thoughts and Sentiments*, Cugoano recalls that he was “first kidnapped and betrayed by some of my own complexion” when he was about thirteen years old (16). Africans stole him from his West African home and sold him to European slave traders headed for Grenada. On the slave ship, one of his “countrywomen,” who “slept with some of the head men of the ship,” betrays the boys and women who have devised a plot to blow up and burn the vessel (15). Equiano describes a similar betrayal in his *Interesting Narrative*: Africans kidnap him and his sister while they are playing with other children near their home in West Africa. This eleven-year-old beloved son soon finds himself separated from his sister, and then tricked by Africans who assure him they are traveling back to his homeland, but stow him in the bottom of a slave ship headed for Barbados. Given their familiarity with the Joseph

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<sup>3</sup> In Exodus 20:2 as God introduces the Ten Commandments, He reminds the Israelites that He delivered them out of the land of Egypt, “the house of bondage.”

narrative and its later fictional versions, Equiano's and Cugoano's readers readily intuited the biblical resonances of such plots.

Cugoano's and Equiano's recollections of the impact of the slave trade on African communities also bid us to consider connections between their experiences and the Joseph story. The story of the inconsolable Jacob, who nearly died of grief after his older sons sold Joseph into slavery, could have offered English readers a means of understanding how slavery fragmented African families. After Equiano recounts how he and other Africans are sold in the Barbadian slave market, I suggest that he echoes Jacob's pain in his lament, "Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? . . . Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives?" (61). To help his readers further sympathize with the slave trade's devastating impact on his homeland, Equiano describes his African community as a replication of ancient Israel: ". . . our government was conducted by our chiefs or judges, our wise men and elders; and the head of a family with us enjoyed a similar authority over his household with that which is ascribed to Abraham and other patriarchs" (44).

By drawing a parallel between his Igbo people and God's ancient people Israel, Equiano challenges the racial hierarchies in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. In their introduction to *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century*, Adam Potkay and Sandra Burr argue that Equiano draws this parallel to present the first stage of his "new Exodus" from slavery and thereby discredits two myths about Africans: "it runs contrary to the common (though fantastic) taunt that blacks were the cursed descendants of Ham who are ordained to serve God's chosen people—here, white Europeans—as slaves" and

it “serves to correct his age’s opposite and equally unreal view of Africa not as a damned but as an Edenic state” (11-12). Aware that his readers would question his parallels between African and Jewish history when the complexions of these peoples’ descendants were obviously different, he tries to sidestep the question by adding: “. . . As to the difference of colour between the Eboan Africans and the modern Jews, I shall not presume to account for it” (44). Constructing such similarities permits Equiano to assert that his people are God’s people and possess the capacity of becoming a great nation just as God had promised Israel would be.

Slave traders’ violent removal of Equiano, Cugoano, and millions of others from their homes prevented African communities from ever becoming great nations, however. I suggest that Cugoano and Equiano represent African slave traders as Joseph’s brothers, and European slave traders as Ishmaelites, making both buyers and sellers part of an extended family disrupted by slavery. When Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery, they nearly destroyed their family. When Africans became involved in the slave trade, they set in motion a chain of events that led to the conquest of a continent. Africans were “torn” away to “toil” for Europeans on West Indian plantations. Through their representation of the impact of slavery on African families, Equiano and Cugoano could encourage their readers to see them as Josephs: cherished sons taken away from communities that are being destroyed, rather than individuals cursed by God to a life of servitude.

In the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, brethren also betrayed family members into other forms of captivity. In his *Narrative*, John Marrant recounts how estrangement from his mother and siblings ultimately leads to his captivity in Cherokee territory. Initially, Marrant’s *Narrative* follows the traditional spiritual autobiography form. He

portrays himself as a pleasure seeker who eventually experiences a spiritual awakening, and develops a relationship with God. Yet his *Narrative* is a complex spiritual-travel-captivity tale in which Marrant characterizes himself as a fourteen-year-old Joseph figure whose decision to give up his career as a musician and devote himself to God and evangelism leads to separation from his family.

Marrant recalls that soon after his conversion, most of his family and neighbors turn against him, a decision that sets him on a path leading to captivity. He decides to risk death in the wilderness rather than continue witnessing to unbelieving brethren. Marrant's retrospective evocation of a wilderness journey suggests the possibility of transformation; Joseph, Moses, John the Baptist, Jesus, Elijah, and other biblical figures underwent spiritual growth when temporarily separated from their brethren, enjoyed spiritual renewal alone with God, and thus became fit to lead spiritual reforms in their communities. Although Marrant experiences conversion, he is an ineffective witness because of his immature faith. Time alone with God nurtures his spiritual growth and makes him a stronger Christian. Wilderness experiences are never void of trials, however. A Native American hunter interrupts Marrant's communion with God, and Marrant decides to join him. Young and inexperienced, Marrant soon finds himself facing persecution when he enters Cherokee territory without permission. I suggest that Marrant's imprisonment by Native Americans is similar to Joseph's imprisonment by the Egyptians, for both are perceived as outsiders who have disrespected laws governing other communities.

Unlike Marrant, Cugoano, and Equiano, Briton Hammon never experiences betrayal from family members, neighbors, or African brethren. He informs his readers

that he took leave of his home in Massachusetts as a sailor on a profitable but dangerous expedition to the Caribbean. The Preface to the *Narrative* states that Hammon is simply presenting “Matters of fact as they occur to my mind,” leaving readers to interpret the story (3). In “‘Surprising Deliverance’? Slavery and Freedom, Language and Identity in the Narrative of Briton Hammon, a ‘Negro Man,’” Robert Desrochers, Jr., asserts that an editor inserted the preface “to encourage readers to search for obscured meanings, while allowing them to think they figured it all out for themselves” (166). One mode of interpreting the *Narrative* is by viewing it as a Joseph story that could have enabled Hammon to construct himself as a betrayed sailor who throughout his Atlantic experiences remains faithful to God and loyal to England.

Hammon begins his story as a sea adventure with spiritual overtones, but quickly shifts to a hybrid narrative filled with acts of betrayal that lead to various forms of captivity. During his journey back to Massachusetts, the sloop he is traveling in runs aground on a reef off the Cape of Florida. Hammon recalls how Captain John Howland, the master of the ship, betrays his men’s trust by choosing to save valuable cargo rather than toss it overboard so the crew can dislodge the vessel. When the men seek safety on land, Native Americans ambush them and kill everyone except Hammon, whom they hold captive. Hammon describes his captors as “barbarous and inhuman Savages,” “Villains,” and “Devils,” the same language that often appeared in Indian captivity narratives like Rowlandson’s (6). By adapting such terms to characterize his encounter with Native Americans, Hammon places himself within the community of white colonists who survive Indian captivity and publish their stories. He aligns himself with members of

his Massachusetts community, a place he repeatedly calls his “native land,” and positions Native Americans, not a “Negro man,” like himself, as the marginalized other.

Further acts of betrayal highlight Hammon’s loyalty to his mother country, England, when he reaches Spanish dominated Cuba, the next stop in his sea adventure. He is within enemy territory, for New Englanders still held grudges against Spaniards and Native Americans because of the cruel tactics they employed during the Seven Years’ War, and they constantly sought opportunities to wage warfare against Spanish “papists” (Desrochers 154). Hammon recalls that when the Native Americans show up to reclaim him in Cuba, the governor, Francisco Antonia Cagigal de la Vega, redeems the sailor from his former captors, who have killed his shipmates. Hammon’s good fortune in Cuba is short-lived, however, for the Cubans soon betray him when as a loyal British subject he refuses to serve in the Spanish Navy. European press gangs frequently sought men to join the navy, especially during wartime. If a potential recruit would not enlist, he often faced immediate detention (Rediker 32). Hammon’s five-year imprisonment is reminiscent of a Joseph experience. All but one of those who visit him fail to relay his pleas for release to the governor. After he is discharged, Hammon works various jobs, including carrying a Catholic bishop around the island. His depictions of the prelate’s ornate chair “lin’d with crimson Velvet, and supported by eight Persons,” likely stoked Protestant passions and aggravated his New England readers’ feelings against Cuba, their military, religious, and empire rival (10). I suggest that Hammon subtly decenters the British colonists’ Exodus narrative here by casting Cuba, rather than England, as Egypt, and giving free blacks, enslaved Africans, and English colonists a mutual enemy. In Cuba, Hammon finds himself severely punished because of his loyalty to England and forced to work for the

Catholic Church to earn a living, but he refuses to complain, distrust God, or disavow his “native land.”

**“So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God”:<sup>4</sup> Providential Intervention**

Regardless of the type of captivity Afro-Atlantic writers’ experienced, many received relief from hardship through favor from benevolent captors. They often characterized this favor as inspired by the “Providence of God.” Eighteenth-century Christians viewed Providence as the supernatural workings of a benevolent God who created humanity, sustained it, and revealed His will in the Bible. They believed God possessed foreknowledge, and made each experience, even evil ones, work for an ultimate good (Rom. 8:28). In the biblical story, when Joseph’s masters saw how God blessed him, they gave him increased responsibilities, granted him freedom, and appointed him to a government position; and they did not enslave or harm Joseph’s extended family.

In Afro-Atlantic writers’ lives, God’s Providence serves a somewhat different purpose. They emphasize the Providential nature of their experiences to an audience that believes religion transforms slaves into better servants but does not necessarily make them spiritually pure or physically free. By citing evidence of God’s Providence at work in the Afro-Atlantic community, writers of African descent seek to convince their readers that God has not saved them to make them more subservient to whites. God intervenes in the lives of oppressed people, regardless of race, to make them effective witnesses.

During his captivity, Marrant initially turns to the stories of Daniel, the young Hebrew who was thrown in a lion’s den, and the three Hebrew boys, who were cast into a fiery furnace, to convey the providential turn of events that enables him to experience the

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<sup>4</sup> Gen. 45:8.

benevolence of his oppressors. After trespassing into Cherokee Territory, Marrant finds himself imprisoned and facing a death sentence, a fate he describes as a lion's den and fiery furnace, but his ability to speak his captors' language saves his life. He explains, "I prayed in English a considerable time, and about the middle of my prayer, the LORD impressed a strong desire upon my mind to turn into their language, and pray in their tongue. I did so, and with remarkable liberty, which wonderfully affected the people" (118). Later, Marrant reads from the Bible in the presence of the Cherokee king and prays for the ruler's sick daughter, who is then miraculously healed. Like King Nebuchadnezzar, who showed favor to Daniel, after the Hebrew exile had disobeyed the monarch's decree not to pray to any God or man for thirty days, and the three Hebrew boys, after they refused to follow the king's orders to worship a golden statue, the Cherokee king treats Marrant like a prince, gives him gold jewelry, and allows him to travel freely. Like Daniel and the Hebrew boys who assimilated into their Babylonian community, Marrant adopts the Native Americans' dress and learns to speak their language fluently. Europeans who were subjected to Indian captivity rarely experienced such favor. In Afro-Atlantic narratives, however, writers always emphasize how their relationship with God leads to favor with man. They subtly challenge Europeans' authority to control their lives, positing themselves as individuals whose prayers for deliverance from their oppressors are answered, often in miraculous ways.

Hammon acknowledges similar acts of God's favor as the overruling principle in his life. At the end of his *Narrative*, he informs his readers that he has been "most grievously afflicted, and yet thro' the Divine Goodness, as miraculously preserved, and delivered out of many Dangers; of which I desire to retain a *grateful Remembrance* as

long as I live” (14). Early in his *Narrative* he reports that his Native American captors spare him from death, as did Marrant’s; he then encounters even greater acts of favor from the Spaniards. A Spanish captain, whom Hammon had met during a previous trip to Jamaica, where the Spaniard was imprisoned, invites Hammon to board his ship when he stops by the Native American settlement where Hammon is being held. The relationship that these two men had formed in the seafaring community compels the Spanish captain to save a fellow mariner, regardless of his national affiliation. Hammon interprets this chance meeting as the providential working of God and vows to remember the deed as long as he lives. Because God has delivered him from many dangers in his travels through the Atlantic world, Hammon is confident that God will preserve him in the challenges he will face as a “Negro man” when he returns to his native land.

Hammon experiences favor from the Spanish when he initially arrives in Cuba. The Cuban governor refuses to turn Hammon over to his former Native American captors, secures Hammon’s release by paying a ten-dollar bounty, and allows the sailor to live in his castle. He soon learns the perils of favor in a foreign land, however. Favor with one’s national rival could not be permanent, and the Spanish forsake him after he refuses to join their navy. Hammon asserts his ties to England, recalling how British citizens providentially come to his rescue. Mrs. Betty Howard, an Englishwoman who had visited Hammon in jail, solicits the assistance of a captain from Boston who, because “kind Providence so order’d it,” has docked his ship in the Havana harbor to repair a leak (8). The captain intercedes with de la Vega and gains Hammon’s freedom. According to Hammon, when God impresses men and women to accomplish His plans, obstacles

disappear. Hammon subtly implies that spiritual, political, and community ties can be more important than race in the Atlantic world.

Hammon is not content to receive his freedom and remain in Cuba, however. Whereas Joseph saw many opportunities in Egypt, Hammon's story emphasizes Afro-Atlantic people's desire to return to colonial America to whose development they have contributed. Hammon does not wish to stay in Cuba-Egypt, Britain's economic, political, and religious rival, but actively seeks to return to his native land of Massachusetts. Once again, Mrs. Howard comes to his aid. While in a tavern, Hammon learns that an English Man-of-War has docked in the harbor and will sail in a few days. Taverns not only provided food and drink for mariners, they functioned as a meeting house where sailors could exchange information about jobs and share stories of harrowing sea adventures (Rediker 133-34). By tapping into the seafaring network, Hammon repeatedly takes advantage of opportunities that "providentially" come his way. At Hammon's request, Mrs. Howard introduces him to the ship's lieutenant who carries Hammon aboard the English vessel.

Throughout his *Narrative*, Hammon emphasizes that everyday experiences in an irreligious seafaring world are the workings of Providence. During his experiences as an Afro-Atlantic Joseph, Hammon asserts that God moves the hearts of English men and women to work together to secure the freedom of some Afro-Atlantic people. As Hammon's readers learn of the good deeds of the English he meets during his journey, they will have to ask themselves what they are willing to do for black Christians in their communities, the "native land" of Afro-Atlantic people like Hammon.

While Hammon suggests that God's Providence works through the English who help him escape from imprisonment, Cugoano locates Providence directly in God Himself. He declares, "This Lord of Hosts, in his good Providence, and in great mercy to me, made a way for my deliverance from Grenada . . . and that horrid brutal slavery" (16-17). Cugoano's deliverance is precipitated by the actions of a new master, Alexander Campbell, Esquire, who purchases him and takes him to England. Within a year of his arrival in London, Cugoano gains his freedom. Although scholars have not determined how he did so, some have suggested that he might have taken advantage of the 1772 Mansfield decision and declared himself free. Cugoano's quick transition from enslaved African to free black confirms Wheatley's assertion in her "Letter to Rev. Samson Occum" that "in every human breast God has implanted a principle, which we call love of freedom; it is impatient of oppression, and pants for deliverance." Cugoano believes God providentially orders the events that lead to his freedom from slavery in Grenada. He asserts, God's "providence rules over all, and [He] is the only Potent One that rules in the nations over the children of men. It is unto Him, who is the Prince of the Kings of the earth, that I would give all the thanks" (17). Like Hammon, Cugoano is convinced that God's Providence extends to Africans. Yet Cugoano makes an even stronger assertion than Hammon, arguing that God's grace extends to Afro-Atlantic people even when they are ignorant of His concern for them. Cugoano interprets his providential deliverance from slavery as a challenge to the authority of Europeans who claimed that God authorized them to enslave Africans. Because he has escaped, Cugoano believes God will emancipate all enslaved Africans.

Equiano echoes Cugoano's sentiment regarding God's favor toward Africans. In the opening page of his *Interesting Narrative*, he declares, "I believe there are a few events in my life that have not happened to many; it is true the incidents of it are numerous; and, did I consider myself a European, I might say my sufferings were great; but, when I compare my lot with that of most of my countrymen, I regard myself as a *particular favourite of Heaven*, and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of my life" (31). Equiano offers his life story as proof of his status as a "*particular favourite of Heaven.*" He works for several benevolent masters, as Joseph and other favored slaves had done for centuries. Equiano acknowledges the providential appearance of Michael Henry Pascal, an officer in the British Royal Navy, who purchases him from Alexander Campbell, removes him from the confines of a Virginia plantation, and introduces him to a seafaring life that takes him all over the world. Pascal treats him so well that Equiano says of their relationship: "The kind and unknown hand of the Creator (who in very deed leads the blind in a way they know not) now began to appear, to my comfort" (63). Later, Equiano recounts the favor of yet another master in the West Indies. He characterizes Robert King as a kindhearted and humane man who puts him in charge of many business and household matters, permits him to become a merchant and learn navigation, lets him keep a greater portion of pay, and allows him to buy his freedom. Equiano shares his friend Cugoano's belief that God has providentially worked in his life even before he knew He existed. Retrospectively, both men acknowledge God as their true Master who uses the dehumanizing experience of slavery to introduce them to Christianity and ultimately rescue them from a life of servitude.

Equiano not only posits himself as a slave favored by God and benevolent masters, he also situates himself as a beloved member of the English community. He details the kindness of Captain Pascal's English friends and the attachment of their young daughter to him during his first trip to England. On a subsequent visit, Equiano recounts that the mother in another family treats him as if he were her child. Equiano even becomes friends with Pascal's relatives, Elizabeth Martha and Mary Guerin; Elizabeth intervenes with Pascal and secures his permission for Equiano to be baptized (78). Visits to London provide Equiano with the opportunity to develop new familial ties and friendships with English people; he begins to see the city as a place where he might eventually enjoy freedom.

Equiano experiences even greater favor in the seafaring community. He acknowledges numerous sailors who befriend him aboard ships where skill is more important than race. Richard Baker, a sailor he meets on his first voyage, becomes his "constant companion and instructor" for two years (65), and Daniel Queen teaches him how to shave and dress hair, and read the Bible (91-92). He recalls fighting in battles and traveling to ports as far flung as Holland and the Canary Islands. By 1762, he had been promoted from the status of servant to the rank of able seaman (Carretta, *Interesting Narrative* 267, note 271). As a sailor, Equiano acquires a skill that would have enabled him to earn a livelihood had he not been a slave. His faithful naval service ironically signifies loyalty to a nation that champions the slave trade. Nevertheless, in this favored position Equiano views himself as a valuable member of his community, "almost an Englishman" as he recalls, rather than a commodity (77).

Equiano, the “*particular favourite of heaven,*” is not shielded from betrayals that punctuated the life of Joseph and England’s slaves, however. Although his masters vouch for his “good character,” they still sell him as personal property. One of Equiano’s keenest disappointments occurs when instead of giving him his freedom, Pascal sells him to Captain James Doran who is sailing to the West Indies. Like other pious slaves who lost the benevolence of their masters, Equiano learns that favor from God and man does not guarantee security in the volatile world of the slave trade. Equiano’s faithfulness to his master, loyalty to England, and conversion to Christianity do not provide him access to freedom.

**“And he hath made me a father to Pharaoh”:<sup>5</sup> Transformation of Self and Community**

Although Afro-Atlantic writers could not depend upon man’s favor to bring about transformation, many continued to trust God to help them create a place for themselves in the Atlantic world. In so doing, they focused on the portion of Joseph’s life in which Pharaoh emancipated him and made him second-in-command after his correct interpretation of the monarch’s dream of a coming famine. Joseph received an Egyptian name and wife, and dressed like an Egyptian. Yet he maintained his Hebrew identity. Similarly, Afro-Atlantic people adopted many European customs in their quest for freedom, but most maintained a connection to Africa and participated in the development of hybrid cultures. Phillip Richards argues that dark skin prevented Afro-Atlantic people from adopting the Joseph narrative in order to assimilate into European communities since race determined a person’s status as slave or free (226-27). In contrast, I suggest that Afro-Atlantic authors do not use the Joseph story primarily to assimilate into

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<sup>5</sup> Gen. 45:8.

European cultures, but to lay the foundation for antislavery and civil rights work that will take centuries to accomplish its purpose. The Joseph story enables them to achieve their goals to varying degrees, depending on their location, benefactors, and purpose.

In their hybrid Joseph narratives, Cugoano, Equiano, Hammon, and Marrant illustrate how Afro-Atlantic people contest the African-slave and European-free binary in the Atlantic world. A racial marker in the title of each publication explicitly identifies the writer as a person of African descent. Marrant is described as “a black,” Hammon as “a Negro man,” Cugoano as “a Native of Africa,” and Equiano as “the African.” Scholars believe printers inserted the racial identifications for Marrant and Hammon, who may have also employed an amanuensis-editor for their narratives (Weyler 41), while Cugoano and Equiano prepared their texts for publication by themselves. Equiano further distinguishes himself from his Afro-Atlantic predecessors by adding the note “Written by himself” on the title page of his *Interesting Narrative*. He underscores his authorship and authority by including a list of patrons who ordered and paid for copies of his book. Explicitly acknowledging their African heritage, all four writers appropriate the Joseph story to emphasize their educational, economic, spiritual, and political transformation during captivity as they challenge their communities to change Afro-Atlantic people’s marginalized status in the New World. Through its emphasis on betrayal by brethren, captivity in a foreign land, and favor from God and benevolent masters, the Joseph narrative offers Europeans a means to understand the transformation of Afro-Atlantic people from marginalized others to beloved members of their families and valued members of communities in the Atlantic world.

Hammon establishes himself as an Afro-Atlantic Joseph by emphasizing the religious and political implications of his imprisonment in Cuba for refusing to serve in the Spanish Royal Navy. His unwavering allegiance to England allows him to claim the status of Englishman. Upon his release from prison, he devotes himself to finding a way to leave Cuba-Egypt and return to his native land. His steadfast loyalty to England prepares his readers for the British captain's identification of him as an Englishman. According to Hammon, "The next Day the *Spaniards* came along side the *Beaver*, and demanded me again, with a Number of others who had made their Escape from them, and got on board the Ship, but just before I did; but the Captain, who was a true *Englishman*, refus'd them, and said he could not answer it, to deliver up any *Englishmen* under *English* colors" (11). In effect, Hammon revises the Joseph narrative by recasting English slavers as benevolent Egyptians who rescue a falsely imprisoned Joseph. The English seafarers not only view him as a fellow sailor in distress, they see him as a Protestant Christian who must be rescued from a Catholic community. The English captain's identification of Hammon as an Englishman might appear surprising for Hammon he is described as a "Negro man" in the title of his *Narrative*. According to Vincent Carretta, the British did not believe "that to be Black necessarily meant that one was suited for slavery, however. Social status could supersede race as a defining category" (*Unchained Voices* 3). Hammon writes his story as a Negro man; yet the captain of the English Man-of-War publicly acknowledges him as an Englishman more than a decade before the 1772 Mansfield decision allows slaves who touch England's soil to refuse to return to slave societies.

Hammon's subsequent work as a sailor on English vessels underscores his transformation to Negro Englishman. During his service in the British Royal Navy, Hammon reports, "I was turned over" or "was oder'd on board" various ships (11). After being wounded in a battle with the French, he receives treatment at a veterans' hospital in England. Hammon carefully notes that he is "honourably paid the Wages due to me" when medical personnel determine he is incapable of service (12). Once he recovers from his wound, he ships out on three different voyages. Hammon exhibits loyalty to England by honorably serving in the Royal Navy, and he demonstrates human agency in seeking work to support himself when he returns to civilian life. The dangerous sailing industry was one of the few businesses where black men could find steady work in the eighteenth century (Bolster 2-4). As an employed sailor who contributes to the development of the British Empire, Hammon presents himself as possessing characteristics that make him a valued member of his community. Yet such employment does not diminish Hammon's longing to return to his "native land."

In describing his voyage home, Hammon doubles his Joseph narrative with the stories of several other familiar biblical figures to encourage his readers to acknowledge him as a providentially led Christian. Through the sailor network of a London tavern, Hammon discovers a vessel headed for Boston and secures a job as a cook. Shortly after he begins working, he overhears the crew talking about a man named Winslow:

I ask'd them what *General Winslow*? For I never knew *my good Master*, by that Title before; but after enquiring more particularly I found it must be *Master*, and in a few Days Time the Truth was joyfully verify'd by a happy Sight of his Person, which so overcome me, that I could not speak to him for some Time—*My good Master* was exceeding glad to see me, telling me that I was like one arose from the Dead, for he thought I had been Dead a great many Years, having heard nothing of me for almost Thirteen Years. (13)

Scholars have not been able to determine whether Hammon was a slave, indentured servant, or free black. Robert Desrochers, Jr., suggests that Hammon's use of the terms "joyfully," "happy," "overcome," and "exceeding glad" to describe his reunion with General Winslow expresses his relief at escaping poor conditions in London and reuniting with an indulgent master (159). This interpretation begs us to question why Hammon would voluntarily return to the precarious life of a slave, however. Other scholars, notably Vincent Carretta, suggest that Hammon was likely free. According to Carretta, the word "Master" is "apparently used here in the sense of *employer* rather than owner. Hammon seems to have been a free man . . . Although slave owners often leased their own slaves to work for others, for an owner to have permitted a slave to work more than a thousand miles away would have been an extraordinary act of faith" (*Unchained Voices*, Note 3, 24-25).

In his account of his meeting with Winslow, Hammon provides a means for us to interpret his sea adventure and reunion with General Winslow by recalling that his "*good Master*" tells him he was "like one rose from the dead" (13). Jesus uttered a similar phrase in the "Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus," in which a rich man who was suffering in hell asked Abraham to send an ostracized beggar, Lazarus, from heaven to warn his unbelieving relatives of their impending doom (Luke 16:19-31). Additionally, in one of His last miracles before the crucifixion, Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the dead, provoking Jewish leaders to plot to kill Lazarus because he provided evidence to support Jesus' claim to be the Messiah (John 11). Both the parable and the miracle revealed the hypocrisy of Jewish leaders who claimed they were looking for the Messiah but rejected the testimony of individuals like the resurrected Lazarus because they had

not studied the Scriptures. I suggest that Hammon employs the phrase “good master” to transform General Winslow into a Jesus figure who in effect warns New England readers against rejecting his servant’s testimony. Given the prevailing racist attitudes toward blacks and the institution of slavery, Hammon’s readers could perceive the young sailor as the beggar Lazarus and dismiss his narrative of providential deliverances. Like the hypocritical and legalistic Jewish leaders who oppressed the marginalized people in their society, Hammon’s readers identified themselves as Christians but did not live by biblical principles in their relationships with Afro-Atlantic people. Hammon provides a testimony that could redeem pious New Englanders who enslave blacks and move Afro-Atlantic people into the mainstream of community life.

At the end of his *Narrative*, Hammon may have further sought to solidify his status as a Christian in his “native land” by doubling the Lazarus story with that of the shepherd David to validate his “Surprizing Deliverances” as miraculous occurrences. He declares, “*And now, That in the Providence of that GOD, who delivered his Servant David out of the Paw of the Lion and out of the Paw of the Bear, I am freed from a long and dreadful Captivity, among worse Savages than they*” (14). Hammon asserts that the same God who had saved David from wild animals rescued him from worse “Savages,” Native Americans and Spaniards. As a faithful believer, Hammon declares, “I am . . . return’d to my own Native Land, to Shew how Great Things the Lord hath done for me: *I would call upon all Men, and Say, O Magnife the Lord with Me, and let us Exalt his Name together!—O that men would praise the Lord for His Goodness, and for his Wonderful Works to the Children of Men!*” (14). Hammon quotes the psalm David wrote after God rescued him from King Saul, who sought to kill him. Similarly, because

Hammon has overcome his fears through his Atlantic adventures, he invites his readers to join him in praising God for his providential deliverance of a Negro man. Hammon places himself within the spiritual community of those who claim the promises of God to bless them just as He protected David, the anointed king of Israel. He has exhibited piety, loyalty, and ingenuity throughout his journey. He has completed his transformation from Negro man to Christian Englishman. Hammon offers his providential story as a means whereby he and his New England readers can find solidarity through their relationships with God.

Marrant's appropriation of the Joseph story to account for his own transformation resembles Hammon's embrace of the biblical narrative, but Marrant's goal is to detail his reunion and reconciliation with his family and justify his call to the ministry. During his encounter with Native Americans, Marrant adopts their dress, masters their language, and embraces their culture. Initially, he has no interest in seeing his family again. After visiting several Native American communities, however, he reports, "I now and then found, that my affections to my family and country were not dead; they were sometimes very sensibly felt, and at last strengthened into an invincible desire of returning home" (121). Unlike Joseph who never expressed a desire to go back to Palestine, Marrant's resolve to return home strengthens as he travels further away from his family. His conversion to Christianity brings about the conviction that he must reconcile with them.

Marrant illustrates how his "lost" condition transforms his family's attitude toward him. A friend he meets on his way home tells him that his family is well, except one "lately lost." He explains: "After [Marrant] had quitted school, he went to Charles-Town to learn some trade; but came home crazy, and rumbled in the woods, and was torn

in pieces by the wild beasts . . . I, and his brother, and uncle, and others . . . went three days into the woods in search of him, and found his carcass torn, and brought it home, and buried it, and they are now in mourning for him” (122). I suggest that the young man’s recollection of the search for Marrant retells the portion of the Joseph story in which the young Hebrew’s brothers presented their sibling’s blood-stained coat of many colors to Jacob and told him a wild beast had devoured Joseph rather than confess their deed. No deception is involved in Marrant’s story, however. His family seems genuinely sorry that their actions led to his death and continue to mourn him. Their sorrow compels Marrant to acknowledge his “lost” condition and admit that, as a Christian, he should have stayed and worked through his differences with his family.

In *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century*, Potkay and Burns suggest that “. . . like the biblical Joseph [Marrant] is reunited with a family that thought him dead” (11). Joanna Brooks also suggests that this episode in Marrant’s life recalls the story of Joseph. Arriving home dressed as a Cherokee, Marrant is not recognized by his friends or family, just as Joseph’s brothers could not identify him when they came into Egypt searching for food. His family does not expect him to come home because they think he is dead. He weeps over his condition as he begins to understand he has been “lost” both physically and spiritually. Marrant’s family invites him into their home and answers his questions, but they soon become uncomfortable and ask him to leave. When his eleven-year-old sister comes home from school, however, she immediately declares that the black man dressed as a Cherokee is John: “She ran and clasped me round the neck, and, looking me in the face, said, ‘Are not you my brother John?’ I answered yes, and wept” (122).

Marrant complicates his narrative of family reconciliation with allusions to the parable of the prodigal son to exhibit evidence of his conversion. Unlike Joseph, the prodigal son and Marrant chose to leave home. He recounts, “I was then made known to all the family, to my friends, and acquaintances, who received me, and were glad, and rejoiced: Thus the dead was brought to life again; thus the lost was found” (122).<sup>6</sup> Brooks argues that Marrant can likewise be viewed as Lazarus since his life is “a series of deaths and rebirths.” Thus he becomes a Joseph-Lazarus figure who can address “slavery as an alienating and depersonalizing form of social death” (98-99). But Lazarus figures in the Bible do not experience repeated cycles of death and resurrection. In “Race, Redemption, and Captivity in *A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings With John Marrant, a Black* and *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro man*,” Karen A. Weyler also identifies a connection between Marrant’s experience and the Lazarus’ story but asserts that Marrant is also “alluding . . . to the parables of the lost sheep and the prodigal son [for] he himself was only truly lost when he lived among his family. By leaving them, he found himself and gained the spiritual confidence to withstand their disbelief” (49). I suggest that early in his *Narrative*, Marrant informs his readers that much like the prodigal son during his wilderness wandering, he sleeps in trees to escape wild animals, eats grass because he has no food, and drinks muddy water that wild pigs have left behind. By shifting his position from Joseph to the prodigal son, Marrant takes responsibility for his estrangement from his family. His experiences as a “lost” son in the wilderness and his captivity with the Cherokees bring about his conversion and prepare him for the ministry. Weyler argues

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<sup>6</sup> The verse from the parable of the prodigal son reads: “For this my son was dead, and is alive again, he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry” (Luke 15:24).

that “[Marrant] can truly speak of himself as being re-born when he returns to his family, for his spiritual rebirth has enabled him to effect conversions among those he meets” (48). Although Marrant wins converts during his journey home, as a Christian, he cannot devote himself to evangelism until he and his family are reunited. The ministry gives him the opportunity to introduce Afro-Atlantic people to Christianity and encourage them to develop piety. Marrant, his converts, and Europeans now have the opportunity to come together and build new communities grounded in their common faith.

While Marrant embraces the Joseph story to posit himself as an evangelist, Cugoano appropriates the narrative to provide evidence that God overrules the plans of slave traders and masters. He asserts, “I may say with Joseph, as he did with respect to the evil intent of his brethren, when they sold him into Egypt, that whatever evil intentions and bad motives those insidious robbers had in carrying me away from my native country and friends, I trust, was what the Lord intended for my good” (17). By embracing the Joseph narrative, Cugoano is compelled to forgive his English captors and admit his enslavement has led to a positive transformation. After his master takes him to London where he gains his freedom, Cugoano receives an education that is not available in Africa. He writes, “I am highly indebted to many of the good people of England for learning and principles unknown to the people of my native country” (17). In singling out “good” Englishmen for praise, he subtly encourages them to extend these opportunities to other Africans.

As Joseph saved his family from starvation, Cugoano seeks to save his people from slavery. He pursues an education in order to address the issue of slavery. He writes, “I have endeavored to improve my mind in reading, and have sought to get all the

intelligences I could, in my situation of life, towards the state of my brethren and countrymen in complexion, and of the miserable situation of those who are barbarously sold into captivity, and unlawfully held in slavery” (17). Cugoano, the servant, becomes the master of English political, historical, and religious ideologies, enabling him to produce a tract that forcefully challenges England’s rationale for slavery. Although Cugoano’s *Thoughts and Sentiments* was not as popular as Equiano’s *Narrative*, his astute grasp of the theories that Englishmen relied on to justify the slave trade undermined arguments that Africans were best suited for servitude and directed the English to see the potential for free Africans to be productive members of their community.

Equiano differentiates himself from Cugoano, Marrant, and Hammon by including the role of other biblical persons—namely, Peter, Jacob, Moses, and Elijah—and adapting larger portions of the Exodus narrative to advance abolition in England. In so doing, he constructs the most sophisticated performance by a black writer in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, recreating himself as an African fully acculturated to the ways of upstanding Englishmen. This radical enactment begins with the *Interesting Narrative’s* frontispiece. Like Joseph the Israelite who was arrayed in the fine linen and gold of Egyptian royalty and given the name Zaphanthpaaneah (Gen. 41:42, 45), Equiano wears the refined clothing of an English gentleman and identifies himself as both Olaudah Equiano and Gustavus Vassa, the African. But although Equiano resembles a Joseph figure, he does not have the power to transform his world. Joseph used his authority as an Egyptian official physically to relocate his free brethren to the best land in Egypt. In contrast, Equiano invokes the power of Pentecost to challenge the British to

free his enslaved brethren. Equiano holds a Bible opened to Acts 4:12, “Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” Peter uttered these words when he and John were released from prison shortly after the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was given to the early Christian church. Potkay and Burr contend, “The book of Acts to which Equiano appealed was of special importance to many blacks and their white abolitionist friends for its strong message of Christian universalism” (13). Eileen Razzari Elrod further suggests that Equiano uses the frontispiece to engage his readers by declaring, “This life narrative . . . like other spiritual autobiographies produced in this period, will be religiously instructive as well as self-reflective in nature” (413). Gazing directly at his audience as a modern Peter, Equiano accesses the divine power of Pentecost to confront and convert his people’s oppressors, and convince them to abolish slavery.

Whereas the paratext of Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* exhibits his transformed self, the book itself details his journey to transformation. The names he receives during his early slave experience reflect his development into a patriarchal figure. When Equiano is enslaved, he recalls, “I was called Michael” (63). When he is sold to a new master in Virginia, he reports, “In this place, I was called Jacob” (63). The conferring of these names reflected the common practice of masters assigning their slaves the names of revered biblical figures in order to emphasize their godlike authority over their servants. After Equiano is sold and heads out to sea, he writes, “When I was on board this ship, my captain and my master named me *Gustavus Vasa*. I at that time began to understand him a little, and refused to be called so, and told him as well as I could that I would be called

Jacob; but he said I should not, and still called me Gustavus” (64). After suffering beatings from his new master, Equiano accepts his new name.

Equiano’s names initially seem curious for up until this point, he has experienced the life of Joseph. He first references the Jacob story when describing the destruction slavery brought on his and other African families. Thus his recollection of being named “Jacob” may have had significance for his Christian readers, for Equiano seeks to be the *patriarch* Jacob, Joseph’s father, the progenitor of a new family in the African Diaspora. Potkay and Burr argue that “[Jacob] is an especially apt name, for Jacob, as ‘Israel,’ is the eponymous patriarch who descends into Egypt. Equiano’s subsequent bondage on the island of Montserrat further supports his identification with the Israelite after whom he had been named” (13). Although Equiano does not choose this name, he embodies the experiences of Israelites who were not only enslaved in Egypt, but ultimately gained their freedom and reached the Promised Land. His master’s insistence on changing his name from Jacob to Gustavus Vassa might have been dictated by his desire to hide Equiano’s slave status (Carretta, *Interesting Narrative* 252, Note 129). Moreover, Equiano’s English readers were familiar with the story of Gustavus Vassa (1496-1560), a Swede who had led his people to freedom from the Danish in 1521-23. The name had been popularized in England by Henry Brooke’s play, *Gustavus Vasa, The Deliverer of his Country*. Publications of the play between 1739 and 1797 helped keep the public engaged in discussions about political oppression. Ironically, the name that Equiano initially resisted, Gustavus Vassa, may have been more effective in advancing his antislavery cause than the name Jacob. After obtaining his freedom, Equiano preferred being called “Gustavus

Vassa.” He may have hoped Britons would make the connection between the Dane’s quest for freedom and his involvement in the antislavery movement (252, note 129).

Equiano’s transformation from a slave named Jacob on a Virginia plantation to an enslaved sailor named Gustavus Vassa on an English naval vessel signals the beginning of his embrace of English culture. His travels as a sailor enable him to become familiar with the English way of life and prepare him for his successful work as an abolitionist in England. Yet, as a slave, Equiano cannot be Jacob, the patriarch of a new African community in the Americas, or Gustavus Vassa, a courageous abolitionist. I suggest that he remains still a Joseph figure in his search of freedom. As Joseph had adopted the lifestyle of his Egyptian masters, Equiano learns the ways of his English slave owners. After nearly four years of service to Captain Pascal, Equiano reflects, “From the various scenes I had beheld on ship-board, I soon grew a stranger to terror of every kind, and was, in that respect at least, almost an Englishman” (77). Becoming “almost an Englishman” means that Equiano has mastered the English language, acquired rudimentary sailing skills, and pledged allegiance to England by fighting in the Royal Navy. Years of faithful service to his master and England do not translate into freedom, however. Captain Pascal sells him to a slave trader heads for the West Indies.

While working in the West Indian Egypt “land of bondage” and witnessing the terrible impact of slavery on his brethren, Equiano desires to be like Moses. His sympathy for their suffering is evident in his recollection of his acquaintance with a poorly treated Creole in Montserrat. The slave’s master and other white men often take his fish without compensating him. Equiano does not console his friend as Jacob the revered patriarch. Rather, he yearns to be Moses, the militant liberator. He writes, “The

artless tale moved me much, and I could not help feeling the just cause Moses had in redressing his brother against the Egyptian. I exhorted the man to look up still to the God on top, since there was no redress below” (110-11). Equiano is referencing here the incident in which Moses slew an Egyptian taskmaster who was mistreating an enslaved Israelite and then hid the Egyptian’s body in the sand (Exod. 2). He describes Moses’ murder of the overseer as a “just cause,” yet he himself refrains from violence in helping his Creole friend. In “Olaudah Equiano and the Art of Spiritual Autobiography,” Adam Potkay argues that Equiano “knows he cannot be Moses, because the Christian dispensation has no room for the violent retaliation imagined by his younger self” (688). I suggest that the reality of slave life may have been a more compelling reason why Equiano controls his anger, for slaves rarely got away with murder in the West Indies. Even Moses became a fugitive after Pharaoh learned that his adopted Hebrew grandson had killed a taskmaster. Although Equiano longs to exercise his own agency in liberating a fellow slave, he encourages the enslaved Creole to trust God to avenge wrong. He thus posits himself as a level headed, faithful Moses at this juncture in his journey. Moses, the pampered prince, needed forty years of training as a shepherd to learn to trust God to deliver his people; Equiano learned that lesson through his life as a slave.

Equiano may have dreamed of violently killing taskmasters just as Moses had, but while toiling in the Caribbean, his experience most often reflects Joseph’s life. He works for masters who allow him to continue acquiring marketable skills, and becomes a merchant after he is sold to Robert King. His new master shows him favor, but he values the services of his slave too much to liberate him. Unlike Joseph, who won his freedom by using his God-given talent to interpret dreams, Equiano employs his marketing skills

to earn enough money to purchase his freedom. When Equiano is finally freed, he doubles his Joseph narrative with the biblical story of Elijah's translation to describe his initial response to freedom. He exclaims, "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 speed as I went on'" (136). Elrod argues that Equiano "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 only way into his story here, he says to the reader, is to look beyond personal experiences to another textual one" (417). Elijah's ascension occurred at the end of his prophetic work on earth, however, while Equiano's emancipation inaugurates his new life as a free man in a slave society where he can never experience eternal bliss.

While Equiano's readers may have been able to imagine his joy by recalling Elijah's fiery exit from earth, they soon learn that his happiness is short-lived. As he begins earning wages as a free black seaman, Equiano encounters abusive white men and is denied promotions in the maritime industry because of his race. These brushes with discrimination do not prevent him from acting more like a recently emancipated Israelite overseer than a savior of his people, however.<sup>7</sup> Like the Israelites who practiced slavery after gaining their freedom and leaving Egypt, Equiano does not immediately seek to abolish the institution of slavery. He accepts his friend Dr. Irving's invitation to help establish a plantation in Jamaica, hoping to use the venture as a missionary endeavor. Ironically, on the day he helps Dr. Irving purchase slaves, he leaves church service,

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<sup>7</sup> Mosaic Law allowed mild forms of slavery in the Hebrew community (Exod. 21:20-21 and Lev. 25:44-46).

condemns individuals who are buying and selling on the Sabbath, and walks immediately aboard a “Guinea-man” and chooses “all of my own countrymen” as bondsmen (205). In *Equiano the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man*, Vincent Carretta argues that “Equiano’s unquestioning willingness to participate in a project based on slave labor and to condone the slave trade as well as the pride he took in selecting slaves should not surprise us . . . Equiano was convinced that his own experiences and observations as a slave enabled him to be a humane overseer of slaves” (184-85). Indeed, Equiano recalls that he “. . . always treated [the slaves] with care and affection, and did everything I could to comfort the poor creatures and render their condition easy” (211).

Equiano soon becomes so disgusted by slaveholding culture, however, that he forsakes plantation life and moves to England. Carretta suggests that Equiano’s experience as a slaver is essential to his transformation for it enabled him to assert that like many English Christians, he needs a “second conversion” before he is convinced of the evils of the slave trade. Equiano’s departure sparks a series of tragic events. He encounters several sea captains who beat and deceive him, and threaten to remand him to slavery. Equiano’s decision to become a slaver exemplifies the assertion in the frontispiece of the *Interesting Narrative* that only God can save humanity and create unity in a diverse community. Equiano needs a providential deliverance from slavery as a bondsman and overseer as much as the English who depend on slaves to build their empire.

After Equiano leaves the West Indies, his life continues to reflect the Joseph narrative during his final transformation from slaver into abolitionist. Like Joseph, Equiano marries a woman from his adopted homeland and works for the salvation of his

people. He petitions the Queen to raise his brethren “. . . from the condition of brutes, to which they are at present degraded, to the rights and situation of men, and be admitted to partake of the blessings of your Majesty’s happy government” (232). Following the Joseph model, Equiano not only wants enslaved Africans to be liberated, he requests that they be integrated into English society. Having risen from the status of slave to free African, Equiano, like Cugoano, offers his life as an example of what his brethren can achieve and what converted Englishmen can accomplish in the new Christian communities they would build throughout the British Empire.

### **Conclusion**

Afro-Atlantic writers entered the biblical language-world and embraced portions of the Joseph story and other biblical narratives to explore the relationships among piety, politics, and freedom for people of African descent in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. With an emphasis on betrayal by brethren, captivity in a foreign land, favor from God and benevolent masters, reconciliation with family, and transformation from marginalized other to valued member of a new community, Joseph’s story helped Afro-Atlantic writers articulate their experiences and challenge the belief that Africans were cursed to a life of perpetual slavery. But their lives often exceeded the representational boundaries of European versions of the Joseph story. As a result, they doubled the Joseph story with episodes from the lives of revered biblical figures like Joseph, David, Moses, or Peter. By positing themselves as Afro-Atlantic Josephs, black writers challenged Europeans to consider the possibility of new communities of believers who experienced favor from man and Providence. Despite the cohesiveness of the central Joseph story in these narratives, however, Afro-Atlantic people did not achieve their goals for equality

and freedom in eighteenth-century England and America. Individually, they experienced a measure of favor and liberty, but most of their brethren continued to languish in slavery. Most lived long enough to see that freedom did not lead to equality in a world where race was increasingly becoming the determining factor through which people of European descent differentiated themselves from Africans and Negroes and justified the perpetual enslavement or oppression of Afro-Atlantic peoples.

