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**THE BIBLE, RACE, AND SLAVERY**  
**AS AN ENDURING AMERICAN PROBLEM**

by

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# THE BIBLE, RACE, AND SLAVERY AS AN ENDURING AMERICAN PROBLEM

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On February 2 of this past year, President Barack Obama delivered a substantial address in Washington, D.C. at the United States' sixtieth annual National Prayer Breakfast. In the speech, which began with the president "giving all praise and honor to God for bringing us together here today" and included a quotation from C. S. Lewis about the impossibility of deriving a specific political platform from the Christian faith, Obama quoted or paraphrased at least ten passages from the Bible. His scriptural repertoire included a full quotation, from the New International Version, of I John 3:17-18 (where the emphasis is on love through action instead of just words) along with allusions echoing the wording of the King James Version and several modern translations to passages ranging from Genesis, Leviticus, Proverbs, and Isaiah in the Old Testament and Matthew, Luke, and Romans in the New.<sup>1</sup>

Several aspects of this address reflected a long American history that connects public life, the use of Scripture, and attitudes toward race. Most obvious was the fact of the prayer breakfast itself, a much-publicized event that annually gathers the nation's political leaders, often including the president, to hear speeches and offer prayers declaring the United States' dependence upon the deity. Although similar events are now held in other countries, none of those others has anything like the public attention enjoyed by the American prototype. The sixtieth anniversary is also significant since the first prayer breakfast in 1953 coincided with an elevated level of religious consciousness that described a mortal combat between "godless communism" and the United States as "one nation under God." The 1953 event also anticipated by only a few months the beginning of the modern civil rights movement when African American religious leaders deployed biblical themes to shame the nation into redressing its systemic racial injustices.

President Obama's speech was also noteworthy in several other ways. It featured skillful biblical quotations from the nation's first African American president; it showed the president using those quotations to advocate his policies for the nation; and it generated immediate opposition from other Bible believers who chastised the president for abusing the Scriptures. So it

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<sup>1</sup> "Remarks by the President at the National Prayer Breakfast," email memo from D. Paul Monteiro, Associate Director, White House Office of Public Engagement, 2 Feb. 2012.

was that on the day after the prayer breakfast self-identified Christians associated with the Republican Party called the president's remarks "theologically threadbare" and the product of "laughable theology."<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I hope to provide useful background for modern developments like the civil rights movement and perhaps even recent events like President Obama's speech. But I do so by focusing on the nineteenth-century, for that is when the entanglement of race and religion was most obvious and also when the presence of Scripture in American history was most obviously forceful and most obviously ambiguous. The beginning point for this paper is to explain why Scripture has enjoyed greater public prominence in American history than in other strongly Protestant nations. The paper then explores why the singular American setting was so important for what happened with Scripture, slavery, and race in the period before the American Civil War. The paper closes by trying to show why the abolition of slavery only complicated the history of race and Scripture that followed in later American history.

The American situation respecting Scripture can be clarified by comparing two programmatic statements about the Bible that were made at critical moments in the history, first, of England and then of the United States. In 1637, William Chillingworth, a protégé of Archbishop William Laud, was engaged in serious literary combat with a Jesuit who contended that England's official religion led inevitably to heretical forms of Christianity. Chillingworth, who had himself briefly converted to Catholicism before returning to stouthearted Anglican allegiance, begged to differ. And so he deployed a full range of his era's standard anti-Catholic polemics to defend the assertion of his book's title, *The Religion of Protestants a Safe Way of Salvation*. Among his many arguments, Chillingworth's focus on Scripture was preeminent. In a famous assertion that has been much quoted by others, he boldly pronounced a Protestant bottom line: "the BIBLE, I say, the BIBLE only, is the religion of Protestants!"<sup>3</sup>

The ironies of Chillingworth's situation have been much less described than his famous words have been quoted, for as a Laudian who used Scripture to define what "the religion of Protestants" entailed, Chillingworth

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph Reed, as quoted in David Nakamura and Michelle Boorstein, "At prayer breakfast and with birth-control decision, Obama riles religious conservatives," *Washington Post*, 3 Feb. 2012 [[http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/at-prayer-breakfast-and-with-birth-control-decision-obama-riles-religious-conservatives/2012/02/02/gIQAgylblQ\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/at-prayer-breakfast-and-with-birth-control-decision-obama-riles-religious-conservatives/2012/02/02/gIQAgylblQ_story.html) (accessed 4 Feb. 2012)]; Peter Wehner, *Commentary Magazine* Email, 3 Feb. 2012.

<sup>3</sup> William Chillingworth, *The religion of protestants a safe way to salvation* (1638; STC/1167:13). 375: the religion of Protestants cannot be defined by any particular individual or confession, "but that wherein they all agree, and which they all subscribe with a greater Harmony, as a perfect rule of their Faith and Actions, that is, The BIBLE. The BIBLE, I say, THE BIBLE only is the Religion of Protestants! Whatsoever else they believe besides it, and the plain, irrefragable, indubitable consequence of it, well may they hold it as a matter of Opinion, but as matter of Faith and Religion, neither can they with coherence (376) to their own grounds believe it themselves, nor require the believe of it of others, without most high and most Schismaticall presumption."

himself was mercilessly assailed by Presbyterians, Baptists, and other reforming Protestants who opposed the Laudians, including Chillingworth, as nothing better than crypto-Romanists. Although Chillingworth lived long enough to write against Scottish Presbyterians and to enlist for King Charles I in the first phases of the Civil War, he died in 1644 and so did not survive to witness the full hurricane of reform that Puritan understandings of Scripture unleashed in England during the next decade and a half. Nor could he witness the Restoration of 1660 when the return of monarchy and an Anglican established church forever ended Puritan efforts to convert a partially reformed England into a full blown Bible commonwealth.

