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# "WHY THEY DID NOT PREACH UP THIS THING": DENMARK VESEY AND REVOLUTIONARY THEOLOGY

DOUGLAS R. EGERTON*

CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS EVACUATED CHARLESTON DURING the night of February 17, 1865. As roughly ten thousand weary veterans retreated northward up the peninsula, thousands more black Carolinians abandoned nearby plantations and poured into the city to celebrate their new-found freedom. But the real celebration came in late September when over three thousand Charlestonians watched as "the corner stone of the [new] African [Methodist Episcopal] church was laid." Situated on Calhoun Street, the church was designed to replace the old African Church, as it was called, which had been razed by city authorities in late 1822. Although the new church was but a modest structure of yellow pine, "every man who is working on it," bragged the Philadelphia *Christian Recorder*, "is a colored man. Robert Vesey, son of Denmark Vesey, is the architect."[1]

What role did the first African Church play in Denmark Vesey's conspiracy, perhaps the most extensive slave plot in North American history? The extent to which mainland slaves adopted the religion of their new country remains one of the most debated topics in American historiography. Scholars debate not only the extent of religious acculturation, but in which century it took place, whether this adoption allowed for West African religious traditions to survive, and whether the fusion of African and Euro-American religions hindered or helped support patterns of resistance to slavery. In the process, however, Old Testament thought is often merged with New Testament teachings, as if the Bible's two parts received equal attention from southern whites and enslaved blacks and contained similar responses to servitude and retribution. Although it is true that most monographs that deal with slave religion touch upon the Old Testament, typically in a brief reference to the fondness most slaves demonstrated for the Exodus story, few modern writers have observed that the injunctions of the Israelites allowed for a revolutionary tradition quite different from that found in the New Testament—or taught by white ministers in South Carolina.[2]

*Douglas R. Egerton is professor of history at Lemoyne College.

[1]Philadelphia *Christian Recorder*, October 14, 1865. The author thanks Alan Gallay, Graham Russell Hodges, Mitchell Snay, Margaret Washington, and Donald R. Wright for their kind comments and suggestions.

[2]Although he primarily examines the modern era, a useful historiographical survey of this issue is Joe Feagin, "Book Review Essay: The Black Church, Inspiration or Opiate," *Journal of Negro History* 60 (October 1975), 536-540.

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This essay argues that some southern bondpeople, and especially those who taught church classes with Denmark Vesey in the old Charleston AME Church, came to regard the militant lessons of the Hebrew Bible, and not merely the saga of Moses, as sacred writ consciously hidden from them by white society. All but one of Vesey's numerous religious pronouncements were drawn from the Old Testament, and in a very real sense, Vesey and his disciples turned their back on the New Testament God of Love. Attracted instead to Jehovah, the ancient God of Wrath and Justice, Vesey, together with Peter Poyas and Africans Monday Gell and Jack Pritchard, fashioned a theology of liberation that fused the demanding faith of the Israelites with the sacred values of Africa. Although there should be absolutely no doubt that Vesey believed in what he taught, his lessons *were* employed as a means by which to produce a profound sense of racial identity among his adherents, which in turn hindered the rise of a common religious bond among Charleston whites and blacks.

One should be careful, of course, in assuming that the majority of blacks in Vesey's South Carolina were familiar with either Testament. At the dawn of the nineteenth century, very few slaves in rural South Carolina exhibited much familiarity with the religious doctrines of their masters. Despite their own pious professions of faith, many planters feared that the Christianization of their laborers would produce egalitarian-minded, and hence unruly, bondpeople. In extreme cases, proslavery theorists rejected the proposition that Africans possessed souls; more commonly, white masters worried that canny slaves who obtained religious training might next demand commensurate political rights as Christians. Because many masters agreed with Joseph Ottolenghe when he complained that "a slave is ten times worse when a Christian, than in his State of Paganism," the few who permitted religious instruction on their estates did so only after warning their workers that baptism would not result in liberation. But even when heavily censored by white masters, a religion of universal brotherhood posed obvious problems in a slave society. Anyone who wanted to acquaint enslaved Africans with the *entire* Bible, lamented Whitemarsh Seabrook, a Sea Island planter and a member of the state Senate, was fit for "a room in the Lunatic Asylum."[3]

[3]Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), 192; Alan Gallay, *The Formation of a Planter Elite: Jonathan Bryan and the Southern Colonial Frontier* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 41-42; Marvin L. Michael Kay and Lorin Lee Cary, *Slavery in North Carolina, 1748-1775* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 194; Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 40-41.

Seabrook need not have worried. As Margaret Washington and Norrece Jones have observed, many of the Africans forcibly imported into the state prior to 1808 showed little interest in learning about the faith of their captors. Isolated on remote rice plantations strewn along the Atlantic coast, the vast majority of native Africans continued to practice the faith of their ancestors. Although few planters prior to the 1830s wished to convert their laborers, for those who did, African religiosity proved stubbornly resistant to Christianization. Old world traditions were ancient enough that African minds were hardly the uncommitted "heathen" slates whites believed them to be. Besides, wary captives suspected the deity of Euro-Americans "to be a cheat." As one bold Carolina bondman explained it to Reverend John D. Long, they supposed "the preachers and the slaveholders to be in a conspiracy against them." If given Sunday as a day of rest, rural blacks used the time, sighed Henry Bibb, an unusually pious slave, to "gamble, fight, get drunk, and break the Sabbath."[4]

Precisely because of that profane indifference, well-intentioned white ministers sought to convince the master class that the conversion of their laboring force would support, rather than undermine, the social order of slavery. Truly alarmed by the "little attention [Africans] paid to the sabbath, or religeon,"[5] and devoutly believing that unchurched Africans were lost souls, white missionaries argued that Christianity, if properly sanitized, could render slaves docile and obedient. As a creed that emphasized paying unto Caesar what was Caesar's, "Christianity," Frederick Dalcho insisted, "robs no man of his rights" under the law. Slaves might be taught to pray for eventual deliverance in heaven, rather than to attempt to seize it while on earth. Although slaves must not be allowed to hear preachers "of their own colour," Dalcho warned, white ministers should lecture black congregations on "their duties and obligations," supported by "instructive" examples prudently "*selected* from the Bible," especially "from the New Testament."[6]

In Charleston, where whites and blacks resided in far greater proximity than along the seacoast, the diligent efforts of white missionaries showed

[4]Margaret Washington Creel, *"A Peculiar People": Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 3; Norrece T. Jones, Jr., *Born a Child of Freedom, Yet a Slave: Mechanisms of Control and Strategies of Resistance in Antebellum South Carolina* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 139; Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 146.

[5]George W. Knepper, ed., *Travels in the Southland, 1822-1823: The Journals of Lucius Verus Bierce* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1966), 73.

[6]Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 148; [Frederick Dalcho], *Practical Considerations Founded on the Scriptures Relative to the Slave Population of South Carolina* (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1823), 21, 32.

some success. By the time that Telemaque, as he was known to whites while a slave, bought his freedom on the last day of 1799, thousands of black Carolinians attended Christian churches. Baptist and Methodist ministers in particular gained adherents by ignoring the counsel of men like Dalcho and enlisting black exhorters to venture into urban alleys and rural quarters. Their emotional style, their emphasis on universal salvation, and their early—if altogether too brief—opposition to unfree labor, combined with their theological flexibility, which allowed for the retention of African religious traditions, brought hundreds of city slaves into predominantly white Charleston churches. Desperate to save "heathen" souls for Christ, Methodist ministers and their black "assistants" shepherded their flocks with a light touch. Too-clear evidence of African "paganisms," such as the practice of polygamy, might be admonished, but loose structures of organization made strict enforcement of church dogma difficult. Black congregants found within Methodism the flexibility necessary to practice their traditional religions even while adopting aspects of their new country's dominant faith.[7]

Largely because Methodism proved so attractive to the city's enslaved population, Charleston browns—as the city's mulatto elite preferred to style themselves—regarded Charleston's emotional faiths as churches devoutly to be avoided. As part of their ongoing campaign to prove their fealty to white society, urban mulattoes kept as safe a distance from Methodist benches as they did from the African community. Most members of Charleston's free colored aristocracy flocked into Episcopal churches. Like all of those of "high position in society," observed Francis Asbury, browns preferred the Episcopal Church, which enjoyed the "prestige of worldly wealth and honor." The venerable St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church, built in 1712 near the corner of Church and Queen Streets, attracted many of the city's wealthiest merchants and prosperous mulattoes; among their number was Joseph Vesey, the mixed-race son of the old sea captain. According to one proud mulatto congregant, the parish register of St.

