

Hide the Outcasts: Isaiah 16:3–4 and Fugitive Slave Laws*

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■ Abstract

Isaiah 16:3–4, part of an obscure prophecy about ancient Moab, appeared frequently in nineteenth-century writings about slavery in the United States, particularly in the context of opposition to fugitive slave laws. The verses were linked with other biblical passages to create a network of proof texts to justify assisting persons who escaped slavery. Eventually, the line “hide the outcast” from verse 3 took on a life of its own as an abolitionist slogan, largely independently of its biblical context. Rebuttals of these uses of the texts by anti-abolitionist writers, which began to appear in the 1850s, criticized the decontextualization of the verses, and one novel response attempted to link the text to interracial intimacy. Despite these rebuttals, the use of the text continued apace throughout the 1850s–1860s in response to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act and the execution of John Brown.

■ Keywords

Isaiah, Moab, fugitive slave laws, abolitionism, George Bourne, William Lloyd Garrison, Moses Stuart, Underground Railroad

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■ Introduction

In his magisterial treatment of the history of Christian interpretations of Isaiah, John F. A. Sawyer asserts that Isaiah 16 remained “largely obscure” until the late twentieth century, when it gained prominence in the work of Latin American liberation theologians: “Although not now in any lectionary, and submerged in what are dismissed as largely obscure and irrelevant ‘oracles against the foreign nations,’ chapter 16 contains some messianic language and imagery as fine as any in the more familiar passages. . . . It was the liberation theologians who unearthed this passage and applied it to our world today.”¹ Sawyer is right about the longstanding obscurity of this chapter, and he correctly assesses its importance in recent liberation theology. Verses 3–4 in particular have featured in current discussions about immigration and refugees in Christian contexts. Missing from Sawyer’s analysis, however, is the prominent role that Isa 16:3–4 played in debates about slavery in the first half of the nineteenth century in the United States. Although interpreters at the time noted the text’s wide currency in abolitionist literature, this fascinating episode in the history of biblical interpretation has received practically no attention from twentieth- or twenty-first-century scholars, despite heightened interest in reception history in recent biblical scholarship.²

In this article, we trace the use of Isa 16:3–4 as an anti-slavery proof text from the 1810s to the 1860s. We begin by examining translational and contextual issues in Isa 16:4a that factored into its use in debates about slavery. Next, we trace patterns in anti-slavery usage of the text up to 1850, noting both how it was linked with other biblical passages, particularly Deut 23:15–16 (vv. 16–17 in Hebrew), to create a network of proof texts to justify assisting persons who escaped slavery, and how it took on a life of its own as an abolitionist slogan almost independently of its biblical context. We then examine rebuttals of these uses of the text by anti-abolitionist writers that began to appear in the 1850s. Finally, we show how, despite these rebuttals, Isa 16:3–4 continued to gain rhetorical traction among abolitionists, especially in response to significant historical events like the passage

¹ John F. A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 227–28. As evidence, Sawyer notes the frequent references to Isa 16 in José Porfirio Miranda’s *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974). Sawyer repeats this assessment of Isa 16:3–4 in his more recent *Isaiah Through the Centuries* (Wiley Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018) 108.

² In an early study of biblical interpretation in 19th cent. slavery debates, Caroline L. Shanks notes that some anti-slavery writers quoted Isa 16:3 along with Deut 23:15–16, but does not elaborate further: Shanks, “The Biblical Anti-Slavery Argument of the Decade 1830–1840,” *The Journal of Negro History* 16 (1931) 132–57, at 142 n. 33. In a more recent work on biblical interpretation by enslaved Black persons in the United States, Emerson B. Powery and Rodney S. Sadler, Jr., briefly examine quotations of Isa 16:3–4 in mid-19th cent. freedom narratives by James C. Pennington and William Craft, which will be discussed further in this article, but they do not discuss the widespread use of the text in other works from that period: Powery and Sadler, *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016) 41–43.

of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and the execution of John Brown in 1859. As this discussion demonstrates, even minor biblical texts may have surprising afterlives far removed from the circumstances of their composition. The widespread use of this otherwise unfamiliar text from Isaiah also illustrates the breadth of biblical material commanded by mid-nineteenth century abolitionist writers.

■ Context and Translation of Isaiah 16:3–4

Isaiah 15–16 contains a set of prophecies concerning the ancient kingdom of Moab, one of a series of prophecies about foreign nations in Isa 13–23. Most of the content of these chapters describes military and environmental catastrophes suffered by Moab.³ In response to these disasters, 16:3–4b contains a plea for asylum on behalf of refugees. The verses are translated as follows in the King James Version of the Bible:⁴

3. Take counsel, execute judgment; make thy shadow as the night in the midst of the noonday; hide the outcasts; bewray⁵ not him that wandereth.
4. Let mine outcasts dwell with thee, Moab; be thou a covert to them from the face of the spoiler.

The larger context suggests that these refugees are Moabite (v. 2), and the plea is directed to the personified city of Jerusalem.⁶ At the same time, the consonantal Hebrew text נִדְחֵי מוֹאָב in v. 4a can be construed in multiple ways. The Masoretic Text vocalized נִדְחֵי as a plural, nominal participle with a first-person possessive

³ For recent studies of these chapters, consult J. Blake Couey, “Evoking and Evading: The Poetic Presentation of the Moabite Catastrophe in Isaiah 15–16,” in *Concerning the Nations: Essays on the Oracles Against the Nations in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel* (ed. Else K. Holt, Hyun Chul Paul Kim, and Andrew Mein; LHBOTS 612; New York: Bloomsbury, 2015) 19–31; Barnabas Aspray, “‘A Throne Will Be Established in Steadfast Love’: Welcoming Refugees and the Davidic Kingdom in Isaiah 16:1–5,” *Open Theology* 7 (2021) 426–44. For discussion of the composition history of Isa 16:3–4, consult Jongkyung Lee, *A Redactional Study of the Book of Isaiah 13–23* (Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) 89–106.

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations in this article are from the King James Version, which was used by practically all of the 19th-cent. writers whom we discuss. On the use of the KJV by Black anti-slavery writers in particular, see Powery and Sadler, *Genesis of Liberation*, 7–18.

⁵ “Bewray” is an obsolete English verb meaning “disclose” or “reveal.” Definition 5 in *OED* is “to reveal the presence of, or expose (a fugitive) to his enemies, or to justice; to betray” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “bewray, v.” <https://www-oed-com/view/Entry/18495>). The 1535 Coverdale Bible also used this verb in its translation of Isa 16:3.

⁶ Four of the seven commands in vv. 3–4 are marked as feminine-singular in the consonantal text of MT, and another is corrected to feminine-singular in the Ketiv-Qere, which suggests that they are directed to “daughter Zion” (בַּת צִיּוֹן, v. 1). The remaining masculine-plural forms likely result from וָא confusion (consult J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015] 232–33; Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27* [trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Continental Commentary; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997] 110–11). Although the commands are addressed to the personified city, it would be the Davidic ruler in Jerusalem who acted upon them. This may explain the instruction in v. 1 to “send lambs to the ruler of the land” (NRSV, although the translation is uncertain), as a gift accompanying the request for sanctuary.

suffix (“my outcast ones”). The first-person language perhaps marks divine speech; otherwise, there is little evidence for identifying the speaker. In addition, the disjunctive accent *zaqeph qaton* indicates a syntactic break between נדחי and מואב. Consistent with the contextually likely interpretation of the verse, it is possible to construe “Moab” as an appositive in MT (“my outcast ones, namely the Moabites”), although it is surprising that God claims the Moabite refugees in this way. Alternatively, the word order in the King James Version marks “Moab” as a vocative, identifying the “outcasts” as Israelites or Judeans and their destination as Moab. This understanding makes good sense of the first-person possessive suffix, but otherwise fits poorly in context. The ancient Greek and Syriac translations of the Hebrew Bible offer another interpretation of the Hebrew phrase, taking נדחי as a plural construct form (“the outcast ones of Moab”). This reading better fits the context, and almost all contemporary English translations adopt it (e.g., CEB; NJPS; NRSV).