The second quotation came two centuries later from Robert Baird, an American Presbyterian who published one of the first comprehensive histories of Christianity in his native land. In a work from 1844, which was aimed at the Europeans with whom Baird had lived for some time as a European agent for the American Foreign Evangelical Society, Baird tried to explain why the United States' "evangelical" denominations had been so successful in cooperating on so many fronts with such great effect on the public life of the United States. He was, in other words, trying to tell Europeans why – despite the great proliferation of church traditions that made up the American evangelical phalanx (Methodists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Disciples, German and Dutch Reformed, "Christians," many Episcopalians, some Quakers, some Lutherans, and even some conservative Unitarians) – American Protestants had been able to join their efforts so effectively. The key for Baird was voluntary, non-ecclesial organizations that drew together Protestants of all sorts to cooperate for Bible distribution, missionary work, education, publication, Sabbath observance, prison reform, temperance, African colonization, and more. Baird stressed a common loyalty to the Bible as the foundation for what we today call a flourishing civil society. But he also went further to specify how American evangelicals used the Bible: they "hold the supremacy of the scriptures as a rule of faith, and that whatever doctrine can be proved from holy scripture *without tradition* is to be received unhesitatingly, and that nothing that cannot so be proved shall be deemed an *essential* point of Christian belief."<sup>4</sup> Unlike the Protestants of Chillingworth's England, a vast array of Protestants in Baird's United States were uniting, rather than dividing, around "the Bible alone." In Baird's rendering, the ideal of "Scripture alone" was working, as it had not worked for Chillingworth's generation, because in America it was liberated from the encumbrance of tradition even as it was blessed with the separation of church and state.

In his famous account of *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville only a few years before Baird had admitted that he did not know "if all Americans have faith in their religion, for who can read the recesses of the

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<sup>4</sup>Robert Baird, *Religion in the United States of America* (Glasgow, 1844), 658 (emphasis added).

heart.” Yet he also went on to observe that Americans themselves linked the evangelical Protestantism of the period to the success of the American experiment. In his words, “I am sure that they believe it [i.e., this Bible-based religion] necessary for maintaining republican institutions. This opinion does not belong to one class of citizens or to one party, but to the whole nation; you find it among all ranks.”<sup>5</sup>

The apparent success of American Protestants during the first half of the nineteenth century in shaping an entire civilization by “the Bible alone” depended on developments from the colonial era, the years of the American War for Independence, and the early national period. The Puritans of New England had taken the Bible as their mandate for establishing the kind of Bible Commonwealth that English Puritans had never, despite great effort, been able to establish. The dissenting Protestants of the middle colonies, inspired by the toleration practiced by William Penn, had proclaimed the Bible as liberation when citizens were freed to follow the sacred rights of conscience as they interpreted Scripture. The War for Independence was mostly secular, but it nonetheless channeled the existing biblical traditions of New England and the middle colonies in a decisive direction. As a *Revolution*, it proclaimed the corruptions of European traditions that had fettered efforts to live by “the Bible alone”; as a revolution informed by *Enlightenment* values, it confirmed the confidence of Protestants that they could read the Bible with perfect epistemic clarity for themselves. When in the early nineteenth century, zealous leaders like the Methodists’ great Francis Asbury accomplished prodigies of evangelism and institution-building, the result was a critical mass of Americans who made “the Bible alone” the foundation for an entire civilization. Significantly, the American War for Independence also nationalized the covenant theology of Puritan New England so as to encourage citizens throughout the entire country to regard their nation as “the new American Israel.”

Compared with the history of Europe, three Scripture-related developments of the early American republic were most striking. The Bible flourished in the United States without the traditional supports of Christendom; it flourished as a source of unifying action; and it flourished in the wake of revolution. Amid America's post-Revolutionary tide of anti-formalism, anti-traditionalism, democratization, and decentralization, trust in the Bible did not weaken, but became immeasurably stronger. It was still “the Bible alone,” as proclaimed during the sixteenth-century Reformation. But it was also “the Bible alone” of all inherited authorities that survived the anti-traditional tide and then undergirded the remarkable evangelical expansion of the early nineteenth century. By undercutting trust in other traditional authorities and heightening confidence in the Enlightenment self,

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<sup>5</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America/De la Démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer, 4 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), 2: 475.

the power-suspecting ideologies of the Revolutionary period had the ironic effect of scripturalizing the United States. Deference to inherited authority of bishops and presbyters was largely gone, obeisance to received creeds was largely gone, willingness to heed the example of the past was largely gone. What remained was self-confidence in intuitive reason, self-confidence in written constitutional foundations, and trust in the Bible alone. The new element in post-Revolutionary American history was not Protestant reliance on Scripture as such, but rather reliance on Scripture in a context where other cultural authorities were very much weakened.<sup>6</sup>

The rapid rise of Disciples or “Christian” churches in the Restorationist Movement provides a striking example of what the free circumstances of the new United States could mean. These churches, which arose from the labors of Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone, combined dedicated biblicism with heightened Enlightenment rationalism and republican scorn for inherited authority. Their number grew from no churches in 1800 to over 2,000 by 1860. The attitude that propelled the movement was memorably expressed by two of Barton W. Stone's colleagues, Robert Marshall and J. Thompson, who were quarreling with Stone when a third party reprimanded them for disregarding the treasured insights of Calvin and other venerable theologians on questions of salvation and church order. Their reply was classic: “We are not personally acquainted with the writings of John Calvin, nor are we certain how nearly we agree with his views of divine truth; neither do we care.”<sup>7</sup> For these Restorationists, a republican understanding of intellectual independence was joined naturally to commonsense confidence in their own ability to understand the Bible in the raw. They were unusual in the era, not so much in what they affirmed, as for the vigorous character of those affirmations.

