

***Denmark Vesey's Bible: The Thwarted Revolt That Put Slavery and Scripture on Trial.* By Jeremy Schipper. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. xxxiv + 181 pp. 26.95 cloth.**

This welcome study illuminates historical realities that have been well known, but only recently sharply outlined—namely, that some African Americans achieved a far-reaching mastery of Scripture very soon after they were brought into American society and that religious defenses of slavery developed in response to specific historical incidents. Although Jeremy Schipper could have engaged the debate over whether Denmark Vesey really conspired to foment the slave rebellion for which he and the 34 other Black Americans were executed (Michael P. Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Conspiracy,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 58 [2001]: 915–976; responses to Johnson, *ibid.* 59 [2002]: 135–202), he makes excellent use of the documentary record published by the historians who have done the most to confirm that Vesey and his associates were indeed on the cusp of rebellion when white authorities in Charleston, South Carolina, discovered their plot (Douglas R. Egerton and Robert L. Paquette, *The Denmark Vesey Affair: A Documentary History* [University Press of Florida, 2017]).

With Egerton and Paquette’s documentation, Schipper shows how significantly texts from the Hebrew Scriptures factored in Vesey’s appeal for militant action, especially Exodus 21:16 and its Mosaic sentence of death for “he that stealeth a man, and selleth him.” As revealed at the drumhead courts that tried Vesey and his collaborators, it was obvious that their knowledge of Scripture extended much further. Vesey apparently was inspired by Exodus 9:1 (“Go to Pharaoh, and say to him . . . Let my people go”). He and others emphasized texts such as Isaiah 19:1 (announcing judgment on Egypt) and Zechariah 14:1–3 (“the day of the Lord cometh”). In the New Testament, they found passages for comfort (John 14:27) and for mobilization (Luke 11:23). And their reach extended beyond the Protestant canon to ponder Tobit from the Apocrypha, the narrative of a captured Israelite faithful under pressure.

Alongside explaining the importance of such passages, Schipper highlights the importance of the gatherings in which enslaved and free African Americans pondered them, especially class meetings that Vesey led as part of “the African church.” This congregation, founded in 1816 after consultation with Richard Allen as an early outpost of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, is also Schipper’s bridge for brief but telling commentary on the American present, for Vesey’s congregation was the forerunner of the Emmanuel AME congregation whose pastor, Clementa Pinckney, would be murdered by a white supremacist along with others at a prayer meeting in 2015.

If the Vesey plot demonstrated the depth of Black biblical expertise, it also marked an expansion of White biblically based defenses of the American slave system. In the aftermath of the foiled uprising, the presiding judge at Vesey’s trial, the Charleston Bible Society, a respected Baptist leader (Richard Furman), a leading Presbyterian (Benjamin Morgan Palmer, uncle of his more famous namesake who became a well-known advocate for the Confederacy), a local Episcopalian (Frederick Dalcho), and a lawyer-journalist (Edwin Holland) elaborated extensive justifications for American slavery in which attention to Scripture remained paramount throughout. The passages they highlighted repeated the pro-slavery prooftexts that had been deployed even before the 1770s and the upsurge of debates over slavery that began at that time. Along with a full-

scale repetition of biblical arguments that occurred during debate over the admission of Missouri as a slave state, these Charleston publications presaged the all-out scriptural defenses of slavery that proliferated for decades thereafter.

Crucial for these expositions was always Leviticus 25:44–46, which allowed Old Testament Hebrews to enslave “the heathen that are found about you” and to pass on those slaves as “an inheritance for your children.” Polemics also included full attention to the silence of Jesus on the institution and to Pauline texts in the New Testament that urged “servants” to obey their masters “as unto Christ” (Ephesians 6:5). In a pattern that would be repeated, the well-educated Rev. Furman did not refer to “the curse of Canaan” from Genesis 9:25 as a justification for enslaving Africans, but Holland, the populist lawyer, took pains to remedy that omission by linking the biblical Canaan and contemporary American slaves. Schipper also shows that the Bible-based defenses of slavery occasioned by the conspiracy hastened the shift in pro-slavery apologetics from “necessary evil” to “positive good,” and with reliance on Scripture integral to that move.

In a book focused tightly on events in the years 1822 and 1823, Schipper does slight important historical contexts, such as the possibility that the first antislavery publication by an African American, Daniel Coker’s 1810 *Dialogue between a Virginian and an African Minister*, might have been known by Vesey because of Coker’s cooperation with Richard Allen in founding the AME Church. Schipper mentions the Charleston presence of the eccentric, and passionately abolitionist, Methodist preacher Lorenzo Dow, but not Dow’s strong apocalypticism that anticipated a similar apocalypticism in the conspirators. The book could also have benefited from the extraordinary recent flourishing of scholarship on its subject in works by historians, litterateurs, and biblical scholars such as Allen Callahan, Vincent Wimbush, Katherine Clay Bassard, and Lisa Bowens. In addition, the timing of publication may have prevented Schipper from taking account of Christopher Tomlins’ *In the Matter of Nat Turner: A Speculative History* (Princeton University Press, 2020), in particular Tomlin’s powerful revisionist argument that Turner’s turn toward violence against slaveholders took place well *after* he had developed an African-inflected, charismatic attachment to Scripture every bit as comprehensive as the biblicism prevailing where white evangelical and Enlightenment interpretive conventions held sway. In Tomlin’s account, Scripture was a spur for Turner to attack slaveowners only because it had first become foundational for its general revelatory meaning. It would have strengthened Schipper’s study to have asked whether a similar all-purpose trust in Scripture existed as a comprehensive backdrop to Vesey’s weaponizing the Bible against enslavement.

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***The Souls of Womenfolk: The Religious Cultures of Enslaved Women of the Lower South.* By Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022. 320 pp. \$95.00 cloth; \$27.95 paper.**

Many recognize the significant role that Black women play in current American religious life. They fill the pews, call back to their ministers, and attend to the needs of