Despite the ubiquity of the King James Version in English-language discourse about the Bible at the time, many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholarly treatments of Isa 16 favored one of the alternative readings. In his influential 1778 commentary on Isaiah, Robert Lowth translated the first line of v. 4 as “Let the outcasts of Moab sojourn with thee, [O Sion],” in support of which he appealed to the Greek and Syriac versions.⁷ Joseph Addison Alexander, an American biblical scholar and Princeton Theological Seminary professor, argued that vv. 3–4 “are the language of Moabitish suppliants or messengers, addressed to Judah,” following MT in reading v. 4a as “my outcasts, even those of Moab.”⁸ These scholarly discussions had little effect on the use of these verses in nineteenth-century debates over slavery. Practically all quotations of Isa 16:3–4 are from the King James Version, with only a few exceptions.⁹ In an 1851 letter to the Restoration Movement leader Alexander Campbell, Isaac Errett quoted Lowth’s translation of Isa 16:3–4 in support of arguments against the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.¹⁰ A decade later, W. H. Bonner, pastor of Trinity Chapel in London, quoted Lowth’s translation in his 1860 preface

⁷ Robert Lowth, *Isaiah: A New Translation with a Preliminary Dissertation, and Notes, Critical, Philological, and Explanatory* (10th ed.; Cambridge, MA: Munroe, 1834) 30, 229. The bracketed phrase “O Sion” was presumably added for clarity, but with no textual basis. Lowth discusses his general distrust of MT in *Isaiah*, xlv–li; consult further, Robert P. Gordon, “The Legacy of Lowth: Robert Lowth and the Book of Isaiah in Particular,” in *Biblical Hebrews, Biblical Texts: Essays in Memory of Michael P. Weitzman* (ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert and Gillian Greenberg; JSOTSup 333; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001) 57–76, at 59–61.

⁸ J. A. Alexander, *The Earlier Prophecies of Isaiah* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1846) 30–31.

⁹ In some cases, especially as the first half of v. 3b became a quasi-independent slogan, the singular “outcast” appears in place of the KJV’s “outcasts.” Additionally, a few writers replaced the archaic verb “bewray” with the more familiar synonym “betray.” It is unclear whether these changes are intentional or reflect an imprecise memory of the text.

¹⁰ Alexander Campbell and Isaac Errett, “The Fugitive Slave Law—Once More,” *The Millennial Harbinger*, 4th Series, 1.11 (Nov. 1851) 621–632, at 630. The quotation is mistakenly cited as v. 3 alone.

to the autobiography of William M. Mitchell, *The Underground Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom*.¹¹ Neither writer discussed the reference to Moab in v. 4. Other quotations of Isa 16:3–4 in abolitionist literature were even more decontextualized. Frequently, writers only quoted v. 3b alone (“Hide the outcasts; bewray not him that wandereth”), which does not mention “Moab.” Other writers included v. 4, but omitted the word “Moab.” This decontextualization, coupled with KJV’s construal of v. 4 as divine speech, contributed to the characterization of these verses by abolitionists as a universal divine command. By contrast, anti-abolitionist writers emphasized the historical setting of Isa 16:3–4, especially the association with Moab, to argue that the text had nothing to do with slavery.

■ Abolitionists’ Use of Isaiah 16:3–4 before 1850

The Fugitive Slave Clause of the United States Constitution (art. IV, §2, cl. 3) required that any “Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, . . . shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due.” The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 detailed the legal enforcement of this clause of the Constitution.¹² Early anti-slavery advocates in the United States challenged these laws through appeals to biblical texts and theological authorities. In 1815, George Bourne, an English-born clergyman living in Virginia, was expelled from ministry by his local presbytery after arguing that Presbyterians should not condone slavery at the denomination’s General Assembly meeting in Philadelphia. The following year, he published *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable*, which wove together a wide array of sources to argue that the Bible (the titular “Book”) opposes the practice of slavery. Early in this treatise, he combined quotations from the KJV translations of Deut 23:15–16, 1 Sam 30:10–16, Isa 16:3, and Obad 14–15, separated by dashes. He then commented, “These scriptures proclaim that slave-holding is an abomination in the sight of God: for it justifies the slave in absconding from his Tyrant, and enjoins upon every man to facilitate his escape, and to secure his freedom.”¹³ Isaiah 16:3 was thus linked with other biblical passages as anti-slavery proof texts—specifically, as warrants for assisting persons who sought freedom from slavery—from early in the history of the United States.

¹¹ W. H. Bonner, “Preface,” in W. M. Mitchell, *The Underground Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom* (2nd ed.; London: Tweedie, 1860) iii–ix, at v. Bonner’s familiarity with Lowth likely reflects his setting in England. It is perhaps surprising that more North American abolitionists do not seem familiar with Lowth’s work, since the biblical scholar and abolitionist Calvin Stowe, who later married Harriet Beecher Stowe, edited the earliest American edition of Lowth’s *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* in 1829.

¹² The full title of the law was “An Act respecting Fugitives from Justice, and Persons Escaping from the Service of their Masters.” For the text, consult *The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States* (22 vols.; Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1849) 3:1414–15. The Thirteenth Amendment superseded this law in 1865.

¹³ George Bourne, *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable, with Animadversions upon Dr. Smith’s Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Sanderson, 1816) 27.

This use of Isa 16:3 gained traction as the abolitionist movement took shape in the 1830s.¹⁴ Bourne's 1834 publication of an expanded version of *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable*, under the new title *Picture of Slavery in the United States of America*, likely contributed to this development.¹⁵ Gerrit Smith, an abolitionist who would later serve as a congressman from New York, quoted Isa 16:3 alongside Isa 58:7 in an 1836 letter to James Smylie, Clerk of the Presbytery of Mississippi. Lamenting how Black families are broken up under slavery, Smith wrote:

It was but last week, that a poor fugitive reached a family, in which God's commands, "Hide the outcasts, bewray not him that wandereth" [Isa 16:3]—"Hide not thyself from thy own flesh" [Isa 58:7]—are not a dead letter. The heaviest burden of his heart is, that he has not seen his wife for five years, and does not expect to see her again: his master, in Virginia, having sold him to a Georgian, and his wife to an inhabitant of the District of Columbia.¹⁶

Like Bourne, Smith paired Isa 16:3 with other biblical material—in this case, Isa 58:7, which Bourne did not cite. He cast these texts as universally normative for Christians by identifying them as "God's commands." Four pages later, Smith turned to another text that Bourne included in his discussion: "The prohibition, Deut xxiii. 15. 16, 'Thou shall not deliver unto his master,' &c., sets the servant free from his authority and of course, from all those liabilities of injury, to which as his servant, he was subjected."¹⁷ These examples attest to the emergence of an abolitionist "canon within the canon" that would be routinely cited in the coming decades. Deuteronomy 23:15–16 and Isa 16:3–4 appeared most frequently as biblical warrants for opposing the Fugitive Slave Clause and similar laws and for assisting persons escaping from slavery.¹⁸ In addition, this group of texts included Isa 10:1–2, Isa 58:6–7, Jer 22:13, Obad 14–15, Ps 82:3–4, and Acts 5:29, among others.