The Bible’s singular American history is essential for understanding why the cataclysmic history of slavery, which was embedded in an even more cataclysmic history of race, proved also so cataclysmic for both national life and the course of American religion. At the same time, the unfolding of that history is anything but simple. The liberated, democratic, nationalized, Enlightenment, and substantially anti-traditional Protestant Scriptures were indeed critical for undergirding the personal religion of white Americans, for lending their churches the dynamic to expand, and for motivating a great number of their voluntary societies. Yet the same Bible did even more. Historians have only recently begun to take the measure of what the

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<sup>6</sup> In a rough survey, Protestants in Switzerland faced the need to federate with Roman Catholics; German Protestants heeded the guidance of Lutheran and Reformed princes; Protestants in Hungary and France faced stiff cultural and political contests with Catholics; Dutch Protestants had to take account of foreign concerns; England’s and Scottish Protestants were part of an established church; while Canada and other commonwealth countries retained a much stronger sense of tradition than did American Protestants.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Marshall and J. Thompson, *A Brief Historical Account of Sundry Things in the Doctrine and State of the Christian, or, as It Is Commonly Called, the Newlight Church* (Cincinnati, 1811), 17.

liberated, democratic, nationalized, Enlightenment, and substantially anti-traditional Protestant Scriptures meant for African Americans. In a word, they converted a population that Europeans Christendom kidnapped and white American Christians enslaved with barely a second thought.<sup>8</sup> Yet by the late eighteenth century, black recourse to the Bible was becoming a force as extraordinary as it was unexpected. During the very decades when white Americans were turning to Scripture for arguments about the legitimacy of slavery, slaves and ex-slaves were reading this same Bible for themselves. What African Americans found when they read the Bible free from the trappings of Christendom sparked a spiritual revolution. The earliest black authors to break into print were figures like Jupiter Hammond, Phyllis Wheatley, and Olaudah Equiano who boldly deployed biblical language, biblical stories, and biblical themes to proclaim “liberty to the captives” and divine mercy to “the least of these.”

In the early nineteenth century, the situation for African Americans both deteriorated and strengthened. The deterioration came about when the South’s new cotton economy greatly expanded the need for slaves and the North’s booming commerce flourished on the back of slave-produced goods. Those practical demands for more slaves and slave-produced cotton, rice, indigo, and other products overwhelmed a nascent anti-slave movement that had grown from principles of republican rights combined with ideals of evangelical benevolence.

The improvement for African Americans in the early nineteenth century came from a dedicated corps of Christian activists who relied on Scripture to organize black churches and attack the new nation’s intensifying commitment to slavery. A dedicated colleague of Francis Asbury, Richard Allen, was the most notable organizer as he fought through white opposition to establish the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Sophisticated biblical arguments concerning race and slavery came from one of Robert Allen’s Methodist colleagues, Daniel Coker, and also from Lemuel Haynes, a black veteran of the Revolutionary War, a follower of Jonathan Edwards, and for many years the pastor of a Vermont Congregational Church.

In a forceful pamphlet from 1810, Coker made what would later become the standard abolitionist claim that the “spirit” or general principles of the Bible condemned slavery. According to Coker, “the righteous and benevolent doctrines and duties, taught in the New Testament” underscored clearly “the unreasonableness of perpetual unconditional slavery.” To Coker, passages like Matthew 7:12 (“Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them; for this is the law and the prophets”)

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<sup>8</sup> Especially useful are Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (New York: Continuum, 2000); and Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

pointed to only one conclusion: “It is very evident, that slavery is contrary to the spirit and nature of the Christian religion.”<sup>9</sup>

Shortly after Coker published his pamphlet, Haynes on 22 February 1813 preached a doctrinally rich sermon, “Dissimulation Illustrated,” at a commemoration for the birthday of George Washington. His text, Romans 12:9 (“Let love be without dissimulation”), gave him full scope to criticize the dissimulation, or deceitful hypocrisy, that he saw in President Madison’s conduct of the War of 1812 and also in American support for slavery. As he dealt with the timely issue of British impressment of American sailors, Haynes turned current events and theology into a powerful anti-slave message: “Our president . . . can talk feelingly on the subject of impressment of our seamen. I am glad to have him feel for them. Yet in his own state, Virginia, there were, in the year 1800, no less than three hundred forty-three thousand, seven hundred ninety-six human beings holden in bondage for life!”<sup>10</sup> Haynes, like Coker, buttressed reliance on “the Bible alone” with a sharp eye for circumstances to make his passionate plea.

Black use of Scripture became even more impassioned in the next generation, almost certainly because the three decades beginning in 1830 witnessed a strong turn toward Scripture to defend slavery. This use of Scripture became nearly omnipresent in the white South and surprisingly widespread throughout the North as well. In response, a host of black activists grew even more determined to show that Scripture legitimated neither slavery in general nor the racism integral to the American slave system in particular. Their number included the firebrand David Walker, the dedicated evangelist Jarena Lee, the distinguished Presbyterian minister Henry Highland Garnet, and the ex-slave abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

Yet as deep as black appropriation of the Bible reached, it exerted only marginal effect on the main American history of slavery, race, and Scripture. That most noticed national history was almost exclusively Caucasian because of the marginalization of black uses of Scripture, a marginalization that would come to an end only in the 1950s. The national moral crisis of the nineteenth century was a white crisis; and for a Bible-only civilization it was a crisis indeed.

The crisis arose because it proved much harder to live by “the Bible alone” than American Protestant communities had possibly imagined. To be sure, by comparison with Europe, American Protestants had escaped the Machiavellian evils of church establishment, they suffered less from the dead hand of tradition, and they enjoyed unprecedented success through

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Coker, *A Dialogue between a Virginian and an African Minister . . . Humbled Dedicated to the People of Color in the United States of America* (Baltimore: Benjamin Edes, 1810), 25; in *Negro Protest Pamphlets*, ed. Dorothy Parker (New York: Arno, 1969).

