American Slave Narratives and the Book of Job: Frederick Douglass’s and Nat Turner’s Quests for Scriptural Authority and Authenticity

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American Slave Narratives and the Book of Job: Frederick Douglass’s and Nat Turner’s Quests for Scriptural Authority and Authenticity

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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April 2014
Acknowledgment

The author wishes to thank several people. I would like to thank my family, friends, colleagues, and professors. Without their generous support, this project would have never come to fruition. I am also thankful for my community’s rich history and for the opportunity to contribute to its legacy.
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Abstract

AMERICAN SLAVE NARRATIVES THROUGH THE BOOK OF JOB: FREDERICK DOUGLASS’S AND NAT TURNER’S QUESTS FOR SCRIPURAL AUTHORITY AND AUTHENTICITY

By Hattie E. Francis, M.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014.

Major Director: Les Harrison, Associate Professor, Department of English

Slave narratives influenced nineteenth-century American religious culture and history; through the slave narrative, modern readers experience the African-American struggle for freedom and personhood in the antebellum South. While the slave narrative stimulated identity-formation, once identity was formed a narrator fought for authority and control of that identity throughout their narrative. This struggle for control is present in the narratives of Frederick Douglass and Nat Turner. Due to each slave’s religious allusions, African-American literary scholars repeatedly link Douglass and Turner to biblical books such as Jonah and Ezekiel. However, this thesis will examine Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave, Written by Himself*, and Thomas R. Gray’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* through the lens of the Book of Job. By examining Douglass’s and Turner’s pursuit of knowledge through correlations within the Book of Job, both scriptural authority and authenticity emerges within each narrative.
Chapter One  
Scriptural Literacy: Job, Douglass, and Turner

In “The Process of Literacy as Communal Involvement in the Narratives of Frederick Douglass,” Daniel J. Royer writes: “Much of what is revealed in these [slave] narratives is the way in which literacy enabled and empowered blacks to gain freedom from, and control over, the ruling culture that enslaved them.”¹ Royer’s statements apply to American slaves Frederick Douglass and Nat Turner beyond their ability to read and write, and advance to scriptural literacy. Born a slave in Maryland, Douglass published the first edition of his autobiography in 1845: *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave, Written by Himself.*² As portrayed in the *Narrative*, Douglass uses education to his advantage by developing a personal understanding of Southern Christianity and gains physical freedom from slavery. He becomes consumed with literary empowerment and takes great risks to develop literacy while residing in the Hugh Auld household. Literacy allows Douglass to control his former owners, as he forever carves their inhumane treatment of slaves into *Narrative*. In contrast to Douglass, Nat Turner uses scriptural literacy and education to justify violence against his enslavers. In *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Thomas R. Gray documented Turner’s deadly slave insurrection that took place on August 22, 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia.³ Notability, within *Confessions*, Turner denies Thomas R. Gray a simple and direction admission of his guilt, but provides his autobiographical slave narrative, beginning with his childhood and concluding with his arrest. While Turner’s confession lacks the signifying claim, “written by himself,” which ignites debate
over authorial control and authenticity, he does exert authority when he voluntarily provides his personal account of slavery. As depicted in *Confessions*, Nat Turner was never physically free of slavery and died within its grasp, but he did exert physical and emotional control over whites on the night of his insurrection. Turner plays God as he dictates who lives and dies during his revolt. His control over the ruling whites lasted for a brief moment during his deadly insurrection; nevertheless, control was possible because of his controversial and radical self-guided education.

As education established permanent control for Douglass and temporary control for Turner, Royer’s blanket observation that education equals empowerment also bears upon each writer’s relationship to scripture: Douglass uses scriptural knowledge to exhibit his educational journey in his *Narrative*, and highlights the young community that completes his early education; Turner’s scriptural knowledge dictates personal relationships and sparks the generation of his insurrectionist community.