[7]For Denmark Vesey's early life and liberation, see Emancipation Deed, December 31, 1799, Miscellaneous Records, Vol. IIIM, 427-428, SCDAH, and Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison: Madison House, 1999), chapters 1-3. On slavery and the Methodist faith, see Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 234-235; and Graham Russell Hodges, *Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North: African Americans in Monmouth County, New Jersey, 1665-1868* (Madison: Madison House, 1997), 77, who suggests that "Methodists did not respect African spirituality as much as fail to recognize it."

Philip's read "like the social directory of the Brown Fellowship Society."[8]

Befitting his uncomfortable status as a member of neither the Brown Fellowship Society nor the slave community, Denmark Vesey initially avoided both Episcopalian and Methodist congregations. In mid-April, 1817, Vesey was one of "three people of Colour" admitted "to Communion for the first time" at the Second Presbyterian Church. Built on Wragg Square on the corner of Charlotte and Elizabeth Streets, the church was one of the newer congregations in the city and had been dedicated only six years before "Danmark Vesey" first appeared in its session records. The predominantly white Calvinist congregation attracted few black Charlestonians. Perhaps the old captain introduced his former slave to the congregation before his 1803 marriage to Maria Blair, which was conducted by the Methodist minister William Brazier. The fact that Vesey was admitted to communion, but unlike the other two "people of Colour," was not baptized at the same service, indicated that the April morning was not Vesey's initial contact with a Christian church.[9]

One can only assume, however, that while Vesey initially found great comfort in his new-found Christian faith, he also found much, at least in how it was presented in white churches, that drove him to look elsewhere for spiritual sustenance. White Southerners, steeped in traditions of Biblical orthodoxy, took great solace in the New Testament and its treatment of human bondage. The fact that Jesus, as far as the extant gospels indicated, failed to denounce the slavery practiced in Roman Judea appeared to provide divine sanction for the peculiar institution. In "all the special

[8]Thomas Holt, *Black Over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina During Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 64-65; Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 139; Register, 1810-1857, St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church, Charleston, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, 260; Michael P. Johnson and James Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (New York: Norton, 1984), 227.

[9]Records of Sessions, Second Presbyterian Church, 1809-1837, Charleston County, South Caroliniana Library. Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 229, argues that Vesey cynically regarded religion merely "as a tool and its places of worship as convenient for conducting... consciousness-raising," but even a cursory reading of the trial documents demonstrate Vesey's profound religiosity. According to fellow abolitionist Henry Bibb, Vesey was well known in the black community for his "moral pursuits in life as a Christian." See his *The Late Intended Insurrection* (New York: no publisher given, 1850), 4. John Lofton's pioneering account, *Insurrection in South Carolina: The Turbulent World of Denmark Vesey* (Yellow Springs: Antioch Press, 1964), 93-94, 132-134, 183, says little about the role of religion in Vesey's conspiracy.

instructions of our Saviour," thundered Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, "not one word condemns the practice." Slavery was not only "most unquestionably permitted," added a South Carolina editor, "perhaps we should speak more correctly to say [it was actually] encouraged" by the early Christians. Noting St. Paul's instruction to an abused slave to return to his master, South Carolina theologian Charles Jones found ample support for his view that the New Testament pronounced it "contrary to God's will *to runaway* [or] to *harbor* a runaway."[10]

Undoubtedly, some of these pronouncements were designed to assuage the embattled consciences of white Christians. Carolina planters as a class demonstrated little enough guilt over their ownership of other humans, but more than a few white theologians demonstrated some uneasiness over the unwaged exploitation of their black brothers in Christ. David Ramsay, a South Carolina physician and a devout Presbyterian, was almost certainly addressing his own soul rather than his Massachusetts correspondent when he pleaded that "[e]xperience proves that they who have been born & grow up in slavery are incapable of the blessings of freedom." And Charlestonian Frederick Dalcho surely did not expect to persuade northern "advocates of manumission" when he insisted that as "the descendants of Ham"—the cursed second son of Noah—blacks had "lost their freedom through the abominable wickedness of their progenitor."[11]

Undoubtedly also, many white Carolinians embraced this comforting, proslavery brand of Christianity in hopes that their slaves would do the same. Servants properly inculcated with the doctrine that God chose them, or perhaps condemned them, to serve their spiritual betters might prove easier to control. Charleston pulpits echoed with lectures to enslaved Africans on being content with their lowly station in life. Bishop Christopher P. Gadsden, the new rector of St. Philip's Episcopal Church, enjoined the few blacks who entered his doors to "fear God, obey the civil authority, [and] be subject unto their own masters." Echoing the common refrain that Africans were the doomed "descendants of Ham [from the land of] Canaan," polemicist Dalcho instructed the black community that "according to the most ancient prophecies" their destiny was to remain "slaves to Christians," even following their own conversion. With that in mind, the industrious Charles J. Jones penned *A Catechism for Colored Persons*, which answered

[10]Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 192; Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, *An Address Delivered in Charleston Before the Agricultural Society of South Carolina* (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1829), 8; Columbia *Southern Times*, April 8, 1830; Charles C. Jones, *A Catechism for Colored Persons* (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1834), 95.

[11]Robert M. Calhoon, *Evangelicals and Conservatives in the Early South, 1740-1861* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 128-129; [Dalcho], *Practical Considerations Founded on the Scriptures*, 8.

possible black queries in simple prose with pertinent Biblical references. When asked if it was wrong in the eyes of God to flee one's master, Jones reminded his black readers of the Eighth Commandment and the warning not to steal, even one's own body. "Also, that whenever we know that any persons are going to steal" themselves, that is, to run away, Jones admonished, "we are immediately to tell on them."[12]

The attempts of pamphleteers like Jones to peddle their vision of a proslavery God to black congregants was hindered by the fact that most Carolina ministers were hardly disinterested teachers. During the two decades that Vesey was a slave in Charleston, forty percent of the preachers or licentiates in the state owned one or more slaves; small wonder that many Africans regarded Christianity as a swindle concocted by planters and politicians. Yet enough American-born bondpeople listened to the theories of white ministers to produce a sense of inferiority or resignation in some quarters of the slave community, a feeling of submissiveness necessary for the survival of the master class. Richard Furman, a Baptist clergyman, assured Governor Thomas Bennett that white ministers "establish Rules of a [subservient] Character, & enforce them by Considerations which far transcend all" that the "Punishment of Man made Laws can inflict." A minority of black voices endorsed Furman's sentiments. "De marstar had to put de fear of God in them sometimes," remembered one former slave in later years, "and de Bible don't object to it."[13]

For Denmark Vesey, such teachings produced only a sense of revulsion. A man given to haranguing white strangers in taverns about the injustice of slavery was not particularly vulnerable to feelings of inferiority, spiritual or otherwise. Even the trappings of his chosen faith served to remind him of his second class status, as segregated seating for people of color was standard practice in Charleston churches. Vesey approached the front of the chapel for communion or baptism, but he spent the remainder of his Sunday mornings banished to the upstairs galleries. The sermons of the Reverend John Adger, minister of the Second Presbyterian Church, provided little comfort to those listening from above. Adger was moderate in his teachings by comparison to Jones and Dalcho, yet he too regarded Africans and their offspring as "a race distinct from" Euro-Americans. When he patronized

[12]Walter J. Fraser, Jr., *Charleston! Charleston! The History of a Southern City* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 204-205; [Dalcho], *Practical Considerations Founded on the Scriptures*, 18-20; Jones, *Catechism for Colored Persons*, 82.

[13]Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 203; Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (New York: Pantheon, 1969), 6-7; Richard Furman to Governor Thomas Bennett, no date, Richard Furman Papers, University of South Carolina; George Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972), 2.

black congregants by insisting that shackled laborers "are not more truly ours than we are theirs," Vesey must have turned away in disgust."[14]

Given these weekly humiliations at the hands of men who purported to represent a religion of universal brotherhood, many Afro-Christians, and especially many Afro-Methodists, who by the end of the War of 1812 outnumbered white Methodists ten to one in Charleston, began to resist white theological control. Literate blacks like Vesey read of Richard Allen and his African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. Born a slave in 1760, Allen converted to Christianity at the age of seventeen upon hearing an itinerant Methodist preach the gospels; his master, himself influenced by Methodism, allowed Allen to purchase his freedom. Like many young black men from the border South, Allen moved to Philadelphia, where he joined St. George's Methodist Church. But in 1792, Allen experienced the sort of humiliation blacks in Vesey's city witnessed each Sunday. When yanked to his feet in the middle of prayer and instructed to retreat to a segregated pews upstairs, Allen led an exodus from the church. Together with Absalom Jones, he formed the African Methodist Episcopal Church. "Notwithstanding we had been so violently persecuted," Allen insisted, he wished to keep his "independent" church within the larger Methodist fold. No "sect or denomination," Allen believed, "suit[ed] the capacity of colored people as well as the Methodist."[15]

For Charleston's slave and free black population, Allen's church served as a model of black self-reliance and resiliency in a hostile white world. In early 1816, Morris Brown, a free black three years Vesey's junior, and Henry Drayton, a former Carolina slave, journeyed north to confer with Allen about the formation of a branch of the Philadelphia church in Charleston. Both Brown, a pious Charleston bootmaker who served twelve months in prison for using his earnings to help slaves purchase their freedom, and Drayton were ordained for pastorates. They may even have been in Philadelphia when delegations from several mid-Atlantic cities met with Allen to confederate their congregations into a united church. This act of

[14]Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, VA by the University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 418; Sylvia R. Frey, *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 268; Fraser, *Charleston*, 204.

