

The Crisis over the Bible

By 1860 Americans who believed in the Scriptures as unquestioned divine revelation should have been troubled by the growing number of their fellow citizens who seemed willing to live without that belief. The most prominent among those coming to doubt the all-sufficiency of Scripture were savants like Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., elite literati like William Dean Howells, and practitioners of realpolitik like William Henry Trescot, who were turning aside from all a priori authorities, including the Bible. Instead, they were looking to scientific, legal, literary, business, or governmental substitutes to provide the necessary ballast required by what they hailed as an increasingly secular, consumer-oriented, and religiously pluralistic society.¹ However important this shift in American perspective represented by such postreligionists actually was, it would be more noticed after the sectional conflict than before or during.

At the time of the Civil War, the party of abolitionists, for whom nothing matched the imperatives of personal freedom, was much more worrisome to traditional believers. Foremost in this group was William Lloyd Garrison, who in 1845 paid homage in the *Liberator* to Thomas Paine for providing him with intellectual resources for getting beyond the Bible. While Garrison never became as thoroughly skeptical about the miracle stories of Scripture as had Paine, and while he always retained belief in God as moral arbiter of the universe, he no longer looked upon the Scriptures as indisputable revelation from God: "To say that everything contained within the lids of the bible is divinely inspired, and to insist upon the dogma as fundamentally important, is to give utterance to a bold fiction, and to require the suspension of the reasoning faculties. To say that everything in the bible is to be believed, simply because it is found in that volume, is equally absurd and pernicious."

So inclined, Garrison no longer had any difficulty with biblical passages that seemed to countenance the legitimacy of slavery: "To discard a portion of scripture is not necessarily to reject the truth, but may be the highest evidence that one can give of his love of truth."²

Garrison's move was audacious and courageous, but his willingness to jettison the Bible if the Bible was construed as legitimating slavery was too radical for most of his fellow Americans. In fact, the willingness of Garrison and a few others to favor abolitionism in place of Scripture actually worked to the advantage of those who defended slavery on the basis of Scripture. With increasing frequency as the sectional conflict heated up, biblical defenders of slavery were ever more likely to perceive doubt about the biblical defense of slavery as doubt about the authority of the Bible itself. In the words of Henry Van Dyke on December 9, 1860, from his pulpit in Brooklyn, "Abolitionism leads, in multitudes of cases, and by a logical process, to utter infidelity. . . . One of its avowed principles is, that it does not try slavery by the Bible; but . . . it tries the Bible by the principles of freedom. . . . This assumption, that men are capable of judging beforehand what is to be expected in a Divine revelation, is the cockatrice's egg, from which, in all ages, heresies have been hatched."³ In short, the radicalism of all-out abolitionists like Garrison made it much harder for anyone who wanted to deploy the Bible in order to attack American slavery. Garrison's stance was more important for how it alienated those who continued to trust in the Bible than it was for attracting sympathizers.

In order to show how this situation developed, the present chapter first lays out the standard biblical defense of slavery as it had been developed in the two generations before the start of the war. It then examines various attempts made by orthodox Christians to take back the Bible for the fight against slavery. The question of how attitudes toward race entered into the use of the Bible with regard to slavery is so involved that it is reserved for separate treatment in the next chapter.⁴

Debates over Scripture and slavery, which combined passionate moral reasoning, careful attention to the particulars of exegesis, and intense argument about the general meaning of the Bible, pointed toward a twofold theological crisis. The first-order crisis was manifest: a wide range of Protestants were discovering that the Bible they had relied on for building up America's republican civilization was not nearly as univocal, not nearly as easy to in-

terpret, not nearly as inherently unifying for an overwhelmingly Christian people, as they once had thought. But the second-order crisis, which was not as obvious, was even worse: although legions of faithful believers struggled long and hard to discern what the Bible said about slavery, far fewer turned seriously to Scripture to find an authoritative message concerning race or the transformation of the American economy, even though race and economic transformation had become the most pressing dangers threatening America's biblical civilization.

The Biblical Defense of Slavery

The power of the proslavery scriptural position—especially in a Protestant world of widespread intuitive belief in the plenary inspiration of the whole Bible—lay in its simplicity. The standard procedure was exemplified in one of the first modern defenses from the early 1770s.⁵ Thomas Thompson published *The African Trade for Negro Slaves, Shewn to Be Consistent with Principles of Humanity, and with the Laws of Revealed Religion* at a time when long-standing antislavery agitation by relatively marginal Quakers was broadening out to include well-placed Englishmen, like the member of Parliament William Wilberforce, who were more politically central than the Quakers had ever been. Thompson's defense could not have been more direct. In effect: open the Bible, read it, believe it. After conceding that in ancient times God had set strict limits to Hebrew enslavement of other Hebrews, he then quoted Leviticus 25:45–46a: "Moreover of the children of the strangers that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you, which they begat in your land: and they shall be your possession. And ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit them for a possession; they shall be your bondmen for ever." Then, after acknowledging New Testament injunctions to piety, charity, and respect for others, Thompson turned to the book of Philemon, the brief letter of St. Paul in which the apostle instructed an escaped slave, Onesimus, to return to his master. Thompson's message was straightforward: if God through divine revelation so clearly sanctioned slavery, and even the trade in "strangers," how could genuine Christians attack modern slavery, or even the slave trade, as an evil?

This mode of argument became more elaborate and more definite when other Bible believers took up Scripture to attack slavery. Crucially, as Larry

Yet countercurrents also worked against these trends that were making it harder to imagine slavery as a just form of social organization. Heightened abolitionist attacks on slavery, slaveholders, and slave society angered those who were under assault. Especially when such attacks were expressed with the antibiblical rhetoric that William Lloyd Garrison employed, they deeply troubled religious believers of almost all sorts. By defining slaveholding as a basic evil, whatever the Bible might say about it, radical abolitionists frightened away from antislavery many moderates who had also grown troubled about America's system of chattel bondage, but who were not willing to give up loyalty to Scripture. With these ideological currents were also mingled political and economic developments that ever more clearly differentiated "the South" as a distinctive society, a distinctive moral culture, and a distinctive political power. And in the North as well as the South, critics of the nation's expanding commercial capitalism were becoming more insistent that this economic system was fraught with moral problems.

The general result was that by the 1840s American debates over the Bible and slavery had assumed a critical new gravity. In particular, those who saw in Scripture a sanction for slavery were both more insistent on pointing to the passages that seemed so transparently to support their position and more confident in decrying the wanton disregard for divine revelation that seemed so willfully to dismiss biblical truths.

Two Defining Publications

The force that biblical proslavery arguments were exerting can be suggested by two important works published by leading moderates, Francis Wayland and Moses Stuart, in the years before sectional antagonism passed beyond the point of no return. When the triennial gathering of the American Baptist Missionary Union resolved in 1844 that it would not appoint slaveholders as missionaries, this action precipitated the establishment of the Southern Baptist Convention the following year. It also led the Reverend Richard Fuller of Beaufort, South Carolina, to write a letter to the editors of the *Christian Register* to defend the legitimacy of slavery. Fuller's letter, in turn, prompted a lengthy response from Francis Wayland, president of the Baptist Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, which then elicited a further rejoinder from Fuller.⁷ This exchange was one of the United States' last serious one-

on-one debates where advocates for and against slavery engaged each other directly, with reasonable restraint, and with evident intent to hear out the opponent to the extent possible. The argument between Wayland, a careful reasoner and a careful biblical exegete defending an antislavery (but not abolitionist) stance, and Fuller, a resolute defender of slavery who nonetheless admitted that Southern slavery contained substantial abuses, represented a signal moment in American moral history.

For our purposes, it was most important for illustrating forcefully how secure the biblical defense of slavery had become in the minds of its advocates. Fuller, in his initial letter, and after praising Wayland's earlier writings on the subject, succinctly summarized the dilemma he was convinced that Bible believers of Wayland's emancipationist convictions could not avoid: "His position is this: the moral precepts of the gospel condemn slavery; it is therefore criminal. Yet he admits that neither the Saviour nor his apostles commanded masters to emancipate their slaves; nay, they 'go further,' he adds, 'and prescribe the duties suited to both parties in their present condition;' among which duties, be it remembered, there is not an intimation of manumission, but the whole code contemplates the continuation of the relation." Fuller was relentless in drawing his conclusion: "Here, then, we have the Author of the gospel, and the inspired propagators of the gospel, and the Holy Spirit indicting [i.e., recording] the gospel, all conniving at a practice which was a violation of the entire moral principle of the gospel!"⁸ By admitting that slavery as practiced in the South entailed practices that were explicitly condemned in Scripture, Fuller only felt that he was turning the screw even tighter. Had not the Roman system of slavery, which the New Testament writers everywhere simply took for granted, also contained practices explicitly condemned by that same New Testament? He was left with only one conclusion: "The matter stands thus: the Bible did authorize some sort of slavery; if now the abuses admitted and deplored by me be essentials of all slavery, then the Bible did allow those abuses; if it be impossible that revelation should permit such evils, then you must either reject the Scriptures, as some abolitionists are doing, or concede that these sins are only accidents of slavery, which may, and perhaps in cases of many Christians, do exist without them."⁹

Wayland's response to Fuller's arguments—which required more than ten pages for every one that Fuller took to state his case—was learned, calm, and

intensely biblical. In the course of that response Wayland raised many of the objections that will be canvassed later in this chapter. But whether in the interpretive climate that then prevailed in the United States, Wayland's elaborate response carried more conviction than the simple statement of Fuller's position must be doubted.

Five years after the Fuller-Wayland exchange, Moses Stuart of Andover Seminary in Massachusetts published a major tract on the same issue, *Conscience and the Constitution*.¹⁰ Stuart, who was widely recognized as the nation's most learned biblical scholar, entered the lists after he was attacked for commending Daniel Webster when the senator supported the Compromise of 1850. Webster had followed the lead of Henry Clay, who engineered admission of California as a free state but also agreed to a strict law for the capture and return from the North of fugitive slaves, a concession that incensed abolitionists everywhere.