Scriptural knowledge is apparent in both Douglass’s and Turner’s narratives and is the root of actions portrayed in each text. As a result of Douglass’s and Turner’s scriptural knowledge, many scholars have examined Douglass’s and Turner’s relationship to biblical accounts and characters. Religion was a driving element of Douglass’s and Turner’s worldly education as they pursued authorial control over their individual lives. Scholars such as Donald Gibson and David Leverenz consider scriptural and biblical knowledge as influences on Douglass and his view of Christianity.⁴ Gibson discusses the role of Douglass’s Appendix in *Narrative* as he states, “The Appendix is one of Douglass’s many efforts to see the church objectively, to drive a wedge between faith in God and support of the Christian church, which, as the Appendix conceives it, was the most ‘peculiar institution’ of all” (95). Similarly, Anthony Santoro and Laura Scales reveal the Bible’s effect on Turner, his education, and his 1831
rebellion. Scales explains, “Turner becomes a reader of God’s earthly text, submitting it to his own acts of imagination, decoding God’s language” (218). Due to Christianity’s noticeable influence on Douglass and Turner, the Bible reveals much of both narratives beyond their selected words, scenes, and characters. The Old Testament is particularly relevant, and specifically the Book of Job, when considering Douglass’s and Turner’s experiences of unjust and needless suffering. Job’s unjust struggles allowed by God easily connect the book and the two slave narratives. The Book of Job, particularly the King James Version, helps to illuminate how biblical knowledge shapes Nat Turner’s and Frederick Douglass’s pursuit of authority.

This chapter first discusses the importance of the Book of Job within nineteenth-century literature, Job’s quest for knowledge from God, and his relationship with his instructive community. Following a discussion of the Book of Job, this chapter reflects on the book’s echoes within Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* regarding the themes of literacy and manhood, as well as both of his restrictive and constructive educational communities. Lastly, this chapter focuses on Turner’s relationship to his slave-holding community, his limiting peer community, and his spiritually empowered insurrectionist community filtered through the Book of Job, as well as a discussion on Turner’s role as a self-provider of literal and biblical knowledge prior to his insurrection. The second chapter shifts to scriptural authority and its use by both slaveholders and slaves to justify suffering and injustice. Using the Book of Job as a biblical example, chapter two explores the function of scripture within American slave society through Douglass’s *Narrative* and his rejection of Southern Christianity. Following a discussion of Douglass, chapter two addresses scriptural authority as a vehicle for Turner in his justification of his 1831 revolt. The final chapter investigates the struggle for authenticity in the Book of Job, Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative*, Douglass’s 1855 revision *My Bondage and My Freedom*, and Gray’s
Confessions. By linking the Book of Job to slave narratives, positive and negative impacts of testimony are recognizable. Restrictive abolitionist testimony forces Douglass to revise Narrative and discover his voice independent of white society. Obstructive testimony produced by Gray in Confessions causes Turner to provide a full autobiography in his attempt to control his personal history. Uniting Douglass and Turner through the Book of Job highlights religious culture in the South and allows the their nineteenth-century texts to speak to one another as each slave seeks to control his distinctive narrative and personal history.

The Book of Job: Nineteenth-century literature and Job’s quest for knowledge

The Old Testament Book of Job clearly influenced American literature during the nineteenth century. In “Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job,” Kirsten Nielsen explains that “the Old Testament permeates English literature from the earliest texts of Old English…although it wanes during the classical period of the eighteenth century and in Romanticism…it resurfaces in the nineteenth century.” An example of Job’s resurfacing is seen in Herman Melville’s Moby Dick. Regarding the Book of Job’s influence on Melville, Janis Stout notes “Verbal allusions of the Book of Job as well as thematic parallels with the situation and spirit of Job form a significant motif in his work”. However, use of the Old Testament and the Book of Job do not rest solely with Melville in American literature. Kristina Knobelsdorff further details the Book of Job’s influence on nineteenth-century American authors as she writes:

It is no surprise that American writers often invoke the rebellious Job as a figure of individualism and iconoclasm…given the distinct character of the American experience and individualism. Job in the American literary (and cultural) imagination has emerged as something of a radical individual, a figure on the frontier, not unlike the heroes in Cooper’s novels and Twain’s Huckleberry Finn.
Knoblesdorff’s relation of the Book of Job to Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is noteworthy. Twain’s character, Huckleberry Finn, befriends the fugitive slave Jim as they begin their journey down the Mississippi River. Jim is a prime example of undeserved suffering as an American slave and a prominent character in Twain’s novel. Throughout Twain’s novel, Huck and Jim seek to understand their new identities as free men as they escape the injustices of the South.

