Poetry and Prophecy: The Question of Salvation in Abolitionist Poetry

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Hilary Caplan

A Thesis in the Field of English Literature

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

March 2024

Abstract

Combining art and politics, American abolitionist poets wrote of horrors and hopes both for individuals and the nation. John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and George Moses Horton each represent different types of poet prophets, abolitionists whose calling to write on behalf of the cause came from a compelling need to save America from its worst sin and save the country and its people. According to each of these poets, who is eligible for salvation? Why are these groups able to be saved, and what would need to happen to save them? What does salvation look like? Whittier, an ardent and vocal abolitionist, employs poetry as another method of persuasion. Writing in the style of Biblical poet prophets, his poems combine lyricism as well as an unwavering faith that redemption and salvation can exist for all people in America. A poet above all else, Longfellow, privately anti-slavery but publicly apolitical, hesitates in his denunciation of the practice, writing one book of abolitionist poetry before retreating back into his Fire Side poems. His prophetic tradition mirrors the Biblical Jonah who concerned himself equally with his reputation as his repudiation of wrongful actions. Horton, a man enslaved, writes inversions of typical readings of Biblical narratives, at times speaking directly to his people about G-d's plan for them where salvation and liberation go hand in hand and cannot be disentangled. His poetry is infused with hope both for salvation from G-d and also, through his reimagined Biblical allusions, for a reconsideration in society of the worthiness of the Black population.

Frontispiece

Alabama Loyalists Greeting the Federal Gun-Boats from Kara Walker's series

Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)

Dedication

For my grandmothers, Sonia Caplan, the writer, and Maxine Becker, the activist.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Paul and Sebastian, who energized and encouraged me, and who tolerated my absence as I wrote. This has been a disruptive process, and you made it possible.

Writing this thesis in Literature was likely due at least in part to growing up in a house with my father, who is the kind of parent with a favorite punctuation mark (the semicolon) and who gave me my grandmother's copies of literature when I studied them. I learned a lot from her marginalia.

Equally important is my mother whose love of art may have shifted from visual to written between our generations, but whose appreciation of and attention to detail lives on in my view of poetry. I cannot help but think of her mother when writing on a subject of social change, as she lived her life to correct injustice regardless of public opinion.

Much gratitude goes to John Stauffer who believed in this project, and whose compassion as I have written it has made it possible. He saw the thesis that exists today through the lens of a very different introduction. This would have been a poorer project without his vision and guidance. Many thanks to Collier Brown, without whom I never would have chosen this topic and whose unflagging confidence in my academic abilities propelled me forward when I had my doubts.

And finally, this thesis could not have been written without everyone who works at The Columbian. You gave me a place to write, listened to me ramble about this project, and made sure I was caffeinated and hydrated.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward.

— Isaiah 58:6-8, King James Bible

Conjure an idea of 19th century abolitionist rhetoric, and you are likely to envision politicians or clergy speaking to crowds large and small, using both language and charisma to influence those indifferent to the plight of the enslaved to rise to action. Another view might be some transcendentalists' prosaic tracts, less studded with insights about man in the natural world, and more imbued with pleas of a common humanity, urging those who do not see themselves as part of the antislavery movement to awaken to the reality that they, too, are complicit. If these writings are less oft recollected than the speeches, then the poets' work has become a whisper in history. Poems, disseminated in pamphlets, abolitionist newspapers, and small batch printings of books, were written not as a battle cry for the masses, but as tracts to inspire those reading or being read to, as art to inspire introspection and individual change that would lead to national salvation.

It is important to note that poetry in the 19th century played a vastly different role in society than it does today. Rather than being relegated to the confines of academia and

niche literary interest, it existed as a vibrant, living aspect of mainstream media and an important tool employed both for recreation and social change. Indeed, poetry vied for popularity with prose genre fiction writing. Abolitionist newspapers like William Garrison's *Liberator* and Frederick Douglass' *North Star* had regular poetry columns which not only furthered their cause but also highlighted the art form's beauty and nuance. Poetry was seen as an integral aspect of the public voice similar to oratory because it is a type of writing meant to be read aloud, and like oratory, it was a way into the political realm. Due to its wide circulation and the fact that it was read orally, poetry had a personal feeling of the poet speaking directly to an audience just as a public speaker would, but poetry had an added intimacy of being read in the home, making this poetry both political and personal. Dickson Bruce Jr. argues in his chapter "Print Culture and the Antislavery Community" that "the very writing of poetry was an important way in which abolitionists sought to build community" largely due to the fact that the public correlated "poetry and respectability, poetry and gentility" (Bruce 221), and therefore poetry opened abolitionists to a non-activist audience, meeting readers in a comfortable form that they trusted and recognized.

This thesis will focus on three poets using this art form as a means of raising the profile of abolitionism: John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and George Moses Horton. While the three have few similarities in their backgrounds, their poetry contains a common thread of religious fervor denouncing the practice of slavery. And yet, even their religious backgrounds differ greatly. Horton, an enslaved Black man with no formal education living in North Carolina, became interested in reading because of Bible readings he heard. Whittier, son of an impoverished farmer, came to his

religious awakening through family texts on the Quaker faith. Longfellow, the only of the three with formal education in childhood, learned scripture in an academic setting. Their uses of Biblical elements come from moral ideology of Christianity, though each goes about doing so in disparate ways. Like his Fire-Side poems, Longfellow's abolitionist verse employs a variety of meters and rhyme schemes as well as a gentleness of language to which his readers would be accustomed. Christoph Irmscher in his chapter "The Fire This Time: Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, Whittier" from *The Cambridge Companion to American Poets* writes of the similarities between the apparently genial approaches of both Longfellow and Whittier to their subject matter, though does identify Whittier's language as more radical and harsher when it comes to the subject of slavery. Whittier's poetry, widely overlooked on aesthetic grounds because of a focus on his activism, fuse the fire of political rhetoric with the style of poetic Biblical prophecy. Horton, while typically using regular tetrameter or trimeter, occasionally writes mixed meter creating a disjointed feel.

Given the places of publication for abolitionist verse and their connection to Christian ideology, these poems, like abolitionist sermons, bridge the political and the spiritual. This confluence of politics and art also contains a third element: prophecy. For the poets considered in this thesis, a calling exists that pull them towards their writing. As Aaron Kramer discusses in *The Prophetic Tradition in American Poetry*, abolitionist poets "do consciously wear the mantle of prophecy" (Kramer 94), since they use specific incidents to fuel their warnings and denunciations. As with Biblical prophets, 19th century Abolitionists knew they were speaking to unfriendly audiences who would abhor them for their work, but this did not deter those who saw themselves as those standing

between the country, including its people, and certain destruction. Like, as Sacvan Bercovitch notes that in "The Typography of America's Mission", the abolitionists, like the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, felt a higher calling, a combination of divine righteousness and visceral need, that drove them to continue even when their life and safety were at stake. After all, what purpose does prophecy play if the prophet speaks solely to those in agreement given that the purpose of prophecy is to spread G-d's message and convince those who are sinful to turn back to righteousness before it is too late. Whittier, Longfellow, and Horton believed that it was not too late for the nation to save itself and its people, but acknowledged that it needed help to get there, and they were willing to various degrees to leap in giving their prophecies to a wary nation. Like Hebrew Bible prophets, abolitionists were at odds with the government. Jacob Stratman argues in "'Oh Rouse ye, ere the storm comes forth': Prophecy and Jeremiad in John Greenleaf Whittier's Antislavery Poetry" that, in taking on the "South's institutional slavery and the North's 'gradualism'" in their denunciation of the American power structures (Stratman 84), they made clear that the horrors of slavery marred the country in innumerable ways from the spiritual to the mundane. Not only were souls at stake, but people's safety would be as well either through rebellion or war. This revelation elucidated the Christian apocalyptic rhetoric through an abolitionist lens by arguing that the issue of slavery would lead to a cataclysmic rupture in America.

In the 19th century, the relationship between abolition and religion was that of intertwined ideology where abolitionists maintained the same fervor about their political beliefs as their religious ones. Unlike most 19th century political causes, "abolition was a religion to those who believed it, a sublime consecration, a solemn sacrament" (Kennedy

70) comments William Kennedy in *John G. Whittier: poet of freedom*, and thus it is no surprise that abolitionists' attention was on salvation. In poetry, where authors have the ability to write more subtly than politicians do, it is sometimes ambiguous whose salvation the poets care about, despite differences in structure and allusion, the three poets discussed here all personify America as a country to have concern about its soul. Beyond that, each focuses on a specific population of the country whose salvation is in jeopardy if slavery continues unabated. While all of these poets, more or less directly, seek salvation for the enslaved, some care, too, about other demographics. What makes a poet take on the cause of the enslavers? Is it an intrinsic sense of a shared humanity of all people? Is it a feeling of kinship with those whose lives are more like theirs? Is it purely expedient to continue to sell their work? Or does it come back to the personification of the country wherein there is no salvation for the nation until all its inhabitants can purify themselves from the sin of slavery? When abolitionists wrote about the rationale for ridding the nation of slavery, they did so by setting it up as a moral wrong typically because of enslavers horrific treatment of enslaved people (Higginson, Irmscher, Keith, Kennedy). The abolitionist awakening of many in this generation, from those enslaved to those with political power, often came from a religious source (Pickard, Stauffer). In this context, and due to the religious nature of the prophetic elements in the selected poems, careful study of this poetry lends itself to the question of how the poets portray salvation and how those choices impact an understanding of their work both for their audiences at the time and in the modern era.

Abolitionist poets join the American tradition of Jeremiad are defined by Stratman as “a socio-politically charged narrative with religious implications” (Stratman

77). In short, the American Jeremiad warns the population of impending peril should their actions continue unabated and offers warnings of what could come to pass unless the country moves in a different direction. Like the Biblical Jeremiah, its warnings come both at an individual and communal level. The abolitionist jeremiad shifts significantly from its Puritan predecessors. Where "the Puritan jeremiad originally aspired to control and erase [the abolitionists sought to encourage and spread] dissent" (Stratman 84). Using the same model of dire predictions, these prophets changed the model of what this type of language seeks to create. Both want their audience to turn towards G-d, but piety has a different look for those worried about the wellbeing of those enslaved and not only the immortal souls of their audience. Longfellow, whose publication *Poems on Slavery* closes with "The Warning" whose central conceit illustrates the hubris and downfall of enslavers who not only refuse to see the holiness of those they enslave, but also underestimate their strength and relationship to G-d. In invoking the jeremiad, Longfellow focuses on the Hebrew Bible's prophetic divine punishment rather than the love of Christ that will come if people change their ways. This tradition is related to but distinct from that of the Black Jeremiad, a prophetic denunciation, an announcement that horrors will occur because of the sins of the white population, and that the disenfranchised Black people will rise up to take rightful ownership of their destiny in the country. This is distinct from a white jeremiad where the threat of destruction comes without a benefit to any subsection of the population. This prophecy implies salvation for the Black population who will be enveloped in Christ's glory after the destruction of their oppressors and does not concern itself with the fate of the white people who have created or ignored systemic oppression. While there were both Black and white

abolitionists who believed that only violent revolution would rid the country of slavery, Willie Harrell's article "Mapping the African American Jeremiad" contextualizes this phenomenon within the Black American experience connecting it not only to Biblical rhetoric, but also acknowledging that "it emerges from the spectrum of racial injustices and brutality as experienced by its prescribers and divulged in their protest writings" (Harrell 154). He connects this to various forms of protests, and therefore contrasts his ideas about Black jeremiad to David Howard-Pitney whose book *Afro-American Jeremiad* retains a more focused perspective on the concept and, Harrell argues, limits it solely to a rebuke of the white population without relating it to Black liberation. To Harrell, this version of jeremiad is intertwined with Black nationalism and liberation while Howard-Pitney focuses on the destruction awaiting white aggressors. In this thesis, Harrell's definition, more encompassing and inclusive than Howard-Pitney's, is a better model for Horton's writing. Not only is this because of his audience of Southern white readers for whom he could not fully unleash his anger for fear of retribution, but also because his poetry uplifts the Black community reimagining both those enslaved and Biblical allegories of them. In his poem "On the Truth of the Savior", Horton seeks Christ's love and G-d's salvation for his people despite not knowing what form this will take. His allusions in this poem rely on the strength and action of G-d on behalf of those who do not have the strength themselves. He sees his own salvation both as G-d's work and also intertwined with the shattering of current society. It is not, however, only Black authors who saw perils in continuing horrific practices.