Stuart did take the last twenty pages of his tightly packed monograph to indicate why he felt biblical principles should move Southerners, especially Southern Christians, to give up slavery voluntarily. But because he was angered by charges from Webster's (and his) abolitionist opponents that slavery must be regarded by all honorable Christians as a self-evident moral evil, Stuart began with a lengthy consideration of that very question. In a curious mixture of painstaking biblical exegesis and rough-hewn political polemics, Stuart took readers over familiar ground. He quoted Leviticus 25; he pointed out that neither Jesus nor Paul had condemned slavery as such; and he cited frequently referenced passages like Ephesians 6:5 ("Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ"). In summing up his biblical conclusions, this learned and pious Northern emancipationist followed Richard Fuller rather than Francis Wayland: "Not one word has Christ said, to annul the Mosaic law while it lasted. Neither Paul nor Peter have uttered one. Neither of these have said to Christian masters: 'Instantly free your slaves.' Yet they lived under Roman laws concerning slavery, which were rigid to the last degree. How is it explicable on any ground, when we view them as humane and benevolent teachers, and especially as having a divine commission – how is it possible that they should not have declared and explicitly [so] against a *malum in se* [something evil in itself]?" Stuart did not feel it would help the abolitionist cause "to dodge the question." For him,

as well as for Fuller, the alternatives were stark: abolitionists "must give up the New Testament authority, or abandon the fiery course which they are pursuing."¹¹

Stuart's defense of the moral legality of slavery, however, differed strikingly from many others of the period. While he strenuously resisted efforts to label slavery a simple moral evil, he also expounded at length on the general biblical teachings that he felt should lead to a gradual, peaceful, and voluntary elimination of the institution. In this part of his argument, Stuart sounded much more like Francis Wayland. He pointed especially to abuses in the Southern system of bondage – like the breaking up of marriages and the sexual predation practiced by white masters on their female slaves – that violated biblical morality. He also insisted on labeling ideas of Caucasian superiority over Africans as an "anti-biblical theory."¹² At the same time, because of the views on states' rights and on limits of federal authority that he shared with Daniel Webster, Stuart did not think there was anything he and other non-Southerners could do to restrict or eliminate the slave system. Stuart's interpretation of the Bible convinced him of the need for gradual emancipation. But that same interpretation led him to view the threat from Bible-denying abolitionism as greater than the South's failure to move toward voluntary emancipation.

This was the situation with respect to biblical interpretation that prevailed in 1850, that would only strengthen throughout the whole country up to the outbreak of hostilities in 1861, and that would remain exceedingly powerful in the South long after most Northerners had reconfigured the War for the Union as also a War for Emancipation. It was the interpretive history that, as we have seen, allowed James Henley Thornwell to say on the eve of the conflict that "we have long since settled" the issue of biblical sanction for slavery.¹³ It was the background that permitted the Southern Methodist minister J. W. Tucker to tell a Confederate audience in 1862 that "your cause is the cause of God, the cause of Christ, of humanity. It is a conflict of truth with error – of Bible with Northern infidelity – of pure Christianity with Northern fanaticism."¹⁴ It was this argument that into the early years of the war itself left many moderate and conservative Christians in the North convinced against themselves that Thornwell and Tucker were probably right.

Opposition: Scriptural Principle and Republican Certainty

The primary reason that the biblical defense of slavery remained so strong was that many biblical attacks on slavery were so weak. To oversimplify a complicated picture, the most direct biblical attacks on slavery were ones that relied on common sense, the broadly accepted moral intuitions of American national ideology, and the weight of "self-evident truth." They were also the easiest to refute. More complicated, nuanced, and involved biblical attacks against slavery offered more formidable opposition. But because those arguments did not feature intuition, republican instinct, and common sense readings of individual texts, they were much less effective in a public arena that had been so strongly shaped by intuitive, republican, and commonsensical intellectual principles.

Like the biblical defenses of slavery, the attacks on the system had a lengthy history. In America these attacks typically arose from an alliance between scriptural principle and republican certainty. In a pioneering tract from 1776, Samuel Hopkins of Newport, Rhode Island, who had been a student and close friend of Jonathan Edwards, concluded that "the whole divine revelation" spoke against slavery.¹⁵ Less than two decades later, but now disillusioned by the failure of an independent United States to move rapidly against slavery, Hopkins returned to the subject. This time he insisted, with a combination of republican and Christian language, that "tyranny and slavery" were "evils" that "the gospel" thoroughly opposed.¹⁶ Hopkins did pay some attention to individual passages like Leviticus 25 and the book of Philemon, but for him grasping the broad sweep of Scripture and applying the most basic meaning of American experience were more important.

Likewise, a rousing polemic from 1815 by George Bourne, *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable*, dealt at length with individual texts of Scripture, even as it leaned even harder on what Bourne obviously considered the humanitarian agreement of biblical and republican principles. Thus he made much of texts like Exodus 21:16 that in his view should have convinced all believers to oppose the slave trade and slavery itself ("And he that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death"). But the burden of Bourne's argument was carried by grand reasoning from first principles: "Every man who holds Slaves and who pretends to be a Christian or a Republican, is either an incurable Idiot who cannot distinguish good

from evil, or an obdurate sinner who resolutely defies every social, moral, and divine requisition. . . . Every ramification of the doctrine, that one rational creature can become the property of another, is totally repugnant to the rule of equity, the rights of nature, and the existence of civil society."¹⁷ Once established, this principled approach to Scripture became the staple of abolitionism.

In October 1845 two able casuists took up the fight in a public debate in Cincinnati that went on for eight hours a day through four long days of public declamation.¹⁸ The thrust and parry of face-to-face confrontation between two Presbyterian ministers did not allow the abolitionist Jonathan Blanchard and the moderate emancipationist Nathaniel Rice to attain the level of sophistication reached by Francis Wayland and Richard Fuller in their written exchange of the same year, but this Cincinnati spectacular was still memorable. Blanchard, who had been a student of Moses Stuart at Andover Seminary, defended the abolitionism that Stuart would later attack in his 1850 monograph. Rice, who had studied at Princeton Theological Seminary, where Stuart's general theology was considered suspect as a deficient form of Calvinism, defended Stuart's position that, although the Bible pointed toward the eventual, voluntary elimination of slavery, it nowhere called slavery evil as such.

Although this debate is worth studying for many reasons, it is pertinent here for how Blanchard advanced the most popular form of the biblical anti-slavery argument. As Rice methodically tied Blanchard in knots over how to interpret the proslavery implications of specific texts, Blanchard returned repeatedly to "the broad principle of common equity and common sense" that he found in Scripture, to "the general principles of the Bible" and "the whole scope of the Bible," where to him it was obvious that "the principles of the Bible are justice and righteousness."¹⁹ Early on in the debate, Blanchard's exasperation with Rice's attention to particular passages led him to utter a particularly revealing statement of his own reasoning: "Abolitionists take their stand upon the New Testament doctrine of the natural equity of man. The one-bloodism of human kind [from Acts 17:26]—and upon those great principles of human rights, drawn from the New Testament, and announced in the American Declaration of Independence, declaring that all men have natural and inalienable rights to person, property and the pursuit of happiness."²⁰ Blanchard's linkage between themes from Scripture and tropes from American republicanism was repeated regularly by abolitionists. But this use

of the Bible almost never found support in the South and only rarely among Northern moderates and conservatives. In general, it was a use that suffered particular difficulties when, as in the ground rules laid down for Blanchard and Rice in their Cincinnati debate, disputants pledged themselves in good Protestant fashion to base what they said on the Bible as their only authoritative source.²¹

Harriet Beecher Stowe's lightning-rod novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, provided one of the era's most powerful examples of the abolitionist appeal to the general spirit of the Bible. The question of the Bible and slavery appeared repeatedly in this novel, which was serialized in 1851 and then published to great acclaim (and scorn) the next year. Stowe, herself a dedicated if romantic partisan for the Bible, nonetheless subtly queried widespread American notions about the self-interpreting power of Scripture. For example, she had one of her slave-owning characters, Augustine St. Clare, suggest that some interpretation was driven more by interest than intellect: "Suppose that something should bring down the price of cotton once and forever, and make the whole slave property a drug in the market, don't you think we should have another version of the Scripture doctrine? What a flood of light would pour into the church, all at once, and how immediately it would be discovered that everything in the Bible and reason went the other way!"²²

Stowe also intimated the cynical conclusion, which would become more common among secularists after the Civil War, that the Bible was easily manipulated to prove anything with regard to a problem like slavery that readers might desire. "Honest old John Van Trompe," with an instinctive objection to slavery, long had kept himself at arms' length from church because of ministers who claimed that Scripture sanctioned the institution. But when he found experts on the other side who could use Greek and Hebrew to attack slavery as effectively as others had used such knowledge to defend it, Van Trompe, in Stowe's dialogue, "took right hold, and jined the church."²³ At another place in the novel, Stowe had passengers on a steamboat, which was carrying slaves down the Ohio River, exchange biblical texts with each other like bird shot. On the one side: "It's undoubtedly the intention of Providence that the African race should be servants – kept in a low condition," said a grave-looking gentleman in black, a clergyman, seated by the cabin door. "'Cursed be Canaan: a servant of servants shall he be,' the scripture says." On the other side: "A tall, slender young man, with a face expressive of great

feeling and intelligence, here broke in, and repeated the words, "'All things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.' I suppose," he added, "that is scripture, as much as 'Cursed be Canaan.'" ²⁴ In each case, Stowe's own sentiments obviously lay with the antislavery use of the Bible, but her portrayal of a divided usage could not have reassured those who paused to reflect on how this novel might awaken uncertainty about the supposedly perspicuous authority of the Bible.

By contrast, Stowe's most extensive incident featuring an appeal to Scripture conveyed a less ambiguous message. After the slave Eliza escapes over the ice-clogged Ohio River with her young son, she comes, exhausted, to the home of Senator and Mrs. Bird just as they have finished discussing the senator's support for Ohio's version of the Fugitive Slave Law. When Mary Bird surprises her husband by attacking all such laws as "shameful, wicked, [and] abominable," John Bird replies with arguments paralleling the biblical defense: "But, Mary, just listen to me. Your feelings are all quite right, dear, and interesting, and I love you for them; but, then, dear, we mustn't suffer our feelings to run away with our judgment." To arguments in favor of fugitive slave laws, which regularly included a proslavery use of the Bible, Mary Bird blows away the equivalent of chapter and verse argumentation with a larger gestalt of scriptural sentiment:

"Now, John, I don't know anything about politics, but I can read my Bible; and there I see that I must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the desolate; and that Bible I mean to follow."