<sup>10</sup> Lemuel Haynes, “Dissimulation Illustrated” (Rutland, Vt., 1814), in *Black Preacher to White America: The Collected Writings of Lemuel Haynes, 1774-1833*, ed. Richard Newman and Helen Maclam (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1990), 157.



schemes of voluntary religious organization. Yet correcting the faults of European Christendom proved far easier than remedying the ills of human nature.<sup>11</sup>

The liberated, democratic, nationalized, Enlightenment, and substantially anti-traditional Protestant Scriptures had truly accomplished wonders for white Americans. But from our late vantage point, it is obvious that “the Bible alone” was never the unalloyed principle that its advocates conceived. It was not a fulcrum operating outside of contextual cultural influences.

Naïve reliance on “the Bible alone” did unleash tremendous energy for the dominant white society and also among African Americans. Moreover, it resulted in less fissiparous interpretive fragmentation than Catholics, state-church Protestants, and Europeans in general predicted. Nevertheless, hermeneutical naïveté was and remains an American Achilles heel. Without the admixture of at least a little cynicism, without a hermeneutics of at least some suspicion, Americans as a whole have regularly lacked self-correcting mechanisms to challenge their intuitions. Even more importantly, naïveté among Bible-believers has meant that they have only sometimes been conscious of how intuitions shape their purported reliance on “the Bible alone.” As we will soon see, this naïveté produced profound confusion between slavery in general and black-only American slavery.

When intuitions about race guided biblical interpretation in the antebellum years, it was not the first time that a hidden hermeneutic had influenced what believers read in Scripture. A recent study by historian Mark Valeri on New England’s economic history demonstrates skillfully that the first Puritans in New England fulfilled their aspiration to be guided comprehensively by Scripture as they sought biblical guidance for conducting trade and conceiving of political economy.<sup>12</sup> But then the second generation, while still speaking about commerce in religious terms, began to shift away from strong theological prescriptions for trade and markets. The next generation, at the end of the seventeenth century and beginning of the eighteenth, moved still further in the direction of accepting the British empire’s expanding market practices as simply ordained by God; this movement coincided with a growing assumption that the expanding British empire enjoyed the blessings of special divine providence. The succeeding generation of ca. 1710-1730 took the next step to seeing the workings of a

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<sup>11</sup> Even sympathetic observers recognized that the achievements of the United States’ early national Protestant civilization were precarious. Unsympathetic observers were far less charitable. From Mrs. Trollope’s impressionistic screed at democracy run amuck in frontier Cincinnati to the scholastic Catholicism of the Jesuit *Civilita cattolica* that interpreted the American Civil War as the end product of purely Protestant follies, these outsiders saw that American trust in “the Bible alone” involved much more than the nation’s Protestants realized. For a survey of foreign views during the Civil War making such points, see Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* ((Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 95-155.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Valeri, *Heavenly Merchandize: How Religion Shaped Commerce in Puritan America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

still expanding British market system as following a “Law of Nature” equivalent to how up-to-date thinkers were interpreting physical nature in the wake of Sir Isaac Newton. The end result was a largely implicit sanction of the imperial status quo as itself given by God. Earlier efforts to discipline commercial practice by strict biblical precepts had passed away.

Roughly the same process occurred in political history from the Seven Years’ War in the mid-eighteenth century through the Revolutionary and Constitutional periods. American Christian patriots did not reason carefully from Scripture about their political differences with the mother country. Instead, biblical metaphors and biblical stories simply sanctified the principles of Real Whig opposition politics. American patriots saw the Thirteen Colonies as Israel oppressed by parliamentary Egypt not because they were reasoning from the Scriptures, but because they were swept up in the tidal wave of republican theory that justified the War for Independence. A few colonial loyalists did try to reason about the Revolution from Romans chapter 13 (“the powers that be are ordained by God”) or to contend that “the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free” of Galatians chapter 5 meant spiritual freedom rather than political liberty. But these arguments were met not by exegesis but expulsion. Thus, in the colonial period a pattern was already established where economic and politics were exempt from “Bible only” reasoning, even among a people whose Protestant commitments were becoming ever stronger in loyalty to Scripture.

So it was that when slavery became America’s dominant national dilemma, the legacies of colonial and early national history created a confusing situation. The confusion can be described as the coming together of four developments.

First, American Protestants had adopted “the Bible only” as their self-conscious authority for all of life. As suggested by Robert Baird in 1844, the rapid expansion of evangelical churches and the comprehensive influence that the churches alongside Protestant voluntary societies exerted in American society seemed proof positive that “the Bible only” represented the realized potential of Protestant Christianity at last come into its own.

Second, when contention over slavery arose, the nation’s Protestants turned instinctively to Scripture for guidance on how a Christian people should resolve the contention. Such reference to Scripture began in the eighteenth century, grew during the early decades of the nineteenth century, and then exploded from 1830 onwards. The nearly simultaneous occurrence in 1831 of Nat Turner’s slave rebellion in Virginia and the launch of William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator* as the spearhead of aggressive abolitionism transformed an already simmering national debate into white-hot moral combat.