[15]John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979 ed.), 86-87; Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 67; Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 95-96, 118-133; James T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 10-11.

congregations, allowed for the introduction of a far more radical message. Sunday, of course, was the black community's day of services, rest, and visitations. But during the working week, lay clergy conducted nightly "class meetings" "in some retired building" or private home. White authorities routinely sat in the rear pews during Brown's formal sermons, but typically no "white person attended" the nocturnal sessions. Each class had "a coloured preacher, or leader," who was chosen by the church hierarchy. If Vesey regarded Brown and Drayton as hopelessly accommodating to white authority, they either failed to recognize his disdain or simply felt the aging carpenter too important to be ignored. Like his old comrade Peter Poyas, Vesey became a class leader as early as 1818, and for "four years," according to one admiring Charleston freeman, "preach[ed] his gospel of liberty and hate."[21]

If the Reverend Brown's Sunday sermons included a creative melding of African and Christian elements, Vesey's nocturnal teachings were far different. Historians traditionally suggest that the class leader "promoted the use of radical Christianity" to encourage resistance to white authority and "invoked Christian sanction" to support his secular pronouncements on black equality.[22] But former slave Archibald Grimke was far closer to the mark when he remembered that Vesey found "in the stern and Nemesis-like God of the Old Testament" a suitable vision "for a day of vengeance and retribution."[23] Embittered by the continuing bondage of his children and

[21]Martha Proctor Richardson to James Screven, July 6, 1822, Arnold and Screven Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina; Hartford *Connecticut Courant*, August 6, 1822; Testimony of Harth's Robert at trial of Peter Poyas, June 21, 1822, in James Hamilton, *An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection Among a Portion of the Blacks of the City* (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1822), 33; Narrative, in Kennedy and Parker, eds., *Official Report*, 22-23; Archibal H. Grimke, *Right on the Scaffold, or, The Martyrs of 1822* (Washington: American Negro Academy, 1901), 11.

[22]Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 48-49, and Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 593, who perhaps agree on little else, both suggest that Vesey used "radical Christianity" to justify his revolt. Two other important studies that come to similar conclusions are Powers, *Black Charlestonians*, 30, and Edward Ball, *Slaves in the Family* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 267. Ball does, however, observe that the aged carpenter "favored passages in the Bible concern[ing] the enslavement of the Jews."

[23]Grimke, *Right on the Scaffold*, 12; Washington, *A Peculiar People*, 263-264, observes that Vesey's conscious association with the children of Israel "inspired some of the Charleston rebels of 1822." But most Carolina slave theology, she writes, "centered on the experience of Jesus rather than the Jews." The "militant nationalism" of the ancient Israelites was a prominent ideology of slaves convicted of standing with Vesey, Washington suggests, "but was not a major orientation in Gullah religion," a finding of critical implications in the ongoing debate regarding Christian conversion and physical nonresistance to bondage.

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DOUGLAS R. EGERTON*

CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS EVACUATED CHARLESTON DURING the night of February 17, 1865. As roughly ten thousand weary veterans retreated northward up the peninsula, thousands more black Carolinians abandoned nearby plantations and poured into the city to celebrate their new-found freedom. But the real celebration came in late September when over three thousand Charlestonians watched as "the corner stone of the [new] African [Methodist Episcopal] church was laid." Situated on Calhoun Street, the church was designed to replace the old African Church, as it was called, which had been razed by city authorities in late 1822. Although the new church was but a modest structure of yellow pine, "every man who is working on it," bragged the Philadelphia *Christian Recorder*, "is a colored man. Robert Vesey, son of Denmark Vesey, is the architect."[1]

What role did the first African Church play in Denmark Vesey's conspiracy, perhaps the most extensive slave plot in North American history? The extent to which mainland slaves adopted the religion of their new country remains one of the most debated topics in American historiography. Scholars debate not only the extent of religious acculturation, but in which century it took place, whether this adoption allowed for West African religious traditions to survive, and whether the fusion of African and Euro-American religions hindered or helped support patterns of resistance to slavery. In the process, however, Old Testament thought is often merged with New Testament teachings, as if the Bible's two parts received equal attention from southern whites and enslaved blacks and contained similar responses to servitude and retribution. Although it is true that most monographs that deal with slave religion touch upon the Old Testament, typically in a brief reference to the fondness most slaves demonstrated for the Exodus story, few modern writers have observed that the injunctions of the Israelites allowed for a revolutionary tradition quite different from that found in the New Testament—or taught by white ministers in South Carolina.[2]

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[1]Philadelphia *Christian Recorder*, October 14, 1865. The author thanks Alan Gallay, Graham Russell Hodges, Mitchell Snay, Margaret Washington, and Donald R. Wright for their kind comments and suggestions.

[2]Although he primarily examines the modern era, a useful historiographical survey of this issue is Joe Feagin, "Book Review Essay: The Black Church, Inspiration or Opiate," *Journal of Negro History* 60 (October 1975), 536-540.

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This essay argues that some southern bondpeople, and especially those who taught church classes with Denmark Vesey in the old Charleston AME Church, came to regard the militant lessons of the Hebrew Bible, and not merely the saga of Moses, as sacred writ consciously hidden from them by white society. All but one of Vesey's numerous religious pronouncements were drawn from the Old Testament, and in a very real sense, Vesey and his disciples turned their back on the New Testament God of Love. Attracted instead to Jehovah, the ancient God of Wrath and Justice, Vesey, together with Peter Poyas and Africans Monday Gell and Jack Pritchard, fashioned a theology of liberation that fused the demanding faith of the Israelites with the sacred values of Africa. Although there should be absolutely no doubt that Vesey believed in what he taught, his lessons *were* employed as a means by which to produce a profound sense of racial identity among his adherents, which in turn hindered the rise of a common religious bond among Charleston whites and blacks.

One should be careful, of course, in assuming that the majority of blacks in Vesey's South Carolina were familiar with either Testament. At the dawn of the nineteenth century, very few slaves in rural South Carolina exhibited much familiarity with the religious doctrines of their masters. Despite their own pious professions of faith, many planters feared that the Christianization of their laborers would produce egalitarian-minded, and hence unruly, bondpeople. In extreme cases, proslavery theorists rejected the proposition that Africans possessed souls; more commonly, white masters worried that canny slaves who obtained religious training might next demand commensurate political rights as Christians. Because many masters agreed with Joseph Ottolenghe when he complained that "a slave is ten times worse when a Christian, than in his State of Paganism," the few who permitted religious instruction on their estates did so only after warning their workers that baptism would not result in liberation. But even when heavily censored by white masters, a religion of universal brotherhood posed obvious problems in a slave society. Anyone who wanted to acquaint enslaved Africans with the *entire* Bible, lamented Whitemarsh Seabrook, a Sea Island planter and a member of the state Senate, was fit for "a room in the Lunatic Asylum."[3]

[3]Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), 192; Alan Gallay, *The Formation of a Planter Elite: Jonathan Bryan and the Southern Colonial Frontier* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 41-42; Marvin L. Michael Kay and Lorin Lee Cary, *Slavery in North Carolina, 1748-1775* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 194; Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 40-41.

Seabrook need not have worried. As Margaret Washington and Norrece Jones have observed, many of the Africans forcibly imported into the state prior to 1808 showed little interest in learning about the faith of their captors. Isolated on remote rice plantations strewn along the Atlantic coast, the vast majority of native Africans continued to practice the faith of their ancestors. Although few planters prior to the 1830s wished to convert their laborers, for those who did, African religiosity proved stubbornly resistant to Christianization. Old world traditions were ancient enough that African minds were hardly the uncommitted "heathen" slates whites believed them to be. Besides, wary captives suspected the deity of Euro-Americans "to be a cheat." As one bold Carolina bondman explained it to Reverend John D. Long, they supposed "the preachers and the slaveholders to be in a conspiracy against them." If given Sunday as a day of rest, rural blacks used the time, sighed Henry Bibb, an unusually pious slave, to "gamble, fight, get drunk, and break the Sabbath."[4]

Precisely because of that profane indifference, well-intentioned white ministers sought to convince the master class that the conversion of their laboring force would support, rather than undermine, the social order of slavery. Truly alarmed by the "little attention [Africans] paid to the sabbath, or religeon,"[5] and devoutly believing that unchurched Africans were lost souls, white missionaries argued that Christianity, if properly sanitized, could render slaves docile and obedient. As a creed that emphasized paying unto Caesar what was Caesar's, "Christianity," Frederick Dalcho insisted, "robs no man of his rights" under the law. Slaves might be taught to pray for eventual deliverance in heaven, rather than to attempt to seize it while on earth. Although slaves must not be allowed to hear preachers "of their own colour," Dalcho warned, white ministers should lecture black congregations on "their duties and obligations," supported by "instructive" examples prudently "*selected* from the Bible," especially "from the New Testament."[6]

In Charleston, where whites and blacks resided in far greater proximity than along the seacoast, the diligent efforts of white missionaries showed

[4]Margaret Washington Creel, *"A Peculiar People": Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 3; Norrece T. Jones, Jr., *Born a Child of Freedom, Yet a Slave: Mechanisms of Control and Strategies of Resistance in Antebellum South Carolina* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 139; Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 146.