Although Smith only quoted Isa 16:3, other anti-slavery sources quoted both vv. 3 and 4. An address issued by an anti-slavery convention of American women held in New York City in May 1837 challenged the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Clause:

The free states are partakers with those who rob God of his creatures, for although most of them have nominally no slaves on their soil, they do deliver unto slaveholders the servant that is escaped from his master, in direct

¹⁴ Shanks, "Biblical Anti-Slavery Argument," 42 n. 33.

¹⁵ George Bourne, *Picture of Slavery in the United States of America* (Middletown, CT: Hunt, 1834). The quotation of Isa 16:3 appears on p. 19.

¹⁶ Gerrit Smith, *Letter of Gerrit Smith to Rev. James Smylie, of the State of Mississippi* (Anti-Slavery Examiner 3; New York: Williams, 1837) 40.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁸ The two texts became so closely associated that, in an extreme example of the disassociation of Isa 16:3 with Moab, J. G. Forman presents it as a command to "the Hebrews" to harbor persons escaped from slavery and seems to think it is part of the Mosaic law (Forman, *The Fugitive Slave Law: A Discourse Delivered in the Congregational Church in West Bridgewater, Mass., on Sunday, November 17th 1850* [Boston: Crosby and Nichols, 1850] 19).

violation of the command of Jehovah “Hide the outcasts: bewray not him that wandereth. Let mine outcasts dwell with thee; be thou a covert to them from the face of the spoiler.”¹⁹

The omission of “Moab” from this quotation of v. 4 encouraged the audience to view themselves as the “thee” addressed by this “command of Jehovah.” By contrast, “Moab” remained in the quotation of Isa 16:3–4 in an 1842 sermon by Owen Lovejoy, a Congregationalist minister and abolitionist congressman from Illinois. Despite including this specific historical referent, Lovejoy still presented the text as a divine command for his own audience. After quoting both Isa 16 and Illinois’s fugitive slave law, Lovejoy proclaimed, “The State of Illinois says that you shall not harbor, or secrete a runaway slave. The statute of the Most High says, ‘Hide the outcast, be a covert to those from the face of the spoiler.’ Now which will you obey?”²⁰ That same year, James W. C. Pennington, a formerly enslaved man who became the first Black student at Yale, made similar rhetorical moves in a Thanksgiving Day sermon at his Fifth Congregational Church in Hartford, Connecticut. Using Isa 28:15 as his text, Pennington referred to the Constitution’s Fugitive Slave Clause as a “covenant with death and an agreement with hell.” He then used language from Isa 16:3–4 to denounce the law: “Against the power of this clause, I allege the direct command of God: Isaiah xvi, 3, 4. Here we are commanded to make a shadow to hide the outcasts. What kind of ‘shadow’ does this clause propose to make? What outcasts does it hide? Where does it permit them to dwell? In our jails!”²¹ Note again the framing of Isaiah’s words as “the direct command of God,” in contrast with the humanly-authored Constitution.²² Isaiah 16:4 later appeared as the epigraph on the title page of Pennington’s 1849 autobiography, *The Fugitive Blacksmith*.²³

¹⁹ *An Address to Free Colored Americans. Issued by an Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women Held in the City of New York, by Adjournment from 9th to 12th May, 1837* (New York: Dorr, 1837) 25–26.

²⁰ Owen Lovejoy, “Sermon on the Supremacy of the Divine Law, January 1842,” in *His Brother’s Blood: Speeches and Writings, 1838–64* (ed. William F. Moore and Jane Ann Moore; Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2004) 19–24, at 22. The sermon was originally published in the newspaper *The Western Citizen* (Paris, KY) on 14 September 1843. Confusingly, the edition in *His Brother’s Blood* includes an unmarked interpolation of the 1952 RSV translation of Isa 16:3–4 alongside Lovejoy’s quotation of the KJV.

²¹ James W. C. Pennington, *Covenants Involving Moral Wrong are not Obligatory upon Man; a Sermon Delivered in the Fifth Congregational Church, Hartford, on Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 17th, 1842* (Hartford: Wells, 1842) 10.

²² Similarly, in an 1843 article titled “The U. S. Constitution Weighed in the Balance,” an author identified only as “R. H.” contrasts the Constitution with several biblical texts, including Deut 23:15, Isa 16:3, 5, and Ps 82:3–4, in parallel columns: R. H., “The U. S. Constitution Weighed in the Balance,” *The Reformed Presbyterian* 7.1 (1843) 19–28, at 25–26. By jumping from Isa 16:3 to 16:5a (“And in mercy shall the throne be established”), the author avoids the reference to Moab in v. 4.

²³ James W. C. Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; Or, Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States* (London: Gilpin, 1849). For recent discussions in religious studies of Pennington’s use of Isa 16, consult Sylvester A. Johnson,

In the mid-1840s, Isa 16:3–4 gained even more popularity among anti-slavery advocates because of its frequent quotation by William Lloyd Garrison, co-founder of the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* in 1831 and the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. In an 1844 address, written on behalf of the Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society, Garrison quoted Deut 23:15–16, Isa 16:3–4, and other biblical texts after discussing the Fugitive Slave Clause in the Constitution.²⁴ Elsewhere, he used the phrase “hide the outcast” without explicitly acknowledging its source. In his preface for Frederick Douglass’s first memoir, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Garrison recounted the first time he met Douglass at an anti-slavery convention in August 1841. After Douglass spoke, Garrison claimed to have told the audience that Douglass was a fugitive from slavery. According to Garrison, the audience pledged en masse “never to betray him that wanders, but to hide the outcast, and firmly to abide the consequences.”²⁵ Garrison would continue using the line “hide the outcast” in speeches throughout the 1840s and 1850s.²⁶ In addition to Garrison’s preface, the front matter of Douglass’s *Narrative* included a letter from abolitionist attorney Wendell Phillips, who compared Douglass’s “labors” with “the fearless efforts of those who, trampling the laws and Constitution of the country under their feet, are determined that they will ‘hide the outcast.’”²⁷ Upon its publication in 1845,

“The Bible, Slavery, and the Problem of Authority” in *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming Its Religious and Sexual Legacies* (ed. Bernadette J. Brooten; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 231–48, at 237; Powery and Sadler, *Genesis of Liberation*, 41–42.

²⁴ William Lloyd Garrison, “Address of the Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society to the Friends of Freedom and Emancipation in the U. States,” in *The Constitution a Pro-Slavery Compact, or, Selections from the Madison papers, &c.* (Anti-Slavery Examiner 11; New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1844) 93–112, at 104.

²⁵ William Lloyd Garrison, “Preface” in Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845) iii–xii, at v.