Typical of the anti-slave crusade were words of the well-known evangelist Charles Finney from 1834: “slavery is, pre-eminently, the *sin of the church*. . . . Let Christians of all denominations meekly but firmly come forth,

and pronounce their verdict, let them clear their communions, and wash their hands of this thing, let them give forth and write on the head and front of his great abomination, SIN! and in three years . . . there would not be a shackled slave, nor a bristling, cruel slave-driver in this land."<sup>13</sup>

But such provocative challenges in a “Bible only” culture allowed the defenders of slavery to seize the high ground. The exegetical defense of slavery came first from the South, where slavery grounded an entire way of life, but soon it was joined by often reluctant voices in the North who conceded that the scriptural record on slavery as such tended strongly toward its legitimation. Thus, in response to charges like Finney’s, a lengthy parade of strongly worded pro-slavery sermons, pamphlets, and weighty tomes showed what reliance on “the Bible alone” entailed for this particular debate. Abraham owned slaves; Mosaic law legislated the details of slaveholding; although Jesus condemned polygamy and other Old Testament practices, he uttered nary a word about slavery; the New Testament epistles in several places instructed slaves to obey their masters as unto the Lord; and the Apostle Paul sent back the runaway slave Onesimus to his owner Philemon. Appealing to “the Bible alone” on slavery proved a boon for slave masters and a considerable embarrassment to the many Protestants who both honored Scripture and yet knew in their heart of hearts that slavery was wrong. Trust in “the Bible alone” seemed a sure way to guarantee the perpetuation of slavery.

The third factor contributing to the problem was the interpretive style that had become deeply ingrained in American public life. Hermeneutics, to most antebellum Americans, was “simple,” a word used many times to describe their ideal approach to Scripture. In 1865, the holiness evangelist Phoebe Palmer summed up an era, as well as one of her own arguments, when she wrote, “The Bible is a wonderfully simple book; and, if you had taken the naked Word of God as . . . your counsel, instead of taking the opinions of men in regard to that *Word*, you might have been a more enlightened, simple, happy and useful Christian.”<sup>14</sup>

The belief that Scripture lay open to all who read it carefully for themselves had grown up with the closely related conviction that biblical interpretation worked like the study of nature. Observe carefully, organize observations, and the result would be indubitable certainty. When the Restorationist James S. Lamar published his *Organon of Scripture: Or, the Inductive Method of Biblical Interpretation* in 1859, he thus spoke for many other Americans when he claimed, “the Scriptures admit of being studied and expounded upon the principles of the inductive method; and . . . when thus

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (1835), ed. William G. McLoughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 301, 302.

<sup>14</sup> Phoebe Palmer, “Witness of the Spirit,” *Guide to Holiness* 47 (June 1865): 137; as quoted in Nancy A. Hardesty, *Your Daughters Shall Prophecy: Revivalism and Feminism in the Age of Finney* (Brooklyn, 1991), 65-66.

interpreted they speak to us in a voice as certain and unmistakable as the language of nature heard in the experiments and observations of science."<sup>15</sup>

With such approaches to interpreting the Bible, it is clear why differences of opinion on what the Bible said about slavery flared easily into all-out condemnation of opponents as infidels deliberately distorting the definitive word of divine revelation. Such condemnations were common from those who thought the Bible attacked slavery. In 1861 the New York abolitionist Gerritt Smith thought it was easy to demonstrate how the Bible ruled out slavery: "the religion taught by Jesus is not a letter but a life. So simple is it that the unlearned can both understand and teach it. . . . The true religion is too simple to make the training of a theological seminary necessary for those who teach it. We should allow the wisdom and goodness of God to assure us that the religion which He has given to the world must correspond in its simplicity with the simplicity of the masses."<sup>16</sup> The condemnations were even more common from those who thought the Bible allowed for slavery. In that same year, the New York conservative, Henry Van Dyke, was flabbergasted that anti-slave Christians could read the Bible as they professed to read it: "When the Abolitionist tells me that slaveholding is sin, in the simplicity of my faith in the Holy Scriptures, I point him to this sacred record, and tell him, in all candor, as my text does, that his teaching blasphemes the name of God and His doctrine."<sup>17</sup>

Here was the manifest problem: "the Bible only" was a proven foundational principle; slavery posed a great moral question that demanded to be adjudicated by appeal to Scripture; Scripture revealed its divine truth on questions like slavery with simple clarity; yet answers to the great moral dilemma of the day contradicted each other flatly.

Scholars in our own day have described well why covert factors made up of intuited racial assumptions have always complicated issues like the permissibility of slavery that most nineteenth-century white Americans' were treating as an overt debate. As the geographer David Livingstone has explained in his study of biblical interpretations of Adam and the possibility that humans may have existed before Adam, histories of race always involve "geographical location" or "geographies of reading." He means by these phrases that the "social spaces" occupied by savants in seventeenth-century France, the antebellum American South, and eighteenth-century Scottish, though all were professing to read Scripture directly, influenced the conclusions they drew about who Adam was and how Adam related to later racial classifications.<sup>18</sup> Colin Kidd's history of race and Scripture speaks

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<sup>15</sup> Lamar, *Organon of Scripture* (1859), 176, as quoted in Hughes and Allen, *Illusions of Innocence*, 156.

<sup>16</sup> Gerritt Smith, "The Religion of Reason," in his *Sermons and Speeches* (New York, 1861), 4-5.

<sup>17</sup> Henry J. Van Dyke, "The Character and Influence of Abolitionism," in *Fast Day Sermons: or the Pulpit on the State of the Country* (New York, 1861), 139.

<sup>18</sup> David N. Livingstone, *Adam's Ancestors: Race, Religion and the Politics of Human Origins* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 222.

similarly about the way that “all racial taxonomies,” though they may be influenced by “the empirical observation of genuine (though superficial, trivial and inconsequential) biological differences,” nonetheless “are the product not of nature but of the imagination combined with inherited cultural stereotyping as well.”<sup>19</sup>

Once observers are aware of such “social spaces” and “inherited cultural stereotypes,” it is clear that the fourth facet of the nineteenth-century American problem was the hidden factor of enculturated racial assumptions. With a few exceptions, these assumptions operated just as foundationally as overt trust in Scripture. For many Americans, including a great number who thought of themselves as living by “the Bible alone,” the overt biblicism never came close to touching the assumption that one “drop” of African blood created a different and significantly deficient variety of human being.