"But in cases where your doing so would involve a great public evil –"

"Obeying God never brings on public evils. I know it can't. It's always safest, all round, to do as He bids us."

"Now, listen to me, Mary, and I can state to you a very clear argument, to show –"

"O, nonsense, John! You can talk all night, but you wouldn't do it, I put it to you, John – would you now turn away a poor, shivering, hungry creature from your door, because he was a runaway? Would you now?" ²⁵

At that very point the fugitive slave Eliza arrives at their door, and the senator proves his mettle by setting aside his "arguments" and moving Eliza in the dead of night away from danger to the home of John Van Trompe.

The significance of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for the biblical debate over

slavery lay in the novel's emotive power. More effectively than debaters like Jonathan Blanchard or Francis Wayland, Stowe exemplified – rather than just announced – the persuasive force of what she regarded as the Bible's overarching general message.

The fact that a novelist brought off this task more effectively than the ex-geotes did not stop abolitionist scholars and preachers from continuing the battle in their chosen media. On the eve of conflict, George Cheever, a Congregationalist minister from upstate New York, published one of the era's most elaborate biblical attacks on slavery. Cheever labored diligently, if not too convincingly, to show that Old Testament "bondmen" and New Testament "servants" were not slaves at all. He certainly scored points in using biblical prohibitions against "manstealing" when he excoriated the internal trade in slaves and, by implication, all slaveholding.²⁶ Yet over and again he appealed to the inconsistency between slavery and "the benevolence commanded in the Scriptures." At the end he brought his book to a climax by moving from the biblical "letter" to a much broader basis: "The moral argument from Scripture on the subject appeals to the common conscience of all mankind, and at every step enlists the common sense of humanity in its behalf."²⁷

So also did Henry Ward Beecher reason in his climactic public statement on the eve of conflict. Maybe, he conceded, a defense of slavery could be teased out of obscure, individual texts of Scripture, but surely the defining message of the Bible was something else entirely. In his fast day sermon of January 4, 1861, Beecher strenuously appealed to the general meaning of the Bible as opposed to the pedantic literalism that undergirded the proslavery view: "'I came to open the prison-doors,' said Christ; and that is the text on which men justify shutting them and locking them. 'I came to loose those that are bound,' and that is the text out of which men spin cords to bind men, women, and children. 'I came to carry light to them that are in darkness and deliverance to the oppressed,' and that is the Book from out of which they argue, with amazing ingenuity, all the infernal meshes and snares by which to keep men in bondage. It is pitiful."²⁸

Such use of the Bible doubtless carries more weight today than it did in 1860, when the way that Beecher reasoned disturbed broad reaches of American religious opinion. At the time, however, the conviction that he could easily separate the Bible's antislavery "spirit" from its proslavery "letter" was

not only a minority position; it was also widely perceived as a theologically dangerous position.

A devastating theological weakness of this position made many, who were otherwise sympathetic, shy away. As early as 1846, the Connecticut Congregationalist Leonard Bacon, who very much wanted to oppose slavery as a sin, nonetheless hung back. His analysis of the "spirit" over "letter" argument caught the dilemma exactly: "The evidence that there were both slaves and masters of slaves in the churches founded and directed by the apostles, cannot be got rid of without resorting to methods of interpretation which will get rid of everything." In Bacon's view, the well-intentioned souls who "torture the Scriptures into saying that which the anti-slavery theory requires them to say" did great damage to the Scriptures themselves.²⁹ To Bacon and many others who were tempted to make a move from the Bible's "letter" of sanction for slavery to its "spirit" of universal liberation, the facts of American experience may have been the great stumbling block. Precisely by following the Bible strictly, by tending to its "letter" when heretics of various kinds were running after its "spirit," the churches had prospered, and the balm of the gospel had reached unprecedented numbers of spiritually needy men and women.

This consideration did not deter abolitionists like Cheever and the Beechers. Yet the stronger their arguments based on general humanitarian principles became, the weaker the Bible looked in any traditional sense. By contrast, rebuttal of such arguments from biblical principle increasingly came to look like a defense of Scripture itself.

Opposition: Historical Contexts and Prudential Reasoning

Bacon and those who like him wanted both to preserve traditional biblical authority and to oppose slavery still had one more argument to advance. They could concede that the Bible never did in fact condemn slavery *per se*, but they could also contend that, when properly interpreted, Scripture did condemn the kind of slavery practiced in the American South. With a substantial history behind it, this was an argument of some subtlety, and one that Bacon himself, along with a sizable number of other earnest Bible believers, tried to make in the years before war broke out.³⁰

In 1808 one of the first and best biblical arguments against the Southern

system of slavery was published by David Barrow.³¹ His *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined; on the Principles of Nature, Reason, Justice, Policy and Scripture* featured arguments denying that the descendants of Canaan were Africans. More generally, he held that the precedents for slavery found by paying close attention to Abraham's life and Mosaic law were, for American experience, irrelevant. If all cotton growers and owners of rice plantations were Hebrews, if they could locate Canaanites for slaves, and if they would then transport their operations to the Middle East, then Barrow would concede a biblical warrant for slavery.

By the 1840s, such quick resolutions would no longer suffice, however effective they might once have seemed. Much of Francis Wayland's lengthy response to Richard Fuller went over Barrow's argument, only with more erudition and with more detail from the Hebrew language and Old Testament history. To Wayland, in an argument that also loomed large in African American biblical exegesis (as we shall see in the next chapter), the fact that Abraham circumcised his slaves (Genesis 17:12), and so included them in all the blessings God promised to "his people," set up a very different situation than prevailed in the South. So it was as well with the Mosaic legislation that provided for manumission if a master harmed a slave in any way (such as knocking out a tooth, Exodus 21:27) or if a slave escaped to a Hebrew town (Deuteronomy 23:15-16). Wayland did not believe that Old Testament slavery provided a legitimate rationale for slavery in other times and places. But even if it did, he held that to follow the Bible meant that Americans would have to abandon the slave system that then existed in their land: "Suppose . . . that whatever was sanctioned to the Hebrews is sanctioned to all men at all times, . . . I do not see in what manner it could justify slavery in the United States. It is, I presume, conceded that a permission of this kind is to be understood according to the utmost strictness of application. If slavery be justified by the law of Moses, it is, of course, only justified in the manner and with the restrictions under which it was placed by that law."³²

A few years later a Baptist preacher with far less of a reputation made Wayland's points even more sharply, and he did so in Kentucky, where such opinions could be dangerous. James M. Pendleton was a hard-nosed defender of the Bible's inerrancy as well as of Baptist distinctives, but that cast of mind did not prevent him from mounting a strong case against slavery as practiced in Kentucky at a time when possible legislation concerning slavery was being considered by a state constitutional convention.³³ Pendleton turned to

the standard passages about Abraham and his slaves and observed "that there are points of material dissimilarity between that system and our system of slavery." Unlike owners in the Southern states, where it was usually illegal for slaves to be armed, Abraham gave weapons to his slaves, and Abraham was prepared, before his son Isaac was born, to make a slave his heir. The only conclusion that Pendleton could draw was that "it does not follow necessarily that Abraham's servants were slaves in the American acceptance of the word."³⁴ In a clever but also bitterly expressed play on categories widely used at the time, Pendleton made his case as forcefully as he could:

Hence when the position is established that "slavery is not of necessity sinful," that it "is not a sin in the abstract," pro-slavery men most ridiculously transport their idea of the innocence of slavery in the abstract to slavery in the concrete. Because they can conceive of circumstances in which a master may hold a slave without doing wrong, they infer that there is nothing wrong in the system of slavery in Kentucky. They reason from what might be to what is. For example, they would say something like this: The slavery which sacredly regards the marriage union, cherishes the relation between parents and children, and provides for the instruction of the slave, is not sinful. Therefore the system of slavery in Kentucky, which does none of these things, is not sinful. Is this logic? Is it not rather a burlesque on logic?³⁵

The kind of biblical reasoning proposed by Pendleton and his predecessors still loomed large, at least among learned advocates, on the eve of conflict. In the first chapter we heard from Rabbi Raphall and Professor Taylor Lewis, who vigorously opposed abolitionist attempts to describe slavery as a simple sin. But in their fuller expositions, both Raphall and Lewis went on to mount strong arguments against slavery as it existed in the United States.

After his scathing attack on abolitionists that we have quoted from his sermon of January 4, 1861, Rabbi Raphall turned to argue against the hard-nosed defenders of American slavery as a positive good. The crux of his argument echoed much of the Catholic commentary that is examined in chapter 7. In particular, unlike ancient systems, American slavery dehumanized the slave: "The slave is a person in whom the dignity of human nature is to be respected; he has rights. Whereas, the heathen view of slavery which prevailed at Rome, and which, I am sorry to say, is adopted in the South, reduces the slave to a thing, and a thing can have no rights."³⁶

Taylor Lewis made an even more extensive case in response to proslavery use of the Bible. He began by arguing that "the Patriarchal Servitude" in ancient times was very different from the slavery found in the American South. And he echoed Rabbi Raphael in asserting that, regardless of the social system in place, Scripture never spoke of servants as mere property. Lewis then expounded at length on what he held to be a key feature of Old Testament teaching—yes, there was divine approval for buying non-Jews as slaves, but never for selling them. More important, since this provision for servitude depended on the distinction in ancient Israel between the people of God and "the heathen," it was imperative to recognize the great change inaugurated by the coming of Jesus Christ. If, as Christians believe, Jesus opened the doorway of salvation to all people everywhere, who then were "the heathen" of modern times? In Lewis's words, "We still speak of heathen, using the term geographically, and, to some extent, ethnologically; but theologically, ecclesiastically, Christianly, there are no heathen." Rather, because the work of Christ accentuated what Lewis called "the blood unity of the race," it was necessary to recognize that there were no longer any "heathen" whom it was acceptable for the people of God to enslave. To drive his point home, he asked why, if proslavery advocates were so faithful in believing the Bible, slaves who became Christians (who, that is, stopped being "heathen" even in the illegitimate sense in which the term was still being used) were not manumitted immediately. Finally, Lewis returned at the end of his long argument to repeat that the slave system practiced in the United States could not by any means be considered the same as anything practiced in the ancient world. In his view, even the brutal Roman system was not as degenerate by biblical standards as the American: "No Roman court ever made a decision so casting a man out of the state, and out of the pale of humanity, as the Dred Scott [case]."³⁷ In sum, Lewis argued that the Bible nowhere legitimated racially defined slavery and everywhere condemned social systems beset with the evils that in fact attended the practice of slavery in the United States.