When it comes to salvation, it is critical to understand 19th century white Christian apocalyptic theology. James Moorhead describes in "Between Progress and

Apocalypse: A Reassessment of Millennialism in American Religious Thought, 1800-1880" a connection between fears of apocalypse and hopes for the second coming of Christ. For both Black and white Christians, the idea of apocalypse involved the dismantling of slavery through violence. The complete destruction of not only the practice, but also those promoting it, would be necessary in order to create the perfect society to follow. Discrepancies exist, however, between how Black and white theology elucidates this apocalyptic violence. White theology focuses more nebulously on how this will occur, be it through a righteous war, G-d's will, or interpersonal violence. Black leaders, by contrast, believed that G-d supported their personal uprisings against their white oppressors, often alluding to or citing the Nat Turner rebellion where Turner evoked prophecy for his actions: "the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first" (Turner). This is not to say that the only avenue to salvation was destruction. The threat of violence, as in David Walker's *Appeal*, could serve as a turning point, as he indicates "I call G-d—I call angels—I call men, to witness, that your *DESTRUCTION is at hand*, and will be speedily consummated unless you *REPENT*" (Walker 45). Here, Walker speaks more ambiguously about who will deliver such judgement, though he is clear that G-d would witness and not execute the desolation of enslavers. With the issue of slavery at hand, some abolitionists argued that the horrors of the apocalypse, foretold through the sinful nature of the populace, could be deflected and instead an era of peace could come

instead, but only if the country actively turned its back on the institution of slavery and repented its sins.

Anti-slavery politicians and religious figures used the language and ideology of prophecy as a means to demonstrate the urgency in abolishing the practice and fending off war, leading, as James Darsey writes in *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* to the ideas of Biblical prophecy in the abolitionist movement becoming commonplace. There was a fear that the soul of the country and its people was at stake — that the very fabric of society could collapse. This anxiety lent itself to particular prophetic tropes that already had long traditions in American poetry such as the jeremiad but also created an opportunity for apocalyptic ideology to enter the dialogue as well. Like many Americans in the first half of the 19th century — abolitionist, pro-slavery, and those with no particular perspectives — the poets highlighted in this thesis saw the issues of slavery and the impending civil war to be signs of apocalyptic cataclysmic events (Moorehead). Raised in a society which, as Mark Knoll reminds us, believed that America was G-d's dominion on earth, and that "since the nation was G-d's nation, corruption of it was a cosmic catastrophe" (Noll 22), these poets felt driven by a divine force to fend off disaster. In publishing his abolitionist poetry, Whittier inscribed the cover using Biblical language to reinforce his denouncement of the practice: "He that stealeth a man and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death" (Exodus 21:16). It is this apocalypse that Whittier wished to avoid as he did not wish for the downfall of the country. While protesting the practice of slavery, giving these warnings indicates that his main goal is to remind those enslaving others of the dire consequences to themselves coming from divine judgement. Whittier's prophetic

connection comes most in line with the Biblical prophets of the Judean diaspora. Lamenting what could have been, he takes aim at specific people and events while writing to whole groups of people. He bemoans his role as a prophet crying out into what feels like a void, and yet, like his predecessors, continues unabated.

By contrast, Longfellow, reticent and cautious, represents a contemporary Jonah whose relationship to prophecy comes with trepidation and acknowledgement of personal cost. Christopher Irmscher describes Longfellow as "a man of quiet contradictions" who "was politically one of the most tolerant of nineteenth-century American writers (an abolitionist, pacifist Unitarian liberal and avowed multiculturalist), he shunned all occasions on which he would have had to declare his opinions publicly" (Irmscher *Longfellow Redux* 8), and yet felt driven and compelled to publish *Poems on Slavery* nonetheless. In response to *Poems on Slavery*, George Lunt, a poet attempting to remain neutral on the topic of slavery, rebuked Longfellow in publishing on the subject, requesting that he "'do all we can do bring about this *will* [to abolish slavery], in all gentleness and Christian charity'" (Higginson 165) implying that Longfellow's public admonition of slavery was in and of itself a problem for abolition. Given his private nature and desire to have his poetry regarded for their literary and not political merit, Longfellow shied away from future publications on the topic. Like Longfellow, Jonah as "a prophet is never said explicitly" (Schellenberg 354) the way other Hebrew Bible prophets receive the name. His one poem referencing his prophetic role is "To William E. Channing" where he lauds his writing as being compelled by G-d and Jesus, much like Luther and John (Longfellow 9-10). Unlike Whittier who regularly writes and speaks that he is doing G-d's will and Horton whose use of Biblical references puts him directly

in dialogue with the ancient prophets, Longfellow speaks out through his poetry without referencing specific prophets. Ironically, while at the time, abolitionists were often "looked on as the scum of the earth, they are now regarded as heroes and martyrs" (Kennedy 74), and therefore Longfellow might have attained acclaim in the aftermath of the slavery debate both as a poet and as an activist, however, his fate could have been the same as Whittier's — ignored for his poetic skills in favor of highlighting his abolitionist ideology.

It is specifically because of abolitionists' ability to prophesy how the ills of slavery imbued the country with problems that make their writing compelling. Horton, publishing his poetry while still enslaved, writes as in a very different prophetic tradition as a Moses figure whose prophecy exists for his community. While his writing dips into aspects of the non-Black experience, his purpose is clear — to advance the cause of the enslaved. His are the exceptions to Kramer's commentary that "it must finally be noted that the runaway slaves and their Negro deliverers receive far less attention […] than their white persecutors or protectors" (Kramer 153). Sandra O'Neale writes about how Horton used the Bible in a nontraditional manner to show precedent of how G-d would come to save those most downtrodden. Instead of aligning American slaves with Israelites in Egypt, Horton uses those traditionally not associated with liberation or salvation: Cain, Ishmael, Esau. And yet, in choosing these figures, he shows how G-d saves and even uplifts even the least likely people. In "The Slave", he revisits these narratives by turning them on their heads as G-d protects Cain despite favoring Abel (Genesis 4), makes Ishmael a holy nation despite his birth into slavery (Genesis 17), and despite G-d's rebuke that "I hated Esau" (Malachai 1:3), he remained in his family's

homestead and prospered, thus reversing the tropes that those with only a passing familiarity with scripture would understand (O'Neale). Living the horrors of slavery himself and using his gifts as a poet to shed light on both the practice and his clarity in G-d's delivery, Horton's relationship with millennial thought is that of certainty that his people, like those he reminds his readers of, will be saved by the almighty. Even if the white population does not see the worth of the enslaved Black one, G-d will in the same way as G-d saw the worth of those unloved and forgotten in scripture.

These three poets, Whittier, Longfellow, and Horton, come from quite disparate backgrounds and traditions. Whittier, growing up a poor farmer in rural Massachusetts living a subsistence existence on his family's land. Despite his limited education, he studied Quaker principles and was heavily influenced by its ideology, especially the focus on divine light in all people and, therefore, a shared responsibility for all humanity. It is this ideology that fueled him throughout his career in politics, poetry, and activism (Kennedy, Pickard). With this background, it is no surprise that, upon adulthood, he quickly joined abolitionist movements and became a staunch activist against slavery. And yet, it was his poetry that most directly led him to his activist work and not his principles. When Whittier was not yet twenty, his sister submitted his poem "The Deity" to William Lloyd Garrison, a man well connected both in the political and the poetic worlds (Wagenknecht). This poem sheds light Whittier's ideology, aesthetic, and trajectory in both realms. Even at this early stage of his career, he was using apocalyptic writing and invoking prophecy. While not identifying a catalyst for the destruction he foretells in this poem, he demonstrates that this devastation tears people away from G-d and the need for individuals to use the horrors as a means to reconnect themselves with

righteousness and holiness. As is true throughout Whittier's poetry, the focus remains on individuals and not societies to change. This is part of his Quaker background fusing the personal with the spiritual where each person's light has a distinct connection to the divine. When he directly calls his speakers prophets, as in his poem "Ezekiel", he invokes specific Biblical places and prophetic language. By asking who will weep for a doomed population, he puts himself in dialogue with the Biblical prophets whom G-d calls to save both those in bondage and the damned. As a Quaker, he sees Christ in everyone in the nation, regardless of their sins.

While types of prophecy are important for this analysis, so, too are the ideas of apocalypse and millennium, and despite the fact that scholarship on these topics often does not specifically refer to poetry, it does touch on abolitionist ideas. Apocalypse and millennium are two sides of the same coin: the catastrophic end days and the subsequent rebirth in G-d's grace and Christ's glory. These poems become prophetic warnings of apocalyptic proportion wherein poets state that there can be no absolution if a particular event comes to pass. The question becomes how these poets continue to do so after their initial prophecies do not come to fruition. Whittier, for example, has several abolitionist poems, at times directed towards particular politicians, prophesying their spiritual doom and the destruction of the soul of the nation given particular parameters.

While Longfellow does not wish to prophesy further in case he loses credibility, Whittier has no such hesitation, continuing in the tradition that James H. Moorhead addresses in "Between Progress and Apocalypse" about there being several tipping points, but all of them leading to the Civil War, that held significant meaning in theological and moralistic terms. In *Redeemer Nation*, Ernest Lee Tuveson writes of the

idea of millennium and the second coming of Christ. The poets I am examining, especially Horton seeking salvation for an enslaved population, use the idea of millennium in their poetry as both a hope and a prophetic promise. Tuveson's ideas about how Americans saw themselves in a chosen nation mirror the idea of the Black Jeremiad's view of Black Americans as chosen within said nation. His description of how abolitionists were looking to perfect the nation in order to bring about the resurrection of Christ reflects more of the cultural context in which the poets write than their works themselves, however, the hope that Longfellow has about the future demonstrates a vision of America after Christ's return. The prophecies given are not universally negative — in fact, some visions of the future exhibit an optimism about salvation for the nation and its people that reflect a Messianic age. In terms of the question of salvation, Horton through his writing has a different perspective on who the Messianic age is for, and while he does not castigate the white population out of it, he also does not include them in his thinking. For Whittier and his personification of America, the purpose of his millennial thinking is to uplift all people, reflecting the Quaker idea of G-d's light in all of humanity.

One last reason for these poets writing about the salvation of different groups is due to their places of publication. Because Horton's poetry was originally published in Black Northern newspapers and subsequently published in Southern newspapers (Sherman), it follows that his writing would expend more energy on Black salvation both through liberty and recognition. His poems fiercely reimagine Biblical figures like Cain, allegorically depicting a Black enslaved population, as equally deserving of salvation and understanding as traditionally heroic ones. In the two contexts of his publications, this

gives the idea that the Black audience should not fear comparisons to these people and that the white audience should not dismiss them. Whittier, too, write for a newspaper audience, though his publications in Garrison's *Liberator* meant that he was writing to a like-minded audience of both Black and white abolitionist thinkers (Pickard). Perhaps it is because of this abolitionist but removed audience that Whittier's poetry is more focused on the salvation of the country and the white population whom he believes need to come together and work for abolition than for the enslaved Black population he wishes to save. His verse, like many abolitionist poets, falls prey to the fact that "the runaways who crawl panting and bleeding through mid-century American verse are impossible to visualize; all that emerges is the humaneness of the poet" (Kramer 116) because they are all nameless, faceless people by contrast to the individuals he calls out for rebuke and distain. Longfellow, the only poet here to publish his anti-slavery poems in a book instead of newspapers, is attempting to persuade a large audience that includes his Southern readers. In his poetry, his focus stays homed on the humanity of his subjects and their relationship with Biblical downtrodden figures. It is the institution of slavery that he argues against in his verse, the violence and inhumanity. His ideas of salvation come both from the commonality of the Christian souls of both Black and white people and from an internal fear that slavery will destroy the enslavers due to violent overthrow, the violence that they themselves have wrought through their violent actions towards those enslaved.

The relationship between prophecy and publication makes sense in a Biblical context as well as an abolitionist one. As a prophet, Moses spoke to Pharaoh on behalf of the Israelites warning him that his actions would bring G-d's wrath on Egypt for their

treatment of the enslaved population. While Jeremiah, by contrast, spoke to his own population about their turning away from G-d. In both instances, it is personal. Both Moses and Jeremiah require change in order to avoid destruction, but one prophesies the destruction of his own society while the other does for an aggressor's. Both need the salvation of America, but for what purpose, it differs.

