

**Frederick Douglass and the Paradox of  
American Christian Slavery**

**Garrett Crowell, U.S. History Survey, MWF**

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Throughout Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, there is a theme of Christianity and the Bible being used – perverted, really – to justify the owning and exploitation of black people by white people. Inasmuch as Douglass uses wordplay, puns, quotes from Shakespeare and other literature to enrich his point, it must be assumed that this Biblical narrative thread is deliberate. In his appendix, however, he goes to great lengths to ensure that his ambiguous feelings toward the Christian faith are not interpreted as antipathy, and indeed, draws a very important distinction between the Christianity practiced by American slaveholding whites and what is perhaps the ideal. From the beginning to the end of the work there is criticism of the religion of those around him, and then at the end, he ameliorates this with an explicit statement after many examples of cruelty. Why?

Douglass's religious sub-narrative begins on page 3 of his story (page 15 of the Yale edition) by mentioning the oft-cited curse upon the descendants of Ham (Genesis 9: 20-25, SAB) by Noah as one justification for the subjugation of black people. Even a strictly Biblical interpretation of this is enough to debunk it for American use: Ham's son Canaan was the one cursed, and many scholars think that this verse is here to justify the specific slavery of the Canaanites to the Israelites (Evans 16-17). It's an excellent example of the kind of thing Douglass will illustrate throughout, though – the seemingly either deliberate misinterpretation of scripture to serve one's own needs (a very popular contemporary concept as well as an historical one) or turning a simple blind eye to the parts of the Bible that don't suit a white slave owner. Perhaps many of them believe what they say when spouting the phrase “damned niggers” during punishment; if the belief is genuinely that black people truly are a cursed people and damned by God, then in the mind of someone who thinks themselves pious, this could justify a whole range of cruel behaviors without inspiring any internal contradictions.

*“A great many times have we poor creatures been nearly perishing with hunger, when food in abundance lay mouldering in the safe and smoke-house, and our pious mistress was aware of the fact; and yet that mistress and her husband would kneel every morning, and pray that God would bless them in basket and store!”* (Douglass 42) This is next direct instance I ran across in the narrative that expresses not only the hypocrisy of the Christian slaveholders observed by Douglass, but also captures his outrage at this dichotomy. As he and his fellow slaves starve and food rots in the pantry, Mr. & Mrs. Auld are down on their knees asking God for more than they already have. This is an argument that persists today, mainly centering on “megachurches” like Murfreesboro’s very own World Outreach – why should a Christian ever be wealthy? Douglass certainly sees this kind of greed firsthand as for the Aulds, it’s never enough, even when they have surplus (that they could be feeding their slaves) going to waste. The example also illustrates the hierarchal importance of “property” in the minds of slaveholders – they could feed some of their property to their other property, but then they’d have less property, so why do that? Just enough to maintain, and no more seems to be the rule followed here.

After this instance is quoted, Captain Auld has a conversion experience at a Methodist camp meeting, and while Douglass is initially optimistic about this, thinking that it might temper Auld’s cruelty, it in fact has the opposite effect, allowing him to biblical justify slavery and his subsequent actions maintaining the status quo. He uses the verse “And that servant, which knew his Lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. (Luke 12:47, SAB)” These are the words of Jesus himself, misapplied, as Jesus often spoke in parables. Auld goes further than to twist it, actually misquoting it (replacing Lord with “master”), which further illustrates the deliberateness of his motivations.

There is a kind of day-to-day delusion in which some people engage when they wish to do a thing without thinking about it overmuch, because they know that if they do, they will not be able to justify it under whatever moral system is being applied. This is usually applied after the fact; the person simply “drives on” and doesn’t give what they’ve done much thought. This does not seem to be that. This seems to be a purposeful pre-event maligning of the Bible to the point of justifying one’s behavior. It’s more insidious to my mind – and I think, Douglass’s – because of the premeditation involved.

The conversion experience also intensifies Auld’s hypocrisy as his household begins to board and entertain and feed preacher after preacher. When the preachers are in evidence, the slaves are dutifully called into prayers without fail. In the absence of preachers in the house, this practice goes on much more sporadically. It seems the appearance of piety is far more important to Mr. Auld than actual right living.

Douglass reflects upon instance after instance of Christian cruelty during the Narrative, including the bloody breaking up of a slave Sunday school service and more condemnations of those who practice rank hypocrisy, but then ends the re-telling of his life and goes on to an appendix. The appendix explicitly deals with the possible misconception (as Douglass sees it) that his readers may have garnered about his attitudes about Christianity. He makes a very clear distinction between what he calls “the Christianity of Christ” (Douglass 81) and the American Christianity that surrounded him. The former he finds to be a desirable state of affairs, and the reader who is paying close attention would tend to believe this with his veneration of abolitionist Catholics and multiple references to the “Providence” that guided the more pleasant times in his life, while the latter is an abhorrent state of the worst kinds of human behavior, a hypocritical

vener of false piousness slapped over an evil white face that seeks to subjugate black people and bend them to its will, extracting labor and life until they drop into or are beaten into, death.

So why is this here? Why is this explicit “just in case you thought I was blasting your religion, I’m not” statement sort of tacked onto the end of a personal narrative? Why does the author go to such great lengths not only to point out that he is an adherent to the teachings of Christ, but that other people have also raised the issue of hypocritical, lying, cruel supposedly Christian slaveholders and the institutions that prop them up?

‘Douglass was aware of the positions and sensibilities of the audience to whom the Narrative was addressed and didn’t wish to alienate them’ can be the only answer. Douglass was not writing his missive to slaves to foment a resistance movement, as most slaves could not read and would not have had access to his book anyway. He was writing with a certain specific kind of reader in mind – someone like William Lloyd Garrison, who wrote the preface at the beginning of the book and helped mightily in getting it published. Garrison is obviously a Christian man, and would later publish “Onward Christian Soldiers” in *The Advocate of Peace* in 1900. (Garrison) Many abolitionists were Christians, having participated and influenced by the thinkers and speakers of the Second Great Awakening, and many were even evangelical, who tend to be the most convicted end of the spectrum of Christ’s adherents – for better or for worse.

If you’re an abolitionist, and Douglass certainly was, then you need the fervor and sheer numbers of the Christians around you in order to advance your cause, get the word out, and influence others. To that end, you cannot afford even the barest hint that you are criticizing the foundations of their faith – after all, an understanding of Christlike behavior is what motivated many of them to become abolitionists in the first place. I think it is because of this, the need to remove any second thinking from the minds of his Christian readers as to whether or not to

support Douglass, that he explicitly makes this clear. It removes the vestigial doubt that could be in the mind of the reader who easily takes offense at such things and further clarifies the distinction between followers of Christ as Douglass saw them and those who simply used the words of the Bible to justify their behavior no matter how repugnant.

Douglass's overarching point – about the huge difference between what people say they are and what they believe and how they actually treat one another is ultimately reinforced by the appendix. This has more to do with Douglass' unflinching writing style and solid prose than the structure of the document – of course, I'm viewing this from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and thought that the multiple introductions – prefaces and letters from upstanding white citizens – was ponderous. I realize that when placed in historical context these introductions served to give the document overall some additional credibility and gravitas, and I have grudgingly come to accept that the appendix does likewise, and does it effectively and well without being apologetic.

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