²⁶ For instance, in a speech titled “The Union and Slavery,” Garrison declared, “People of Massachusetts, it is your duty to ‘hide the outcast and betray not him that wandereth.’ See that you do it, whether the Union stand or fall!” (Garrison, “The Union and Slavery, Delivered at the Celebration of Independence Day, July 5th, 1850, and Reported in the Liberator,” in *The World’s Greatest Classics* [ed. Timothy Dwight et al.; 50 vols.; New York: Colonial Press, 1899] 28:211–12, at 212). Already in *The Liberator* 11.33 (13 August 1841) 131, a report of the annual meeting of the Haverhill Anti-Slavery Society appears under the headline “Hide the Outcast,” although that language appears nowhere in the report itself. While we are not certain, it is possible that Garrison created this headline. Consult further Garrison, *No Fetters in the Bay State: Speech of Wm. Lloyd Garrison Before the Committee of Federal Relations, In Support of the Petitions Asking for a Law to Prevent the Recapture of Fugitive Slaves, Thursday, Feb. 24, 1859* (Boston: Wallcut, 1859) 3–4; idem, “Speech of Wm. Lloyd Garrison at the Meeting in Tremont Temple, Dec. 2d, Relating to the Execution of John Brown,” *The Liberator*, 29.50 (16 December 1859) 198.

²⁷ Phillips, “Letter from Wendell Phillips, Esq.,” in Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston: Published by Anti-Slavery Office, 1845) xiii–xvi, at xv–xvi. Phillips again quoted Isa 16:3b in a speech on the anniversary of the rendition of Thomas Sims on 12 April 1852 (Phillips, *Speeches, Lectures, and Letters* [Boston: Walker, Wise, and Company, 1864] 97).

Douglass's first memoir quickly became a bestseller. Its popularity likely further cemented the place of Isa 16:3–4 in abolitionist rhetoric.

As the line “hide the outcast” developed into an abolitionist slogan, more writers began using it without explicit reference to Isaiah. In the summer of 1844, a coded advertisement for the Underground Railroad—called the “Liberty Line”—appeared in the Chicago abolitionist newspaper *The Western Citizen*.²⁸ The advertisement appealed to “Gentlemen and Ladies, who may wish to improve their health or circumstances, by a northern tour,” highlighting the no-cost seats and directing would-be travelers to “apply at any of the trap doors.” It also included the line, “‘Hide the outcasts—let the oppressed go free.’—*Bible*.” Like other cases under discussion, this joint quotation of Isa 16:3b and Isa 58:6, attributed simply to the Bible, claimed divine sanction for assisting the escape of enslaved persons. Although it is unclear precisely what the designers of the advertisement intended to convey, they apparently expected readers to recognize the quotation as a staple of abolitionist discourse. Other authors did not even identify Isa 16:3–4 as a biblical text. In October 1846, when introducing Garrison at a meeting of the Anti-Slavery League in Edinburgh, John Wigham read from a letter by James Buffum that combined lines from Isaiah and Jeremiah without attribution: “If to deal his bread to the hungry, and hide the outcast, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor, be anything to excite our admiration, then we ought to love and respect [Garrison].”²⁹ In a letter dated December 1846, William Jay wrote, “Who, at the North, except here and there a needy attorney, policeman, or a merchant ready to barter his character for southern custom, is vile enough to carry into practice the doctrine of Mr. Jones’s negro catechism, and bewray him that wandereth, or refuse to hide the outcasts, or to be a covert to them from the face of the spoiler?”³⁰ In both of these examples, the biblical texts are not cited or marked as quoted speech.

Isaiah 16:3b even appeared in an 1848 children’s book, *The Young Abolitionists*. The book opens with a conversation between a child named Charlie Selden and his abolitionist mother. Charlie reports about his sister, “The other day when Jenie was reading her Bible, she asked [her teacher] what it meant to ‘Hide the outcast.’ I suppose she was thinking something about Hide and Seek. He told her she asked quite too many questions.”³¹ Later in the book, Charlie’s mother explains that his

²⁸ The advertisement appeared in the 6 June and 13 July 1844 issues of the *Western Citizen*. It was reproduced in N. Dwight Harris, *The History of Negro Servitude in Illinois, and of the Slavery Agitation in that State, 1719–1864* (Chicago: Lakeside, 1904) 16.

²⁹ Quoted in J. S. “The Evangelical Alliance and Slavery,” *The British Friend* 4.11 (30 November 1846) 300–302, at 302. The quoted texts are Isa 58:7, Isa 16:3, and Jer 22:3.

³⁰ William Jay, “A Letter to the Right Rev. L. Silliman Ives, Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina,” in William Jay, *Miscellaneous Writings on Slavery* (Boston: Jewett, 1853) 453–89, at 472–73. “Mr. Jones’s negro catechism” refers to a pro-slavery pamphlet by Charles C. Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (Savannah: Price, 1842).

³¹ J. Elizabeth Jones, *The Young Abolitionists; Or Conversations on Slavery* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1848) 7.

father could face a fine or imprisonment because he harbored a married couple who had escaped slavery. Nevertheless, Charlie's mother resolved:

"It is our duty to 'Hide the outcast'; therefore did we secrete Tom and his wife, and convey them away from their enemies."

"Oh that's what it means to 'Hide the outcast,' is it?" cried Charlie. "Then the slaves are outcast, are they?"

"Yes, child, there are no people to whom the word would better apply, for there are none so poor—none so afflicted—none so cruelly cast out from the regard and fellowship of men and the joys of life as the slave."

"Now I can tell Jenie what it means to 'Hide the outcast.' You needn't do it, mother; let me. You remember she wanted to know once."³²

As Jones's book demonstrates, Isa 16:3–4 had become so entrenched in anti-slavery discourse by the late 1840s that one would naturally imagine it as a topic of discussion in a fictional abolitionist household.

■ Responses to Abolitionist Interpretation of Isaiah 16:3–4

As Isa 16:3–4 gained prominence as a proof text and slogan in abolitionist rhetoric, it is unsurprising that these uses of the text evoked rebuttals. Perhaps the most influential one appeared in the 1850 book *Conscience and the Constitution* by prominent biblical scholar and Andover Theological Seminary professor Moses Stuart.³³ Stuart favored the gradual dissolution of slavery and supported efforts to resettle formerly enslaved persons in Africa (the so-called "colonization" movement).³⁴ Nonetheless, he pointedly attacked abolitionist biblical interpretation because of his frustration with its perceived misrepresentation of biblical texts. Stuart first discusses at length how the laws of the Pentateuch allow for slavery.

³² *Ibid.*, 106–7.

³³ Moses Stuart, *Conscience and the Constitution: With Remarks on the Recent Speech of the Hon. Daniel Webster in the Senate of the United States on the Subject of Slavery* (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1850). Abolitionist responses to Stuart appeared almost immediately, including William Lloyd Garrison, John Dick, and Samuel May Jr., "Celebration at Abington, July 4, 1850," *The Liberator* 20.28 (12 July 1850) 110; William Jay, *Reply to Remarks of Rev. Moses Stuart on Hon. John Jay and an Examination of his Scriptural Exegesis Contained in his Recent Pamphlet Entitled "Conscience and the Constitution"* (New York: Gray, 1850); G. W. Perkins, *Prof. Stuart and Slave Catching: Remarks on Mr. Stuart's Book "Conscience and the Constitution" at a Meeting in Guilford, August 1, 1850, Commemorative of Emancipation in the West Indies* (West Meriden, CT: Hinman, 1850).