Ultimately, it is the differences between these three poets that make them ideal figures for study and not the fact that they all use prophetic allusion in their poems. While all play on white fears of slave uprisings as well as theological ideology about the end days, each employs a unique position and aesthetic in producing poetry. Hope resonates throughout Horton's poetry despite the horrors he faced. His faith, a central part of him and his connection to the literary world, provided a lens through which to examine his poetry. Reunification with Christ in salvation is clearly in the divine plan throughout his writing. Whittier, while also having faith in G-d and believing in Jesus' redemption, also has faith in humanity as is clear in his poetry referencing specific political incidents. His disappointment that those in the pro-slavery camp are not living up to the light inside of them comes across clearly as he reflects the Hebrew Bible prophets who denounce their people but believe in their redemption. Finally, Longfellow focuses on the humanity of those enslaved, shedding light not on their struggle, but on their souls. That these poets have such disparate views of both the institution of slavery as well as the people both Black and white who exist in it show a near-universal power both of the art of poetry and the act of prophecy to the abolitionist movement.

Chapter II.

John Greenleaf Whittier: Poet, Farmer, Activist

Revisited now, Whittier appears fresh, honest, even flinty and practical. His diction is easy, his detail rich and unassuming, his emotion deep. And the shale of his New England landscape reaches outward, promising not relief from pain but a glimpse of a better, larger world.

— Brenda Wineapple

John Greenleaf Whittier's *Poems Written During the Progress of the Abolition Question in the United States* demonstrates his use of Quaker background to create a Jeremiad melding Christian and secular ideas to attempt to sway opinion. After publishing these collected poems, he commits to this endeavor through repeated publications in William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*. In fact, many of the poems in his collection had originally been in the *Liberator* whose audience was like-minded white abolitionists as well as free Black people making his purpose less persuasion and more call to action. His poetry and politics, while heavily influenced by his Quakerism in his finding of an inner light in those enslaved and thus taking on their cause as his own, do not utilize specific Quaker language and ideology, but rather fit more generally into the Christian ethos fearing apocalyptic violence and hoping for millennial peace. His work demonstrates a concern about the soul of the country as he worries that slavery and its horrors will lead to its complete destruction. In his poetry, he attempts to find meaning in salvation through a common purpose as he writes of the blight of slavery as destroying enslaved and enslavers together considering the role of violence, be it in the nature of the

slave state or the threat of it through insurrection and apocalypse, as indications of a need for salvation.

When William Sloan Kennedy writes about Whittier's prophetic leanings in *John G. Whittier: The Poet of Freedom*, he notes that Whittier, like Biblical prophets, did not have more information than his readers, but believed he had special insight about what he understood in the world. What critics have not noted is that because of where he was publishing, he had the perspective of considering at what salvation looks like for Black Americans versus white Americans, and his poetry reflects differing yet equally important methods for each group. Additionally, he, more than other abolitionist poets, embodies the change in the American Jeremiad that Sacvan Bercovitch examines in *The American Jeremiad* which considers not only individual behavior, but also systems and laws. Bercovitch, while not discussing Whittier in his work, sets up a framework through which I will address Whittier's use of political and legal specifics such as the Fugitive Slave Law or the question of expanding slavery into a newly annexed Texas. Because Whittier takes on not only personal morality but national morality in his poetry, he also opens the idea of national redemption, a unique take on salvation for these poets. According to Kramer, Whittier's "most vigorous period comes after Webster's 1850 address" as he uses the Fugitive Slave Act as a call to action for everyone in the United States, imploring Northerners to understand that they, too, have been implicated personally in the institution of slavery through that Act (152). Because his poetry, often referencing specific political acts, reflects the ideas of the American jeremiad while simultaneously offering hope for redemption, his voice is an important marriage of the political and the artistic.

Whittier, whose poetry spans decades, bemoans the soul of the country rather than simply its people as the war looms overhead. His apocalypse is the specter of war, but in addition he holds a millennial view that all people have the light of Christ inside of them and therefore can be saved. His poetry comes across as a harsh rebuke of the horrors of slavery while simultaneously acting as a warning to a people who could still repent and redeem themselves. Because he has positioned himself as a prophet seeking to improve the plight of the enslaved through specific actions of the nation including enslavers, the salvation of all people become intertwined. In publishing the abolitionist pamphlet "Justice and Expediency", Whittier made a name for himself in anti-slavery circles as a staunch ally. Here, he begins his use of Biblical language to support his ideology and to call people to action, saying "Sympathy! — the sympathy of the Priest and the Levite, looking on, and acknowledging, but holding itself aloof from mortal suffering" and "Drag, then, the Achan into light; and let national repentance atone for national sin" ("Justice and Expediency") making an explicit connection between the prophetic voice and current necessary action. He continues these allusions to Biblical slavery making a woman's stolen children into Moses when "by the bruised reed He spareth" them ("The Farewell") inverting the American idea that the white population represents the Israelites creating a promised land. This continues through "Slave Song in the Desert" where the singers ask continuously ask the "All-seeing, All-knowing […] Where are we going" in a twisted inversion of Israelites fleeing Egypt in the desert. Since Whittier "had from boyhood up fed his mind with accounts of the oppressions endured by his fellow Quakers and had inherited from persecuted ancestors instincts of freedom" (Kennedy 59), he used

this drive along with the idea that everyone shares G-d's light in order to paint those enslaved as those most cherished in the Bible.

For all of the critical writing about Whittier's poetry, most of it focuses on the abolitionist content and not the artform. Even his biographer William Kennedy posits that "of Whittier, we must affirm that the very depth and intensity of his religious nature have been an injury to his work as an artist" (Kennedy 210), but this diminishes his artistic work. As a poet, he evolves from one invoking the prophetic tradition to one writing in it. At times, as with his 1844 poem "Ezekiel", his writing mirrors both the ideology and form of poetic prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah as well as the Book of Lamentations. While much of his writing reflects its content. When rejoicing in the liberation of a population as in "Hymn for the Celebration of Emancipation at Newburyport", Whittier employs regular iambic tetrameter. When his subject is darker, however, like "The Branded Hand" or "Moloch in State Street", his meter becomes disjointed showing the horrors both with his words and with his verse. Whittier's poetry reflects the idea in "The Formal Challenges of Antislavery Poetry" that "the most radical antislavery poems enlist form—as well as content—to heighten the reader's consciousness that the oppressed have consciousness" (Keith 98). This mirroring of form and ideology is a consistent theme throughout his poetry.

Whittier comes from the abolitionist tradition of using the eloquence of poetry in order to support the cause. This idea posited that "eloquence as a force in battle against slavery" specifically as a "Holy Truth" (Bruce 225) reflected in the religious sentiments in the writing as well as the method of delivering these truths. It is because of this that, as Bruce recounts in his chapter on the power of antislavery poetry, fellow abolitionist

and poet James Russel Lowell said of Whittier that nobody "deserved the title of poet" more than him because of his ability to truly reflect his subject matter in his writing. Says Brenda Wineapple, his poems, rallying cries for the abolitionist cause, "were meant to be read, sung, shouted" (xix) to bring out the infectious nature of his verse. In fact, the singing of one ballad to troops in the Civil War created such an emotional uproar that a General had it temporarily banned (Wineapple). Far from lacking poetic merit and existing purely as a form of activism, Whittier's verse showcases a nuance in crafting powerful treatises against slavery within formal structures.

"The Deity" as Whittier's Introduction to Poetry, Publication, and Prophecy

Whittier's first publication sets the stage for his future writing. The meter in this poem, regular iambic pentameter punctuated with inverted feet and spondees, evokes a sense of being thrown back and forth, unmoored and uncertain. Opening with a half line, "The Prophet stood" gives a clear visual of a solitary figure of moral clarity, standing at the ready "On high the mount" ("Deity"), as Whittier continues, reminding readers of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, though here the Prophet sees instead of speaks. This mount, rather than being the location of a doctrine of compassion and love for all humanity, as Jesus declared (Matthew), it becomes a location of complete destruction. Instead of congregated disciples, what appears is "congregated gloom" (Whittier, "Deity") doing its best to warp love into desolation. Violent rending of longstanding nature, "The mountain oak / torn from the earth, heaved high roots where once its branches waved" ("Deity"), shows an awesome power that can uproot even the most entrenched. The heaving, a word associated with laborious effort, the roots to the location where the branches engaged in such a simple and outwardly friendly act as

waving prophesies the upending of the mundane in catastrophe. Despite not mentioning a catalyst for the destruction the prophet witnesses, the apocalyptic warning is clear that the world is in danger of annihilation. Such a great power, a reader would assume, could only belong to G-d.

And yet, as Whittier continues, the prophet recognizes that "the Eternal Spirit moved not in the storm" nor "in the earthquake moved the G-d of Heaven" and that "Israel's G-d came not within the flame" ("Deity"). The horrors brought upon the mount, far from being G-d's judgement, are instead temporary. "The tempest ceased […] The murmur died away [… and] The fiery beacon sank" ("Deity") because of an opposing force, but not an antagonistic one matching the intensity of those aggressions. Rather, "A still, small voice" ("Deity") exists as the balm to temper the various horrors. This poem reimagines with vivid imagery 1 Kings where an angel tells the prophet Elijah to go stand before the Lord. When "the Lord passed by" His presence did not come from the storm, earthquake, or fire, but rather in "a still small voice" (1 Kings 19:11, 12) that ultimately guides Elijah. A discerning reader would know that the Lord, at this juncture, sends Elijah, who fears for his life as many Israelites have forsaken G-d and killed prophets, to seek out the peace seeking believers in order to bring those who have strayed back into the fold (1 Kings 19:14-21). It is not with force, not when "the topmost crags were thrown, / With fearful crashing, down [the mountain's] shuddering sides" or "the pyramid of flame / Mighty and vast" (Whittier, "Deity") come to tear down G-d's dominion that change will come, but rather the calm of the voice that "at once conveyed / Deep awe and reverence to [the prophet's] pious heart" ("Deity") which, as in 1 Kings, will create a movement of followers. Here, Whittier writes a poem that lauds the art of

poetry over force for societal change. The "still, small voice" is the power of language to inspire.

Perhaps it was this spark of a subversive spirit in having G-d's power come from the "still small voice" instead of "The storm, the earthquake, or the mighty flame" (Whittier "Deity") that William Lloyd Garrison saw in "The Deity" when Whittier's sister sent it to him. Whittier's family, recognizing the power of Garrison's newspaper *The Free Press* subscribed to it bringing Garrison's language and ideology into their home (Wagenknecht). The fire and force in "The Deity" shares the same passion as Garrison's writing. Upon reading this poem alone, Garrison became interested in Whittier, encouraging him to formally study poetry and eventually providing him with editorial opportunities. Whittier's literary connections through his study of poetry and in the editorial world put him in contact with poets and abolitionists who influenced his ideology and writing, but regardless of these shifts, Whittier's poetry continued to display the poetic and rhetorical devices from this first publication. This first poem, however, plants Whittier in his upbringing. Here, he shows his deep connection both to the Bible and Quakerism's interpretation of it as well as his relationship with land. The imagery evokes New England's trees, crags, and storms. He reimagines Biblical images in the context of where he lives and how he understands the world.

"To William Lloyd Garrison" and "Toussaint L'Ouverture": Whittier's Creation of Modern Prophets

As Whittier shifts to explicitly abolitionist poetry, he invokes real people as prophets. As the theology of America as a country linked it to the new Promised Land, "prophecy and nationalism were far more integrally linked" (Moorhead 532) just as the

Biblical prophets spoke to create a holy land comprised of just people. The first two poems in his published book *Anti-Slavery Poems: Songs of Labor and Reform*, written and originally published in 1832 and 1833, feature those Whittier feels to be real prophets both in life and death: William Lloyd Garrison and Toussaint L'Ouverture. According to Christian theology, people must be without sin in order for the peace of the millennial world to come, and as prophets working towards this goal, abolitionists felt compelled to testify about the sins of the nation in order to change the minds of those straying from Christ (Moorhead). In these poems, Whittier embodies the ideas that Francis Darcy elucidates, that "the prophet reveals G-d. This is the marvel of a prophet's work: in his words, the invisible G-d becomes audible. He does not prove or argue. It is impossible to adduce evidence for G-d's law, for it contains its own evidence; it is self-evident, clear upon viewing" (Darsey 19). This is the "Holy Truth" that Dickinson Bruce discusses as he writes about poetic elegance which Whittier references in asking Garrison to continue "In the steadfast strength of truth" (Whittier, "Garrison"). Whittier not only uses this in his poetry, but here he uses it as the subjects of his poetry.