[5]George W. Knepper, ed., *Travels in the Southland, 1822-1823: The Journals of Lucius Verus Bierce* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1966), 73.

[6]Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 148; [Frederick Dalcho], *Practical Considerations Founded on the Scriptures Relative to the Slave Population of South Carolina* (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1823), 21, 32.

some success. By the time that Telemaque, as he was known to whites while a slave, bought his freedom on the last day of 1799, thousands of black Carolinians attended Christian churches. Baptist and Methodist ministers in particular gained adherents by ignoring the counsel of men like Dalcho and enlisting black exhorters to venture into urban alleys and rural quarters. Their emotional style, their emphasis on universal salvation, and their early—if altogether too brief—opposition to unfree labor, combined with their theological flexibility, which allowed for the retention of African religious traditions, brought hundreds of city slaves into predominantly white Charleston churches. Desperate to save "heathen" souls for Christ, Methodist ministers and their black "assistants" shepherded their flocks with a light touch. Too-clear evidence of African "paganisms," such as the practice of polygamy, might be admonished, but loose structures of organization made strict enforcement of church dogma difficult. Black congregants found within Methodism the flexibility necessary to practice their traditional religions even while adopting aspects of their new country's dominant faith.[7]

Largely because Methodism proved so attractive to the city's enslaved population, Charleston browns—as the city's mulatto elite preferred to style themselves—regarded Charleston's emotional faiths as churches devoutly to be avoided. As part of their ongoing campaign to prove their fealty to white society, urban mulattoes kept as safe a distance from Methodist benches as they did from the African community. Most members of Charleston's free colored aristocracy flocked into Episcopal churches. Like all of those of "high position in society," observed Francis Asbury, browns preferred the Episcopal Church, which enjoyed the "prestige of worldly wealth and honor." The venerable St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church, built in 1712 near the corner of Church and Queen Streets, attracted many of the city's wealthiest merchants and prosperous mulattoes; among their number was Joseph Vesey, the mixed-race son of the old sea captain. According to one proud mulatto congregant, the parish register of St.

[7]For Denmark Vesey's early life and liberation, see Emancipation Deed, December 31, 1799, Miscellaneous Records, Vol. IIIM, 427-428, SCDAH, and Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison: Madison House, 1999), chapters 1-3. On slavery and the Methodist faith, see Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 234-235; and Graham Russell Hodges, *Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North: African Americans in Monmouth County, New Jersey, 1665-1868* (Madison: Madison House, 1997), 77, who suggests that "Methodists did not respect African spirituality as much as fail to recognize it."

Philip's read "like the social directory of the Brown Fellowship Society."[8]

Befitting his uncomfortable status as a member of neither the Brown Fellowship Society nor the slave community, Denmark Vesey initially avoided both Episcopalian and Methodist congregations. In mid-April, 1817, Vesey was one of "three people of Colour" admitted "to Communion for the first time" at the Second Presbyterian Church. Built on Wragg Square on the corner of Charlotte and Elizabeth Streets, the church was one of the newer congregations in the city and had been dedicated only six years before "Danmark Vesey" first appeared in its session records. The predominantly white Calvinist congregation attracted few black Charlestonians. Perhaps the old captain introduced his former slave to the congregation before his 1803 marriage to Maria Blair, which was conducted by the Methodist minister William Brazier. The fact that Vesey was admitted to communion, but unlike the other two "people of Colour," was not baptized at the same service, indicated that the April morning was not Vesey's initial contact with a Christian church.[9]

One can only assume, however, that while Vesey initially found great comfort in his new-found Christian faith, he also found much, at least in how it was presented in white churches, that drove him to look elsewhere for spiritual sustenance. White Southerners, steeped in traditions of Biblical orthodoxy, took great solace in the New Testament and its treatment of human bondage. The fact that Jesus, as far as the extant gospels indicated, failed to denounce the slavery practiced in Roman Judea appeared to provide divine sanction for the peculiar institution. In "all the special

[8]Thomas Holt, *Black Over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina During Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 64-65; Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 139; Register, 1810-1857, St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church, Charleston, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, 260; Michael P. Johnson and James Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (New York: Norton, 1984), 227.

[9]Records of Sessions, Second Presbyterian Church, 1809-1837, Charleston County, South Caroliniana Library. Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 229, argues that Vesey cynically regarded religion merely "as a tool and its places of worship as convenient for conducting... consciousness-raising," but even a cursory reading of the trial documents demonstrate Vesey's profound religiosity. According to fellow abolitionist Henry Bibb, Vesey was well known in the black community for his "moral pursuits in life as a Christian." See his *The Late Intended Insurrection* (New York: no publisher given, 1850), 4. John Lofton's pioneering account, *Insurrection in South Carolina: The Turbulent World of Denmark Vesey* (Yellow Springs: Antioch Press, 1964), 93-94, 132-134, 183, says little about the role of religion in Vesey's conspiracy.

instructions of our Saviour," thundered Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, "not one word condemns the practice." Slavery was not only "most unquestionably permitted," added a South Carolina editor, "perhaps we should speak more correctly to say [it was actually] encouraged" by the early Christians. Noting St. Paul's instruction to an abused slave to return to his master, South Carolina theologian Charles Jones found ample support for his view that the New Testament pronounced it "contrary to God's will *to runaway* [or] to *harbor* a runaway."[10]

Undoubtedly, some of these pronouncements were designed to assuage the embattled consciences of white Christians. Carolina planters as a class demonstrated little enough guilt over their ownership of other humans, but more than a few white theologians demonstrated some uneasiness over the unwaged exploitation of their black brothers in Christ. David Ramsay, a South Carolina physician and a devout Presbyterian, was almost certainly addressing his own soul rather than his Massachusetts correspondent when he pleaded that "[e]xperience proves that they who have been born & grow up in slavery are incapable of the blessings of freedom." And Charlestonian Frederick Dalcho surely did not expect to persuade northern "advocates of manumission" when he insisted that as "the descendants of Ham"—the cursed second son of Noah—blacks had "lost their freedom through the abominable wickedness of their progenitor."[11]

Undoubtedly also, many white Carolinians embraced this comforting, proslavery brand of Christianity in hopes that their slaves would do the same. Servants properly inculcated with the doctrine that God chose them, or perhaps condemned them, to serve their spiritual betters might prove easier to control. Charleston pulpits echoed with lectures to enslaved Africans on being content with their lowly station in life. Bishop Christopher P. Gadsden, the new rector of St. Philip's Episcopal Church, enjoined the few blacks who entered his doors to "fear God, obey the civil authority, [and] be subject unto their own masters." Echoing the common refrain that Africans were the doomed "descendants of Ham [from the land of] Canaan," polemicist Dalcho instructed the black community that "according to the most ancient prophecies" their destiny was to remain "slaves to Christians," even following their own conversion. With that in mind, the industrious Charles J. Jones penned *A Catechism for Colored Persons*, which answered

[10]Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 192; Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, *An Address Delivered in Charleston Before the Agricultural Society of South Carolina* (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1829), 8; Columbia *Southern Times*, April 8, 1830; Charles C. Jones, *A Catechism for Colored Persons* (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1834), 95.