Literary engagement with the Book of Job is not restricted to the nineteenth century as Jerold J. Savory reveals that, “Job is, in many ways, a prototype of all restless and frustrated sufferers who have found themselves pressured by forces they can neither understand nor control”. Moving beyond the nineteenth century, a concrete relationship between African American literature and the Book of Job develops in Richard Wright’s novel, *Native Son*. Wright cites Job 23:2 directly in his novel’s epigraph:

```
Even today is my complaint rebellious,
My stroke is heavier than my groaning
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Job’s criticism of God as he seeks understanding of undeserved torment prefaces injustices experienced by Bigger Thomas, a young man who loses his life in his attempt to secure his individuality and manhood in pre-civil rights America. Like Bigger Thomas, Nat Turner and Frederick Douglass attempt to establish themselves as individuals free of societal restrictions and the Book of Job serves as a cornerstone to their attempts.

Beyond identity formation and suffering, The Book of Job’s influence on American literature advances to the acquiring of wisdom and knowledge. Paul S. Sanders writes that the Book of Job is grouped with the wisdom literature of the Bible and that the Book of Job is the closest philosophical message the Bible can provide with a more practical than speculative meaning. Sanders explains that, “at its best [the Book of Job] canvasses the breadth and plumbs
the depths of human existence” (2). While Sanders states the constant theme in the book is that fear of the Lord will lead to wisdom, it is the journey to knowledge and wisdom that is most important within the Book of Job in relation to nineteenth-century slave literature. As American slaves such as Frederick Douglass and Nat Turner searched for wisdom in their attempts to form self-worth and identity, the Book of Job served as an easily accessible example. Biblical scholar G. Buchanan Gray helps to outline the Book of Job’s enlightening journey as he details, “The book opens with the presentation of a perfect character…. But the Satan disputes the inherent worth of this character.”13 Just as the slave owner materializes righteous authority over the slave, Satan too appears to hold righteous authority over Job. Satan’s authority sparks Job’s quest for wisdom and knowledge as he tries to comprehend God’s approval of Satan’s challenge: “human nature is incapable of pure devotion to God” (37). Satan’s challenge results in the removal of valued possessions and family members from his faithful, unquestioning servant. Job initially accepts his losses and chides his wife who urges Job to curse God as he speaks: “What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2.10). Although Job receives evil and rebukes his wife’s request, in this portion of the story Job reflects the native African stripped of his home and family, shackled and forced into chattel servitude. At this point, nineteenth-century American slave narratives align with Job.

Though enslaved African Americans were forced to undertake servitude, many resisted as seen through slave narratives that detail pursuits of emancipation and justice. Dickson D. Bruce Jr. links Job’s losses to the American slave as he states, “The [slave] narrators vividly evoked the sufferings of family members who lost their loved ones, the anguish of mothers or children, wives or husbands suddenly sent away, knowing they would never see each other again.”14 However, Job does not allow his misery to go unquestioned for long and begins to question God.
as he seeks knowledge and understanding of his developing torment. As Job’s search for
knowledge continues, he develops a longing for death to end his torture. He declares:

Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man
child conceived./ Let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above, neither let
the light shine upon it. (Job 3.3-4)

Job’s relationship with death initiates his interactions with a larger community consisting of his
four friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu. Job’s “friends” endeavor to offer knowledge of
suffering and highlight his lacking reverence of God—actions the American slave community
likely related to, as African American religious leaders attempted to rationalize slavery-induced
suffering. Buchanan Gray stresses that Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu, “infer from Job’s
calamities that he must have been wicked, though his own conscience and God’s unerring
judgment assert that the life on which these calamities descended had been free from blame”
(38). Despite attempts to educate Job of his sins committed against God and God’s justice, Job
realizes God is the sole possessor of any knowledge he craves and he continuously rejects his
friends’ restraining communal advice. Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad conclude their attempts to
provide Job explanations of suffering at the onset of chapter thirty-two: “So these three men
ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes” (Job 32.1). With their