Where in other poems he places himself as a prophet to others, here Garrison's words and L'Ouverture's death act as prophets for him. For Whittier, the call to action came not only from G-d, but from Garrison, who wrote his abolitionist journalism with fiery language, writing "with strong ink his words […] not musk-scented by any means, and the lip of his medicine-glass he offered the South was not smeared with honey" (Kennedy 65-66). William Kennedy notes in his biography of Whittier that he writes of it as a religious experience, that Whittier wrote in his journal "'a summons like that of Garrison's bugle-blast could scarcely be unheeded by one who, from birth and education,

held fast the traditions of that earlier Abolitionism which, under the lead of Benezet and Woolman, had effaced from the Society of Friends every vestige of slave-holding'" (Kennedy 85). Like many abolitionists, Whittier viewed the cause as a religious calling, his prophetic voice rising from a view of G-d's kingdom on earth, "'my duty go G-d and my fellow-men'" (Kennedy 85).

In these early works, it is clear that Whittier has a great deal of faith in his countrymen to head what these prophets told them. He tells Garrison to "Speak in a slumbering nation's ear / As thou hast ever spoken" ("Garrison") to rouse them. The fact that the nation here slumbers is significant. In this poem, the country has no active role in the sin of slavery, it instead sleeps through the agony that faces those enslaved. Ignoring the pain of those living within its borders, America need only awaken to recognize reality and come back to G-d's fold. And yet, it is not so simple because reconnection to G-d "cannot be achieved through adjustment of the message, but only through purification of the audience" (Darsey 26). Whittier contrasts this with the threat of what would occur without this reconciliation comes in his next poem as he says of L'Ouverture in death "That voice which rises unto G-d / Solemn and stern, —the cry of blood!" (Whittier "L'Ouverture") reminiscent of when the voice of Abel's blood "cries out to [G-d] from the ground" (Genesis 4:10) upon his murder by Cain. The implication is clear that, just as Cain is "now cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive [his] brother's blood from your hand" (Genesis 4:11), so, too are the American people cursed by the blood of their brothers. This is where Whittier's Quakerism shines through evoking a brotherly bond between enslaved and enslaver. In these words, Whittier hopes to use the prophetic tradition that Darsey writes of, that metaphors create

a vision create for prophets, a rhetoric of being able to pull back a curtain to foretell the truth.

In both of these poems, Whittier employs regular meter which uplift their subjects. When he proclaims that "I feel my pulse thrill, / To mark thy Spirit soar above / The cloud of human ill" ("Garrison"), the words ring forth like a hymn exhausting Garrison and his prophet-like spirit reaching upwards towards the divine to inspire the masses away from their sinful negligence. While Garrison appears as a prophet guiding America, L'Ouverture becomes one whose death is meant as a sacrifice to show people the error of their ways.

> Yes, dark-souled chieftain! if the light
> Of mild Religion's heavenly ray
> Unveiled not to thy mental sight
> The lowlier and the purer way,
> In which the Holy Sufferer trod,
> Meekly amidst the sons of crime;
> That calm reliance upon God
> For justice in His own good time; (Whittier, "L'Ouverture")

Marking L'Ouverture as the "Holy Sufferer" shows him as Jesus, dying not for the sins of his people, but for the sins of a country in need of repentance in order to have redemption. L'Ouverture's history mirrors that of Whittier's Quaker understanding of G-d's light in humanity. Having both saved the man who enslaved him in the 1791 Haitian slave uprising and governed St. Domingo through a time of peace, L'Ouverture exhibited an understanding of a common humanity that Whittier worked to spread through his writing and oratory. This love, like Jesus' for his fellow man, did not save him from vicious treatment of the French in their attempts to reestablish slavery on the island. The sins against him are active, not ones of neglect like in the Garrison poem. Whittier attempts to elicit meaning in L'Ouverture's death and use his history to create positive

change and movement in the abolitionist front. Understanding that it is not "As if a human sacrifice / Were purer in His holy eyes, / Though offered up by Christian hands, / Than the foul rites of Pagan lands!" (Whittier, "L'Ouverture"), Whittier uses this specific atrocity to show the apocalyptic actions that those advocating for slavery are willing to enact in order to advance their cause. He contrasts that with the hope, that "the dead in sin shall hear, / The fetter's link be broken" (Whittier, "Garrison"), and the millennial peace can come to America. While these poems do not strictly adhere to all elements of the jeremiad, they do reflect the idea that writers of American jeremiads "substituted a regional for a biblical past" and thus were writing a "metaphor for limitless secular improvement" (Bercovitch, 93-94) within a biblical framework. Garrison as a prophet and L'Ouverture as Jesus compelled Whittier forwards in his abolitionist work, and through his poems, it is clear that he believed that their lives would be instrumental to a larger audience.

"Ezekiel" and the Poet Prophet

While the thread of prophecy weaving through his abolitionist poetry, Whittier's clearest and most explicit revelation of himself as a poet prophet comes in "Ezekiel" where he, like the Biblical prophets, bemoans that "The burdens of the prophet's power / Fell on me in that fearful hour; / From off unutterable woes / The curtain of the future rose" ("Ezekiel"). This poem, however, like "The Deity", eschews references to American events as Whittier prefers, rather, to speak through Biblical allusion. And yet, even without current references, his message is clear. America, represented as a besieged Jerusalem, suffers from not heeding its prophet. According to Bercovitch, the Biblical idea of Canaan became both a spiritual state and a representation of America — first the

colonies and then the country. This jeremiad foretells what will occur should the American people continue to disregard the warnings against slavery. Despite knowing that his message had not yet turned the tide towards abolition, Whittier does have faith, and using "Quaker terms, prophecy is a result of the Inner Light becoming so strong in an individual, as it did with the Hebrew prophets, that it would be sinful to keep it silent" (Stratman 80). Because of the Quaker structure of equality wherein each congregant held the same authority within the church, Whittier came into his faith and his convictions in an environment wherein his voice held weight. Without hierarchy in his congregation, he was able to take on the mantle of prophet easily with the faith that his ideology stemmed from divine light. It is through his compulsion to speak that he believes he must work to redeem the nation. Interestingly, this poem is the one of Whittier's that most clearly espouses evangelical ideology about apocalyptic and millennial attitudes. Where his Quakerism gave him the authority to speak and the drive to push for justice, mainstream evangelical theology directed a specific hand of G-d in punishment and redemption. Desiring to use these themes, Whittier could not do so within the framework of current political struggle. Implication and allusion are the tools he selects for this violent message.

In referencing Babel and the Chaldeans, Whittier espouses the belief that G-d has an active hand in punishing a hubristic and sinful population of supposedly chosen people. This view of apocalyptic destruction comes not purely as a jeremiad of what might be to come, but rather as a warning of what has already occurred and could come to pass again. He bemoans "How stung the Levite's scornful smile" ("Ezekiel"), that those with the power to truly work for abolition scoffed at such responsibilities, and that

"The shadow crept on Israel's woe / As if the angel's mournful roll / Had left its record on my soul" ("Ezekiel") noting that he, alone, notices the horrors mounting on the nation. Here, Whittier depicts "a terrible day of wrath, a literal Second Coming, and a dramatic overturning of the present age were motifs deeply embedded in the Scriptures; and since evangelicals believed the Bible to be G-d's authoritative word, they could not dismiss such themes" (Moorhead 536), allowing Whittier to tap into non-Quaker beliefs. This theology winds its way through this poem focusing mostly on apocalyptic ideology while concluding with the potential for millennial salvation:

> Yet shrink not thou, whoe'er thou art,
> For God's great purpose set apart,
> Before whose far-discerning eyes,
> The Future as the Present lies!
> Beyond a narrow-bounded age
> Stretches thy prophet-heritage,
> Through Heaven's vast spaces angel-trod,
> And through the eternal years of God!
> Thy audience, worlds!—all things to be
> The witness of the Truth in thee! ("Ezekiel")

Despite, or perhaps in evangelical terms because of, the apocalyptic war, there is a future without discord. Like in his poem to Garrison, here the "weak disciples slept" ("Ezekiel") again implying a negligence and not malice. In contrast to the sleeping population in his first poem, these sleeping are supposed to be roused to action, disciples not masses. This, in large part, is what makes them weak, their ability to rest while people suffer, and the soul of the nation remains in jeopardy.

It is important to note that this poem, written in 1844, is a bridge between his earlier poems where Whittier's admonition against the population begins as relatively benign and becomes more virulent as time went on. What is interesting about the timing of this poem is that, by this time, Whittier had split with Garrison over the most effective

way to end slavery with Whittier advocating that only through political action could the battle be won. "Ezekiel" comes between the founding of the Liberty Party in 1839 and his retreat from public life for safety and health reasons. The violence he foretells here reflects frustration with being long ignored by those purportedly in agreement about ending slavery. Though he never lost his faith in America's ability to repent and share in G-d's righteousness, he became increasingly convinced that individual actions had broad consequences and that even those relatively untouched by slavery in free states played an active role in the distance that the country had from G-d because they would not work to end the practice. Where here people sleep, later they willfully ignore suffering.

The prose of Ezekiel, an epitaph before the poem, decries those unable to make warnings into action. The poetry, using the same themes, lulls the readers with its meter while jarring them with its words. The form mirrors the content of those ministered to who cannot take the ministry to heart. Instead of heeding the alarm in the prophet's words, they notice only the beauty of the cadency and rhymes. Because of their inability to see beyond the pleasures of the verse, they cannot repent and atone. This brings the nation further into an intrenchment of its sinful state, one further away from the hope finishing the poem.

Politics in Poetry after The Fugitive Slave Act

Written in the first half of the 1850s, Whittier's poetry in opposition to The Fugitive Slave Act marks a shift into specific, timely attacks. "Moloch in State Street", the first of these, references not only the complicity but the assistance of institutions in Massachusetts, that "Chain Hall and Pulpit, Court and Press / Make g-ds of gold / Let

honor, truth, and manliness / Like wares be sold" ("Moloch"). Three years later, he takes on the persona of Anthony Burns, a fugitive himself, crying out against the "Law, an unloosed maniac" ("Rendition") upon deaf ears, for no one would care for the pleading of a man condemned if they would not aid him prior to this remand. Between these lies a poem of a different nature, a more explicitly religious one. When Whittier lashes out against the unnamed magistrate in "Official Piety", he does so by questioning his Christianity noting that he "At Heaven's door lays / His evil offspring, and, in Scriptural phrase / And saintly posture, gives to G-d the praise / and honor of the monstrous progeny" ("Piety"). His poetry of this time reflects his concurrent political activism where "he mounts an unsparing attack against the 1850 Law: its shapers, apologists, and executors […] Whittier's prophetic flame has run high" (Kramer 148). The final poem in this series demonstrates a shift in philosophy, that Northerners wished to rid themselves of their part in the slave trade, that they yearned for a purity of conscience. By 1855, these people had a "vision of a Christian man, / In virtue, as in stature great / Embodied in a Christian State" (Whittier, "Arisen at Last"). In these poems, there is an explicitness of what Stratman sees throughout his work, that "implicitly, Whittier's prophetic and jeremiadic poetry asks simple questions: what is the Christian's responsibility to his home, city, state, and nation? How should our spiritual lives respond to the civic problems concerning the environment, poverty, disease, war, and prejudice?" (Stratman 87) linking his activism specifically to Christian theology and spirituality.

In these poems, Whittier reflects upon what Christians should value versus what they clearly do through their actions. Though "Your hoards are great, your walls are strong / Yet G-d is just; / The gilded chambers built by wrong / Invite the rust"

("Moloch"). In this moment, the inversion of the long and short lines cut off the flowing money and ornate receptacles for it with G-d's judgement and moral decay finding physical manifestation. The verses of "Moloch in State Street" alternate between tetrameter and dimeter, a dichotomy that never ceases to make the poem feel jarring and cut off regardless of how many stanzas repeat the pattern. In addition to manifesting the reversal of fortune for those with no moral understanding, this meter imitates the jolt experienced by Thomas Sims, the fugitive ripped from his newfound freedom in Massachusetts to be returned to slavery. The magistrate, too, inverts what is important in his search for holiness. Instead of applying G-d's law to man, he attempts to apply man's to G-d:

> Official piety, locking fast the door
> Of Hope against three million souls of men,
> Brothers, G-d's children, Christ's redeemed, and then
> With uprolled eyeballs and on bended knee,
> Whinning a prayer for help to hide the key! (Whittier, "Piety")

These fugitives have redemption, and for the first time in his poetry, Whittier does not show a way to redemption for the magistrate. This is a significant shift for Whittier from his typical refrain that all people have an Inner Light that can return them to Christ's grace. This series demonstrate specific, vehement language directed at Northerners, and "in truth, it may be doubted whether mild language would have excited any attention" (Kennedy 69). As Darsey reminds his readers, the idea of an impending threat that will wreak havoc is in Biblical prophetic ideology, and it is against that threat of chaos that the prophet posits order through G-d's will. The threat here is spiritual, that, like the money lenders that Jesus denounces, those assisting with the Fugitive Slave Act have become overly enamored of money and lost their ability to care for humanity.