³⁴ For discussion of Stuart's views, consult John H. Giltner, "Moses Stuart and the Slavery Controversy: A Study in the Failure of Moderation," *Journal of Religious Thought* 18 (1961) 27–39; Robert Bruce Mullin, "Biblical Critics and the Battle over Slavery," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 61 (1983) 210–26, at 214–17; Laura L. Mitchell, "'Matters of Justice Between Man and Man': Northern Divines, the Bible, and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850," in *Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery* (ed. John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay; Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998) 134–65, at 139–47; Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) 58–61.

In response to anti-slavery uses of Deut 23:15–16, he countered that this law only concerned persons who escaped from slavery in “heathen” nations and was thus consistent with the ancient Israelite practice of slavery, but not relevant to persons escaping slavery in the American south.³⁵ Stuart then turned to anti-slavery interpretations of other Hebrew Bible texts, noting specifically Isa 58:6, Jer 22:13, Ps 82:3–4, Jer 34:17, and Isa 16:3. He argued first that these texts cannot contradict the Mosaic law’s allowance of slavery, and second that they “have no special bearing whatever on slaves or slavery.”³⁶ He took particular umbrage at the decontextualization of Isa 16:3 by abolitionists:

And who are the outcasts and the wanderer? They are the fugitive daughters of Moab, who flee from the conquering invaders of their country, and seek safety in the land of Israel. The prophet presents them as addressing the Hebrew people, beseeching them, in the words quoted, to conceal them in a place of safety, and not to tell the pursuing enemy where they are, i.e. not to bewray them. This is all. But how this is to be put to the justification of concealing runaway slaves, or made into a command to aid and protect them, I have not sagacity enough to divine.³⁷

For Stuart, these verses from Isaiah were not a universal divine command, but rather the historically specific plea of Moabite refugees for asylum in Israel.

Stuart established the contours for future rebuttals of Isa 16:3. In an 1859 defense of slavery titled *Southern Institutes*, Louisiana attorney George S. Sawyer paraphrased Stuart’s arguments: “But who are the outcasts and the wanderers here spoken of? Are they runaway slaves? A glance at the context shows us that they were the fugitive daughters of Moab who fled from their sanguinary invaders and sought safety in the land of Israel. . . . What application, then, has this language to the case of a slave escaping from one tribe of Israel to another?”³⁸ John Bell

³⁵ Stuart, *Conscience and the Constitution*, 29–33. Stuart refers to the Pentateuch as the “Mosaic Constitution and Laws,” and he views both the Mosaic and United States Constitutions (specifically the Fugitive Slave Clause) as absolutely binding, with no exceptions (*Conscience and the Constitution*, 26, 56–60). On Stuart’s interpretation of Deut 23:15–16, consult Mitchell, “Matters of Justice,” 141–45; Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 58–61. Neither Mitchell nor Noll discuss Isa 16 in the cited works.

³⁶ Stuart, *Conscience and the Constitution*, 38.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 40. Stuart’s identification of Isa 16’s “outcasts” as displaced Moabite refugees is consistent with scholarly interpretations of the text in his day, as we have already discussed. Because he only quotes the KJV in Isa 16:3, it is unclear how he would resolve the ambiguities in the Hebrew text of v. 4.

³⁸ George S. Sawyer, *Southern Institutes: Or, an Inquiry into the Origin and Early Prevalence of Slavery and the Slave-Trade, with an Analysis of the Laws, History, and Government of the Institution in the Principal Nations, Ancient and Modern, from the Earliest Ages down to the Present Time, with Notes and Comments in Defence of the Southern Institutions* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1859) 49. Although he did not cite Stuart here, Sawyer had engaged Stuart’s work a few pages earlier to criticize his comparison between the Pentateuch’s allowances of polygamy and slavery (*Southern Institutes*, 44–45). Sawyer differed from Stuart, however, in his interpretation of Deut 23:15–16 as applying to enemy deserters rather than enslaved persons (*Southern Institutes*, 38–40).

Robinson, a pro-slavery Methodist pastor from Pennsylvania, similarly addressed the use of Isa 16:3–4 in his 1863 book *Pictures of Slavery and Anti-Slavery*:

These two verses have not the slightest allusion to slavery as found in our Southern States. . . . When Judah began to recover, and becoming more prosperous, he seemed to be called upon to receive and protect the fugitive Moabites, that, perhaps, were scattered in the time of battle. I think any candid person will say there is no application to American slaves in this quotation, nor to fugitive slaves from the South. The context makes the text quoted clearly something else.³⁹

Yet another pro-slavery engagement with these texts appeared in the post-Civil War treatise *A Defense of Virginia* by Robert Lewis Dabney, a professor at Virginia's Union Theological Seminary who served as a Confederate chaplain and chief-of-staff to Confederate General Stonewall Jackson. Dabney made the novel argument that the prophets themselves "were undoubtedly slaveholders," pointing to Elisha's enslavement of Gehazi as evidence.⁴⁰ Otherwise, his exegesis mirrored that of Stuart, whom he quoted at length when discussing Deut 23:15–16.⁴¹ Dabney argued that the prophetic books could not possibly contradict the laws of Moses.⁴² Calling abolitionist use of Isa 16:3 "the illustration of crowning folly," he observed that the verse is the reported plea of "fugitive Moabites," rather than the speech of the prophet, and he even claimed that the text leaves open what the proper response to this plea should have been.⁴³

A very different strategy for refuting abolitionist uses of Isa 16:3 appears in Louisiana author John Fletcher's *Studies on Slavery* in 1852.⁴⁴ The book received glowing endorsements from pro-slavery intellectuals and politicians, including the physician Samuel A. Cartwright, who invented the racist pseudo-scientific disease drapetomania, and future Confederate President Jefferson Davis.⁴⁵ Not

³⁹ John Bell Robinson, *Pictures of Slavery and Anti-Slavery. Advantages of Negro Slavery and the Benefits of Negro Freedom. Morally, Socially, and Politically Considered* (Philadelphia: 1330 North Thirteenth Street, 1863) 357–58. A discussion of Deut 23:15–16 immediately follows. Robinson is responding to an 1849 letter by abolitionist L. Julia Childs, which we discuss in section four of this article.

⁴⁰ Robert Lewis Dabney, *A Defense of Virginia [And Through Her, of the South,] in Recent and Pending Contests against the Sectional Party* (New York: Hale, 1867) 143.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 128–30.

⁴² Dabney follows Stuart in calling the Mosaic law a "Constitution," and, in a possible attack on the recently passed Thirteenth Amendment, he asks, "Were the guardians and expounders of the Constitution [i.e., the prophets] armed with power not only to repeal but to vilify, the very law which they were appointed to expound [i.e., the laws of Moses]? May the sermon contradict its own text?" (*ibid.*, 143–44).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴⁴ John Fletcher, *Studies on Slavery: In Easy Lessons/Compiled into Eight Studies, and Subdivided into Short Lessons for the Convenience of Readers* (Natchez, MS: Warner, 1852).