## **Chapter 2: Exodus as the Blueprint for Building Free Black Communities in America and Abroad, 1800-1840**

And afterward Moses and Aaron went in, and told Pharaoh,  
Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Let My people go,  
that they may hold a feast unto Me in the wilderness.  
—Exod. 5:1

I shall need, too, the favor of that Being in whose hands  
we are who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land  
and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and  
comforts of life.  
—Thomas Jefferson, second inauguration address (1805)

Well was I aware that if I contended boldly for His cause,  
I must suffer. Yet, I chose rather to suffer affliction  
with His people, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin  
for a season.  
—Maria W. Stewart, “Farewell Address” (1833)

In the first decade of the nineteenth century, abolitionists gained a major victory when England and the United States outlawed the transatlantic slave trade. Each nation, however, developed different philosophies regarding their continued involvement with slavery. The United States further entrenched itself as a slave society through a profitable domestic slave trade while England began to consider how to improve the condition of slaves in the West Indies and legislate for their gradual emancipation. As it expanded territorially, the United States maintained an equal number of free and slave states, reflecting the country’s continued division over slavery. In contrast, in 1833 Parliament abolished slavery throughout the British Empire.

These divergent approaches to slavery caused a major shift in the development of Afro-Atlantic Exodus narratives. As England’s antislavery movement flourished and emancipation day drew near, Afro-British writers’ literary production diminished. By

1800, many of the late eighteenth-century black British authors who had invoked the Exodus narrative in their writings had died or disappeared from public record. Other black writers in England published a variety of texts, most notably John Jea's *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Suffering of John Jea, the African Preacher, Compiled and Written by Himself* (1815), Robert Wedderburn's *The Axe Laid to the Root* (1817) and *The Horrors of Slavery* (1824), and Mary Prince's *History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* (1831). Two of these writers invoked the Exodus narrative in their work: Jea to encourage release from the slavery of sin and Wedderburn to demand the slaying of English slaveholders in Jamaica similar to God's destruction of the Israelites' Egyptian oppressors. British abolitionists continued to publish stories in antislavery newspapers about enslaved Africans laboring in the West Indies, but they rarely contributed to the black Exodus tradition that Equiano, Cugoano, Hammon, Marrant, and Wheatley had created.

In contrast, American free blacks strengthened their battle against slavery by petitioning legislators, delivering lectures, and publishing antislavery texts. Enslaved African Americans expressed their discontent in spirituals, sermons, folktales, rebellions, and by running away. The Second Great Awakening, a religious revival that swept the nation from the late 1700s to the mid-1800s, reintroduced free and enslaved African Americans to the Exodus narrative, rekindled their hope for a deliverer, and made them the primary authors of Afro-Atlantic Exodus stories.

As early nineteenth-century African American writers and their supporters began to shape new Exodus narratives, they embraced Moses as the model of a deliverer who would lead them to their promised land. They were attracted to Moses because of his

humble beginnings, personal connection to God, and unwavering commitment to his people. Born into slavery in ancient Egypt, Moses immediately faced a death sentence after Pharaoh commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill baby boys as a means of checking the population growth of the Israelite slave community. Moses survived because the midwives disobeyed Pharaoh's orders. His mother hid Moses for three months, and then placed him in a basket among the cattails in a river. Pharaoh's daughter found the baby and adopted him, ushering him into a life of luxury as heir to the throne of Egypt. During a visit to the Hebrew slave community, Moses murdered an Egyptian taskmaster who he believed was punishing an enslaved Israelite too severely. Once Pharaoh learned of his action, the Egyptian prince became a most-wanted fugitive. Moses escaped death a second time by fleeing to Median, where he lived forty years, tending sheep and raising a family until God called him to lead the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land. During the Israelites' wilderness journey, Moses established divine and civic laws that transformed former slaves into citizens.

No American slave experienced the kind of favor and freedom that Moses did. Unlike Pharaoh, American slave owners valued enslaved African Americans as property and laborers, and explored every means to increase the slave population. Although benefactors occasionally manumitted slaves, none ever offered them the opportunity to live in the White House and become a government official. Nevertheless, like Moses, enslaved and free blacks worked for the emancipation of their brethren and the development of their communities.

This chapter examines how Moses' community-building strategies inspired abolitionists and activists to establish black communities in America and abroad. In the

North, black ministers who tended to the spiritual and temporal needs of their congregations initiated these early efforts. In *A Thanksgiving Sermon* (1808), Episcopal minister Absalom Jones turns to the book of Exodus to create a non-violent strategy that will help free black Philadelphians strengthen their community and transform their brethren's Egypt into a promised land. AME minister Daniel Coker characterizes himself as Moses during his transatlantic Exodus to encourage free blacks to emigrate to an African promised land in the *Journal of Daniel Coker: A Descendant of Africa* (1820) and his unpublished journal, "Daniel Coker, Diary, April 21, 1821 – September 21, 1821." In the South, trial records reveal slave leaders' reliance on revolt as the best means to establish free black communities. In 1800, the Exodus story inspired Gabriel's co-conspirators to establish Richmond, Virginia, as a home for African Americans. Twenty-three years later, Denmark Vesey and his followers appropriated portions of the Exodus narrative to convince slaves and free blacks in Charleston, South Carolina, to slaughter their white oppressors and escape to the promised land of Haiti.

White American newspapers' racist characterizations of Vesey and other members of the black community convinced African Americans that they needed to develop a literature that addressed their concerns, supported reform movements, and nurtured an international black community. From 1827 on, newspapers like *Freedom's Journal* (1827-29), *The Liberator* (1831-65), and *The Colored American* (1836-41) published stories to promote the work of local race leaders, notably Maria W. Stewart and David Walker. In his *Appeal in Four Articles* (1829), Walker urges blacks to build a strong global community by emulating Moses' loyalty to his people. In her pamphlet *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must*

*Build* (1830) and “An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall, Boston” (1833), Stewart admonishes blacks to pattern their lives after Moses. After black Bostonians rejected her counsel, Stewart delivered “Mrs. Stewart’s Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston” (1833), in which she presents herself as a Moses who has given up life’s pleasures to suffer with her people and fight for their rights.

### **The Second Great Awakening, the American Revolution, and the Exodus Narrative:**

#### **The United States—Egypt for Blacks, Promised Land for Whites**

In the late 1700s, prominent, influential New England theologians such as Abiel Abbot, Samuel Langdon, Samuel Miller, and Ezra Stiles built on the Puritan Exodus narrative tradition by encouraging politicians and parishioners to see their new republic as the modern manifestation of ancient Israel. For example, in his sermon “The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor” (1783), Stiles recalls Moses’ admonition to the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Promised Land: “And to make [Israel] 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” (Deut. 26:19). According to Stiles, the biblical passage also predicts the “future prosperity and splendor” of “God’s American Israel” (83). He asserts that civic and religious liberty, coupled with property ownership, would enable American settlers to participate in a grand experiment in which every citizen profited from his labor, shared power, and developed a prosperous republic. Stiles further maintains that God had providentially ordered the establishment of America to disseminate Christian and democratic ideals throughout the world.

Other New England ministers further expands the national Exodus narrative as they instructed white citizens to fulfill their political and spiritual responsibilities. In “The

Republic of the Israelites an Example to the United States” (1788), a sermon he preached before the general court at the annual election in Concord, New Hampshire, Langdon reviews ancient Israel’s transformation from a community of twelve enslaved tribes into a Jewish nation with strong political and spiritual organizations. He admonishes his listeners to establish a similar society or risk repeating the failures of the Jews who refused to follow God’s plan consistently. He warns, “I have presented you with the portrait of a nation, highly favored of Heaven with civil and religious institutions, who yet, by not improving their advantage, forfeited their blessings and brought contempt and destruction on themselves. If I am not mistaken, instead of twelve tribes of Israel, we may substitute the thirteen states of America and see the application plainly offering itself, *viz*” (98). According to Langdon, American legislators could develop a strong republic by caring for their families, studying the Bible, selecting honest representatives, funding schools generously, and preserving knowledge of God. This approach represents a careful balance of family, politics, and religion that many white Americans believed was essential to the success of their new nation. In their sermons, neither Langdon nor Stiles acknowledges African Americans’ presence in or contributions to the young republic, however.

If the United States was “God’s American Israel,” the nation needed a Moses to guide its citizens in establishing their government. Shortly before George Washington died, prominent theologians appropriated the Exodus narrative to assert that God had selected America’s first president just as He had chosen ancient Israel’s first leader. Immediately after Washington’s death, ministers throughout the nation, particularly in New England where many still embraced the Puritan tradition, eulogized Washington as

the “American Moses.” They drew parallels between the two men’s upbringing and leadership qualities, and emphasized their roles in nation building. For example, in *A Funeral Sermon, Preached at Rockaway, December 29, 1799, on the Much Lamented Death of General George Washington* (1800), John J. Carle declares, “. . . Moses was, under God, almost the sole director in civilian and military departments, to the Israelites, and Washington, by epistolary communication, afforded, unto Congress, much light and assistance. Especially in cases of difficulty and perplexities; and in considerable measure guided our councils while he led our armies” (qtd. in Hay 785).

By writing Exodus narratives with Washington as Moses, American theologians continued developing official stories that steeled them for political battles at home and abroad. Contrary to their assertions, Moses had not been a military leader; his sole effort to free the Israelites by killing an Egyptian taskmaster had failed. During the journey to Canaan when the Israelites fought one major battle, Moses sat on a nearby hill with his hands stretched toward heaven to indicate their dependence on God for victory while Joshua commanded the troops. Other preachers even argued that Washington was a greater man than Moses because he led the American colonists into their promised land (Hay 788). In the early decades of the nineteenth century, white Americans would recall the exploits of their Washington Moses to assure themselves of victory during the War of 1812, disputes over slave and free states in the 1820s, and political conflicts in the late 1820s and 1830s (790).

Indeed, the success of the American Revolution and elevation of Washington to Mosaic leadership inspired white Americans to become more confident and assertive. The United States prospered under the guidance of slaveholding politicians who invoked

the Exodus story to chart a course for the new nation. During his second inaugural address on March 5, 1805, President Thomas Jefferson, a slave owner, linked the future of America to the history of the Israelites. He declared, “I shall need, too, the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life.” Like the Israelites who settled in a land “flowing with milk and honey” (Exod. 3:8), Jefferson asserted that the pilgrims discovered a New World filled with abundant resources essential in developing a prosperous republic. To ensure that the inhabitants of their promised land would be white Americans, Jefferson and Stiles both advocated colonization to relocate free blacks and emancipated slaves to Africa. In the meantime, black Americans shouldered increasing responsibility for providing white Americans’ “necessaries and comforts of life.”

As they bore the burden for building the nation, African Americans decentered and rewrote the nation’s national Exodus narratives to inspire their people to exercise human agency in demanding civil liberties, and to pressure whites to liberate the slaves and accept blacks as citizens. From 1800 to 1840, black writers and their supporters enter the “language-world” of the biblical narrative and create Exodus stories that reflect “a communal identity as a special, divinely favored people” (Wimbush 4 and Raboteau, “African Americans” 84). In their writings they constitute themselves as God’s oppressed people and express their belief that He will intervene on their behalf. They variously urge free and enslaved blacks to transform their American Egypt into a promised land, fight white racists in a contested American promised land, or emigrate to foreign black promised lands. In the process, some advocate non-violent resistance, others physical

rebellion. Editors of antislavery and black newspapers encourage the development of black Exodus stories by publishing articles instructing a national black audience how to transform the language of Exodus into abolitionist and reform rhetoric essential for community building in the United States. Although Moses continues to be the primary leadership model in the early nineteenth century, some writers create a fissure in the black Exodus story by invoking the Joseph and Joshua stories to characterize new leaders who call for homes in foreign promised lands. Although the black Exodus narratives that emerge do not fulfill the promise of emancipation, they foster racial uplift efforts and nurture activists who advocate increasingly radical means for African Americans to achieve freedom and equality in the promised land of their choice.

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### **African Americans Employ Exodus for Community Building in America and Abroad**

#### **Absalom Jones: Moses for the City of Brotherly Love**

African American activists embraced the Exodus narrative to articulate their plans for their people's transformation from slaves to citizens. They understood the value of casting white Americans as Egyptians, black Americans as Israelites, and their own leaders as Moses figures in order to empower racial uplift efforts. One such activist was Absalom Jones, a former slave who became an Episcopal minister in Philadelphia. Jones joined other prominent activists in planning a Day of Thanksgiving to celebrate the passage of the 1807 law that abolished the transatlantic slave trade. On January 1, 1808, he preached *A Thanksgiving Sermon* in which he invokes the Exodus story to transform the legislation into a divine sign portending the emancipation of the slaves and encourage

black Philadelphians to commemorate their victory, aggressively work for emancipation and civil rights, and extend their community building efforts to Africa.

Although he was born into slavery in Delaware in 1746, Jones acquired the skills that prepared him for Mosaic leadership. While a house servant, he taught himself to read using a New Testament. After moving to Philadelphia to work in his master's grocery store, he attended a school for blacks run by Quakers. He remained in Philadelphia during the American Revolution, witnessing its transformation into the first capital of the new republic. By 1784, he had saved enough money to purchase his own freedom and his wife's as well. He soon became a licensed preacher at St. George's Methodist Church. Three years later he and Richard Allen led an exodus from the church after white trustees demanded that black parishioners move to segregated balcony pews during opening prayer. Later that year, Allen and Jones established the Free Aid Society to address the economic, spiritual, and physical needs of their brethren. When Matthew Carey, a prominent Philadelphia printer published *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia* (1793), falsely accusing black Philadelphians of pilfering the homes of whites who left the city during a yellow fever epidemic, Jones and Allen defended their community in a pamphlet of their own, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia* (1794). Jones and Allen appropriate the Exodus story to remind Philadelphians that God heard the pleas of enslaved Israelites and punished the Egyptians when they refused to emancipate His people. They argue that Carey's accusations are rooted in the nation's acceptance of African American enslavement rather than the true evidence of black Philadelphians' aid to suffering white residents. They admonish blacks to forgive their oppressors and avoid

violence as a remedy for their wrongs. Jones and Allen were convinced that enslaved African Americans could become a community of industrious citizens if set free, just as the Israelites had made the transition from slaves to productive inhabitants in Canaan.

Jones continued to embrace the Exodus story as he struggled to find a way to integrate his oppressed brethren into America society. During the Day of Thanksgiving service, he framed his sermon with Exodus 3:7-8: “And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of My people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their task-masters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians.” When He called on Moses to tell Pharaoh to emancipate the Israelites, God revealed an intimate knowledge of His people’s experience in slavery. As Jones encourages his listeners to celebrate the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, he turns to this Exodus moment to remind them of the Israelites’ sufferings during slavery, mingling details from the story with descriptions of American slave experiences. As he reflects on the biblical narrative, he shifts emphasis from the specific Hebrews’ “God of their fathers” to the more general “Judge of the world . . . Deliverer of the innocent, and those who call upon His name . . . God of heaven and earth . . . Common Father of the human race” (337). Because God is African Americans’ Father, Judge, and Deliverer, He will emancipate enslaved blacks.

Jones’s role of Moses in his Thanksgiving Sermon builds on his earlier efforts on behalf of slaves’ liberation. In 1797, he had confronted Congress regarding the issue of slavery. In his first petition, he protested the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793 and demanded the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and domestic slavery. When legislators ignored his request, he gained the support of seventy-three subscribers and sent a petition

that deplored slavery and the slave trade to President Jefferson and Congress (*Petition of Absalom Jones* 330-32), which also went unacknowledged. Jones informs those listening to his *Thanksgiving Sermon* that God delivered the message Himself. Just as God had come down to Egypt and emancipated the enslaved Israelites, and then to the British Parliament in 1807 to convince legislators to outlaw the slave trade: “*He came down* into the Congress of the United States, the last winter, when they passed a similar law, the operation of which commences on this happy day” (*Thanksgiving Sermon* 338). Nearly ten years after Jones had submitted his first petition, Congress finally passed “An Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves into any Port or Place Within the Jurisdiction of the United States, From and After the First Day of January, in the Year of our Lord One Thousand Eight Hundred and Eight.” When the Israelites cried for relief, God answered their prayers by empowering Moses to be their leader and convincing Pharaoh to liberate them through a series of plagues. In Jones’s black Exodus narrative, American slaves also plead for divine deliverance. God answers their prayers when legislators pass a law that abolishes the transatlantic slave trade, but not slavery. Jones posits American politicians as being more obstinate than Pharaoh in their refusal to emancipate the slaves. Unlike the Egyptians, however, US legislators suffer no devastating consequences. And unlike the Israelites, African Americans cannot experience a biblical-like Exodus since they dwell in a fragmented nation.

Yet, in a radical fissure, Jones addresses his brethren’s unique Exodus experience by positioning black Philadelphians *within* their promised land to teach them the importance of incorporating faith, commemoration, and action into their community-building efforts. He strengthens his message by doubling a portion of the Exodus story

with an important New Testament event to encourages his audience to celebrate the 1808 legislation outlawing the slave trade as the “first fruit” of “peace upon earth, and goodwill to man” (*Thanksgiving Sermon* 338). When the Israelites left Egypt, Moses instituted Passover, a yearly festival that reminded them of their deliverance from slavery. During their first Passover in the Promised Land, the Israelites presented a sheaf of the first grain they harvested, their “first fruit,” to express their faith in Christ’s resurrection and the ultimate resurrection of all believers (Lev. 23:1-11 and 1 Cor. 15:20). In addition, Christ’s birth was heralded by angels singing “peace on earth” to announce the fulfillment of God’s promise of a Savior who would give His life to ransom humanity (Luke 2:8-14). Jones embraces these events to reveal God’s plan to free enslaved blacks and usher the entire black community into a time of peace and prosperity. When he instructs his audience to “give thanks unto the Lord; let us call upon His name, and make known His works among the people,” he directs their attention to Psalm 105 in which the writer recounts the miraculous deliverance of the Israelites from slavery and settlement in the Promised Land (338). Jones’s biblical allusions also evoke America’s first Thanksgiving when the Pilgrims praised God for safe passage to the New World and the harvesting of their first crops as a sign of divine blessing on their community. Jones creates a day for free blacks to herald the abolition of the slave trade as a sign of the eventual emancipation of American slaves and equality for all Americans.

Like Moses who taught the Israelites how to celebrate Passover, Jones introduces a five-point plan for African Americans to follow. He admonishes them to:

- 1) maintain a spirit of gratitude and praise for God’s blessings on them and their enslaved brethren;

- 2) pray that all European nations outlaw the slave trade and improve the life of slaves;
- 3) live exemplary lives and instruct their children how to become good Christians;
- 4) express appreciation for the assistance of abolitionists; and
- 5) establish January 1 as the day to thank God publicly for His mercy and teach black history to their children. (339-41)

Jones's plan is designed to transform black Philadelphians into exemplary citizens for whom the Exodus story serves as a blueprint for community building.

In *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*, Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., argues that Jones's "invocation of Exodus emphasized a kind of radical voluntarism [that] encouraged each participant to imaginatively relive the moment of bondage and deliverance. They were to become Israelites. America was to be seen as Egypt" (82). Because Jones claims that black Philadelphians are celebrating the harvest of "first fruits," however, they are *already* occupying their promised land, despite the fact that slavery and discriminatory laws threaten their freedom. Like the Israelites who battled the occupants of Canaan before they could establish their communities, free blacks in the North lived uneasily in a contested promised land. Although Pennsylvania had adopted a policy of gradual emancipation in the late 1700s, slaves and free blacks were still struggling to survive when Jones preached his *Thanksgiving Sermon*. Enslaved African Americans in the South faced greater hardships in their Egypt because the discontinuation of the transatlantic slave trade accelerated the growth of domestic slave markets. Thus, the task of free black Philadelphians was to transform the entire nation into a peaceful promised land. Just as God had impressed politicians to abolish the transatlantic slave trade, Jones encouraged his parishioners to believe He would answer

their prayers and persuade legislators to liberate the slaves and provide civil liberties for black citizens.

Yet Jones did not expect his brethren simply to wait for divine intervention. By supporting the abolition movement, black Philadelphians could exercise their own agency in mitigating their brethren's sufferings. Living frugal and exemplary lives as Christians could help them develop a thriving community. Teaching history to their descendants would instill in young people an appreciation for the sacrifices their ancestors had made to acquire freedom and inspire them to become involved in racial uplift.

As a sixty-two-year-old Moses, Jones likely realized he would not live to see the end of slavery, and he recognized the need for continued strong leadership. Instead of encouraging his audience to seek Mosaic leaders, however, Jones creates a fissure in his black Exodus narrative by instructing his parishioners to identify a Joseph to help them develop vibrant Christian communities throughout the world. As an Egyptian government official, Joseph was able to save his family's life during a famine and secure the best land for them to settle on when they relocated to Egypt. Jones wonders, "Who knows but a Joseph may rise up among them, who shall be the instrument of feeding the African nations with the bread of life, and of saving them, not from earthly bondage, but from the more galling yoke of sin and Satan" (*Thanksgiving Sermon* 340). Enslaved and free blacks needed a young leader who could negotiate between two worlds, as Joseph had done when he served as Egyptian prime minister and Hebrew savior. Jones asserts that such a black Joseph would be missionary minded and instrumental in Christianizing African nations. He would fulfill their brethren's greatest need for spiritual food and eternal life in black promised lands throughout the African Diaspora.

Black Philadelphians heeded Jones's call to hold annual New Year's Day programs to commemorate the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and become model US citizens. Their actions did not bring about the desired results, however. Whites resented free blacks' progress, supported discriminatory laws, and continued to rely on slave labor to sustain America's economy. Nearly ten years after Jones delivered his first *Thanksgiving Sermon*, the American Colonization Society (ACS) emerged as a major threat to the stability of Philadelphia's progressive black community. Organized to transport free blacks to Africa, the ACS established an auxiliary society in Philadelphia and sought the support of local black activists. Although some black Philadelphians, including Jones, advocated voluntary emigration and foreign missions, the majority opposed the ACS initiative, fearing it would lead to a forced exodus that would separate free blacks from their families and friends, and transform America into an Egypt for enslaved blacks. Until his death in 1818, Jones helped lead the protest against colonization.

### **Daniel Coker: Moses for "Bleeding Africa"**

While Jones hinted at the possibilities of a Joseph who would Christianize Africans, Daniel Coker explicitly appealed to free blacks to remedy their woes by joining the ACS and emigrating to the promised land of Africa. Born Isaac Wright to Susan Coker, a white indentured servant, and Daniel Wright, an enslaved African, Coker faced thirty-one years of servitude because his parents' relationship was illegal in the state of Maryland.<sup>8</sup> He gained an education because his white half-brother Daniel Coker refused to attend school without him. As a teenager, Coker escaped to New York, where he

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<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey R. Brackett, *The Negro in Maryland: A Study of the Institution of Slavery* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1889, 1969) 32-34. According to a Maryland law passed in 1715, "Children born to white mothers and black slave fathers were subjected to servitude for thirty-one years."

converted to Methodism and received his license to preach from Bishop Francis Asbury. Moving to Baltimore, the light-skinned youth passed as his white sibling Daniel Coker to avoid detection. Friends purchased his freedom so he could teach at the city's first school for black children. Coker soon joined the predominately-white Sharp Street United Methodist Church. When church officials limited black congregants to minor leadership roles, he helped establish a separate black congregation that later became the African Methodist Bethel Church. Coker also involved himself in local community activism and published an antislavery tract, *A Dialogue between a Virginian and an African Minister* (1810).

At the 1816 meeting that he and Richard Allen planned to organize the African Methodist Episcopal denomination, Coker's life took an unexpected turn that led him to embrace emigration. Delegates elected Coker as their first bishop, but he resigned in favor of Allen for reasons that remain unclear. At the first AME Conference in Baltimore later that year, Allen rebuked Coker for publicly criticizing his preaching style. In 1818, church leaders found Coker guilty of undisclosed charges and dismissed him from the Connection; Coker also filed for bankruptcy that year. During the AME Conference in 1819, church officials accepted Coker's petition for readmission to fellowship, but restricted his access to the pulpit, allowing him to preach only at the invitation of a local elder. This decision severely hampered Coker's efforts to unify the AME churches in Baltimore. He continued teaching at a school for black children but was not able to support his family (Corey 177-78 and Phillips 138).

In 1820, Coker sought new opportunities by signing onto the ACS's first voyage to Africa. He chronicled his journey to what he hoped would be a new home for blacks in

*The Journal of Daniel Coker, a Descendant of Africa* (1820) and “Daniel Coker, Diary, April 21, 1821 – September 21, 1821.” In his *Journal*, he recorded entries from the time he boarded the *Elizabeth* in New York to the initial days of setting up a colony in West Africa; in his “Diary” he reflected on early life in the colony and his family’s resettlement to Sierra Leone. Coker did not write every day, but he noted activities, weather conditions, religious services, spiritual reflections, personal readings, and the conflicts between emigrants and agents. When the ACS published Coker’s *Journal*, they included copies of his letters to friends in Baltimore in an Appendix.

In his *Journal*, Coker intimates that his primary reason for emigrating is to Christianize Africans. His view of colonization broadens as he develops closer ties to the ACS agents while traveling in their berth, and developing and establishing the settlement in Africa. When he realizes that the other emigrants distrust the agents, who they believe are exerting excessive control over their lives and the proposed colony, he unsuccessfully attempts to bridge the gap between the two groups. Through his manipulation of competing Exodus narratives in his *Journal* and “Diary,” Coker demonstrates the challenges of performing as Moses, positing Africa as the promised land, and presenting race as a presence in biblical reinterpretations.

Coker’s first *Journal* entry underscores how both he and the ACS agents characterize their voyage as a black Exodus to give credibility to a venture that many prominent African Americans did not support. In his description of a worship service held while the passengers wait for their voyage to begin, he recalls how ACS Agent Samuel Bacon, a Harvard-educated lawyer and Episcopal priest from Pennsylvania, invokes the Exodus narrative to draw a parallel between the biblical story and African

colonization. He writes: “This evening Mr. Bacon, read Deut. c. 11 and made some very appropriate and feeling remarks on the same; and I feel that his remarks were felt by most present” (2). Bacon reads the portion of scripture in which Moses reminded the Israelites of their miraculous deliverance from bondage and the protection they experienced during forty years of wilderness wandering. Similarly, as the emigrants prepare to leave the United States, Bacon encourages them to go forward fearlessly, obey God’s commandments, and teach His laws and the story of their Exodus experience to their children. Bacon thus posits Africa as the free blacks’ new promised land, and inadvertently characterizes the United States as Egypt. His appropriation of the Exodus narrative to justify the ACS’s removal of free blacks from the United States ensures the survival of an unreconstructed white promised land supported by slave labor.

Bacon’s invocation of Exodus reflected the ideas of ACS founder Presbyterian minister Robert Finley. By December 1816, Finley had enlisted the support of several leading politicians, executives, and clergy, including Henry Clay and Francis Scott Key, and organized the ACS to provide government-sponsored relocation of blacks. In a letter to John P. Mumford, Finley conveyed his hope that “rich and benevolent” contributors would fund the development of a colony in Africa so that “We should be cleared of them;—we should send to Africa a population partially civilized and Christianized for its benefit:—our blacks themselves would be put in a better situation” (Brown, *Biography* 99-100). Just as the Israelites had returned to Canaan, the land of their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Finley believed that “. . . only in Africa, the ‘land of their fathers,’ could Africans find true freedom and equality” (Staudenraus 19-20). While some colonizationists were concerned about the welfare of black Americans, others were

convinced they could strengthen the institution of slavery by ridding the country of “our blacks.”

Finley and Bacon had embarked on this exodus venture with limited experience working with African Americans, however, and seemed to sense their need for a black Moses to help them lead the emigrants. Coker, a well-educated, articulate, and experienced minister, teacher, and administrator, quickly emerged as a liaison between the agents and the emigrants. The ACS’s preference for Coker was evident in their recruitment efforts. They reportedly told him that he was “too intelligent to remain in [the United States]. They said he should go to Africa where his talent could be exercised in the interest of his race” (Smith and Payne 36). When Coker hesitated, they promised to appoint him president of Liberia (36). Shortly after setting sail for Africa, the ACS agents granted him permission to establish an official religious society that AME church officials had forbidden him upon reinstatement (Ashmun 247, Hardy 331, and Wright 68).

Promises and privileges won Coker’s allegiance and he eagerly carried out his new responsibilities. As the voyage progressed, the agents invited him to sleep in their berth and included him in planning meetings for the colony. In his *Journal* Coker recalls, “I think the Lord has ordered it, that my lot should be cast in the cabin, that I might witness the deep concern of the agents for the good of poor afflicted Africa. I have often been laying in the berth, at the midnight hour, and witnessed them pouring out their souls in supplication” (19). By asserting that God arranges for him to stay in the agents’ cabin, Coker claims divine authority for his role as mediator. As he observes the agents’ piety, he seems convinced of their sincerity in relocating free blacks to Africa. In turn, the ACS

agents publicly acknowledge his value to the expedition. In the *Memoir of the Life and Character of the Rev. Samuel Bacon*, Jehudi Ashmun, an ACS agent, writes:

It is due to the zeal, good judgment, and uniform fidelity of the Rev. Daniel Coker . . . the value of whose services, both during the voyage and on the coast, the agents made very honourable mention, and the society have received the most substantial proofs to observe in anticipation, that he continued to the present time, to justify by a consistent course of upright and discreet conduct, the confidence reposed in him. (253)

With the support of the agents, Coker was poised to emerge as the black emigrants' Moses.

In his *Journal*, Coker acknowledges the mixed motivations of his sponsors and reveals a more realistic view of their community building efforts. Nearly two months after he records ACS agent Bacon's appropriation of the Exodus narrative, Coker references the same passage from Deuteronomy 11 in an entry that confirms his view of the voyage as a transatlantic exodus. On March 3, 1820, Coker writes:

May these children ever cherish a grateful remembrance of the benevolent and humane act of the country that gave them birth, and tell it to their children, and their children; and the Lord grant that this, and every subsequent exertion may be to the increasing of our faith in the sincere determination of America, to heal the wounds that have been made in bleeding Africa. (20)

Like Bacon, Coker positions the emigrants as emancipated Israelites who will share the story of their deliverance with future generations (Deut. 11:18-19). There is a twist of irony in his reference, however, for Coker hints at the ACS's unscrupulous motives for colonizing free blacks in order to develop the United States as a slave society. In contrast to Bacon, Coker claims the United States, not Africa, as African Americans' homeland. Yet, the "country that gave them birth" could not truly be their native land because slavery had transformed it into Egypt. Furthermore, the promised land that the black emigrants are traveling to is a "bleeding Africa," wounded by the same nation that

sponsors their resettlement and relies on them to “heal the wound” it has caused. While the Israelites needed to conquer Canaan, African American emigrants faced the challenge of transforming Africa, a land ravaged by slavery and tribal rivalries, into a promised land. Nevertheless, Coker instructs his readers to tell the colonization story to their children just as Moses had commanded the Israelites to teach their descendants about their miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt. As the emigrants write a new Exodus narrative for their families, Coker encourages them to create a history that casts colonization in a positive light, especially because many of their brethren have denounced the initiative. America has given them life but the ACS offers them a future—in Africa.

The dangers of sea travel led the spiritually minded emigrants to join Coker and the ACS agents in expressing a desire for a Moses to direct their journey to the promised land of Africa. In his “At Sea, Feb. 20, Sunday” entry, Coker recalls the passengers singing a Methodist hymn by Isaac Watts while the sea rises up like mountains around them:

If but a Moses waive the rod  
The sea divides and owns its God  
The stormy floods their Maker know  
And led His chosen armies through. (15)

The passengers find comfort in remembering how Moses stretched his rod over the Red Sea and the waters divided, creating a path for the Israelites to escape the pursuing Egyptian army (Exod. 14:13-31). They express a need for God’s protection even though a hostile army is not following them and seeking to take them back to the United States. They further envision themselves as God’s “chosen army” led by a Moses, out of a racist

country to the promised land of Africa. At this point in his *Journal*, however, Coker does not name a Moses appointed by God to help them navigate their journey.

Coker's recollection of the Methodist hymn subtly sets himself up as a Moses figure. In an entry written three days after they survive the storm, Coker reports that the emigrants decide to fast and pray for the success of their trip. They had increasingly come to rely on his leadership and seek his opinions about the project (Shick 49-50). Echoing the challenges of the biblical Exodus journey, Coker writes, "May He that was with Moses in the wilderness, be with us; then all will be well.—This is a great undertaking, and I feel its importance more and more, daily" (15-16). After the Israelites left Egypt, they embarked on a forty-day journey through the wilderness to Canaan. God provided water and food, delivered them from enemies, and protected them from the extreme desert temperatures with the pillar of fire and cloud. As a minister, Coker understood the implications of describing their transatlantic journey as a passage through a wilderness. The Israelites' wilderness trek had been the most difficult part of their journey; thousands died because of disobedience.

Coker's prayerful request for guidance signals his awareness of conflicts aboard the *Elizabeth* and his desire for divine assistance to resolve them. As the white ACS agents distanced themselves from the emigrants while maintaining control of the plans for the colony, neither Coker nor the ACS agents realized the limitations of Coker's role as a Mosaic mediator on an ACS sponsored exodus. In accord with the Exodus narrative, Coker records a time filled with murmurings and miracles as the emigrants and agents travel through their wilderness. Initially, Coker is effective in resolving disputes. His job becomes more difficult about halfway through the voyage after the agents inform the

emigrants of their plans to set up the colony. The emigrants are particularly displeased over the stipulation that agents would manage the settlement. They had believed the ACS would be a “means of transporting them to a land where they hoped to live free from the intrusions of white domination” (Miller 56). The exchange between ACS agents and emigrant leaders becomes so contentious that Bacon fears “mutinous spirit” might lead to a fight that will leave the ship without its crew (Ashmun 249-50). Once again, Coker acts as a liaison between the groups. Moses had functioned as an intercessor between God and the Hebrews, however. In contrast, Coker calls the male emigrants aside for a private meeting and convinces all but two to cooperate with the agents. By attempting to resolve differences between the white agents and his brethren, Coker inadvertently elevates the ACS agents to god-like stature and casts the emigrants as disobedient Israelites. Thus, the truce he negotiated could only be a fragile, temporary one.

Coker’s difficulties in mediating conflicts between the emigrants and ACS agents did not decrease his view of himself as a Moses, however. As they near Africa, he discovers a thriving slave trade and jots down a verse from a hymn to express his dismay. On March 18, 1820, he writes:

When will Jehovah hear our cries?  
When will the sun of freedom rise?  
When will for us a Moses stand?  
And bring us out from Pharaoh’s hand? (31)

By quoting this hymn, Coker affirms that the “bleeding Africa” he had described earlier is Egypt rather than Canaan because Europeans and Africans are still engaged in a lucrative slave trade, and he intimates that he could be the Moses who would deliver Africans from slavery. Although the US Congress and British Parliament had outlawed the slave trade by 1808, business flourished because traders continued to purchase

Africans, and European and American authorities did not aggressively enforce the ban. Coker reminds his readers that the persistent practice of slavery prevents Africa from being Canaan for people of African descent. As a Mosaic leader, he believes he can effectively work for the abolition of the African slave trade that has destroyed native communities and would threaten the stability of the colony.

In his *Journal*, Coker portrays himself as a Moses to persuade potential emigrants to join him in contributing to the development of free black communities in a continent that the slave trade had nearly destroyed. The Exodus story becomes the exemplary narrative for relating the difficulties of the journey and emphasizing the local bounties that could help them transform Africa into a promised land. During his first few days in Africa, Coker writes about the fruits that grow plentifully in the woods throughout Sierra Leone. He recounts a successful fishing outing where the emigrants see thousands of fish, oysters, and shells. He details the wealth of produce in the markets. He recalls a lavish dinner at a minister's home where the table is laden with food harvested in Africa that would have "satisfied the taste of an epicure" (22, 25, 31, and 35). Such a land of abundance would have appealed to many free blacks struggling to feed their families and sustain a living in America.

Just as Moses had assured the Israelites of prosperity in the Promised Land, Coker insists that opportunities await emigrants to Africa. In a letter to Jeremiah Watts included in the *Journal's* Appendix, Coker encourages black Baltimoreans to sell their possessions and emigrate to Africa. He instructs them to bring goods, such as tobacco, calico cloth, handkerchiefs, pocketknives, and pins, to sell in order to purchase property and supplies or hire workers. He assures black Americans that they can introduce Christianity to the

natives and through struggle help rebuild Africa as a great nation: “I expect to give my life to bleeding groaning, dark, benighted Africa . . . I rejoice to see you in this land; it is a good land; it is a rich land, and I do believe it will be a great nation, and a powerful and worthy nation: but those who break the way will suffer much” (44). Emigrant pioneers would undoubtedly face difficulties in settling in Africa just as the first generation of Israelites had fought to possess Canaan. Coker remains optimistic, however, as he draws parallels between God’s promise to make Israel a “great nation” and his belief that hard-working, knowledgeable people of African descent could make Liberia “one of the greatest nations in the world,” perhaps even rivaling the United States (44). Coker infuses his black Exodus story with a Pan African sentiment by shifting the focus from the assistance the ACS provides in establishing the colony to the work the African Americans and Africans will accomplish on their own in transforming Liberia into a prosperous country.

The ACS published Coker’s *Journal* before death, disease, and defiant emigrants and Africans brought about the failure of the first colony. The agents, emigrants, and Coker had created competing Exodus narratives that were irreconcilable. After ACS agents Bacon and Crozer died from illness, Coker became the leader of the colony. The emigrants refused to accept his guidance, however. Suspicious of anyone who had worked closely with the ACS agents, they looked instead to Kizzel, a local African leader, for direction (Miller 62-63). Despite the colony’s initial failure, the ACS continued to send emigrants, including Coker’s wife and sons in 1821. Coker and his family soon moved to Sierra Leone, the British colony where his friend Paul Cuffe had settled free black emigrants nearly ten years earlier. In his unpublished “Diary” of this

period, a more reflective, experienced Coker muses, “Moses was I think permitted to see the Promised Land but not to enter in. I think it likely that I shall not be permitted to see our expected earthly Canaan. But this will be of but small moment so that some thousands of African children are safely landed.” Unlike Moses, who peered into the promised land from Mt. Pisgah, Coker was trapped in the wilderness, unable to climb the mountain and catch a glimpse of Canaan. Nevertheless, he experienced some of his vision for an African Canaan when Sierra Leone Governor Charles McCarthy appointed him superintendent of the village of Hastings where he established an AME Church (Coan 30). Black emigrants continued to relocate to Liberia and Sierra Leone throughout the nineteenth century. But the problems that plagued the first settlement persisted, preventing Coker’s dream of an African promised land from coming to fruition.

### **Exodus Justifies Revolt to Establish Free Black Communities in America or Abroad**

#### **Gabriel: Joshua for the Promised Land of Richmond, Virginia**

While free blacks in the North often invoked the Exodus story to advocate nonviolent resistance in their antislavery and equal rights struggles, slaves and free blacks in the South appropriated the biblical narrative to organize massive revolts to liberate slaves and establish promised lands in America or abroad. In Richmond, Virginia, Gabriel and his followers embraced this story as they envisioned themselves and their brethren as Israelites who had been defrauded of their freedom, and who would rebel to reclaim their rights and establish a home for their people in the land of their choice.

In the summer of 1800, twenty-five-year-old Gabriel and his co-conspirators began to recruit slaves, free blacks, and sympathetic whites for a rebellion against slavery advocates in predominately black Richmond, hoping to claim the city as a free and

integrated southern community. Gabriel had been born into slavery but learned to read. His parents introduced him to Christianity and were spiritual leaders in their community. Thomas Prosser, Gabriel's master, arranged for him to be trained as a carpenter. As an enslaved artisan who hired himself out, Gabriel soon gained a sense of independence and enjoyed many of the new privileges—increased mobility, for example—Virginians had provided for their slaves after the Revolution. But he soon grew tired of turning most of his wages over to his master and haggling with dishonest white businessmen. Inspired by the rhetoric of the American, French, and Haitian revolutions, and African armies, Gabriel advocated “death or Liberty” to gain political and economic equality for blacks throughout the United States (Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion* 51). For nearly six months, he mobilized men and women to join him in killing slaveholders. When faced with the challenge of deciding if they should execute or postpone their rebellion, Gabriel's co-conspirators debated whether to characterize themselves as enslaved Israelites who desired deliverance from Egypt or emancipated Israelites who chose to exercise human agency and conquer Richmond, their promised land.

Although Gabriel himself did not rely on biblically inspired rhetoric in his recruitment appeals, two of his conspirators later connected their revolutionary struggle with the Israelites' liberation from slavery in Egypt. In testimony recorded on September 17, 1800, during the trials held after the failed rebellion, Ben Woolfork recalls a planning meeting in which Gabriel and his followers discuss whether they should implement their plans for the revolt. Gabriel's brother Martin admonishes the group to move ahead by reminding them that “there is an expression in the Bible that delay breeds danger. . . . I read in my Bible where God says, if we will worship Him, we should have peace in all

our Lands, five of you shall conquer an hundred and a hundred, a thousand” (“Communication of Ben”).

In opposition to Martin, Woolfork justifies delay by positing the group as enslaved Israelites who are looking for divine emancipation. He explains: “I told them that I had heard that in the day of old, when the Israelites were in Servitude to King Pharaoh, they were taken from him by the Power of God,—and were carried away by Moses—God had blessed them with an Angel to go with them, But that I could see nothing of that kind these days” (“Communication of Ben”). Woolfork hesitates to move forward because they have not received divine affirmation of their plans. In *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730-1810*, James S. Sidbury argues that from a secular perspective Woolfork seems to oppose Martin’s recommendation and challenge Gabriel’s leadership. He had not witnessed miraculous manifestations like those that accompanied the Israelites’ deliverance, and God had given neither Gabriel the role of Moses the emancipator nor that of the angel Gabriel the messenger (77). In *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia*, Gerald W. Mullin suggests that Woolfork’s comment reflects his “unfulfilled search for a Moses” (154).

Sidbury asserts that we must view Woolfork and Martin’s exchange through a spiritual lens because African Americans made no sharp distinction between secular and sacred arguments. Accordingly, Sidbury interprets Woolfork’s remarks as a sign of Martin’s reliance on biblical authority to justify the rebellion (77). If we place the exchange within a spiritual framework, however, we must also be attentive to the context of the portions of Exodus that Martin and Woolfork select to describe their dilemma.

Woolfork supports his case for delay by declaring, “God had blessed [the Israelites] with an Angel to go with them.” Sidbury argues that when Woolfork “claimed to see nothing like an angel at the head of the conspiracy, he may have been playing on Gabriel’s name while metaphorically rejecting his leadership” (77). I suggest that Woolfork was more likely referring to scriptures such Exodus 23:20: “Behold, I send an Angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared.” On at least five different occasions, God assured the Israelites that He had sent an Angel to lead and protect them during their journey to and settlement in the Promised Land. Woolfork believes the conspirators are slaves in their American Egypt and do not yet have an angel to lead them.

Martin acknowledges the similarities between the conspirators’ and Israelites’ experiences, but unlike Woolfork, he does not characterize the conspirators as enslaved Israelites. In his response to Woolfork, Martin references God’s admonition to the emancipated Israelites regarding the conquest of the Promised Land: “And five of you shall chase an hundred, and an hundred of you shall put ten thousand to flight: and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword” (Lev. 26:8). Martin creates a fissure in his black Exodus narrative by positing the enslaved conspirators as already emancipated Israelites who God has instructed to kill Canaanites—the proslavery residents of Richmond—so they can inhabit their promised land. From this perspective, Gabriel does not present himself as a Moses dependent on divine intervention. Rather by adapting the rhetoric of revolution, he positions African Americans as freedmen unlawfully held in bondage worse than colonists had ever experienced under the oppressive rule of King George III. Like the colonists, Gabriel seeks to sever their ties with their oppressors.

Instead of establishing their own republic, however, they will remain in Richmond, the promised land of their choice. Thus, in Martin's Exodus narrative, Gabriel becomes Joshua, leader of a band of wrongfully enslaved blacks who are reclaiming their freedom and the right to a home in their American Canaan.

Despite their disagreement about leadership and strategy, the men consulted and decided to move forward. Martin instructed them to gather on Saturday night, August 29, 1800, to prepare for an early strike the following morning. Gabriel and his followers never carried out their rebellion. On the morning they had agreed to meet, a torrential rainstorm washed out many of the roads leading to Richmond, forcing them to abort their plans, and a slave, ironically named Pharaoh, informed authorities of the conspiracy. In the aftermath of Gabriel's rebellion, twenty-six slaves, including Gabriel, were tried, convicted, and hanged, and two others were transported out of state. Virginia Governor James Monroe justified the state's swift and severe response for he feared that the slaves might regroup and attack Richmond. In a letter to the speaker of the House of Delegates several months after the rebellion, Monroe muses that it "is strange that the slaves should embark on this novel and unexampled enterprise of their own accord. Their treatment has been more favorable since the revolution and as the importation was prohibited by the first act of our independence their number has not increased in proportion with that of the whites." The "favorable" treatment slaves like Gabriel had experienced in their tight-knit Richmond community only increased their desire to experience the independence white Virginians enjoyed. Gabriel's black American Revolution inspired other nineteenth-century activists, notably Henry Highland Garnet and John Brown, to continue the work of building strong, stable free black communities in the United States, but none was

successful. It forced slave owners and proslavery advocates to take stronger measures to control their “contented” slaves. It led southern legislators to thwart African Americans’ community building efforts through the enactment of harsher restrictions for both slaves and free blacks. Under these conditions, emigration became an increasingly attractive option for southern blacks.