Revelations about the guilt over the collaboration with Southern states for the Fugitive Slave Act led to an understanding of a state of sin for Northerners who could no longer assuage their consciouses with the belief that they were not culpable. Abolitionist newspapers served as a jeremiad due to their determined rebuke of slavery and "empowered individual dissent against the current hegemony" (Stratman 81) and the poetry sections acted as connections between the literary and the activist worlds showing the beauty in these ideas. If the first three poems in this section reflect Whittier's anger at Northern collusion with slavery, "Arisen at Last" hows the reconciliation he typically shows in his work. Where he opens with "I said I stood upon thy grave, / My Mother State" he goes on to recognize the atonement of the people. He sees that "No threat is on thy closed lips / But in thine eye a power to smite / The mad wolf backwards from the light" ("Arisen") and that the people have taken an active step towards their own redemption fiercely attacking the unjust laws. In this poem, Whittier exhibits the grace that he espouses elsewhere drawing in compatriots who redeem themselves. It shows a belief that the entirety of the country can have such an experience with G-d with the correct actions. The shift in public opinion demonstrates the power of abolitionists' work to raise consciousness to the evils of the Fugitive Slave Act and compelling people to pay attention to its implications. It is also noteworthy that this legislation, while originally viewed as a setback for the abolitionist cause, created opportunities for personalizing it in northern circles where many felt disconnected from the issue of slavery, and therefore ultimately had a positive impact on the movement.

Emancipation and the Poet Prophet's Role Therein

In his first poems published since emancipation, Whittier asserts himself subtly as a prophet. He opens "Hymn for the Celebration of Emancipation at Newburyport" with "The word that burned within to speak" ("Hymn") reflecting Jeremiah's "His word was in my heart like a burning fire Shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, And I could not." (Jeremiah 20:9). The fire imagery from both prophets puts them in dialogue with Exodus' burning bush, the origin of G-d's voice to Moses. Both Whittier and Jeremiah have fire inside of them, and like the bush, the fire does not consume but compels. The fire in the bush compels Moses to believe G-d's message and plan for him and the Israelites, and so too does the fire within the prophets compel their speech to sway the behavior of those who hear them. Unheeded, the fire would consume and destroy, its combustion engulfing the nation in Jeremiad horrors, but the prophecy comes to correct the course and grant reprieve. Like G-d did not consume the bush, He will not consume the nation if His will is done. For Whittier, this drive comes from a place of faith as Quakers "saw themselves as functioning prophets; and as the prophet's primary responsibility is to warn people of forthcoming doom due to current malpractice and sin, their message needed to be urgent, fierce, and unyielding" (Stratman 80).

In contrast to both Jeremiah and Moses, at the point at which Whittier utters these words, G-d's will has been done; abolition has become the law of the land. After the horrors of slavery and war, finally the time of peace has come upon the nation, heralded by bells "Loud and long, that all may hear / Ring for every listening ear / Of Eternity and Time" ("Laus Deo"). In this millennial potential utopia, repentance continues to be part of the reunification with the divine "Lord forgive us! What we are / That our eyes this

glory see / That our ears have heard this sound!" ("Laus Deo"). It is when people have come face to face with G-d and his kingdom that true redemption can occur. In celebration, repentance must also occur since "The air we breathed was hot with blame [… because] We made the bondman's cause our own" ("Hymn"). As Irmscher explains in "The Fire This Time", Whittier's abolitionism — even after the war and the 13th amendment — is connected to his faith and the idea of salvation, that men evolve from slaves and that the soul of man and the soul of the nation intertwined. Unlike the other poets discussed in this thesis, Whittier gets to see the salvation which he seeks. In the aftermath of slavery, he speaks as a prophet for abolitionists, that "We bore, as Freedom's hope forlorn / The private hate, the public scorn / Yet held through all the paths we trod / Our faith in man and trust in G-d" ("Hymn"). In an ironic twist, the faith is in people and trust in the divine as abolitionists staunchly believed their mandate came from the Christian ideology and had to maintain faith in humanity who had not always shown themselves to see the Inner Light that Whittier did.

In these poems immediately written upon emancipation, Whittier has the ability to reflect on his part in the abolitionist cause. In this time when he had the ability to laud his own work, Whittier shies away from recognition of his accomplishments. This is despite the fact that "for Whittier the sum of his life consists in what he was able to do for others. And yet, as a devout Quaker, Whittier attributes his success – the righting of the wrong – not to his own efforts but to G-d" (Irmscher 58) as is evident from his continuous commentary that "we hoped" in "Hymn" and that man's actions are absent from "Deo." Instead, the prophet compels people to "Send the song of praise abroad / With a sound of broken chains / Tell the nations that He reigns / Who alone is Lord and

G-d" ("Deo") and that "The Praise, O Lord! is Thine alone" ("Hymn"). Yet, even if G-d receives the glory, the prophet is the one who sings His praise. As Kramer reminds us, "if the successful prophet is he who compels the attention, irritates the conscience, restores the vision, and incites the motion of *his own* time and people […] Whittier is, for an amazing span of years, brilliantly triumphant" (Kramer 147). He gives more than a jeremiad warning, adding to that a hope of the millennial future that he can see due to his fierce belief in G-d's light in humanity coupled with his unwavering work towards a better future.

Chapter III.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: A Reticent Prophet

Part resplendent Old Testament prophet, part modest Messiah, aged in body perhaps but youthful in spirit—a gifted poet, yes, but one who feels our pain, too, one whose heart is, as Howells put it, "open to all the homelessness of the world.

— Christopher Irmscher

Prophecy can come from the most unlikely places. Like the Biblical prophet Jonah, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow did not have a comfortable relationship with prophecy. What Jonah feared — being publicly ridiculed and ignored in Nineveh, the land he denounced (Jonah) — Longfellow lived after he published *Poems on Slavery*. Kramer argues that Longfellow "is averse to handling public issues in his art" and yet, in *Poems on Slavery*, "the courage, and the urgency of his appeal, are characteristic of prophecy" (Kramer 134). As a poet who, in his Fire Side poetry, had "showed how educated Cambridge and aristocratic Boston could speak to – could even unify – the American multitudes" (Burt 157), moving into a political sphere threatened to undo the good he had done not only for his reputation but for reconciling disparate parts of the country through art. Concerned with his popularity and credibility, Longfellow shied away from a full throttled denouncement of slavery but could not bear to be entirely silent on the matter. Thomas Higgins, in his biography of Longfellow, quotes the Irish abolitionist Richard D. Webb as saying of Longfellow that "'is it not a poor thing for

Longfellow that he is no abolitionist—that his anti- slavery poetry is perfect dish water beside Whittier's—and that he has just penned a Pæan on the Union?'" (Higginson 167). What Longfellow, who positioned himself as an abolitionist in his private life, had not accounted for was the anti-slavery camp rejecting his efforts. Because of this, he received distain from those on all sides of the debate — abolitionists admonishing him for not having a strong enough stance, pro-slavery readers for denigrating their beliefs, and the neutral party for dragging politics into his poetry (Higginson). Nowhere is it clearer that both sides rebuked Longfellow than in William Kennedy's description of its reception in a Philadelphia magazine where Kennedy bemoans the work as "weak and harmless" while also explaining that "the editor of 'Graham's Magazine' wrote to him to offer excuses for the brevity of a guarded notice of the poems, saying the word 'slavery' was never allowed to appear in a Philadelphia periodical, and that the publisher of the magazine had objected to have even the name of the, book appear in his pages" (Kennedy 73), o controversial was not only the topic but also Longfellow's execution.

His Biblical corollary Jonah is so concerned with his own reputation that he argues with G-d when Nineveh stands after his prophecy of destruction, and while Longfellow does not have the same impulse to go on the offensive, his retreat from abolitionist poetry is in the same vein as Jonah's anger. So focused on how his audience received his work, he becomes unwilling to write explicitly on the subject again lest he receive more repudiation. While both prophets' messages were heard, and while the messages resonated with people who heard them, neither prophet remained willing to speak again for fear of his reputation. While Jonah "is concerned with himself, namely,

with his role as a prophet who occupies a difficult position between divine appointment and divine mercy" (Schellenberg 357), Longfellow's struggle is between moral appointment and public mercy.

Not everyone disputed Longfellow's contributions to the anti-slavery cause, though. John Greenleaf Whittier, unabashedly abolitionist, "had written thanking [Longfellow] for his *Poems on Slavery*, which in tract form, he said, 'had been of important service to the Liberty movement.' Whittier had also asked whether Longfellow would accept a nomination to Congress from the Liberty Party, and had added, 'Our friends think they could throw for thee one thousand more votes than for any other man'" (Higginson 167-68). It was specifically Longfellow's acclaim that Whittier believed added credence to the abolitionist cause and not the cause which would detract from Longfellow's estimation in the public eye. However, "Henry Longfellow's driving ambition had been to fashion a form of literary expression distinctive to his time and place, one that celebrated America" (Basbanes 14), which complicated his desire to write about abolition since that denigrated America on a global stage, bringing its faults and moral failings to the forefront. Drawing on his poetic acumen, *Poems on Slavery* combine Longfellow's artifice with moralistic indignation aiming to better the country and not tear it down. Longfellow aligned himself with the majority of northern Protestants who did not openly denounce slave holders as sinners despite feeling that the practice would bring apocalyptic calamity. In order to have true salvation, it would be necessary to work towards "elevating slaveholders and slaves" through a "gradual process of Christian nurture" (Fredrickson 115). This nurture, even in evangelical circles

hoping for a postmillennial society, used secular ideas of morality for Christian purposes, and this is where Longfellow's sentiments lie, a desire for a society pure of spirit reflecting the literary America he aims to create through his poetry. "Longfellow creates an American, synthetic, secondary orality, appropriate to a nation created by literate actors responding to written texts" (Burt 159), a tone which he continues in *Poems on Slavery*.

Like Jonah, Longfellow was abroad from the place where he prophesied to when receiving his calling. Both on ships, both tasked with giving their audiences "a chance to return from their evil ways and with that to change G-d's mind" (Schellenberg 355) about their fate, only Longfellow's faith in his task becomes more fervent as he sails towards his destination. Nicholas Basbanes recounts in his biography that Longfellow was returning from Europe while writing *Poems on Slavery*. In a twisted parallelism to Jonah, he used his ocean voyage, one bringing him closer to his audience, to reflect on the horrors he had committed himself to write about. Unlike Jonah who used the ocean to attempt to flee from his prophecy before finally succumbing to the resignation that he must indeed warn Nineveh of their sinful ways, Longfellow used his voyage to hone his message. While at sea, "the sense of compulsion, of being commanded 'despite himself' to speak" (Kramer 134) shows himself to create these poems in the prophetic tradition, one where he moves beyond his comfort zone as a Fireside Poet because of societal sin and need. His poetry grapples with the question of "how to translate a deep, and in most instances a religious, conviction into public policy" (Burt 164) through an art form. For Longfellow, there was always a low rumble of morality urging him towards active

abolitionism as "he could hear, wherever he went, the low murmur of the disenfranchised slaves, like the chorus in a Greek tragedy (February 15, 1861)" (Irmscher, *Longfellow Redux* 208). Despite, after publishing *Poems on Slavery*, Longfellow removed "himself from public outcry, Henry's sympathy of African Americans, and the less fortunate in general, found expression in tangible ways" (Basbanes 227) specifically financial contributions to Black individuals and institutions.