⁴⁵ Samuel A. Cartwright, "Editorial and Literary Department," *DeBow's Southern and Western Review* 12 (April 1852) 456–63, at 461; Jefferson Davis, "Speech at Oxford," in *The Papers of Jefferson Davis* (ed. Lynda Lasswell Crist, Mary Seaton Dix, Richard E. Beringer, 14 vols.; Baton

surprisingly, Fletcher explicitly criticized abolitionist uses of many biblical texts. For example, he rejected the interpretation of Deut 23:15–16 by Albert Barnes, an abolitionist pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and an 1823 graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, who had argued that an “essential and fundamental feature of the Hebrew slavery was, that the runaway slave was not to be restored to his master.”⁴⁶ Fletcher did not offer his own exegesis of Deut 23, but he cited apparent biblical examples of enslaved persons who were returned to their slaveholders (Gen 16:7–9; 1 Sam 25:10–11; 1 Kgs 2:39–40).⁴⁷ Although the specific contours of his argument were different, Fletcher’s approach was similar to that of Stuart, George S. Sawyer, Robinson, and Dabney.⁴⁸

Isaiah 16:3–4 did not receive similar treatment from Fletcher. Instead, he referred to v. 4a twice in the context of interracial intimacy, without acknowledging abolitionist usage of the verse—which, as we have shown, was thoroughly established by 1850. Fletcher marshalled additional biblical texts in his extensive discussion of interracial intimacy, most of which had established connections to the topic in mid-nineteenth century biblical interpretation.⁴⁹ By contrast, his interpretation of Isa 16:4a in this context was novel: “There are instances where the white man, so cohabiting with the slave whom he has purchased for the purpose of emancipation, sends her and his offspring to some free State, often to Cincinnati, the Moab of the South! ‘Let mine outcasts dwell with thee, Moab.’ Isa. xvi. 4.”⁵⁰

Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983) 4:275–91, at 280. By contrast, in a detailed and scathing review for the abolitionist newspaper *The National Era*, an African American minister in West Philadelphia named J. G. Hood wrote that Fletcher’s “theory is constructed altogether on probabilities,” rather than the biblical text itself, and that he “displays more inventive than argumentative or expository talent” (J. G. Hood, “Fletcher’s Studies on Slavery,” *The National Era* 6.305 [4 November 1852] 177). For further discussion of the reception of *Studies on Slavery*, consult Jeremy Schipper, “Religion, Race, and the Wife of Ham,” *Journal of Religion* 100 (2020) 386–401.

⁴⁶ Albert Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* (Philadelphia: Perkins and Purves, 1846) 140. Barnes did not cite Isa 16:3–4 in this book.

⁴⁷ Fletcher, *Studies on Slavery*, 119–20. Fletcher later cited Deut 23:15 (23:16 in Hebrew) as part of an extensive word-study on Hebrew עֶבֶד (“slave”), but did not otherwise comment on it (*Studies on Slavery*, 612).

⁴⁸ Although *Studies on Slavery* was not published in full until 1852, some portions of it were contemporary with Stuart’s *Conscience and the Constitution* (1850). Fletcher published an excerpt from an early draft in 1850 as “Review of Dr. Channing on Slavery,” *DeBow’s Southern and Western Review* 9 (July 1850) 22–31. Fletcher never directly referred to *Conscience and the Constitution*, although he cited Stuart’s *Hebrew Grammar* and *Hebrew Chrestomathy* and alluded to abolitionist attacks on Stuart (*Studies on Slavery*, 487–88, 508, 619). In turn, George S. Sawyer cited Fletcher’s work repeatedly at the end of the decade in *Southern Institutes* (124, 132, 164). It is worth noting that Sawyer and Fletcher lived near each other, and *Studies on Slavery* was published in Natchez, MS—also the home of Samuel Cartwright—just across the Mississippi River from Sawyer’s hometown of Vidalia, Louisiana; on these connections, consult Alfred L. Brophy, *University, Court, and Slave: Pro-Slavery Thought in Southern Colleges and Courts and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) 129.

⁴⁹ Consult Schipper, “Religion, Race, and the Wife of Ham.” Schipper does not address Fletcher’s use of Isa 16 in this article.

⁵⁰ Fletcher, *Studies on Slavery*, 210.

One might be tempted to dismiss the comparison between Cincinnati and Moab as a strange rhetorical flourish, but Fletcher later provided more context for this interpretation. Based on 1 Chr 8:8a, he argued that men from the tribe of Benjamin impregnated Black women and then exiled them to Moab. He incorrectly understood the word “Shaharaim,” which is the proper name of a Benjaminite man, as a plural form from the Hebrew root שָׁחַר (“black”), and so interpreted the text as, “And these blacks begat children in the land of Moab after he had sent them away.” He then claimed that Isa 16:4 refers to the same practice: “The fact that it was a custom to send persons of a certain description there, seems to be alluded to by the prophet: ‘Let mine outcasts dwell with thee!’ Isa. xvi. 4.”⁵¹ In short, Fletcher ignored the widespread association of this verse with fugitive slave laws, but twice associated it with interracial intimacy, despite the lack of any established interpretative tradition connecting the text to discussions of exogamous relations, much less interracial relations.

The differences between Fletcher’s treatments of Deut 23:15–16 and Isa 16:3–4 are striking because the two texts were so frequently cited together by abolitionists, and Stuart, George Sawyer, Robinson, and Dabney all offered counter-interpretations of both texts. Perhaps the difference lay with the distinctive way that abolitionists had come to use Isa 16:3–4. Unlike other biblical texts such as Deut 23:15–16, language from Isa 16:3–4 had taken on a life of its own by 1850 and become a common slogan protesting fugitive laws. Fletcher attempted to discredit the popular abolitionist slogan by using a different line from these verses as a counterslogan lampooning mixed-race relationships. This explanation makes some sense of his otherwise odd declaration that Cincinnati is “the Moab of the South.” To our knowledge, however, no other writer takes up this line of interpretation, and there is no evidence that it slowed the use of these verses as an abolitionist rallying cry. On the contrary, that use continued apace over the next decade.

■ Isaiah 16:3–4, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, and the Execution of John Brown

A few months after Fletcher completed a draft of *Studies on Slavery*, the United States Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, strengthening earlier such laws with harsh penalties for officials who did not arrest suspected fugitives from slavery.⁵² This legislative action inspired a renewed sense of urgency to abolitionist cries to “hide the outcasts.” Over the next year, quotations of Isa 16:3–4 appeared in at least six published sermons denouncing the legislation.⁵³ One can reasonably

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 463.

⁵² For a recent study of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, consult Andrew Delbanco, *The War before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America’s Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

⁵³ Nathaniel Colver, *The Fugitive Slave Bill: Or, God’s Laws Paramount to the Laws of Men. A Sermon, Preached on Sunday, October 20, 1850* (Boston: Hewes, 1850) 14; Forman, *Fugitive Slave*

assume that other sermons and speeches citing it were not preserved.⁵⁴ These appeals largely continued the rhetoric of earlier uses of the text, presenting it as a divine command with greater force than any opposing human command. The fact that the new law expressly made it illegal to follow these biblical demands was portrayed as particularly offensive. An excerpt from Nathaniel Colver's sermon in Boston in October 1850 exemplified this move:

Obedience to this Bill involves a direct violation of many, very many of the moral precepts of the Bible. God says, "Hide the outcasts." This Bill says, hide them at your peril. God says, "Betray not him that wandereth;" but this Bill commands you to betray him into the hands of his worst enemy. God says, "Suffer mine outcasts to dwell with you;" this Bill says, enter their humble dwellings, seize them, call out the *posse comitatus*, carry them out of the State, and deliver them to the scourge, to the shambles or to death.⁵⁵

As with earlier anti-slavery uses of the text, Colver left out the word "Moab" from his quotation of v. 4, thereby making the text directly address his congregation. By contrast, an 1851 sermon against the law by James Wallace in Cherokee, Ohio, was a rare exception to the tendency to decontextualize the verse: "This direction God gives the Moabites, to show them the means of averting judgments impending over them, as a community, and as individuals. If we would have calamities averted from us, we are instructed here to befriend the oppressed, and protect the innocent."⁵⁶ It is unclear whether this acknowledgement of the text's historical setting was an implicit response to Stuart's criticism of abolitionists for taking the verses out of context, published in the previous year.