Taking Stock

Promising as the arguments made by Professor Lewis might now seem, they failed in late 1860 to make much headway in American public debate. Three reasons explain why this nuanced biblical attack on American slavery was so

relatively ineffective. The first was that biblical defenders of slavery found it easy to lump Lewis's kind of nuanced biblicism with the arguments of radical abolitionists who claimed that the Bible condemned slavery *per se* as a sin. Since these radical arguments seemed so obviously to lead to the overthrow of the Bible, the more nuanced position probably did too.

The other two reasons for the failure of a nuanced biblical antislavery concerned the weighty issues of race and common sense. As indicated in Professor Lewis's arguments, an inability to countenance "the blood unity of the race" provided strong support for biblical defenses of slavery. How Bible believers, both white and black, tried to counteract that inability is the subject of the next chapter.

On the other front, nuanced biblical attacks on American slavery faced rough going precisely because they were nuanced. This position could not simply be read out of any one biblical text; it could not be lifted directly from the page. Rather, it needed patient reflection on the entirety of the Scriptures; it required expert knowledge of the historical circumstances of ancient Near Eastern and Roman slave systems as well as of the actually existing conditions in the slave states; and it demanded that sophisticated interpretative practice replace a commonsensically literal approach to the sacred text. In short, this was an argument of elites requiring that the populace defer to its intellectual betters. As such, it contradicted democratic and republican intellectual instincts. In the culture of the United States, as that culture had been constructed by three generations of evangelical Bible believers, the nuanced biblical argument was doomed.

The question of Scripture and slavery constituted a great problem in 1860 because a biblically inspired people had done so much to construct the country they were now pulling apart. The interpretative practices that had grown up with the great antebellum denominations favored democratic, republican, antitraditional, and commonsensical exegesis. Against this historical background, the biblical proslavery argument seemed very strong, the biblical antislavery argument seemed religiously dangerous, and the nuanced biblical argument against slavery in its American form did not comport well with democratic practice and republican theory. Yet many in the North who because of their commonsensical interpretation of the Bible opposed any use of Scripture to attack slavery were nonetheless uneasy with the system. They were joined by at least a few from the South. Though conservative in their at-

tachment to traditional views of the Bible, they continued to struggle against the all-out proslavery biblicism of the South's great champions.

On the eve of the Civil War, interpretations of the Bible that made the most sense to the broadest public were those that incorporated the defining experiences of America into the hermeneutics used for interpreting what the infallible text actually meant. In this effort, those who like James Henley Thornwell defended the legitimacy of slavery in the Bible had the easiest task. The procedure, which by 1860 had been repeated countless times, was uncomplicated. First, open the Scriptures and read, at say Leviticus 25:45, or, even better, at 1 Corinthians 7:20–21. Second, decide for yourself what these passages mean. Don't wait for a bishop or a king or a president or a meddling Yankee to tell you what the passage means, but decide for yourself. Third, if anyone tries to convince you that you are not interpreting such passages in the natural, commonsensical, ordinary meaning of the words, look hard at what such a one believes with respect to other biblical doctrines. If you find in what he or she says about such doctrines the least hint of unorthodoxy, as inevitably you will, then you may rest assured that you are being asked to give up not only the plain meaning of Scripture, but also the entire trust in the Bible that made the country into such a great Christian civilization.

With debate over the Bible and slavery at such a pass, and especially with the success of the proslavery biblical argument manifestly (if also uncomfortably) convincing to most Southerners and many in the North, difficulties abounded. The country had a problem because its most trusted religious authority, the Bible, was sounding an uncertain note. The evangelical Protestant churches had a problem because the mere fact of trusting implicitly in the Bible was not solving disagreements about what the Bible taught concerning slavery. The country and the churches were both in trouble because the remedy that finally solved the question of how to interpret the Bible was recourse to arms. The supreme crisis over the Bible was that there existed no apparent biblical resolution to the crisis. As I have written elsewhere, it was left to those consummate theologians, the Reverend Doctors Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman, to decide what in fact the Bible actually meant.³⁸

“The negro question lies far deeper than the slave question”

In April 1861, just as the guns were speaking at Fort Sumter, the *Mercersburg Review* published a long article on slavery by the émigré theologian and church historian, Philip Schaff. Schaff, a native Swiss who had studied at Germany's finest universities before accepting a call to the German Reformed seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, was the nation's most versatile religious scholar. He was also one of the era's shrewdest interpreters of American religion to European audiences.¹ Schaff's learned article upheld the conservative position in almost its Southern form with detailed exegesis of the many biblical texts that, in his view, legitimated slavery. Toward the end of his essay, he turned from the general topic of the Bible and slavery to address the particular American situation. In this analysis, Schaff argued that slavery would one day be recognized as “no doubt an immense blessing to the whole race of Ham,” but he also anticipated that “Christian philanthropy” would bring about the gradual, voluntary end of the American slave system. It was for its time and Schaff's place not an unusual performance, with one exception. That exception was Schaff's frank conclusion about the relationship of race to slavery: “The negro question,” as he put it in italics, “lies far deeper than the slavery question.”²

Schaff's lengthy article in the spring of 1861 did not live up to the promise of his own insightful observation, since it did not even raise the question whether the general sanction for slavery he found in the Bible could be applied unambiguously to the black-only form of slavery that existed in the United States. Yet with this elision of questions concerning slavery and questions concerning the enslavement of only African Americans, Schaff was again representative of his age.

What Schaff saw when he defined "the negro question" and "the slavery question" as two distinct matters and what Schaff practiced in assuming that they could be treated as one problem constituted a theological crisis. The crisis created by an inability to distinguish the Bible on race from the Bible on slavery meant that when the Civil War was over and slavery was abolished, systemic racism continued unchecked as the great moral anomaly in a supposedly Christian America. This crisis reflected a greater difficulty than when a large Protestant population drew incommensurate theological conclusions from a commonly exalted sacred text that it approached with common hermeneutical principles.

The crisis identified by Schaff involved two badly handled questions. The first concerned how to regard African Americans and their relationship to Caucasians. This issue pointed to foundational theological difficulties since most of America's white Bible-believing Christians addressed the issue with commonsense solutions derived neither from the Bible nor from the historical storehouse of Christian moral reflection.

The second mishandled question was the issue of what the Bible had to say about the general economic organization of the United States and its practices, potential, and problems. This issue also betrayed theological difficulties because, while oceans of ink were spilled in trying to decide whether the Bible legitimated slavery, far less biblical analysis was devoted to the broader American economy of which slavery was a part and to principles of economic justice. David Brion Davis once highlighted the underpinnings of the confusion involved here: "In the United States . . . the problem of slavery . . . had become fatally intertwined with the problem of race. Race had become the favored idiom for interpreting the social effects of enslavement and emancipation and for concealing the economy's parasitic dependence on an immensely profitable labor system"³—and for concealing as well the challenge posed to capitalist individualism by the patriarchal communalism of the slave South. Buying and selling slaves so monopolized theological attention that little energy remained for evaluating American systems of buying and selling in general.

To be sure, as a number of historians have convincingly demonstrated, Southern defenders of slavery did, in fact, raise serious questions from Scripture about the moral order of an individualistic and profit-mad economy, which they saw as the North's aggressive alternative to a slave order. In

Eugene Genovese's words, the threat was of "a materialistic, marketplace society that promoted competitive individualism and worshiped Mammon." Or, as Kenneth Starnup has put it, the "economically, socially rooted affirmation of slavery was . . . complemented by the Southern ministers' attempt to link abolitionism with Northern greed and selfishness and with a peculiar, destructive distortion of Northern economic sensibility."⁴ Southern critics were joined in their worries by a few political economists from the North like Francis Wayland.⁵ But since most Southern thinking on the economy came to be anathematized because of the prominence it gave to racial slavery, and since Northerners like Wayland, as if in exhaustion, gave up theological analysis of the economy once slavery had been eliminated, Christian attention to the larger economic questions tailed off dramatically after the end of the Civil War.

For the religious history of the 1860s, the restriction of serious theological analysis to slavery alone, at the expense of theological attention to the economy as a whole, was less important than the confusion between slavery as such and America's system of black-only slavery. But if this book were extended to the postbellum period, it would be pertinent to ask if "victory" in the constitutional elimination of slavery—accompanied as it was by a general retreat from theological analysis of economic issues—did not contribute to the parlous economic-religious history of the latter nineteenth century. In an oversimplified picture, those were years when a commercial capitalism far larger and more all-encompassing than ever imagined by the probusiness Whigs of the antebellum era came to exert an unprecedented influence in American society; when many of the Protestants who had once guided national life retreated from efforts at shaping society in order to cultivate private gardens of inward spiritual development; and when potentially innovative religious convictions among newer immigrant groups (Catholic, Lutheran, Jewish) were only inching toward broad public commentary on economic issues.⁶

In that postbellum climate, Southern Christian defenses of patriarchal communalism were fatally compromised by their association with slavery, and Northern Christian assessments of economic principle ran out of steam after human bondage was brought to an end. The result was theological weakness in the face of pressing economic circumstances: while there was a heightened capacity to produce wealth, there was also a heightened capacity

to produce alienation and vast economic inequality. These issues were eventually addressed practically by pietists like the Salvation Army and theoretically by leaders of the Social Gospel, yet theological incoherence in the face of modern economic realities has remained a major problem for Christian thinking ever since the Civil War.