surrender, Job’s former practice of blind faith no longer survives as he commits to his pursuit of
knowledge.

Job’s pursuit of knowledge forces his acceptance of a new understanding of God created
from his experiences. This acceptance forms a barrier between Job and the restricting community
of friends. Job’s new barrier resembles the same barriers formed within slave communities, as
slaves sought meaningful identity and liberation through education. Buchanan Gray explains
Job’s estrangement through persistent questioning and his refusal to return to his former belief
that men only suffer if they sin, as he acknowledges, “Job cannot accept such advice, for in doing so he would be false to his conviction of his integrity” (39). Savory points out that Job is confronted with two choices in the book as he writes:

Either he must admit that his suffering is his own fault and submit as a loyal slave to a God he can neither understand nor accept, or he must maintain the integrity of his feelings and questionings and contend with God in order to vindicate himself...Job is compelled by his self-respect as a man to choose the latter. He must risk the perils of rebellion for the sake of the survival of his integrity. (55)

Job’s decision to seek knowledge and reject his peer community is significant. Job creates his own identity apart from his community as he upholds his integrity through requesting a direct explanation from God. In connecting the Book of Job with nineteenth-century slave narratives, Douglass and Turner also participate in educational journeys and develop distinctive interactions with different communities that dictate the development of their personal freedoms and empowerment.

**Frederick Douglass: Knowledge as a Path to Freedom**

Biblical literacy abounds in Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* as he highlights the use of scripture by slaveowners to maintain power, and, like such biblical literacy, the *Narrative* is a potent example of literacy as a means of gaining control, freedom and civil liberties. Lucinda H. MacKethan points to the importance of Douglass’s *Narrative* as a tool against slavery: “Frederick Douglass’s first autobiography, the 1845 *Narrative*, made the slave narrative form into a weapon of words to establish the right to letters as a basic human and civil right.” While Douglass transformed the slave narrative into a weapon, the understanding of literacy as a basic human and civil right occurred long before Douglass composed his original 1845 *Narrative*. Slave owners were aware that in order to confine the slave population to a sub-human class, their
basic education must be prevented. Douglass provides an example of the southern population’s disapproval of slave education in his Narrative as Hugh Auld chastises his wife Sophia for teaching Douglass his letters:

If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy. (78)

Auld’s restriction of Douglass mirrors Job’s educational relationship with his restrictive community. Job’s restrictive peer community continuously provides unwanted intelligence, and hinders Job’s quest for knowledge regarding God’s allowance of suffering. An example of unwanted intelligence appears early in the book when Eliphaz states:

Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty / For he maketh sore, and bindeth up: he woundeth, and his hands make whole. (Job 5.17-18)

Eliphaz’s obstruction of Job’s search for understanding correlates with Douglass’s experiences with the Aulds and their withholding of literacy. Like Job, Douglass does not accept the limiting community that surrounds him and responds by reaching beyond this community to seek the education he desires.

Due to restricting orders from his master, Douglass resorts to the white children of Baltimore for reading lessons. About Auld’s prohibition of Douglass’s learning MacKethan makes the following observation regarding the Bible and Douglass: “Literacy becomes here a sacred although forbidden fruit through Douglass’s allusion to Christ’s scriptural injunctions to his disciples to ‘become as little children’ and ‘Suffer little children to come unto me’” (61).

This referral to knowledge as the forbidden fruit is reflected in the restriction of knowledge in the Book of Job— unavailable truth forces Job to choose his newly developed understanding of faith
over his former. As previously indicated, the rejection of his former faith allows Job to create a new unrestrictive community outside of his friends. Like Job, Douglass creates new communities for himself as he continues to seek literacy; one such community is his group of young tutors. Douglass writes:

When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. (82-83)

MacKethan explains, “Douglass’s preliminary lessons in the street are presented as a kind of ‘first communion’ experience complete with consecrated bread” (61). Douglass’s act of communion with the young children completes his introductory education that began with Sophia Auld. However, Douglass vividly fulfills Auld’s warnings of unhappiness when newly gained literacy from his young friends triggers thoughts of death as he becomes aware of society and his exclusion from it as an uneducated African American slave.