As both Irmscher in *Longfellow Redux* and Nicholas A. Basbanes in *Cross of Snow* recount that Longfellow published his *Poems on Slavery* for the same audience as his less political poetry, and therefore, had a broad audience of white readers without political uniformity. Because he attempts to sway public opinion through this work, it makes sense that the people eligible for salvation in his poems are white, that his warnings about what will occur if slavery is not abolished are warnings about the physical and spiritual danger to his white audience. The atmosphere in which Longfellow published "was one in which whites intolerant of abolitionists affirmed racism and proslavery violence in increasing degree. The pursuit of abolitionism in such an atmosphere was particularly dangerous" (Stuckey 186) and Longfellow would have known that Whittier was attacked by a pro-slavery mob a few years before he published. Between concerns for his career and his safety, Longfellow's willingness to write publicly on the subject shows strength that many do not attribute to him. While commentators argue that his poetry is too mild to be a true rebuke of slavery, it is not that he does not take on the plight of the enslaved, but rather that he couches these parts of the book in the frame of how white readers would feel. He plays on racial fears, and while

not explicitly referencing the Haitian Revolt or Nat Turner's Rebellion, the picture he paints in "The Warning" uses those as a backdrop as a jeremiad warning to white enslavers that, if his poems about the inherent dignity of the enslaved did not influence their views, they should consider their own best interests. The message about salvation in his poetry is intertwined with his audience.

Proof of Prophetic Power in "To William E. Channing"

Like Whittier's combined publication of his abolitionist poetry, Longfellow, too, opens with a hymn to his prophet guide: William Ellery Channing. For Longfellow, Channing's words serve as his inspiration, proclaiming that "The pages of thy book I read / And as I close each one / My heart, responding, ever said / 'Servant of God! well done'" (9). In his introductory stanza, he shares the power of language and prophetic voice. Unlike Whittier who reflects on his mentor, Garrison, Longfellow writes of a clergyman with whom he has no personal connection. In many ways, Channing is a perfect reflection of Longfellow, though in the clergy and not poetic world. Both held private abolitionist views and felt compelled to write in opposition to slavery but were otherwise disconnected from the cause publicly. For both writers in relation to Biblical prophecy, "it is clear that these ambivalent feelings reflected in the book of Jonah have to do with the situation of literary prophets, those latecomers in the history of ancient Israelite prophecy, who stood in the tradition of earlier prophets but so clearly were different from them" (Schellenberg 371). Neither Channing nor Longfellow fit neatly into the radical

abolitionist tradition of those outspoken and rushing towards change. A later adopter of this tradition, Longfellow believes literary as well as prophetic power.

Given his relative lack of religious sentiment in *Poems on Slavery*, it is interesting that Longfellow chooses Channing as the man whose words to uplift. Reference to his book *Slavery* brings a specifically millennial undertone to Longfellow's poetry as Channing's sentiments about the effects of the end of slavery come in Christian terms.

> I feel and can say, 'The Kingdom of Heaven, the Reign of Justice and Disinterested Love, is at hand, and All Flesh shall see the Salvation of God.' I know, and rejoice to know, that a power, mightier than the prejudices and oppression of ages, is working on earth for the world's redemption, the power of Christian Truth and Goodness. (Channing 159)

By invoking the phrase "Servant of G-d", Longfellow implies that Channing's book directly stems from the divine spirit, that his words reflect a higher truth as Paul indicates saying that those who are servants of G-d show this though "love unfeigned, by the word of truth, by the power of G-d" (2 Corinthians 6:6-7). By that logic, Longfellow endorses Channing's Christian view of abolition, that it will bring powerful redemption and peace. Urging Channing to "Go on, until this land revokes / The old unchartered Lie," the poet reasserts the truth of equality that "Speaking in tones of might / Like the prophetic voice" (10) would prove that "all men have the same rational nature, and the same power of conscience, and all are equally made for indefinite improvement of these divine faculties, and for the happiness to be found in their virtuous use" (Channing 18). The truth of what could come is something implied through this poem, however, the current horrors are explicit. In closing, Longfellow compels Channing to "Record this dire eclipse / This Day or Wrath, this Endless Wail / This dread Apocalypse" (10). The connection between

the “Day or Wrath” of G-d’s judgement for the sins of slavery and the “Endless Wail” of those enslaved reiterates, through violence instead of harmony, the sameness of everyone involved in the institution of slavery. For salvation to occur, it must include everyone.

Humanizing Africa and Africans in “The Slave’s Dream” and “The Good Part”

Where Channing asked “who, that comprehends these gifts, does not see that the diversities of the race vanish before them?” (Channing 18), Longfellow responded with poems “The Slave’s Dream” and “The Good Part” humanizing those enslaved rather than highlighting the brutality of the institution. Almost entirely ignoring the white population, and America entirely, Longfellow uplifts his idea of a native Africa — beautiful, peaceful, powerful. A sleeping man dreams that “Wide through the landscape of his dreams / The lordly Niger flowed / Beneath the palm-trees of the plain / Once more a king he strode” (12), the verse flowing as the Niger, as the beauty of the dream. In the same way as he is able to use his language to build a version of America, he, too, can do so for the African plains. His other poem personalizes the people instead of the place. Imagining a millennial utopia in a world devoid of slavery, Longfellow declaims, prophet-like, the reunification of an enslaved woman with her native land. Seeing her soul “encircle[d] there / All things with arms of love” and that “her angelic looks” give her power to humble “village churls” (16), Longfellow anoints this anonymous woman with a Christ-like temperament. In freedom, either in the mind or in reality, these

individuals encapsulate strength and fortitude from the man's commanding ride of his stallion to the woman's devotion to acts of charity.

Each of these poems reflects a view of Africans specific to context. In "The Slave's Dream", the protagonist, deeply connected to his previous home, has no thoughts of Christianity as he dreams of his previous idealized life. His dream, reflecting Longfellow's view of nobility in Africa, depicts him as master of his realm where "he could feel the scabbard of his steel / Smiting his stallion's flank" riding along the river "as he crushed the reeds" (13). Contrasted with the life he lives in bondage, here he has power and dominion. There is no higher authority to whom he must submit, be it man or G-d. The ideal of an African man is one secure in his position with control over his surroundings, loved by his "dark-eyed queen" and children who "clasped his neck, they kissed his cheeks" (12) in submission and devotion. The image of perfection for a freed woman, however, is quite different. Seeing her as a post-slavery figure, Longfellow overlays Christian ideology on her, supplicating her before a redeeming power. Instead of a millennial view of integrated America, Longfellow depicts colonization where this woman, expatriated to another land, brings Christian theology to it. As John Stauffer comments, for "most white reformers, the purging of the nation's sin came with colonization" (Stauffer 223), and in Longfellow's view, it also came with exporting Christianity. Here "She reads to them at eventide / Of One who came to save," and, instead of building wealth for her community and family, "following her beloved Lord / In decent poverty / She makes her life one sweet record / And deeds of charity" (Longfellow 17). Saved by Christ, her role becomes to emulate his life and teachings

meekly and humbly. The contrast between these two people is significant. In gendered tropes, Longfellow plays on the stereotypes of the Black population while putting a positive spin on them. The man's strength, instead of being used for violence against the white population, dominates his ancestral landscape. The woman, instead of being subservient to those who own her, is supplicant to Christ. Both exist as nonthreatening figures in large part because they have been removed from American soil; for them to be in a state of peace, Longfellow argues, they must leave the country. This postmillennial view follows from Channing's book and dominant Christian ideology.

These poems, full of hope for what could be, show an idealized, white version of those enslaved. The man, a king in his home, sees "Before him, like a blood-red flag / The bright flamingos" and at night "heard the lion roar / And the hyaena scream" (Longfellow 13) while the woman saying "all her hope and pride / Are in the village school" upon securing freedom in America "in meek humility / now earns her daily bread" (17) in a land he has imagined for her. Given that the international slave trade ended in 1808, by the time Longfellow published *Poems on Slavery* in 1842, his fictitious protagonists would have had no homeland they knew of which to return. The utopia he writes about has little basis in reality but has the effect of demonstrating the potential for these people's lives. While Aaron Kramer argues that "typical of the poems on this topic, Longfellow's fugitive slave is pathetic rather than tragic" (Kramer 135), these poems, focused on the lives that these people could have lived without bondage, show the tragedy of ripping human beings away from their land.

Ambivalence at Depicting Horror: Longfellow's Poetry of the Institution of Slavery

The latter poems in Longfellow's book depict slavery in its practice from the portrayal of a slave, unidentifiable in any capacity, brutalized and hiding in a swamp to a prayer of a young man for freedom to the horrors of the slave ship. In these, he employs techniques Jennifer Keith describes that "the most inventive poets used form to engage the reader in sensory experiences, creating a phenomenological realm where the reader no longer looks at the suffering slave but is asked to see through the eyes of slaves or to experience with other senses the dynamics of restriction and freedom" (Keith 98). In "The Dismal Slave in the Swamp", his meter mirrors horses cantering nearby while their riders search for this person hiding in a place no one would wish to go. When he writes "Where will-o'-the-whisps and glowworms shine / In bulrush and in break" (Longfellow 18), the distinction between the "w" sounds of the first line verbally illustrating the fluid motion of the creatures and the "b's" of the second indicating a starkness of the wilderness brings the reader to the place. Despite writing in the third person, this vivid imagery solidifies the person's experience even if the reader knows nothing about him. In the same manner, "The Witnesses" includes violent specificity creating a vision of the desperate reality on the ships. While, for those alive, "Their necks are galled with chains / Their wrists are cramped with gyves" (24), it is the dead who are the most clearly depicted. These former souls, "These are the bones of Slaves; / They gleam from the abyss; / They cry, from yawning waves / 'We are the Witnesses!'" (24) return, like the Greek chorus Longfellow stated that he heard of slaves, to punctuate the poem and pronounce judgement on the institution of slavery. Interestingly, there is no reference to

actual people serving on the ship nor those purchasing people at slave auctions. It is merely those ferried from Africa to America who are seen in his poem. This dichotomy reflects the tension in Jonah of actually taking on the mantel of prophet to name what the people of Nineveh do wrong, for "on the one hand, [Jonah] is portrayed as a prophet in the tradition of Elijah or Jeremiah" (Schellenberg 353) and yet, he is also depicted as a man with deep hesitation, almost tragic in his reluctance to do G-d's will.

It is not only the absence of enslavers that shows Longfellow's reticence, but also the lack of portrayal of the daily lives of those enslaved. When we are the closest to an enslaved man, we do not see what has happened to him, but rather we hear his pleas for freedom. A psalmist instead of a prophet, this man "Sang of Israel's victory / Sang of Zion, bright and free" (Longfellow 21) reminding G-d of His ability to save. This man is not one of the Israelites, as many Americans saw themselves, but rather reminisces on Biblical stories, "Songs of triumph, and ascriptions / Such as reached the swart Egyptians / Where upon the Red Sea coast / Perished Pharaoh and his host" (22). Taken from his perspective, this is a song of freedom, but for those reading Longfellow's poem, it is a warning. While white Americans may not include the Black enslaved population as Israelites along with them, the message here is clear that slave holders have become the Egyptians who will be drowned in G-d's judgement without atonement. This is a subtle jeremiad that Longfellow weaves into his verse. Instead of explicitly giving his warning, here he forces his audience to unpack that for themselves and see what is to come. The closest that Longfellow gets to naming atrocities that people committed is when a Planter has a moment of recognition around the provenance of a quadroon girl's existence: "His

heart within him was at strife / With such accursed gains / For he knew whose passions gave her life / Whose blood ran in her veins" (29). Casting blame for sexual sins on the Slaver, Longfellow here shows why salvation is necessary not only for those in bondage but for those holding slaves. It is the sins that slavery brings out within the white population that damn the nation, and for America to be redeemed, these sins must cease.

Repeatedly in these poems, Longfellow uplifts the people enslaved as pious and therefore worthy of salvation while the implication is that those enacting horrors upon them could be worthy simply by a change of behavior. The Planter in "The Quadroon Girl," active in the slave trade, is described as "thoughtful" yet "weak", implying that if he refused "the glittering gold" that he could be saved. She, by contrast, "holy, meek, and faint" has "the features of a saint" (28), and therefore is redeemable by her virtue. The Singer, as he pleads with G-d for freedom, exists through the gaze of the white observer as "the voice of his devotion / Filled my soul with strange emotion" (22) while he recalls Biblical salvation. Again, like with the quadroon girl, it is his connection to Christianity that make him eligible for salvation. The millennial nature of salvation in these poems exists within the framework of slaves who have embraced Christianity. It is important for G-d to save them because of their relationship to Christ.

