

BOOK REVIEW FORUM

## Encountering the Bible from Subaltern Sources

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Mark A. Noll's insightful and comprehensive survey of the Bible as foundational to American history skillfully nuances this contested topic. While some might describe the United States as a Bible republic, Noll, in stunningly dense detail and documentation, correctly calls the nation a Bible civilization. In drawing this crucial distinction, Noll demonstrates that the Bible and Biblical literacy underlay discourse about politics, culture, and citizenship while at the same time he shows that religious neutrality was enshrined as a national norm in not privileging in the civic sphere one religion over another. After the "proprietary" churches that once exercised disproportionate influence in the public square yielded to a competitive religious marketplace, Methodists emerged in buttressing the body politic through the power of private piety. This disengagement from overt public involvements—a signature attribute of Wesleyan whites—paralleled what the American Bible Society designed in maintaining Biblical primacy in the life of the nation. Distribution of scriptures, especially on the expanding frontier, without doctrinal note or denominational advocacy would sustain the Bible as a glue holding together the American polis and sustaining this body of scriptures as "America's book."

Noll's note about Methodism was a reminder of his interactive sensibilities about religion among both Euro-Americans and African Americans and the racial chasm that separated them. While scriptural holiness, Noll says, spurred white Methodists to eschew an energetic presence in the public square, black Methodists drew from Wesleyan scriptural holiness a corresponding warrant to espouse social holiness and its requirement to pursue societal reconstruction. Hence, black Methodists, who faced existential realities that white Methodists could avoid, courted dangerous consequences as they attempted active assaults against slavery, an ugly blot on God's creation. Noll acknowledges the abortive Denmark Vesey slave insurrection and its blended Biblical and African Methodist Episcopal connections, but he did not describe the planned rebellion as the result of an alternate reading of how Methodists should engage the public sphere and reorder the Biblical bearings of American society.

This part of Noll's magisterial narrative segues into his unfinished reckoning with an omission of the dual trajectories embedded in black religion. One track showed a scarce intersection between the Bible and black spirituality while the other developed within a Black ecclesia that embraced African American appropriations of Christian scripture. Most scholars of black religion agree that the African religious background persisted into African American belief, rituals, and practices. Charles H. Long posited that

“religious history and theology in America” are “synonymous with the history of European traditions (especially the Protestant traditions) that were transplanted to the American continent” and victimized enslaved populations.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the rich religious history of enslaved Africans in their direct encounter with Euro-American religion stood stubbornly outside of Bible civilization and its historical development in America. Primary to Africans, who gradually became African American in the successive waves of importation of captured Africans, were tense interactions that created new and synthetic religions that at times awkwardly resembled Euro-American Christianity. Despite these differences and parallels, black religion remained premised on criteria often omitted from scholarly queries like that undertaken in the Noll volume. Long viewed as axiomatic three characteristics that comprised black religion. They included “Africa as historical reality and religious image” as idioms embedded in black religious consciousness. Long also noted the ongoing reality that blacks in America were “an involuntary presence” and possessed this consciousness about themselves that white Americans could not easily fathom. Moreover, Long discussed the singular belief derived from the African religious background in a powerful High God whose power lay in being the exclusive first person in the Trinity. These attributes transferred to African American religion and constituted core sensibilities within black belief. Black religion, Long argues, was essentially African, whatever the Christian garb in which it was sometimes attired.

The Bible, therefore, had to be viewed through an African religious prism. It is no wonder that Noll, despite the breadth of the book, did not deeply reckon with Tituba, an African woman tried as a witch in the Salem witchcraft trials in Massachusetts in 1692. Her African-ness, whatever Christian superficialities she may have possessed, showed the Bible either as tangential or irrelevant to how she religiously constructed herself. And then there was Gullah Jack, known as a sorcerer whom both whites and blacks feared. He was a fellow member alongside Vesey in Charleston’s African Methodist Episcopal congregation and his co-conspirator in the planned slave insurrection. Jack’s African religious-ness, like that of Tituba, existed on a contested Biblical terrain that shaped an African Methodism that Francis Asbury would have found incomprehensible. Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh’s *The Souls of Womenfolk: The Religious Cultures of Enslaved Women in the Lower South* further deepened the discourse about the African religious background and how enslaved women constructed themselves in the existential environment of racist and sexist exploitation.<sup>2</sup> She centers the experience of women and explores the resources from within their African background that influenced their religious and ethical perspectives. Enslavement, because of rape, pregnancy, childbirth, escape, and the other facets of a lifetime of forced and uncompensated labor, raised issues not easily answered by a pithy Biblical maxim. The ubiquity of enslaved women’s experience did not allow for the Bible to function as the primary arbiter for explaining for them what norms they should adopt for a moral and ethical existence. These complexities within black religion eluded Noll’s otherwise insightful Biblical history commentary. Moreover, he needed to take into account that a minority of the enslaved actually were Christian and that their religious communities included palpable Muslim influences rooted in their West African origins. The

<sup>1</sup>Charles H. Long, “The Study of Religion in the United States of America: Its Past and Future” in *Ellipsis: The Collected Writings of Charles H. Long* (London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2018), 45.