### **Denmark Vesey: Joshua for a Haitian Promised Land**

Court records suggest that unlike Gabriel, Denmark Vesey explicitly relied on the Exodus narrative in recruiting for his revolt in Charleston, South Carolina, that would lead to emigration to the promised land of Haiti. His experiences in slavery and freedom nurtured his desire to liberate his people. Historians believe that Vesey was born in West Africa or the West Indies in 1767. Captain Joseph Vesey, a slave trader and merchant, purchased him in Saint Thomas, West Indies. When he was about fifteen years old, the young African worked under the name Telemague on Captain Vesey’s ships. His break from harsh plantation life was short lived, however, for Vesey sold him in 1781.

Telemague reportedly escaped plantation life a second time by feigning epileptic fits. When his new owner insisted that he was unfit for labor, Vesey was forced to reclaim him. Telemague traveled extensively as a member of Vesey’s crew. By the time his master retired and settled in Charleston, Telemague had mastered several languages, including French and Creole, and visited Haiti and France, where grass roots revolutions had empowered the poor and dispossessed.

Exposure to international events sharpened Telemague’s perception and deepened his understanding of the injustices black people suffered throughout the Atlantic world. In Charleston, Telemague eventually became known as Denmark, for Caribbean-born

slaves who could not pronounce his name shortened it to “Telmark,” and then to Denmark (Pearson 22-23, 28-29 and Egerton, *He Shall Go Out* 47). He became a skilled carpenter and hired out his labor for his master. In 1800, he won fifteen hundred dollars in the East-Bay Lottery and purchased his freedom for six hundred dollars. He used the remaining funds to buy a house and establish a carpentry shop. As a member of Charleston’s African Methodist Church, Vesey became so well versed in the Bible that Morris Brown, his minister, appointed him to be an exhorter. While leading Bible studies, Vesey became familiar with the Exodus narrative and began to note similarities between ancient Israelites and blacks in Charleston. Like Gabriel’s brother Martin, he conflated the Exodus narrative and the rhetoric of revolution to persuade members of Charleston’s black community to see themselves as emancipated Israelites who whites had defrauded of their liberty and encouraged them to fight for their rights as American citizens.

Vesey’s revolt<sup>9</sup> failed when slaves informed authorities of his plans. Local officials arrested, imprisoned, tried, and hung many of the conspirators. In trial testimony, Rolla Bennett, one of Vesey’s chief lieutenants, recalls a meeting at Vesey’s home where the rebel leader admonishes his followers “that we ought to rise up and fight for our liberties against the whites—he was the first to rise and speak and he read to us from the Bible, how the children of Israel were delivered out of Egypt from bondage—

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<sup>9</sup> Historians are engaged in a major dispute regarding the accuracy and authenticity of the trial records for Vesey’s revolt. Michael Johnson argues that Vesey and other black men who lived in Charleston had not planned or attempted to initiate an insurrection, and whites forced blacks to testify to convict the men. After finding errors in the trial records published in books he reviewed, Johnson conducted research and concluded that historians, particularly Douglas Egerton, David Robertson, and Edward Pearson, who have written books about Vesey, had read the wrong records and some had published numerous errors in their transcriptions of the trial records. *William and Mary Quarterly* published a two-part Forum, “The Making of a Slave Conspiracy,” that featured articles regarding this dispute in October 2001 and January 2002. Even if the revolt did not occur, the frequent references to the Exodus narrative in the document reveals that whites and blacks in early nineteenth-century Charleston understood the strength of the story to empower the oppressed.

he said the rising would take place last Sunday night week” (qtd. in Pearson 185 and Kennedy and Parker 45-46). Vesey appropriates the Exodus narrative to claim the right of emancipation from slavery. He believes, however, that the circumstances of their bondage require a “rising” rather than divine deliverance. Jesse, another of Vesey’s followers, affirms Bennett’s testimony, explaining how “[Vesey] said that we were deprived of our rights and privileges by the white people, and that our church was shut up, so that we could not use it, and that it was high time for us to seek our rights” (qtd. in Pearson 189 and Kennedy and Parker 58). Just as American Israelites had done during the Revolution, Vesey focuses on acquiring civic and religious liberties. Vesey claims whites had violated the law by prohibiting them from living as American citizens and depriving them of their constitutional right to worship God. He reportedly told his followers that the Missouri Compromise had provided freedom for slaves rather than designating which of the new US territories would be classified as slave or free (Pearson 120). When freedom fails to materialize, Vesey convinces his followers that whites had reneged on their promise. He links their struggle to the children of Israel’s plight in Egypt, but relies on human agency to achieve liberation. Like Gabriel and his followers, they will fight for their freedom.

As a free black, Vesey could have sought passage on an ACS voyage, but he rejected white controlled colonization of an African promised land. Historians have speculated that he did not want to leave his wife and children behind in slavery. Since he was fifty-six years old at the time of the revolt, advanced age may also have deterred him from undertaking a transatlantic journey. Vesey was not averse to travel, however. His years as a seaman had conditioned him to the unpredictable nature of the sea and

introduced him to black communities throughout the world. Unlike Coker, who traveled to Africa under ACS sponsorship and established close ties with white agents, Vesey hoped to place black Charlestonians beyond the influence of white Americans.

In court testimony, Vesey's co-conspirators report that he drew on the Exodus story to plan the destruction of Charleston and advocate emigration to Haiti, their black promised land. In his "confession," Jesse details how Vesey planned to signal the start of the revolt by setting Charleston on fire. Vesey and his followers "would kill every man as he came out of his door, and that the servants in the yard should do it, and that it should be done with an ax and clubs, and afterward they should murder the women and children, for He said, God had so commanded in the scriptures" (qtd. in Pearson 190 and Kennedy and Parker 58-59). Some revolt leaders reportedly questioned Vesey's strategy. In the biblical narrative, when the Israelites attacked Jericho during their first battle in the Promised Land, God instructed them to kill all residents and livestock (Josh. 4:21). Vesey allays the concerns of those who viewed killing as a sin by asserting that if they left any whites alive, those individuals would testify against them and could thwart their escape by spreading news of the insurrection. Ultimately, since white Charleston citizens had developed and profited from a slave society, they deserved death, punishment as "man stealers," according to Mosaic Law.

While Vesey turns to the Exodus narrative as a blueprint for revolt and community building, he also conflates his biblical mandate with references to the Haitian Revolution to infuse the conspirators' efforts with black nationalist sentiment. Bennett asserts that he had opposed killing ministers, women, and children but Vesey said "*he thought it was for our safety not to spare one white skin alive, for this was the plan they*

*pursued in St. Domingo. . .*” (qtd. in Pearson 190 and Kennedy and Parker 59). Similarly, Bennett claims that Vesey assured his followers “that we were fully able to conquer the whites, if we were only unanimous and courageous, as the St. Domingo people were” (qtd. in Pearson 189 and Kennedy and Parker 58). Vesey invokes the Exodus narrative to justify killing whites, but he does not rely on divine aid to ensure the success of their rebellion or the selection of their Canaan. The Haitian Revolution provided tangible evidence of blacks’ ability to overcome their oppressors and develop a black nation. Vesey and his followers would stand up to their enemies like Israelites, but fight like Haitians.

Vesey chose Haiti as their promised land, and delineated an exodus experience that required the assistance of their Haitian brethren. To facilitate emigration, Vesey attempted to establish an alliance with Jean Pierre Boyer, president of Haiti. In his “Confession,” Monday Gell reports that Vesey had sent a letter to Boyer via a cook on a schooner, soliciting his assistance (qtd. in Pearson 244-45 and Kennedy and Parker 70-71). Bennett informs the court that Vesey expected armed Haitian vessels to escort and protect them when they sailed from Charleston (Pearson 187). Because Haitians had fought off French oppressors and established an independent black nation, Vesey was convinced that they would be sympathetic to African Americans’ plight. Moreover, since many of the revolt participants were skilled artisans, Vesey believed they could help their Haitian brethren establish a strong economy. Vesey did not plan to leave Charleston empty handed. Inspired by the story of Israelites who received valuables from their former Egyptian slave masters when they left Egypt, Vesey instructed his followers to take money out of banks and goods from stores before embarking for Haiti. He may have

viewed the money and merchandise as just compensation for wages white masters owed their slaves and unscrupulous businessmen owed enslaved and free black workers. Such resources would give them bargaining power for negotiations with Boyer during their settlement in Haiti.

### **Exodus Nurtures the Development of a National Black Community**

In articles published in American newspapers, national magazines, and other publications, white writers and artists transformed Vesey and his co-conspirators into grotesque caricatures that helped fuel a backlash against black Americans. In the “Narrative of the Conspiracy,” an introductory essay to the *Official Report of the Trials of Sundry Negroes* (1822), an edited version of the trial records, Lionel Kennedy and Thomas Parker describe Vesey as a free black who had sowed dissension among his brethren and perverted Scripture, particularly the Exodus story, to justify his belief that blacks had the right to revolt against slaveholders. Kennedy and Parker include the sketch of Vesey’s life authorized by the Corporation of Charleston in which City officials promote racist language to dehumanize Vesey: “Among his color, he was always looked up to with awe and respect. His temper was impetuous and domineering in the extreme, qualifying him for the despotic rule, of which he was ambitious. All his passions were ungovernable and, savage; and to his numerous wives and children, he displayed the haughty and capricious cruelty of Eastern Bashaw” (161). Thomas Wentworth Higginson affirmed Kennedy and Parker’s views for a national audience by republishing excerpts of their *Official Report* in an 1861 article titled “Denmark Vesey” in the *Atlantic Monthly*. White Americans considered these publications as authoritative sources, accepted such

representations of Vesey and his associates as factual, and used them to justify the continued subjugation of blacks.

Black activists and their supporters responded to such racist characterizations by founding newspapers that would help them refute negative depictions of their community. Even sympathetic whites like Higginson contributed to the problems by refusing to challenge or even by employing racist rhetoric and imagery. Local efforts by Absalom Jones and others could not unite the race as long as there was no effective means of communicating their activities to a national black audience. In articles published in black and antislavery newspapers, editors suggested specific rhetorical strategies that black readers could adapt to attack slavery and initiate reform. Many contributors invoked episodes of the Exodus story to model how African Americans could develop a national voice to address the diverse needs of their people.

Editors founded black and antislavery newspapers that functioned as community-building textbooks for African American readers. In *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*, Elizabeth McHenry argues that for nineteenth-century black newspaper audiences, “reading was not presented as a passive or solitary activity, rather, it was an invitation to participate, a means of orienting the individual toward social and communal models of exchange, be they written or oral, that would enhance civic life and facilitate involvement in the public sphere” (102). Black and antislavery newspaper readers learned how to assert their ideas, attack their opponents, admonish well-meaning sympathizers, and establish a national voice to address their concerns.

By promoting rhetorical strategies that emphasized the Exodus narrative, these newspapers taught black readers across the nation how to counter pro-slavery arguments, a formidable task given the fact that many leading theologians believed the Bible sanctioned slavery (Noll, *America's God* 387-89). Writers for *Freedom's Journal*, *The Weekly Advocate* (later known as *The Colored American*), and *The Liberator* facilitated this task. At times, authors employed comparative analysis effectively to undermine proslavery ideology. At other times, they took a straightforward approach, claiming the authority of biblical scholarship. Finally, some drew direct parallels between slavery in Egypt and the United States to call for a Moses to liberate the slaves.

Newspaper editors encouraged their readers to speak out against slavery and urged them to appropriate the Exodus narrative to offer public criticism of hypocritical Christians who misinterpreted the Bible to support the institution. In "The History of Slavery" (1827), a four-part series that Samuel E. Cornish and John B. Russworm published in *Freedom's Journal*, an anonymous author analyzes the various forms of slavery described by Moses to argue that such practices are different from the American slave system. For example, enslaved Israelites belonged to the state rather than to private citizens. Additionally, Mosaic Law guaranteed Hebrew and foreign-born slaves fair treatment or even freedom during the Year of Jubilee. Enslaved African Americans did not experience such favor. With this information, readers could challenge white America's claim to be modern Israel by positing the United States as Egypt and urging masters to give their slaves to the federal government, or by characterizing the country as a promised land and encouraging slaveholders to create an American version of the Hebrews' Year of Jubilee when all debts were forgiven and all slaves freed. In so doing,

they could dispute the biblically based arguments whites relied on to justify the continued existence of an American slave society.

Other writers adapted a comparative approach to refute pro-slavery arguments purportedly rooted in the Exodus story. *The Colored American* published “Contrast Between the Mosaic Servitude and American Slavery” (1837), which had been printed in *Review of Nevin’s Biblical Antiquities*, in which the anonymous author itemizes and compares eight characteristics of laws regulating slavery in America and among the Israelites:

Mosaic	American
1. No heredity servitude, limited term	1. Perpetual servitude, hereditary
2. Voluntary, except for crime	2. Involuntary for people of African descent
3. Servant had legal rights	3. Slave had no legal rights
4. Servant freed if cruelly punished	4. Slave punished as severely as master wished
5. Families kept together	5. Slave often separated from family
6. Servant received religious instruction	6. Slave deprived of truthful religious teaching
7. Love the stranger	7. Black stranger is an enemy who must prove freedom
8. Runaway servant harbored and protected	8. Fugitive slave unprotected, hunted, and returned to master

This point-by point analysis clearly indicates that in rewriting the Exodus narrative to recast the United States as God’s Israel, white Americans had appropriated Mosaic Law to develop a slave society that breached nearly every regulation regarding biblical servitude. It gave African Americans a succinct, biblically based response to the major

arguments that defended slavery and destroyed black communities. As African Americans nationwide incorporated such rhetorical strategies into their abolitionist appeals, they strengthened their voice and encouraged Americans to question the authenticity of the dominant culture's Exodus story that authorized the enslavement and oppression of blacks.

Readers discovered that comparative analysis also worked well in classical forms such as the apology. Writers of this form embrace the Exodus narrative to challenge claims about the harshness of nineteenth-century slavery and argue that slaveholders' obstinacy could lead to the destruction of the nation. In "An Apology for Pharaoh" (1827) published in *Freedom's Journal* as a reprint from the *New York Observer*, the anonymous author asserts that Egyptian slavery was milder than nineteenth-century slavery, and that Pharaoh, a pagan ruler, had greater justification for enslaving the Israelites than did white masters African Americans. The writer offers several biblically based reasons why the Hebrews' condition in slavery was less severe and why Americans should not censure Pharaoh for enslaving the Israelites. He reminds his readers that the Israelites became wealthy during their sojourn in Egypt for Pharaoh had insisted that Joseph provide enough food for them during the famine while the young ruler compelled the Egyptians to sell their possessions to obtain sustenance. Furthermore, Pharaoh allowed the Israelites to continue dwelling in Goshen, the best land in Egypt, even after their enslavement. In effect, white masters were worse than Egyptian slaveholders. The writer encourages readers to compare the Hebrews' plight with that of enslaved blacks in a nation where masters often use Christianity to justify slavery. In so doing, they would eventually see that since God had punished a "pagan" ruler for refusing to emancipate

His people, He would certainly hold American Christians more accountable for establishing a brutal system of hereditary slavery.

Newspaper editors further increased their readers' ability to transform the Exodus story into a rhetorical weapon that undermined the self-serving work of proslavery Christians by teaching them the techniques of biblical exegesis. In the article titled "Did Moses Authorize Slavery?" (1839), *The Colored American* introduced readers to a writer who differentiates between American and Hebrew slavery practices. Examining Old Testament scriptures in which Moses used the words "bondsmen" and "bondswomen" interchangeably with "servant," the author argues that slaves occupied a valued place in Hebrew society; Mosaic Law protected their rights and mandated their inclusion in the community through the rite of circumcision and participation in national festivals. In contrast, American law did not require masters to treat their slaves as valued members of families or the national community. Readers could thus employ exegesis to recontextualize proslavery arguments and expose perversions of Mosaic Law. Even if newspaper readers were unable to convince slavery proponents to modify their beliefs, they could challenge the validity of their arguments that clearly contradicted Scripture.

One of the most effective tools antislavery newspaper editors developed for their readers was to publish the work of respected white theologians who appropriated Exodus to condemn slavery and reveal its negative impact on communities. In "Biblical Exposition, By Thomas Scott" (1839), reprinted in *The Colored American* from the *Emancipator*, the author presents Scott's exegesis to condemn slave owners. White ministers viewed the Episcopalian theologian's three-volume *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments According to the Authorised Version; with Explanatory*

*notes, Practical Observations, and Copious Marginal References* (1817) as the authoritative source for Bible study. The author of the article quotes Scott's commentary on three scriptures regarding Mosaic Laws that regulated slavery:

Exodus 21:16, "He that stealeth a man and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death." . . . The text implies, that he who stole anyone of the human species, in order to make a slave of him, should be punished with death.

Deuteronomy 24:7, "If a man be found stealing any of his brethren of Israel, and maketh merchandise of him, or selleth, then that thief shall die." . . . Every man is now our brother, whatever may be his nation, complexion or creed. How then can the merchandising of men and women be carried on, or abetting those who do, without transgressing this commandment?

Deuteronomy 23:15-16, "Thou shalt not deliver unto his master, the servant who has escaped from his master unto thee. I shall dwell with thee, in that place which he shall choose—though shalt not oppress him." . . . To slaves who fled to the Israelites for protection, they were commanded to afford shelter and to show great kindness; to recommend their religion, and to give them an opportunity of learning it. The people of God must keep at a distance from cruelty and oppression, and ever be ready to patronise the cause of the oppressed.

Scott argues that anyone who sells another human into slavery is selling a family member and guilty of theft; thus, he deserves death. Americans who perpetuated the domestic slave trade were equally guilty for they had stolen black Americans' liberty. The Bible not only prohibited American Christians from enslaving other humans, it obligated them to ignore the Fugitive Slave Law of 1798, and follow the example of the Israelites by harboring runaway slaves. In effect, Scott intimates that whites and blacks are members of an American family that is being destroyed by the slave trade, just as Cugoano had argued in his eighteenth-century Joseph story. Black activists could have cited Scott's commentary to undermine the influence of white Christian slavery advocates who upheld slavery as a system rooted in economic gain and refused to follow biblically sound principles to build a nation that protected the rights of all citizens.

Still other newspaper writers emphasized a parallel between slavery in Egypt and America and urged readers to confront politicians and demand emancipation. Cornish suggests this rhetorical strategy to his readers by reprinting a fictionalized “Dialogue Between Moses, Pharaoh and Others” (1838) in *The Colored American* that had appeared in the *Union Herald* and several other major newspapers. The anonymous author focuses readers’ attention on the Israelites’ experience in Egypt when Moses demanded immediate freedom for his enslaved brethren. As the conversation progresses, Pharaoh’s arguments reflect those advanced by American presidents claiming that “I did not bring these people hither. I found them in my possession on taking the throne of my father.” American legislators and pro-slavery advocates of the 1830s were just like Pharaoh and his advisors. They were still offering excuses to perpetuate slavery, much as they had in the late eighteenth century when Absalom Jones and others had confronted them with antislavery petitions. By equating the Israelites’ and black Americans’ experiences in slavery, the writer asserts that American slaveholders were waging a losing battle against God. The Exodus narrative instructed blacks and their supporters to move their battles from the local and regional level to national forums such as the lecture podium, conventions of colored people, and the halls of Congress. Newspaper editors urged community activists to appeal for the slaves’ freedom, confident that God would intervene if government officials did not cooperate just as He had when Pharaoh denied Moses’ petitions for the Israelites’ freedom.

### **Exodus Inspires Reform Movements**

Contributors to black and antislavery newspapers expanded their efforts beyond abolition to address other reform movements essential to community building. During the

Second Great Awakening, church growth sparked the establishment of voluntary societies to spread Christianity and initiate moral reform in the United States and abroad, including the American Board for Foreign Missions (1810), American Bible Society (1816), Colonization Society for Liberated Slaves (1817), and American Sunday School Union (1824). Temperance advocates also published tracts in which they “preached the values of sobriety and castigated the evils of drunkenness” (Reynolds and Rosenthal 3). These efforts encouraged collaboration with both abolitionist and women’s rights movements. In *The Serpent and the Cup: Temperance in American Literature*, David Reynolds and Debra Rosenthal assert, “Within abolitionist and feminist circles there were many who endorsed temperance. For abolitionists, the enslavement of southern blacks was paralleled metaphorically by the drunkard’s enslavement to the bottle. For feminists, man’s injustice against woman was often figured in the image of the oppressed wife, brutalized by an intemperate husband from whom she could not escape because of the legal difficulty of procuring a divorce” (5). During this period, black activists and their supporters focused on divine and Mosaic laws governing emancipated Israelites to broaden the scope and appeal of their national community building efforts. Newspaper writers invoke the Exodus narrative to posit America as a promised land where the temperance and women’s rights movements function as essential components of racial uplift efforts, and citizens decry colonization as a misguided plan that stunts African Americans’ intellectual development.

Newspaper editors played an important role in helping African Americans understand how the Exodus story could link racial uplift and temperance. *The Colored American* highlighted this connection in “Temperance Celebration” (1837), a report on

the opening festivities of the Marlboro Hotel in Boston. Nearly two hundred persons had gathered to support hotel owner Nathaniel Rogers who had stopped serving alcoholic beverages. During the evening celebration, as guests offered toasts with sparkling iced water, John Pierpoint sang an “Ode” in which he transforms Moses the abolitionist into a temperance man who advocates abstinence as the only means for Americans to enter their promised land.

Pierpoint claims biblical authority to argue that God had always provided water when He established new communities for humanity. God gave Adam and Eve water in the Garden of Eden, the first home established on Earth. Nineteenth-century descendants of the first parents should follow emulate this practice. Pierpoint doubles the Edenic story with the narrative of the Israelites’ journey to Canaan to emphasize further the central role of water in building healthy communities. He asserts:

And when the man of God  
From Egypt led his flock,  
They thirsted, and his rod  
Smote the Arabian rock,  
And forth a rill  
Of water gushed,  
And on they rushed  
And drank their fill.

By highlighting Moses’ role in providing water for the Israelites in the wilderness, Pierpoint stresses that Mosaic leaders’ relationship with God gives them access to divine power to supply their brethren’s temporal needs. Mosaic restaurant owners did not have to worry about losing business. When Moses provided water for the newly emancipated Israelites, they “rushed” to drink the beverage; they did not complain or ask for alcohol. Similarly, as African Americans embarked on the road from slave to citizen, they should follow the Israelites’ example and patronize restaurants that served water. Some masters

provided alcohol to enslaved blacks, hoping the intoxicating effect would make them forget their oppression. Additionally, many slaves harvested sugar used to distill liquor, and some slave traders bartered for slaves with rum (Reynolds and Rosenthal 5). By drinking water instead of alcohol, free blacks could distance themselves from the institution of slavery and invest their resources in businesses that would sustain strong communities.

Ultimately, Pierpont holds Mosaic leaders responsible for the health of their people. He muses:

Had Moses built a still,  
And dealt out to that host,  
To every man his gill,  
And pledg'd him in a toast –  
How large a band  
Of Israel's sons  
Had lain their bones  
In Canaan's land?

Pierpont suggests that the Israelites would have been more inclined to consume alcohol if Moses had built a still and encouraged them to drink. If alcohol consumption during the wilderness journey could have kept Israelites from reaching the Promised Land, white and black Americans who viewed themselves as nineteenth-century Israelites should likewise avoid the beverage. The presence of saloons exposed all Americans to a potentially devastating practice, but it could be even more destructive for African Americans by distracting them from community uplift and diminishing the ranks of activists.

The Exodus narrative not only taught Mosaic leaders how to build temperate communities, it also suggested how they could acknowledge the contributions of black women. In “Right of Petition” (1838), published in *The Colored American*, an

anonymous author praises Rep. John Quincy Adams, Whig from Massachusetts who had been elected to Congress after his presidency. Adams had made a speech to Congress supporting women's right to petition. He had opposed Congress' passage of a resolution barring all petitions, for he believed that everyone, including slaves, had the right to petition Congress. The writer reports that Adams chastised Rep. Benjamin Chew Howard, a Maryland Democrat, for questioning women's participation in political affairs by invoking the Exodus story to recall that women played a pivotal role in the celebration following Israel's emancipation from slavery: "And Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam answered them, Sing ye to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea" (Exod. 15: 21). Instead of discouraging women from praising God for a miraculous deliverance, Moses affirmed their action by recording their celebration to inspire future generations. Adams interprets the Israelite women's song as a political act that inaugurates the birth of their nation.

Adams further strengthens his argument by retelling a series of biblical stories in which Hebrew women continued to play a major role in politics after the Israelites settled in the Promised Land. Deborah, one of the first judges of Israel, led her brethren in their defeat of Sisera, the captain of a Canaanite army, after Israel's military leader Barak became too afraid to fight. In song, she acknowledged God as the avenger of their enemies and praised Jael, the woman who killed Sisera by driving a spike through his temple (Judg. 4-5). Esther petitioned the king to save her people from Haman's death decree (Esth. 5, 7 and 9). Abigail defied her husband and made a lavish meal for David and his men as repayment for their kindness in watching over her husband's flocks (1

Sam. 25). Huldah the prophetess counseled young King Josiah who sought to reestablish the worship of God in Israel (2 Chron. 34). Adams conflates his list of female biblical leaders with the names of women who had distinguished themselves in secular history, including Roman and Spartan women. By citing these examples, he reinforces the need for women's involvement at all levels of community building. Some women, like Miriam, could fill roles alongside male leaders. Others could initiate petition drives to Congress or organize public demonstrations. Like Moses, men had a responsibility to affirm women's participation and ensure the preservation of their collective history in order to inspire young men and women to contribute to black America's community building efforts.

Newspaper editors were equally assertive in supporting authors who embraced the Exodus narrative to challenge those who impeded the growth of the black community. In "African Colonization, From The Friend, or Advocate of Truth" (1832), an article Garrison printed in *The Liberator*, an anonymous author disputes the ACS's notion of Africa as the promised land for black Americans. The writer argues that readers should not consider Liberia, Canada, or Haiti as promised lands but should focus instead on "the native, rigorous soil of African intellect. This is the much neglected and despised land which wants nothing but a proper culture to insure the negro a home in any climate of the hospitable globe!" (1). For the author, African Americans' promised land was not a place; it was an educated state of mind. He argues that those interested in aiding blacks should redirect their energy from supporting colonization to educating blacks in the United States. He states, "When the Mississippi is turned back in its course or the Alleghany mountains be removed from their base, then may the colored people of the

United States be transported to Africa, and not before” (1). Relocating African Americans abroad was as unnatural as redirecting the flow of a river to the ocean or shifting a mountain range to a new location. Colonization would destroy the black community. It was not a viable solution to America’s race problem, since it encouraged moving ill-prepared blacks out of the country rather than integrating them into society. Effective community building could occur only when blacks gained equal access to education and developed their intellect.

**Black Exodus Stories Cultivate National Race Leaders: David Walker and Maria W. Stewart**

Despite newspaper editors’ efforts to incorporate black Exodus narratives into their moral suasion strategy, they were unable to disprove biblically based, proslavery arguments publicly supported by prominent white theologians. In *America’s God from Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, Mark A. Noll asserts proslavery and antislavery advocates “had set out their views fairly completely as early as the 1830s. From that early period, it was evident that, especially given the reigning American conventions governing the interpretations of Scripture, the proslavery argument was formidable” (391). Nevertheless, Exodus stories published in antislavery and black newspapers created a space for two self-appointed Moses figures to emerge: David Walker and his protégée Maria W. Stewart. In his *Appeal in Four Articles* (1829), Walker challenges African Americans to acknowledge their wretchedness and community dissension, and fight for their rights. Stewart took a similar approach to racial uplift through stirring speeches and writings addressed to her complacent brethren. Many scholars, notably Wilson Jeremiah Moses, have argued that both activists adapted the Jeremiad, the style of Old Testament

prophets who chastised and encouraged the Israelites. While I acknowledge the importance of this literary strategy in Stewart's and Walker's work, my concern is with the activists' appropriation of the Exodus story to impel blacks to emulate Moses. Walker and Stewart invoke the Exodus story to posit themselves as Moses figures who condemn white Christians for enslaving their brethren, admonish blacks to oppose colonization, and urge their people to enact a Mosaic Moment in which they commit themselves to racial uplift rather than worldly pleasure and success.

Walker was born free in Wilmington, North Carolina. After witnessing slavery in North Carolina during his formative years, he spent some time in Charleston, South Carolina, prior to Vesey's revolt, and then traveled about the country before settling in Boston, getting married, opening a used clothing store, and becoming involved in the abolitionist movement. Walker distributed his searing indictment of slavery by hiding his *Appeal* in the clothing of sailors who traveled to southern ports and by giving it to local activists. White southerners, fearing the power of the *Appeal* to incite rebellion, placed a bounty on Walker's head and enacted laws to curtail the movement of free blacks and slaves.

In writing the *Appeal*, Walker drew on the religious and political rhetoric colonists had successfully relied on to build the nation. Newspapers had attuned black readers to a diverse public voice. Walker participated in this process by working as an agent for *Freedom's Journal* and contributed to black America's arsenal of rhetorical weapons by issuing the *Appeal*. As Robert S. Levine contends in "Circulating the Nation: David Walker, the Missouri Compromise, and the Rise of the Black Press," Walker's *Appeal* "represents the dialogic nature of early print culture . . . black newspapers and the *Appeal*

itself, participate in a national conversation” (29). Walker also analyzes Thomas Jefferson’s influential tract *Notes on the State of Virginia* and comments on articles published in the *National Intelligencer*, the ACS’s newspaper, and *Freedom’s Journal*. In “*Doers of the Word*”: *African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)*, Carla Peterson argues that Walker relied on “Enlightenment methodologies—observation, rational demonstration, historical evidence, and general book knowledge” (65). Walker modeled the format of his pamphlet on the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution with its Preamble and Four Articles. Additionally, Walker mimicked Thomas Paine’s writing style in *Common Sense* (1776), a pamphlet that had motivated colonists to work for independence from England. “Like Paine, Walker recognized the importance of claiming a public voice through which to communicate with both black and white Americans, and the utility of using printed documents to do so,” according to McHenry (27). Walker also drew on the oral tradition within the African American community in writing his *Appeal*, however, and instructed his audience to read it aloud to groups. In *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance*, Peter P. Hinks argues, [The *Appeal*’s] principal function was public, not private. It was structured like an enthusiastically preached extemporaneous sermon intended to excite and inspire the audience to support some general ideas and plans. . .” (193).

In the “Preamble” to his *Appeal*, Walker conflates the story of the Israelites’ experience in Egypt with the history of slavery in other ancient nations to condemn white Christian slavery advocates for fragmenting African American families and establishing near insurmountable obstacles for blacks to overcome in developing a community. Walker

identifies the Israelites as the first of many people who experienced slavery. He distinguishes the slavery enforced by Egypt, Greece, and Rome, “heathen” nations, from that practiced by the United States, a “Christian” nation. Walker accuses white Christians of failing to abide by their religious creed. He believes they have developed a race-based slave system that creates an artificial barrier between blacks and whites, and blinds them to African Americans’ humanity. Their advocacy of such a system reveals their hypocrisy and positions them as being harsher slave masters than the Egyptians whose belief system did not prohibit slavery. Building on arguments that writers had advanced in black and antislavery newspapers, Walker argues that God would hold Americans accountable for supporting slavery and force them to suffer severe penalties just as the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans had for maintaining slave societies. In so doing, Walker places all nations within the biblical sphere, subject to laws that govern God’s universe. He exposes the hypocrisy of a nation that defines itself as “God’s American Israel” but maintains a race-based, hereditary slavery system.

In her writings, Stewart echoed many of Walker’s ideas regarding the hypocritical behavior of white Christians. Born Maria Miller, Stewart was orphaned at the age of five and then labored as an indentured servant for a clergyman’s family in Connecticut for ten years. At the end of her term of service, she educated herself by attending Sunday School and supported herself by working as a domestic. Stewart eventually settled in Boston where she married James W. Stewart, a prosperous shipping outfitter. Her happiness was temporary, however, for three years after they were married her husband died unexpectedly. She plunged into further despair when her husband’s white business partners defrauded her of her inheritance. The deaths of her close friend Walker in 1830 and Thomas Paul, her

pastor, in 1831 deepened her grief. Stewart sought solace in religion, experienced conversion, and felt called by God to devote herself to race work. She launched her public career in the fall of 1831 by submitting an essay titled “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build” (1830) to the *Liberator*, which Garrison later sold in pamphlet form, and giving speeches in which she chastised her brethren and white Christians for failing to support racial uplift.

Like Walker, Stewart invokes the Exodus story to assert that Christian proslavery advocates are subject to divine punishment. In “An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall, Boston” (1833), she declares, “But the most high God is still able to subdue the lofty pride of these white Americans as He was the heart of that ancient rebel” (69). Stewart trusts God to deliver her people from white “Christian” oppressors and slaveholders, for she believes He has heard their cry for aid. In *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality*, she proclaims, “. . . in His own time, He is able to plead our cause against you, and to pour out on you the ten plagues of Egypt” (19). While the Exodus narrative had inspired Gabriel and Vesey to organize slave revolts and some northern free blacks to advocate violence as the best means of ending slavery, Like Phillis Wheatley, Stewart did not advocate armed resistance. As a woman, Stewart was not in a position to encourage or sanction insurrection, actions that were outside the realm of the domestic sphere. Rather, as a woman of piety, she directs her readers to depend on divine retribution, not human agency as the means of their deliverance.

Stewart also appropriates the Exodus narrative to speak out against those who are destabilizing the black community by advocating colonization. In her “Address Delivered at the Masonic Lodge,” she expands the ideas that were presented in the article “African

Colonization, From The Friend, or Advocate of Truth,” asserting that the ACS is mistaken in relocating blacks to Africa and recommending that the organization redirect its resources to educating blacks and providing economic opportunities in the United States. Stewart suggests a more sinister motivation for the ACS’s actions. She writes, “But ah! methinks their hearts are so frozen toward us, they had rather their money should be sunk in the ocean than to administer it to our relief; and I fear, if they dare, they would order every male child among us to be drowned” (69). As Pharaoh sought to check the Israelite slave population by killing newborn baby boys, Stewart believes the ACS would kill all African American males if given the opportunity, thereby reducing the black population and leaving black women more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and poverty. Stewart intimates that the ACS prefers to suffer financial loss rather than spend money to uplift the black community. The relocation scheme obscures their supporters’ desire to develop a slave society as well as the depth of their hatred for African Americans.

Like Stewart, Walker invokes the biblical story in his *Appeal* to posit colonization advocates as scheming Egyptians, arguing that they are using colonization to separate free blacks from their enslaved brethren. In “Article IV” of his *Appeal* he writes: “How cunning slave-holders think they are!!!—How much like the king of Egypt who, after he saw plainly that God was determined to bring out his people, in spite of him and his, as powerful as they were. He was willing that Moses, Aaron and the Elders of Israel, but not all the people should go and serve the Lord. But God deceived him as he will Christian Americans, unless they are very cautious how they move” (75). If Israel’s leaders had accepted Pharaoh’s offer of emancipation, they would have left their brethren in perpetual bondage. Similarly, if all free blacks accepted trips to Africa, slaves would lose their inspiration for freedom

and most of the leaders of their cause. Walker seeks to undermine the colonization plan by exposing the sinister nature of the scheme. By resisting the ACS's invitation to emigrate, free blacks affirmed their support of their enslaved brethren and their belief that God would ultimately thwart the colonization efforts.

Walker does not focus all of his attention on criticizing his people's oppressors, however. Unique to this period, he complicates his reading of Exodus by drawing a parallel between African Americans and Egyptian slaveholders to emphasize blacks' need to acknowledge their wretchedness before they can experience the Mosaic Moment and commit themselves to community building. He challenges some African Americans' beliefs that Egyptians were "gangs of devils" who had treated enslaved Israelites almost as badly as Christian slaveholders treated enslaved African Americans (9). Walker argues, "For the information of such, I would only mention that the Egyptians were Africans or coloured people, such as we are—some of them yellow, others dark . . ." (10). He then disputes African Americans' claims to a glorious Egyptian heritage by positing them as the descendants of the African slaveholders who are involved in the transatlantic slave trade. Affiliation with Egypt deepens African Americans' wretchedness and exposes one of the major reasons why their community is fragmented. They must face their past honestly before they can find a path that gives them a future.

Walker also instructs blacks to acknowledge the differences between their slave experience and Hebrew bondage. Human favor and divine intervention led to the Israelites' liberation, but African Americans can expect neither favor nor grand miracles in a slave system built on perpetual hereditary bondage. Walker argues that American slavery is much worse than the Israelites' bondage by contrasting key portions of Joseph's and Moses'

stories with black Americans' experiences. He informs his audience that Joseph married an Egyptian woman, but blacks cannot marry whites. Pharaoh gave Joseph's relatives the best land when they relocated to Egypt, but blacks cannot own property. Pharaoh appointed Joseph as prime minister, and Pharaoh's daughter adopted Moses and groomed him for the throne, yet African Americans cannot hold elected or appointed public offices. Both Joseph and Moses experienced betrayal: the Egyptians eventually enslaved Joseph's brethren, and Moses' Egyptian benefactors turned on him after he killed an Egyptian overseer.

Nevertheless, their successes stand in stark contrast to the lives of enslaved and free blacks, whom whites believe "were not of the *human family*" (12). Because many white Americans accepted Jefferson's influential view in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that African Americans were descendants of monkeys and orang-outangs, blacks could not expect favor from government officials or slaveholders.

Since Walker believes white Americans will not show favor to African Americans, he encourages his people to emulate Moses who shunned royalty to share the lot of his brethren, a decision that eventually led to the Israelites' emancipation. He reminds them that Moses "would have become Prince Regent to the Throne. . . But he had rather suffer shame, with the people of God, than to enjoy pleasures with that wicked people for a season" (13). Moses did not allow the generosity of his benefactors to blind him to the plight of his oppressed people. When given the choice, he forsook the throne and suffered with his brethren (Heb. 11:24-26). I characterize this choice as the "Mosaic Moment," when Christians must choose between following God's plan for their lives or pursuing personal ambitions.

Nineteenth-century African Americans faced a Mosaic Moment when they had to decide whether to turn their backs on their people in order to gain temporal advantages in a racist nation or unite with them in the struggle for freedom and equality. Walker exclaims, “O! that the coloured people were long since of Moses’ excellent disposition, instead of courting favour with, and telling news and lies to our *natural enemies*, against each other—aiding them to keep their hellish chains of slavery upon us” (13). Some blacks—slaves who reported the intimate details of their quarters to their masters or free blacks who sought favor for themselves without regard for their people—contributed to their community’s wretchedness by colluding with the enemy instead of maintaining loyalty to the race. They could not blame hypocritical Christians for keeping them in bondage. They could never build strong communities with traitors in their midst. They needed to unite together against their oppressors.

Like Walker, Stewart challenges her readers to embrace their Mosaic Moment. Alarmed that the majority of free blacks follow “the vain bubbles of life with so much eagerness” (8), she implores them to shun worldly amusements. In *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality*, Stewart appropriates the Moses story to encourage black youth to become community leaders rather than pleasure seekers, just as Moses had chosen to be his people’s leader rather than an Egyptian crown prince. She writes, “. . . could I but see young men and maidens turning their feet from impious ways, rather choosing to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season” (10). Black Boston had its share of brothels, dance halls, gambling houses, and taverns. Its youth faced the temptation of choosing paths that led them away from what Stewart thought was the essential work for their brethren. She presents these temptations as

equally alluring for males and females, for she believes both “men and maidens” could become race leaders. Although she was one of the first black women to speak publicly, she did not envision herself as being the last to occupy this position. By selecting Moses as a role model for black youth, Stewart emphasizes free blacks’ need for men and women to initiate community uplift as well as fight for the emancipation of their enslaved brethren.

Stewart learned from personal experience that making the right choice in a Mosaic Moment did not guarantee immediate acceptance or success. Like Walker, she references Hebrews 11 to characterize her Mosaic commitment to her people. In the final paragraph of “Mrs. Stewart’s Farewell Address To Her Friends in the City of Boston” (1833), she asserts: “Well was I aware that if I contended boldly for His cause, I must suffer. Yet, I chose rather to suffer affliction with His people, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season” (82). As God had called Moses to deliver the Israelites from slavery, Stewart believes He had appointed her to lead His cause of liberating slaves and uplifting free blacks. Fulfilling this calling would not be easy for, as Stewart indicates, “I must suffer.” Everyone who God calls to perform community uplift faces challenges, and Stewart does not expect her experience to be any different. Gender politics increased the difficulties Stewart experienced in nineteenth-century America, however. In *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*, Jacqueline Royster explains, “Stewart had the desire to speak out publicly about discrimination and injustice and about the need for political and economic activism. In this era, women were not granted this privilege. The woman’s role in society dictated that such actions were unseemly, a violation of ‘a woman’s place.’ Women were not public speakers; men were.

Women's domain was not politics or public discourse; it was in the home" (164). Stewart violates the restrictions of "a woman's place" because she believes God has called her to enter the public sphere. She considers the costs and embraces the challenge of public speaking instead of limiting herself to the domestic sphere. In so doing, Stewart models how women can become involved in racial uplift work by speaking out against injustices, admonishing their brethren to embrace race work, and being willing to experience rejection to advance the struggle for freedom and equality.

Walker and Stewart employed the Exodus narrative to invigorate their community building efforts. By invoking a familiar story, Walker helped his brethren understand their true wretched condition. Once blacks acknowledged their lot, they could embrace activities and attitudes that would free the slaves and foster community building. Stewart transgressed the boundary that confined women to the domestic sphere and embarked on a public career that she knew would bring suffering. Both offered Moses as a model citizen for their brethren to emulate in racial uplift initiatives. By choosing to ". . . suffer affliction with [my] people, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season," both Walker and Stewart exemplified the Mosaic life they admonished their audience to embrace and provided a legacy for future leaders. The black community rejected both Stewart and Walker. During the mid-nineteenth century when racial uplift efforts faltered, however, prominent abolitionists like Henry Highland Garnet began directing African Americans to embrace Stewart's and Walker's community building initiatives that had once seemed too radical.

## **Conclusion**

In the early nineteenth century, many African American writers and their supporters appropriated the Exodus narrative to exercise human agency in demanding liberty and equality. Despite its inspirational nature, however, the Exodus story did not enable them to accomplish their goals between 1800 and 1840. Revolts failed. Neither Africa nor Haiti became a promised land. Slavery flourished and oppression increased. Instability and discontinuity still characterized black Exodus narratives written and published by abolitionists and activists. Although the stories did not fulfill the promise of freedom and equality, they helped focus community building efforts and encouraged black leaders and their supporters to continue what had become a long, difficult battle for civil liberties.

### Chapter 3: “Where is our promised land?”: Mosaic Leaders Advocate Assimilation or Emigration in the First Nadir, 1840-1861

We do but follow out our destiny,  
as did the Ancient Israelites—and strive,  
Unconscious that we work at His decree,  
By Whom alone we triumph as we live!  
—“Progress in America,” *Democratic Review* (1846)

The earnest prayer of my heart is, that you may,  
like the man Moses, be instrumental in releasing  
your brethren from thralldom.  
—Ebenezer James, letter to the *North Star* (1859)

God our father bids us go.—Will we go?  
Go we must and go we will, as there is no alternative.  
—Martin Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration,  
and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852)

By 1840, nearly two and one-half million blacks suffered in slavery in the South, while more than three hundred thousand free blacks throughout the nation languished under laws that severely restricted their liberty, according to the US Census. Black leaders and their supporters continued to demand freedom, while white politicians remained invested in strengthening the national economy through southern slavery, northern industrialization, and westward expansion rather than join the fight for emancipation and equality. National discourse continued to posit the United States as a promised land. Yet as Congress persisted in enacting legislation that regulated rather than eliminated slavery, it truly seemed to black Americans that the United States was Egypt.

Nevertheless, the Exodus story continued to inspire bondsmen to seek freedom in the promised lands of the North and Canada, and black activists to redouble their efforts to liberate slaves and win civil rights. In the biblical narrative, God fulfilled His promise to deliver the Israelites after four hundred years of slavery in Egypt and lead them to “a

land flowing with milk and honey” (Gen. 15:13 and Exod. 3:8). He freed the Hebrews by directing Moses to go and tell Pharaoh to emancipate His people. When Pharaoh refused, God sent a series of plagues that convinced the ruler to honor His request. Moses then led the children of Israel out of Egypt to the border of the Promised Land. In the decades leading up to the Civil War, black and abolitionist Mosaic leaders who viewed the United States as their native land embraced the Exodus narrative and hoped to transform their Egypt into Canaan. Others appropriated the story to support emigration to foreign promised lands in which blacks could experience liberty and prosperity.

This chapter examines how black activists and their supporters invoked the Exodus story to appoint Mosaic leaders willing to employ radical means to lead African Americans to a promised land. In speeches and literature some anoint themselves or others as Moses figures who seek to emancipate slaves and transform the United States into a promised land for black Americans. They include Henry Highland Garnet in “Sketch of the Life and Character of David Walker” (1848) and *Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* (1843); Ebenezer James in his letter to the *North Star* (1848); Frederick Douglass in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” (1852), and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855); British reformer Thomas Gardiner Lee in the introduction to the second edition of the *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* (1851); and black Canadian activist Osborne Anderson in *A Voice from Harper’s<sup>10</sup> Ferry: A Narrative of Events at Harper’s Ferry* (1861).