Hugh Auld’s attempt to restrict education not only generates a deeper desire for learning within Douglass, but it also creates a mindfulness of his lack of involvement in humanity. Royer highlights, “Douglass knows that literacy will do more than physically liberate him—it will also integrate him into a human community” (369). According to Royer, Douglass’s first realization of literacy as currency occurs after the prevention of instruction by Auld. Douglass states the following in response to Auld’s words to Sophia:

These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. (78)
Douglass is barred from entering the human community and takes note of his exclusion by the whites; however, he is not deterred. Once he develops basic literacy, Douglass begins to seek knowledge in the *Columbian Orator*. Like the slave who turns to the Bible for moral guidance and authority, Douglass turns to the *Columbian Orator*. Job, by contrast, turns only to experience for support.

Though Job and Douglass both receive knowledge, they do not mirror each other in their post-education experience. Prior to gaining an understanding of God’s actions toward him, Job longs for death as he laments: “So that my soul chooseth strangling, and death rather than my life” (7.15). Despite his longing for death, Job receives “twice as much as he had before” once God supplies him a vague, unsatisfying explanation of the injustices imposed upon the now humbled, yet honorable Job (42.10). Post-education for Job includes instant joy and wealth. Unlike Job, once literacy is obtained and knowledge is consumed, Douglass immediately longs for death, even if only briefly admitted in his 1845 *Narrative*. Douglass confesses in his *Narrative*: “I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own…. I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed” (84). For Douglass, an understanding of Royer’s “human community” produces hope in the possibility of one day joining that community upon his escape to freedom. More importantly, Douglass’s observation of death reveals his awareness that for educated slaves serenity is found in death or freedom, with no alternatives. As he longs for death as Job did, he also begins to question God of his suffering: “My thoughts would compel utterance; and there, with no audience but the Almighty…. O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave? I will run away. I will not stand it. Get
caught, or get clear, I'll try it” (106). Douglass’s interaction with the thought of death is sparked by education and leads him on a quest for manhood and individuality. Douglass creates his own freedom through accepting the possibility of death when he engages in a physical altercation with the overseer Covey.

Following Douglass’s initial plea to escape Covey’s rule, he decides rebellion is better than torture and suffering. His decision to rebel is significant since he could consequently lose his life. Donald Gibson connects Douglass to the Bible in multiple ways by comparing Douglass’s resistance to authority to Jacob’s fight with the angel of God in Genesis: “Douglass tests authority, as does Jacob, and withstands the test.” Gibson explains that unlike Jacob’s conceivably deadly altercation with God, Douglass’s altercation with Covey holds a deeper victory, one of self-preservation and empowerment. Douglass’s test of authority moves beyond Gibson’s Jacob analogy since the Book of Job also serves as an example of individual liberation in the face of authority. With death as a possibility, Job staunchly tests God in his pursuit of individual freedom from torment. Gibson details Douglass’s willingness to die in order to obtain freedom through confronting his version of Satan personified in the overseer Covey. Douglass supports Gibson as he writes, “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood…. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom” (113). While Douglass and Job react to death differently, each individual achieves fulfillment through his relationship with death and the communities produced from or because of death. For Douglass, his created educational community provides the completion of his education and forces him to wish for death; however, his acknowledgment of death simultaneously allows him to escape the “tomb of slavery” and achieve his own sense of
manhood and freedom as he joins the human community. For Job, the thought of death creates an unwanted community, but it also instills his desire to speak one-on-one with God. In return, Job is rewarded with beautiful children, oxen, camels, and gold; Job is the sole possessor of his integrity and is allowed to reenter a now jaded and dulled mortal community.

*Nat Turner: Prophetic-knowledge and Community*