Examples are legion where straightforward citation of biblical texts merged seamlessly with unselfconscious evocations of common sense, or the voice of experience, or the moral consciousness of human kind, to explain the separate, dangerous, or polluting status of Africans. But one example is particularly telling since it was published by a leading scholar, Philip Schaff, who in 1861 had already gained a wide reputation for deep learning in biblical subjects and broad authority in the history of Christianity. Schaff, who had come to America from his native Switzerland to teach at the German Reformed Seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, would later go on to chair the American committee responsible for revising the King James Version, edit a still useful edition of the church fathers, and found the American Society of Church History.

In April 1861, the same month that southern bombardment of Fort Sumter, began the Civil War, Schaff published an article in the *Mercersburg Review* entitled “Slavery and the Bible.”<sup>20</sup> Its status as a representative period piece arose from how it combined exquisite scholarship with the most blithe assumptions about race. Schaff began by commenting on the Noahic curse of Genesis 9:25-27. With other learned biblical scholars of his era, including many southerners who used Scripture to defend slavery, Schaff asserted that Noah’s curse of his grandson Canaan was fulfilled when the Israelites conquered the land of Canaan; properly speaking it had nothing to do with Africa. But then, without hesitating, he went on to link “the whole of the posterity of Ham” with the “unfortunate African races,” (291) and to conclude on this point: “Whether we connect it with this ancient prophecy or not, it is simply a fact which no one can deny, that the negro to this day is a servant of servants in our midst.” (292) It is crucial to observe the rapid

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<sup>19</sup> Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>20</sup> Philip Schaff, “Slavery and the Bible,” *Mercersburg Review* 13 (Apr. 1861): 288-317, with quotations indicated in text within parentheses. The article also contains much on Schaff’s confident reading of providence.

shifts at the very beginning of Schaff's argument. He was addressing "slavery and the Bible," but already in his first paragraphs, "a fact which no one can deny" was exercising equal authority with the direct witness of Scripture.

Then Schaff launched into a discussion that invoked "God . . . in his infinite wisdom and mercy" as the only solution to "the negro question;" he then expressed hope that "the wholesome discipline of slavery" would allow "Ham" to be "trained in America for his final deliverance from the ancient curse of bondage." (292) Detailed examination of Old Testament passages touching on slavery then ensued, followed by learned discussion of the nature of slavery in the Roman world. The prominence of racial stereotypes, as opposed to biblical conclusions, as indicated by Schaff's conclusion that American slavery was vastly superior to Roman slavery since Rome "made no distinction between race and color," while American slavery "is based on the inferiority of the African race." (305) After careful attention to the New Testament passages that simply took slavery for granted and then by claiming that "the spirit of Christianity" (316) would work to undo slavery over time, Schaff drew toward his conclusion with these words: "Of all forms of slavery the American is the most difficult to dispose of, because it is not only a question of domestic institutions and political economy, but of race. *The negro question lies far deeper than the slavery question.*" (316, Schaff's emphasis) Schaff was exceedingly perceptive with this conclusion, but what that conclusion had to do with evidence from Scripture is a puzzle.

African Americans were, naturally enough, quick to notice the unselfconscious elision of biblical quotation and cultural assumption. With increasing frustration they insisted that it was one thing to consider slavery in the abstract, but something else entirely to consider the black-only racial slavery that actually existed in the United States. Frederick Douglass was characteristically most direct, as when he wrote in 1861: "nobody at the North, we think, would defend Slavery, even from the Bible, but for this color distinction. . . . Color makes all the difference in the application of our American Christianity. . . . The same book which is full of the Gospel of Liberty to one race, is crowded with arguments in justification of the slavery of another."<sup>21</sup>

A very few white observers agreed with what Douglass was trying to say. In 1850, for example, during Kentucky's acrimonious debate over a new state constitution, one dissenting minister, John G. Fee, put matters about as clearly as they could be put. Fee was laboring against the biblical arguments that had been offered to defend slavery. He was exasperated. Even if, he countered, the New Testament did not condemn Roman enslavement of Teutons, Gauls, Greeks, and Egyptians, "What," he asked,

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<sup>21</sup> Frederick Douglass, "The Pro-Slavery Mob and the Pro-Slavery Ministry," *Douglass' Monthly*, March 1861, pp. 417-18.

“was the complexion of these nations?” His answer was that “most were as white or whiter than the Romans themselves.” Consequently, Fee went on, if “the apostles’ teaching and practice sanctioned slavery, it sanctioned *the slavery of the age* – the slavery amongst which the apostles moved. N. B. THIS SLAVERY WAS WHITE SLAVERY . . . the large portion of those enslaved were *as white, and many of them whiter than their masters.*”<sup>22</sup> But so solid was the use of Scripture against which Fee argued that efforts like his to disentangle confidence in Scripture from confidence in widely shared racial assumptions gained almost no traction in white, Bible-believing America.

This fourth factor of intuition acting alongside trust in “the Bible alone” again differentiated the American situation from the nearly parallel English history. English tumults of the 1640s and 1650s convinced most citizens that the effort to follow strict biblical guidelines in root and branch reform of an entire society was a non-starter. After 1660, however important the Bible remained as a cultural or religious authority, Scripture alone would never again be invoked as a simple blueprint for the nation. Supporters of the monarchical ancien regime described in the works of Jonathan Clark cushioned Scripture within Anglican tradition. Creative intellectuals looked elsewhere in order to contain unruly biblicism, as Thomas Hobbes to direct state power or John Locke to carefully defined toleration. Ardent Bible-believers would certainly feature large in English history after 1660, but even the most dedicated heirs of the Puritans sought ameliorations against ungodliness and did not try to construct an entire national order on the basis of “the Bible alone.”

After the Civil War in the United States, by contrast, the aspiration to organize all of national society on this basis took on a second life. Where recourse to “the Bible alone” had only heightened sectional conflict, the North’s military victory and three amendments to the Constitution conclusively ended slavery. But Union triumph and constitutional amendments did little to uproot the racism that slavery had enabled. Because of the confusion between biblical witness and racial assumption that had attended the history of slavery, the results of the American Civil War differed considerably from what happened after the English civil wars.