During the years of the Civil War and before, however, confusion between race and slavery was a more pressing concern than the dynamics of the economy. In this chapter, therefore, we look first at several clear statements from white commentators to show that the confusion between slavery in the abstract and the enslavement of only African Americans was apparent to at least some contemporary observers. Then an attempt is made to explain why considerations of slavery at the time so systematically took for granted – rather than confronted – issues of race. Finally, it is important to ask how Bible-believing African Americans brought Scripture to bear on these questions. Not surprisingly, what they found in the Bible was very different from the scriptural word proclaimed by the defenders of slavery, though the word they found was just as clear and reassuring.

Black Slavery, White Slavery

One of the strongest indications of the prevailing racism of the mid-nineteenth century was that Bible expositors could not get Americans to take as seriously what Scripture said about the color of biblical slaves as what it said about slavery itself. Some secular thinkers, like George Fitzhugh and James Hammond, were, in fact, aware that proving slavery by the Bible might be proving too much.⁷ More so than most religious figures, they were open to the idea of enslaving whites as well as blacks. But the possibility that Scripture might sanction slavery for whites, unlike the general defense of slavery from the Bible, got nowhere with the general public.

Debate in Kentucky over a new state constitution in 1849 allowed two opponents of slavery in that state to make a forceful case for the Bible's color-blindness. James M. Pendleton, whose efforts at differentiating "slavery in the abstract" from "slavery in the concrete" we observed in the last chapter, also attacked the axiomatic link between slavery and black-only American slavery. When responding to an opponent who claimed that the slave system as it existed in the United States promoted the "holiness and happiness"

of slaves, Pendleton played what he considered the unbeatable race card: "If then it could be established that slavery promotes the holiness and happiness of slaves, it would follow that as it does not promote the holiness and happiness of the white population it would be well for white people to be enslaved in order to their holiness and happiness."⁸

Even stronger arguments were heard during that same Kentucky debate from John G. Fee, an independent-minded minister who was among the South's most forceful opponents of the slave system. In his battle to convince Kentuckians that "caste" (that is, race) was the deeper evil that propped up slavery itself, Fee pushed well beyond other Kentucky emancipationists like Robert Breckinridge, a Presbyterian controversialist who took much heat for his lifelong opposition to slavery, but who also favored the colonization scheme as a way of avoiding the "amalgamation" of the races.⁹

In a series of pamphlets from the mid-1840s, Fee offered a full arsenal of biblical antislavery armament. In fact, he provided so many arguments, and of so many kinds, that his sharp analysis of the racial situation seems to have been lost in the tussle. As an example, in 1851 he published a substantial pamphlet that included the bold declaration that American slavery, "by whomsoever caused, is always sinful," and he did not hesitate to claim that "the plain principles of the Bible (justice, mercy, impartial love) are opposed to slavery." Amid this fusillade of argumentation more characteristic of radical abolitionists who played fast and loose with Scripture, strict attention was paid to race. Thus Fee argued that if the slavery of African Americans was defended because as a race they were less intelligent or had darker skin, the logic led to an absurd conclusion: "The fact that one man, or race of men, may have more intellectual capacity than another man, or race of men, gives no just ground for enslaving the inferior; otherwise the most intellectual man that exists may have a right to enslave every other man – white and black. . . . Otherwise, he who has a fairer skin . . . than you or I, may have a right to enslave us; and the fairest man in the world may enslave every other man."¹⁰

Most pointed of all was Fee's direct reasoning from the Bible. Let us grant, he supposed, that the New Testament never condemned the enslavement by Rome of those it conquered in Germany, Gaul, Spain, Greece, Egypt, and so forth. "What," he asked, "was the complexion of these nations?" His answer was that "most were as white or whiter than the Romans themselves." Con-

sequently, if in general "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."¹¹

However slight was the hearing gained by Pendleton and Fee through such polemics, at least one ex-Kentuckian was able to use the Bible in a similar way during the course of later political strife. In a speech in Cincinnati in the late summer of 1859, Abraham Lincoln continued his ongoing exploration of the era's political crises by responding to what Senator Stephen A. Douglas had only shortly before told an audience in the same city. Lincoln acknowledged that some in Kentucky were "trying to show that slavery existed in the Bible times by Divine ordinance." He paused to pay a back-handed compliment to Senator Douglas for not picking up on this argument. "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."¹² As it happened, however, that thought did not "occur" to many of those who, in the North as well as in the South, interpreted the Scriptures as justifying American slavery.

Had white Protestants been following the Bible as carefully as they claimed, they could not have so casually dismissed the biblical interpretations advanced by Pendleton and Fee and mentioned by Lincoln. The inability to propose a biblical scheme of slavery that would take in all races reveals that factors other than simple fidelity to Scripture were exerting great influence as well. Personal interest, as satirized by Harriet Beecher Stowe, was certainly a factor. Even more important was the unbiblical assumption that slavery could only mean black slavery.

Experience, Common Sense, and Race

No biblical warrant existed for the assumption that slavery could only mean black slavery except the often refuted application of the "curse of Ham" that, according to Genesis, chapter 9, doomed Ham's progeny, Canaan, to servitude.¹³ Rather, it was acceptance of black racial inferiority that supplied the missing term to many of the arguments that defended American slavery by appeal to Scripture. Especially in an age like our own that has become sanctimonious about its ability to discern the evils of race, class, and gender stereo-

typing, it is important to attend carefully to the texts of an earlier era when different presuppositions prevailed. What such attention reveals is that opponents of slavery often had the same difficulty as its defenders in recognizing the large role that extrabiblical racial axioms played in their arguments, even when they professed to be arguing from the Bible alone. Laura Mitchell has put the matter well in her study of religious responses to the Compromise of 1850. As she describes them, antebellum Bible readers encountered difficulty when they attempted scriptural interpretations of American events because the Old and New Testaments "describe specific situations whose applicability to the antebellum United States was complicated and imperfect. The passages raised many questions that could not be answered within the body of the text." First among the difficulties was race. In Mitchell's terms, "Even the most committed abolitionists often had trouble perceiving blacks as 'beloved' brothers."¹⁴

Among early antislavery advocates in the late eighteenth century, there may have been more awareness than among antebellum Americans of the weight that preconceptions about race exerted on arguments about slavery. Two of America's most active early opponents of slavery were Benjamin Rush, a Philadelphia physician and all-purpose polemicist, and Samuel Hopkins, the student of Jonathan Edwards who at the time of the American War of Independence was a Congregationalist minister in Newport, Rhode Island. In carefully argued works published when protests against "British tyranny" were coming to a climax in the colonies, Rush and Hopkins both turned to the Bible as much to justify the full human dignity of Africans as to refute the biblical defense of slavery. Together they acknowledged that God, for his own purposes, had allowed the ancient Hebrews to make slaves of non-Hebrews. But they also held that this was only a temporary expedient designed to preserve the Israelites from intermarriage, which would have thwarted the good that God intended to bestow on all humanity through the promised Jewish messiah, Jesus Christ.

In the Christian era, however, these authors held that such racial discrimination was no longer appropriate. On the subject of race, Rush contended that Africans "are equal to the Europeans, when we allow for the diversity of temper and genius which is occasioned by climate." Any vices that seemed to be more prevalent among African Americans than among whites had resulted from "the genuine offspring of slavery" itself.¹⁵ For Hopkins, the Bible

as a whole spoke against any special designation of blacks as due subjects for slavery or of Europeans as their due masters. Moreover, the fact that Jews once held non-Jews as slaves offered just as strong a rationale for modern blacks to enslave whites as vice versa.¹⁶

It may be true, as David Brion Davis has suggested, that Rush, Hopkins, and other early opponents of slavery made a fatal concession when they acknowledged that Israel's need for racial purity justified slavery in the ancient world. A practice once acknowledged as historical precedent might be revived for modern use.¹⁷ But Rush and Hopkins insisted so stoutly on both the uniqueness of Jewish experience and the racial equality of contemporary blacks and whites that if they offered any support for later biblical defenses of slavery, it was very slim indeed.

An indication of how the landscape shifted in the decades that followed is provided by the instructive case of Moses Stuart. Stuart's reputation as America's most competent Bible scholar, which was based on a parade of learned grammars, commentaries, and treatises published from the 1810s into the 1850s, was well earned. That reputation wore a special luster because great learning had not turned him away from the practical piety he had maintained as a loyal son of New England's revival tradition. As we have seen, Stuart's 1850 monograph, *Conscience and the Constitution*, was notable for its combination of exegetical rigor (defending the divine permission of slavery) and pastoral unction (urging the South to follow scriptural principle and start to dismantle the slave system). Its treatment of one of the most important passages to figure in debate over fugitive slave provisions in the Compromise of 1850 was also noteworthy for what it assumed about race.

The passage was Deuteronomy 23:15-16: "Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee. He shall dwell with thee, even among you, in that place which he shall choose in one of thy gates, where it liketh him best; they shalt not oppress him."¹⁸ Opponents of fugitive slave laws claimed that the Bible at this place stood unequivocally on their side. Stuart begged to differ.

To Stuart, this injunction from Deuteronomy took for granted that the escaped servant (or slave) had to have come from outside Israel, from "a heathen master."¹⁹ Otherwise, if it had been a slave escaped from a Hebrew master, "restoration, or restitution, if we may judge by the tenor of other property-laws among the Hebrews, would have surely been enjoined." Stuart held that

God's treatment of Israel, as his "chosen people," was singular by being designed to preserve them from "all tangling alliances and connections with the heathen." Thus when a slave escaped from one of Israel's neighbors, it was a humanitarian gesture not to return the slave, and it amounted also to an evangelistic gesture since the slave could come to know the true God. Such an escaped slave might even be circumcised and so come to enjoy all the benefits of solidarity with the chosen people.

If, however, the slave had escaped from a fellow Hebrew, everything was different. Since Jewish slave laws were relatively mild, since property laws among the Jews were strict, and since the slave of a Hebrew was already being instructed in God's law, any slave escaped from a fellow Hebrew had to be returned to his or her rightful owner.