Nat Turner’s relationship with God also revolves around scriptural literacy and the search for knowledge, and it is through his relationship with God that Turner is driven to action in Southampton County, Virginia. Like Douglass, Turner begins his education at a young age. Thomas R. Gray contradicts Turner in *Confessions* when he claims Turner learned to read from his parents. However, Turner confesses, “I acquired it with the most perfect ease, so much so, I have no recollection whatever of learning the alphabet….” (3). In his *Narrative*, Douglass clearly develops his learning process from start to finish within his text, but Turner’s text contains conflicting statements addressing how his education begins. The *Confessions*’s vagueness is similar to the Book of Job as Kirsten Nielsen explains: “The Book of Job is an account of how through no fault of his own a pious man is struck by misfortune because Satan manages to convince God that it is worth testing Job’s godliness” (283). Nielsen emphasizes Job’s righteousness and innocence that precedes God’s warranted testing. In her emphasis, Nielsen highlights the Book of Job’s incomplete description of the character’s religious piousness and lifestyle with no background. It remains unclear how Job came to possess his original knowledge of God that shapes him as an unquestioning, faithful follower. Though each character possesses lacking back-stories, both Turner and the Book of Job provide detailed development of their new
understanding of faith as the result of communal interactions. Early in his confession to Thomas R. Gray, Turner informs his audience that Christianity surrounds him. Turner states:

…my master, who belonged to the church, and other religious persons who visited the house, and whom I often saw at prayers, noticing the singularity of my manners, I suppose, and my uncommon intelligence for a child, remarked I had too much sense to be raised, and if I was, I would never be of any service to anyone as a slave. (3)

Turner’s master unsurprisingly resembles Douglass’s owner and slaveholding community in his negative reaction to slave education; however, Turner’s master does not restrict his education. For Turner, it is both his slave community and slaveowners who hold the greatest influence over his quest for knowledge and faith.

Turner’s slave community motivates his search for knowledge early in life. Unlike Douglass, Turner’s master does not mistakenly encourage his education. Turner is intellectually independent from childhood as he confesses to Thomas R. Gray:

…to the astonishment of the family, one day, when a book was shown to me to keep me from crying, I began spelling the names of objects…and this learning was constantly improved at all opportunities. (3)

Because his master and family are noted Christians, constant improvement of Turner’s education occurs through direct contact with the Bible and scripture. Turner’s religious education, therefore, dictates his oral autobiography to Thomas R. Gray. Anthony Santoro explains that Turner’s direct use of the Bible in Confessions primarily includes the New Testament texts of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Santoro observes: “Turner used the scriptures to frame and support his narrative, in the process telling his story and the story of his rebellion in a surprisingly candid fashion” (3). While Santoro examines Turner’s direct connections to and direct uses of the New Testament, Turner’s language and odd relationship with God links him with the Old Testament
and the Book of Job. During one portion of his confession, Turner explains to Gray that the
Spirit who spoke to him was, “The Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days” (4).
Turner’s correlations with the Old Testament and the Book of Job are confirmed by his
understanding and knowledge of prophecy. He first recognizes his community-sponsored role as
prophet when he confesses, “And my father and mother strengthened me in this my first
impression, saying in my presence, I was intended for some great purpose…” (3). However,
Turner’s acceptance of prophecy does not fully occur until he is made aware of his position in
society as a slave.

Similar to Douglass’s delayed realization of enslavement, Turner becomes aware of his
bondage once he is forced to digest the aforementioned remarks made by his master and church
officials. In his remarks, Turner’s master criticizes the productivity and capability of educated
slaves. Turner admits to Gray, “Now finding I had arrived to man’s estate, and was a slave, and
these revelations being made known to me, I began to direct my attention to this great object, to
fulfill the purpose for which…I felt assured I was intended” (4). In realizing his status as a slave,
Turner is aware of the human community he is restricted from joining and further embraces the
claims of greatness previously forced upon him by his direct slave community. Not only is he
aware of Royer’s human community, but also he is confident in his role as prophet. Anthony
Kaye states, “Neighborhood was the place where he found confirmation of his childhood sense
that he was intelligent beyond his years.” However, as Turner’s confidence is solidified, he is
required to regulate his own education and relationship with God. Kaye notes that when Turner
forms ownership of his knowledge and his role as prophet, the neighborhood rejects his intellect
and denies him credibility as well as the ability to educate. As was the case with Douglass and
Job, Turner’s initial community also restricts any confirmation of intelligence and forces a