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<sup>10</sup> I have presented the title of Anderson’s book as it was published, “Harper’s Ferry,” rather than its current spelling, “Harpers Ferry,” throughout the dissertation.

Given the legal setbacks that occurred between 1850 and 1860, other black activists shifted their focus from assimilation into the promised land of the United States to emigration to foreign Canaans. Mary Ann Shadd in *A Plea for Emigration; Or, Notes of Canada West* (1852), Martin R. Delany in *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852), an anonymous writer from Ohio in a letter to the *Provincial Freeman* (1854), and James Theodore Holly in “Thoughts on Hayti” (1859) take on the role of Mosaic activists who will lead blacks to foreign promised lands.

Still other black leaders appropriated different episodes and figures of the Exodus story—Joseph and Joshua as well as Moses—to create narratives that represented alternative ways of representing their fragmented communities whose needs traditional black Moses figures could not address. In his novel *Blake or the Huts of America* (1859-62), Delany creates the character of Henry Blake, a transnational Moses who plans to establish a Pan-African community. In “Our Greatest Want” (1859), Frances E. W. Harper questions the validity of a simple black Mosaic leader and urges *all* Americans to emulate Moses. Joshua and Joseph stories offered writers a means to teach African Americans how to initiate rather than rely on Mosaic leaders to implement reform. In an article titled “Wisdom and Her Children” published in *Provincial Freeman* (1855), an anonymous author appropriates the Exodus story to inspire slaves to prepare for the appearance of a Joshua who will organize a regional revolt through which slaves would liberate themselves. In *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a free Black* (1859), Harriet E. Wilson embraces the Joseph story to highlight the contributions and emphasize the

needs of neglected free black domestic servants and the challenges mulatta and poor white women faced in the North.

### **The United States, a Divided Nation: Promised Land for Whites, Egypt for Blacks**

As black activists struggled to sustain the Exodus story in their writings during the 1840s, white Americans strengthened their national Exodus narratives by increasingly characterizing themselves as Anglo-Saxons, the superior European race chosen by God to enjoy civil and religious liberty, and spread democracy throughout North America. Editors of national magazines nurtured white Americans' belief in their providential calling by publishing numerous articles by writers who describe pivotal moments in the young republic's history through the lens of Exodus, while failing to acknowledge the presence or contributions of African Americans. For example, in "American Puritanism" (1843), an anonymous writer for *The New England and Yale Review* posits the Puritans' journey to the New World as a transatlantic voyage to the promised land (358). In *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, another anonymous author published a review of the *Cyclopedia of American Literature* (1856) in which he asserts that it was the pilgrims who, in bringing "their love of reading with their household treasures, to the promised land of religion and freedom," had created American literature (170). Other writers characterized the Revolutionary War as another chapter in the white American Exodus story. In "Memoirs of Generals Lee, Gates, Stephen and Drake" (1858), published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, an anonymous author describes soldiers who had opposed General George Washington as disobedient Israelites because they had rejected their "true chief" and favored General Horatio Gates to "lead them by a short and pleasant route in the promised land" (596).

Still other writers depicted the establishment of colonies in the South as an extension of the pilgrims' northeastern promised land. In "Campbell and Stevens: History of Virginia and Georgia" (1847), a review of William Bacon Stevens' *A History of Georgia, from its First Discovery by Europeans to the Adoption of the Present Constitution published in The North American Review*, an anonymous critic highlights Stevens' assertion in that the "Garden of Georgia" had rivaled the attractiveness of Virginia and South Carolina. According to Stevens, "Oglethorpe, in particular, was quite enthusiastic in his description of the climate, soil, production, and beauties of this American Canaan" (312). In "Daniel Boone" (1859) published in *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, Benson J. Lossing describes Boone as a Moses figure, gazing from a mountain top to survey land that would become Kentucky: "That eminence was Pisgah from which those pioneers of civilization looked into the promised land" (579).

Such recollections of the providential establishment of colonies in the New World encouraged white Americans to continue the physical, ideological, and rhetorical work of transforming unexplored western territories into their promised land. In *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalistic Expansionism in American History*, Albert K. Weinberg argues that "[t]he magnitude and rich natural resources of the western American wilderness strengthened the conviction that Americans were chosen people. Surely this was land for the new children of Israel" (113).

To commemorate the induction of Texas into the Union in 1844, for example, the *Democratic Review* published a poem titled "Progress in America: Or, a Speech in Sonnets, on Great Britain and the United States; not delivered either in Parliament or

Congress” (1846). The poet draws a parallel between the United States’ acquisition of Texas and the Israelites’ conquest of the promised land:

We do but follow out our destiny,  
as did the Ancient Israelites—and strive,  
Unconscious that we work at His decree,  
By Whom alone we triumph as we live! (92)

Americans, however, were determined to limit the land for “the new children of Israel” to whites. When Texas became a promised land for whites, its population included 30,000 enslaved African Americans. Similarly, Oregon emerged as a Canaan for whites but an Egypt for blacks. In an article titled “The Oregon Question” (1846) published in *The North American Review*, an anonymous author describes Oregon Territory as the “promised land” for white settlers (228). Thirteen years later, residents of Oregon Territory enacted “A Bill to Prevent Negroes and Mulattoes from Coming to, or Residing in Oregon.” The law allowed blacks who lived in the territory to remain, but banned new black emigrants, except those accompanying whites on business (“A Bill”).

In prohibiting blacks from entering their western promised land, white Americans appropriated the Exodus story to present colonization as an effective means to create a white American Canaan. In his eulogy of Henry Clay (1852), Abraham Lincoln invoked the Exodus narrative to characterize the founder of the American Colonization Society (ACS) as a leader who had helped the nation avert the fate of Pharaoh and his army by facilitating the restoration of “a captive people to their long-lost father-land” (“Eulogy”). Although the ACS had initially recruited free blacks for West African colonies, by the 1850s they were considering relocating slaves as well. Other white authors supported colonization by ridiculing African Americans’ attempts to build independent communities in North America. In her novel *Liberia: or, Mr. Peyton’s Experiments*

(1853), Sarah J. Hale's protagonist Mr. Peyton liberates his slaves but finds them unsuited for life as freedmen in the United States or Canada. He believes his former slaves will be unhappy until they move to Liberia. By characterizing former slaves as incapable of becoming self-sufficient in America, Hale asserts that blacks are unfit for citizenship.

Although few blacks had been interested in colonization, many began to reconsider emigration options after legislation and scientific "research" published in the 1850s resulted in serious setbacks in racial uplift efforts. The revised 1850 Fugitive Slave Law demanded that northerners capture and return runaway slaves. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 undermined the gains made by free-state advocates by forcing residents of new territories to determine whether to enter the union as a slave or free state. The US Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision of 1857 denied blacks citizenship. Racist sentiments published in books like George R. Gliddon and J. C. Nott's *Types of Mankind: or, Ethnological Researches* (1854) offered "scientific" justification for racial hierarchies that strengthened anti-black laws and quashed hopes for equality. In effect, these developments transformed the nation into Egypt by making black Americans subject to slavery or stripping them of their rights.

In search of a promised land, black authors of this period, like their predecessors, relied on a variety of narrative strategies to decenter and rewrite the national Exodus story. Some writers invoke episodes in the Exodus narrative to anoint themselves or others as Moses figures who will identify African Americans as God's people, spearhead antislavery efforts, lead emigration movements, justify slave revolts, or warn white Americans of divine punishment for enslaving blacks. Others double Exodus figures with

prominent biblical persons (for example, David, Christ, or the Pharisees) to transform Mosaic leaders into multi-faceted sacred heroes who plot to liberate slaves or condemn white Christians who do not support emancipation. Many authors conflate the language of Exodus with secular/republican discourse to present Mosaic leaders as civic-minded revolutionaries who argue for emancipation, demand the rights of citizenship, support emigration, or plan insurrections.

The location of the promised land was on the minds of these authors. In their Exodus stories, some look for a Moses who will transform the United States or Canada into African Americans' Canaan. Others set their sights on homes in an "Atlantic black diaspora," including Central and South America, Haiti, and Africa, where they hope to settle among people who abhor slavery (178). Still other writers view the United States as simultaneously Egypt and promised land because slavery and discriminatory laws continue to permeate the nation. Finally, a few authors create fissures in this era's dominant Mosaic narratives by invoking the Joseph and Joshua stories to emphasize militant action—for example, an innovative southern slave revolt or reform that addresses slavery as well as labor issues that abolitionists had ignored. Ultimately, these black Exodus narratives represent the varied and innovative attempts of African Americans and their supporters to achieve freedom and equality for the black community, goals that remained unfulfilled during this period.

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### **Emancipate and Integrate within an American Canaan**

#### **Henry "Box Brown, an Unwilling Moses**

In the late 1840s, Henry Box Brown shipped himself in a crate via express railway from Richmond to Philadelphia. His astonishing escape brought him to the attention of abolitionists who were searching for a Moses figure to lead slaves to freedom. Brown arrived in the North in the late 1840s just as prominent black leaders such as Frederick Douglass and Henry Highland Garnet were declaring independence from white abolitionists and advocating radical racial uplift efforts. Brown soon shared the stage with other popular fugitive slaves, including William Wells Brown and William and Ellen Craft who, like Douglass, had published their experiences, won acclaim for their ingenuity and bravery, and traveled abroad to protect their newfound freedom. The enactment of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law forced these escaped slaves to flee to England. Instead of settling into the conventional role of lecturer on the British antislavery circuit, however, Brown created a variety show with the assistance of James Smith, who had helped him to escape. The show featured performances of slave songs, reenactments of Brown's journey to Philadelphia, and viewings of Brown's "Mirror of Slavery," a moving scroll of paintings depicting "an archetypal narrative of the history of the slaves" through the experiences of a "Nubian family" forced into slavery in Africa and brought to the United States and the story Brown's escape from slavery (Ruggles 96-104).

Brown's decision to stage a variety show disappointed British abolitionists. In the introduction to the second edition of Brown's *Narrative* (1851), Thomas Gardiner Lee, a British minister and reformer, appropriates the Exodus story to encourage readers to force the independent-minded Brown into the traditional role of Moses, the slaves' deliverer, more in keeping with the image of the godly, conservative activist that English abolitionists had in mind. Although many scholars have analyzed Brown's escape from

slavery, none has examined Lee's characterization of Brown as a Moses figure. In "Passing Beyond the Middle Passage: Henry 'Box' Brown's Translation of Slavery," Cynthia Griffin Wolff characterizes Brown's escape in a box as a "reverse Middle Passage." In *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865*, Marcus Wood positions Brown as a Noah figure who prefigures Christ's resurrection. In a recent edition of Brown's *Narrative*, Henry Louis Gates and Richard Newman posit Brown as a Christ figure, escape artist, and inventor. Yet all overlook Lee's analogy of Brown to Moses in his comment that God will send a Mosaic leader to liberate enslaved African Americans. He writes:

. . .when we consider that Great Being who beheld the Israelites in their captivity, and beholding, came down to deliver them is still the same; have we not reason to believe that he will in his Providence raise up another Moses, to guide the now enslaved sons of Ham to the privileges which humanity, irrespective of colour or clime is always at liberty to demand. (6)

As God had sent Moses to emancipate the Israelites, Lee believes God will send a pious Moses to guide enslaved African Americans to freedom. Like Absalom Jones, who assured his congregation that God had seen the oppression of American slaves and impressed Congress to outlaw the international slave trade, Lee argues that God is aware of the slaves' suffering and will emancipate them. Lee does not simply draw a parallel between the experiences of enslaved Israelites and African Americans, however. He refutes the commonly held belief that slaves were cursed descendants of Ham by declaring that blacks are members of the human family, and all human beings—blacks, Englishmen, and Americans—have the right to demand liberty. When human beings enslave others, God always sends a deliverer.

Numerous Moses figures had stepped forward to demand freedom for slaves, employing every means from petitions to revolt. Rather than blindly accept anointed or self-appointed Moses figures, however, Lee encourages readers to consider Brown's escape as a sign that the fugitive slave could be a divinely appointed Moses. Lee writes:

It may be that the subject of the following narrative has a mission from God to the human family. Certainly the deliverance of Moses, from destruction on the Nile, was scarcely more marvelous than was the deliverance of Mr. Henry Box Brown from the horrors of slavery. For any lengthy observations, by which the reader will be detained from the subject of the following pages, there can be no necessity whatever. (7)

In the Exodus narrative, Pharaoh's daughter saved Moses from a death sentence when she found him tucked in a waterproof ark among the bulrushes in a river. The Egyptian princess adopted him and raised him as a prince. By comparing Brown's escape in a box to baby Moses' escape from slavery in an ark, Lee characterizes Brown's feat as a miracle. Brown's successful twenty-six hour train ride in a small crate from Richmond to Philadelphia becomes the miraculous sign that qualifies him to be Moses, separating him from the many other Moses figures who had emerged to lead enslaved African Americans to freedom. Furthermore, by emancipating slaves, Brown could help the United States regain its reputation as a land of liberty.

Although Moses' rescue from an ark and Brown's ingenious escape in a crate may appear similar and divinely appointed, Lee's comparison strips Brown of human agency. The biblical Moses was dependent on his mother Jochebed who had created his ark, his sister Miriam who watched over him as he floated in the river, and the Egyptian princess who rescued him and groomed him for the Egyptian throne. In contrast, Brown had left his family in the South, shipped himself North in a crate, adopted the name

Henry “Box” Brown, and become active in the antislavery movement, not as the slaves’ deliverer but as a shrewd businessman.

By placing Brown in an ark, Lee recasts the young, autonomous abolitionist as a dependent baby Moses who must rely on the British Antislavery Society for his safety. Sympathetic British abolitionists would “adopt” Brown, establish him in a foreign country, and name him “Moses.” While the Egyptian princess raised Moses as the heir apparent, British abolitionists would groom Brown to be his people’s deliverer. Yet, by the time Lee wrote his introduction to Brown’s *Narrative*, Brown had been touring with his “Mirror of Slavery” panorama and lecturing on the British antislavery circuit for six months. He had reportedly developed a rather sophisticated program that was educational, entertaining, and even subversive, but his showman style made the British abolitionist community uncomfortable, particularly after he staged a reenactment of his railroad journey around the time he published the second edition of his *Narrative*. Although Brown was devoted to abolition, he preferred the excitement of crowded amusement halls to the more traditional antislavery venues where the public gathered to hear speeches and first-hand accounts of slavery. Brown soon learned that the members of the British Antislavery Society was as conservative as their American counterparts, and had strict ideas about how their protégées should act both in public and private (Wood 106). Brown refused to be contained. Instead of becoming Moses, he charted his own path by separating from James Smith, who had attempted to discredit him, and touring on his own. He refused offers from British abolitionists to raise money to purchase his family and bring them to England, and reportedly married an

Englishwoman. When he returned to the United States after the Civil War, he arrived as Professor H. Box Brown, the magician (Ruggles 167).

### **David Walker, a Rejected Moses**

Whereas Henry “Box” Brown ignored Lee’s call to be a Moses, the black community rejected other Mosaic leaders who dedicated themselves to racial uplift. In the early 1840s, Henry Highland Garnet, a prominent abolitionist who had escaped from slavery and become a Presbyterian minister, reminded his people that in 1828 David Walker had offered a powerful *Appeal* for “coloured citizens” to acknowledge their wretchedness and unite in their efforts to demand freedom and denounce colonization. Although some of Walker’s contemporaries, notably Maria W. Stewart, had supported him, most were unwilling to adopt his aggressive approach toward emancipation. By 1840, however, many members of the black community, impatient with the slow progress of the national antislavery movement, began to view the nation as Egypt and advocate militant uplift efforts rather than moral suasion to attain their goals. They looked for a radical Moses, who would support his people, confront Pharaoh, and organize slave revolts, if necessary, to achieve freedom. In his “Sketch of the Life and Character of David Walker” (1848), Garnet reminds the black community that they had once opposed such a leader. He characterizes Walker as Moses, transforming him into a sacred hero whom blacks could emulate as they considered radical means to emancipate slaves and combat racism.

Garnet invokes several Old Testament narratives to reintroduce Walker and strengthen the dead leader’s standing in the black community. He begins by drawing a parallel between David Walker, the radical abolitionist, who distributed his *Appeal*

throughout the South and David, the young shepherd and future king of Israel, who hurled a stone from his slingshot and killed Goliath, the Philistines' ten-foot giant-warrior (1 Sam. 17-18). By positing David Walker as David fighting Goliath, Garnet reconstructs the South as a contested promised land where Philistine masters oppress enslaved African American Israelites. Slaves did not face one giant, however, but thousands of slave owners in the South. Just as the Philistines depended on Goliath to intimidate the Israelites, white Americans empowered slaveholders to subdue their slaves. According to Garnet, Walker's *Appeal* was the small stone hurled at a "host of Goliaths," slaveholders who were actually "poor, cowardly, pusillanimous tyrants." Walker did not slay slave masters as David had conquered Goliath. To the contrary, his revolutionary rhetoric compelled slavery proponents to place a bounty on his head and enact stricter slave codes. If Walker through his *Appeal* could provoke such a strong reaction from slavery proponents, however, the black activist community and their supporters could employ an arsenal of powerful tactics to spread their message and stoke the antislavery debate.

Some antislavery leaders condemned Garnet's assertive approach, but his account of Walker's fearlessness gave black activists of the 1840s a heroic example of courage in the face of death threats. Garnet emphasizes Walker's boldness by doubling the story of David with portions of the narratives of Moses and Christ, and then conflating those stories with the history of martyrs. Garnet reports that Walker had refused to seek refuge in the promised land of Canada, preferring like Moses, to suffer with his people. When Walker's relatives and friends urged him to flee, "Said he, 'I will stand my ground. Somebody must die in this cause. I may be doomed to the stake and the fire, or to the scaffold tree, but it is not in me to falter if I can promote the work of emancipation.'"

Walker had perceived his work as a sacred calling. He had linked his life to that of Christ the crucified as well as Christian martyrs burned at the stake, recognizing that he would likely lose his life to “promote emancipation.” He understood that his *Appeal* might not free enslaved blacks but it could strengthen the abolition movement and unify his brethren. In invoking Walker’s sacrifice, Garnet reminded black activists that they were involved in work that could cost them their lives at a time when some were beginning to advocate emigration, particularly to Canada where they could continue their antislavery work in a less hostile society. Garnet intimates that despite the danger, activists could work most effectively if they remained in the United States and fulfilled Walker’s goal of transforming the nation into their promised land.

Most blacks had not heeded Walker’s *Appeal*. Garnet invokes another episode in the Exodus narrative to provide an unflattering comparison between the Israelites and Walker’s detractors. Garnet writes, “[Walker] had many enemies, and not a few were his brethren whose cause he espoused. They said he went too far, and was making trouble. So the Jews spoke of Moses. They valued the flesh-pots of Egypt more than the milk and honey of Canaan.” Shortly after the Israelites began their journey through the wilderness, they complained about being hungry and wished they had died in Egypt where they had dined on meat (Exod. 16:1-3). Similarly, Garnet suggests that some African Americans preferred to eat from the “fleshpots” of their American Egypt, those unhealthy conditions that compelled slaves and free blacks to accept degradation, rather than struggle for freedom. They had feared Walker’s methods would make their lives more difficult or even subject them to death instead of leading them to a promised land of freedom and equality. African Americans’ lives had worsened in the fifteen years following the

publication of Walker's pamphlet, however, because moral suasion had not convinced politicians to liberate slaves or elevate free blacks. In the early 1840s, Garnet recalled the wisdom of Walker's *Appeal*, and urged African Americans to adopt his bold methods to ensure the success of their journey to the promised land.

### **Enslaved African Americans, a Community of Moses Figures**

Before publishing his tribute to Walker, Garnet had affirmed his belief in the necessity of militant antislavery initiatives in his *Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* at the 1843 Convention of Colored Citizens in Rochester, New York. For more than ten years, Garnet had joined with other blacks who gathered regularly in state and national conventions to discuss racial uplift strategies that included education, emigration, employment, suffrage, and abolition. But Garnet believed activists had erred in formulating plans to abolish slavery and transform the United States into Canaan for African Americans without directly consulting or advising the slaves (90). At the convention, Garnet adapts Walker's strategy of offering a message of empowerment to slaves in his *Address*, a speech Donald Yacovone has characterized as his "declaration of independence from white dominance in reform" (293). Garnet enlarges the scope of the black community's abolition efforts by creating an Exodus story in which millions of slaves will play a central role as Moses figures who convert the South into a promised land of economic opportunity by demanding and being willing to fight for freedom.

Garnet's *Address* directly challenged William Lloyd Garrison and other prominent black abolitionists like Douglass who believed moral suasion was the best means to abolish slavery. Garnet's speech was most likely a response to Garrison's conciliatory speech, also titled *Address to the Slaves of the United States*, delivered at the

1843 New England Anti-Slavery Society Convention. Throughout his “Address,” Garrison repeatedly begins sentences with the pronoun “they,” a reference to northern abolitionists like himself who he describes as the slaves’ only “true and unyielding friends on whom you can rely.” He assures slaves that they have many friends “who are laboring to effect your emancipation without delay, in a peaceable manner, without the shedding of blood.” Garrison advises slaves to “be patient, long-suffering and submissive, yet a while longer—truly that, you by the blessings of the Most High on their labors, you will be emancipated without shedding a drop of your master’s blood, or lose a drop of your own.” Garrison may have been addressing the slaves, but he was certainly attempting to curtail the efforts of militant abolitionists like Garnet.

While Garrisonians preached patience, Garnet advocated action through which southern blacks could liberate themselves. Because they were scattered throughout the South, they needed to see themselves as individually responsible for their collective response to slaveholders’ obstinacy. In the United States, Pharaohs and bloodstained rivers blocked the slaves’ path to freedom. Garnet asserts, “It is impossible, like the children of Israel, to make a grand Exodus from the land of bondage. The Pharaohs are on both sides of the blood-red waters!” (96). When the Israelites left Egypt, God miraculously parted the Red Sea to provide an escape from the pursuing Egyptian army. Southern slaves could not leave their Egypt, however, for US President John Tyler, a slaveholder from Virginia, governed a republic divided by the “blood-red” Mississippi River separating the East from the West and the “blood-red” Ohio River dividing the North and South. Slave states were located on both sides of these waterways and free states did not guarantee freedom or equality for African Americans. Garnet warns the

slaves that they cannot escape through the North to Canada, “the dominion of the British Queen,” for northern Pharaohs collaborate with southern slaveholders to capture fugitives. Neither can they “overrun Texas, and at last find peace in Mexico” because Texas is a slave state. For African Americans, the entire United States had become Egypt even before the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Furthermore, no nation in North America would be able to handle the influx of more than two million fugitive slaves.

In *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*, Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., asserts that “[Garnet] rejected Exodus as a model for black liberation. . . . This rejection spoke directly to the slaves’ belief that God was acting, in fact, would act on their behalf as he had acted for Israel” (156-57).<sup>11</sup> While Garnet contends that African Americans cannot experience an Exodus-like moment of liberation, I argue that he still draws on the biblical narrative to develop his liberation strategy for slaves. Garnet encourages slaves to be as bold as Moses and other revolutionary leaders in confronting slaveholders. He urges them to emulate Moses; Bruce, thirteenth-century leader of Scottish resistance against the English; Marquis de Lafayette, French soldier and statesman who aided the colonists; John Hampden, seventh-century English parliamentarian who resisted the king’s ship money tax; Joseph Cinque, Toussaint L’Ouverture, Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and Madison Washington, leaders of slave insurrections; William Tell, fourteenth-century Swiss patriot who resisted imperial authority; William Wallace, thirteenth-century leader of Scottish resistance against the

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<sup>11</sup> In a footnote to Garnet’s quote regarding “Pharaohs on both sides of the blood-red waters,” Glaude concedes that “Garnet doesn’t completely reject Exodus. He seeks instead to open up space within prevailing interpretations of the story for the kind of action he advocates. His denial of the analogy, then, is an effort to transform the Exodus story in order to justify his revolutionary politics” (201).

English; and George Washington, commander of the colonial army. Garnet cites Moses as the first of many leaders who led revolutions and revolts, and defied monarchs and slaveholders. Some had openly demanded their rights and then fought for freedom; others had secretly planned revolts and surprised their oppressors. If Garnet had rejected Exodus as inspiration for black liberation efforts, he would not have included Moses in his revolutionary heroes hall of fame.

Rather than instruct slaves to organize rebellions or revolutions, Garnet offers a new version of the Exodus story: adoption of Moses' strategy in demanding liberty, and if diplomacy fails, fight for freedom. Garnet begins by informing slaves of the colonists' clarion call during their struggle for independence: "The sentiments of their revolutionary orators fell in burning eloquence upon their hearts, and with one voice they cried, LIBERTY OR DEATH." He then conflates republican discourse with an allusion to Exodus, equating the slaves' fight against slaveholders with colonists' revolt against the British. He implores the slaves to

. . . go to your lordly enslavers, and tell them plainly, that YOU ARE DETERMINED TO BE FREE. *Appeal* to their sense of justice, and tell them that they have no more right to oppress you, than you have to enslave them. Entreat them to remove the grievous burdens which they have imposed upon you, and to remunerate you for your labor. Promise them renewed diligence in the cultivation of the soil, if they will render to you an equivalent for your services. . . Tell them in language which they cannot misunderstand, of the exceeding sinfulness of slavery, and of a future judgment, and of the righteous retributions of an indignant God. Inform them that all you desire, is FREEDOM, and that nothing else will suffice. Do this, and forever after cease to toil for the heartless tyrants, who give you no other reward but stripes and abuse. If they then commence the work of death, they, and not you, will be responsible for the consequences. You had far better all die—*die immediately*, than live slaves, and entail your wretchedness upon your posterity. (73)

Garnet urges the slaves to demand an exodus from slavery and entry into the promised land of economic opportunity where they will earn wages for their labor. Rather than

depend on divine intervention for liberation, however, they must be prepared to fight for their freedom if their masters refuse to treat them as hired workers. He asserts that slaves are justified in resorting to violence because they, like enslaved Israelites, cannot obey God's commandments while in bondage and thus are in danger of forfeiting eternal life. Their sacred duty to God outweighs an unjust obligation to man.

### **Frederick Douglass, America's Moses**

When Garnet issued his *Address to the Slaves*, Frederick Douglass sat among the educated, self-confident new generation of outspoken activists in the audience. Delegates initially accepted Garnet's plan, but debated whether they should refer the text to a committee for revision before adopting it. Garnet passionately objected, reportedly moving many of the delegates to tears. Douglass was one of Garnet's major detractors. Convinced that the plan would lead to an insurrection, Douglass implored the delegates to "try moral means a little longer" and withhold support from Garnet's *Address* (*Minutes* 13). After delegates initially rejected Garnet's resolution by one vote, the debate continued, with Douglass persuading more of them to support the moral suasion position (Schor 32). Their actions revealed the fragmentation of the black community that Walker had sought to unite with his *Appeal*.

Douglass actively sought a leadership role in the antislavery movement by delivering speeches and publishing the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (1845). His story became so widely known that he feared being recaptured. As a consequence, he embarked on a twenty-one month speaking tour of Great Britain where he networked with abolitionists who helped provide him with the necessary tools to assume a greater leadership role in the American

antislavery movement. In 1848, he returned to New York with his freedom papers and sufficient funds from his British friends to purchase a printing press. After completing a western speaking tour with Garrison, Douglass settled in Rochester, New York, and began publishing the *North Star*, an antislavery newspaper that gave him independence from white abolitionists who had attempted to control his views regarding slavery and racial uplift. In “The Blood of the Slaves on the Shirts of the Northern People,” an 1848 editorial in which Douglass criticizes northern voters of betraying their people by electing a Whig party candidate, General Zachary Taylor, a popular veteran of the Mexican American War and slave owner, as the twelfth US president. After reading the editorial, Ebenezer James wrote a letter to Douglass in which he invokes the Exodus story to characterize the North as Egypt and urge Douglass to be a Moses for enslaved blacks.

James expresses a need for a Moses for free blacks and slaves because white northerners’ business practices have transformed them into overseers. He writes, “The people of the North, like Egyptian taskmasters who kept the Israelites in bondage, wield power that rivets the chains upon three millions<sup>12</sup> of American citizens . . . America has, it is true, many valuable institutions within her borders . . . yet I have no desire to embrace her gifts, for they will always be covered with blood, until her great sin is washed away.” In the biblical narrative, Egyptian taskmasters inflicted heavy burdens on enslaved Israelites, provoked them to cry to God for deliverance, forced them to make bricks without straw, and beat them when they did not meet their quotas (Exod. 1:11, 3:7 and 5:9-14). Similarly, northern taskmasters had increased the slaves’ burdens by supporting businesses—insurance companies, factories, textile mills, and shipping industries—that relied on slave labor (Farrow et al. xxvi-xxviii). Blacks needed a leader

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<sup>12</sup> According to the 1840 US Census, approximately 2,487,355 African Americans labored as slaves.

like Douglass to boldly expose northerners' complicity in slavery, for Congress would not abolish slavery if it meant dismantling the financial network that sustained the institution. Northerners' support of businesses and institutions connected to slavery threatened the liberty of free blacks and ensured the perpetuation of slavery.

Northerners' election of Zachary Taylor in 1848 validated black activists' perception of the nation as Egypt and renewed their call for a Moses to deliver enslaved African Americans. James accuses northerners of voting "at the recent election for a modern Pharaoh as their ruler for the next four years." By electing a slaveholding president, white Americans signaled their support of slavery as a federal institution rather than a state's right. In light of the election, James shares his belief that slaves need a Mosaic deliverer. He implores Douglass, "The earnest prayer of my heart is, that you may, like the man Moses, be instrumental in releasing your brethren from thralldom." James prefaces his plea with a prayer, acknowledging that even a prominent abolitionist needs divine aid to abolish slavery. Douglass was well suited for this task, however. As a recently emancipated slave, he understood the experience of bondage and the perils of freedom. As a free black, he had earned the respect of blacks and sympathetic whites by eloquently demanding emancipation and equality for African Americans. The *North Star* gave Douglass a platform to reach a wider audience, disseminate his ideas, shape the abolition debate, establish an international network of supporters, and present himself as the Moses of his people.

By the time James urged Douglass to be black America's Moses, a variety of other activists, notably Martin R. Delany, Henry Highland Garnet, James T. Holly, and Samuel Ward, were vying to be the race's representative and debating what qualities

Mosaic leaders should possess. Like Cornish and Russwurm, they wished to “plead [their] own cause” without the paternalistic interference of well meaning white abolitionists. Although the men shared similar goals for racial uplift, they often disagreed on the means. In his *Narrative*, his speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” (1843), and his second biography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Douglass distinguishes himself from his competitors by invoking the Exodus narrative to transform himself from a Moses who would lead slaves to freedom into a Moses who would guide *all* Americans to the promised land of liberty and equality.

Douglass begins his transformation process by presenting himself as the most qualified activist to lead black Americans because of his experiences as a slave. In his 1845 *Narrative*, he had recounted his arguments to his companions about the injustices of slavery and his plan for escape (120, 122). When he retells the story in *My Bondage*, however, he places himself in the more prominent position of “instigator” of their elaborate scheme and takes full responsibility for its success or failure (314). Douglass bolsters his brethren’s confidence in his plan by encouraging them to see their escape as an exodus. He recalls:

We were, at times, remarkably buoyant, singing hymns and making joyous exclamations, almost as triumphant in their tone as if we had reached the land of freedom and safety. 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 mean to reach the *north*—and the north was our Canaan . . . Pending the time of our contemplated departure out of our Egypt, we met often by night, and on every Sunday. (*My Bondage* 308-09)

By characterizing himself as his enslaved friends’ guide, Douglass presents himself as a Mosaic leader who carries out his responsibilities under the adverse conditions of slavery. They naively view the North as “Canaan” because of the absence of slavery. Douglass

and his friends are so confident of his plans for their escape that they joyously anticipate their departure to Canaan.

Like Garnet in his *Address to the Slaves* and Gabriel's brother Martin in his recruitment efforts for his slave revolt, Douglass conflates portions of the Exodus narrative with the rhetoric of the American Revolution to draw a parallel between their quest and the colonists' war for liberty. He and his enslaved friends were not merely seeking freedom from an oppressive government, however. Douglass argues that they were more courageous than Patrick Henry, who proclaimed, "Give me liberty or give me death" because "[w]ith us it was a *doubtful* liberty, at best, that we sought; and a certain, lingering death in the rice swamps or sugar fields, if we failed" (*My Bondage* 312). Henry and his compatriots risked their lives to form a new republic, while Douglass and his brethren imperiled their lives for liberty and equality within their native land. Even if they escaped, they would not fully enjoy freedom in the North, for they would be fugitive slaves.

Douglass relates that he eventually escaped alone with the assistance of friends in Baltimore. Freedom fuels his desire to replace white abolitionists as the new Moses prepared to liberate blacks from slavery and whites from racism. In the North, Douglass joined the antislavery circuit, at the behest of the William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison, the most prominent abolitionist of the period had edited *The Liberator*, founded the American Antislavery Society, delivered antislavery speeches, escaped lynch mobs infuriated by his devotion to abolition, and led major abolition initiatives. Douglass referred to Garrison as "the Moses, raised up by God, to deliver modern Israel from bondage" (*My Bondage* 363), but the young man chafed under Garrison's patronage.

When Garrison requested that Douglass simply relate his slave experiences without reproving slaveholders, Douglass recalls, “I could not always obey, for I was now reading and thinking. New views of the subject were presented to my mind. It did not entirely satisfy me to *narrate* wrongs; I felt like *denouncing* them. I could not always curb my moral indignation for the perpetrators of slaveholding villainy, long enough for circumstantial statement of facts which I felt almost everybody must know. Besides, I was growing and needed room” (367). By using the word “obey” to describe his response to Garrison’s entreaties, Douglass characterizes Garrison as a controlling parent rather than a Mosaic leader. “Reading and thinking” enables Douglass to mature from a nervous orator into a bold abolitionist who fearlessly denounces slavery and its advocates. Indeed, as many scholars have noted, the title, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, announces his transformation from slave to Mosaic leader. Douglass presents himself as a Moses who can speak more forcefully and convincingly against slavery than Garrison, who deeply sympathizes with bondsmen and risks his life to abolish slavery but has not experienced slavery himself and does not treat African Americans as equals.

In his second biography, Douglass enacts a Mosaic Moment to solidify his resolve to become America’s Moses. After his British friends purchase his freedom and raise money for him to buy a printing press, he recalls, “I felt that I had a duty to perform—and that was, to labor and suffer with the oppressed in my native land” (*My Bondage* 377). In the biblical narrative, when Moses reached adulthood, he chose to “suffer affliction with the people of God, than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season” (Heb. 11:25). I have suggested that Maria Stewart and David Walker rely on this episode in the Exodus narrative to create a Mosaic Moment in which they must decide whether to

pursue their own dreams or devote themselves to racial uplift. Whereas Stewart and Walker encourage all blacks to emulate Moses in everyday life, Douglass aspires to be the nation's Mosaic leader. Douglass's Mosaic Moment catapults him onto the national stage as a black abolitionist who is strong enough to break with Garrison, publish his own antislavery newspaper, and appeal to black and white audiences as a gifted writer and internationally renowned orator.

In "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852), a speech delivered at a meeting sponsored by the Rochester Ladies' Antislavery Society, Douglass appropriates the Exodus story to anoint himself as the American Moses who will lead a new revolution built on the power of moral suasion to transform the United States into a promised land for all citizens. To illustrate why slaves need a Mosaic leader to initiate a revolution for freedom, Douglass conflates the history of the Fourth of July and the biblical story of Passover. He declares, "This, for the purpose of this celebration, is the 4th of July. It is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom. This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God. It carries your minds back to the day, and to the act of your great deliverance; and to the signs, and to the wonders, associated with that act, and that day." Both white Americans and Jews could identify a specific historical moment that marked the birth of their nations. By repeating the pronouns "you" or "your," the recently liberated Douglass reminds his audience that African Americans can not celebrate the national holiday because more than three million blacks are enslaved and the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law makes all blacks susceptible to slavery. He also suggests that black liberation will not

come without violence, for a war brought about Americans' independence and the divine plague of death on the Egyptians delivered the Israelites from slavery.

Like Garnet, who appropriates several biblical narratives to reintroduce Walker as a Mosaic leader for the black community, Douglass invokes episodes from a variety of biblical stories to introduce himself as a self-appointed Moses who rebukes white Christians for their tepid support of the antislavery movement and then teaches them how to celebrate the Fourth of July. He asserts, “YOUR HANDS ARE FULL OF BLOOD; cease to do evil, learn to do well; seek judgment; relieve the oppressed; judge for the fatherless; plead for the widow” (Isa. 1:15-17). According to the biblical narrative, after settling in the Promised Land, the Israelites continued practicing religious rituals but soon began oppressing the weak. Isaiah implored them to repent for their sins, be just to everyone, and relieve suffering. In the United States, white Americans celebrated their independence and enjoyed prosperity, yet many continued to enslave and oppress African Americans. Douglass infuses his Mosaic calling with the voice of the black jeremiad, condemning slaveholders and northern whites for refusing to abolish slavery or eliminate racist legislation and traditions. He holds white Americans accountable for slavery because they know God disapproves of the practice. Like the Israelites, they can experience redemption only by relieving the suffering of the oppressed—enslaved African Americans.

Lest anyone question his right to rebuke white Americans and lead the abolition movement, Douglass asserts that he is following the New Testament examples of Christ and His apostles, who criticized Jewish leaders because they rooted their faith in empty rituals and traditions. Douglass accuses white Americans of being hypocritical scribes

and Pharisees, faithfully paying tithe on mint, cumin, and anise, but neglecting the oppressed. He reminds his listeners that Jewish leaders claimed, “Abraham is our father,” and then killed prophets and dishonored their heritage (John 8:39). Similarly, white Americans embraced George Washington as the father of their country and thereby shared his legacy as a slaveholder who did not liberate his slaves until he died. Douglass identifies notable Christian families who taught “that we ought to obey man’s law before the law of God,” the inverse of the apostles’ creed, “We ought to obey God rather than man” (Acts 5:29). By upholding the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act and other discriminatory legislation, white Americans supported slavery as a national institution that oppressed millions of free and enslaved African Americans.

After chastising his listeners and pointing the way to redemption, Douglass suggests how the United States could become a promised land. White Americans had not welcomed blacks into Oregon territory. In contrast, Douglass encourages his audience to look toward the West where “[t]he far off and almost fabulous Pacific rolls in grandeur at our feet.” The Compromise of 1850 included a provision for California to enter the Union as a free state, setting an example for all territories entering the Union prior to the Civil War. As America’s Moses, Douglass encourages white Americans to pressure Congress to keep slavery out of the new western territories and thus move the nation closer to the possibility of freedom and equality for all citizens.

### **John Brown, Captain Moses**

In the mid-nineteenth century, as black activists debated whether they should employ moral suasion or advocate violence, a white abolitionist began laying plans for an insurrection to liberate slaves throughout the South. Delegates to the 1843 Colored

Convention rejected Garnet's "Call to Rebellion," but Douglass's efforts to "try moral means a little longer" failed. Moral suasion did not convince southerners to free their slaves, or northerners to prohibit businesses that profited from slavery. White Americans respected Douglass as an orator but did not embrace him as their Moses. Nevertheless, he remained reluctant to advocate organized violence to overthrow slavery and win citizenship rights for African Americans.

When John Brown began to recruit men for his raid on the federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), many prominent abolitionists, including Douglass, privately supported him but none joined his party. Osborne P. Anderson, a free black who had emigrated from Pennsylvania to Canada West, heeded Brown's call to arms at a meeting in Chatham, Canada. On October 16, 1859, Anderson joined Brown and twenty other men at Harpers Ferry to arm themselves, establish a racially integrated maroon community in the mountains of Virginia, and inspire northerners to join the abolition movement (Reynolds 104). Brown and his men gained control of the armory, but could not implement their plans. When Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee and US Marines overpowered the raiders, ten of Brown's men died, Brown and six others were captured, and five escaped, including Anderson. In *A Voice from Harper's Ferry. A Narrative of Events at Harper's Ferry* (1861), Anderson invokes the Exodus narrative to memorialize Brown as a Moses who seeks to transform the United States into a promised land by treating blacks as equals and arming slaves to gain freedom through violent revolution.

In his account of their raid on Harpers Ferry, Anderson conflates Brown's mission to free the slaves with stories of other liberators to characterize Brown as the

Moses slaves had needed to lead their emancipation efforts. In his opening chapter, “The Idea and Its Exponents: John Brown Another Moses,” Anderson asserts:

There is an unbroken chain of sentiment and purpose from Moses of the Jews to John Brown of America; from Kossuth, and the liberators of France and Italy, to the untutored Gabriel, and the Denmark Vesey, Nat Turners and Madison Washingtons of the Southern American States . . . Lafayette, the exponent of French honor and political integrity, and John Brown, foremost among the men of the New World in high moral and religious principle and magnanimous bravery, embrace as brothers of the same mother, in harmony upon the grand mission of liberty.

Anderson draws no distinctions between sacred and secular history. In *Liberation Historiography*, John Ernest argues that because African Americans lived in a “religious culture—that is, a culture that identified religion as the foundation of its ideological justification for both domestic and foreign policy—[they] drew from their own religious beliefs in their attempt to understand and function in their historical situation. . .” (10). Anderson views the Exodus story as one of many historic struggles against tyranny, including battles in ancient Egypt, Europe, the Caribbean, and the United States, that antislavery advocates could rely on to support the violent overthrow of slavery. Unlike Douglass and Garnet, Anderson does not refer to American patriots such as George Washington in his list of revered revolutionaries, but he names Lafayette, the French military strategist who had come to the aid of the colonists during the Revolutionary War, just as Brown offered his assistance to slaves when congressional legislation all but destroyed African Americans’ dreams of citizenship. By placing the Harpers Ferry raid within the context of struggles for freedom from biblical times to the late 1850s, Anderson posits Brown as a legitimate revolutionary and the slaves as rightfully fighting for liberty.

Anderson further justifies Brown's violent attempt to overthrow slavery by drawing parallels between Brown's actions and those of several prominent biblical figures including Moses. The conflict between free and slave state proponents in Kansas convinced Brown to envision himself as a Moses for enslaved African Americans.

Anderson explains:

When the Egyptian pressed hard upon the Hebrew, Moses slew him; and when the spirit of slavery invaded the fair territory of Kansas, causing the Free-State settlers to cry out because of persecution, old John Brown, famous among the men of God for ever, though then but little known to his fellow-men, called together his sons and went over, as did Abraham, to the unequal contest, but on the side of the oppressed white men of Kansas that were, and the black men that were to be.

In the biblical narrative, when Moses killed the taskmaster, Pharaoh expelled him from the royal family and the Israelites rejected his violent leadership. (Exod. 2-3). Anderson doubles this episode of the Moses story with a portion of the narrative of Abraham, the Israelites' patriarch, attacking the army that had kidnapped his nephew Lot's family. Abraham armed three hundred servants, ambushed Lot's captors, rescued his family, and reclaimed their possessions (Gen. 14). Brown and his sons, however, make a preemptive strike, killing men who want Kansas Territory to enter the union as a slave state. To Anderson, Brown becomes a Mosaic Abraham figure, the "father" of a new nation in which everyone has a moral obligation to fight for the freedom and equality of all citizens.

Although many believed Brown's methods were extreme, Anderson argues that Brown's commitment to fulfilling a divinely ordained mandate qualifies him to be the slaves' Moses. He asserts:

Close observation of him, during many weeks, and under his orders at his Kennedy-Farm fireside, also, satisfied me that in comparing the noble old man to

Moses, and other men of piety and renown, who were chosen by God to his great work, none have been more faithful, none have given a brighter record.

Anderson invites readers to trust his assessment of Brown's character and methods because he worked with him, unlike most Americans who had received only second-hand accounts of Brown's daring acts. By insisting that God had chosen Brown to liberate the slaves, Anderson encourages his readers to see that Brown had faithfully fulfilled a mission he perceived to be God's will, just as Moses, and European and black leaders had initiated revolutions for their people.

### **Agitate and Emigrate to Foreign Canaans**

During the 1840s, other Mosaic leaders arose to advocate emigration as the best means for African Americans to achieve their racial uplift goals. Like Daniel Coker, who had emigrated to the promised land of Africa in 1820 on the first voyage sponsored by the American Colonization Society, mid-nineteenth century black emigrationists believed African Americans could find civil rights and economic opportunities only by settling in foreign Canaans. Instead of encouraging African Americans to affiliate themselves with white-led black colonization organizations, however, they advocated voluntary emigration to a variety of promised lands, further fragmenting and complicating black Exodus narratives. Some encouraged fugitives and free blacks to settle in Canada where they could continue supporting the abolition movement. Others took a nationalistic approach, advocating relocation to black nations, particularly Haiti and Africa, where African Americans' could help governments abolish the international slave trade. Still others believed Central and South America were the most suitable Canaans for blacks because of their proximity to the United States, absence of slavery, and abundant natural resources.