As Stuart then turned to the American situation, exegesis receded and assumptions advanced. He first declared that the United States was "one nation — one so-called Christian nation" and that "Christianity is a national religion among us." Of course, not everyone in the country was personally a Christian believer, but almost all of the American people "profess to respect Christianity, and appeal to its precepts as a test of morals, and as furnishing us with the rules of life." The fact of American national Christianity meant that Northerners could not look upon slave masters in the South "as heathen in our sight." Because there were so many true believers in the South, "a bond-man, fleeing from them to us, is a case of just the same kind as would have been presented among the Hebrews, if a Hebrew bond-man had fled from the tribe of Judah to that of Benjamin." In that case, the response was clear: the slave must be returned, since "we do not send back the refugee from the South to a heathen nation or tribe." At this point, Stuart's sturdy federalism joined his sharp sense of American chosenness to drive home a firm conclusion:

But be the master as he may, since we of the North are only other tribes of the same great commonwealth, we cannot sit in judgment on cruel masters belonging to tribes different from our own, and having, by solemn compact, a separate and independent jurisdiction in respect to all matters of justice between man and man, with which no stranger can on any pretence whatever intermeddle. . . . The Mosaic law does not authorize us to reject the claims of our fellow countrymen and citizens,

for strayed or stolen property—property authorized and guaranteed as such by Southern States to their respective citizens. These States are not heathen. We have acknowledged them as brethren and fellow citizens of the great community. A fugitive from them is not a fugitive from an idolatrous and polytheistic people.²⁰

The force of Stuart's application of this passage from Deuteronomy 23 to the United States in 1850 depended on two premises imported into his argument. Each of these premises contradicted what Stuart, as a formidable Calvinist theologian, otherwise held concerning God's work in history.

The first imported premise was the belief that the American states were analogous to the tribes of Israel. Although this notion was widespread at the time, standard Reformed theology taught that God's purposes for Israel had been fulfilled in his creation of the Christian church for all times and places. Israel had indeed borne the promise of God uniquely for many centuries, but then the appearance of Christ broadened out those promises to all who turned to Christ in faith. As Samuel Hopkins had written in his own pamphlet on the subject of slavery in 1776: "This distinction [between Israel and other nations] is now at an end, and all nations are put on a level; and Christ, who has taken down the wall of separation, has taught us to look on all nations as our neighbours and brethren, without any respect of persons, and to love all men as ourselves, and to do to others as we would they should treat us; by which he most effectually abolished this permission given to the Jews."²¹

Stuart himself, in a commentary on the book of Romans that long represented the American ideal for close scriptural exegesis, concluded just about the same when he considered the Jews and Gentiles whom Paul treated in Romans 9 through 11. In the Christian dispensation, God regards all nationalities the same, "without any respect of persons" (on Romans 9:25); again, "the goodness of God is not limited to the Jewish nation, but equally professed to all" (on Romans 10:12); and, in conclusion, "the apostle has shown once more . . . that the Gentiles stand on an equal footing with the Jews, as to gospel privileges, and that God may, in perfect consistency with his ancient promises and declarations, cast off the Jews, when they persist in unbelief, and receive believing Gentiles as his people in their stead" (on Romans

10:21).²² By the light of Stuart's own Calvinism, therefore, the analogy between American states and Hebrew tribes was impossible.

The second imported premise was that the federal union (even with its shaky analogy to Old Testament Israel) created a higher organic bond than the bond constituted by the unity of all Christian believers in the church. Early in the development of British antislavery, some evangelicals had contended that converted slaves must be treated as full members of the Body of Christ, his church, and thus as full fellow members of Spiritual Israel. This Spiritual Israel, in turn, deserved a higher loyalty than the loyalty appropriate for any man-made entity, including the nation-state. Proslavery advocates had turned aside this argument, in part because leading early evangelicals like George Whitefield had denied that Christian conversion should affect the status of slaves.²³ But they had not succeeded in silencing those who felt that biblical teaching about oneness in Christ superseded the sanction Scripture offered to modern tribal nationalism.

Stuart, however, did not seem to feel that escaped slaves—considered as either Christians or potential Christians—had a higher claim on fellow believers than did Southern slaveholders considered as fellow American citizens. Rather, by overriding his commitment to standard Reformed theology, Stuart's strong sense of American national messianism constrained his interpretation of Scripture. Even for this rightly honored defender of strict biblical exegesis, race exerted a powerful sway. White fellow Americans counted for more than black fellow Christians. Analogical Israel meant more than Spiritual Israel. A dubious theological warrant (treating America as the chosen people) exerted more force than a strong theological warrant (including blacks in the fellowship of the church).

The bearing of racist thinking on biblical defenders of slavery who did not share Stuart's desire to promote voluntary emancipation was much stronger. Thornton Stringfellow, a Virginia Baptist who published several of the era's most influential treatises laying out the biblical sanction for slavery, offers an instructive example.²⁴ At least some of his books depended as much on his experience with African Americans as on his reading of Scripture. Thus, in a work titled *Slavery, Its Origin, Nature, and History Considered in the Light of Bible Teachings, Moral Justice, and Political Wisdom* (1861), Stringfellow moved

unself-consciously between dictates of Scripture and conclusions from ex-

perience. While the Bible was the prime authority to defend the legitimacy of slavery, it was otherwise when Stringfellow showed why blacks, and blacks only, were the proper subjects of enslavement. Unlike white children, who eventually grew out of a state of dependency, or white convicts, who by their own actions put themselves into penal servitude, the members of "the African race" were suited to "domestic slavery for life," Stringfellow thought, "because they are not qualified to use political freedom, and because they receive the full due for this [slave] service and labor, and that in a form accommodated to the service they pay for it." Stringfellow was sure about this conclusion, but not because he found it in the Bible: "The African race is constitutionally inferior to the white race. Experience proves this in all the conditions and countries they have ever occupied."²⁵

For other biblical defenders of slavery, like James Henley Thornwell, "common sense" supplied the premises that Thornton Stringfellow found in "experience." Thornwell, an exemplary Southern theologian, was also exemplary in the clarity of his prose. In 1861 when he was asked by the newly organized Southern Presbyterian church to address European Christians on reasons for secession, Thornwell began with a profession to reason by Scripture alone. That pledge deserves full quotation as one of his era's strongest statements of its type:

As a Church, let it be distinctly borne in mind that the only rule of judgment is the written word of God. The Church knows nothing of the intuitions of reason or the deductions of philosophy, except those reproduced in the Sacred Canon. She has a positive Constitution in the Holy Scriptures, and has no right to utter a single syllable upon any subject, except as the Lord puts words in her mouth. She is founded, in other words, upon express revelation. Her creed is an authoritative testimony of God, and not a speculation; and what she proclaims, she must proclaim with the infallible certitude of faith, and not with the hesitating assent of an opinion.²⁶

A few pages further on, however, when Thornwell took up treatment of African American slaves, biblical warrant faded into the background. As was then customary, he first simply took for granted that the only slaves would be Africans. Then he offered a series of conclusions based on anything but the explicit guidance of Scripture.

- Justification for enslaving blacks only rested on Thornwell's own judgment: "As long as that race, in its comparative degradation, co-exists side by side with the whites, bondage is its *normal* condition."
- Thornwell's conclusion that, in the scale of races, African slaves were "at the bottom of the line" and did not deserve what was "out of proportion to [their] capacity and culture" rested on his assessment of the past. People "are distributed into classes, according to their competency and progress. For God is in history."
- Finally, in defending Southern slavery, Thornwell said that he would need "some eternal test" to justify the system. At this point, especially after the profession of sole scriptural authority that began his argument, one would expect to find a biblical text. But, no, it was rather to "an inward necessity of thought, which in all minds at the proper stage of maturity, is absolutely universal" that he appealed. And he concluded, "Whatever is universal is natural. We are willing that Slavery should be tried by this standard."²⁷

Thornwell's letter was a breathtaking performance in an era filled with such pyrotechnics. It was matched in its bold biblicism and self-contradicting audacity only by Henry Ward Beecher's claim, made just a few months earlier, that slavery had no chance to survive in those civilizations where the Bible was read freely without prelate or priest.

WITH ONLY a few exceptions, during the antebellum era confusion beset whites who turned to Scripture for guidance on slavery. The exceptions included bold, but ignored, figures like John G. Fee who insisted on taking the Bible very seriously; if the United States were to sanction slavery on the basis of Scripture, then let it be slavery without distinction of color as was the slavery of biblical times. Fee's argument was logical. But because it appeared amid the standard repertoire of abolitionist denunciations of bondage per se, majority religious opinion dismissed it with the same nervousness that it dismissed the claim that the Bible ruled out slavery without qualification. Much more common was the not so logical argument that since the Bible allowed slavery, it provided sanction for American slavery. Had American Bible believers faced squarely the illogic of this reasoning, especially where it confused slavery with black-only slavery, there is no telling what would have happened. Too many interests, political entanglements, economic commit-

ments, and sectional tensions existed for any painless solution. The one certainty is that the use of Scripture would have become more complicated. If white Americans, North and South, could have recognized the disjunction between what the Bible taught about slavery and what experience together with common sense taught about race, they could not have been as convinced that they had discovered the mind of the Lord.

But, of course, whites were not the only ones looking to Scripture for a sure word.

African Americans, the Bible, and Slavery

By the time of the Civil War, there existed a substantial history of African American biblical commentary on slavery. Considering the circumstances, in which opportunities for both education and church leadership were limited, it was also a history rich in specific theological argument. The pervasive biblicism of black spirituals and black preaching provides solid evidence for how deeply Scripture had entered into African American consciousness.²⁸ The record is equally clear from written sources. For example, the *Christian Recorder*, a weekly paper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church that began publication in the mid-1850s, was as evangelically Scripture-saturated as any comparable periodical in the English-speaking world. Without exception, each issue showered readers with the Scriptures: Bible-based homilies, injunctions to piety from Scripture, reports on Bible distribution at home and abroad, and frequent articles directly supporting the supernatural character and divine authority of the sacred text. Among countless instances was the issue of April 13, 1861: on the same page the editors turned to "the Holy Word of God" to take the measure of "the present crisis" and defended Scripture as the "doctrinal basis of Christianity" by saying that "errors of faith always lead to errors of life . . . unbelief in the doctrines of the Bible will sooner or later lead to a rejection of Christianity."²⁹ In fact, so securely did the Bible become the book for black Americans that in the years before the Civil War there seems to have been a diminishing need to rehearse arguments from the Bible against slavery. As was true for much of white Protestant Christendom outside the United States, scriptural antislavery had simply become instinctive.