[11]Robert M. Calhoon, *Evangelicals and Conservatives in the Early South, 1740-1861* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 128-129; [Dalcho], *Practical Considerations Founded on the Scriptures*, 8.

possible black queries in simple prose with pertinent Biblical references. When asked if it was wrong in the eyes of God to flee one's master, Jones reminded his black readers of the Eighth Commandment and the warning not to steal, even one's own body. "Also, that whenever we know that any persons are going to steal" themselves, that is, to run away, Jones admonished, "we are immediately to tell on them."[12]

The attempts of pamphleteers like Jones to peddle their vision of a proslavery God to black congregants was hindered by the fact that most Carolina ministers were hardly disinterested teachers. During the two decades that Vesey was a slave in Charleston, forty percent of the preachers or licentiates in the state owned one or more slaves; small wonder that many Africans regarded Christianity as a swindle concocted by planters and politicians. Yet enough American-born bondpeople listened to the theories of white ministers to produce a sense of inferiority or resignation in some quarters of the slave community, a feeling of submissiveness necessary for the survival of the master class. Richard Furman, a Baptist clergyman, assured Governor Thomas Bennett that white ministers "establish Rules of a [subservient] Character, & enforce them by Considerations which far transcend all" that the "Punishment of Man made Laws can inflict." A minority of black voices endorsed Furman's sentiments. "De marstar had to put de fear of God in them sometimes," remembered one former slave in later years, "and de Bible don't object to it."[13]

For Denmark Vesey, such teachings produced only a sense of revulsion. A man given to haranguing white strangers in taverns about the injustice of slavery was not particularly vulnerable to feelings of inferiority, spiritual or otherwise. Even the trappings of his chosen faith served to remind him of his second class status, as segregated seating for people of color was standard practice in Charleston churches. Vesey approached the front of the chapel for communion or baptism, but he spent the remainder of his Sunday mornings banished to the upstairs galleries. The sermons of the Reverend John Adger, minister of the Second Presbyterian Church, provided little comfort to those listening from above. Adger was moderate in his teachings by comparison to Jones and Dalcho, yet he too regarded Africans and their offspring as "a race distinct from" Euro-Americans. When he patronized

[12]Walter J. Fraser, Jr., *Charleston! Charleston! The History of a Southern City* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 204-205; [Dalcho], *Practical Considerations Founded on the Scriptures*, 18-20; Jones, *Catechism for Colored Persons*, 82.

[13]Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 203; Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (New York: Pantheon, 1969), 6-7; Richard Furman to Governor Thomas Bennett, no date, Richard Furman Papers, University of South Carolina; George Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972), 2.

black congregants by insisting that shackled laborers "are not more truly ours than we are theirs," Vesey must have turned away in disgust."[14]

Given these weekly humiliations at the hands of men who purported to represent a religion of universal brotherhood, many Afro-Christians, and especially many Afro-Methodists, who by the end of the War of 1812 outnumbered white Methodists ten to one in Charleston, began to resist white theological control. Literate blacks like Vesey read of Richard Allen and his African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. Born a slave in 1760, Allen converted to Christianity at the age of seventeen upon hearing an itinerant Methodist preach the gospels; his master, himself influenced by Methodism, allowed Allen to purchase his freedom. Like many young black men from the border South, Allen moved to Philadelphia, where he joined St. George's Methodist Church. But in 1792, Allen experienced the sort of humiliation blacks in Vesey's city witnessed each Sunday. When yanked to his feet in the middle of prayer and instructed to retreat to a segregated pews upstairs, Allen led an exodus from the church. Together with Absalom Jones, he formed the African Methodist Episcopal Church. "Notwithstanding we had been so violently persecuted," Allen insisted, he wished to keep his "independent" church within the larger Methodist fold. No "sect or denomination," Allen believed, "suit[ed] the capacity of colored people as well as the Methodist."[15]

For Charleston's slave and free black population, Allen's church served as a model of black self-reliance and resiliency in a hostile white world. In early 1816, Morris Brown, a free black three years Vesey's junior, and Henry Drayton, a former Carolina slave, journeyed north to confer with Allen about the formation of a branch of the Philadelphia church in Charleston. Both Brown, a pious Charleston bootmaker who served twelve months in prison for using his earnings to help slaves purchase their freedom, and Drayton were ordained for pastorates. They may even have been in Philadelphia when delegations from several mid-Atlantic cities met with Allen to confederate their congregations into a united church. This act of

[14]Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, VA by the University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 418; Sylvia R. Frey, *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 268; Fraser, *Charleston*, 204.

[15]John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979 ed.), 86-87; Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 67; Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 95-96, 118-133; James T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 10-11.

self-determination marked the final act of emancipation from the religious jurisdiction of white clergymen.[16]

Not surprisingly, white clergymen were nervous about their loss of theological control. Brown and Drayton returned south in early 1817 only to discover that Anthony Senter, a powerful Methodist leader, was attempting to reassert authority over the black Methodist majority and the disbursement of their collection plates and revenues. In a show of force, white trustees voted to construct a hearse house atop a small black cemetery adjoining the Bethel Methodist Church. In response, 4376 blacks resigned in protest and began construction of an independent African church. The "Whites wanted nothing," Reverend Drayton laughed, "but a good spanking with a sword."[17]

Built on Anson Street near the corner of Boundary, Charleston's African Methodist congregation grew so quickly that the city's black community soon began work on a second church on Cow Alley (now Philadelphia Street) in the predominantly black Hampstead neighborhood along the town's northern edge. The African Church, as both white and black Charlestonians dubbed the congregations, drew its leadership from free black artisans like Vesey. Of the twenty-six freemen who boldly affixed their signatures to the petition sent to the state legislature in 1818 for the incorporation of the African Methodist Church, at least ten were artisans. The two churches housed the largest black Methodist congregations in the South, and Charleston's membership was second only in size to the parent body in Philadelphia. As Vesey does not appear in the records of the Second Presbyterian Church after Easter 1817, he presumably became an early, perhaps even a founding, member of the Cow Alley Church. His old confidants Monday Gell and Peter Poyas, both of them slaves, also promptly joined, and as Gell himself put it, Denmark's son Sandy Vesey became a "zealous [member of] the African Church."[18]

Like Allen's Philadelphia church, Morris Brown's Charleston congregations implicitly challenged not merely white religious domination,

[16]Donald R. Wright, *African Americans in the Early Republic, 1789-1831* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, 1993), 156-157; Harding, *There Is a River*, 67; C. Peter Ripley, ed., *The Black Abolitionist Papers: The United States, 1830-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 3: 134 note 3, 196 note 14.

[17]Campbell, *Songs of Zion*, 35; Frey, *Water From the Rock*, 322; Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 27; William Colcock's Confession, July 12, 1822, Records of the General Assembly, Governor's Messages, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia (hereafter RGA, GM, SCDAH).

[18]Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 27; Lionel Kennedy and Thomas Parker, eds., *An Official Report of the Trials of Sundry Negroes* (Charleston: James R. Schenck, 1822), 22, 76; Testimony of Monday Gell, July 16, 1822, RGA, GM, SCDAH.

but white social and political control as well. The black community's struggle to create autonomous sacred institutions by seceding from white governance was, in the context of a slave society, a decidedly radical act. In the process of managing their own churches, slaves and free blacks defied established theories of African intellectual inferiority. As individuals, even the shrewdest slave marketeer could amass little property, but collectively, enslaved congregants purchased burial grounds, raised and disbursed charity funds for care of the aged or indigent, and maintained church buildings. Because both white ministers and secular authorities regarded the African churches as dangerous bastions of slave autonomy, Charleston's city government made it a practice to harass the leadership and routinely disrupt as many services as possible.[19]

Despite the persistent fears that an African Methodist leader would emerge as a latter-day Moses, Morris Brown's eloquent sermons ultimately failed to deliver a theology of liberation. For all of their facility in fusing the powerful creation stories of their ancestral home with the egalitarian teachings of their adopted land, southern AME clergymen rarely spoke of a promised land on this earth. The Reverend Brown was a pragmatist who believed that his first responsibility was to protect his black flock and preserve their sense of hope for the future. White authorities daily threatened to close his church, which is to say they threatened to close the focus of black cultural and social life in Charleston. Such concerns forced Brown and Drayton to surrender the principle of political leadership in hopes of keeping his church doors open. Although most slave congregants appreciated his precarious position, some of the more radical members of his church, including the increasingly bellicose Vesey, regarded him as a good man deserving of respect, but not a safe man worthy of trust. It little helped matters that Malcolm Brown, Morris Brown's oldest son and one of the six church trustees, was the sole black member of the accommodationist Brown Fellowship Society.[20]

The decentralized organizational structure of American Methodism, however, together with the unwieldy size of Charleston's growing African

[19]Harding, *There Is a River*, 67; Bernard E. Powers, *Black Charlestonians: A Social History, 1822-1885* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 19.