<sup>2</sup>Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh, *The Souls of Womenfolk: The Religious Cultures of Enslaved Women in the Lower South* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

Bible, while present as a spiritual resource, was not the only religious guide available to the enslaved, whether female or male.

Noll is on point, however, with another aspect of African American religion. He acknowledges that leaders in the black ecclesia appropriated the Bible and deployed it to speak to the existential realities in which they lived. Richard Allen's denunciations of slavery reflected an Afro-centric hermeneutic in his citation of scripture that buttressed his abolitionism. Noll is similarly insightful in observing Vesey's use of scripture to undergird his insurgency against slavery, notwithstanding the author's glaring oversight of Gullah Jack, his confidante. Noll, however, amply documents how the Bible functioned as an indispensable resource for several other black abolitionists similarly determined to destroy slavery.

The Bible for subaltern populations in the ante bellum period functioned differently for the politically powerless and the disenfranchised who were barred from participation in American governance. In multiple ways Noll showed how the Biblical language and imagery diffused throughout the American culture tracked debates about political philosophy and the relationship between religion and the state. Dissemination of the Bible, and its wide availability, thanks to the American Bible Society and other similar agencies, had a pervasive effect upon American society. This phenomenon is made clear in the Noll volume. The Bible, however, as such scholars as Charles H. Long emphasized and Noll sidestepped, functioned as a text that was inseparable from the racial and gender hegemony that enslaved African Americans, evicted Native Americans from their lands, and circumscribed the rights of women. The use of the Bible was hardly neutral with regard to issues of political rule and economic ascendancy and as it was drafted to serve hegemonic interests. Nonetheless, Noll is tenacious in his coverage of racism and sexism putting them at the center of his understanding of American religious history.

These issues thrust the Bible onto a contested terrain that lay in its deployment in pro-slavery and anti-slavery debates. Noll provides an in-depth juxtaposition between those on each side of this moral matter. All of the advocates in the debates depended upon the Bible and the selection of predicable scriptures to shore up their points of view. Though Noll acknowledged that pro-slavery apologists seemingly enjoyed a rhetorical edge, this discussion, however heated, still avoided the harder considerations of violence that could be deployed to end the egregious wrongs that a barbaric bondage imposed upon the enslaved. Moral suasion, aid to slave escapees, and numerous non-violent tactics that aimed to undermine the "peculiar institution" seemed facile against the Biblical and higher law justifications for violent action. Noll mentions Nat Turner and the scriptural grounding for his violent insurgency in 1831, but *America's Book* needed more fully to acknowledge that there was much more to this tactical trajectory than what was discussed in this already comprehensive volume. This meant tackling the matter of violence and whether, on behalf of slaves, it should be used to achieve their manumission. Nonetheless, Noll observed that Turner and his predecessor, Denmark Vesey, drew a Biblical warrant from "America's book" to reckon with the ultimate in existential issues facing the enslaved.

For black abolitionists, John Brown, and the African American ecclesia, all Bible people, reconciling "America's book" and violence, often pejoratively described as insurrection when it pertained to enslaved blacks, pushed Biblical scripture far afield from normative discourse. Jermain Loguen, a former slave, abolitionist, and later a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, declared that force was morally mandated to maintain the freedom of those who escaped bondage. John Brown led

an aborted raid on the federal arsenal in Harper's Ferry, Virginia, in order to arm the enslaved. Both the Bible and what he envisaged as a higher law, he said, required this action. Henry M. Turner, a Civil War chaplain who would be elected to the AME episcopacy in 1880, observed the performance of black soldiers at the 1864 Battle of Petersburg. "The skirmish," he said, "was the grandest sight I ever beheld," notwithstanding the violence and carnage that accompanied this benchmark battle with its lengthy list of black military fatalities. Loguen, Brown, and Turner extended the Bible-based discourse about violence that Vesey and Nat Turner inaugurated three decades earlier. Black Christians, perhaps more than what most scholars of religion have conceded, normalized violence as a core Biblical query in their quest for freedom. They believed that they had Bible backing for this emancipatory project.

Noll argues that a post-bellum shift occurred in which the Bible was increasingly decentered in the American body politic and in the national culture. Despite industrial and urban development, accelerated demographic and religious diversity, and changes in the academic and lay understanding of the Bible, no declension in the vibrancy of religion and Biblical engagement occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Noll is correct in asserting that the maintenance of a Bible civilization in the United States did not reach fruition. At the same time the Bible in multiple spheres and often without a transcendent demographic reach remained a religious and civic lodestar that provided a national nomenclature for debates about the body politic and its identity as a Biblically influenced republic.