"The Warning" as Longfellow's Jeremiad

In the final poem in his book, Longfellow plays on Southern white fears of rebellion couched in terms of Biblical apocalyptic language. While Nat Turner's rebellion had been almost fifteen years prior and the *Amistad* revolt five, these violent

uprisings loomed large in the public's mind. A poem like "The Warning", lending Biblical credence to the enslaved's insurrection, would heighten emotions. This poem does not contend itself with who is worthy of salvation or what a postmillennial world may look like; instead, it prophesies brutal slaughter against those holding people in chains. In doing so, "the political message Longfellow's poetry conveys comes filtered through the lens of the past and the lessons we still have to learn from it" (Irmscher, "The Fire This Time" 52). Both through Biblical and historical precedents, the only way to avoid Longfellow's apocalyptic message is to end slavery. "The Israelite of old," or Samson, becomes, in this poem, all those enslaved, and it is he, not G-d as in the Judges 14, "who tore / the lion in his path" (Longfellow 30), foretelling bloody revolt should America continue the institution of slavery.

Because Samson represents the slaves, the implication of this poem is that they, not slave holders reflected in the Philistines, who deserve to have G-d on their side. Existing merely as "A pander to Philistine revelry" (30), Samson is a pitiable figure. He reflects what Kramer describes when saying that the slave figures are piteous and not tragic, but instead of making them two-dimensional, this piteous nature makes them more harrowing. That the "poor, blind Samson in this land / Shorn of his strength, and bound in bonds of steel" (31) could be the cause of such destruction proves that G-d is on their side. This jeremiad, much more forceful than that in "The Slave Singing at Midnight", is the most powerful poem in this book. This is Longfellow as the Jonah in Nineveh, crying out to the masses that the city will be destroyed, but unlike Jonah, he hopes for a reprieve. What goes unsaid in this final poem is what atonement looks like, how enslavers must

come back from sin in order to achieve salvation. Like the people of Nineveh, it is up to the audience to hear Longfellow's warning and seek to find a way to bring about change. The salvation that Longfellow seeks for the nation can only come about with serious action, that which he cannot compel, but only inspire.

In *Poems on Slavery*, Longfellow jolts between different tactics to make his case about the evils of the institution. It is as though he writes for various audiences — those swayed by the humanity of the Black slaves, those who believe that a connection to Christ is the only way towards redemption, those who require fear to rouse them to action. And through all of these varied methods, he stayed true to his own craft as a poet selecting his allusions carefully, creating flowing verse without any disjointed meter. Longfellow may not have contributed many poems to the abolitionist cause, but those he did portray a man deeply committed to ending a system destroying all it touched from those enslaved who "From the morning of his birth / On him alone the curse of Cain" (20) not because of any sin, but simply because of his existence, to those who "cry, from unknown graves" (25) and have no chance at salvation in life, but do in death, even to the Planter whose "voice of nature was too weak" (29) and sells the girl for sexual slavery. That he can write with empathy, that his poems can elicit sympathy, for all of these people shows how firmly Longfellow is to the nation's redemption.

Chapter IV.

George Moses Horton: Subverting Allusions

I am for developing our own resources, and cherishing native genius… As a North Carolina patriot, I ask, Why leave our own land to stand on foreign soil? Why go abroad for poetry when we have an infinitely superior article of domestic manufacture? I am too modest to speak of my own, but surely there is poetry of native growth, even in your fair City of Oaks, good enough without straying off into foreign parts.

— George Moses Horton

One of the most remarkable attributes of George Moses Horton's work is that we have it at all. The risks he took, not only in the act of writing, but in publishing his poems, demonstrates remarkable strength and tenacity. At a time where "most American Negros were slaves, lacking education and wholly without means, where more than 90 percent of American Negros lived in the South where laws prohibited Negros from receiving any formal education" (Bryan 6), Horton's writing with its relationship to Christian themes, can only be prophetic, the call of a man compelled to speak. Unique in his situation, the fact that he published two books of poems while enslaved gives him a position unlike others to be a named enslaved poet with a body of work to examine.

Horton's poetry, according to Joan R. Sherman in her introduction to the poets' work, first appeared in New York's *Freedom's Journal*, a newspaper published by Black Americans, before he began publishing in North Carolina. Because of this, much of his

early work needed to be carefully constructed because "a slave who wished to write and publish in the South (both illegal activities) could not reasonably hurl anathemas on pro-slavery institutions or portray blood-curdling details of rack and whip and perilous escapes" (Sherman 39). What Sherman and the critics she discusses in her introduction do not examine, however, is the ways in which Horton subtly uses Biblical tropes to make his abolitionist points without outwardly advocating for an overthrow of the system. His depiction of Essau or Ishmael subvert their typical meaning when writing Biblical allegory thus speaking for and about those disenfranchised without appearing to place himself in a position of power. When writing about freedom and breaking the bonds of slavery, Horton writes to others who would understand to look at his references not as the villains of the stories but as those without voices. In Horton's poetry, the Black population is reflected in these figures, and they are shown as having great empires and salvation, even if that is not the common trope. As typified the writing of those enslaved, Horton "extended the boundaries of their restrictive universe backwards until it fused with the world of the Old Testament, and upwards until it became one with the world beyond" (Levine 32-33). Sandra O'Neal in her article "Roots of our Literary Culture: George Moses Horton and Biblical Protest" touches on the way in which Horton's subversion of these tropes show a roadmap for Black salvation in America, tying him into a prophetic tradition. His writings, while published in the South, were also circulating in the North through the *Freedom's Journal* Douglass' *North Star* and Garrison's *Liberator*. With this audience Horton could take on the mantel of a Moses

figure for others in slavery who did not have the privileges afforded him in terms of literacy, education, and access to publication.

His abolitionist poetry shows Black Americans as a people whose redemption from bondage would raise them up not only as individuals but as a nation. This reflects the ideology of the Black Jeremiad which Willie Harrell describes in "A Call to Consciousness and Action: Mapping the African-American Jeremiad" as theology centering the chosen-ness of the Black population within an already chosen Christian nation of America, and Horton, while writing from the confines of a place of enslavement, manages to bring out the spirit of this ideology. Unlike David Walker, who, as a free man, could speak about how a slave's "condition resulted from disobedience to G-d and cruelty at the hands of whites, whom he thought the 'natural enemies' of blacks and of people of color generally" (Stuckey 136), Horton had no such luxury, and had to couch his repudiation in abstractions. His poetry, rather than vengeful, exhibits esoteric allegory and a focus on what his people will find once salvation comes in the same vein as other Black writers with mixed audiences. David Howard-Pitney writes about the way in which Frederick Douglass' writing reflects the jeremiad while also catering to the temperament of a white audience; his argument connects to Horton's poetry. As Todd Vogel articulates in *The Black Press*, Douglass' papers had an audience looking to create systems for Black abolitionists alone without catering to white audiences, and so, while it was necessary for Horton to couch his language in terms that would remain subtle to white readers, he had the ability to speak directly to his people. These newspapers helped to create a formalized Black culture as "the authenticity of their

collective racial identity seemed to derive from the fact that it was found in print" (Fanzzui 57) giving both authority and commonality to Black language, opinions, and narratives. Since *The North Star* published works solely focusing on the salvation of the enslaved, Horton's poems incorporated a prophetic tone that took on the role of Moses leading their people out of bondage.

While O'Neal and Richard Gaither Walser in *The Black Poet* comment that Horton has prophetic leanings, they do not elucidate what tradition he follows, nor do they or other commentators tie this or his poetry into his concept of salvation. Like Black spirituals that had "the tendency to dwell incessantly upon and relive the stories of the Old Testament" (Levine 23), his poetry steeped itself in allegory and allusion. It is with representations of "apocalyptic narratives" Horton alludes to from the Hebrew Bible, those of ruination of great civilizations, that "add the idea of present society's irremediable corruption and certain downfall, applied either to the Gentile world within which Israel is embedded or to the entire extant world" (Hobson 26). With these references, Horton's poetry reflects, if indirectly, the Black jeremiad, focusing on the reinterpretation of Biblical anecdotes that would redefine the Black experience as well as Christian ideology. He not only argues that G-d will redeem the American slaves without care for the enslavers, but also that divine love comes to those typically left out of His fold. In doing so, Horton puts himself forward as a prophet speaking G-d's truth. This puts him in the tradition that Christopher Hobson discusses in his article on the Biblical underpinnings of Black prophecy that "'Truth' in prophecy does not lie in the power to reveal the future or understand pattern in history, as such, but in the ability to discern and

communicate G-d's assumed purposes which reveal themselves in history" (Hobson 28). In his depictions of Biblical figures, Horton is stating, from his perspective, G-d's truth about His chosen people, and he, like other American writers, makes "an effort to use enigmatic biblical prophecies to make sense out of experiences" (Moorhead 532). The experiences that Horton has, so distinct from those of white abolitionists, allow him to view prophecy in a vastly different light, not as a means of impacting politicians or slave holders, but as a way of providing home to the Black community who could see themselves as part of G-d's plan.

Reception of Horton's writing demonstrated, as Lawrence Levine writes "the difference between northern and southern attitudes towards Negro culture" (Levine 141) as both groups, while applauding his writing, neglected to take him seriously as a poet for most of his life. Sherman recounts that Garrison appreciated Horton's abilities in "the growing 'talents of the degraded race of black people' and that 'good education' would surely raise the race high among nations (Sherman 20). By contrast Richard Walser, Horton's biographer and a twentieth century southerner, criticized Horton's abolitionist word as lacking conviction, that "he did not find his bondage overly tragic or oppressive" (Walser 72) and that his life was significantly better off enslaved than it would have been in freedom. These critiques confirm Levine's conviction that "where southern whites generally were perfectly content to allow the blacks to stew in their own cultural juices, the northerners pined to wipe them clean and participate as midwives at a birth" (Levine 142). Despite these criticisms of his work both while he lived and in posterity, Horton's poetry gained wide acclaim, even after the Civil War when "he could no longer be

chattel, but he remained a cultural property of the South" (Richmond 182). In comparing his work with that of Phyllis Wheatley, Richmond asserts that "he is more original, more inventive, his range is far broader in form and language, and theme. More importantly, a distinct human personality emerges […] that is, on occasion, bold enough to break with convention" (Richmond 182-83). These convention breaks, both in form and content, are what drive his prophetic voice, speaking not as expected but as needed. What is more, Horton, like Longfellow, believed in American literature, a distinct voice telling a unique story, and his poetry is part of the evolution of this literary tradition. For Horton, this tradition is also important in creating a Black American voice, not just to speak for slaves, but to make tradition unique to this population as manifest in the journals and newspapers publishing such pieces.

Personal Pleas as Forays into Subtle Prophecy

In his first published poems on the topic of slavery, Horton writes first person verses pleading with an unnamed deliverer for respite from his bondage. With no reference to his broader community or placing his hardships within a context of historical or Biblical oppression, these poems lack the gravitas of his other works on the subject. These, as critics have commented, bear a lyrical resemblance to Wesley hymnal, whose "melodies were in his heart, and the forms of the corresponding words fixed in his brain" (Richmond 89). The song-like verse Horton creates in the poems "On Liberty and Slavery" and "The Slave's Complaint" may have given rise to the idea Walser contends that Horton was fairly satisfied with his condition of enslavement. When opening his

poem “Alas! and am I born for this, / To wear this slavish chain? / Deprived of all created bliss, / Through hardship, toil, and pain!” (*Black Bard* 75) and not going on to enumerate the details of the “hardship, toil, and pain”, it appeared to be tempting to assume that he as nothing further to articulate, to focus on the simple rhymes and find within them a simple person, seemingly as happy as the meter implies. Without depictions of the suffering he faced, the audience is left to imagine what makes him ask “Worst of all, must hope grow dim / And withhold her cheering beam? / Rather let me sleep and dream / Forever!” (79). The vagueness of these poems stands in stark comparison to his others which, while not illuminating the particularities of enslaved life, explore its people with more vibrancy and vividness.