## **An Ohioan Moses: the Promised Land of Canada**

Black activists often assisted fugitives as they traveled through the northern free states to Canada. Because their state lay between the Egypt of the South and the promised land of Canada, many Ohio residents actively supported the Underground Railroad (UR). Some became conductors or provided stations for the UR. Mary Ann Shadd, whose family had offered their homes in Delaware and Pennsylvania as safe havens for runaway slaves, recruited supporters for the UR by delivering lectures on emigration or publishing articles about a Canadian Canaan in her newspaper, the *Provincial Freeman*, edited from Chatham, Canada. After hearing three of Shadd's speeches in Cincinnati, Ohio, "A." wrote a letter to the *Provincial Freeman* (1854) in which he decenters the national Exodus narrative and gives Ohio residents moral authority to become Moses figures and defy the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law by guiding runaway slaves to a Canadian Canaan.

Ohio residents who assisted fugitives challenged the nation's characterization of itself as a land of freedom, since the United States remained an Egypt for millions of enslaved African Americans. In his letter to the *Freeman*, the anonymous writer reports:

. . . And though on the borders of the land of oppression, more grievous than Egyptian bondage ever was, yet, there are those who willingly devote themselves, as did Moses, to guide the Israelites to the land of promise—not the Canaan over Jordan; but to Canada, truly a land of promise to the thousands of our race, who would be haunted down by the oppressors in any part of this boasted land of liberty. ("Correspondence")

In declaring that enslaved African Americans toiled in a "land of oppression," the writer designates the South as Egypt. Like David Walker in his *Appeal*, he accuses Americans of practicing a form of slavery far worse than the bondage Israelites had experienced in Egypt. He describes the United States as a "boasted land of liberty" filled with "oppressors" searching for runaway slaves. Although white citizens enjoyed freedom, the

Fugitive Slave Law forced every American to acknowledge slavery as a national institution and assist slaveholders in reclaiming their property or face fines and imprisonment. Yet the writer asserts that these threats of punishment do not intimidate Moses figures in Ohio “on the borders of the land of oppressors” who “willingly” escort runaway slaves through their American Egypt, over the Jordan River of Lake Erie, and to the promised land of Canada. Like the biblical Moses, Ohio Moses figures do not enter Canadian Canaan, but they are not barred because of disobedience. Having led their Israelites to the border of the promised land, they willingly return to Egypt where millions of blacks are still enslaved so they can guide other fugitives to the promised land of Canada.

Other contributors to the *Provincial Freeman* took a more radical stance on emigration. In “The Free People’s Hate of the People Enslaved” (1855), another anonymous author conflates the Exodus narrative with historical accounts of migrations to support African Americans who relocate to Canada to escape oppression in the United States. The writer asserts, “It is the universal custom of all people, of every nation, and every age, to flee from their country if tyrants rule it, and they are unable to conquer them, and enjoy their liberty in their native state. We had well find fault with the children of Jacob, for leaving Egypt, as the colored Americans, for leaving the hell of the continent and the piety of demons.” American colonists had gained inspiration for their revolution by looking to the Israelites’ miraculous escape from slavery and incorporating Judeo-Christian ideologies into the new republic’s political discourse. White Americans admired Europeans who abandoned their homelands to obtain freedom, and the US government granted asylum to immigrants who wished to escape tyranny. Yet through

laws such as the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, Congress created an environment so hostile to African Americans that thousands viewed the nation as Egypt and left the country, following the example of the Israelites and others who had abandoned exploitative governments. As native-born Americans forced blacks into hereditary bondage, enslaved blacks were justified in running away. If their actions were illegal, then white Americans' Exodus story was invalid since pilgrims and founding fathers alike had taken the same drastic measures as ancient Israelites and American slaves.

### **Mary Ann Shadd: the Promised Land of Canada West**

The 1850 Fugitive Slave Act convinced many blacks to reconsider their refusal to abandon their native land and to throw their support to activists who advocated emigration. In 1851, Mary Ann Shadd and her brother Isaac moved to Canada and settled in Windsor, where she opened an integrated school to help free blacks and fugitive slaves make a smooth transition to their new home. Within six months of their arrival, Shadd published *A Plea for Emigration; Or, Notes of Canada West* (1852), a pamphlet that provided information about Canada's agricultural resources, employment opportunities, community institutions, political systems, and social structures. In *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteen Century*, Jane Rhodes observes that the pamphlet "catapulted Mary Ann Shadd into the public arena and into the heart of the emigrationist debate" (43). In *A Plea for Emigration*, Shadd characterizes herself as a trustworthy Moses who has explored her Canadian Canaan and found it to be the favorable location for new black communities.

By positing the United States as an Egypt governed by officials who support slavery and colonization, Shadd makes Canada attractive for black emigrants. She directs

her ire at President Millard Fillmore who as a concession had moderated the congressional debates regarding the Compromise of 1850 but withheld his own opinion. When he became president in 1850 after the unexpected death of President Taylor, Fillmore quickly signaled his intent to support each measure of the Compromise, including the “odious” Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which had prompted Shadd and many others to emigrate to Canada West (Shadd 43). In her *Plea*, Shadd expresses more disdain for ACS agents who obfuscate their intent to transform the United States into a slave society by advertising their scheme as a Christian, philanthropic endeavor. In effect, the ACS reinforces the US government’s efforts to strengthen slavery by relocating free blacks to Africa where they can not champion the cause of their enslaved brethren. In Canada West, Shadd believes blacks can live in freedom *and* remain close enough to the United States to contribute to the antislavery movement.

Shadd dismisses the ACS’s choice of Africa as a promised land for black emigrants. She argues, “Information is needed.—Tropical Africa, the *land of promise* of the colonizationists, teeming as she is with the breath of pestilence, a burning sun and fearful maladies, bids them welcome;—she feelingly invites to moral and physical death, under a voluntary escort of their most bitter enemies at home” (43, my emphasis). Instead of freedom and prosperity, Shadd asserts that decay and death await black emigrants. She never visited Africa, but based her claims on widely circulated accounts, for example, *The Journal of Daniel Coker* and articles published in the *African Repository and Colonial Journal*, that detailed the difficulties colonists faced in establishing communities in Africa. Shadd joined the chorus of black activists who argued that

African Americans who accepted free passage to Africa on ships sponsored by the ACS were willingly placing themselves in the hands of their enemies.

For blacks who were looking for a land of promise, Shadd recommended Canada West and offered herself as a Mosaic tour guide. In *Doers of the Word*, Carla L. Peterson characterizes Shadd as a “colored tourist” who acted as a “participant-observer” in her detailed descriptions of black Canadian communities (106). Shadd acknowledges the “increasing desire on the part of the colored people, to become thoroughly informed respecting the Canadas, and particularly that part of the province called Canada West—to learn of the climate, soil, and productions, and the inducements offered generally to emigrants” (43). She seeks to allay her readers’ concerns about the cold weather, poor agricultural prospects, and meager business opportunities, and to assure them that they will live in an environment where they can be healthy and self-sufficient.

As a Moses for her brethren, Shadd provides first-hand observations to potential black emigrants who need assurance of a better life before they embark on a journey that requires them to leave their native land. Initiating an exodus of African Americans to Canada West in the 1850s was a formidable proposition. Nevertheless, for Shadd, Canada West provided blacks with the best alternative to oppressive life in the Egypt of the United States. As she presents the social aspects of her Canadian Canaan in her pamphlet, however, she minimizes the challenges that awaited black emigrants. Shadd assures blacks that “slavery is not tolerated, and prejudice of color has no existence” (60). Peterson reminds us that Shadd believed racial differences were “superficial differences of complexion” rather than a “biological difference that separates people hierarchically” (99). Thus, she hoped that “emigration to Canada West—where racial discrimination had

no de jure existence—would enable blacks to attain full civil rights, achieve social equality with whites” (Peterson 100). Even though racial discrimination was illegal in Canada, Shadd was forced to acknowledge the existence of prejudice. For example, she cites segregation on public transportation systems but asserts that Canadians mistreat all emigrants, including African Americans and Europeans (87). She even accuses black emigrants of being partly responsible for their reception because they segregate themselves, especially within black churches and schools (61-67). Nevertheless, as an advocate of emigration, Shadd encourages African Americans to migrate to her Canadian Canaan. Despite prejudice and segregation, in Canada blacks could become citizens, own property, and in some provinces even vote and serve on juries, rights that her prosperous, land owning, tax paying father Abraham Shadd never enjoyed until he emigrated. Mary Ann Shadd firmly believed that blacks could create a new identity in a community that was similar to the United States but offered more opportunities.

### **James Theodore Holly: the Promised Land of Haiti**

Like Mary Ann Shadd, James Theodore Holly, an Episcopal minister and abolitionist, became disillusioned with life for African Americans in the United States and began supporting emigration. After obtaining an education in Washington City (now the District of Columbia) and New York and then finding few opportunities for advanced academics or employment, Holly flirted with colonization before he wrote letters to Henry Bibb’s Canadian newspaper, *Voice of the Fugitive*, in support of emigration to Canada. Although he was unable to attend the 1851 Emigration Convention in Toronto, Holly attempted to influence the debate by submitting a resolution in which he recommended the formation of the North American League that would work for abolition

and racial uplift throughout the world. Holly soon joined Bibb in Canada West where he helped to publish the *Voice of the Fugitive*, develop the Refugee Home Society, and promote emigration (Dean 1-27). By the mid-1850s, Holly had selected Haiti as the ideal destination for black emigrants because slaves had “. . . sprung by their own efforts, and inherent energies from their brutalized condition, into the manly status of independent, self respecting freemen at one gigantic bound; and thus took their place at once, side by side with nations whose sovereignty had been the mature growth of ages of human progress” (Holly 185). In “Thoughts on Hayti” (1859), a six-part series of articles published in the *Anglo-African Magazine*, Holly anoints himself as a Moses who offers a religious-political mandate for blacks to emigrate to the promised land of Haiti to restore a self-identity destroyed by slavery and thereby create a Pan-African community that will address the needs and concerns of their people.

By rooting his Haitian emigration plan in the Exodus narrative, Holly challenges white America’s exclusive claim to the story that inspired the pilgrims to escape religious and political oppression and relocate to the New World. Like the author of “The Free People’s Hate of the People Enslaved,” Holly asserts that God has ordained migration as the principal method for racial renewal:

Emigration alone is the only means by which a suffering people can seek their political regeneration. Indeed we may call this God’s divinely appointed method of national regeneration, if we be allowed to deduce a legitimate conclusion from the great deliverance, that He effected for His people Israel, when He led them forth from Egyptian bondage, with a high hand and an outstretched arm. (241)

In recalling the Exodus story, Holly emphasizes God’s role in emancipating His people rather than Moses’ part in facilitating the plan. Because he himself delivers God’s call to emigration to African Americans, Holly, in effect, becomes their Moses by emulating

Moses' directive to inform the Israelites that the time had come for their deliverance. By drawing a parallel between enslaved Israelites and African Americans, Holly asserts that his people are in essence God's people. If they migrate from their Egypt to their foreign Canaan, they too can regain their national identity by separating themselves from the racist whites who are enacting laws that are effacing their humanity through slavery and discrimination. Unlike the Israelites who drove the inhabitants out of their Promised Land, African Americans will unite with their Haitian brethren and transform the first black republic established in the Western Hemisphere into a political and economic powerhouse that can effect positive change for blacks throughout the world.

Holly presents a series of biblical narratives to support his argument linking emigration and regeneration, and to encourage blacks to accept his call to escape God's wrath to an unrepentant nation. He writes:

When the highest conception of political justice, as developed in the American Declaration of Independence; and the freest field for the untrammelled operation of religion, as secured by the American Constitution fail to improve public sentiment, and to correct social prejudices after the operations of nearly three generations, then we have nothing to look for in this nation, but God's terrible judgment which He promises to visit upon those who neglect to obey His commandments, unto the third and fourth generations. And although the colored people have been the passive sufferers under the crimes of these people, yet even they must come out from among them, if they would not partake of their plagues. They must escape as Lot from the guilty and doomed cities of the plain, not even looking back upon this accursed land—lest like the wife of Lot, they should be turned into signal moments of Divine vengeance; or like that Slavish generation of Israelites, who hankered after the flesh pots of Egypt, be doomed to wander in the wilderness of darkness and error until they are all slain by the avenging hand of God, with but two left to bear witness that such a degenerate race ever existed. (242)

Holly begins by reminding his audience that God had warned His people of divine judgment if they disobeyed His commands. He then emphasizes how God had repeatedly directed His people—including Lot and his family, the Israelites, and godly inhabitants in

Babylon—to migrate to escape divine judgment on unrepentant nations. Lot’s wife and thousands of Israelites died because they desired to return to communities God had commanded them to leave (Gen. 19, Exod. 20:5-6, Num. 14:29, and Rev. 18:4). Holly asserts that the United States had forfeited God’s protection and blessing when it abandoned its foundational principles of liberty and justice through participation in the slave trade. If blacks do not leave the country, they will be guilty by association and subject to divine judgment.

Emigration to Haiti was no guarantee that blacks would regain self-identity, however. The émigrés could fail if they repeated the mistakes the Jews made after entering the Promised Land. The Israelites experienced prosperity and blessings, but eventually lost their identity by disobeying God’s commands and suffering oppression, slavery, and captivity. Holly argues, “The Jews being thus without national prestige in the world, have been the scorn and derision of all the nations of the earth” (365). He admonishes African Americans to avoid the Israelites’ fate by obeying God’s call to emigrate to Haiti and develop “a strong, powerful, enlightened and progressive negro nationality . . . equal to the demands of the nineteenth century, and capable of commanding the respect of all the nations of the earth” (365). Their new “negro nationality” would place them in an influential position to abolish slavery throughout the world.

Few African Americans heeded Holly’s call in “Thoughts on Hayti.” Dissuaded by the difficulties of settling into a tropical climate, making a living in an agricultural economy, and abandoning their enslaved brethren, most remained in the United States or relocated to Canada. Emigration to Haiti did not bring the results Holly expected. Within

a few years of their arrival, all of his family members died. Sorrow did not break his commitment to emigration, however. Although his dream of a community of black American expatriates with a new Negro identity never materialized, Holly remained in Haiti, became a Mason, built schools and institutions, and was ordained bishop of the Apostolic Church.

### **Martin Delany: the Promised Lands of Central and South America, and the Caribbean**

Whereas Holly was the foremost proponent of emigration to Haiti, Martin R. Delany advocated several different emigration options during the 1850s. In *Martin R. Delany: A Documentary Reader*, Robert S. Levine asserts, “It is worth understanding that Delany’s emigration projects and commitments tended not to last for very long. For Delany, emigration was a way to sustain black community when that community was being degraded and splintered by white racist culture” (6). After white classmates forced his dismissal from Harvard Medical School and Congress adopted the Compromise of 1850, Delany felt compelled to “sustain black community” by encouraging blacks to emigrate. In *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852), Delany decenters the national Exodus story by positing himself as a Moses who urges blacks to embrace a divine mandate and historic opportunity to emigrate to the hospitable promised lands of Central and South America or the West Indies, where they can prosper.

Like Mary Ann Shadd, Delany became an ardent supporter of emigration after the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. In *The Condition*, he argues that the law had disfranchised free blacks and made them “slaves in the midst of freedom” (155). For

Delany, emigration is the most practical means for blacks to escape slavery and oppression in their American Egypt. He conflates the Exodus narrative with historical accounts of migration to support his claim: “the Exodus of Jews from Egypt to the land of Judea . . . the expedition of Dido and her followers from Tyre to Mauritania; hundreds of Modern Europeans—also in the ever memorable emigration of the Puritans, in 1620 from Great Britain, the land of their birth, to the wilderness of the New World” (159). Like Osborne Anderson, Delany places the American Exodus narrative within the context of such Exodus stories that stretch back to the Israelites’ departure from Egypt, and asserts African Americans’ claim to this narrative. Blacks would follow the path of thousands who had left their houses of bondage and sought freedom, equality, and prosperity in foreign promised lands.

Delany posits himself as a Moses who God sends directly to African Americans to inform them that the time has come to leave their American Egypt. Like Holly, he appoints himself to deliver God’s call to emigrate to his brethren: “God our father bids us go.—Will we go? Go we must and go we will, as there is no alternative” (181). In so doing, he was emulating the biblical Moses who informed the Israelites that God had seen their affliction, but that he would petition Pharaoh to let his people go (Exod. 4-5). For more than seventy years, black activists like Absalom Jones had petitioned their American Pharaohs to free the slaves and provide equal rights for their people. Yet despite their achievements and contributions to the nation, blacks remained oppressed in an increasingly hostile society. Delany argues that they have no choice but to seek citizenship in foreign promised lands.

As Delany thrusts himself into the emigration debate, he seems acutely aware of the black community's dilemma in choosing which Moses to follow. To deflect perceptions of himself as vying for Mosaic leadership, Delany asserts, "The writer is no 'Public Man,' in the sense in which it is understood among our own people, but simply a humble individual endeavoring to seek a livelihood by a profession obtained entirely on his own efforts . . ." (201). Although Delany professes to have no ulterior motives, his humility trope nevertheless evokes greatness, for Moses was also described as "very meek, above all men which were on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). With the confidence of a Mosaic leader, Delany assures his brethren that "God has, as certain as he has ever designed anything, designed this great portion of the New World for us, the colored race; and as certain as we stubborn our hearts, and stiffen our necks against it, his protecting arm and fostering care will be withdrawn from us" (183). In the biblical narrative, Moses characterized the Israelites as "stiff-necked" as he led them through the wilderness to their Promised Land (Deut. 31:27). Similarly, Delany sets his people on the Israelites' path from Egypt to Canaan but warns them that if they reject his call to emigration, they will experience harsher treatment in the United States. If they follow his advice and abandon America, however, they will avenge themselves and experience elevation. The voluntary exodus of over three million blacks—slaves who provide free labor and free blacks who work in jobs ranging from domestic workers to skilled artisans—would wreak havoc on the nation's economy.

In *The Condition*, Delany selects Central and South America, and the Caribbean as promised lands for African Americans because the region's proximity to the United States would facilitate a black exodus, and offers environments that Delany believes will

foster black communities. He characterizes these countries as “the ultimate destination and future home of the colored race on this continent” (178). Warm weather, fertile land, extensive waterways, beautiful landscapes, and lucrative mining opportunities make the regions attractive, but Delany naively argues that blacks will not encounter racism or denial of rights. He is convinced that the inhabitants south of the border will welcome blacks and fight annexation into the United States to avoid being burdened by more than three million enslaved African Americans (181). Delany does not consider the impact that an influx of blacks into these “New World” communities would have on native populations. He assumes that natural resources and the absence of racism will assure the success of his venture.

Delany never discovered if his assumptions were correct, for he did not develop a practical application for his grand emigration scheme. Instead, he continued to make varied “impassioned commitments at particular historical moments, and those commitments changed as historical circumstances changed,” according to Levine (*Martin R. Delany* 7). When Congress enacted the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, Delany supported emigration to the Americas. After Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the US Supreme Court rendered its Dred Scott decision, he advocated emigration to Canada West, supported John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry, and favored establishing communities in the Niger Valley in Africa.

### **Alternatives to the Traditional Moses Figure**

#### **Martin Delany: Blake, a Transnational Moses**

By the late 1850s, black activists and their supporters had invoked many portions of the Exodus story to advocate a variety of community building initiatives in America

and abroad, but none had succeeded. They had supported numerous Moses figures who promised to liberate their enslaved brethren, but freedom remained elusive. Despite repeated setbacks, community leaders refused to give up hope for a deliverer, but they eventually shifted tactics. As the nation edged closer to civil war, Delany turned to fiction and created Henry Blake, a wrongfully enslaved Cuban who represented his desire for a leader for blacks throughout the African diaspora. In *Blake, or the Huts of America* (1859-61), Delany appropriates episodes from the Exodus narrative to present Blake as a transnational Moses who plans revolts in the United States and Cuba to abolish slavery throughout the world and create a thriving Pan-African community.

Early in the novel, Delany begins the process of transforming Blake into a militant Mosaic leader when his hero reinterprets a pivotal moment in the Exodus narrative to justify violence as the appropriate means to liberate slaves. After Blake discovers his wife Maggie has been sold, his father-in-law, Daddy Joe, advises him to “‘stan’ still an’ see de salbation” (21). Blake responds, “That’s no talk for me, Daddy Joe; I’ve been ‘standing’ long enough—I’ll ‘stand still’ no longer” (21). In the biblical narrative, Moses had admonished the Israelites to “Fear ye not, stand still and see the salvation of the Lord” when they were trapped between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea (Exod. 14:13). God sent a wind to make a path for them through the water, but their Egyptian oppressors drowned when they attempted to follow the Israelites (Exod. 14). Later, the prophet Jahaziel gave King Jehoshaphat a similar admonition when the Israelites faced the Ammonite and Moabite army: “. . . set yourselves, stand ye still, and see the salvation of the LORD with you.” The Israelites marched to the battlefield with singers leading their army, and God sent “ambushments” to defeat their enemies (2

Chron. 20). In both incidents, the Israelites trusted God to fight and win their battles. During the antebellum period, slaveholders asserted that this portion of the Exodus story meant slaves should obey their masters and wait on God to deliver them. Blake rejects the slaveholders' injunction and Daddy Joe's counsel by quoting 2 Corinthians 6:2: "But with me, 'now is the accepted time, today is the day of salvation.'" Delany doubles the story of Exodus with a passage from Paul's second Corinthian letter to enable Blake to explain how Christianity calls its adherents to act on their faith. Like Paul, who admonished the Corinthian believers to accept salvation without delay, Blake encourages his enslaved family and friends to liberate themselves today. While acknowledging his desire for divine aid, Blake asserts the need for immediate justice. In Blake's black Exodus narrative, slaves must initiate their liberation in defiance of white Christians who urge them to wait passively for divine intervention.

Delany transforms Blake into a militant Moses who sees revolt as the best means for slaves to overthrow their oppressors. Like Moses, who killed a taskmaster and fled to the wilderness where he gained the skills essential to leading his people, Blake kills an overseer, crosses the Red River into Mississippi, begins his journey through the wilderness, and accepts the challenge of becoming a Mosaic leader. He voices his resolve to be a Moses by singing a verse from an old hymn:

Could I but climb where Moses stood,  
And view the landscape o'er;  
Not Jordan's streams, nor death's cold flood,  
Could drive me from the shore! (69)

In *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass and the Politics of Representative Identity*, Robert S. Levine suggests that this scene invokes the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea (196). In contrast, I argue that Delany here appropriates the portion of the Exodus narrative in

which Moses neared the end of his forty-year wilderness journey and God directed him to climb Mount Nebo to look over the Jordan River and into the promised land (Deut. 34:1-5). In Delany's novel, Blake escapes to freedom, but his spiritual rebirth compels him to begin a reverse Exodus through the wilderness back to the Egypt of the Deep South where he lays plans to liberate his still enslaved brethren.

Delany depicts Blake as an avenging Moses, the slaves' long-awaited deliverer. According to the narrator, "From plantation to plantation did [Blake] go, sowing seeds of future devastation and ruin to the master and redemption to the slave, an antecedent more terrible in its anticipation than the warning voice of the destroying Angel in commanding the slaughter of the firstborn of Egypt" (83). According to the biblical story, Moses delivered a warning to Pharaoh that God would kill Egyptians' firstborn children and livestock if he refused to liberate the Israelites. Conversely, Blake instructs slaves to prepare for a surprise attack on their oppressors in a revolt more devastating than the slaughter in Egypt.

Like other nineteenth-century black activists, Delany realized that the Exodus narrative offered leadership models that did not fully meet the needs of slaves and free blacks. In his novel, he doubles the Exodus figures with the stories of Christ and ancient Israelite judges to expand Blake's role into a Mosaic-savior who slaves acknowledge as their leader. When two community elders meet Blake, they exclaim, "'God bless de baby!' said old aunt Dolly as uncle Nathan entered the hut, referring to Blake . . . 'Now Laud!' with uplifted hand exclaimed [uncle Nathan] at the conclusion of the interview. 'My eyes has seen, and meh years heahn, an' now Laud! I's willing to stan' still an' see dy salvation!'" (73). Aunt Dolly and Uncle Nathan rejoice, just as Anna and Simeon did

when Joseph and Mary brought Jesus into the temple for His dedication service. Simeon was willing to die peacefully after he saw the Messiah (Luke 2). Conversely, Dolly and Nathan prefer to “stan’ still an’ see dy salvation!” anticipated by their Mosaic-savior for they need redemption from slavery. As Blake continues to travel, he meets Samson and his wife Dursie who describe the fugitive “as the messenger of deliverance shown to them,” recalling the judges God sent to rescue the Israelites from their enemies after they settled in the Promised Land (85). By giving Blake the authority of a judge, Delany enables him to mete out justice on behalf of his people. Thus, Blake exhibits the qualities of emancipator, messiah, and judge when he utters the biblical injunction to “stand still and see the salvation,” assuring slaves who have been looking for a divinely appointed leader that he will give them a sign when the time is ripe for insurrection. Instead of making a grand Exodus, they will kill their oppressors and transform their Egypt into a promised land.

For Blake, organizing and financing the revolt are equally important. He seeks to assure victory by giving his lieutenants the following instructions: “God told the Egyptian slaves to ‘borrow from their neighbors’—meaning their oppressors—‘all their jewels,’ meaning to take their money and wealth wherever they could lay hands upon it, and depart from Egypt. So you must teach them to take all the money they can get from their master, to enable them to make the strike without a failure” (43). In the biblical story, the Egyptians gave liberally to the departing Israelites because they were happy to rid themselves of a people who had brought tragedy to their nation (Exod. 11:2). Denmark Vesey instructed his followers to take money from banks and goods from stores during their slave revolt to recover unpaid wages and ease their transition into their Haitian

promised land. In contrast, Blake directs his followers to steal from their masters *prior* to the insurrection, encouraging them to compensate themselves for years of slave labor. He gains their full devotion by empowering them to play an integral role in preparing for and participating in the revolt.

After Blake finishes his southern tour and leads his family and friends to freedom in Canada, he travels to Cuba where he is reunited with his wife and son. He seeks more recruits for his insurrection during a trip to Africa and in Cuba. Blacks throughout the diaspora acknowledge his leadership and pledge to participate. By the end of the novel, Blake is appointed “Commander in Chief of the Army of Emancipation,” an affirmation of his “messianic, Moses-like ability” to [unite] blacks “against their oppressors,” according to Levine (*Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass* 191). Scholars are not certain whether Blake and his co-conspirators are successful in carrying out their revolt since the final chapters of Delany’s novel are missing. Nevertheless, Delany seems to intimate that the successful nineteenth-century Mosaic leader must be committed to family and community, and skilled at building a Pan-African coalition to combat slavery and racism throughout the world. But this type of leader seems only to exist in a fictional world.

### **Frances E. W. Harper: a Nation of Moses Figures**

In contrast to Delany, who urged African Americans to anoint a Moses and fight for freedom, some activists encouraged their brethren to experience the Mosaic Moment. I have argued that some prominent activists had a Mosaic Moment, notably David Walker, who issued his *Appeal* and then stayed in Boston despite a death threat; Maria Stewart, who braved public scorn to make public speeches in which she urged her brethren to unite; and Frederick Douglass, who returned from England to resume

abolition work in the United States. These activists grappled with the choice of protecting themselves or leading their people, a dilemma most never faced.

Frances E. W. Harper did not limit the Mosaic Moment to leadership decisions, however. In “Our Greatest Want” (1859), published in the *Anglo-African Magazine*, she decries the emphasis on gaining wealth as a means of attaining success and urges her readers—both male and female—to emulate Moses in their commitment to racial uplift to effect reform in the United States. Although many black activists and their supporters had presented themselves as Moses figures and worked to free the slaves, Harper questions whether a Mosaic leader truly existed. She writes, “We have millions of our race in the prison house of slavery, but have we yet a single Moses in freedom. And if we had, who among us would be led by him?” (160). Harper issues her plea despite the activism of men like John Brown, Delany, Douglass, Garnet, and Holly who had anointed themselves or others to be Moses. No Mosaic leader had inspired the *entire* community to follow his plan or unite in racial uplift. Political developments in the 1850s had fragmented the black community and Mosaic leaders disagreed on the best tactic to eliminate slavery and achieve equality.

Despite these challenges, Harper argues that Moses is the best role model for all Americans by focusing on a specific episode of the Moses narrative. She writes, “He is the first disunionist we read of in the Jewish Scriptures. The magnificence of Pharaoh’s throne loomed up before his vision, its oriental splendors glittered before his eyes; but he turned from them all and chose rather to suffer with the enslaved, than rejoice with the free. He would have no union with the slave power of Egypt” (160). In *Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E. W. Harper 1825-1911*, Melba

Joyce Boyd argues, “In her writings and speeches, Frances Harper encourages an allegorical connection between the repression and enslavement of the Hebrew people and Afroamerican dilemma. This parallel provides a context for historical insight, spiritual fortification, and revolutionary action” (80). By characterizing Moses as a “disunionist,” Harper emphasizes his refusal to indulge in a life of pleasure and prestige as heir to the throne of Egypt. Taking that path would have forced him to enter a “union” with Egyptian taskmasters and repudiate his faith in God. Rather than look for a Moses to emancipate the slaves or initiate reforms, Harper directs her readers to emulate Moses’ sacrificial commitment. The challenge of liberating slaves was so difficult that all Americans needed to contribute to the cause and recognize each other as equal partners in the struggle.

Harper broadens her appeal by emphasizing similarities between Moses’ choice and those faced by Americans, tempted to collaborate with slavery advocates in order to “preserve the union,” who actually destroy the nation. She writes, “When we have a race of men whom this blood stained government cannot tempt or flatter, who would sternly refuse every office in the nation’s gift, from a president down to a tide-waiter [a custom’s official], until she shook her hands from complicity in the guilt of cradle plundering and man stealing, then for us the foundations of an historic character will have been laid” (160). Like Ebenezer James, who refused to patronize businesses associated with slavery, Harper argues that Americans who accept opportunities from slavery proponents strengthen the institution and oppress their brethren. By naming the positions of president and tidewaiter in her statement, occupations not open to blacks, Harper stresses the need for all Americans to embrace the Mosaic Moment. If Americans disassociate themselves

from every institution that supports slavery, they could experience a Mosaic Moment and take their first step toward living by Mosaic principles. If they refuse to associate with slavery proponents and racist officials, activist-minded Americans could become a formidable network of Mosaic figures devoting their talents and resources to community uplift. The collective impact of their commitment could undermine slavery and perhaps even lead to its abolition.

### **Provincial Freeman: a Fugitive Slave as General Joshua**

Some black activists of the 1850s turned to other portions of the Exodus story to represent a different set of goals. While many leaders admired Moses because he had confronted Pharaoh and relied on divine power to send plagues and protect the Israelites, others were more drawn to Exodus figures who exercised human agency in executing God's plan for liberation. Inspired by the exploits of Gabriel, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nat Turner, and Denmark Vesey, as well as the American revolutionaries, these activists recommended outright revolt to overthrow slavery.

In "Wisdom and Her Children" (1855), an article published in the *Provincial Freeman*, an anonymous author embraces the Exodus narrative to advocate a new African American Revolution in which a black Joshua will lead slaves to overthrow their oppressors and reclaim their liberty. The writer argues that African Americans should expect a deliver because God always sends reformers to remedy injustices in society. He asserts, "If wisdom is the use of the best means to attain certain ends; then most beautifully is the wisdom of God seen in *his* adaptations of means to accomplish his purposes . . . How strikingly does such a truth appear, in God's giving existence to, and the preparation of *a man* for *every* age and its reforms!" The nineteenth century was a

time of great reform movements. *Freeman* readers would have been familiar with the activities of Frances Harper and Sojourner Truth in the women's movement, Susan B. Anthony and Frances Willard in the temperance movement, Charles Grandison Finney and Francis Asbury in the evangelical movement, and Douglass and Garrison in the antislavery movement. According to the author, the history of reform movements stretched back to antiquity. Hence, he argues, God had initiated the abolition movement, so its success was inevitable.

African Americans could be confident not only that reformers were divinely ordained to challenge oppression, but that God was preparing an individual from within their midst to initiate reforms for their community. The author writes:

As Jacob had a Joseph,—so his children had a Moses. IF the Philistines had a Goliath,— so Israel had a David. If the American colonies had a *despotic* George,—they had also a *democratic* Washington. If Europe had a Napoleon I,— she had her Wellington too. If Turkey has a *foe*, in the Russian Czar,—so she has a *friend*, in the British Queen. AS THE AMERICAN SLAVE HAS A WHITE CAPTOR,—SO HE HAS A BLACK DELIVERER!

During Israel's early history, God appointed Joseph to deliver his people from famine, Moses to lead them from slavery in Egypt, Joshua to direct the conquest of the Promised Land, and kings, prophets, and judges to protect or rescue them from their enemies. Like Osborne Anderson, the author characterizes "sacred" and "secular" events as part of the historical record of oppression. Because military leaders had arisen to protect American colonies, Europe, and Turkey from hostile forces, American slaves could also expect a deliverer. By locating the genesis of all reform movements in the Exodus story, the writer transforms slaves into a people beloved of God and worthy of deliverance and argues for the slaves' right to emancipate themselves.

Focusing specifically on colonial America, the writer conflates an episode of the Exodus narrative with pivotal points that further suggest that a black American deliverer will one day emancipate his people. According to the author, the man “. . . reminds me of one Joshua, of Africans, the Ajax of the Seminoles” who is in a “campaign for freedom or the grave.” The writer bolsters his claim by recalling how military leaders had guided colonists to victory over the British. During the American Revolution, some colonists had hailed George Washington as the patriots’ Joshua after his triumphs on the battle field secured the promised land of America. In the early nineteenth century, Native Americans had extolled Ajax for his valor during his people’s victorious wars against the US military in Florida. Like Joshua, Washington, and Ajax, the black deliverer, would lead the slaves in a fight for liberty. The writer characterizes this fight as a “campaign for freedom or the grave,” echoing the rhetorical strategies of Gabriel, Douglass, Garnet, and other activists who had invoked Patrick Henry’s mantra, “Give me liberty or give me death,” to draw a parallel between the slaves’ quest for emancipation and the colonists’ revolution for independence. Although enslaved blacks like Gabriel had never acquired freedom, the new black deliverer’s desire to establish a free black community would be so strong that the triumphal exploits of Ajax, Henry, and Washington that slaves would join him in overthrowing their oppressors.

Like Washington and the Israelites’ Joshua, the black Joshua desires recognition for slaves as men and citizens but he does not seek to establish an independent nation. The author explains, “It is time for the oppressor to know, that the slave is a man, and if need so require, let the weapons of death teach him what he would not learn without them, and in this righteous work may the ‘weak be as David, and David as the Angel of

the Lord,' and this obscure general come forth, and lead his people on to *victory!*". In the biblical records of the Israelites' Babylonian captivity, Zechariah prophesied, "In that day shall the LORD defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and he that is feeble among them at that day shall be as David; and the house of David shall be as God, as the angel of the LORD before them" (Zech. 12:8). God promised to defend and strengthen His people, destroy their enemies, and make everyone equal, a prophecy that was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. Unlike Washington, who led the colonists' revolution against the British and Joshua who directed the Israelites' conquest of Canaan, the black Joshua would initiate a slave insurrection that would liberate African Americans and establish a land of freedom for all citizens. But the slaves' victory would not come through divine intervention alone. After years of pleading for emancipation and equality, some black activists were ready for militant action. The divinely appointed "obscure general" would gain moral authority from biblical narratives and world history to plan a southern slave revolt, confident that American slaves would win their freedom. Once they won, they would need divine power to overcome racist attitudes and practices that blocked their path to citizenship.

### **Harriet E. Wilson: "Frado," an Enslaved, Imprisoned Joseph**

While activists' concerns for enslaved African Americans' emancipation never waned, they often overlooked the plight of black indentured servants, even in northern abolitionist strongholds where such practices were common. In *Belabored Professions: Narratives of African American Working Womanhood*, Xiomara Santamarina reminds us that some of these leaders even demeaned the work of black domestic workers. At the 1848 Colored National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio, for example, delegates passed

resolutions encouraging blacks to seek jobs in those “respectable industrial occupations” held by whites to achieve elevation, and avoid, if possible, labor as domestics or servants that were “degrading to us as a class” (*Minutes*). Nevertheless, domestic work remained one of the few occupations available to black women in the mid-nineteenth century. In *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859), Harriet E. Wilson invokes the Joseph story to challenge activists to include female domestic laborers as essential partners in racial uplift initiatives since they often suffered slave-like conditions in the North.

Wilson characterizes *Our Nig* as an “experiment” she published to support herself and her child. Through her narrative, she reveals how she overcomes the denigration often associated with domestic work. Like eighteenth-century Afro-Atlantic Josephs, she creates a hybrid text by adapting the conventions of popular genres—autobiography, sentimental novel, and slave narrative—to convey a compelling life story. P. Gabrielle Foreman and Reginald H. Pitts, co-editors of the recent Penguin edition of Wilson’s book, assert, “*Our Nig* is prototypical of black antebellum writing in its tendency to blend and challenge the narrative forms it incorporates, weaving together factual and fictional conventions. Indeed, *Our Nig*, functions as an autobiography characterized by its complex novelistic maneuvers just as surely as it is a brilliant novel that makes autobiographical claims” (xxx). Wilson fictionalizes her life through the experiences of “Frado,” a young free black female whose mother abandons her to twelve years of indentured servitude with the Bellmonts, a prominent white family in Milford, New Hampshire. For Frado, the North is Egypt, a place where her kindred desert her, whites exploit her, and no benefactor favors her. She even seeks help from “our good antislavery

friends at home,” but none assist her. Frado resists abuse and survives, but poor health prevents her from working regularly to earn a living after she fulfils her servitude contract. She marries and has a son, but her husband abandons them. Nevertheless, she becomes a writer and reportedly sells hair tonics to earn a living.

An episode from the Joseph story enables Wilson to illustrate how she overcomes her oppressors and challenges black leaders who emphasize “respectable” means to achieve elevation. In the final chapter of *Our Nig*, “The Winding Up of the Matter,” she characterizes herself as an enslaved, imprisoned, forgotten Joseph in Egypt. In the last sentence she writes, “Frado has passed from [the Bellmonts’] memories, as Joseph from the butler’s, but she will never cease to track them until beyond mortal vision” (72). In the biblical narrative, Joseph was imprisoned after being falsely accused of rape and was not released until the butler who had been restored to Pharaoh’s court remembered that the Hebrew slave had interpreted his dream. Foreman and Pitts have suggested that Wilson’s appropriation of Joseph’s experience as an interpreter of dreams foreshadows her later involvement in Spiritualism (xxxix and 99, Note 13). But the Exodus narrative compels black writers to remember and re-imagine their lives as part of sacred history as they seek to make themselves visible and vital members of Christian communities that disparage them for their labor, the “nigger work” that no one else wanted to do (Roediger 144-45). In *Liberation Historiography*, John Ernest argues that “. . . the experience of oppression shaped a collective moral identity that allowed African Americans to identify themselves both historically and theologically, as their developing conceptions of a collective identity inspired deeply invested readings of the Bible that, in turn, allowed them to define agency in the world, to conceptualize themselves as

theologically identifiable actors on the historical stage” (11). Thus, by rewriting the Joseph story, Wilson challenges perceptions of the indentured servant experience through her reliance on human agency, rather than favor, to contest the concept of a “free” North, expose her oppressors, and improve her condition.

As an enslaved, imprisoned Joseph, Wilson impels her readers to see that the North had become Egypt for free blacks in the 1820s, long before the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. Wilson casts the Bellmonts as the butler in Joseph’s story, but gives them the authority of Egyptian taskmasters who force her to experience years of slave-like servitude. Although Jack, one of the Bellmont children, occasionally relieves Frado’s suffering, he leaves her to languish in Egypt when he relocates to Illinois, white Americans’ mid-western promised land. Once Frado has fulfilled her service contract, the Bellmonts abandon her to the prison of poverty brought about by years of abuse and overwork. Joseph fared better; he eventually became prime minister of Egypt. Because Wilson does not have a divine gift that enables her to gain the favor of her oppressors like the biblical Joseph and her Afro-Atlantic Joseph predecessors, she becomes her own advocate. In *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form*, Priscilla Wald argues that “[Wilson] is forgotten, left alone in the house to be its historian. She gets the final word. She will *track* them into enslavement to her plot” (170). The Bellmonts forget Wilson, but she remembers them. By immortalizing their misdeeds in *Our Nig*, Wilson prevents them from reclaiming a place of honor in their community, as the butler was able to do in Joseph’s story. She releases herself from the prison of poverty by publishing a book that privileges her version of her experience with the Bellmonts. Moreover, she encourages her community to read, remember, and retell the story of an

indentured servant who not only survives, but confronts and exposes her oppressors, and then sells hair tonics to support herself and her child—a direct challenge to prevailing notions of slothful free black domestic workers.

Wilson's characterization of herself as Joseph not only positions the Bellmonts as her butler-taskmasters, but it encourages us to re-imagine her mother and northern abolitionists as Joseph's brothers, who betray their sibling into servitude. In the Preface to *Our Nig*, Wilson writes that she was "deserted by kindred." White America's embrace of Victorian ideals regarding virtuous womanhood limited Mag's options and convinced her to abandon her daughter to servitude with the Bellmonts. Although presented as a "fallen woman," Mag never experiences the redemption and reunion that Joseph's brothers enjoyed in the Exodus story. Wilson suffers the additional indignity of being betrayed by abolitionists who profess commitment to racial uplift. Like the butler who was released from prison and forgot Joseph, some activists had escaped the drudgery of day labor or domestic work but had forgotten to fight for those left behind. The "good antislavery friends at home," who devoted themselves to liberating slaves while ignoring oppressed free black indentured servants, did not understand the necessity of devoting more attention to racism in the North, particularly the needs of female domestic workers. Since many northern whites perceived free blacks as inferior human beings whom they could treat like slaves with impunity, Wilson's experience revealed that the elimination of slavery would not necessarily mean the elevation of her people. Her story was designed to convince free black northerners to improve their oppressive labor system, and to remind abolitionists that the future of the race was inextricably linked both to slavery and the plight of the poor black masses.

## **Conclusion**

Mid-nineteenth century African Americans writers turned to the Exodus narrative to meet the complex needs of slaves and free blacks in need of an arsenal of rhetorical and practical tools to map a path from slavery and oppression to emancipation and equality. Although blacks met annually in colored conventions to discuss ways to combat racism and eliminate slavery, they could not agree on a plan to reach their goals and eventually fractured into assimilationist or emigrationist factions. The Moses story dominated black Exodus stories that emerged from both groups, however.

Assimilationists anointed leaders to deliver the slaves, encourage the slaves to liberate themselves, or unite all Americans in fighting for freedom and equality. After the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave law, emigrationists posited themselves as Moses figures who increasingly urged blacks to relocate to foreign promised lands, but they could not agree on a destination. The majority emigrated to Canada where they experienced freedom but encountered racism. Another writer questioned the existence of Mosaic leadership, and urged Americans, both male and female, to experience a Mosaic Moment that would enable them to transform the nation into a promised land for all citizens. As the African American community grew and the promise of various Exodus narratives remained unfulfilled, other authors embraced different episodes of the biblical narrative to address the needs of neglected segments of the black community. These varied attempts to construct Exodus stories that would advance racial uplift objectives did not enable blacks to obtain their goals. By 1861, as the divided nation tottered toward civil war, unable to reconcile its desire for slavery with blacks' demands for civil rights, African Americans

and their supporters turned again to the promise of Exodus to sustain their hope for freedom and equality for all citizens in the promised land of the United States.

## Chapter 4: Exodus, the Civil War, and Reconstruction: From Egypt to the Border of Canaan, an American Journey, 1861-1877

And the LORD gave the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians. Moreover the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's servants, and in the sight of the people.  
—Exod. 11:3

Like Moses of old, [Abraham Lincoln] reached the mountain's brow, and viewed the glory that was promised to his people. But as he was preparing for the last step, he fell—a Martyr to his cause, and a Sacrifice to his country.  
—“Our National Sacrifice,” *The Christian Recorder* (1865)

There is a woman in our country who has received the name of ‘Moses,’ not by lying about it, but by acting it out (applause)—a woman who has gone down into the Egypt of slavery and brought out hundreds of our people into liberty.  
—Frances E. W. Harper, “We Are All Bound Up Together” (1866)

Until the outbreak of the Civil War, black and white writers had developed distinct Exodus narratives. White authors invoked the biblical story to establish themselves as God's New Israel, promote westward expansion, and enslave and oppress blacks. African Americans and their supporters had appropriated Exodus to demand emancipation and civil liberties. While white Americans prospered in their Canaan, African Americans languished in an Egypt within the United States.

After the Civil War began, however, many black and white writers turned to the Exodus story to create new national narratives that would enable the United States to become a promised land for all citizens. They were drawn to portions of the biblical story in which the Egyptians experienced plagues—for example, blood, flies, locust, frogs, and darkness—after Pharaoh refused to liberate the Hebrews. When his eldest son died during the plague of death for all first-born humans and livestock, Pharaoh finally yielded to

God's demand. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt through the wilderness under the divine protection of the pillar of cloud and fire that provided shade during the day, and light and heat at night. Shortly after the Israelites departed, Pharaoh attempted to capture his former slaves. God delivered His people by preparing a path for them through the Red Sea and then drowning the pursuing Egyptian army. As the pillar of cloud and fire led the Israelites toward the Promised Land, Moses introduced laws, statutes, and commemorative festivals that transformed his people from a community of slaves into the nation of Israel. The majority of the Israelites who had labored as slaves in Egypt never reached Canaan, however, for most adults aged twenty and older died in the wilderness after rebelling against God. Although disobedience also kept Moses out of Canaan, he caught a glimpse of the Promised Land from atop Mt. Pisgah.