[20]Robert L. Harris, Jr., "Charleston's Free Afro-American Elite: The Brown Fellowship Society and the Humane Brotherhood," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 82 (October 1981), 292; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 272-273, is especially good on the difficult position of black preachers in the slave states. During the organizing of his conspiracy, Vesey warned his followers not to tell "Morris Brown, Harry Drayton, and Charles Corr" of the plot "for fear that they would betray us to the whites." See second confession of Monday Gell, July 13, 1822, in Kennedy and Parker, eds., *Official Report*, 98.

congregations, allowed for the introduction of a far more radical message. Sunday, of course, was the black community's day of services, rest, and visitations. But during the working week, lay clergy conducted nightly "class meetings" "in some retired building" or private home. White authorities routinely sat in the rear pews during Brown's formal sermons, but typically no "white person attended" the nocturnal sessions. Each class had "a coloured preacher, or leader," who was chosen by the church hierarchy. If Vesey regarded Brown and Drayton as hopelessly accommodating to white authority, they either failed to recognize his disdain or simply felt the aging carpenter too important to be ignored. Like his old comrade Peter Poyas, Vesey became a class leader as early as 1818, and for "four years," according to one admiring Charleston freeman, "preach[ed] his gospel of liberty and hate."[21]

If the Reverend Brown's Sunday sermons included a creative melding of African and Christian elements, Vesey's nocturnal teachings were far different. Historians traditionally suggest that the class leader "promoted the use of radical Christianity" to encourage resistance to white authority and "invoked Christian sanction" to support his secular pronouncements on black equality.[22] But former slave Archibald Grimke was far closer to the mark when he remembered that Vesey found "in the stern and Nemesis-like God of the Old Testament" a suitable vision "for a day of vengeance and retribution."[23] Embittered by the continuing bondage of his children and

[21]Martha Proctor Richardson to James Screven, July 6, 1822, Arnold and Screven Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina; Hartford *Connecticut Courant*, August 6, 1822; Testimony of Harth's Robert at trial of Peter Poyas, June 21, 1822, in James Hamilton, *An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection Among a Portion of the Blacks of the City* (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1822), 33; Narrative, in Kennedy and Parker, eds., *Official Report*, 22-23; Archibal H. Grimke, *Right on the Scaffold, or, The Martyrs of 1822* (Washington: American Negro Academy, 1901), 11.

[22]Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 48-49, and Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 593, who perhaps agree on little else, both suggest that Vesey used "radical Christianity" to justify his revolt. Two other important studies that come to similar conclusions are Powers, *Black Charlestonians*, 30, and Edward Ball, *Slaves in the Family* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 267. Ball does, however, observe that the aged carpenter "favored passages in the Bible concern[ing] the enslavement of the Jews."

[23]Grimke, *Right on the Scaffold*, 12; Washington, *A Peculiar People*, 263-264, observes that Vesey's conscious association with the children of Israel "inspired some of the Charleston rebels of 1822." But most Carolina slave theology, she writes, "centered on the experience of Jesus rather than the Jews." The "militant nationalism" of the ancient Israelites was a prominent ideology of slaves convicted of standing with Vesey, Washington suggests, "but was not a major orientation in Gullah religion," a finding of critical implications in the ongoing debate regarding Christian conversion and physical nonresistance to bondage.

Beck, his first wife, and disgusted with the proslavery ministers of South Carolina, Vesey turned his back on the New Testament and what he regarded as its false promise of universal brotherhood. Having seceded from the white Presbyterian church and the white society of which it was a part, Vesey seceded a second time, from Christianity itself. In his numerous religious pronouncements, Vesey never once mentioned Jesus or a God that would have him forgive his enemies. The instinct of freedom was the righteous voice of *his* God.

Most slaves, as they gathered about the table in Vesey's rented home at 20 Bull Street, were drawn to the Book of Exodus and the story of Israel delivered. Themselves enslaved laborers in a barbaric land, Africans naturally identified with those who centuries before had toiled under burning sun in pharaoh's Egypt; black Carolinians prayed only that the sacred liberation of God's chosen people would be repeated in North America. More to the point, the figure of Moses, who possessed the mystical ability to transform inanimate objects into leaving creatures, corresponded easily to African practices of conjure.[24]

According to his disciples, however, Vesey focused not on the epic of Moses but rather on the Jewish Bible's edicts on slavery. As he studied the Book of Exodus, Vesey obviously found great comfort in its teaching. Mosaic law permitted both divorce and polygamy. (Vesey had at least three wives during his forty years in Charleston, and possibly practiced polygamy.) The Hebrew lawgiver also tolerated slavery, but with specific admonitions. "Denmark read at the meeting different Chapters from the Old Testament," recalled a slave named John, and "spoke and exhorted from the 16[th] Verse [of Exodus, Chapter 21] the words 'and He that Stealeth a man.'" These "ordinances" regarding unfree labor allowed the Israelites to buy and own slaves in perpetuity, but only if the slaves were nonbelievers. "When you buy a Hebrew slave," the Israelite lawgiver had cautioned, "he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing." And whoever steals a man, Moses had warned, "shall be put to death." In the theology of Vesey's class, African Methodists were the new Israelites. St. Paul and his planter defenders could say what they wished, but Jehovah demanded the death of those who owned the chosen people.[25]

[24]Johnson and Roark, *Black Masters*, 38; Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 311; Theophius H. Smith, *Conjuring Cultures: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 40. Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 258, suggested the Demerara rebels were partly inspired by the story of "Moses crossing the Red Sea."

[25]Confession of Enslow's John, no date, William and Benjamin Hammett Papers, Duke University Library; Book of Exodus, Chapter 21, Versus 1-4.

When not at his workbench, Vesey devoted every available moment to exploring the mysteries of the Old Testament. He became the master, as white magistrates later conceded, of "all those parts of the Scriptures" that dealt with servitude, and he could "readily quote them, to prove that slavery was contrary to the laws of God." If Africans, or at least those blacks who joined the Methodist ranks, remained captives beyond their allotted six years, they "were absolutely enjoined" by God's law to "attempt their emancipation, however shocking and bloody might be the consequences." Vesey's favorite texts became "Zechariah, Chapter 14th, verses 1, 2 and 3," which foretold of the sack of Jerusalem, and Joshua, Chapter 6, verse 21: "Then they utterly destroyed all in the city, both men and women, young and old [with] the edge of the sword."[26]

For the slaves and free blacks in Vesey's class, word that the most ancient books of the Bible condemned their bondage reminded them anew of the treachery of the white clergy who had hidden this knowledge from them. Bacchus demanded to know why South Carolina whites "did not preach up this thing (meaning the passages on liberty &c) to them before." All "the Ministers [should] be killed except a few," Vesey replied brusquely. He reminded his pupils of the "19th Chap[ter of] Isaiah": "And I will stir up Egyptian and Egyptian, and they will fight [and] I will confound their plans." For a man who took great interest in the bitterly divisive Missouri debates, it required little imagination to find a modern counterpart for the Egyptians.[27]

In his determination to spread his empowering version of the gospel and to reveal the typically-censored passages of the Old Testament, the old carpenter used every opportunity to "prove," as his friend William Paul observed, "that Slavery and bondage is against the Bible." Vesey told all who would listen that white ministers were a fraud, that they "made a Catechism *different* for the Negroes" in an attempt to hide Jehovah's will from his chosen people. His tendency to preach to all comers grew so overpowering that even "his general conversation[s]" at carpentry sites and taverns, reported Benjamin Ford, a white boy of sixteen years, "was about religion, which he would apply to slavery." Taught to believe that the heavens approved of unfree labor, young Ford challenged Vesey's teachings. But unmindful of the crowd gathering around them, Vesey, like the Puritan radicals who battled the majesty of King Charles I, fell back on the example of Eden. At the "creation of the world," he observed, "all men had equal

[26]Narrative, in Kennedy and Parker, eds., *Official Report*, 17-18; Book of Zechariah, Chapter 14, Verses 1-3.

[27]Confession of Hammett's Bacchus, no date, William and Benjamin Hammett Papers, Duke University Library.

rights, blacks as well as whites."[28]

Before long, Vesey's disciples echoed his teachings—as well as his bravado. Jacob Glen, an enslaved carpenter and a member of the African Church, fell into a debate with Reverend Drayton on the justice of seizing their freedom in this life. When the nervous black minister counseled patience, Glen angrily "quoted Scripture to prove he would not be condemned for raising against the Whites." Rolla Bennett, the domestic servant of Governor Thomas Bennett, also began to speak about the coming wrath of Jehovah. When Joe LaRoche reminded Rolla that the God of the New Testament "says we must not kill," Rolla "laughed" in his face and called him "a coward."[29]

To be sure, not every member of the AME congregations followed the eloquent Vesey down the path of revolutionary theology. Of the twenty-six freemen who petitioned the General Assembly for the right to incorporate their church, not a single one was later implicated in Vesey's conspiracy. Many parishioners never strayed from the Christian doctrine of loving one's neighbor, even if that neighbor was their owner. Typical of these Afro-Christians was George Wilson, an enslaved blacksmith owned by Major John Wilson. Like Vesey, Wilson "could read and write" and served as a "class leader in the [African] Methodist Church." A "dark mulatto of large frame," George lived away from his master's Broad Street home and was allowed the privilege of hiring his services about the city and "paying to his owner a reasonable amount of wages." As a convert to Christianity, George struggled to love his master as he loved his God. Like Brown and Drayton, he refused to listen to angry talk of Jehovah's bloody justice.[30]

But many congregants *did* listen. One of Vesey's disciples may well have been young David Walker, a freeman who moved from his birthplace

[28]Examination of William Paul, June 19, 1822, RGA, GM, SCDAH; Mary Lamboll Beach to Elizabeth Gilchrist, July 5, 1822, Beach Letters, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston; Examination of Benjamin Ford, June 26, 1822, RGA, GM, SCDAH.