In addition to these sermons, Isa 16:3 appeared in multiple statements and resolutions by anti-slavery and religious organizations denouncing the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act.⁵⁷ These included at least two statements in October 1850 by groups with

Law, 19–20, 24, 34; Theodore Parker, *Trial of Theodore Parker, for the 'Misdemeanor' of a Speech in Faneuil Hall against Kidnapping, Before the Circuit Court of the United States, at Boston, April 3, 1855, with the Defence* (Boston: Allen and Farnham, 1855) 185–86 (recounting his September 1850 sermon titled "Sermon of the Function and Place of Conscience in Relation to the Laws of Man"); L. H. Sheldon, *The Moral Responsibility of the Citizen and Nation in Response to the Fugitive Slave Bill* (Andover, MA: Flagg, 1851) 26; J. Wallace, "Obedience to Civil Rulers: A Sermon Preached Before the Associate Congregation of Cherokee," *Evangelical Repository* 10.1 (1851) 3–10, at 8; William C. Whitcomb, *A Discourse on the Recapture of Fugitive Slaves, Delivered at Stoneham, Mass., Nov. 3, 1850* (Boston: Moody, 1850) 7, 10, 34. Note that several sermons included multiple references to the text. In many of the sermons, Isa 16:3–4 is connected to Deut 23:15–16.

⁵⁴ That said, historian Laura L. Mitchell suggests that the total number of sermons denouncing the law was relatively small. She found approximately seventy in her research, with even more encouraging obedience to the law (Mitchell, "Matters of Justice," 161 n. 8; 163 n. 33).

⁵⁵ Colver, *Fugitive Slave Bill*, 14. Colver went on to contrast Deut 23:15–16 with the new law in similar fashion.

⁵⁶ Wallace, "Obedience to Civil Rulers," 8.

⁵⁷ "Minutes of the Associate Synod of North America, at the Fiftieth Annual Meeting Held in Zenia, Ohio, May 22nd, 1851, and Continued, by Adjournment, to the 30th," *Evangelical Repository* 10.2 (1851) 49–98, at 86; "Resolutions, Passed by the Tremont Street Baptist Church, Boston, Oct.

predominantly Black members. At Philadelphia's Brick Wesley African Methodist Episcopal Church, a committee convened by Octavius Catto and William Still pledged that "in obedience to the command, to 'hide the outcast and betray not him that wandereth,' we shall never refuse aid and shelter and succor to any brother or sister who has escaped from the prison-house of Southern Bondage."⁵⁸ In Boston, a meeting of freedom seekers poignantly demanded that White clergy use their power to oppose the act: "By all the woes and warnings pronounced by the prophets against those who refuse to hide the outcast, and bewray him that wandereth—who decree unrighteous decrees, and write grievousness which they have prescribed, to turn aside the needy from judgment—denounce the law!"⁵⁹ Along with the sermon and autobiography of James Pennington, discussed in section two, these examples indicate that Isa 16:3–4 found use as a proof text among both Black and White abolitionists. Other appeals to the text to discredit the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act appeared throughout the 1850s in a variety of media, although with less frequency as the decade progressed.⁶⁰

Isaiah 16:3–4 also continued appearing in anti-slavery literature not directly related to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. Most examples conformed to patterns of usage that developed prior to 1850. For instance, following the precedents set by the prefatory material to Douglass's *Narrative* and Pennington's *Fugitive Blacksmith*, the text showed up in multiple autobiographies and freedom narratives. In an appendix to the 1859 autobiography of Rev. Jermain Wesley Lougan, a formerly enslaved man who worked on the Underground Railroad, Rev. E. P. Rogers of Newark, New Jersey, wrote, "If the words of the Bible, 'hide the outcasts and betray not him that wandereth,' mean anything at all, they mean it is the duty of Christians

11, 1850," in Colver, *Fugitive Slave Bill*, 2; J. C. Telford, "Action of the Associate Presbytery of Clarion on the Fugitive Slave Law," *Evangelical Repository* 10.4 (1851) 209–10.

⁵⁸ "Resolutions by a Committee of Philadelphia Blacks," reported in *Pennsylvania Freeman*, 31 October 1850; reprinted in *The Black Abolitionist Papers* (ed. C. Peter Ripley; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015) 4:68–72, at 69. Another of the resolutions quoted Isa 10:1. For further background on this meeting, consult Daniel R. Biddle and Murray Dubin, *Tasting Freedom: Octavius Catto and the Battle for Equality in Civil War America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010) 146–47.

⁵⁹ "Address to the Clergy of Massachusetts," in William C. Whitcomb, *Discourse on the Recapture of Fugitive Slaves*, 6–7. Note again the combination of language from Isa 16:3 and 10:1–2.

⁶⁰ Anonymous, "Revolution, the Only Remedy for Slavery," (Anti-Slavery Tracts 7; New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1855) 12–15; Campbell and Errett, "Fugitive Slave Law—Once More," 630; Lydia Maria Francis Child, *The Duty of Disobedience to the Fugitive Slave Act: An Appeal to the Legislators of Massachusetts*, (Anti-Slavery Tracts NS 9; Boston: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1860) 22; E. H. Gray, *Assaults upon Freedom! Or, Kidnapping an Outrage upon Humanity and Abhorrent to God: A Discourse Occasioned by the Rendition of Anthony Burns* (Shelburne Falls, MA: Gunn, 1854) 15. As late as January 29, 1861, the American Anti-Slavery Society—attended by Beriah Green and Susan B. Anthony, among others—passed a resolution calling for the abolition of "all Fugitive Slave Laws," noting that "the law of God requires us to befriend the friendless, to succor the distressed, to hide the outcast, to deliver the oppressed" (recounted in Samuel J. May, *Some Recollections of Our Antislavery Conflict* [Boston: Fields, Osgood, & Co., 1869] 393).

and philanthropists to do as Mr. Loguen and his patrons have done.”⁶¹ Similarly, Rev. W. H. Bonner of London cited Isa 16:4 in his preface to the autobiography of Rev. William Mitchell, also a person of color involved in the Underground Railroad. Bonner described Mitchell’s decision to aid freedom seekers as “obedience to the will of God, enjoined by the prophet Isaiah (chap. xvi, v. 3,4).”⁶² In all of the cases discussed so far, the reference to Isa 16 did not appear in the text of the autobiography itself, but rather in the preface, appendix, or title page. That changed with the 1860 freedom narrative *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* by William Craft. Craft and his wife Ellen escaped from slavery in Georgia in 1848, only to be forced to flee from Boston to London after the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. In his autobiography, Craft denounced prominent supporters of the act, including Moses Stuart, and quoted Deut 23:15–16 and Isa 16:3–4 as evidence “that the slaves have a right to run away, and that it is unscriptural for any one to send them back.”⁶³