Yet if African Americans ever felt the need for arguments to match those of the learned exegetes who found sanction for slavery in the Bible, they were

ready to hand.³⁰ Beginning in the early years of the century, black ministers and other careful Bible readers had responded critically and creatively to biblical interpretation moving the other way. A panoply of such arguments can be found scattered in several works that I draw on here, which were spread throughout the antebellum period:

- ▶ Daniel Coker's *Dialogue between a Virginian and an African Minister* (1810) advanced at least seven biblical arguments against slavery as it then existed in the United States. Coker was one of Richard Allen's first colleagues as a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.³¹
- ▶ In an unusually full sermon from 1813, Lemuel Haynes, a Congregational minister in Vermont, set out a picture of human relationships, including slavery, that drew on the theological principles he had learned from the works of Jonathan Edwards.³²
- ▶ In 1829 David Walker, a free black in Boston, published the era's most widely noticed attack on the slave system by an African American. His *Appeal . . . to the Coloured Citizens of the World* was unusual for both its militancy and its explicit Christian argumentation. The work's most striking feature was Walker's prediction, based on scriptural precept, that the United States would soon be destroyed because of its sins as a slaveholding nation.³³
- ▶ Only a few years after the appearance of Walker's tract, Daniel Ruggles of New York City used Scripture as the foundation for a scathing indictment of the sexual license that accompanied American slavery.³⁴
- ▶ Better known was the work of Frederick Douglass, who in his newspapers regularly published biblical articles from others and who himself in March 1861 drew on the Bible when he attacked "the pro-slavery mob and the pro-slavery ministry."³⁵
- ▶ At about the same time, the *Christian Recorder* was running a long series titled "Chapters on Ethnology," in which reflection on biblical accounts of early humanity was prominent.³⁶

With even this limited range of sermons, tracts, dialogues, and periodical articles, the diversity of biblical argumentation was striking.

As might be expected, the abolitionist claim that the "spirit" or general principles of the Bible condemned slavery was prominent in works by African Americans. Daniel Coker, for example, emphasized "the unreasonableness of

perpetual unconditional slavery" in light of "the righteous and benevolent doctrines and duties, taught in the New Testament." 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") pointed to only one conclusion: "It is very evident, that slavery is contrary to the spirit and nature of the Christian religion."³⁷ Frederick Douglass was characteristically more impassioned, but less precise, when he made roughly the same point in 1861: "It would be insulting to Common Sense, an outrage upon all right feeling, for us, who have worn the heavy chain and felt the biting lash to consent to argue with Ecclesiastical Sneaks who are thus prostituting their Religion and Bible to the base uses of popular and profitable iniquity. They don't need light, but the sting of honest rebuke. They are of their father the Devil, and his works they do, not because they are ignorant, but because they are base."³⁸ To African Americans it seemed clearer than to all others that slavery contradicted the Scriptures in general.

Arguments from broad biblical principle were not, however, as frequent as interpretations pointed specifically to concrete features of the American slavery system. Thus much of this black writing simply bypassed the general question of the legitimacy of slavery as such in order to focus on anti-Christian aspects of the system in practice. This was the entire burden of Daniel Ruggles's pamphlet on the immoralities occasioned by American slavery. Ruggles took Psalm 50:18 as his text: "When thou sawest a thief, then thou consentedst with him, and hast been partaker with adulterers." His indictment was based on "four of the principal facts connected with the condition of female slaves": the rise in the number of mulattoes who "incontestably demonstrate the wide spread and incessant licentiousness of the white population"; the inability of black women to resist the advances of white males since "there is no law to preserve them, and no protecting authority to which they can appeal"; the manifest temptation from "pecuniary advantage" to slave owners who tried to breed as many slaves as possible; and the fact that in American slavery "the matrimonial connection among the slaves is altogether nullified."³⁹ In light of these conditions, Ruggles urged Christian believers to recognize the existence of a spiritual crisis and to meet that crisis with "evangelical weapons."⁴⁰ One such weapon proposed by Ruggles was for "female members of our Northern Christian churches" to rise up and "slay this hydra-headed monster of corruption and wo [sic]." Ruggles ap-

pealed particularly for them to denounce "slaveholding" as such, but his reasoning homed in on practices associated with the American system. Women church members should especially demand that "perpetual and impenitent transgressors of the seventh [adultery] and eighth [stealing] commandments" be ejected from the churches.⁴¹ By describing slavery as it actually existed, Ruggles felt he could exploit explicit biblical commands against adultery and stealing to demand an end to the system.

Other black authors rang the changes on a full catalog of practices prohibited by Scripture that they saw as intrinsic to American slavery. Daniel Coker, for example, complained that slaves were regularly "deprived of instruction in the doctrines, and duties of religion."⁴² David Walker was even more aggressive. In his view, Roman slavery "was, comparatively speaking, no more than a gypher, when compared with ours under the Americans." Walker cited many aspects of American slavery that he contended the Scriptures condemned. Especially galling to him was the treatment of slave children, which he felt involved constant violation of Jesus' command from Matthew 18:6: "Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea." Walker had only scorn for disregard of such passages: "Now the avaricious Americans think that the Lord Jesus Christ will let them off, because his words are no more than the words of a man!!" Such rhetoric struck fear into some white hearts, in part because of its vehemence, but also because of how effectively Walker evoked the Scriptures: "Will not those who were burnt up in Sodom and Gomorrah rise up in judgment against Christian Americans with the Bible in their hands and condemn them?"⁴³

As might be expected, black opponents of slavery did not limit themselves to biblical arguments; they ranged widely in making their case. As white antislavery advocates had been doing since the Revolution, black abolitionists cited inconsistencies between the United States' stated republican ideals and the practice of slavery. In 1813 Lemuel Haynes praised George Washington for recognizing that religious virtue was required for a republic to flourish. He then pointed to slavery as illustrating how Washington's dedication to both religion and republicanism was not being honored by the Virginians who came after him. In referring to Washington's last will and testament, Haynes proclaimed, "He was an enemy to slaveholding, and gave his

dying testimony against it, by emancipating, and providing for those under his care. O that his jealous surviving neighbors would prove themselves to be his legitimate children, and go and do likewise!"⁴⁴ Fifteen years later, David Walker made a similar point dramatically: "Can there be a greater absurdity in nature [than slavery], and particularly in a free republican country! . . . Americans! I ask you candidly, was your suffering under Great Britain, one hundredth part as evil and tyrannical as you have rendered ours under you?"⁴⁵

Other pragmatic arguments were more religious, as in the repeated refrain about the damage done by slavery to American missionary efforts. Daniel Coker recounted the story of a band of Native Americans who, upon being approached by American missionaries, took counsel together before concluding: "The white people made slaves of the black people, and if they had it in their power, they would make slaves of the Indians; they therefore wanted no such religion."⁴⁶ Such reasoning was a staple.⁴⁷

Although they skillfully presented other arguments, black Christians returned consistently to reasoning from Scripture. The grounding of American slavery in race prejudice was, not surprisingly, a regular theme. David Walker and Frederick Douglass underscored this point vehemently, while the *Christian Recorder* made it with subtlety. Walker appealed to the "Great Commission" from Matthew 28:18–20, where the resurrected Christ sends out his followers to "teach all nations . . . to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." Walker berated his white readers with a challenge: "You have the Bible in your hands with this very injunction – Have you been to Africa, teaching the inhabitants thereof the words of the Lord Jesus?" No, it was just the reverse. Americans "entered among us, and learnt us the art of throat-cutting, by setting us to fight, one against another, to take each other as prisoners of war, and sell to you for small bits of calicoes, old swords, knives, etc. to make slaves for you and your children." To Walker, such behavior was a direct contradiction of Scripture: "Can the American preachers appeal unto God, the Maker and Searcher of hearts, and tell him, with the Bible in their hands, that they made no distinction on account of men's colour?"⁴⁸

Frederick Douglass said about the same when in early 1861 he spotlighted race as the keystone of American slavery: "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 Chris-

tianity. . . . 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. Those who shout and rejoice over the progress of Liberty in Italy, would mob down, pray and preach down Liberty at home as an unholy and hateful thing."⁴⁹

In contrast to Walker and Douglass, the anonymous scholar who in 1861 contributed the "Chapters on Ethnology" to the *Christian Recorder* developed his subject with patient care. Yet his conclusion was the same: distinctions among the races of the sort that allowed for American slavery had no basis in reliable history or proper biblical authority. Against the rising scholarly notion that humankind had descended from many sources, the *Christian Recorder* responded that "the Jewish and Christian Scriptures . . . plainly teach, that mankind, of whatever race, family, or tribe, have descended from a single pair of progenitors." Details about early humans were not taught in the New Testament, except that nothing could be "more pointed and striking than the language of the Apostle Paul to the Athenians at Mars Hill, when he said: 'God hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation'" (Acts 17:26).⁵⁰

In the arsenal of African American biblical antislavery were also several instances of sophisticated interpretive reasoning. Daniel Coker offered one of the earliest and most theologically profound. His text was Genesis 17:13, where Abraham is commanded to circumcise his slaves ("He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money").⁵¹ Proslavery Bible readers often used this text to argue that since God regulated slaveholding by Abraham, the father of all believers, slaveholding was legitimate for other believers in other times and places. Coker, however, went further by expanding on the second part of the same verse: "and my covenant [says God] shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant." He pointed out that "this law of circumcision" was a central part of biblical religion and that circumcision was "a token of that covenant, by which . . . the land of Canaan, and various privileges in it, were promised to Abraham and to his seed, and to all that were included in the covenant." To Coker, this last provision was critical. God's covenant promises were meant for "all . . . to whom circumcision [which was the token of the covenant] was administered." This inclusion extended to the one who "was bought with money." Therefore, all the benefits of God's covenant promises were extended to slaves whom Abraham purchased and

whom he then, on God's command, circumcised. But once they were circumcised, "these persons bought with money, were no longer looked upon as uncircumcised and useless; as aliens and strangers; but were incorporated with the church and nation of the Israelites, and became one people with them." Consequently, once purchased slaves had been circumcised, they were part of Israel. And so the children of such circumcised slaves "were the servants of the Lord, in the same sense as the natural descendants of Abraham were" — which meant that, as naturalized Israelites, these children of circumcised slaves could not be sold as slaves themselves (Coker quoted Leviticus 25:42 and 54, with the prohibitions against Jews' enslaving other Jews). To Coker, the conclusion was inescapable: "The passage of scripture under consideration was so far from authorizing the Israelites to make slaves of their servants [sic] children, that they evidently forbid it; and therefore, are so far from proving the lawfulness of your enslaving the children of the Africans, that they clearly condemn the practice as criminal."