This chapter argues that the Civil War inspired American writers to develop new national Exodus stories to guide the *entire* nation from Egypt to Canaan. As they wrote the new narratives, however, black writers assigned the roles of both Moses and Pharaoh to President Abraham Lincoln. In "The Plagues of This Country," a letter to *The Christian Recorder* (1862), H. M. T. Washington describes Lincoln as Pharaoh because he opposed the enlistment of free blacks and fugitive slaves in the Union army. In contrast, Lincoln found redemption in John S. Rock's 1862 speech at the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society that identifies the president and Union Army General John Fremont as potential Moses figures and Confederate President Jefferson Davis as Pharaoh. As the war progressed, however, black writers increasingly posited Lincoln as the Moses of black America. In a letter to the Athens, Ohio, *Messenger*

(1864), black Union soldier Milton M. Holland describes Lincoln as a Moses veterans are depending upon to ensure benefits for themselves and their families.

Assassination transformed Lincoln from black Americans' Moses into the nation's Moses. In *Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868), Elizabeth Keckley lauds Lincoln as the slave's Moses whom she had worshiped. In "Xenia Correspondence," a letter published in *The Christian Recorder* (1865), however, Annie M. Smith notes that crowds in Ohio mourn the death of their "modern Moses," and an anonymous author in "Our National Sacrifice" (1865), also published in *The Christian Recorder*, posits the assassinated president as the nation's martyred Moses. White preachers took the leading role in presenting Lincoln as the nation's Moses. Charles Lowe in *Death of President Lincoln* (1865), J. E. Raskin in *Moses and Joshua: A Discourse on the Death of Abraham Lincoln* (1865), and Joseph A. Seiss in *The Assassinated President* (1865) eulogized the president as a Moses for all Americans.

Although Moses remained the central figure in American Exodus stories, some black and white Reconstruction writers looked for a Joshua to direct the nation's journey into the promised land. A few believed Andrew Johnson could finish the work Lincoln had begun in reuniting the North and South and giving blacks the rights of citizenship. In *Moses and Joshua*, Raskin recommends Johnson as a potential Johnson. Black writers were even more distrustful of Johnson. T. H. Jackson acknowledges Johnson as a Joshua in "The Necessity of Education" (1865), published in *The Christian Recorder*, but urges African Americans to rely on education instead of political leaders to assure their entry into Canaan.

Johnson never showed interest in being a Joshua figure. He had offered himself as a Moses for African Americans before he became Lincoln's running mate, but quickly betrayed himself. Black and white writers exposed his duplicity. Lewis Hayden in his "Address before Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of Massachusetts, at the Festival of St. John the Evangelist" (1865), Thomas Nast in his cartoon "Reconstruction and How It Works" (1866) published in *Harper's Weekly Magazine*, Frederick Douglass in a series of speeches in 1866, and Republican Senator Charles Sumner in a speech before Congress (1867) question Johnson's sincerity in being a Mosaic leader for African Americans and accuse him of becoming a Pharaoh, given his support of proslavery politicians and racist policies.

As writers shaped Lincoln's and Johnson's roles as Moses figures in the Civil War and Reconstruction, some lauded a white legislator and black woman as Mosaic leaders. In a letter to *The Christian Recorder* (1864), John Wilkinson eulogizes outspoken abolitionist Owen Lovejoy as black Americans' Mosaic congressman. Others reminded readers that Harriet Tubman had distinguished herself as black America's Moses long before public officials were drawn to that role: Sarah Bradford in *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (1869), Frances E. W. Harper in her speech "We Are All Bound Up Together" (1866), and William Still in *The Underground Railroad* (1872).

While she acknowledged the importance of Mosaic leaders, Frances Harper continued to emphasize the responsibility of the individual in developing Mosaic character. In *Moses, A Story of the Nile* (1869), she affirms the role of women in developing Mosaic qualities in their children. In *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869), she

encourages African Americans to experience a Mosaic Moment in which they commit themselves to racial uplift.

While some writers focused on Mosaic leaders and citizens, others concentrated on Americans' journey to the promised land. In "Let the Monster Perish" (1865), Henry Highland Garnet urges Congress to embark on the path to its American Canaan. In "Liberia-President Warner" published in *The Christian Recorder* (1866), an anonymous author encourages blacks to ignore calls to emigrate to the promised land of Liberia.

\* \* \*

### **European Immigrants and African American Citizens as Members of God's New Israel**

Although numerous black and white writers offered new national Exodus narratives for all Americans during the Civil War era, some white authors published Exodus stories that positioned European immigrants as members of God's American Israel but offered colonization for African Americans. In *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Thomas Fitch presents California as Canaan for emigrants who pass through Carson County, Nevada (317). An anonymous author in *Scientific American* focuses on the "steady stream of [European] immigrants, who, taught by frugality and industry by vain efforts to wrest subsistence from the ungenerous soils of the Eastern states, seek the promised land, and find their anticipations fully realized" ("The National Bank" 137).

As they assimilated into American society, some European immigrants encouraged the nation to develop a more inclusive Exodus narrative. In "Our Country's Place" (1869), a lecture delivered to the Theological and Religious Library Association of America, Rabbi Isaac M. Wise argues that Providence had designed the United States

to become a great nation. Well educated and wealthy, Wise lived the American dream and advocated its promise. Unlike Afro-Atlantic authors of Exodus narratives, Wise embraces the Puritan Exodus tradition by reminding his listeners of the colonists' wars, the "'Israelites against the Philistines' and 'God's chosen people against the Indian Gentiles,'" and then argues that the development of English as the colonies' official language ". . . was the cornerstone to national greatness" (230). In Wise's American promised land, however, "Every child born on this soil is Americanized. Our country has a peculiar people to work out a new and peculiar destiny. . . . As long as we cling to this ideal [of liberty], we will be in honor, glory, wealth and prosperity" (230, 234). His speech was a stark reminder that white American had oppressed and killed Native Americans, and reluctantly liberated African Americans, but did not treat either group as citizens.

During the early months of the Rebellion, Lincoln had affirmed blacks' marginal status in the United States by blaming them for the war and suggesting colonization as the best means to quell the rebellion. Congress appropriated six hundred thousand dollars to colonize African Americans, but Lincoln's plan failed. The government could not find suitable land for the colonies, foreign government officials would not allow colonies in their countries, and federal appointees mismanaged the project. Furthermore, prominent northern newspaper editors and politicians decried Lincoln's scheme, arguing that blacks should be integrated into American society (Vorenberg 43).

The outbreak of the Civil War turned the nation's attention from colonization to emancipation. African Americans supported the Union, hoping victory would lead to the abolition of slavery. Many were disappointed with the war's early developments,

however. President Lincoln initially prohibited blacks from enlisting in the Union army to appease border states, and most whites deemed blacks unfit for military service. Nevertheless, in the early months of the war, blacks worked in both armies as “laborers, nurses, cooks, scouts or spies” (Christian 184). When the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on January 1, 1863, the North recognized African Americans as soldiers, and activists helped establish black regiments. African Americans had become fully invested in transforming their American Egypt into a promised land.

Black and white writers who believed that the Civil War offered the possibility of freedom and equality for all citizens relied on a variety of narrative strategies to decenter and rewrite national Exodus narratives. They cast the US president variously in the roles of Pharaoh, Moses, and Joshua to mark the nation’s transformation from Egypt to a promised land. Others rely exclusively on the Moses story to praise African Americans’ supporters and direct the community’s response to racism and participation in reform. Some writers conflate the Exodus narrative with secular/republican discourse to critique political leaders, demand the abolition of slavery, and claim the rights of citizenship for all Americans. Still others double the Exodus narrative with additional biblical stories, for example, Revelation’s prophecies, to argue that emancipation is imminent and slaveholders will be punished. While most authors agree that the Civil War transforms the United States into Egypt and select specific episodes from the Exodus narrative to mark the nation’s path to the promised land, one invokes the Exodus story to support emigration to an African Canaan. In this period, American writers experienced some success through their national Exodus narratives, particularly the abolition of slavery, but

their stories did not enable the nation to complete its journey to a promised land of equality for all citizens.

### **Exodus Leaders for a Divided Nation**

#### **Abraham Lincoln: Black America's Pharaoh or Moses?**

During the early years of his presidency, Lincoln often seemed more intent on saving the Union than freeing the slaves. African Americans questioned his commitment because he issued an Emancipation Proclamation that liberated slaves only in Confederate states, advocated colonization for African Americans, and prohibited blacks from serving in the Union army. Black activists and their supporters, notably David Walker in his 1828 *Appeal* and James T. Holly in his 1859 "Thoughts on Hayti," had warned Americans that God would punish the nation for the sin of slavery. As the Civil War drew near, black writers, inspired by millennial fever that had swept the nation during the Second Great Awakening from 1790 to 1845, issued similar pronouncements. In a letter to *The Christian Recorder* titled "Plagues of this Country" (1862), H. M. T. Washington invokes the Exodus narrative to posit Lincoln as a Pharaoh ruling an American Egypt doomed to destruction if the president does not emancipate American slaves.

Washington introduces his Exodus-inspired warning by directing his readers' attention to the teachings of prominent preachers who had predicted major millennial events in the nineteenth century. He reminds his audience of William Miller, a white minister who had initially announced Christ's second coming in 1844 before discovering that the date signaled the start of Christ's high priestly ministry in heaven. Other prominent white preachers, including Methodist minister Dr. Cross, Lutheran minister

Dr. Seiss, and Drs. Cumming and Eliot of England, had admonished Christians to study biblical prophecies that specified a great change on earth. Although none of the latter group identified an event, all of them believed the change would elevate oppressed African Americans. Washington then conflates the Exodus narrative with events leading to the war to argue that God is punishing the United States for the sin of slavery. He writes: “There seems to be a very singular correspondence existing between the war in the United States and the Egyptian plagues. I suppose no one, in the face of so many evidences, will question the practicableness of the assertion, that this war is being waged through providential interposition for the benefit of some portion of discarded humanity.” National unrest that had begun with the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, worsened with the adoption of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, and intensified with the 1857 Dred Scott decision spilled over into sectional strife in the early 1860s seemed to confirm the predictions that a calamitous event would occur. Washington suggests that the event ministers have predicted is linked to slavery because sectional strife over the institution leads to civil war.

Washington blames the nation for bringing calamity upon itself by refusing to liberate enslaved African Americans. He constructs an Exodus story in which the president is responsible for the country’s support of an institution that oppressed God’s people. Washington argues, “Abraham Lincoln and not Jeff Davis becomes the Pharaoh of mystic Egypt. And however unwilling to comply with a dispensation of liberation, nature’s God calls from heaven, echoed too by five million of mystic Israelites, (abject slaves) in peals of vivid vengeance, let my people go.” In the Exodus story, God heard the cries of the enslaved Israelites and sent Moses to tell Pharaoh, “Let my people go”

(Exod. 5:1) Because Lincoln does not exercise his presidential power to liberate slaves, Washington posits him as Pharaoh ruling an American Egypt. Henry Highland Garnet, Ebenezer James, David Walker, and Phillis Wheatley had made similar arguments when northern politicians failed to aid the slaves. Washington asserts that God’s message to Lincoln is shrouded in vengeance because the Exodus narrative reveals that God punishes rulers who refuse to emancipate His people.

As Washington reflects on the events that led to the war, he appropriates the Exodus narrative to recast them as a series of plagues that punish the United States for its obstinacy but portend emancipation for enslaved Americans. He suggests that God sends a plague each time the Union oppresses slaves:

*Action*

Lincoln refused to emancipate the slaves.

Gen. Irvin McDowell, with presidential approval, refused to allow black soldiers to enlist.

Lincoln voided Gen. John Fremont’s call to shoot rebels and free their slaves.

Gen. Henry Halleck replaced Gen. Fremont and proclaimed blacks to be disloyal spies for the Confederacy, forbade their entrance into Union territory, and returned them to their masters.

Gen. David Hunter freed slaves in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, but Lincoln remanded them to slavery.

*Plague*

Confederate forces attacked Ft. Sumter and killed soldiers of the Sixth Massachusetts Regiment in Baltimore.

Confederate soldiers defeated the “American Egyptian” [Lincoln] at Bull Run.

Gen. Charles R. Lyons died, Lexington fell, and Gen. Franz Sigel’s army was demoralized.

The USS Merrimac came from Norfolk and destroyed lives, ships, and property, and nearly demoralized the entire nation.

Maryland regiment was killed, Gen. Stonewall Jackson captured thousands of prisoners and humiliated Gen. Nathaniel Banks, and the Union army experienced other brutal cruelties.

Slaves are liberated.

Sixth plague, phial, or vial, or sounding of the sixth trumpet is imminent.

In the Exodus story, God sent ten plagues that brought destruction and death to Egypt when Pharaoh refused to emancipate the Israelites (Exod. 7-11). Similarly, because Lincoln refuses to emancipate the slaves, Washington asserts that God allows the Union army to experience a series of defeats. Like the Egyptian Pharaoh who had forced the Israelites to work harder after Moses demanded their freedom, Lincoln made decisions that worsened oppression for slaves and free blacks. Washington further complicates his reading of the Civil War by doubling the story of the plagues in Egypt with the prophecies of the sixth trumpet and vial of Revelation. In the final plague of the Exodus story, all first-born humans and livestock died in households that did not have lamb's blood on the doorposts (Exod. 11). When the sixth angel blew a trumpet and an angel poured out the contents of a sixth vial, the Euphrates River dried up and Armageddon, the battle of the great day of God Almighty, began (Rev. 9:13 and Rev. 16:12). Like the Egyptians, Americans lose their beloved sons because they refuse to heed God's warnings to abolish slavery. Washington argues that America's Armageddon—the Civil War—will lead to the slaves' emancipation.

Washington conflates biblical and secular discourse to warn of unparalleled national disaster if Lincoln does not free the slaves. He declares that “the inexpressible tortures inflicted upon ancient Egypt, the cruelties of Antiochus to the Jews, the devastation of Jerusalem by the Roman Generals Titus and Vespasian, the bloody streets of France in 1792, will all hardly bear a comparison to what will befall this nation.”

Washington juxtaposes punishments God inflicted on His people with those experienced

by tyrannical secular powers to support his contention that anyone who disobeys God's law that calls men to relieve rather than inflict suffering is subject to divine judgments. White Americans prided themselves on being God's New Israel, yet they enslaved millions of native-born people. Washington suggests that they will suffer more than the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, or French because they have ignored lessons from the Bible and history regarding the fate of oppressive governments and disobedient believers.

As the Civil War intensified, other black activists joined Washington in describing the conflict as God's judgment on an unrepentant nation for the sin of slavery, but suggested that Lincoln could become African American's Moses. In his 1862 speech at the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Antislavery Society, John S. Rock, abolitionist, dentist, and lawyer, argues that slavery has caused the war and must be eliminated to save the Union. He assures members of his predominately-white audience that white Americans need not worry about how millions of newly emancipated African Americans would care for themselves because free blacks and slaves have already proven they are capable of laboring to earn a living. In his speech, Rock invokes the Exodus narrative to cast southerners as Egyptians and northerners as potential Israelites, whose victory is contingent on heeding God's warnings and inviting blacks to join the Union army.

Rock relies on a complex series of biblical narratives to call for divine liberation of the slaves and punishment of their oppressors. He asserts:

I think I see the finger of God in all this. Yes, there is hand-writing on the wall: I came not to bring peace, but the sword. Break every yoke, and let the oppressed go free. I have heard the groans of my people, and am come down to deliver them! (Long and continued applause.) . . . I thank God I have lived to see this great day, when the nation is to be weighed in the balances, and I hope not found wanting. (Applause)

In the biblical narrative, during a party hosted by Babylonian King Belshazzar, who ruled the kingdom that had forced Israel into captivity, a hand mysteriously appeared and etched a message that God had judged the monarch, found him to be evil, and given his kingdom to a foreign invader that evening (Dan. 5). Rock characterizes Americans as Babylonians who have enslaved innocent Africans and their descendants. Instead of informing Americans that God will destroy their nation, Rock gave them messages from Jesus who admonished His disciples that He would send a sword among the peace seeking Jews and break the yoke of the oppressed during His earthly ministry. Similarly, it would take a war to end slavery in the United States. Rock then doubles these biblical stories with the Exodus narrative, focusing on the episode in which the Israelites prayed for deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Unlike Absalom Jones who had quoted the same Scripture to posit the 1808 law outlawing the international slave trade as a harbinger of the slaves' *eventual* liberation, Rock intimates that it signals the *imminent* emancipation of enslaved African Americans. He then directs his audience's attention back to Belshazzar, whom God had punished. If Americans heed Rock's warning they can avert national destruction.

Northerners and African Americans could insure the nation's redemption by viewing the war through the lens of the Exodus narrative. In opposition to Washington, Rock asserts, "Jeff Davis is to the slaveholders what Pharaoh was to the Egyptians, and Abraham Lincoln and his successor, John C. Fremont, (applause) will be to us what Moses was to the Israelites. (Continued applause.) I may be mistaken, but I think the sequel will prove that I am correct." By identifying a southern Pharaoh and northern Moses figures, Rock divides the nation into a promised land and Egypt, reversing the

status it had attained as entirely Egypt for African Americans after the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. By casting the US president and Union army general as the North's Mosaic leaders, Rock groups free and enslaved blacks with whites in a community of Israelites who will be subject to bondage and oppression if the Confederate army wins the war. As Moses figures, Lincoln and Fremont can provide an Exodus experience for African Americans by wielding legislative and military powers against Confederate Egyptians.

Rock invokes another episode from the Exodus narrative to support his belief that the Union army needs a multi-racial force to assure victory. Although blacks are willing to fight for emancipation, Rock argues that the North had not availed itself of the military assistance black troops could provide. He asserts, "As the Government has not had the courage to receive the help that has been standing ready and waiting to assist her, we will now stand still, and see the salvation of *our* people (Applause)" (my emphasis). During the first two years of the war, Lincoln had refused to allow blacks to enlist in the Union army. Instead of standing still to see the salvation of their God as the Israelites had done when God parted the Red Sea, however, Rock intimates that African American are prepared to fight. Earlier in his speech, he had declared, "I have faith in God and gun-powder and lead (loud applause) and believe we ought not be discouraged. (Applause.)." Rock encourages northerners to seize the opportunity God has given them to eliminate slavery by enlisting African Americans to help them win the war and redirect the nation toward a promised land.

## **Abraham Lincoln: from Black America's Moses to America's Moses**

While Rock viewed Lincoln as a prospective Moses, other African American writers embraced him as their people's Moses after the war began. Lincoln eventually allowed blacks to join the Union army, and more than 386,000 fought in the Civil War. As they risked their lives for emancipation and equality, some turned to the Exodus narrative to sustain their hope for victory. While former slaves who fought in the Union army often sought a liberator, free black soldiers desired a trusted military commander. Sergeant-Major Milton M. Holland, a black Union soldier, wrote a letter to his hometown paper, the Athens, Ohio, *Messenger* (Jan. 19, 1864), in which he challenges Lincoln to fulfill his role as Mosaic commander-in-chief by protecting and providing for the families of black veterans who faithfully serve their country.

Holland's carefully crafted letter balances a plea for assistance for soldiers' families with reports of their valor on the battlefield. He begins by reminding his readers that he had organized a troop of black soldiers that left their hometown carrying a flag made by fellow citizens. During three months of duty, he reports that they had engaged the enemy, suffered few losses, and liberated slaves. White officers had complimented the black company on their strength and bravery. While Holland acknowledges the racism black soldiers experience, he expresses hope that a northern victory will lead to the creation of a better nation.

After describing how his company had fought valiantly for their country, Holland invokes the Moses story to convey their desire to be rewarded for military service. He writes, "Though we should fall struggling in our blood for right and justice, for the freedom of our brothers in bondage, or fall in defense of our national color, the Stars and

Stripes, our home and fireside will ever be protected by our old friend Gov. [David] Tod, by the loyalty of Abraham Lincoln, our Moses, and the all-wise God that created us.” As Holland introduces each reason black soldiers have enlisted, he uses the pronoun “our” to refer collectively to his company and assert the group’s right to the rewards of military service. They remain loyal to the Union even though they frequently do not receive adequate wages, supplies, and medical treatment, and they expect Lincoln to provide veterans’ benefits for their loved ones. In his letter, Holland also asserts their right to protection from Ohio Governor Tod who he believes is obligated to guard the welfare of constituents whose men are at war. To reinforce his pleas for government officials to honor black soldiers as citizens, Holland’s reminds his readers that an “all-wise God” had created blacks. As members of the human family, black Union soldiers serve God and country, and demand that US officials honor their patriotism by caring for their families.

After Lincoln was assassinated, other African American authors acknowledged the president as a Moses for the black community because he had abolished slavery. In *Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868), a hybrid slave narrative-memoir, Elizabeth Keckley provides an insider’s view of events in the White House following Lincoln’s death. Born into slavery in Virginia, Keckley eventually purchased her freedom and worked as a modiste and traveling companion for Mary Todd Lincoln. From her vantage point as trusted employee for the first family, Keckley invokes the Exodus narrative to elevate Lincoln to god-like status because of his unparalleled achievements during the final months of his presidency. As she describes the day she enters the White House’s guest room where Lincoln’s body lies in state, she writes, “No common mortal had fallen. The Moses of my people had fallen in the hour of his

triumph” (140). In the biblical narrative, disobedience mars Moses’ success as the Israelites’ leader and leads to his death on the border of the Promised Land. Conversely, Keckley characterizes Lincoln as dying triumphantly after winning reelection to the presidency in November 1864, presenting the thirteenth amendment to abolish slavery to Congress in January 1865, and overseeing the Union army’s victory in the Civil War in April 1865. Lincoln had savored these achievements only five days when John Wilkes Booth shot him in Ford’s Theatre. Keckley adds that she had “worshiped [Lincoln] as an idol—whom I looked upon as a demigod” (140-41). She elevates Lincoln to god-like stature because the Mosaic president had helped the nation accomplish what no other leader had been willing or able to do: free the slaves, outlaw slavery, and preserve the Union.

Contributors to black newspapers helped signal the shift of Americans’ perception of Lincoln from black Americans’ Moses to the nation’s Mosaic leader. In “Xenia Correspondence,” a letter to *The Christian Recorder* (1865), Annie M. Smith appropriates the Moses story to describe Ohio residents’ reactions to the news. She reports, “Crowds gathered in the streets, with melancholy countenances and downcast eyes; not a smile was to be seen—all hearts were sad on account of the assassination of our noble and praiseworthy President,—our modern Moses.” In describing Americans’ reaction to Lincoln’s death, Smith describes mournful “crowds,” groups that likely included black and white citizens. She intimates that Ohio residents, regardless of race, grieved the untimely death of their “modern Moses.” Thus Smith posits the nation as Egypt, encourages Americans to embrace their slain president as the nation’s Moses, and suggests that Americans need a new Exodus narrative to reflect their experiences.

Another contributor to *The Christian Recorder* offers a new national Exodus narrative for all American citizens. In “Our National Sacrifice” (1865), an anonymous author selects specific episodes from the biblical story to posit Lincoln as a martyred Moses who had guided Americans on the only path that would enable them to reach the promised land of the United States. He writes:

For more than four years he led the great American people through the quicksands and hidden shoals and rocks of slavery, and had landed them safely at the port of universal freedom and emancipation. Like Moses of old, he reached the mountain’s brow, and viewed the glory that was promised to his people. But as he was preparing for the last step, he fell—a Martyr to his cause, and a Sacrifice to his country.

In the Exodus narrative, after leading the emancipated Israelites out of Egypt and through forty years of wilderness wandering, because of disobedience, Moses did not enter the Promised Land. God allowed him to view Canaan from atop Mt. Pisgah before he died, however. Like disobedient Israelites, Americans had wandered in the wilderness—a four-year civil war rather than a forty-year sojourn—because of their acceptance of slavery. Yet now the author describes slaves, free blacks, and whites as “Great American people,” emphasizing their equality despite slavery. Lincoln becomes a Moses who not only glimpses the promised land of America by subduing the rebellion but is preparing to complete the journey. Assassination by a proslavery advocate elevates him to martyrdom. In this new national Exodus narrative, the Mosaic leader earns a place of honor because he gives his life to save the nation.

White preachers soon emerged as the most prominent authors of new national Exodus narratives through the eulogies they presented after Lincoln’s death. Unlike eighteenth-century ministers who had transformed slaveholding President George Washington into white Americans’ Moses following his death, these men presented

Lincoln as a Moses for *all* Americans. For example, in his eulogy *The Assassinated President* (1865), Joseph A. Seiss reassures his audience that grieving is a natural response to the death of an accomplished leader who has attained a long-sought goal. After Moses died on the border of the Promised Land, the Israelites mourned thirty days for him (Deut. 34:7-8). Seiss suggests that Lincoln deserves a similar outpouring of public grief because of the president's accomplishments and the striking similarities between his and Moses' life and work. Seiss draws a parallel between Moses' and Lincoln's upbringings. Both were born of "humble parentage," learned wisdom and moral principles from their mothers, disliked slavery, aided the oppressed, and were called by God to do challenging work, mocked by their constituents, and made mistakes (14-15, 20, 24-25, 32, 38). By reading Lincoln's life as a Moses story, Seiss helps his white Christian audience understand why their Mosaic president eventually advocates emancipation and why they should see themselves as Israelites poised on the border of the promised land of America.

To honor Lincoln's memory, Seiss appropriates the Moses story to direct his audience to adapt principles that governed Lincoln's actions and teach them to their children. He explains, "We may not, indeed be Moses or Lincoln, but, like both, we can be ourselves, and by being honestly ourselves in humble things, we know not [to] what high spheres we yet may be raised" (42). Seiss reminds his parishioners that not everyone could be president, but all Americans have a responsibility to serve their country. Both Moses and Lincoln had risen from humble backgrounds to hold positions of responsibility. If every American followed their example of honesty and fidelity, the nation would prosper in the hands of faithful citizens. Although he encourages his

listeners to emulate Lincoln, Seiss cautions them against idolizing their accomplished leader. Seiss stresses, “[Lincoln] was but a man” (33). He admonishes them not to draw many conclusions about Lincoln’s legacy so soon after his death. By instructing them to think of Lincoln as a Moses, however, Seiss affirms the American leadership tradition rooted in the Exodus narrative.

Many southerners did not perceive Lincoln as their Moses or a martyr after his assassination because the Union president not only won the war, he emancipated their slaves and confiscated their property. As southerners contemplated their options, some northern ministers visited churches throughout the South to encourage white Christians who had supported the Confederacy to rejoin the Union. Charles Lowe, secretary of the American Unitarian Association, traveled to Charleston, a port town that had been a Confederate stronghold. In *Death of President Lincoln* (1865), a sermon he preached at the Unitarian Church on Archdale Street, Lowe acknowledges the nation’s difficulty in overcoming sectional strife but urges his audience to set aside their differences with the North, forgive their enemies, and work together for the common good of the country. He appropriates the Exodus story to implore white Charleston citizens to accept Lincoln as their Moses because the president has reunited the nation and led Americans to a peaceful promised land.

Lowe invokes specific episodes in the Exodus narrative to give Charleston residents a role in the reconciliation process after the war. He declares, “[Lincoln] stands before us, and will stand in history, as the Moses of this Israel of ours. The medium and willing instrument of God, he led us through the wandering of the wilderness for four long years . . . standing firm in his purpose when they, in moments of discontent, sighed

after the fleshpots they left behind” (18). In the Exodus story, the Israelites accused Moses of leading them into the wilderness to die of hunger and thirst, and expressed a desire to return to Egypt where meat had been plentiful (Exod. 16:1-3). Throughout their forty-year journey, they repeatedly rebelled against God and took out their frustrations on Moses. Like Moses, Lincoln had presided over a nation divided by rebellion, but white Americans’ fleshpots were slavery and the laws, traditions, and businesses that made the institution an integral component of American life. Although southern states had seceded from the Union, Lowe argues that they are still a part of “this Israel of ours.” He appeals to his audience’s patriotism, urging them to respect the outcome of the war and rebuild a nation that now offers freedom and equality to all citizens.

Lowe conflates the Exodus story with republican discourse to argue that Lincoln has sacrificed his life to give every citizen access to the promised land of America. He reminds his audience that like Moses, Lincoln only glimpsed the promised land. He explains: “But to the people it is given to enter in, rejoicing after their weary wanderings, and without one lost tribe. The Promised Land of peace and Union, and freedom for all, and prosperity restored” (19). In the Exodus narrative, of the thousands of liberated Hebrews aged twenty and older who left Egypt, only Caleb, Joshua, and the Levites entered the Promised Land. Their brethren died in the wilderness because of disobedience. Lowe alludes to these stories to distinguish American Israel’s experience from that of ancient Israel and reveal the potential for the development of a new inclusive national Exodus story. Lowe suggests that the Union victory in which all southern states return to the nation ushers in a new era of prosperity for every American in a unified republic. Yet Americans’ journey to their promised land was not analogous to the

Israelites' trek to Canaan or the pilgrims' transatlantic exodus to their New World. In exchange for promises of renewed prosperity, former Confederates were expected to treat members of the race they had enslaved as equals.

Convincing southerners to embrace Lincoln as their Moses proved difficult, especially when prominent white ministers continued to characterize them as rebellious Israelites and politicians disagreed on the proper punishment for former Confederates and their supporters. Ministers turned to Exodus to guide the nation through this challenging phase. In *Moses and Joshua. A Discourse on the Death of Abraham Lincoln* (1865), a sermon preached at the Winthrop Church in Charlestown, Massachusetts, Congregational minister Jeremiah E. Rankin introduces a new national Exodus story in which he posits Lincoln as Moses and Johnson as Joshua, without, however, accounting for racial, sectional, and political divides that doom his narrative to failure.

Rankin claims authority for his invocation of the Exodus story during a time of national crisis by arguing that the Bible is a history of humanity. He believes Americans should seek biblical events analogous to their own to gain a better understanding of their life experiences. Rankin views the Exodus narrative as the story that most closely resembles the Civil War era because of the parallel between the Israelites' liberation from slavery in Egypt and enslaved Americans' emancipation (5). As God appointed Moses to lead Israel, Rankin argues that He had anointed Lincoln to lead the nation through the Civil War. He declares, "I believe, also, that he had a sincere purpose to serve his God, and so God accepted him as his servant, even as he did Moses; honored him as his servant; permitted him to do—nay, raised him up to do—a work almost as marked, in its political aspects, as that of Moses himself" (9-10). Rankin characterizes both Moses and

Lincoln as leaders whose relationship with God enables them to be effective servants for their people. By characterizing Moses' role in the Israelites' emancipation as a political act, he justifies the liberation of American slaves and rebirth of a nation that guarantees freedom, justice, and equality for all citizens.

To affirm Lincoln's role as a Mosaic leader, Rankin examines his presidency through a specific episode in the Moses story:

To the North, "All was industry, thrift and success." To the mid-west prairie, "he saw the great artery of the nation's system pouring its unshackled currents into the waiting gulf." To the Pacific Coast, "the virgin soil of mountain and of valley was forever free." To the South, "he saw Ethiopia—a nation born in a day—stretching out her liberated hands to God, and invoking his richest benediction to descend upon her deliverer. He saw Treason vacating her capital and strongholds in the vain attempt to flee inland to the mountains . . . and, finally, surrendering her sword." (7-8)

In the biblical narrative, Moses viewed a bountiful Canaan awaiting the Israelites. Conversely, Rankin's Mosaic Lincoln sees a fertile American Canaan inhabited by industrious northern Americans, grateful former slaves, and defeated Confederate soldiers. Rankin's American promised land was an illusion, however. He does not acknowledge the discrimination against European immigrants and free blacks in the North, South, and West, or the continued oppression of blacks. Furthermore, he characterizes former slaves as foreigners, as Ethiopians rather than black American citizens. The promise of prosperity offered by the biblical Canaan causes Rankin to underestimate the work of integration that awaits the nation.

Rankin does acknowledge the nation's need to punish those who are guilty of treason, however, and he turns to the Exodus narrative for guidance on how to deal justly with former Confederates. He argues, "But the nation has now reached the Jordan, beyond which were sterner duties than any in the past" (13). In the Exodus story, when

the Israelites crossed the Jordan River and entered Canaan, God instructed them to destroy the inhabitants of the Promised Land who had refused to worship Him as their Creator and punish people like Achan and his family who disobeyed divine commands regarding the conquest of Canaan (Josh. 7). Americans' enemies were not foreigners, however. They were proslavery advocates who had lost their property and wealth but were still legal residents of the promised land of the United States. Rankin doubles the Exodus narrative with the story of Satan's rebellion in heaven to devise proper punishment for "unprincipled spirits" (14). He suggests that Americans' "sterner duties" in their promised land include stripping the rebels of citizenship and hanging treasonous individuals to eliminate the possibility of secession recurring. To ensure the prosperity and peace of their nation, traitors must be punished. But this biblical view of American history gives Rankin a false sense that justice will be served, for Lincoln had not mandated trials for Confederate soldiers and politicians who were accused of treason.

#### **Andrew Johnson: from Potential Joshua to Unfaithful Moses**

After Lincoln's death, many Americans hoped that his predecessor, Andrew Johnson, would become a Joshua and lead the nation into the promised land. During the Revolutionary War, colonists had characterized George Washington as their Joshua because he led their successful battle for independence against their English Egyptian oppressors. African Americans had also been inspired by the Joshua story, describing revolt leaders, for example, Gabriel and an anonymous fugitive slave, as Joshua figures, who they vainly hoped could lead insurrections to free the slaves. In *Moses and Joshua*, Rankin encourages Americans to embrace Johnson as a potential Joshua who will guide them into their American Canaan. Rankin does not enthusiastically endorse Johnson,

however. He suggests that Johnson can be an effective Joshua “*if* we may confide in his repeated utterances” to punish those who had committed treason (14, my emphasis). Rather than generate the trust of his constituents through his promises to punish the rebels, Johnson’s “repeated utterances” raise suspicions that he might not carry out his plans. Having witnessed Lincoln’s propensity to give clemency to Confederate soldiers, Rankin fears Johnson could follow his predecessor’s example. He instructs his audience to follow Johnson only if their new president abides by biblical and republican principles of justice that support of punishment for traitors.

As he expresses concerns about Johnson’s qualification for leadership, Rankin invokes a specific episode in the Exodus story to foreshadow the difficulties Americans will face in creating a promised land of equality and freedom for all citizens. Near the end of his sermon he directs his audience to “go over this Jordon and take possession of what is before us [and] respond to the appeal of our new President for sympathy and support as the Israelites did to Joshua: ‘According as we hearkened unto Moses in all things, so will we harken unto thee, only the Lord thy God be with thee as He was with Moses’” (16). In the Exodus narrative, when Joshua assumed leadership of the Israelites as they prepared to cross the Jordan River into Canaan, they promised to follow him and encouraged him to be faithful to God (Josh. 1). Rankin presents a new national Exodus narrative in which He claims God’s blessings on a mixed nation of Confederate sympathizers and Union adherents whose leader is a Joshua they do not fully trust. Furthermore, by claiming that Americans will follow Johnson as the Israelites promised to follow Joshua, he sets them up for further difficulties. Because the Israelites had repeatedly rebelled against Moses and refused to follow Joshua’s guidance consistently,

they suffered for generations. As they prepare to enter their promised land of the United States, Rankin urges Americans to follow Israel's intent but not its example. His hesitancy to support Johnson fully reflects Americans' uncertainty regarding the ultimate outcome of the war and the destination of their uncharted journey. Because the federal government did not hold trials for those suspected of treason or protect the civil rights of black Americans, however, Americans soon found themselves occupying an unstable Canaan.

African American authors harbored no illusions about Joshua figures who would direct their journey or lead the conquest of Canaan. In "Necessity of Education" (1865), an address delivered at Wilberforce University published in *The Christian Recorder*, T. H. Jackson employs the Exodus narrative to argue that African Americans could not trust American politicians but should wield the sword of education to attain equality. Jackson acknowledges Lincoln as the Moses who had led African Americans to the border of the promised land and Johnson as the Joshua figure who would enable them to enter the "land of freedom," yet he did not trust government officials to guarantee the success of the black community. He asserts that education would provide African Americans access to citizenship: "But we will have to strain every nerve to remove the prejudice that exists toward us in the country, and, in the language of an able writer, 'We must educate! If we do not, short will be our race from the cradle to the grave! If, in our haste to become rich and mighty, we outrun our religious literary institutions, short will be our race of freedom. For unless we do educate, we will be reduced to worse servitude than before.'" Ignorance had been one of the most effective tools slaveholders used to keep blacks in bondage. Jackson recalls the laws that prohibited slaves from learning to read. By barring

blacks from obtaining an education, whites had blocked their access to knowledge that may have helped slaves attain freedom. By learning to read and acquiring education, freedmen and their children could better determine the commitment of their leaders, understand and exercise their rights, and challenge racist laws that still governed the nation after the Civil War—the essential work that would facilitate the development of an American promised land.

As blacks struggled to educate themselves and enter their American Canaan, they encountered resistance from a president some had once trusted to be their people's Moses. About six months prior to Lincoln's assassination, Johnson had signaled his support of the African American community by offering to be their Moses in a speech to black residents of Nashville, Tennessee, on October 4, 1864. As Tennessee's former governor and state senator, Johnson was a familiar and somewhat heroic figure for black Tennesseans, for he had remained loyal to the Union after his state voted to secede, a decision that helped him earn the vice president spot on Lincoln's "fusion" ticket in the 1864 election. A correspondent for the *Cincinnati Gazette* reports that in his speech, Johnson expresses his sympathy for the plight of African Americans and his hope that a Moses will arise to lead them through "the Red Sea of war and bondage to a fairer future of liberty and peace." The crowd responds, "You are our Moses . . . we want no Moses but you. Johnson replied, "Well, then, humble and unworthy as I am, if no other better shall be found, I will be induced to be your Moses, and lead you to freedom and happiness in the true Promised Land" (xli). By voicing his appeal in the language of Exodus, Johnson raised the hopes of black Tennesseans that their emancipator had arrived. Although Tennessee eventually came under Union control during the Civil War,

Johnson intimated that African Americans needed a federal representative like himself to ensure their safe passage into an American Canaan.

When Johnson assumed the responsibilities of the presidency after Lincoln's assassination, he appeared to be the ideal candidate to transform the United States into a promised land. Within eight months of becoming president, however, Johnson granted amnesty to former Confederates and gave them the right to reclaim their property, except slaves, pardoned rebels, and limited black voting, causing black Americans to question his pledge to be the their community's Moses. In her speech "We Are All Bound Up Together" (1866), delivered at the Eleventh National Woman's Rights Convention in New York, Frances E. W. Harper extols a faithful Mosaic leader to expose Johnson's duplicity. She describes Harriet Tubman as "*a woman* in our country who has received the name of 'Moses,' not by lying about it, but by acting it out (applause)—*a woman* who has gone down into the Egypt of slavery and brought out hundreds of our people into liberty" (219, my emphasis). Harper highlights Tubman's gender to draw a contrast between the bravery of a female fugitive slave and the cowardice of a US president. She notes that Johnson had promised to be a Moses for African Americans but had supported proslavery officials and legislation that eliminated the gains blacks had made during Reconstruction. Harper characterizes Johnson as a man who "keeps 'poor whites' all the way through" (219). Whereas Tubman devoted herself to freeing her enslaved people and inspired black and white activists and citizens to support her work, Johnson not only broke his promises to black citizens, he empowered slavery proponents.

The national press affirmed Harper's accusation that Johnson had lied to become black America's Moses. In his political cartoon "Reconstruction and How It Works"

(1866), published in *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, Thomas Nast depicts Johnson as Shakespeare's Iago and a black Union veteran as Othello flanked by Johnson's slogans, "I am your Moses" and "Treason is a crime that must be made odious." Illustrations that signal the failure of Reconstruction fill out the cartoon: whites sparking race riots in Memphis and New Orleans; Johnson charming the Confederate copperhead snake with a Constitution fashioned into a flute as prominent cabinet members watch; Johnson issuing numerous pardons and vetoes. Nast conflates the Moses story with Shakespeare's *Othello* to reinforce Johnson's duplicity and its devastating impact on the African American community. But Iago betrayed Othello because of the Moor's marriage to Desdemona. In the nineteenth century, artists often presented white women as symbols of freedom. By positing the black veteran as a Moor, Nast characterizes blacks as outsiders, whose liberty must be curtailed to protect white Americans' freedom and purity.

Frederick Douglass soon emerged as one of Johnson's fiercest critics, focusing on the president's refusal to support legislation that would provide civil liberties for African Americans. In February 1866, as a member of a delegation appointed by the National Convention of Colored Men to meet with Johnson, Douglass requested that blacks be given the right to vote, reminding the president that black citizens paid taxes, supported the nation, and served in the military. Johnson counters that that he had offered to be a Moses and liberate blacks from slavery, but he rejects Douglass's demand, arguing that such action would lead to "the injury of whites as well as the colored man" (Douglass, "Claims of Our Race" 100). Johnson had supported emancipation, but he would not force Congress to address the legacy of racism and oppression that blocked African American citizens' path to equality. Johnson's actions rupture new national Exodus narrative by

encouraging whites to block African Americans' access to the rights and privileges of citizenship in the promised land of the United States.

As Johnson's intentions for the black community became clear, Douglass, like Harper and Nast, invokes the Exodus narrative to expose the president's duplicity. During the 1866 Southern Loyalists' Convention, Douglass spoke after delegates from the border states attempted to block a vote supporting suffrage for blacks. In "Govern With Magnanimity and Courage: An Address Delivered in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on 6 September 1866," Douglass argues that blacks are being treated like enslaved Israelites, foreigners, and aliens in the land they have nourished with their blood and tears. He explains:

Andy Johnson was to be our Moses (applause); but he has taken a back track. (Applause.) Without principles or friends, for no men or set of men can be said to love Andrew Johnson (applause), and if he lives to the end of his term he shall go down to eternal infamy. He deceived his own party, and when his party fell into pieces, from sheer rottenness, he clung to the rottenest end of it. (Cries of 'hit him again,' and laughter.). (143-144)

Douglass asserts that Johnson's refusal to keep his promise to black Americans set him on a path that led to personal and political failure. Johnson's unprincipled manner attracted unsavory politicians who supported his decisions to weaken the Freedman's Bureau, veto the Civil Rights Act, and withdraw troops from the South before blacks had established new, stable communities, acts that further fragment the fragile national Exodus narrative.

Douglass continued to question Johnson's commitment to Mosaic leadership in a series of speeches he gave after black leaders met with the president. In "The Issues of the Day: An Address Delivered in Washington, D.C., on 10 March 1866," Douglass demands suffrage for African Americans and challenged Johnson's integrity. He invokes

a series of biblical stories and then conflates them with secular discourse to accuse Johnson of acting like Pharaoh. Douglass asks, “But what shall be said of him who told us that the traitors must take a back seat to the work of restoration, if he now invests those same traitors with the supreme control of the States in which they live? What shall be said of him who promised to be the Moses of the colored race, if he become[s] their Pharaoh instead? Why this must be said of him: that he had better never been born” (123). During the Last Supper, Jesus identified His disciple Judas as His betrayer, asserting, “. . . good were it for that man if he had never been born” (Mark 14:21). For thirty pieces of silver, Judas helped the Jewish leaders arrest Jesus. By accepting homage from former Confederates, the president becomes a Judas who betrays Americans who had trusted him to punish the rebels and restore the Union, and a Pharaoh who oppresses African Americans rather than protect their civil liberties. Under Johnson’s leadership, the nation loses its claim to be God’s American Israel for it is bereft of a Mosaic president who can be trusted to lead the country.

Lewis Hayden had raised similar reservations about Johnson’s fitness for Mosaic leadership shortly after the Civil War. In his “Address Before the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of Massachusetts, at the Festival of St. John the Evangelist, Dec. 27, 1865,” Grand Master Hayden expresses concern about recently emancipated blacks whose former masters are oppressing them. Hayden, who had escaped from slavery and become a prominent abolitionist and businessman, laments the plight of rural blacks who do not have access to economic and educational opportunities available in cities and coastal areas. He accuses Johnson of exacerbating his

brethren's condition by withdrawing federal troops from the South and appointing rebels to fill important government posts.

Hayden claims biblical authority to challenge Johnson publicly by analyzing the president's alleged Mosaic actions. He appropriates the Exodus narrative to question Johnson's commitment to Mosaic leadership and accuse him of being Pharaoh. Hayden wonders who will help rural blacks:

For Andrew Johnson will not—although he was to be our Moses to lead us to liberty and equality; instead of which, I fear he will prove to be the Pharaoh of our day. In this we ought not to be deceived, for it is plain that he who undertakes to be the friend of the black man in this land of Negro haters, will not have the Negro haters all over the country singing praises to him, as you see they are now doing to our said Moses; so much so, that astonished people stand off amazed, and know not what to do or to say. (455)

Johnson's post-war alliances reveal his allegiances. He cannot be a Mosaic leader for African Americans if he accepts praise from "Negro haters." Hayden goes so far as to challenge the president's authority by conflating the Exodus story with an Old Testament narrative: "Were it not that we are forbidden to speak against those in authority, I should say, the Lord rebuke thee and deliver us from such a Moses" (456). In the biblical narrative, the prophet Zachariah has a vision in which Jesus rebukes Satan for taunting His people because of their sins (Zach. 3:1-2). Hayden suggests that Johnson is an evil Moses who is oppressing African Americans. Although civil and biblical laws prohibited citizens from criticizing government officials, Hayden boldly expresses his desire that God will censure Johnson by removing him from office, just as He had punished Pharaoh and reproved Satan.