At the very end of the decade, with the nation on the threshold of the Civil War, the arrest and execution of John Brown in 1859 occasioned further appeals to Isa 16:3–4. Lydia Maria Francis Child, a prominent abolitionist and women’s rights activist from Massachusetts, corresponded with Brown while he was in prison, offering to nurse him back to health. One of her letters was published in the *New York Tribune* without her permission, sparking outrage in Virginia. She received a vitriolic letter, dated 11 November 1859, from Maria Jefferson Carr Randolph Mason, a great-granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson and member of a slaveholding family in Virginia. The letter opened, “Do you read your Bible, Mrs. Child?”⁶⁴ In her response, dated 17 December 1859, Child observed that “abolitionists also have favorite texts” and quoted Isa 16:3–4, Deut 23:15–16, Prov 31:8–9, and Isa 58:1 and 6, among others, as her examples.⁶⁵ Although William Lloyd Garrison initially opposed the raid at Harper’s Ferry, he later took up Brown’s cause and delivered a

⁶¹ E. P. Rogers, “Appendix: Testimony of Rev. E. P. Rogers,” in J. W. Loguen, *The Rev. J. W. Loguen, As a Slave and as a Freeman: A Narrative of Real Life* (Syracuse: Truair, 1859) 445–49, at 448. Loguen, who later became a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, was born into slavery under the name Jarm Logue. He is mentioned by that name in Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Water Dancer: A Novel* (New York: One World, 2019) 226. We discuss this novel in this article’s conclusion.

⁶² Bonner, “Preface,” v. A similar use of Isa 16:3 appeared in the 1874 *History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America* by U.S. Vice President Henry Wilson. Wilson recounted the testimony of “Mr. Van Dorn,” a white businessperson who worked with the Underground Railroad in Ohio: “I had either to ignore my principles or ‘hide the outcast’” (Wilson, *History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America* [3 vols.; Boston: Osgood, 1874] 2:67).

⁶³ William Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; Or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (London: Tweedie, 1860) 98. Although William Craft is listed as the sole author, Ellen Craft likely played a significant role in the book’s production. On Craft’s quotation of Isa 16, consult further Powery and Sadler, *Genesis of Liberation*, 42–43.

⁶⁴ Lydia Maria Francis Child, *Correspondence Between Lydia Maria Child and Gov. Wise and Mrs. Mason, of Virginia* (Boston: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1860) 16.

⁶⁵ Child, *Correspondence*, 18–19. Child misidentified Prov 31:8–9 as Prov 29:8–9.

tribute to him on 2 December 1859—the day of his execution—in which he once again quoted Isa 16: “God commands us to ‘hide the outcast, and bewray not him that wandereth.’ I say, LET THE WILL OF GOD BE DONE!”⁶⁶

■ Conclusion

We have not provided an exhaustive catalogue of the uses of Isa 16:3–4 during the debates over the Fugitive Slave Clause of the Constitution and related laws passed prior to the Thirteenth Amendment.⁶⁷ These examples, however, indicate that Isa 16:3–4 received substantial attention on both sides of these debates. These verses were not quoted as often as Deut 23:15–16, with which they were frequently paired, and they do not appear in some prominent abolitionist sources like Barnes’s *Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* or Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Nonetheless, their use in abolitionist arguments was sufficiently notable to attract implicit and explicit rebuttals from defenders of slavery. The variety of genres in which these verses appear—sermons, public addresses, letters, autobiographies, scholarly treatises, and even a children’s book—is especially remarkable. It is difficult to overlook these uses of this passage from Isaiah, which exemplify the potential for creative reappropriations of biblical texts by later readers, especially among popular interpreters in the public sphere. Nevertheless, although reception history has received greater attention among biblical scholars over the last three decades, there remains a tendency in the field to exclude, ignore, or minimize discussions of race in the United States in reception histories of biblical texts or characters.⁶⁸ We hope that our discussion of Isa 16:3–4 fills a small part of this gap, and that it might further contribute to ongoing scholarly conversations about biblical interpretation in nineteenth-century American religion.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ William Lloyd Garrison, “Speech of Wm. Lloyd Garrison at the Meeting in Tremont Temple,” *The Liberator* 29.50 (16 December 1859) 198, capitalization original.

⁶⁷ Our research to this point has uncovered over forty-five historical sources in which the text appears.

⁶⁸ On this issue, consult Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper, *Black Samson: The Untold Story of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁶⁹ Isaiah 16:3–4 has received little, if any, attention in recent works on American religious history that consider the place of the Bible in 19th-cent. debates over slavery. In addition to Noll’s *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, consult Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders’ Worldview* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Molly Oshatz, *Slavery and Sin: The Fight against Slavery and the Rise of Liberal Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1993); Harry Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Penguin, 2007). We welcome cross-disciplinary conversation with scholars of American religious history about the implications of studies of specific biblical texts, like this one, for understanding how appeals to the Bible shaped Americans’ political and religious sensibilities in this period. Given how the historical context of Isa 16:3–4 featured in debates about its applicability to American slavery, our research could particularly inform work on the hermeneutics of biblical

These verses have continued to inform how we imagine our nation's past and the stories of those who escaped from slavery and their supporters. As late as 1880, Isa 16:3 appeared (along with Deut 23:15–16) in Austin Bearse's account of the formation of a Committee of Vigilance in Boston three decades earlier.⁷⁰ The 1844 Underground Railroad advertisement, discussed in section two of this article, was reprinted in a 1904 history of slavery in Illinois.⁷¹ Moving to the present, Tanehisi Coates returned to this text in 2019 in his critically acclaimed novel, *The Water Dancer*, which debuted at number one on a *New York Times* bestseller list for fiction. Hiram Walker, the novel's protagonist, is born into slavery in Virginia but escapes to Philadelphia. At one point, Raymond White, a formerly enslaved Underground Railroad agent, shares with Walker an assortment of "correspondences with fugitives," which allow him to access vivid memories of these fugitives.⁷² Walker explains,

Leafing through the pages, I felt the stories come to life before me. I saw them as though I were right there, so that on the walk to the ferry, on the ferry itself, and then all the way to the Philadelphia station, legions of colored people, panoramas of their great escapes. . . . I saw them that day on the Philadelphia docks, praying, "Hide the outcasts, betray not him that wandereth."⁷³

By recasting Isa 16:3–4 as the prayer of these freedom seekers, Coates continues to expand America's primary contribution to the interpretive history of these verses.

interpretation in the slavery debates.

⁷⁰ Bearse, *Reminiscences of Fugitive-Slave Law Days in Boston* (Boston: Richardson, 1880) 14.

⁷¹ Harris, *History of Negro Servitude in Illinois*, 16.

⁷² Coates, *The Water Dancer*, 223. These correspondences were inspired by those compiled in William Still, *The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, &c., Narrating the Hardships, Hair-Breadth Escapes and Death Struggles of the Slaves in Their Efforts for Freedom, as Related by Themselves and Others, or Witnessed by the Author; Together with Sketches of Some of the Largest Stockholders, and Most Liberal Aiders and Advisers, of the Road* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1872); so Coates, *The Water Dancer*, 405.

⁷³ Coates, *The Water Dancer*, 226–27.