To vastly oversimplify another complex history, after the Civil War the United States was no longer dominated by Robert Baird’s cooperative evangelical Protestantism as it had been before the conflict. A “Bible only” civilization simply made no sense to the growing numbers of Catholics, Jews, Protestants recently arrived from Europe, and a growing non-religious

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<sup>22</sup> John G. Fee, *The Sinfulness of Slaveholding Shown by Appeals to Reason and Scripture* (New York: John A. Gray, 1851), 29, 28. A few others joined this chorus. Abraham Lincoln, for example, used part of a stump speech in Cincinnati in 1859, to explain why Stephen Douglas did not use the biblical arguments for slavery that so many of his Democratic supporters put forward. The reason? “Douglas knows that whenever you establish that Slavery was right by the Bible, it will occur that that Slavery was the Slavery of the *white* man – of men without reference to color.”<sup>22</sup>

segment of the population. In addition, an elite segment of the popular, represented by Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., became so disillusioned by the romantic idealism of the War that it turned away from religion and toward pragmatism as the hope for a better ordered American society.<sup>23</sup>

Yet for significant components of the American citizenry, “Bible only” thinking remained alive, even if for several generations after the War that thinking would be far less influential than before. Significantly, the Americans who retained such thinking were also the Americans whose racial assumptions, attitudes, or self-definition remained most potent.

As described in a fine recent book by historian Molly Oshatz, the postbellum Protestants who retained the strongest commitment to Christianity as a nation-shaping force were no long “Bible only” Protestants.<sup>24</sup> Figures like the Social Gospel leaders Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch had been chastened by the “Bible only” defense of slavery. Although they continued to rely on Scripture, these liberals self-consciously abandoned the common sense exegesis that defended slavery and embraced the moral intuitions that condemned slavery. Instead of a static view of Scripture as a timeless guidebook existing outside of history, they viewed the Bible as an exemplary record of evolving religious consciousness within history. Instead of trying to shape the nation by “the Bible only,” they supported the reforms of the American Progressive era. The Bible was still centrally important for these progressive Protestants, but the interpretative habits of the antebellum era were not.

Liberal Protestants, in their roles as leaders of the large Protestant denominations, key figures in the United States’ elite universities, and ardent supporters of Progressive reforms, kept alive the goal of shaping the nation by Scripture.<sup>25</sup> But if their views of the Bible were much more advanced than antebellum varieties, their racial attitudes continued many of the same assumptions that had complicated the antebellum use of Scripture.

Woodrow Wilson, president of the United States from 1913 to 1921, is a good example of how progressive attitudes to the Bible co-existed with traditional American assumptions about race. In a widely reported speech on the Bible from 1911, Wilson expounded at great length on why he thought Scripture was the foundation of the American experiment. The speech exalted the Bible as the source of what distinguished the United States in the world: “We do not judge progress by material standards. America is not ahead of the other nations of the world because she is rich.

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<sup>23</sup> On that disillusionment, see George M. Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of Union* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); and Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Molly Oshatz, *Slavery and Sin: The Fight Against Slavery and the Rise of Liberal Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Oshatz, *Slavery and Sin*, 46, 57.



Nothing makes America great except her thoughts, except her ideals, except her acceptance of those standards of judgment which are written large upon these pages of revelation.” He concluded his address by saying, “America was born a Christian nation. America was born to exemplify that devotion to the elements of righteousness which are derived from the revelations of Holy Scripture.”<sup>26</sup>

In 1911, Wilson proclaimed that this “book . . . has made democracy and been the source of all progress.” Yet in 1916, when asked to take part in public ceremonies marking the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the American Bible Society, this staunchly segregationist president was told that, since the Bible Society was a national organization with an extensive work among African Americans, it would have to include a black person in the platform party. Wilson objected. The ceremony was, therefore, duly segregated so that Wilson, echoing phrases he had uttered in 1911 about “the masses of mankind” drawing inspiration from Scripture, could extol the Bible for “weaving the spirits of men together” throughout the world.<sup>27</sup> For Progressive Protestants like Wilson, the Bible still had a major role to play in American civilization, but it was still a Bible encumbered with the assumptions of black racial inferiority.

We do not, however, get from the Civil War to President Obama’s recent prayer breakfast speech by tracing the course of the liberal Protestantism that Wilson exemplified. While still a not insubstantial force to this day, that kind of Protestantism over the course of the twentieth century steadily declined in national influence. Instead, that trajectory was sketched by groups who faded from public attention after the Civil War and would not re-emerge into public consciousness until the mid-twentieth century.

First to re-emerge were African Americans whose churches had never abandoned the Bible nor “the Bible only” interpretive practices that black leaders adopted for their spiritual succor in their first experience of evangelical faith. For African Americans, “the Bible only” meant literal adherence to passages like Psalm 68:31 (“Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God”) and Acts 17:26 (God “hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on the face of the earth”). No one paid much attention to this African-American biblical trajectory during the long years of Jim Crow discrimination. The dominant white population of American society, whether religious or not, conspired for several generations to ensure that black voices were muffled. But when in the years after World War II the modern civil rights movement took

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<sup>26</sup> “An Address in Denver on the Bible,” *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 23, 1911-1912, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 18, 20.

<sup>27</sup> “Remarks Celebrating the Centennial of the American Bible Society,” *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 36, 1916, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 631.

shape, the peculiarly African-American version of “Bible only” Christianity spoke up loudly and refused to be silent.