[29]Examination of Charles Drayton, July 17, 1822, RGA, GM, SCDAH; Testimony of Joe LaRoche at trial of Rolla Bennett, June 19, 1822, in Kennedy and Parker, eds., *Official Report*, 62.

[30]AME Petition, [1818], General Assembly Papers, Petitions, no. 1893, 4-9, SCDAH; W. Hasell Wilson to Reverend Robert Wilson, no date, Charleston Library Society; Elizabeth B. Pharo, ed., *Reminiscences of William Hasell Wilson* (Philadelphia: Patterson and White Co., 1937), 6. Richard C. Wade, "The Vesey Plot: A Reconsideration," *Journal of Southern History* 30 (May 1964): 143, who argues that the highly organized conspiracy was nothing more than "loose talk," fuses George Wilson with free black William Penceel (who also revealed the plot to white authorities) into a single man named "George Pencil."

in North Carolina to Charleston around 1817. Several passages in Walker's uncompromising 1829 pamphlet, *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, not only hint at a familiarity with events in the Cow Alley church but echo the teachings of the old carpenter. When Walker sailed north for Boston in 1821, Vesey's message of divinely-inspired revolution sailed with him, a connection that should serve as a warning to those scholars who would banish slave rebels from the pantheon of leading abolitionists. Few congregants, however, were free to leave the city; those held behind by shackles instead cast their lot with Vesey and the sword. As Abraham Poyas put it: "Fear not, the Lord God that delivered Daniel is able to deliver us." Of the seventy-two slaves and freemen found guilty of conspiracy in 1822, at least half, or thirty-six, were or had been members of the African Church.[31]

Modern scholars from John B. Boles to Mechal Sobel have found many points of convergence between Christianity and West African theology, yet the Old Testament provided an even better fit with African religious traditions. It was not merely that the saga of the enslaved children of Israel reminded black Charlestonians of their own unhappy condition, although it surely was that in part. Vesey's habit of reading aloud "two Chapters from the prophet Tobit," which described the trials of the Jewish people in their early diaspora, indicated that he found parallels between Tobit's injunctions to hold true to the covenant and the difficulties of Africans in *their* diaspora. (Vesey's emphasis on Tobit also indicated that he had abandoned his Presbyterian Bible, for Protestant Bibles typically omitted the fourteen books of apocrypha.) But Vesey's fondness for the Hebrew Bible was more than a coincidental identification with the tale of the exodus from Egypt. African cosmology held that natural places could hold magical power, and certain objects, especially holy ones, could alter nature itself. Protestant theologians frowned on such ancient notions, which they associated with "popery" or barbarian superstition, but the Hebrew Bible was filled not merely with miracles but with magic—and therefore power: blazing bushes that did not burn, walking staffs that turned into serpents that terrified the master class, and holy men who could part the great water while Jehovah's

[31]Peter P. Hinks, "'There Is a Great Work for You To Do': The Evangelical Strategy of David Walker's *Appeal* and His Early Years in the Carolina Low Country," in Randall Miller and John McKivigan, eds., *The Moment of Decision: Biographical Essays on American Character and Regional Identity* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 104-106; Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 38; Abraham Poyas to Peter Poyas, no date, in Kennedy and Parker, eds., *Official Report*, 84; Examinations, RGA, GM, SCDAH. The courts that tried Vesey's men became so convinced of the connection between the African Church and the conspiracy that they routinely asked the accused if they were members.

chosen people escaped their captivity.[32]

Strengthening Vesey's belief in a divine ability to quite literally manipulate the natural world was his decade-long association with another member of the African Church, Jack Pritchard. Known as "Gullah Jack, [or] sometimes Cooter Jack" to his fellow congregants, Pritchard was an East African priest and woodworker. Zaphaniah Kingsley, a seasoned slave trader and Florida planter who purchased Pritchard as "a prisoner of war at Zinguebar" in late 1805, later wrote that "Jack the Conjurer was a priest in his own country [of] M'Choolay Morcema." The port of Zinguebar was adjacent to the island of Zanzibar, where Swahili and Arab traders sold men and women from a broad region of central and eastern Africa to American and European traders. Kingsley remembered that Jack boarded his ship, the *Gustavia*, with his "conjuring implements" carried "in a bag." Upon arriving in Charleston in April of 1806, Jack was purchased by Paul Pritchard, a ship carpenter who operated a shop at Gadsden's Wharf.[33]

Paul Pritchard resided at 44 Hasell Street. Despite the fact that Jack openly "practised [his mystical] arts," Pritchard came to regard the African carpenter as a skillful and obedient slave. At length, Pritchard permitted Jack the distinction of allowing him to live away from Hasell Street, and perhaps also to hire his own time about the city. Jack rented a house on Meeting Street "next to Monday Gell's," who also lived apart from his master. Whites saw him as nothing more than an industrious "little man with large black whiskers," but to the black AME community, Pritchard was an African priest of great power and magic.[34]

Where Vesey used his towering height and dominating personality to

[32]John B. Boles, *Black Southerners, 1619-1869* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 158; Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 74; See also Blassingame, *Slave Community*, 72; Charles W. Joyner, *Down By the Riverside* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 142-143; Examination of William Paul, June 19, 1822, RGA, GM, SCDAH.

[33]Examination of Y, unnamed slave of George Cross, no date, RGA, GM, SCDAH; Zaphaniah Kingsley, *A Treatise on the Patriarchal, or Co-operative System of Society* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1970 reprint of 1829 ed.), 13; Daniel Schafer to author, August 2, November 15, 1996. (Professor Schafer is writing a biography of Kingsley and kindly shared his research with me.) On Zinguebar and Zanzibar, see Daniel P. Mannix and Malcolm Cowley, *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1518-1865* (New York: Viking Press, 1962), 241-243, and George L. Sullivan, *Dhow Chasing in Zanzibar Waters* (London: Sampson Low, 1873), 74.

[34]Hamilton, *An Account*, 23; *Directory and Stranger's Guide, 1819* (Charleston: James R. Schenck, 1819), 77; Examination of Vanderhorst's George, no date, RGA, GM, SCDAH.

gain disciples, Jack's fellow African congregants instinctively regarded the diminutive man as a natural leader. African priests typically obtained their powers from some unnatural circumstance of birth, such as entering the world with an amniotic caul over one eye. But in rare cases, powerful sorcerers might pass their arcane abilities on to their children, who in time would take their place as village leaders. Members of the Cow Alley church understood Jack to be a "conjurer by [both] profession and by lineal heritage," and their respect—and fear—grew accordingly. Like all charismatic leaders, Jack recognized that he possessed the gift of authority, and he labored to accentuate that gift by adopting, or perhaps maintaining, a menacing appearance. Charleston whites discouraged their slaves from wearing their hair in a bushy and "uncivilized" manner, as they had in Africa. But Jack defiantly grew his thick whiskers ever longer. Like Vesey's elegant apparel, Jack's appearance at once impressed his fellows and defied the conventions of local authorities.[35]

Many historians, particularly Albert J. Raboteau and William W. Freehling, suggest that Vesey, as he began to consider a modern exodus from Charleston, consciously used Jack Pritchard to reach the African plantation constituency, while he himself used the AME Church to reach the more assimilated urban creole population.[36] But in fact no such dichotomy existed. African magic and European Christianity may have uneasily coexisted on the Carolina countryside, but Old Testament tales melded easily with Africa's sacred legends in Charleston's African Churches. Gullah Jack was, after all, a member of Vesey's African Church, as was his neighbor Monday Gell, an Ibo. Neither man appeared to find any

[35]Charles Joyner, "'If You Ain't Got Education': Slave Language and Slave Thought in Antebellum Charleston," in Michael O'Brien and David Moltke-Hansen, eds., *Intellectual Life in Antebellum Charleston* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 274; Thomas W. Higginson, *Black Rebellion* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969 reprint of 1889 edition), 230-231; Shane White and Graham White, "Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Journal of Southern History* 61 (February 1995), 58.