temporary separation of community and self. Turner confesses, “Having soon discovered to be
great, I must appear so, and therefore studiously avoided mixing in society, and wrapped myself
in mystery, devoting my time to fasting and prayer” (4). Like Job, Turner resorts to an
independent relationship with God because his direct community restricts his intellect. As a
result, Turner depends solely upon himself as a basis for biblical and religious proficiency.

Though Turner’s loss of community was through the self-inflicted exclusion from his
slave community, his independent relationship with God mirrors Job’s relationship with God.
Similar to Job, Turner is forced to achieve his greatest level of education through an independent
pursuit of knowledge. In his confession to Gray, Turner details visions experienced during
alienation. Turner illustrates one vision stating, “…and I saw white spirits and black spirits
engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood
flowed in streams” (5). For Turner, the contrasts between dark and light signify the fulfillment of
his accepted prophecy. He uses the vision to foretell his coming insurrection and take control of
his role as prophet. Turner continues to receive prophetic instructions and independently
decipher given knowledge as he states:

...and there were lights in the sky to which the children of darkness gave other names
than what they really were—for they were the lights of the Saviour's hands, stretched
forth from east to west, even as they were extended on the cross on Calvary for the
redemption of sinners (5).

Light in this passage is representative of Turner’s self-education and direct knowledge received
from God—a gift Job never fully receives. Turner recognizes God’s provided knowledge by
telling Gray, “…it was plain to me that the Saviour was about to lay down the yoke he had borne
for the sins of men, and the great day of judgment was at hand” (5). Interestingly, in order for
Turner “to lay down the yoke,” he must rekindle his place within his former peer community.
Turner remains socially withdrawn from his former community for an extended time of approximately six years. Turner’s return to his former neighborhood occurs through the creation of a new, smaller spiritual community. Forming a community of two, Turner returns from alienation with his baptism of Etheldred T. Brantley. Kaye acknowledges, “Only a reprobate white man was suitably impressed by these visions, and Turner took him down into a creek, where the Spirit baptized them” (713). Despite condemnation by individuals within Turner’s neighborhood, the newly formed community of Turner, Etheldred T. Brantley, and the Spirit reignite Turner’s mission to fulfill divine instruction and reenter his former peer community. Combined with his new community, the solar eclipse of February 12, 1831 further stimulated Turner’s confidence as he, “confided his purpose to four slaves” (Kaye 714). Turner’s insurrectionist community reflects Job’s community solely in number, as Job’s community serves to obstruct while Turner’s community serves to assist. Turner’s social return to his former neighborhood includes four men, as Kaye helps to detail: “Hark Travis lived on the same farm as Turner, while Sam Francis, Henry Porter, and Nelson Edwards belonged to owners nearby. These men, all from his neighborhood, were the people ‘in whom I had greatest confidence’” (714). With his renewed communal support from Hark, Sam, Henry, and Nelson, Turner is able to complete God’s task and his self-educated journey as he leads the deadliest American slave insurrection six months after his return.

For Turner, death is a part of the prophecy he is to fulfill. Turner accepts death and carries out the task he believes God set before him. His acceptance of death is illustrated in his fellow insurrectionist’s words on the importance of rebellion. Turner states, “I saluted them on coming up, and asked Will how he came there, he answered, his life was worth no more than others, and his liberty as dear to him. I asked him if he thought to obtain it? He said he would, or
lose his life. This was enough to put him in full confidence” (6). Will’s willingness to die generates confidence from Turner and strengthens the community of rebellious slaves. In communal strength, Turner deems physical action a necessity. Like Douglass, he resolves to fight. Turner makes the choice to resist freely; therefore, he enters the human community slavery denies. Douglass and Turner also enter the human community upon the publication of their texts. With Narrative and Confessions, both slaves commit their personal histories to human history; therefore, each slave creates a sense of authority that neither fully possesses in antebellum America. Santoro helps reveal Turner’s successful formation of identity as he writes, “Turner believed himself not sinless, but cleansed, made perfect so as to be worthy of sacrifice. As Christ was crucified, and in his death gave humanity the option for redemption, so too did Nat Turner—through his hanging—give to his society an example of their wrongdoing and the chance of freedom for his people” (142). Turner’s self-sacrificing and symbolic character gives him a sense of permanent authority. Donald Gibson helps to illuminate Douglass’s creation of identity stating, “Out of his fight with Covey comes an understanding of his life experience, of the relation of humankind to God and nature” (601). According to Gibson, this relation of humankind implies that God is not responsible for Douglass’s enslavement; therefore, it is up to him to free himself and create his own individuality. Job is also forced to free himself of suffering and he does so as he refuses to yield to his former blind and unquestioning faith. Through the Book of Job, one may witness Douglass’s and Turner’s successful development of individuality outside American slavery and their successful formation of control over personal experiences.