The two other groups that kept alive “Bible only” commitments after the Civil War were white evangelical Protestants in the North and their counterparts in the South. In the North, movements identified with the evangelism of D. L. Moody sustained vigorous private faith based on literal scriptural interpretations. These movements would come to include Pentecostals, advocates of dispensational premillennialism, and a wide range of other conservative, Bible-oriented evangelicals. But after these evangelicals tried and failed to reform the nation through the prohibition of alcohol, they mostly abandoned efforts to shape society comprehensively by “the Bible alone.” Throughout the twentieth century, these Protestants were often called fundamentalists because of their efforts to defend what they considered the essentials of the old-time religion. Northern fundamentalists were known for their separatism; their strenuous efforts to avoid contamination from the world meant that they mostly stayed out of politics, often set up their own educational institutions, and in general tried to create alternative social lives in parallel to the broader culture. On race, northern fundamentalists tolerated lingering prejudices against African Americans, but were mostly passive toward racial issues as they were passive about social matters in general.

It was otherwise with the white evangelical Protestants of the South. The Confederate “Lost Cause” was a movement that treated defeat in the Civil War not as God’s judgment for the sin of slavery, but as a challenge to persevere in the defense of family, home, local government, and resistance to Yankee aggression. White southern evangelicals who would also become “fundamentalists” in the twentieth century had very little national political influence except for their contributions to making the former Confederate South solid for the Democratic Party. These southern fundamentalist remained militantly “Bible only” Christians and also remained militantly racist. White churches provided the Jim Crow South with the spiritual background that sustained segregation as a way of life for a century after the Civil War. As many historians have suggested, when in 1876 southern whites regained political control of the former Confederate states, it meant that the white South, though defeated in the war, would succeed in winning the peace.

For the nation as a whole, however, it seemed of little consequence that white southern evangelicals remained “Bible only” Christians and militant defenders of racist regimes. The South as a whole exerted minimal political influence; Woodrow Wilson, for example, was the only southern-born president elected until in 1964 Lyndon Johnson rode national mourning for the assassination of John F. Kennedy to his own election as president. Because of their deliberately separatist ways, white southern evangelicals

were for national purposes the most marginal of the marginalized. Until, that is, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s.

When African-American “Bible only” Christians forced their way into the national consciousness during that era, it precipitated a series of dramatic reactions. Among the most dramatic was the re-politicization of white fundamentalists and evangelicals, North and South. Northern evangelicals re-entered the political sphere in part to aid resistance to “godless communism,” but even more to resist the expansion of federal government power that had been required to implement the racial desegregation championed by African-American reformers. Southern evangelicals became significant politically at first to defend the racist regimes that had persisted throughout their region. Most, even of these southern evangelicals, did eventually accept the end of racial discrimination as both the law of the land and a mandate of Scripture. But even more than northern evangelicals, these southern conservative Protestants became militant opponents of an expanded federal state. As historian Darren Dochuk has shown in a deeply researched book, the migration of “Bible only” southern evangelicals to the West Coast played a crucial role in the rise of modern political conservatism throughout the entire country.<sup>28</sup>

To summarize this all-too-hasty historical overview, my key assertion is that the racial-religious-political turmoils of the 1960s and 70s represented at least a partial reprise of the racial-religious-political turmoils of the 1840s and 50s. Although the agents of change were different, with African Americans reformers replacing white defenders of slavery as the actors prompting the strongest reactions, a similar entanglement of race and “Bible-only” religion was central to the turmoil in both periods. In the latter period, slavery was gone, but the earlier period’s confusion between slavery as an economic system and slavery as an anchor for racial hierarchy continued to work its effect, especially since contending varieties of “Bible only” Protestantism were almost as prominent in the late twentieth century as they been in the mid-nineteenth.

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When considering the public history of Scripture in the United States, the Civil War brought about not a conclusion but a hiatus. Slavery was abolished, but efforts to live by “the Bible alone” were not. In addition, racial attitudes – whether acknowledged by black Americans or unacknowledged by many whites – continued to exert the most profound effects on how Scripture was interpreted and how bible-believing Christians went about their lives.

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<sup>28</sup> Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Subelt: Plain-folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).

When in February, Barack Obama stood before an audience dominated by evangelical Protestants, his quotations from Scripture represented an epitome of American history. Two brief statements from Colin Kidd's magisterial account of race and Scripture in western Protestant history provide the perfect farming for that epitome. First, "the Bible is largely colour-blind: racial differences rarely surface in its narratives." But also, "although many social and cultural factors have contributed significantly to western constructions of race, scripture has been for much of the early modern and modern eras the primary cultural influence on the forging of races."<sup>29</sup> American history testifies eloquently to the color-blindness of Scripture, but also to its centrality in American constructions of race.

The Protestant principle of "the Bible alone" proclaimed by William Chillingworth as a safe way to salvation has had a consequential American career. It is hard to imagine that the fundamental ambiguity attending this principle could be more starkly observed than in American experience. "The Bible alone" helped materially to construct American society in the wake of the War for Independence; "the Bible alone" miraculously converted a slave population oppressed by masters, many of whom held to "the Bible alone." "The Bible alone" turned strife over slavery into a dispute about divine revelation and so helped make America's greatest conflict into a holy war. Union military might brought an end to slavery, but racist assumptions continued to dominate the South and exert a strong influence over the nation. In that post-slave but still racist United States, "the Bible alone" sustained white churches as they imposed Jim Crow and black churches as they fought Jim Crow. After the Second World War, "the Bible alone" reemerged to assist the reorganization of the nation's political life.

Naïveté about "the Bible alone" has led to both moral disasters and moral triumphs. Because of the tightly interwoven history of slavery, race, and Scripture, the disasters and the triumphs cannot be pried apart from each other. The history of "the Bible alone" in the United States represents Protestant principles of authority extended to their logical conclusion. That history reveals at one and the same time the United States' strongest claim to be recognized as a Christian nation and the most decisive proof that it should never be so considered.

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<sup>29</sup> Kidd, *Forging of Races*, 3, 19.