While Douglass and Hayden focus their criticism of Johnson on his strained relationship with the black community, other activists appropriate the Exodus story to

characterize his presidency as a monarchy, further weakening the new national Exodus narrative. When Johnson attempts to circumvent Congress and appoint former Confederates who had committed treason to federal government posts, Charles Sumner, senator from Massachusetts, invokes the biblical narrative to encourage lawmakers to acknowledge their president as a self-serving Pharaoh rather than a faithful Mosaic president. In his speech to Congress on January 18, 1867, Sumner introduces a bill to undermine Johnson's presidential authority and declares:

The President has usurped the powers of Congress on a colossal scale, and he has employed those usurped powers in fomenting the rebel spirit and awakening the dying embers of rebellion. This is his great and unpardonable offense, for which history must condemn him, if you do not. He is a usurper, through whom infinite injury has been done to his country. He is a usurper, who, promising to be a Moses has become a Pharaoh. ("Great Speech")

Like Douglass, Sumner accuses Johnson of betraying his own political party and empowering the rebels. Congress had outlawed slavery, but citizens were subjected to the whims of a president who acted like Pharaoh. Sumner seems to suggest impeachment for Johnson, for in bypassing federal legislators and oppressing black citizens, Johnson has abused his presidential powers. Like the colonists who described King George III as their Pharaoh after he enacted unjust laws, an American legislator criticized the US president because he had acted autonomously without regard for the welfare of his constituents. When Congress initiated impeachment proceedings a year later, Sumner reminded them, "He once declared himself the Moses of the colored race. Behold him now the Pharaoh" (*Charles Sumner*).

## **Faithful Mosaic Leaders**

### **Owen Lovejoy: Mosaic Congressman**

Before US presidents emerged as Moses or Joshua figures for African Americans, as well as the nation, other white as well as black abolitionists had served faithfully in that role and were acknowledged for their commitment to the black community. Owen Lovejoy, Republican from Illinois, often spearheaded antislavery debates in Congress. In their introduction to *His Brother's Blood: Speeches and Writings 1838-64 of Owen Lovejoy*, William F. Moore and Jane Ann Moore suggest that Lovejoy's method was "to call for justice based on Christian compassion and humanitarianism" (xxii). The US representative became active in the abolition movement after a proslavery mob murdered his brother Elijah Lovejoy, and quickly developed a reputation as a fearless abolitionist by encouraging slaves to steal, if necessary, to finance their journeys to freedom, offering his home as a station on the Underground Railroad, and advocating emancipation for slaves and civil rights for blacks. When Owen Lovejoy died in 1864, James L. N. Bowen, a member of the Washington Island Literary Association, joined many African Americans in hailing him as their hero. In a letter to *The Christian Recorder* (1864), John F. N. Wilkinson recalls Bowen's reliance on the Moses story to eulogize Owen Lovejoy as a revered abolitionist and present the Civil War as divine punishment for slavery.

Wilkinson reports that Bowen characterizes Lovejoy as a Mosaic figure who devoted himself to the uplift of the black community. Bowen describes the congressman as ". . . a friend of the race, a tried and true friend, a friend, who, in the dark day of slavery, when we groped in darkness like that of Egypt which could be felt, he was with us, and like Moses, helped to lead us to the promised land." In the biblical narrative,

Moses accepts God's call to deliver his people from slavery; he issues the plague of darkness when Pharaoh refuses to liberate the Israelites. Bowen describes African Americans as being lost in the darkness of slavery, however. Black Moses figures, for example, Absalom Jones, had unsuccessfully petitioned Pharaoh to free American slaves. Locked out of the legislative process because of their race, dispossessed African American citizens needed a sympathetic Mosaic legislator to advocate for their rights. Sumner voluntarily risked his life to support fugitives and demand emancipation.

Bowen doubles the story of Moses with the narrative of the Apostle Paul to depict Lovejoy as a public servant who does not experience the full fruits of his labor. He explains, "He hoped to have lived to see the abominable institution of slavery abolished from the face of the whole earth; but, alas, like Paul, he had 'fought a good fight, finished his course, and was ready to be offered up.'" In the biblical narrative, Paul uttered these words just before he was martyred (2 Tim. 4:6-7). Bowen invokes the Scripture to memorialize a respected antislavery activist who died after an extended illness. Bowen draws other parallels between the two men. As he traveled to Damascus to persecute Christians, Paul was converted and heeded God's call to evangelize Gentiles. After a mob murdered his brother because of his commitment to abolition, Lovejoy, a Congregational minister, embraced the antislavery cause. Each man spoke boldly against the injustices of their times, died confident that his good deeds had influenced his world, and left a legacy in published texts.

To illustrate how Lovejoy's antislavery publications and speeches would support racial uplift after his death, Bowen doubles the stories of Moses and Paul with the narrative of Israel's seventy-year Babylonian captivity. He asserts, ". . . the echoes of his

benevolent and justice-loving voice have not died in the Hall of Congress, but his example and his doctrines will stand in glowing letters upon the memory of this nation, as the handwriting upon the wall of Belshazzar.” In the biblical narrative, King Belshazzar ignored the warning God wrote on the wall of his banquet hall and lost his Babylonian empire to the Medes and Persians. While John S. Rock invoked the story to warn white abolitionists that God would violently overthrow slavery, Lovejoy urged legislators to respond to petitions from black constituents and their supporters to avert God’s wrath. Congress refused to enact legislation to abolish slavery and outlaw racial discrimination, however. Lovejoy’s words blazed from the pages of *The Congressional Record*, reminding Americans that their elected officials had ignored his warnings of impending judgment, the Civil War, for the nation’s sin of slavery.

While Bowen acknowledges white Mosaic leadership in the abolition movement, he urges his audience to create their own Exodus narrative replete with black heroes to inspire their children to become involved in community uplift. He explains:

It is the loftiness of great men to defend the weak and feeble; the only way to appreciate these things is to follow the example [Owen Lovejoy] has set forth, for the mental, moral and intellectual improvement and progress of the Anglo-African . . . Teach your children, sirs, that for this boon, your fathers fought and died – for this, their grandfathers left the rice-fields and the cotton-fields to defend. Teach them that they did it for us, and that they must do it for you. Teach them, also, the name of our departed friend, the Hon. Owen Lovejoy.

In the Exodus story, Moses instructed the Israelites to teach God’s laws to their children so their descendants would enjoy prosperity and longevity in Canaan (Deut. 6:7 and 11:19). Similarly, Bowen admonishes blacks to instruct their children to adopt the principles that guided Lovejoy and thereby prepare themselves for service and prosperity in their promised land of America. Bowen places the roots of abolition work within the

black community, however, by reminding his listeners of the contributions, especially former slaves, were making to racial uplift. If blacks were to build and sustain communities in the United States, they must cooperate with their leaders and benefactors, seek role models among their people, assert human agency, and nurture a commitment to racial uplift in their children.

### **Harriet Tubman: Moses, the Emancipator**

Other writers joined Bowen in encouraging Americans to look within the black community and identify Mosaic leaders. As authors characterized elected officials as Moses figures, several reminded Americans that Harriet Tubman had proved faithful to her calling as black America's Moses even before the nation lauded Lincoln and Lovejoy as the slaves' Moses. Between 1850 and 1860, Tubman, a fugitive slave, earned the moniker Moses while making repeated trips to Maryland to lead nearly one hundred slaves to the North and Canada. In lauding Tubman for her work, Frederick Douglass stated, "Excepting John Brown—of sacred memory—I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people than you" (qtd. in Humez 85). Scholars have recently suggested that Tubman may have had additional motives for her decade-long treks to the Eastern Shore. In *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories*, Jean M. Humez speculates that Tubman's "strong attachment to her family, rather than an abstract idea of 'liberating her people,' drove [her] to run such great risks" (24). Sarah Bradford in *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (1869) and William Still in *The Underground Railroad* (1872) assert that in contrast to the biblical Moses, Tubman relied on a network of free and enslaved blacks, as well as white supporters. Her interracial network enabled her to become the only Moses who

repeatedly returned to Egypt and led slaves to the promised lands of the North and Canada.

While the biblical Moses confronted Pharaoh and delivered God's demand for Israel's release from slavery, Tubman bypassed her American Pharaohs and gathered slaves for their perilous trip North. Because Tubman did not write an autobiography or keep records of her rescues, scholars must piece together her story from the recollections of her contemporaries. Many report that Tubman trusted Providence to protect her and the fugitives as they traveled, but her network provided provisions and financial assistance, and helped them outmaneuver slaveholders and slave catchers. In the Exodus story, when God instructed Aaron to accompany the reluctant Moses to face Pharaoh, he gave the brothers an arsenal of plagues to convince the stubborn monarch to free the Hebrews. Later, Moses' father-in-law advised him to appoint advisors to address the Israelites' concerns during their wilderness journey.

In contrast, Tubman reportedly employed her network—an extended circle of family, friends, supporters, and strangers—throughout the 1850s when she rescued slaves. In *Bound for the Promised Land*, Kate Clifford Larson provides important insights into Tubman's network that stretched from Maryland to New Jersey. Developing such a network required her to step outside the boundaries of the woman's sphere, particularly in developing alliances with white male abolitionists and initiating expeditions into slave territory that most of the devoted male abolitionists would not undertake. After meeting with Tubman while planning his raid on Harpers Ferry, John Brown referred to her as "General Tubman" and wrote to his son John that "He *Hariet* is the most of *man* naturally; that I *ever* met with" (Reynolds 259). According to Fergus M. Bordewich in

*Bound for Canaan*, Tubman “. . . defied every antebellum notion about what women were supposed to be” (347).

Although she traveled alone into the Egypt of Maryland’s Eastern Shore to rescue slaves, Tubman relied on her earnings from domestic work, her faith in God’s protection, contacts in free and enslaved black communities, and contributions from wealthy abolitionists to ensure the success of her journeys. In *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, Bradford relates the story of Tubman’s rescue of her three brothers who were about to be sold. Their father, who blindfolded himself so he would not “see” his children, provided much needed provisions and shelter for the group as they headed for Canada (57-64). Prominent abolitionists also supported Tubman. In *The Underground Railroad*, Still includes a letter from Thomas Garrett who informs J. Miller Kill of his arrangements to send Tubman, six men, and one woman to “Allen Agnew’s, to be forwarded across the country to the city. Harriet, and one of the men had worn their slices off their feet, and I gave them two dollars to help fit them out, and directed a carriage to be lured at my expense, to take them out, but do not yet know the expense” (296). Tubman even enlisted the help of racist whites who would provide services for a fee (Larson xvii).

Without the assistance of her network in Maryland and the North, Tubman would not have experienced such success in liberating slaves. Unlike Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, James T. Holly, and other Mosaic leaders who limited their racial uplift work primarily to the North, Tubman distinguished herself as a singular Moses who willingly risked her life and devoted her earnings to emancipation, and relied on her faith in God and the support of her network to ensure the freedom of her fugitives. Arrival in the

North and Canada did not guarantee liberty, however. Tubman and the slaves were considered fugitives and they faced the constant threat of being caught and remanded to slavery. Racist laws and customs tempered their joy at gaining tenuous liberty in northern promised lands, making their escape from slavery bittersweet.

### **Frances Harper: a Mosaic Moment for All Americans**

While most writers invoked Exodus to anoint a single Moses figure for a new national Exodus narrative, Frances E. W. Harper continued to encourage African Americans to emulate Moses. In *Discarded Legacy*, Melba Joyce Boyd argues that Harper “construct[s] a ‘Moses’ model for radical Christian character . . . He serves as the quintessential model for Afroamerican character, male and female” (80). Harper had questioned the existence of a Mosaic leader in her 1859 essay “Our Greatest Want” and wondered whether anyone would follow him if he appeared. Carla Peterson argues that through poetry, Harper fashioned herself as a poet-preacher whose verse “was designed to rationalize the emotions in order to encourage her audience’s social activism” (125). In *Moses, the Story of the Nile* (1869), Harper offers an epic poem that traces the revered biblical leader’s life from his birth as a slave in Egypt to his death on the border of the Promised Land, a journey that African Americans had completed by the end of the Civil War. As she presents Moses as a model for leadership in the black community, Harper emphasizes the essential role of women in preparing children to enact a Mosaic Moment in which they choose to remain faithful to God and their community.

In the Exodus narrative, Moses’ life was threatened before he was born, but five women—two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, his mother Jochebed, his sister Miriam, and Pharaoh’s daughter—saved him. After the Hebrew slave population

dramatically increased, Pharaoh feared his slaves would make an alliance with a foreign power to overthrow their oppressors, so he issued a decree ordering Hebrew midwives to kill all newborn baby boys. When the women ignored his order, Pharaoh instructed everyone to drown the babies in the river. Jochebed hid her newborn boy for three months, and then made a waterproof basket and floated him in the waters Pharaoh had hoped would be his tomb. While Miriam watched over her baby brother, Pharaoh's daughter found the Hebrew child, decided to adopt him, and upon Miriam's suggestion, hired Moses' mother to nurse him. In "The Hebrew Women Are Not Like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in Exodus 1," Renita Weems characterizes this episode of the Exodus narrative as a conflict between enslaved women and Pharaoh, their master. She argues that "biblical texts take sides in ideological debates, debates which usually center around issues of power where literature becomes a form of public discourse seeking to either challenge or defend the way in which people are socially constituted" (25). Weems suggests that the Hebrew women ultimately win because they choose to defy Pharaoh and honor God's directive to "be fruitful and multiply" (29). The Hebrew women may have also been exercising faith in God's promise to their ancestor Abraham that the patriarch's descendants would be as numberless as the stars in the heavens and sands on the seashore (Gen. 22:17).

Harper retells Miriam's story to emphasize the centrality of the young woman's role in the power struggle between the Hebrew women and Pharaoh, which enables Miriam to empower Hebrew women after their escape from slavery. In Harper's poem, Moses recalls that Miriam quickly inquires whether Pharaoh's daughter needs a nurse when the princess discovers the child. In so doing, she enables Moses to return home and

learn about his faith and family. Later in the poem, Harper's narrator revises a specific episode in the Exodus narrative to transform Miriam's role in saving her brother into a politically subversive act. After God parts the Red Sea and the Israelites walk to safety on dry ground, Miriam remembers her intervention in Moses' life as she leads the women in a song of praise to God for their victory over their Egyptian oppressors. Instead of singing about Pharaoh and his army drowning in the Red Sea like the biblical Miriam, however, Harper's Miriam recalls the last plague God sent to the Egyptians: "A wail in the palace, a wail in the hut/The midnight is shivering with dread/And Egypt wakes up with a shriek and a sob/To mourn for her first-born dead" (60). Boyd characterizes Miriam's song as a Negro Spiritual for it follows the same rhythmic pattern and reflects the slaves' style of refashioning biblical narratives to reflect their experiences (104). In the song, Harper juxtaposes Miriam's memory of saving her brother's life and his triumph as God's deliverer of Israel with her recollection of the death of Egypt's first-born. Many Hebrew baby boys had escaped Pharaoh's death sentence, but no Egyptian first-born son avoided God's plague of death. By facilitating Moses' return home, Miriam enables Moses to learn the faith that later compels him to give up the throne of Egypt and heed God's call to deliver his people from slavery. Thus, Harper emphasizes the strong role African American females, from a very early age, can play in protecting their families and participating in racial uplift initiatives that would sustain their communities.

Harper further develops her gendered reading of the Moses story by giving his mother Jochebed the responsibility of instilling principles within her son that he will need to enact his Mosaic Moment. Boyd argues that Harper's poetic interpretation of Exodus includes radical representations of Moses' mother as the key molder of his political and

religious consciousness (80). In Harper's poem, when Moses returns to the slave quarters, Jochebed tells him that his father Amram had cried when he heard Pharaoh's death decree, but her faith had compelled her to make the ark to save his life and then teach him to trust the Israelites' God. Harper roots her retelling of this portion of the Moses story in Hebrews 11, the faith chapter, but gives his mother, rather than his parents, the dominant role recognizing his potential and preparing him for his leadership role. When his adopted mother had encouraged him to complete his training for the royal line, Moses informs Jochebed that he had remembered her lessons about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph: ". . . thy words/Came back as messengers of light to guide/My steps, and I refused to be called the son/of Pharaoh's daughter. . . /And thus I left the pomp and pride of Egypt/To cast my lot upon the people of my race" (46). An untutored slave mother gives her son the fortitude he needs to resist ascension to the throne of the most powerful nation on earth. In the nineteenth century, black activists such as William Wells Brown, Henry Box Brown, Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, Harriet Jacobs, and Harriet Tubman had risen from the ranks of the slave. Their mothers or grandmothers frequently played pivotal roles in their upbringing. As the black community searches for new leaders to spearhead uplift efforts during Reconstruction, Harper suggests that they look among newly freed slaves whose mothers had likely taught them to be faithful to God and their people during the difficult days of slavery.

As she continues developing Moses stories, Harper gives her readers more practical directions on how to apply Mosaic principles to their lives. In her serialized novella, *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869), published by *The Christian Recorder*, Harper expands the concept of the Mosaic Moment in which a character chooses, like Moses, to suffer

with his or her people rather than enjoy temporal pleasure or personal gain. As the federal government began rolling back many of the gains blacks were making during Reconstruction, Harper invokes the Exodus narrative to challenge her brethren to view everyday choices and challenges through a spiritual lens for their decisions have both present and eternal consequences and rewards.

In *Minnie's Sacrifice*, Harper appropriates the Moses narrative to encourage blacks to become involved in community uplift during Reconstruction. *The Christian Recorder* published the novella in twenty chapters over six months. In her introduction to *Minnie's Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, and Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels by Frances E. W. Harper*, Frances Smith Foster reminds us that Harper provides a deliberate retelling of the Moses story in *Minnie's Sacrifice*. Indeed, the first word of the story is "Miriam," a direct reference to Moses' sister Miriam. In *Minnie's Sacrifice*, a slaveholder's daughter Camille rescues her white-skinned, blue-eyed half-brother Louis from slavery after his enslaved mother dies unexpectedly. Camille insists that Louis' grandmother Miriam serve as his nurse. Like Louis, Minnie is born to a slaveholder and an enslaved woman, but her father sends her North to escape the wrath of his jealous wife who insists that the slave girl who looks so much like her husband be sold.

Race complicates Harper's Moses story, however, and forces her Mosaic characters to enact a Mosaic Moment by choosing between passing as white and acknowledging their black ancestry. Unlike the biblical Moses, who was aware of his Hebrew heritage when he entered Pharaoh's palace, Minnie and Louis are raised as white children. The Civil War precipitates rude racial awakenings, for Minnie's mother travels North and finds her daughter, while Camille and Miriam inform Louis of his black

heritage when the young man professes allegiance to the Confederacy and his intent to join the southern army. Boyd asserts that “While [Harper’s] characters must struggle with the ambiguity of their racial identities the resolution to their identity lies in the political involvement to alter the socio-economic structure that advocates benefits from such confusion and class” (171). Faced with their Mosaic Moments, both young people choose to live as members of the African American community, a decision that enables them to escape the fate of tragic mulatto characters by devoting themselves to racial uplift while constantly testing their commitment to their people. After their marriage, instead of living in relative ease in the North, they return to the South to work for their people.

In the “Conclusion” of her novella, Harper’s narrator directly addresses the reader, a narrative strategy that enables Harper to draw a connection between Minnie’s sacrifice and the Mosaic principles she had espoused in her 1859 essay, “Our Greatest Want.” She writes, “The great want of our people, if I understand aright, is not simply wealth, not genius, nor mere intelligence, but live men, and earnest, lovely women, whose lives shall represent not a ‘stagnant mass, but a living force’” (91). In her essay, Harper had argued that every American must emulate Moses by refusing to associate with anyone who refused to advocate freedom and equality for all citizens. She ends

*Minnie’s Sacrifice* by asserting:

The lesson of Minnie’s sacrifice is this, that it is braver to suffer with one’s own branch of the human race . . . than to attempt to creep out of all identity with them in their feebleness, for the sake of mere personal advantage, and to do this at the expense of self-respect, and a true manhood, and a truly dignified womanhood, that with whatever gifts we possess, whether they be genius, culture, wealth or social position, we can best serve the interests of our race by a generous and loving diffusion . . . . (91)

Although Harper encourages all African Americans to work for their people, she directs her appeal to those who possess special gifts. As many African Americans enjoyed the benefits brought about by Reconstruction, Harper argues that race work provides the greatest source of dignity. Minnie's devotion to community uplift leads to her death, a sacrifice that Harper intimates blacks must be willing to make to advance the cause of their people.

### **Exodus as the Impetus for an Integrated America**

#### **Exodus and Colonization Refuted**

Although the Mosaic legacy was an important component of the new national Exodus stories published during the Civil War era, black writers were equally concerned with settlement in the promised land of the United States. Opposition to these goals came from an unexpected source: Daniel Bashiel Warner, the American-born black president of Liberia, West Africa. Like Daniel Coker, who had joined the American Colonization Society's (ACS) first expedition to Africa, Warner believed blacks should follow the example of the Israelites and leave their American Egypt for an African Canaan. After the Civil War, he expressed his concern about black Americans' future in the United States in "The American Colored Population" (1866), an article published in *The African Repository and Colonial Journal*, the ACS's quarterly newspaper. He suggests that the Exodus narrative provides the answer to the prevailing question of the day: "What shall we do with the Negro population?" He argues that there are obvious parallels between the Israelites' experiences with the Egyptians and African Americans' encounters with white Americans. Like the Jews, slaves had not sought to overthrow the government and occupy Egypt. Both had received divine signs that the time for their Exodus from Egypt

had arrived: for the Israelites, Pharaoh's decree to drown Hebrew baby boys and God's plagues on the Egyptians; for African Americans, the Civil War. Warner suggests that the US government transport blacks to Africa to appease whites who do not believe blacks will ever become American citizens.

In the article titled "Liberia-President Warner" (1866), an anonymous contributor to *The Christian Recorder* rejects Warner's argument, asserting that the Liberian president forces a parallel between the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt and black emigration to African colonies. The writer argues that the Israelites' and African Americans' experiences are not analogous:

How absurd the parallel: The going out of Egypt was the condition of the deliverance of the Israelites. They fought no Wagner nor Petersburg battles, and manned no war vessels on the Red Sea. They did as they were commanded to do—"stand still" until they were ordered "to go forward" out of the land. This was the condition of their freedom, and God only put them to the trouble of looking at Moses' rod; but we had not only to look at a rod, but take hold and use rods in the shape of mini rifles and sabers—thousands and ten thousands of them. God made us fight for our liberty in our "Egypt," because we were going to enjoy it.

The religion of the Egyptians would not have permitted the Israelites to stay in Egypt and carry out the Divine plan. Our religion and that of the white people is the same.

In the Exodus narrative, God sent plagues to convince Pharaoh to free the Israelites, commanded His people to leave Egypt, and then destroyed the Egyptian army in the Red Sea when they pursued their former slaves. The author constructs a new Exodus story for African Americans based on blacks' participation in the war that transformed their Egypt into a promised land. The writer cites two major Civil War battles that exemplify black soldiers' valor. On July 18, 1863, the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Infantry volunteered to lead the attack on Fort Wagner, South Carolina, and engaged in a bloody battle before

Confederate soldiers drove them back. A year later, black troops fought in the battles for Petersburg, Virginia. White military officers lauded black soldiers for their bravery, challenging the myth that colored troops were cowards. As participants in a civil war that abolished slavery, blacks had earned the right to enjoy freedom in the United States. As Christians, white and black Americans worshiped the same God. The nation had experienced an exodus from slavery and could therefore become a promised land for all citizens.

The author conflates a biblical narrative with republican discourse to reinforce his belief that African Americans have the right to live peaceably with whites in the United States. He asserts that when blacks and loyal whites “were passing through the furnace fires, heated seven times seven, and were only saved by the spirit of liberty that walked therein, like the ‘fourth form,’ Liberia never sent a word of sympathy or encouragement.” During the Israelites’ Babylonian captivity, three Hebrew boys who refused to bow down and worship King Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image, were thrown into the fiery furnace. The king soon saw a “fourth form” in the fire, for God walked with the young men, preventing them from being burned (Dan. 3). Similarly, whites and blacks who refused to support American slavery were cast into a fiery civil war but were saved by the same spirit of liberty that had inspired the pilgrims and founding fathers to seek religious, political, and economic freedom from England. Instead of supporting his brethren’s cause for equality, Warner had encouraged their expulsion from their native land. Warner may have hoped the influx of African Americans into Liberia would boost his fledgling nation’s economy and foster stronger relations with local people who had opposed the development of ACS settlements. In the post-Civil War years, few African Americans

were willing to abandon the United States for a more uncertain life in a West African colony that was still struggling to assert its independence from European and American control.

### **Exodus and Integration Embraced**

Henry Highland Garnet joined the anonymous contributor to *The Christian Recorder* article in arguing that the Civil War had enabled the nation to leave the Egypt of slavery, but he believed Americans needed committed elected officials to guide them on the uncharted path to the promised land. In his work as an abolitionist, Garnet had supported both emigration and integration but his militancy often put him at odds with his contemporaries, particularly Douglass. During the Civil War, Garnet had recruited black soldiers. In February 1865 during the debates regarding the thirteenth amendment, President Lincoln invited Garnet to address Congress. In his sermon, “Let the Monster Perish,” Garnet decentered white Americans’ national Exodus narrative by characterizing the United States as Egypt and challenging legislators to facilitate the nation’s journey to a promised land for all American citizens.

Garnet conflates the Moses story with republican discourse to support his argument that slavery is incompatible with progressive societies. He characterizes Moses as “the greatest of all lawgivers and legislators” and emphasizes a portion of the Mosaic Law that declares, “Whoso stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death” (Exod. 21:16). Garnet intimates that US politicians should have modeled their legislative initiatives on Mosaic Law. Because they did not, “The destroying angel has gone forth through this land to execute the fearful penalties of God’s broken law.” Similar to the Exodus story in which God sent a series of plagues,

culminating in the death of all firstborn children and livestock, the United States suffered the consequences of legalizing slavery through a war that killed nearly 400,000 soldiers, destroyed numerous communities, and devastated its infrastructure.

Nevertheless, many Americans did not view slavery as the cause and God as the source of their misfortune. Garnet invokes the Exodus story to support his argument that slavery must die before legislators can rebuild the nation. He asserts, “The nation has begun its Exodus from worse than Egyptian bondage; and I beseech you to say to the people that they go forward. With the assurance of God’s favor in all things done in obedience to His righteous will, and guided by day and by night by the pillars of cloud and fire, let us not pause until we have reached the other side of the stormy and crimson sea.” In the Exodus narrative, God directed the Israelites to embark on their journey to the Promised Land, guided by a pillar of fire and cloud, a symbol of His presence and power. When the colonists won independence from England, General George Washington had urged the founding fathers to adopt a seal featuring a pillar of fire and cloud leading the nation. Garnet reminds Congress that they are responsible for setting the course for the nation, and can achieve success only if they follow biblical principles of equality for the races. Garnet also seems to suggest that the path to a slave-free society will be difficult, even violent, for the nation will pass through a “stormy and crimson sea.” Americans who commemorated their independence through a bloody revolution should not expect an easy transition to a new society that would give the rights of citizenship to a formerly enslaved population.

Near the end of his sermon, Garnet quotes a verse from the poem “Exodus” by Adeline T. Whitney to encourage legislators to emulate key figures in the biblical narrative as they construct a new national Exodus narrative for all citizens. He implores:

Show us our Aaron, with his rod in flower!  
Our Miriam, with her timbrel-soul in tune!  
And call some Joshua, in the Spirit’s power,  
To poise our sun of strength at point of noon!  
God of our fathers! Over sand and sea,  
Still keep our struggling footsteps close to thee!

In Garnet’s new national Exodus narrative, Americans are *beginning* their journey from Egypt to the promised land at the end of the Civil War. They would need an Aaron, Israel’s high priest, to provide spiritual guidance as they developed a democratic republic for all citizens. Like Harper, Garnet also creates a space for American women to participate in the political process by recalling Miriam’s leading role in directing the Hebrew women’s song of praise to God for drowning their Egyptian oppressors in the Red Sea. Finally, he recommends a Joshua to guide Americans in their conquest of Canaan, for proslavery advocates and racist Americans were inventing new methods to oppress blacks. Garnet omits the verse that references Moses, however, in which Whitney posits Moses within the pillar of cloud communing with God. Garnet encourages legislators to resist the urge to depend on the guidance of a Mosaic leader and fulfill their responsibilities by collaborating with community activists during the nation’s exodus from slavery. Ultimately, they could reach their American Canaan only through dependence on God to guide them through their obstacle-filled journey.

### **Conclusion**

Americans may have suffered the devastating plagues of Egypt for the sin of slavery but many remained unrepentant. Federal and state legislators soon established

new laws to oppress African Americans. Exodus narratives that had held so much promise at the beginning of the war yielded disappointing results for black men and women who had yearned to experience the rights and privileges of citizenship that many white men had enjoyed for nearly one hundred years. Americans found themselves living in a republic where presidents could shift from being Pharaoh to Moses, or Moses to Pharaoh. Confederate soldiers could be Egyptians and then regain their status as Israelites, with restored inheritance rights and a deeper desire to marginalize people of African descent. Black Americans, who were once viewed as enslaved Israelites, gained freedom without civil liberties to protect them from white supremacists often resorted to violence to subdue them. Even when white authors included African Americans in their new national narratives, they often identified blacks as outsiders—Ethiopians or Moors—rather than American citizens. Rather than provide a journey from slavery to freedom or marginalization to equality, these unfilled Exodus narratives marked a path from bondage to a land of broken promises where discrimination pushed African Americans further than they had ever been from the border of the promised land of the United States.

## Chapter 5: “Get away, Jordan, there’s one more river to cross”: African Americans at the Second Nadir, 1877-1903

Now after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD it came to pass, that the LORD spake unto Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ minister, saying, Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel.

—Josh. 1:1-2

The “Exodus” implies two things, the perfect emancipation of an enslaved people, and the immediate destruction of their enslavers, and both accomplished by a miracle, in which the former, as a race, is forever separated from the latter as a race. These ideas became facts in the case of Egyptian bondage—they can never be realized in the case of American slavery.

—Daniel Payne, “African Emigration, or Colored Americans and Africa—Colored Americans and America” (1878)

The characters of the Old Testament I most admire are Moses and Nehemiah. They were willing to put aside their own advantages for their race and country.

— Frances E. W. Harper, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1893)

The failure of Reconstruction brought an end to black and white writers’ attempts to construct inclusive national Exodus narratives. Reconstruction had ushered in an era of unparalleled economic, educational, political, and social gains for blacks in the promised land of the United States. Within a decade, however, white legislators expelled African Americans from their Canaan through laws that stripped them of their civil rights, and racists groups such as the Ku Klux Klan resorted to violence to intimidate and terrorize black citizens. The nation quickly reverted to a promised land for whites and an Egypt for blacks. White Americans began publishing stories that posited the United States as an imperialistic, industrialized world power, while African Americans wrote Exodus narratives to help them regain their rights.

The Israelites had also experienced a troubled journey from Egypt to Canaan, but their problems were rooted in doubt and disobedience. When they became thirsty shortly after leaving Egypt, the Israelites accused Moses of leading them on a death march into the wilderness. When they grew weary of their daily meals of manna, they recalled the fish, cucumber, melon, leeks, and garlic they had eaten in Egypt and demanded meat. When they reached the border of the Promised Land, they believed the lying report given by ten spies who feared unconquerable giants and impenetrable cities and wished to return to Egypt. Even after they entered the Promised Land, the Israelites never fully enjoyed their new home because they did not trust God to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan. In contrast, few African Americans murmured or complained after the Union's victory in the Civil War signaled the nation's entrance into the promised land. As their newfound freedoms disappeared, however, they wondered if they were waiting on the border of the promised land, wandering in the wilderness, or journeying back to Egypt.

This chapter argues that from 1877 to 1903, black writers turned to the Exodus narrative to direct African Americans' responses to setbacks that continue to undermine their achievements in racial uplift. Paul Laurence Dunbar in "An Ante-bellum Sermon" (1895) and Frances E.W. Harper in *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1893) invoke the Moses story to preserve the community's history of activism and encourage blacks to continue demanding equality. Not all writers relied solely on the Moses story to represent the black experience, however. In "Till Another King Arose, Which Knew Not Joseph" (1889), published in the *AME Church Review*, William Hannibal Thomas appropriates the Joseph and Moses narratives to develop strategies for confronting the challenges of post-Reconstruction life.

Both black and white writers looked beyond the Joseph and Moses narratives to the Joshua story to discuss the need for new leadership. W. E. B. DuBois in “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” published in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and white Baltimore attorney H. Rufus White in *A Joshua in the Camp,” or, The Life of Booker T. Washington, of Tuskegee, Alabama* (1895) invoke the Joshua narrative to establish qualifications for black Americans’ leader in their conquest of Canaan. Conversely, in “A Joshua in the Camp” (1896), a review of White’s book, the editorial board of the *AME Church Review* rejects the Joshua model and turns to other biblical narratives to create its criteria for community activists.

Some writers were more interested in searching for a promised land than identifying a leader. In “Migration is the Only Remedy for Our Wrongs” (1879), Robert Harlan relies on the Exodus narrative to support migration to a midwestern Canaan. In contrast, Frederick Douglass, in “The Negro Exodus from the Gulf States” (1880), appropriates the biblical narrative to oppose midwestern migration and instruct blacks to transform their southern Egypt into Canaan. Other authors invoke the book of Exodus to advocate emigration to foreign black Canaans. In *The Liberian Exodus. First Voyage of the Azor. Liberia a Delightful Country. Climate, Soil and Productions. Character of the People in Liberia; and How They Live. Full Information of the Exodus Movement* (1878), Charleston’s black-owned Liberian Exodus Association promotes Liberia as an ideal promised land. Conversely, African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Bishop Daniel Payne challenges their mission in “African Emigration, or Colored Americans and Africa—Colored Americans and America” (1878), an article published in *The Colored American*,

by rejecting the Exodus narrative as an appropriate representation of emancipation and emigration.

New Exodus-inspired strategies, rather than persistent concerns about Exodus leaders and promised lands, were on the minds of other black activists. In “A Resemblance and a Contrast between the American Negro and the Children of Israel, in Egypt, or the Duty of the Negro to Contend Earnestly for his Rights Guaranteed under the Constitution” (1902), black Presbyterian minister Francis Grimké selects portions of the Exodus narrative to support his blueprint for a national organization that would address his community’s challenges and aspirations.

### **The United States: Promised Land for European Immigrants, Egypt for African Americans**

After Reconstruction, white writers frequently posited the United States as a dominant world power that welcomed European immigrants as the newest members of God’s American Israel. Millions of Europeans moved to the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, attracted by the promise of economic opportunity and religious freedom in a democratic republic. Although immigrants experienced discrimination, white writers romanticized their experience as an Exodus journey just as they had during the Civil War era. For example, in “The New Northwest” (1898), published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, J. A. Wheelock asserts that “. . . the railroad locomotive will furnish the ‘pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night’ which is to guide the great exodus of the poor from the crowded communities of the Old World and the new into this promised land,” the Northwest (310). Like European immigrants who had migrated to California and Oregon in the mid-nineteenth century,

those who entered America after Reconstruction embarked on a transcontinental journey, but the god of technology beckoned them to settle in the promised land of the state of Washington.

While white authors often invoked the biblical story to create a place for European immigrants in their national Exodus stories, some excluded African Americans from white Americans' promised land. In *An Appeal to Pharaoh: The Negro Problem, and Its Radical Solution* (1889), Caryle McKinley argues that the US government should deport black citizens to atone for nation's error in sanctioning slavery. McKinley was not the first to suggest the removal of blacks from the United States. In the late 1700s, Thomas Jefferson advocated colonization in Haiti. In 1818, Robert Finley founded the American Colonization Society to relocate blacks to Africa. Prior to the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln recommended colonizing African Americans in Central America to appease racist whites. To justify his scheme, McKinley asserts that the United States made four mistakes in its relationship with African Americans: bringing them to the nation, keeping them in America, leaving them in slavery too long, and giving them suffrage rights. The nation could redeem itself by sending blacks to Africa, forcibly if necessary (vii-xv). Although McKinley accepts the biblical injunction, "God hath made of one blood all nations of men, for to dwell on the face of the earth," he stresses the latter part of the verse: "[God] Himself *hath determined the bounds of their habitation!*" (178). For McKinley, the bounds for whites and blacks are as wide as the Atlantic Ocean. White Americans could regain God's favor and occupy their promised land only by expelling black citizens.

White Americans further marginalized African Americans by presenting “The Negro Problem” as a popular topic in monthly magazines that targeted white middle class readers and they attempted to solve their “problem” by enacting legislation that curtailed black citizens’ rights, lynching blacks in record numbers, and perpetuating stereotypical images of black Americans in minstrel shows, plantation literature, and other cultural productions. The black community struggled to survive in a period termed by Rayford W. Logan as the “Nadir,” “the lowest point in the quest for equal rights” (11). Although blacks and their supporters established numerous colleges, women’s clubs, and benevolent societies to uplift the race, unemployment and poverty devastated the community. They further faced a formidable obstacle when the US Supreme Court legalized “separate but equal” facilities in its 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, effectively barring blacks from the American promised land of equality.

Like their predecessors, black activists in post-Reconstruction America relied on the biblical language-world to decenter and rewrite national Exodus narratives. Some turn to the Moses story to express the community’s plea for the restoration of civil rights and to encourage blacks to become involved in reform. Others double the Moses story with prominent biblical narratives, for example, Jesus’ teachings and Revelation’s prophecies, to direct blacks’ responses to the challenges of racism and the demands of citizenship. Still others posit African Americans as Israelites camped by the Jordan River in need of a Joshua to lead the conquest of their American Canaan because of the failure of Reconstruction. Another writer produces a fissure in the Exodus stories of this period by invoking the Joseph narrative to describe black Americans’ plight during the Nadir.

Black writers' difficulty in finding leaders underscores their challenge of locating suitable promised lands. Like their predecessors, black authors appropriate the Exodus narrative to argue that racist laws have transformed the nation into an Egypt for African Americans and Canaan for white Americans. Another writer invokes the biblical story to assert that race violence, voter intimidation, and employment discrimination have turned the South into Egypt, compelling blacks to migrate to the promised land of the Midwest. Still another writer employs the story to suggest that racist whites have changed the South into a contested Canaan and directs blacks to remain in their homes and fight for their rights as American citizens. Still others employ the Exodus narrative to justify emigration to a Liberian promised land as the best means for African Americans to escape oppression and find a safe home. In a radical move, however, one activist rejects the Exodus story as representative of American slaves' experiences and justification for emigration because their experiences had not mirrored the Israelites' journey from slavery to freedom.

Despite the instability of their promised lands, black writers conflate episodes of the Exodus narrative with secular/republican discourse to demand the rights and privileges of citizenship wherever they choose to live. One activist even encourages blacks to reexamine the biblical narrative and then develop a new Exodus story to guide racial uplift efforts in the early twentieth century. During the Nadir, black the promise of freedom and equality offered by Exodus stories remain unfulfilled as persistent obstacles keep African Americans from attaining their racial uplift goals.

\* \* \*

**From Moses to Joshua: The Evolution of Black Exodus Figures in Post-Reconstruction America**

**Paul Laurence Dunbar's Messianic Moses**

In the late nineteenth century, plantation fiction posed a challenge for black writers who published Exodus stories featuring strong Mosaic leaders with militant objectives: free the slaves, elevate free blacks, transform America into Canaan, or emigrate. Paul Laurence Dunbar published dialect poetry for white readers but upheld the Mosaic tradition in African American Exodus narratives in his poem “An Ante-bellum Sermon” (1895). The work, published in his first poetry collection *Majors and Minors* (1895) and also included in his second collection *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896), features a dialect-speaking preacher who conveys his understanding of the transformative nature of Scripture for the oppressed to his slave congregation. In the poem, Dunbar decenters the national Exodus narrative through a slave preacher prophesying the arrival of an avenging Messianic Moses who will restore slaves to their rightful status as free-born citizens.

Like American colonial ministers, the slave preacher takes a “Bibleistic” approach to freedom, appropriating the Exodus narrative to characterize his enslaved brethren as God’s children, worthy of divine liberation. In *Strange Talk: the Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded America*, Gavin Roger Jones argues, “‘An Ante-bellum Sermon’ is a clear illustration of the potential of black vernacular performance to mask subversive meaning with ambiguity. . . Rather than conforming to the humorous stereotypes of much dialect literature, Dunbar’s poem empowers the dialect of this preaching performance as a medium of political resistance” (192). In the Exodus

narrative, God delivered His people from slavery and established them as the nation of Israel. Similarly, enslaved African Americans had implored God to send a Moses to emancipate them. By encouraging the slaves to look for a Moses because “de Lawd will he’p his children,” the slave preacher claims the right to invoke Exodus for liberation from American slaveholders, just as colonists had appropriated the story to demand freedom from the English during the Revolutionary War. As members of the human family, oppressed Israelites, colonists, and slaves have access to the assistance God provides for His children.

The slave preacher doubles biblical narratives with republican discourse to claim African Americans’ right to freedom. He asserts that God allowed Pharaoh to see “Dat de people he put bref in, —/Evah mother’s son was free.” He further argues that from Creation, “the Lawd’s intention was dat His almighty freedom/should belong to every man.” In effect, the preacher issues a Declaration of Independence for slaves, echoing the sentiments of the founding fathers, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are *created equal*, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (my emphasis). Because God’s original intent was for all humans to be free, and white Americans had affirmed that right in the nation’s founding documents, enslaved African Americans could trust God to liberate them. The poem may have encouraged white readers to reconsider whether the federal government was justified in stripping black citizens of rights they had won after the Civil War.

Like other characters in black Exodus narratives, in issuing judgments against America, Dunbar’s preacher appropriates the Exodus narrative to declare slaveholders

guilty of the sin of slavery. He accuses them of emulating Pharaoh who believed he had the right to enslave the Israelites. When Pharaoh refused to liberate the Hebrews, God sent a series of plagues that convinced him to free them. This accusation is a subtle reminder that American slaveholders had experienced the plague of civil war that led to emancipation. The slave preacher doubles the Exodus story with the teachings of Jesus to assert the slaves' right to earn wages as a freedman. He explains, the American master "calls de Scripturah liar/Fur de Bible says a servant/Is a-worthy of his hire." When Jesus sent his disciples to teach and heal their people, He instructed them to accept the hospitality of strangers, "And in the same house remain, eating and drinking such things as they give: for the labourer is worthy of his hire" (Luke 10:7). The slave preacher argues that American slaves are worthy of wages for their labor, however, not hospitality. In his speech "What if the Slaves are Emancipated?", black activist John S. Rock had assured northern white abolitionists that slaves had learned to be industrious during their years of servitude and prosper as freedmen and women. Similarly, Dunbar's slave preacher challenges the stereotype of lazy, dependent slaves popularized by the plantation tradition, characterizing his brethren as laborers, whom white Christian slaveholders are defrauding of their wages and echoing earlier colonists' complaint of taxation without representation. The slave preacher reveals a better understanding of biblical standards than "Christian" slaveholders and assures the slaves that biblical teachings support the justice of their cause. Because white masters had been unjustified in withholding wages from slaves, white Christian businessmen are guilty of underpaying and exploiting black citizens.

Throughout the poem, the preacher instructs his enslaved brethren to rely on the biblical language-world to articulate their desire for freedom, but their experience in the United States calls for the development of a new Exodus narrative featuring a more militant Moses. When he describes their eventual liberation, the slave preacher doubles the Exodus story with prophecies from Revelation to herald the coming of a messianic deliverer for enslaved African Americans. He had begun his sermon by reminding them his audience when Pharaoh refused to free the Israelites, God emptied “down on Egypt/All the vials of [His] power.” In “The Plagues of this Country,” H. M. T. Washington had offered a similar interpretation of the Civil War, arguing that the Union’s setbacks were plagues God had sent because Pharaoh Lincoln had refused to emancipate American slaves. Dunbar also draws on the millennial rhetoric the Second Great Awakening had introduced to American Christians that culminated in Christians’ expectation for Christ’s second coming or a significant event that would liberate the oppressed. His preacher asserts that emancipation would be apocalyptic in nature. As he nears the end of his sermon, the slave preacher declares that God would sound His “thundah” and “Gabriel’s horn” to signal His intent to free the slaves. White Christians had taught slaves that they would experience emancipation in heaven. In contrast, the preacher insists that their deliverance will be brought about by a powerful Moses who “is a-comin’/An’ he’s comin’, suah and fas’/We kin hyeah his fee a-trompin’/We kin hyeah his trumpit blast.” The words the preacher associates with the arrival of their emancipator echo the terms that John the author of Revelation relies on to describe Christ’s second coming and judgment. On their “reck’nin’ day,” the slaves will be recognized “ez citiz” rather than saints. Unlike the Israelites, enslaved African American sought freedom, civil

rights, and liberties in their native land. Revelation's prophecies reveal the destruction of sinners, including slaveholders, in hell, and the reward of the righteous, a sin-free world. Slavery had become so entrenched in American society that it could be abolished only through an apocalyptic-like appearance of a messianic deliverer. As they recalled the nation's Mosaic leaders, President Lincoln, who led the war that emancipated American slaves, and General George Washington, who directed the battles that led to independence, white readers could be more sympathetic to the plight of dispossessed African American citizens.