Coker's argument required concentration to follow since he was enlisting passages from several parts of the Pentateuch and then linking them into a single chain of reasoning. Yet it was a theologically powerful argument. In particular, he was taking seriously the principles of theological inclusion that would later prove so difficult for Moses Stuart. For Coker, once an Old Testament slave had been circumcised, enslavement of that circumcised slave's children was impossible, because circumcision represented God's incorporation of the slave into Israel. By implication, when in the modern era Africans were enslaved and, in consequence of that enslavement, brought under the preaching of the Christian gospel, their situation became analogous to the slaves of the Old Testament. As "spiritual Israel," Christianity bestowed on those grafted in as converts all the privileges that it offered to those who were raised in Christian homes.

Coker's voice is so clear in its reasoning that it is worth hearing him further when, at the end of his discussion of Genesis 17, he summarizes what was different about Old Testament history: "The Israelites were not sent by a divine mandate, to nations three hundred miles distant, who were neither doing, nor meditating any thing against them, and to whom they had no right whatever, in order to captivate them by fraud or force; tare [sic] them away from their native country, and all their tender connections; bind them in chains and fetters; croud [sic] into ships, and there murder them by thou-

sands, for want of air and proper exercise; and then doom the survivors and their posterity to bondage and misery forever."⁵²

Only shortly after Coker, the African Methodist Episcopal itinerant from Virginia, published his dialogue against slavery, Lemuel Haynes, the regular Congregationalist minister from Vermont, preached a doctrinally rich sermon, "Dissimulation Illustrated," at a commemoration of George Washington's birthday on February 22, 1813. Haynes's text, Romans 12:9 ("Let love be without dissimulation"), gave him full scope to criticize the dissimulation, or deceitful hypocrisy, that he saw in both President Madison's conduct of the War of 1812 and the American support for slavery. Near the start, he paused to lay a theological foundation, which he took from Jonathan Edwards's theory of true virtue.⁵³ To Edwards, virtue had meant treating any object in accord with its quality of being. Since God was ultimate Being, God deserved to be approached with ultimate love. And since humans were made in God's image, they deserved to be approached with proportionate love. Without this "regard" for "beings according to their magnitude and importance," as Haynes put it, the result would be only "pretences of love to mankind, and to our country." The spiritual truth Haynes wanted to teach was that if people attempted to love their fellow humans (lesser beings) without honoring God first (highest Being), "it [would be] highly posterous."⁵⁴

The reverse relationship allowed Haynes to make political points related to the War of 1812. He asked his listeners to judge whether "the warm zeal, party spirit, war and blood-shed" that then prevailed in the United States reflected the sort of benevolence to lesser beings that true love to God as highest Being required. Haynes obviously felt that President Madison's dragging of New England into war with Britain failed this test of benevolence: "Benevolent affection will dispose men to make a proper estimate, or set a suitable value on things; men's lives are not to be trifled with, or vainly thrown away." Haynes, quoting the Apostle Paul's description of rulers in Romans 13, urged proper regard for proper government. But "unbounded" power was something else — it revived "the old tory spirit that was among us in our old revolutionary war."⁵⁵

Almost as if in passing, Haynes then turned his combination of Edwardsean theology, republican ideology, and dissatisfaction with Madison into an assault on slavery. First, he expressed his sympathy for impressed sailors whose liberty was forfeited and who (in republican parlance) were languish-

ing "in slavery" to the British. But then Haynes twisted the dagger: "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!" His conclusion tied antislavery back to the theme of his sermon: "Partial affection, or distress for some of our fellow-creatures, while others, even under our notice, are wholly disregarded, betrays dissimulation."⁵⁶ From his objections to Madison's war effort and as guided by the theology of Jonathan Edwards, Haynes fashioned a sophisticated theological weapon against the continuation of slavery in the United States.

AFRICAN AMERICAN theology never exerted broad influence in antebellum society, but it did include several lines of rigorous antislavery biblical interpretation. As with theological efforts that enjoyed broader influence, the ability to act on messages purportedly from the Bible depended on the circumstances in which those messages were received as well as on the messages themselves. For African Americans, circumstances were as unpropitious as at least some of their arguments were strong.

The Shape of a Crisis

Despite what African American readers of the Bible concluded, the belief that the Scriptures sanctioned slavery in its black-only American form held sway among many white Northerners into the early months of the war – and among many white Southerners long thereafter. Several reasons, which were deeply rooted in broad American circumstances, made proslavery biblical interpretations seem more persuasive than antislavery readings. The first was abolitionist overstatement. When abolitionists maintained that the Bible condemned slavery *per se*, they contradicted conclusions that the vast majority of white Americans drew from Scripture by using the same interpretive principles almost everyone had employed in drawing on the Bible for evangelizing the nation and constructing American civilization.

As a consequence, abolitionist efforts left the impression in many minds that to employ Scripture for opposing slavery had to undercut the authority of Scripture itself. In particular, arguments that contrasted the principles

or the "spirit" of the Bible with the clear message of individual texts (its "letter") were gravely suspect in a culture of democratic common sense that urged people to read and decide for themselves.

Capable arguments, which drew on interpretive methods endorsed by a vast majority of Americans (of all colors, regions, and religions), also demonstrated that the Bible allowed – and perhaps even sanctioned – slavery as an economic system.

Nonetheless, polemicists against slavery did succeed in gaining substantial agreement, even in large parts of the South, that the American slave system was beset with sinful practices (or, to slavery defenders, "abuses"), such as the breakup of families, sexual predations, the withholding of education, and what the Bible called "manstealing" (whether by original slave traders or later slave sellers). Antislavery polemicists did not succeed, however, in convincing many Caucasian Americans that sinful practices, or abuses, deligitimated the institution itself. The weight tipping the scales against that conclusion was whites' inability to regard African Americans as fully human, whether defined by classical Christian theologies or defined by American republican ideology.

It was the same with arguments pointing out that slavery in the Bible was colorblind. Proslavery forces never mounted even the beginnings of a successful counterargument against this conclusion. No matter. So seriously fixed in the minds of white Americans, including most abolitionists, was the certainty of black racial inferiority that it overwhelmed biblical testimony about race, even though most Protestant Americans claimed that Scripture was in fact their supreme authority in adjudicating such matters.

Finally, testimony from African American Bible readers, which was surprisingly rich under the circumstances, was never taken seriously. With the same skill as their white confreres, but with even more passion, African Americans deployed biblical arguments against slavery. Lemuel Haynes and Daniel Coker demonstrated that African American biblical reasoning could match in theological acumen the most profound arguments that any white put forward in that period. Yet since most of white America simply could not accept persuasion from a black source, this African American testimony had little impact.

In order for American Bible believers as a whole to have acted on distinctions between slavery as such and slavery as practiced in the United States, or

between colorblind biblical slavery and black-only American slavery, a revolution in the nation's racial attitudes would have been necessary, and that revolution would have demanded a greater alteration in accepted convictions than the American War of Independence itself. Even the Civil War that preserved the Union, that broadened out to the Emancipation Proclamation, and that led to the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments did not persuade most Caucasian Americans that African Americans were on their level of humanity. To have carried the country in 1860, the argument that a racially discriminatory slavery was a different thing from slavery *per se* would have required the kind of commitment to racial antiprejudice that the nation only accepted, after immense struggle, late in the twentieth century – if in fact it has accepted it even now. Advocates of emancipationist biblical arguments who in 1860 still wanted to keep blacks out of the territories and still expected colonization to solve the United States's race problem – not to speak of those who felt that the whole of the Bible sanctioned the whole of the American slave system – were not prepared to let a bare reading of the Bible overcome centuries of inherited race prejudice.

In sum, the theological crisis involving the Bible and slavery had several components:

- ▶ a failure to examine biblically the Southern charge that individualistic consumer capitalism was an ethically dangerous economic system;
- ▶ a blow to Christian orthodoxy caused by the abolitionist flight to the "spirit" of Scripture;
- ▶ an inability to act on biblical teaching about the full humanity of all people, regardless of race; and
- ▶ a confusion about principles of interpretation between what was in the Bible and what was in the common sense of the culture.

Even more than the obvious fact of incompatible interpretations of a commonly honored Bible, this set of difficulties constituted the theological crisis of the Civil War.

The Crisis over Providence

Standard Christian teaching about God's control of the world and all events taking place in the world sprang vigorously to life as the dramatic events of the war unfurled. Belief that God controlled events had always been foundational wherever biblical religion prevailed. Yet in nineteenth-century America confidence in the human ability to fathom God's providential actions rose to new heights. When the prevalence of religious conviction was added to widespread self-confidence in the powers of human perception, assessment, and interpretation, the result was a flourishing of providential reasoning. Americans thought they could see clearly what the world was like, what God was like, what factors drove the world, who was responsible for events, and how the moral balance sheet should be read. They were children of the Enlightenment as well as children of God.

In such a situation, clarity about the workings of divine providence posed a particular problem because God appeared to be acting so strikingly at odds with himself. As with clashes over the interpretation of Scripture, the conflict in understanding providence was disconcerting by itself. Even more, the assumptions on which the interpretation of providence was based seemed to be flawed, thus pointing to a profound theological crisis.

The Workings of Providence

Immediately as war approached, theologians turned instinctively to God as the one who would decide the outcome. In January 1861 James Henley Thornwell of South Carolina carefully laid out the constitutional case for secession in order to demonstrate that if armed struggle arose, it would be because of the North's wrongdoing, not the South's. His concluding word, however,