[36]Four scholars who suggest that Vesey "had the best of both religious worlds, the doctrinal sanction of Scripture and practical protection of conjure," are Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 163 (quotation); Vincent Harding, "Religion and Resistance Among Antebellum Negroes," in August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, eds., *The Making of Black America: Essays in Negro Life and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 1: 186; William W. Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 55; and Smith, *Conjuring Cultures*, 159, who observes that Vesey practiced "radical Christianity" while Pritchard relied on African "conjurational practices." Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 147-148, says only that slave magic and slave religion coexisted, "but appropriated different spheres."

contradiction between the religious teachings of their childhood, and what they heard in Cow Alley. It was not that the old carpenter cynically used his church to recruit revolutionaries, but rather that his fusion of Old Testament law and African ritual transformed his timid disciples into revolutionaries.[37]

For all that, it is nonetheless possible that Vesey's revolutionary theology might never have translated into revolutionary activity were it not for the behavior of Charleston authorities. Under two South Carolina statutes of 1800 and 1803, blacks were permitted to gather for religious worship, but only after the "rising of the sun" and before "the going down of the same." Moreover, state law demanded that a "majority of [the congregation] shall be white persons."[38] Perhaps hoping that the Christianization of the city's black labor force would have a stabilizing effect, a series of intendants (mayors) had chosen to ignore the African Church's—and their evening classes—blatant violation of these laws. But the intendant's inclination to look the other way suddenly changed in June 1818 when six bishops and ministers from the parent church in Philadelphia arrived in Charleston. Area whites trusted Brown, but envoys from Richard Allen's northern church were quite another matter. On Sunday, June 7, the city guard burst into the church and arrested "One hundred and forty free Negroes and Slaves," one of them presumably Denmark Vesey. Confined for the night, the Charleston and Philadelphia blacks were released the next morning "by the City Magistrates, who explained the law to them."[39]

Not to be dissuaded, the "Black Priests" appeared before the City Council and requested a dispensation to "allow them to hold their meetings in the way they wished." Believing Allen's Bethel "Missionaries" to be "firebrands of discord and destruction," the Council flatly refused. City authorities were willing to bend the law of 1803 so that daylight meetings could be held

[37]Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 46, and *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 37, correctly, in my view, argues that Vesey "did not play a double game" but instead formulated a flexible religious appeal based on . . . both African and classical Christian ideals." This essay suggests, however, that Vesey did so by abandoning the Christian books and fusing African religion with Judaic teachings. Many of Vesey's disciples may not, of course, have understood that he was deviating from the teachings of the Charleston AME leadership, but as E.P. Thompson reminded us, popular revolutions arise from the "conjunction between the grievances of the majority and the aspirations articulated by the [literate leadership] minority." See his *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1963), 168.

[38]"An Act Respecting Slaves, Free Negroes, Mulattoes, and Mestizoes," December 20, 1800, in Thomas Cooper and David J. McCord, eds., *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina* (Columbia: A.S. Johnston, 1840), 7: 440-443; "A Law Regarding Religious Worship," 1803, in Joseph Brevard, ed., *An Alphabetical Digest of the Public Statute Laws of South Carolina* (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1814), 2: 261.

[39]*Charleston Courier*, June 9, 11, 1818.

if but a "single white person" was present to monitor the sermons, but beyond that the Council would not go; the supervision of Charleston's black majority was "so essential a part of the policy of the state." The Philadelphia churchmen, however, proved determined to carry on. On the following Sunday, they organized a large service "in a [private] house in the suburbs of the city." Once again the city guard invaded the service and arrested the congregation. This time, the City Council sentenced the Philadelphia leadership to "one month's imprisonment, or to give security [and] leave the state." Eight unnamed Charleston churchmen were sentenced "to receive ten lashes," or to each pay a fine of five dollars.[40]

The armed assault on the African Church demoralized many congregants and forced Morris Brown to be even more cautious, unless he too wished to find himself at the receiving end of "a little sugar," as Charleston whites euphemistically called a visit to the Workhouse. But the desecration of sacred ground—a capital crime under Mosaic law—had a very different effect on the African priest. Gullah Jack told Monday Gell that he "wanted to begin" to organize against the whites, when the "African Church was taken up in 1818." Gell himself was much inclined to go "after the same thing."[41] Only Denmark Vesey, now approximately fifty-one-years-old and known to his friends as the "old man," was ready to give up. His friend George Creighton, a wealthy freeman, had grown weary of his endless, humiliating confrontations with Charleston whites. Creighton planned to emigrate to Sierra Leone or Liberia, which in 1819 was purchased at gunpoint by the American Colonization Society with funds allocated by Congress.[42]

For most men, even if young and vigorous, the prospect of starting life anew in a foreign land was daunting at best. But Vesey's life had been little but a succession of migrations from one point in Atlantic waters to another. St. Thomas, Saint Domingue, Norfolk, Charleston, perhaps even West Africa, had each been his home during various chapters in his long life. Sierra Leone could use both capital and carpenters. After considerable time and thought, however, Vesey resolved to stay in Charleston. Perhaps the bold words of Jack Pritchard, perhaps the plight of his Robert, Sandy,

[40]Edwin C. Holland, *A Refutation of the Calumnies Circulated Against the Southern & Western States* (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1822), 11; *Charleston Courier*, June 11, 1818.

[41]Third confession of Bacchus, July 17, 1822, RGA, GM, SCDAH; Confession of Smart Anderson, July 1822, RGA, GM, SCDAH.

[42]For the formation of the Society see Douglas R. Egerton, "'Its Origin is Not a Little Curious': A New Look at the American Colonization Society," *Journal of the Early Republic* 5 (Winter 1985), 463-480; see also Marie Tyler-McGraw, "Richmond Free Blacks and African Colonization," *Journal of American Studies* 21 (1987), 210-217, for black attitudes toward emigration.

Polydore and his other children, all of whom remained human property and so chained to Charleston, restored the revolutionary fire in the former slave. "[H]e had not a will" to "go with Creighton," he finally confided to Frank, another member of the African Church. "[H]e decided to stay, and see what he could do for his fellow creatures."[43]

Charleston whites, in later years, came close to making the connection between the temporary closure of the African Church and the first stirring of black revolt. "In speaking of this attempt being in agitation for four years," wrote two of the judges who would sentence Vesey to die, "allusion was had to [the formation of] the African Congregation."[44] But Charleston whites never came close to recognizing as legitimate the radical theology forged in Vesey's crowded parlor. Vesey "grossly perverted Scripture," insisted one white Christian, who later bragged that he watched Jack Pritchard die. "[E]ngendered by superstition and ignorance" was the verdict of another, while Richard Furman, a white clergyman, rightly insisted that the revolt could not be blamed on the Christianization of slaves. The "Chief himself [was a] Member of an irregular Association, which called itself the African Church." Despite the fact that Vesey's sermons consisted of accurate quotations from the Old Testament, the court that found him guilty accused him of "pervert[ing religion] to his purpose." Perhaps, however, Anna Haynes Johnson, the daughter of the Supreme Court Justice, came closest to the truth when she observed that "nothing but the merciful interposition of our God has saved us." In saying this, she appeared to understand that her God was not Vesey's.[45]

Echoing William Freehling, Vincent Harding and Albert Raboteau have suggested that Vesey "chose wisely" when he brought Jack Pritchard into his circle, as "Gullah Jack exerted tremendous influence" over the unchurched Africans on the coastal plantations. Vesey had the "best of both religious worlds, the doctrinal sanction of Scripture and the practical protection of conjure." Norrece Jones agrees: "[I]t is no more valid to assert that Vesey, a class leader in a Charleston church, was divinely inspired to wage rebellion than to claim that the slave [George Wilson] who held the identical church rank betrayed the plot because he felt God decried such

[43]Examination of Ferguson's Frank, June 27, 1822, RGA, GM, SCDAH.

[44]Narrative, in Kennedy and Parker, eds., *Official Report*, 22.

[45]John B. Adger, *My Life and Times* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publications, 1889), 54; Martha Proctor Richardson to James Screven, September 16, 1822, Arnold and Screven Papers, Southern Historical Collection, UNC; Richard Furman to Governor Thomas Bennett, no date, Richard Furman Papers, University of South Carolina; Narrative, in Kennedy and Parker, eds., *Official Report*, 17-18; Anna Haynes Johnson to Elizabeth Haywood, July 18, 1822, Haywood Papers, Southern Historical Collection, UNC.

upheavals." But if there were two religious worlds here, it was not that of Vesey and Pritchard, but rather of Vesey and George Wilson, who stood with Morris Brown and the Christian community. Vesey's Jehovah, who had led his chosen people out of bondage, provided not only scriptural sanction but physical protection. George Wilson, reading deeply of the New Word, loved his fellow man, even if that man was his master. Denmark Vesey, reading deeply in the Hebrew Bible, forged a very different kind of lesson, and for one brief moment, a theology of true liberation.[46]

[46]Harding, "Religion and Resistance Among Antebellum Negroes," in Meier and Rudwick, eds., *Making of Black America*, 1: 186; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 163; Jones, *Born a Child of Freedom*, 146-147.