### **Frances E. W. Harper's Mosaic Moment**

Before the Civil War, Frances Harper had introduced the concept of the Mosaic Moment in her essay, "Our Greatest Want," and continued to develop and enlarge its application in her writings. In *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1893), Harper presents a Reconstruction story to direct African Americans' responses to the challenges of the Nadir. The novel focuses on Iola and her extended family, light-skinned characters who must choose between passing for white or identifying themselves as African Americans in the era of the "one-drop rule," but it also relates the stories of a variety of slaves who gain freedom during and after the Civil War. When her father dies unexpectedly, Iola learns that she has a black mother. As her story unfolds, Harper invokes an episode from the Moses story to reveal how race and gender complicate Iola's ability to enact a Mosaic Moment in which she commits to community uplift rather than seek worldly happiness.

Iola faces decisions regarding marriage that complicate the Mosaic Moment experience for black women. She experiences slavery but is rescued by Union troops and given work as a nurse. Iola soon meets her Uncle Robert and resolves to find her family.

She also meets Dr. Gresham, a white physician, who proposes to her twice, inviting her to pass as his white wife. Iola turns down both proposals. Boyd asserts, “As a Moses figure, Iola refuses the proposal of the privileged, rich doctor who wishes to shelter her in a traditional marriage and focuses on her pledge to her dying sister, Grace, ‘*To stand by Mamma*’” (182). In so doing, Iola chooses to identify with her people and experience their oppression. Relationships between white men and tragic mulattas were common themes in nineteenth-century fiction, but the women often died at the end of these sentimental tales. Harper challenges this stereotype by presenting a female protagonist who chooses the work of racial uplift over marital comfort.

Rather than follow the footsteps of her mother, Marie, who married a white slaveholder, however, Iola weds Dr. Latimer, a mulatto physician. When asked her opinion of Dr. Latimer, Iola replies, “The characters of the Old Testament I most admire are Moses and Nehemiah. They were willing to put aside their own advantages for their race and country. Dr. Latimer comes up to my ideal of a high, heroic manhood” (265). Unlike Moses, Nehemiah was a Hebrew exile who served as the king’s cupbearer in the Persian court. Whereas Moses forfeited the throne of Egypt to emancipate enslaved Israelites, Nehemiah gained support from the king to return to the Promised Land and complete the work of rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem (Neh. 1-2). Iola doubles these biblical narratives to emphasize the commitment Dr. Latimer makes to his people in refusing his white paternal grandmother’s offer to accept him as her grandson and heir (238). Like Iola, Dr. Latimer must choose whether he will pass as white to experience worldly success. He is attracted to Iola because she makes a similar sacrifice:

But I know a young lady who could have cast her lot with the favored race, yet chose to take her place with the freed people as their teacher, friend, and adviser

. . . She had been fearfully wronged, and to her stricken heart came a brilliant offer of love, home, and social position. But she bound her heart to the mast of duty, closed her ears to the siren song, and could not be lured from her purpose. (263)

Like Moses, Iola chose service to her people rather than “pleasure” that would have come through lying about her identity. Boyd argues that the main characters “exemplify the Moses ethics of sacrifice and leadership” (173). Through their marriage, Dr. Latimer and Iola will work for their people and provide a legacy of service and race loyalty to their children.

One might be tempted to dismiss *Iola Leroy* as a sentimental fantasy. I suggest that by placing the Mosaic Moment within the context of Moses’ life, we can gain a deeper understanding of this experience. Although Moses gave up the throne of Egypt to work among his people, he did not enter the Promised Land. One act of disobedience kept him out of Canaan. Nevertheless, his devotion to the Israelites never wavered. Similarly, although Iola and Dr. Latimer experience earthly joys when they enact a Mosaic Moment, African Americans living in the post-Reconstruction era knew that this joy did not always represent reality. Like Moses, however, they could develop a morally upright character and faithfully serve their race even in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

### **William Hannibal Thomas’ Joseph-Moses**

Rather than rely on a simple Moses story to address the harsh conditions of the Nadir, other writers created a more complex representation of their experiences. Political setbacks convinced some authors that the United States had reverted to Egypt for African Americans. In “Till Another King Arose that Knew Not Joseph” (1889) published in the *AME Church Review*, William Hannibal Thomas details the difficulties blacks faced at

this time and provides instructions for overcoming problems. He decenters the national Exodus narrative by positing the United States as an Egypt and directing African Americans to embrace both the stories of Joseph and Moses to liberate themselves from their oppressors.

Thomas creates a fissure in black Exodus narratives of this period by turning to the Joseph story to draw a connection between the young Hebrew's experience in Egypt and the trials blacks faced after Reconstruction failed. Like Joseph, African Americans were betrayed by those they had faithfully served. In the biblical narrative, Joseph's brothers sell him to slave traders headed for the markets of Egypt, where he gained favor from his master Potiphar. While imprisoned on false charges of rape, Joseph interpreted a dream for the butler who forgot his benefactor when he returned to Pharaoh's court. Similarly, Thomas asserts that blacks' "heroic deeds in war and valiant service in peace, his unrequited toil in the field and unselfish labor in the forum, may each be overcast by obvious shadows of heartless national forgetfulness in its mad rush for gain and fame . . ." (343). By casting African Americans as Joseph figures, Thomas characterizes the United States as Egypt during a time when the nation had begun to assert itself as an imperialistic, industrialized Canaan. In the mid-eighteenth century, Afro-Atlantic people had turned to the Joseph story to demand emancipation and acceptance. More than fifty years later, Harriet E. Wilson in *Our Nig* had invoked an episode of the Joseph story to publicize the challenges domestic workers and poor women faced in the North. At the Nadir, Thomas holds the nation responsible for the continued oppression of African Americans. Instead of rewarding blacks for their contributions, Congress had stripped them of their rights by enacting discriminatory legislation. Although some white

legislators, notably Sen. Charles Sumner, had argued for the integration of blacks into American society, few whites challenged the obstacles lawmakers erected to suppress blacks.

Because blacks were bereft of benefactors during the Nadir, Thomas doubles the story of Joseph with the Moses narrative to teach them how to regain their citizenship status. He argues that the Moses of “thrift, industry, brain and brawn, manhood and brotherhood” will lead African Americans out of their American Egypt (343). In contrast to the biblical narrative, Thomas instructs African Americans to undertake an exodus, not from their Egypt of the United States, but from oppression. Like Absalom Jones in his 1808 *Thanksgiving Sermon* and Henry Highland Garnet in his 1865 “Let the Monster Perish” speech before Congress, Thomas admonishes his readers to become model citizens despite unfair treatment. The Moses figures in his Exodus narrative can integrate into American society by exhibiting traits white Americans admired in citizens. Because slavery and discrimination mark the history of blacks in America, however, Thomas envisions a land where “past wrongs, if not forgotten, will be forgiven in the *amende honorable* that a homogeneous unification is surely forging out of complex national elements” (343). Although African Americans had not forgotten that rebels were not punished after the Civil War, like Joseph, they would forgive their oppressors and move forward in the spirit of Moses who tirelessly worked to uplift his race.

### **Booker T. Washington: Black America’s Potential Joshua**

Rather than rely on the Moses and Joseph stories as models for individual action, some writers urged African Americans to seek a new Exodus leader to guide the black community. Frederick Douglass’s death in 1895 precipitated this shift as activists

searched for a leader to replace the man many viewed as black America's Moses. After the Civil War, white American writers had promoted Andrew Johnson as the nation's Joshua. During the Nadir, both white and black writers saw the need for a Joshua figure to lead African Americans in their conquest of Canaan. In "*A Joshua in the Camp,*" or *the Life of Booker T. Washington, of Tuskegee, Alabama* (1895), H. Rufus White, a white attorney and editor of the *Suburban Enterprise* from Towson, Maryland, anoints Booker T. Washington as African America's Joshua because of his eminence as a race leader and commitment to industrial education for blacks.

White begins by invoking an episode from Exodus to characterize blacks as a leaderless band of Israelites on the border of their American Canaan. He identifies Douglass as their dead Moses and suggests that they are wondering whether a Joshua is in their midst. In so doing, he posits blacks as an oppressed people who have not yet experienced the promised land of freedom and equality. Furthermore, by intimating that the black community had unequivocally acknowledged Douglass as their Moses, he diminishes the contributions of Mosaic leaders like Martin Delany, Henry Highland Garnet, and Mary Ann Shadd who had developed racial uplift initiatives that sustained the community's quest for liberty and civil rights but often conflicted with Douglass's ideas.

White invokes the Joshua story to recommend a leader who will help African Americans understand the privileges and responsibilities of freedom as they prepare to enter the promised land of the United States. He identifies Booker T. Washington as Douglass's successor, "a Joshua in the camp." In the biblical narrative, Joshua received his training for service from Moses, and God selected him to lead because of his fidelity

throughout the forty-year wilderness journey. White supports his choice of Washington as Joshua by detailing the Tuskegee Institute president's life, work, school, conferences, and speeches, and presenting accolades for Washington from newspaper editors and prominent Americans. He does not include affirmations from any black authors, activists, organizations, or publications, however. In identifying Washington as Joshua and neglecting to seek counsel from African American leaders, White gives himself god-like authority to select a leader for blacks based on his own criteria.

Many within the black community objected to white Americans anointing a leader for African Americans. In "A Joshua in the Camp" (1896), the *AME Church Review* editors laud Washington as a capable leader but reject White's advocacy of a singular Joshua to lead African Americans. The editors argue that "leaders are not made to order, they are born. They are not elected by the people to lead, they take their rightful place in spite of the people" (419). They infer that God, not man, chooses leaders, just as He had anointed Joseph, Moses, and Joshua to guide disobedient Israelites. Furthermore, they refuse to limit African Americans' options to the manual labor training that Washington offered at Tuskegee Institute. In constructing their model of leadership, the editors turn to the teachings of Jesus, not the Exodus story. They assert, "A house divided against itself cannot stand" (Matt. 12:25) and that "A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid (Matt. 5:14). In the first scenario, Jesus was rebuking the Pharisees who had accused Him of casting out a demon by the power of devils. In the second, He taught His followers that they were the light of the world, reflecting His love and goodness. The editors allude to the Civil War, a time when a divided nation battled over states' rights and slavery. Andrew Johnson, the nation's compromising Joshua, had not been able to reunite the

country or protect the rights of all citizens. True leaders like Senators Owen Lovejoy and Charles Sumner were easily identifiable, however. As black activists sought to reestablish their community after the failure of Reconstruction, the *AME Review* editors suggested that White's appointment of Washington, the compromiser, would create rifts between African Americans since leaders that were forced upon a people divided rather than united. Furthermore, if Washington was to be their leader, he would assume that position without human intervention. The editors' comprehensive plan calls for a variety of leaders to address the varied needs of the community, however. Skilled laborers, religious teachers, authors, secular educators, and inventors would provide "education of the head, heart and hands, and not any one to the neglect of the others" (421). As American Christians, they desired to become responsible citizens and build strong communities.

Like the *AME Church Review* editors, W. E. B. DuBois acknowledged Washington as an important leader in the black community, but also refused to endorse him as African Americans' Joshua. Washington and DuBois differed on the most effective means of helping blacks assimilate into the United States and publicly challenged each other's ideas regarding racial uplift. Although they agreed on some issues, for example, self-improvement, education, and black businesses, they disagreed on the best means to achieve these goals. By the early 1900s, DuBois had become increasingly critical of Washington's accommodationalist views. He emerged as the leader of Washington's opponents through the publication of "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). In his essay, DuBois critiques Washington's methods to suggest how the prominent Tuskegee University president could become an effective Joshua for the black community.

DuBois begins by juxtaposing secular rhetoric to the Exodus narrative to represent African Americans' determination to continue the battle for freedom and equality. He frames his critique of Washington with a verse from "Canto the Second" in Lord Byron's poem *The Bride of Abydos* and musical notations from the Negro spiritual "Great Camp Meeting in the Promised Land." He quotes Byron's verse:

Hereditary bondsmen! know ye not,  
Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow?

Colonists had popularized these lines by urging their brethren to liberate themselves from the British. Abolitionists later appropriated the verses to inspire slaves to escape bondage. DuBois adds a line from the poem, "From birth till death enslaved; in word, in deed, unmanned!" to stress how slavery had stripped African Americans of their humanity both physically and intellectually. By conflating Byron's poem with the musical notation from the spiritual, DuBois equates African Americans' struggle for equality with the colonists' revolution for freedom, for both groups seek entrance into the promised land of the United States. Enslaved blacks had fought for emancipation for more than one hundred years but still faced the possibility of being shut out of Canaan, however. By juxtaposing Byron's poem with a Negro spiritual, DuBois stresses the black community's need for a leader who will uncompromisingly demand the rights and privileges of citizenship for his people.

Because many Americans viewed Washington as one of the black community's most successful leaders, DuBois invokes the stories of African American activists to examine the effectiveness of Washington's contributions. He describes Washington as a "successful man" who established Tuskegee Institute and won admirers in the North and South through "his program of industrial education, conciliation of the South, and

submission and silence as to civil and political rights” (30). Despite these achievements, however, DuBois asserts that both envious and honest opponents had criticized Washington’s leadership abilities. DuBois presents a brief history of prominent black leaders from the Maroons to Frederick Douglass to argue that Washington had become “a compromiser between the South, the North, and the Negro” whose commitment to manual labor would “lead to industrial slavery and civic death” (36, 40). In so doing,” DuBois links Washington’s actions to Lincoln’s conciliatory gestures toward the South, for example, his initial return of slaves to their masters or refusal to allow them to join the Union army. Only through decisive action did Lincoln win the war. Blacks now needed a courageous new leader like Williams Wells Brown or David Walker to guide them into the promised land of America. Washington had disqualified himself by failing to honor the legacy of bold activists who preceded him.

Despite this harsh assessment, DuBois recommends Washington as a *potential* Joshua for African Americans—if he fulfills DuBois’ definition of loyalty to the race:

So far as Mr. Washington preaches Thrift, Patience, and Industrial Training for the masses, we must hold up his hands and strive with him, rejoicing in his honors and glorying in the strength of this Joshua called of God and of man to lead the headless host. But so far as Mr. Washington apologizes for injustice, North or South, does not rightly value the privilege and duty of voting, belittles the emasculating effects of caste distinctions, and opposes the higher training and ambition of our brighter minds,—so far as he, the South, or the Nation, does this,—we must unceasingly and firmly oppose them. (42)

DuBois’s Exodus narrative complicates rather than simplifies African Americans’ journey to the promised land of the United States, however. Rather than present Washington as a simple Joshua figure, he doubles the story of Joshua with an episode from the Moses narrative to teach the black community how to support their new leader. In the book of Exodus, Aaron and Hur held up Moses’ arms as Joshua led the Israelites’

battle against the Amalekites (Exod. 17). When they entered Canaan, however, Joshua directed Israel's armies and boldly fought battles until they possessed the land. By suggesting that Washington become a Mosaic Joshua, DuBois presents him as a leader who will need constant supervision from trusted black advisors to ensure that African Americans engage in battles for equality rather than compromise and thereby undermines Washington's authority and leadership potential.

**African Americans' Search for Post-Reconstruction Promised Lands: Integration, Migration, or Emigration?**

**Robert J. Harlan: Exodus Justifies Migration to Midwestern Promised Land**

Few African Americans disputed the community's need for a Joshua to direct the conquest of their American Canaan. Escalating violence, political setbacks, and unfair business practices compelled many to turn to episodes in the Exodus narrative to address their immediate desire for safety and freedom. Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, who described himself as the "father of the Black Exodus," soon became the most prominent Moses figure leading black migrants out of the South. In *Exodusters, Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction*, Nell Irvin Painter asserts that some "blacks left home on the strength of their faith in the ultimate deliverance from the terrorists and extortionists of the white South," while others "studied the flight of the believers and asked themselves, 'Why stay?'" (4). From the 1860s to the early 1900s, thousands of southern blacks migrated to a midwestern promised land, a move several prominent black leaders, notably Frederick Douglass, opposed. Some black activists defended migration, however, sparking discussions reminiscent of those surrounding the integration versus emigration debates of the 1820s and 1850s. In 1879, when about six thousand African Americans

migrated from the South to the Midwest, black political activist Robert J. Harlan defended their right to relocate in his speech “Migration is the Only Remedy for Our Wrongs” delivered at the National Conference of Colored Men of the United States in Nashville, Tennessee. Harlan decenters the national Exodus narrative by asserting that black American citizens have the right to migrate to the promised land of their choice because whites have reconstructed the South as Egypt.

Harlan invokes the Exodus narrative to support African Americans who choose to migrate to the promised land of the Midwest to escape oppression. He explains:

If the leading men of the South will make another Egypt of these bright and sunny valleys, then must the oppressed go forth into the promised land of liberty, into the Western States and Territories where the people are at peace and the soil is free, and where every man can secure a home for himself and family with none to molest him or make him afraid . . . It is not a flight of fugitive slaves, but a voluntary movement of freemen seeking liberty and security. It is the exercise of the right of an American to better his condition by going from one part of the country to another, just as interest or fancy may lead him. (601-02)

The Israelites experienced slavery after settling in the Promised Land, but they never returned to Egypt. African Americans repeatedly faced the danger of returning to Egypt because they lived in a land that was a promised land for whites and an Egypt for marginalized races. Like the pilgrims and European immigrants who had migrated to the New World to escape religious and political persecution, African American citizens would have the right to relocate their families. Congress may have disenfranchised them and restricted them to segregated facilities, but it could not prohibit them from moving to a place where they could find employment and establish safe homes.

Harlan then conflates the Exodus story with secular/republican discourse to affirm African Americans’ right as citizens of a democratic nation to migrate to escape oppression. He asserts:

If we cannot [migrate], we are not free, no more than are the serfs of Russia, who, until lately, were a part of the estate and sold as such, but, if *we* are to be re-enslaved we may as well die on the road to liberty as at the feet of tyrants. We may as well expire contending for liberty, aye, and far better, than in base submission to degrading slavery. (602)

The United States had welcomed thousands of European immigrants seeking relief from political oppression and new economic opportunities while reenslaving African Americans. Harland intimates that the United States cannot truly be a republic if it mimics European nations that enforce servitude on citizens, however. Instead of seeking a Moses figure to guide them out of their southern Egypt, Harland directs blacks to resist oppression by embracing Patrick Henry's mantra, "Give me liberty or give me death," and thereby uphold their American heritage of willingness to die for liberty.

### **Frederick Douglass: Reject Exodus, Integrate Contested Southern Canaan**

Although many black activists joined Harlan in supporting African Americans' 1879 Exodus to the Midwest, Frederick Douglass disassociated himself from advocates of migration. He found a welcoming audience for his stance against migration among white middle class Americans. In "The Negro Exodus from the Gulf States: Address before the Convention of the American Social Science Association, Saratoga Springs" delivered on September 12, 1879, Douglass appropriates the Exodus narrative to transform the South into a contested promised land where black workers and white employers must collaborate if the region is to become an economic powerhouse in post-Reconstruction America.

Although he opposes migration, Douglass invokes the Exodus story to hold the white "masterclass" responsible for the exodus of blacks from the South. Nevertheless, he argues that this "exodus" has convinced southerners of their dependence on the "despised

and hated negro” for prosperity and civilization. In the biblical narrative, Pharaoh emancipated enslaved Israelites, but then he pursued them, realizing his empire would stagnate without their labor. In effect, Douglass transforms the South into an Egypt where former slaveholders are taskmasters aware of their need of cheap black labor but unwilling to treat black workers fairly. Yet, unlike the Israelites who left Egypt immediately after emancipation, former American slaves had remained in their Egypt under highly qualified conditions of freedom. Hence, many decided to migrate and seek new opportunities in the promised land of their choice.

Douglass employs another portion of the Exodus narrative to compare the conditions of the South with an equally discouraging scene of migrants’ unsuccessful attempts to reach their midwestern promised land. He asserts, “[The freedman] lines the sunny banks of the Mississippi, fluttering in rags and wretchedness, mournfully imploring hardhearted steamboat captains to take him on board; while the friends of the emigration movement are diligently soliciting funds all over the North to help him away from his old home to the new Canaan of Kansas” (42). In the biblical narrative, the Israelites left Egypt with the spoils of plague-weary oppressors who were eager for them to go. Conversely, Douglass posits migrants as impoverished citizens stranded on the banks of the Mississippi, watching white captains ferry white passengers to their promised land. Instead of bettering their condition, migration deepens blacks’ suffering. Although colonists and European immigrants had experienced similar difficulties, Douglass refuses to acknowledge such difficulties as common challenges during the relocation process.

Because he believes democracy will ultimately prevail in the South, Douglass conflates the Exodus narrative with republican rhetoric to encourage his audience to address the issues impelling black migration. He asserts that the nation is beginning to acknowledge white oppressors as impediments to national progress; therefore, it is a problem that both American citizens and the federal government must address. Yet Douglass weakens the effectiveness of his argument by accusing migrants of placing themselves at risk by accusing the federal government of not being able to protect them, obscuring their success in the South, for example, their payment of federal taxes, and impoverishing themselves by leaving their homes. In effect, Douglass suggests that black migrants are inhibiting their ability to obtain assistance from the government and sympathetic white citizens by exercising human agency to solve their own problems. In so doing, he disassociates blacks from their American heritage of persistence. If pilgrims could sail to America to escape persecution, homesteaders journey to the West to establish new communities, and Americans of European descent immigrate to the United States to escape unrest, black Americans should be free to migrate to the Midwest.

Although he opposes migration, Douglass acknowledges relocation as a viable option for his oppressed brethren. Near the end of his speech he asserts, “Exodus is medicine, not food; it is for disease, not health—it is not to be taken from choice, but necessity. In anything like a normal condition of things, the South is the best place for the negro. Let him stay there if he can, and save both the South and himself to civilization” (47-48). After enumerating the numerous challenges blacks encounter in the South, Douglass still claims the region is the best home for his brethren. Ultimately, he holds blacks responsible for the success of the region and their community. Nevertheless, he

conflates the Exodus narrative with secular discourse to caution whites against forcing blacks to stay in the South. He reminds them of blacks who bravely battled for freedom, joined John Brown at Harpers Ferry, fought during the Civil War, or rose up in the spirit of Joseph Cinque, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nathaniel Turner, Denmark Vesey, and Madison Washington, (48). His naming of slaves as historical examples serves as a reminder of the slave-like conditions of the migrants. Even thirty years after Emancipation, black citizens live in a nation where oppressive conditions still demand that they risk their lives for freedom.

### **Liberian Exodus Organizations: Exodus Justifies Emigration to a West African Promised Land**

Thousands of African Americans ignored Douglass's pleas and migrated to the Midwest. Others responded to the challenges of the Nadir by embracing colonization and seeking opportunities in Africa as had David Coker many years earlier. Rather than affiliate themselves with the American Colonization Society, however, blacks in Charleston, South Carolina, formed the Liberian Exodus Association (LEA) to transport African Americans to a West African Canaan on their own ship, the *Azor*. Despite a difficult transatlantic journey during which twenty-one emigrants died, the LEA considered the voyage a success and published *The Liberian Exodus. First Voyage of the Azor. Liberia a Delightful Country. Climate, Soil, and Productions. Character of the People in Liberia; and How They Live* (1878). In the pamphlet, white and black writers present competing Exodus stories that affirm Liberia as a promised land for hard working African Americans but represent the colony as a replica of the oppressive society blacks had hoped to escape.

In ten letters written for the *Charleston News and Courier*, white reporter A. B. Williams, Esq., invokes the Exodus story to posit Africa as the ideal Canaan for industrious African Americans. In the Exodus story, God promised to lead the Israelites to “a land flowing with milk and honey” that they would inhabit peacefully if they obeyed His commands (Exod. 3:7-8). In contrast, Williams reports that “a magnificent country” awaits black emigrants—if they are willing to work in a land without government assistance (2). Like Coker in his letters to prospective emigrants in Baltimore, Williams instructs potential emigrants to bring tools and recruit family members to help clear land and plant crops. In effect, Williams transforms the emigrants into homesteaders. Instead of migrating to a western American promised land like European immigrants and white Americans, however, African Americans would emigrate across the Atlantic Ocean and make a home among their African brethren. Williams lauds Liberia as a land where the African American is “capable of becoming much nearing a perfect man than he is in America,” all the while asserting that the “American negro” is beneath the “English colony negro” and the “Liberian negro” (3). While Williams acknowledges the progress blacks have made in the United States after Emancipation, he presents them as best suited for Africa, a land where he ranks them below Africans, who Europeans and white Americans already see as inferior humans.

Unlike Williams, Israel W. Moultrie, a black emigrant who had settled in Liberia, appropriates the Exodus narrative to posit Africa as a promised land of unlimited economic opportunities and freedom as Martin Delany had during the mid-nineteenth century. He informs potential emigrants that they can produce more crops with less land, eat foods available in the United States, spend American currency, and find better deals

on staples such as sugar, meat, and clothing (7). African Americans had enjoyed new privileges during Reconstruction, but were obliged to seek new prospects when they lost their rights. According to Moultrie, blacks can have an “American” experience in Africa. Hence, they should give emigration serious consideration. Moultrie doubles the Exodus narrative with republican rhetoric to transform Africa into a promised land of liberty for African Americans. He asserts, “I will say without fear, this is the best country in the world—a man can live here . . . all that is wanting are workmen and money, and Charleston would be but a lighthouse to this place; and every person that can come, there is room sufficient for them, I my friends expect to die here, for every blow I strike is freedom . . . come out here like we have, you will be done with serfdom, starvation and want” (7). The blows Moultrie strikes are clearing his land, planting crops, and building a home. Thus, Liberia would be appealing to African Americans who had experienced privation because of limited economic opportunities in the United States.

Although economic opportunities and freedom were important considerations to emigrants, some emphasized their relationship to the native population. In a letter to the association, J. T. Richardson, H. D. Brown, J. W. Hilson, C. L. Parsons, and T. G. Fuller, residents of Liberia, recall how they welcome emigrants who arrive on the *Azor* as pilgrims from a southern Egypt. They double the Exodus story with republican discourse to declare that servitude

. . . palpably counteracts those grand principles set forth in the magna chart of that country, that all men are endowed with certain inalienable rights, life, liberty and the acquirement of property: that all men are created equal, that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men; and WHEREAS, now they are removed beyond those influences which depressed them in their native land, and are here enabled to enjoy those rights and privileges, and exercise and improve those faculties which they have been endowed by the God of nature in common with the rest of mankind. (6)

Like the pilgrims, the emigrants claim the right to emigrate to attain religious and political freedom. The writers suggest that African Americans will finally experience freedom in a black nation built on republican principles. By invoking America's founding documents, they posit their Liberian colony as a new America inhabited by black citizens. In so doing, the emigrants impose their values on the native peoples. Members of the welcoming party report that they invite the newly arrived emigrants to "take part with us in the great work of civilizing and evangelizing, a continent" (6). Like American colonists who claimed the New World as their promised land and attempted to Christianize Native Americans, black emigrants believe Christianity is the path to civilization. They eagerly embrace Liberia's natural resources but rely on American values to transform the nation into their promised land, the same principles that had led to their enslavement and oppression in the United States and would cause them to marginalize Africans in their adopted homeland.

### **Daniel Payne: Black Americans' Experience is No Exodus Adventure**

Although the LEA enjoyed the support of AME Bishop Henry Turner, the influential AME Bishop Daniel Payne vigorously opposed the association. In 1878 when the LEA consecrated the *Azor*, Payne refused to dedicate the vessel (Wills 157). That same year, C. H. Pearce wrote a letter to Payne in *The Christian Recorder* requesting that he clarify his position on African emigration. Payne responded in a three-part letter, "African Emigration, or Colored Americans and Africa—Colored Americans and America," in which he denounces the Liberian Exodus as an ill-advised venture that draws African Americans away from their native land. Payne rejects Exodus as the primary narrative for the African American community because the biblical story fails to

help African Americans liberate slaves and transform the United States into their promised land.

Payne characterizes the Liberian Exodus as misnamed and impractical. He argues:

The new departure of our brethren in South Carolina has been unfortunately called an “Exodus.” I say unfortunately, because, if they mean what that historic name implies, then, they have given utterance to a great fallacy. The “Exodus” implies two things, the perfect emancipation of an enslaved people, and the immediate destruction of their enslavers, and both accomplished by a miracle, in which the former, as a race, is forever separated from the latter as a race. These ideas became facts in the case of Egyptian bondage—they can never be realized in the case of American slavery. The enlightenment and *salvation of humanity* is involved and needed in the former; no salvation of humanity is involved or needed in the latter.

Unlike the Israelites, African Americans experienced multiple exoduses from the mid-eighteenth century until the end of the Civil War. Slaves turned to the Exodus narrative to articulate their desire for freedom and find inspiration to escape from bondage alone or in small groups. Although Congress outlawed slavery after the war, they did not punish former Confederates, and thus set the stage for the resurgence of discriminatory laws, and violence and intimidation against African Americans. Nevertheless, most enslaved African Americans and free blacks were determined to fight for the rights and privileges of citizenship in their native land. But God had not designated them as His “chosen people” and offered them a special mission to evangelize the world. Like their predecessors who had selected specific portions of the Exodus narrative to address the given needs of their communities at particular historical moments, supporters of Liberian emigration fashioned an Exodus story that represented the desires of their constituents but did not reflect the reality of their experiences.

Although LEA supporters insist that they had designed their program for the benefit of their communities, Payne employs the Exodus narrative to raise suspicions

about their motivations. He argues that their misdirected plea for an “exodus” is the “offspring of disappointed political ambition . . . Just so long as the leaders of this ‘Exodus’ held their seats in the Legislatures of Georgia and South Carolina, or played a successful part in the politics of these States, not a word was heard from their lips concerning African Emigration.” After gaining the right to vote, African Americans helped elect black state and federal legislators until the failure of Reconstruction led to the disfranchisement of black citizens through poll taxes, literacy tests, and voter intimidation. Payne contends that former black public officials would have opposed the Liberia Exodus if they had been able to maintain their political positions. Liberia was therefore attractive to blacks who wished to pursue political opportunities.

Even if African Americans were able to regain some political clout, Payne suggests that emigrationists had misread African realities as badly as they had misapplied the exodus narrative. He asserts, “The hope of escaping from the oppression of the white man in America, and of finding an asylum from his power in Africa has doubtless influenced tens of thousands of the dupes of the ‘Exodus’ movement. This hope is . . . vain . . . because, on their arrival . . . they will ascertain that . . . the white man has gone ahead and taken possession of the best portions of Africa.” Like Delany, black emigrants would leave their native land, hoping to find political and economic opportunities in a nation where they would not encounter racism and discriminatory practices. Europeans had preceded them, however, claiming the best land and wielding significant influence on how the continent would develop. Even if African Americans segregated themselves in Liberia, they could not isolate themselves from the influence of white Americans and Europeans who controlled major economic markets and resources throughout the world.

Rather than rely on the Exodus story to justify emigration, Payne doubles the biblical narrative with the story of Noah to urge his brethren to live exemplary lives among white men throughout the world until whites acknowledge the dignity and equality of the race. Black Americans' quest for an African promised land is in Payne's judgment hopeless, for "the races were never made for isolation, but for fraternity . . . God has tested Ham by himself, Shem by himself, Japheth by himself . . . He the Omnipotent God is now about to test these three brothers abreast of each other, for the benefit of each other and for the reconstruction of society, in order that He might develop in them a history, brighter, purer, more glorious than the past." Payne invokes here nineteenth-century white biblical scholars' belief that humankind was descended from Noah's three sons, Ham, Shem, and Japheth. For centuries, the races had lived separately. When they began to interact, Europeans emerged as dominant world powers. With the eradication of slavery, however, Payne suggests that God has provided an opportunity for men to learn to live together as equals. If blacks segregate themselves in Liberia, they will never experience the blessings that come from developing integrated societies in which various peoples contribute to each other's well being.

### **Francis Grimké: Exodus as the Inspiration for New Radical Uplift Initiatives**

Instead of taking sides in the western migration and African emigration debates, other writers encouraged African Americans to seek integration in the United States. The Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), a socio-political organization founded by Union Army surgeon Benjamin F. Stevenson in 1866 for Civil War veterans, encouraged a black preacher and activist to create a new Exodus-inspired racial uplift strategy for his brethren. The GAR established chapters in each state to meet the needs of veterans,

influence local and national elections, sponsor a memorial day, and operate a Soldiers Home that led to the development of the federal government's Veterans Administration. By 1890, more than four hundred thousand veterans had joined the organization. Each year the GAR held a National Encampment, a multi-day event that featured camping, dinners, parades, and memorials. In early October 1902, GAR gathered for its thirty-sixth annual Encampment in Washington, DC. Two days after the Encampment ended, Francis Grimké, pastor of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, preached a sermon, "A Resemblance and a Contrast between the American Negro and the Children of Israel, in Egypt, or the Duty of the Negro to Contend Earnestly for his Rights Guaranteed under the Constitution," to honor GAR members for quelling the rebellion and including black veterans in their organization. In his sermon, Grimké urges African Americans to reconsider the connections between the Exodus story and their experiences, and then develop a new national organization modeled after the GAR to help them regain their rights.

Grimké begins by examining the similarities as well as the differences between their slavery experiences and the Israelites' bondage to determine if the story reflected the community's needs in the early twentieth century. The Israelites had voluntarily traveled to Egypt for temporary lodging during the famine, but stayed after Joseph secured good land and job opportunities for them. In contrast, Europeans had enslaved Africans and forced them to migrate to the Americas. Like the Israelites, African Americans were few in number when they arrived in their land of bondage; the population of each group rapidly increased. Whereas Pharaoh attempted to curtail the slave population explosion by overworking the Israelites and killing their newborn baby

boys, American slaveholders mistreated enslaved African Americans but did not enforce population controls. The Israelites resented their ill treatment and readily left Egypt when God sent Moses to emancipate them. Blacks also chafed under the adverse conditions of American slavery, but most wished to remain in the United States. Ultimately, there were more differences than similarities between African Americans' and the Israelites' experiences in slavery and freedom. The majority of African Americans sought integration in their American Canaan rather than migration to a foreign promised land. Because they lost many of their rights after Reconstruction, blacks needed a new racial uplift model that would help them regain their status as citizens.

Grimké doubles the Exodus narrative with republican discourse to argue that dramatic changes in the political system compel blacks to make radical shifts in their community uplift tactics. When describing the Republican Party, he asserts, "It used to be the Grand Old Party. It is no longer such. There isn't a single thing about it, either in what it is at the present doing, or in its purposes with reference to the future, to which the term 'grand' can be truthfully applied" (356-57). Republicans had initially supported antislavery initiatives, but abandoned African Americans after the Civil War. With the support and encouragement of Andrew Johnson, Republicans rolled back many of the gains blacks had made during Reconstruction. For example, they restricted voting rights and declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional. Like their predecessors who relied on white legislators like Owen Lovejoy and Charles Sumner to gain their freedom, emancipated blacks now needed the support of sympathetic whites in regaining the rights of citizenship.

Rather than direct his audience to the Exodus story as a model for their new racial uplift strategy, Grimké instructs them to look to the GAR for inspiration. He argues that this organization deserves the title “Grand” because “the Army of the Republic. . . is the Army that put down the great Rebellion, and with it the accursed system of slavery, which was like a millstone about the neck of both races” (358). Grimké is particularly pleased that black veterans are members of the organization and participate in the annual Encampments, for they are a reminder that blacks had fought in every major war since the founding of the nation. Stevenson had created the GAR after the Civil War when the federal government failed to keep its promise to care for black and white veterans. Similarly, rather than lament the failure of Reconstruction, African Americans must devote themselves to self-improvement by developing their own national organization to remind the nation of their contributions, provide for the needs of their people, and demand the restoration of their rights. In effect, Grimké sees the need for an organization like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People that had would be founded in 1909 “To Discuss Means for Securing Political and Civil Equality for the Negro” (Christian 272).

As they contemplate the structure of their new organization, Grimké conflates secular discourse with the story of John the Baptist to give blacks a role model for leaders who will spearhead reform. He explains:

If we are to succeed; if we are to make the proper kind of a fight in this country for our rights, we have got to develop a class of men who cannot be won over by a few offices, or by being patted on the shoulder; men, who, like John the Baptist, are willing to be clothed in camel’s hair, and to subsist on locust and wild honey—to wear the coarsest clothing, and be content with the plainest food, in order that they might be free to follow the dictates of their own conscience that they might be unhampered in the fight which they are making for their rights, and for the rights of the race. (360)

In the biblical narrative, John the Baptist lived an austere life as the herald of the Messiah, but thousands flocked to the desert to hear his message that often included rebukes for the king and religious leaders. Like Frances Harper in her essay “Our Greatest Want,” Grimké encourages his listeners to avoid the pitfalls of flattery offered by public office and officials. But he directs them to emulate John the Baptist, rather than Moses, in becoming principled men who will challenge corrupt American politicians, businessmen, and clergy and herald the establishment of a new organization that would address the black community’s needs. Such leaders would experience success only if they were true to themselves and loyal their community. Whereas John the Baptist had been divinely anointed from the womb, black activists, from Absalom Jones to Frederick Douglass, had appointed themselves or others to lead their brethren; none had developed an effective national organization like the GAR to galvanize the race. Grimké differentiates African Americans’ experience from that of the ancient Israelites by turning his congregation’s attention to a successful integrated national organization. In time, spiritually pure leaders would rise to teach them how to develop the political and economic power essential for racial uplift success in twentieth-century America.

## **Conclusion**

Black writers published Exodus narratives during the Nadir to help them address new issues that confronted their segregated, oppressed community. They encouraged blacks to emulate Joseph and Moses, signaling the nation’s retransformation into an Egypt for their people. Although these stories brought some relief, they did not solve the major problems blacks faced at this time. Others urged African Americans to look for a Joshua in Booker T. Washington, but Washington’s emphasis on manual training and

compromise with white Americans caused blacks to search elsewhere for leadership. After losing their civil rights and being terrorized by racial violence in the South, some African American writers began searching for a new promised land. Numerous activists supported migration to a midwestern Canaan. Success was temporary, however, for blacks soon learned that the racism they had hoped to escape permeated the entire nation. Others recommended emigration to a Liberian promised land as the best means to find peace and freedom, but life in the colony proved challenging and seldom reflected the glowing reviews presented in recruitment pamphlets. Most African Americans remained in the United States, refusing to give up hope of transforming the nation into a promised land. Life became so difficult, however, that some black writers urged African Americans to reject the Exodus narrative because it did not reflect their experience, or did so only minimally, and to be far more cautious in drawing parallels between God's people the Israelites and oppressed African American citizens. As the final phase in the early development of black Exodus narratives drew to a close, the promise of Exodus stories that had sustained a struggle for one hundred and forty-three years remained unfulfilled. Nevertheless, their hope for freedom and equality continually drew African Americans back into the biblical language-world to articulate their desire for entrance into American or foreign promised lands.

## **Coda: “What happens to a dream deferred?”: The Unfulfilled Promise of Exodus and the Continuing Struggle for Civil Rights**

Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel.

—Josh. 1:2

It literally means “the way out.” A loanword from the Greek, *exodus* signifies the road of escape. . . . African Americans heard, read, and retold the story of Exodus more than any other biblical narrative. In it they saw their own aspirations for liberation from bondage in the story of the ancient Hebrew slaves. The Exodus was the Bible’s narrative argument that God was opposed to American slavery and would return a catastrophic judgment against the nation as he had against ancient Egypt. The Exodus signified God’s will that African Americans too would no longer be sold as bondspeople, that they too would go free.

—Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*

In his conclusion to *The Bible in History: How the Texts Have Changed the Times*, David Kling suggests that scholars should examine how texts infused with biblical rhetoric function as “transforming agents,” “re-created meaning,” “comprehending sources,” “hermeneutical keys,” and “secondary justifications” (311-12). Based on such an examination, the significance of biblical narratives would rest in their ability to change individuals who apply the stories to their lives. Marginalized groups could challenge national narratives by recasting them as reflections of their oppressed condition and desire for freedom. Authors could infuse new meaning into their narratives by drawing on a variety of Scripture to create themes such as liberty and equality. Individuals could turn to the Bible to confirm principles that informed ideas such as civil rights and apply them to their cause.

My study addresses Kling’s concerns through its analysis of Afro-Atlantic writers’ embrace of the Exodus story in narratives that often include multiple biblical

references, and secular and republican rhetoric that reflect the writers' sophisticated understanding of the potential of their texts to affect change. I argue that black Exodus narratives did little to alter white Americans' views of their people. Although Afro-Atlantic Exodus narratives provided varied means of achieving racial uplift goals, the promise of freedom and equality remained unfulfilled. The "road of escape" from slavery to freedom was longer and more difficult than the Afro-Atlantic community had anticipated.

Henry Highland Garnet's challenge in gaining support for his militant plan to direct slaves to demand freedom epitomizes the struggles that blacks faced from 1760 to 1903 in developing Exodus narratives to articulate their desire for civil rights. When Garnet presented his *Address to the Slaves of the United States* to the 1843 Convention of Colored Citizens in Rochester, he hoped delegates would join him in encouraging slaves to emulate Moses and other revolutionary and revolt leaders by demanding wages for their labor and being willing to fight for freedom if their masters tried to force them back to work. Rather than approve his *Address*, delegates formed a committee to examine Garnet's speech and recommend changes before voting down the resolution that advocated the dissemination of his speech to the slaves. Forces from within and without the black community limited the effectiveness of early Afro-Atlantic Exodus narratives. Some activists, particularly Frederick Douglass, insisted that black leaders allow more time for their Exodus narratives and other rhetorical strategies to effect change without resorting to methods that would likely lead to bloodshed. Some black authors and activists, and their supporters achieved limited success by drawing on the power of Exodus to liberate slaves. Harriet "Moses" Tubman, for example, led over one hundred

slaves to freedom in the North and Canada. But African Americans were not free as long as slavery or racism existed.

Nevertheless, African Americans turned repeatedly to the Exodus narrative to chart their path from slavery to freedom. In “African Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel,” Albert J. Raboteau suggests that the biblical story gave blacks a means to articulate “their own sense of peoplehood. . . . In times of despair, they remembered Exodus and found hope enough to endure the enormity of their suffering” (84). Thus Exodus empowered blacks and sustained their struggle even as the promise of liberty remained unfulfilled. Raboteau elaborates on this idea in *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans*, arguing, “The Christian slaves’ identification with the biblical children of Israel was intensified by the songs, sermons, and prayers of their meetings, when the biblical past became dramatically present and the stories they sang about came alive. . . . In the ecstasy of worship they reenacted the trials and tribulations of God’s people and so reaffirmed their own value and dignity, as they kept up their hope for freedom” (44-45).

Raboteau emphasizes oral traditions that enslaved blacks relied on to address their struggles while sustaining their hope for freedom. During the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, the Bible was a central cultural text and the Exodus story one of the primary narratives that both white and black Americans relied on to express their experiences in and visions for their young republic. Free blacks in the North and South embraced the Exodus story, not only to demand freedom for the slaves but to claim the rights and privileges of citizenship for all African Americans. Life in slavery

and limited freedom impelled blacks to embrace the biblical narrative to create “a way out” of bondage and oppression.

During the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, African Americans continued to rely on the Exodus narrative to support their desire for equality, since the elimination of slavery did not immediately usher in an era of equal rights for black citizens. As they introduced their children to the biblical narrative and their Exodus stories, blacks assured the continued production of narratives featuring an array of Exodus leaders, promised lands, and methods to accomplish racial uplift goals. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s invocation of Exodus in his famous 1968 “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech in Memphis, Tennessee, is one of the most popular twentieth-century black Exodus narratives. Although many scholars have examined King’s speech, none has provided a comprehensive analysis of the development of black Exodus narratives published after 1903, including visual representations by artists such as Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden and music by Bob Marley and Isaac Hayes.

Contemporary Exodus narratives enable us to understand why people of African descent have continued to turn to the biblical story to support their civil rights initiatives for nearly two hundred and fifty years. For example, on March 7, 2007, presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama, Democrat-Illinois, delivered a speech at the Selma Voting Rights March Commemoration in which he presents a new type of black Exodus narrative that features multiple Exodus figures who spearhead civil rights initiatives for their people. Obama doubles the stories of Joshua and Moses to illustrate how a new generation of leaders must address inequities in the United States:

We’re going to leave it to the Joshua generation to make sure it happens. There are still battles that need to be fought; some rivers that need to be crossed. Like

Moses, the task was passed on to those who might not have been as deserving, might not have been as courageous, find themselves in front of the risks that their parents and grandparents and great grandparents had taken. That doesn't mean that they don't still have a burden to shoulder, that they don't have some responsibilities. The previous generation, the Moses generation, pointed the way. They took us ninety percent of the way there. We still got that ten percent in order to cross over to the other side. So the question, I guess, that I have today is what's called of us in this Joshua generation? What do we do in order to fulfill that legacy; to fulfill the obligations and the debt that we owe to those who allowed us to be here today?

Rather than identify one central Moses figure for the Civil Rights Movement, for example, Martin Luther King, Jr., Obama acknowledges a "Moses generation" that also includes activists such as Ralph Abernathy, Medgar Evers, Fannie Lou Hamer, John Lewis, Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, as well as unknown community leaders and citizens. He then suggests that the "Joshua generation" will ensure African Americans' passage into Canaan. In so doing, Obama places the African American community on the border of the promised land, the same position they had occupied in 1903 when DuBois characterized Booker T. Washington as a potential Joshua. Instead of anointing one Exodus leader like many of his predecessors, however, Obama calls for a Joshua generation to complete the work their Mosaic forbearers had begun in waging numerous battles for multiple promised lands. Obama's Exodus narrative exemplifies the continued promise of the biblical story for the black community and compels scholars to analyze the complex factors that contribute to the persistent presence of black Exodus narratives well into the twenty-first century.

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