Yet, in the context of his other poems, these begin to set the tone for where he is going. Asking for “Heaven” to “Condescend to be my guide” (79) foreshadows his inversion of Biblical figures by asking for guidance as someone potentially unworthy of it. Just as “[David] Walker described his people as the most oppressed, wretched, and degraded set of human beings seen since the world began, and he prayed that no such humiliated and oppressed ‘ever may live again until time shall be no more’” (Stuckey 136), Horton depicts himself and those enslaved with him as those all Christians would see as denigrated and neglected, but does so in order to show the humanity of those even most unloved. Pleading with “Slavery [to] hide her haggard face, / and barbarism fly” (*Black Bard* 76) subtly alludes to Biblical Hagar’s flight from her mistress Sarai, for when “an angel of the Lord found [Hagar] by a fountain of water in the wilderness [and asked] whence camest thou? and whither wilt thou go? And she said, I fly from the face

of my mistress Sarai" (Genesis 6:7-8). As O'Neal and Richmond discuss, Horton's knowledge of the Bible was so intricate that he had the capacity to use it in ways that would be unrecognizable to a general audience. Connecting the slave girl Hagar with slavery hiding "her haggard face" both because he personifies Slavery as a woman and through the similarity of the word haggard to Hagar, and the subsequent parallels between Hagar's narrative and the stanza bring to the forefront Horton's subtle prophecy. When Horton declares that "I scorn to see the sad disgrace / In which enslaved I lie" (*Black Bard* 76), it mirrors the catalyzing events leading to Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion from the house of Abraham wherein Ishmael is seen "mocking, scorning" Isaac leading Sarah to demand that Abraham "cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, *even* with Isaac" (Genesis 21:9-10). While readings of this narrative typically interpret this as favoring Isaac, Horton, in his later poetry "The Slave" inverts this to show how G-d uplifts Ishmael, too, and that the expulsion from Abraham's house, his inadvertent freedom from enslavement, leads to the creation of a great nation in Ishmael's name. This allegory manifests two important elements of his poetry, and "while Horton is known today as one of the forerunners of protest poetry, critics have not yet acknowledged his adroit statements on slavery made through the use of veiled Biblical symbol" (O'Neal 19) leaving him open to criticism of simplicity and childishness that do not accurately reflect his literary abilities.

These early poems, while appearing simplistic on the surface, are infused with subtlety that his critics largely ignore, and also set the stage for his later complexities. He does so in the tradition of "the hermeneutical of African Americans [that] featured the

Bible as a source of prophecy, magic, conjuring, and dreams; the Bible as a dramatic, narrative book; the Bible as a book of grand, controlling themes" (Noll 52) that Horton imbues with new magic, new dreams, the prophecy of the unloved and the downtrodden, even in moments when a cursory reading of his verse appears otherwise. In relating his own struggle to that of the unloved son of a Christian forefather, he conjures new interpretations, ones that do not relegate the forgotten to the fringes of society, but rather put their narratives in the center of discourse and divine empathy.

Inverting Biblical Tropes

Where Horton's Biblical inversions are implicit in "The Slave's Complaint" and "On Slavery and Liberty", they become explicit in "The Slave" where he names his figures and claims direct descent from them. It is not only the narratives that Horton twists into new form, but also modern implications of Biblical facts. Unlike other Black writers, Horton does not take on the mantel of the Israelites or claim that those enslaved in America are G-d's chosen people, but instead cedes these to the white population. Instead, he targets Christian ideology asking, "If Africa was fraught with weaker light / Whilst to the tribes of Europe more was given / Does this impart to them the lawful right / To counterfeit the golden rule of Heaven?" (*Black Bard* 130). By "making these ancient situations analogous to the white man's reception of the gospel before 'rejected' Africans" Horton points out that "any defense of slavery based on the book of Genesis, Abraham's slave empire being a case in point" does not follow that "preordained election on the one hand" will necessitate "preordained damnable enslavement on the other"

(O'Neal 21). By invoking Jesus' Golden Rule to "do unto others whatever you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12), Horton both rejects the Hebrew Bible's precedent of slavery and also introduces an abstruse jeremiad for the sins of slavery. While whites should have treated Africans as fellows in Christ, since they did not, the retribution of those enslaved will be fierce. This is where Horton embodies the Black jeremiad with an ''analysis of and lamentation over the misery and humiliation of blacks in America'' that dovetails with ''warnings to whites to beware of the inevitable judgment of G-d for the sin of slavery'' (Andrews 14). In Horton's poetry, however, it is not G-d but rather a righteous anger from the Black population that the ruling whites must truly fear. His use of this trope, like other Black writers, "as a rhetorical strategy, […] grew from their practical judgment of their situation, as they relied immensely on the power of their words to persuade their white audiences that their own salvation was also at stake" (Harrell 176). Ironically, to save himself, Horton attempts save the nation that enslaved him. While his poem does not imply a care enslaver, he does use his poem as a warning.

In later stanzas, Horton makes a connection between his people and those not favored in the Bible. If American is a new home of new Israelites, then they descend from the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The decisions of those favored patriarchs to leave their unfavored counterparts in peace is in direct opposition to the decisions that these new Israelites made in America, arguing their divine right to have dominion over Africans. Horton elucidates this idea asking, "Why do ye not the Ishmaelites enslave / Or artful red man in his rude attire / As we as with the Black man, split the wave / And to his progeny with rage aspire?" (*Black Bard* 130) referencing Esau, known for his ruddy

complexion in scripture. It is not only that these people were not enslaved, "but in Horton simultaneously points out that the 'rejected' sons were never punished" but that instead "G-d blessed and prospered each of them" (O'Neal 21). Despite the fact that "Jacob have I loved, yet Esau I have hated" (Genesis 25:23), He still gives to Esau prosperity and nationhood. These lines, also prophetic reflecting prophecy in Genesis foretelling that both Ishmael and Esau will be great nations. If those rejected in favor of the forefathers became nations, so, too will Black Americans. In this sense, Horton's theology is tied to his concept of liberty through redemption and salvation.

And yet, Horton does once connect his people with G-d's chosen one. When he cries "Like Cain you've your consanguine brother slain / And robbed him of his birthright — Liberty" (*Black Bard* 130), he portrays himself as Abel, divinely favored, slaughtered in senseless hatred while his oppressors become Cain, a man marked for his violence. In saying that they are "consanguine" and pointing out their brotherhood, "Horton [is] arguing that all men are brothers because they are of one blood" (O'Neal 26), arguing that, as Christians, these people bear responsibility for the denigration of their fellows. Inverting the trope of Black men as violent and erratic, he gives "Cain's violent attributes to the slave master" removing their moral purity and implying that, because of their familial blood on their hands, that their prosperity comes from "the merciful will of G-d" (22) just as Cain prospered and built the city Enoch after his fratricide (Genesis 4:17). And yet, Cain's descendants do not prosper forever, as after generations their sins increase, and they are destroyed in the Flood (Genesis 6:17). This apocalyptic image of how G-d will judge slave holders feeds the Black jeremiad ideology

that it is the Black population alone which G-d will redeem upon the abolition of slavery, that the millennial peace is for Horton's people, not their oppressors.

In closing his poem, Horton wonders "can you deem that G-d does not intend / His kingdom through creation to display / The sacred right of nature to defend / And show to mortals who shall bear the sway?" (*Black Bard* 131) reminding his audience that G-d cares to demonstrate His power in redeeming those oppressed, just as He did when leading the Israelites in exodus from Egypt. This situates itself within the Black context that "their vision of millennium came with apocalyptic violence" (Stauffer 224) wherein G-d must first tear down white society just as He did when the Israelites left Egypt. While not aligning his people with the Israelites' forefathers, he does use their salvation as proof of the way in which G-d brings judgement upon those who displease Him, as they will "suffer Heaven to vindicate the cause / The wrong abolish and the right restore" (*Black Bard* 131) as divine punishments will give way to peace. Given Black Christianity's reflection that "assimilated the self-sacrificial Jesus with the idea of Moses as a communal deliverer" Horton, here, contends that his people have sacrificed and are awaiting both "'spiritual freedom' and 'earthly deliverance'" that he holds for his "community until Canaan was reached" (Andrew 231). As he makes his references to his people's redemption subtle, he focuses more on relating their suffering in the context of what good Christians should have done, implying that, when their shackles are broken, their deliverance will be absolute. Here, Horton acts as Moses leading his people not physically towards their salvation, but rather spiritually towards G-d's truth and an understanding of the place that the divine has in store for them.

Actualization of Covenant

It is a personal relationship with Christ that Horton lauds in his poems "On the Truth of the Savior" and "Heavenly Love" that focus not on enslavement and oppression but the inner peace that comes with having been saved. If his other poems prophesy the apocalyptic events that will come in renunciation of slavery, these tell of the infinite love coming thereafter, the "Eternal spring of boundless grace" (*Black Bard* 86) who lets "the feeble, week and lame / With strength rise up and run" (80) bringing great relief to those weary. This relationship with Jesus Christ, intent on His direct action in the lives of his followers, is, as Sterling Stuckey asserts, a central pull for those enslaved towards Christianity.

> Within the circle [of Black Christian theologians] new life was breathed into Christianity, as the African felt the need for a salvation from slavery that, it must have seemed, only a miracle could effect. Hence the appeal of Christianity: "He is the mighty One! He will help!" But Christ did not replace the G-d of the Africans, for the African G-d was more an Absentee Landlord than a personal G-d on intimate terms with His followers; this helps explain, together with the brutality to which the slaves were subjected, the prominent strain of fatalism in the fabric of so much of black folk life and lore. The circle of culture had plenty of room for Jesus. (Stuckey 40)

That Jesus, too, suffered, makes this relationship closer and more significant. When "G-d the Son unveils his face / And shows that Heaven is love", Horton depicts a utopian future, where "Love which can ransom every slave / And set the pris'ner free" (*Black Bard* 86) returns the world to a time of Jesus' dominion on earth when "Devils far from his presence flee" (80). These poems connect Christ's miracles in his life with the millennial peace and love that Horton sees imminently before him.

Instead of focusing purely on "the social justice strand of prophecy that infuses African American thought, [wherein] disregard of the covenant appears as injustice to the poor and oppressed [as Biblical prophets] speak on behalf of the powerless and victimized" (Hobson 22), Horton infuses his work with the realized covenant between his people and Christ. His understanding that "all influence opposite to divine, perverts human nature into brutality from infancy into distant years; while spiritual influence elevates man into an angelical sphere, where he discovers one eternal individual, occupied of an omnipotent influence in time, and through all eternity" ("Individual Influence" 1246) shows his divine faith and his belief that only G-d, not man, can positively impact lives. Because of this, his poetic prophecy focuses on divine actions for and against man instead of the retribution and judgement that other Black thinkers espouse slaves could exact upon the white population. Perhaps this, too, is why these poems do not concern themselves with the fate of these people but instead hone in on the grace that his community can achieve. Where Horton knows that Christ's power has meant "Immanuel speaks, and Lazarus hears — / The dead obeys his call" (*Black Bard* 80), so his faith proclaims that his soul will "Wing thy swift flight beyond the son / Nor dwell in tents confined" (86) as the strength of divine love will transcend earthly bounds of understanding. His people, reflected in prophecy of "the faithful remnant idea," encompass "an entire community whose sins are commuted" (Hobson 26) as Horton declares as "The mystic sound of sins forgiven / Can waft the soul away" (*Black Bard* 86) in order to experience Christ's redemption.

Horton's faith in the actualization of divine love is in direct opposition to the suffering he has experienced in his life. His vision of "*Love* that revolves through endless years— / *Love* that can never pall; / *Love* which excludes the gloom of fears, / *Love* to whom God is all!" (86) gives literary voice to his personal theology of divine influence. What is on earth becomes heavenly and the distinction between the spiritual and mundane dissipates as loving salvation envelops those enslaved. This is the promised land where Moses leads the Israelites but actualized through Jesus' love and sacrifice. Where the G-d of the Hebrew Bible worked through man, the G-d Horton describes is with man, where spirits "often soar on high" when the "smile of Heaven / Upon the bosom play" (86). This realized postmillennialism, rooted in the unfettering of chains, appears immediate in Horton's verse. Unlike Whittier's poems employing mixed meter, "Heavenly Love" does not feel disjointed. Horton's use of inverted feet when beginning lines with "love", rather than make the lines come across in a jolted manner add emphasis, creating a sensation of the love rushing to meet the people. Of all the poems written in the antebellum era, this is the most hopeful. Horton, a man who, after repeatedly attempting to liberate himself with no success, continues to have faith in heavenly liberation. Though abolitionist in his sentiments, he does not demonstrate faith in the movement, but rather puts his faith securely in the divine whom he knows will not neglect him or his people.

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