Chapter Two
Scriptural Authority: Justifying Violence and Resistance

It is important to consider how both whites and blacks invoke scripture to justify violent and resistant actions in the antebellum South. In “Christian Violence and the Slave Narrative,” SallyAnn H. Ferguson notes: “Most readers of slave narratives quickly recognize the central role that violence played in maintaining the institution of American slavery and fostering the concomitant growth of American economic, political, and military power” (297). As slave narratives clearly showcase the use of scripture to maintain America’s violent slave society and southern economic stability, slave narratives also illustrate African American reaction to the slaveowner’s use of scripture, as well as the slave’s use of scripture to justify personal rebellions against their masters. Ferguson comments, “Rather than emphasize the material results of slavery, as most scholars tend to do, the slave writers focus on its human causes in an attempt to understand why white people chose to victimize them” (298). In a large portion of Narrative, Frederick Douglass focuses on slaveowners who quote biblical texts to justify treatment or punishment. At the close of his Narrative, Douglass speaks against the use of scripture to justify slavery: “I…hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land” (153). In this context, his battle with Covey physically signifies his conquering of scriptural authority when he defends himself against the scripture-quoting overseer. As a result of this corporeal confrontation, Douglass forms a blend of scriptural and physical authority. A mix of scriptural and physical authority is also seen in Nat Turner’s
confessions to Thomas R. Gray. Prior to taking each life within his master’s home, Turner relies heavily on New Testament scripture and the Book of Matthew to justify his calling to revolt in Southampton County, Virginia. In citing the New Testament directly and echoing the Old Testament, Turner develops scriptural authority over his fellow insurrectionists and creates a physical authority over the slaveholders he rebels against.

The Book of Job once more lends itself to Douglass’s and Turner’s nineteenth-century narratives, this time regarding scriptural authority. The prophets of the Old Testament hold great influence over the use of scripture as authoritative power. Throughout the Old Testament, prophetic books such as Jeremiah and Jonah are used to illuminate the suffering experienced by God’s followers. Similarly, the Book of Job also uses scripture to explain unjust suffering and to establish the authority of Job as a believer. This same use of scripture occurs in nineteenth-century antebellum America by white slaveholders; consequently, morality becomes questionable when slaveowners use scripture to establish authority and justify African enslavement. Ferguson helps to explain, “When Christianity sacrifices innocents in order to permit unlimited wrong with unlimited forgiveness to sinners, evildoers—whether slaveowners or the Ku Klux Klan—pay only lip service to this God” (300). Ferguson aligns slaveholders with the obstructive lip-serving followers of God in the Old Testament—as seen in the friends, or counselors, of the Book of Job. Moreover, Ferguson’s comments ignite questions of how Douglass and Turner respond to this lip service. Some answers may lie within the actions of Job and how he responds to the use of scripture to justify his suffering and the establishment of authority attempted by his friends Eliphaz, Zophar, Bildad, and Elihu.
The Book of Job: Job’s rejection of the Hebrew Canon

In the Book of Job, Job’s physical well-being and emotional stability are challenged in his attempt to understand God’s afforded injustice. In the first chapter of the book, Job must reckon with his suffering and chooses to seek God’s knowledge to do so. However, his educational journey is halted multiple times by Elizphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu—the friends who seek to assist him. Job’s friends are essential to this particular discussion as they use religious doctrine to explain Job’s suffering and ward off Job’s developing shift in spirituality. Biblical scholar Paul S. Sanders helps begin this discussion as he states, “Like Jacob at Peniel (Gen. 32:24-32), Job would not wrestle so passionately did he not, paradoxically, expect a blessing. The unknown God must also be the God one has known in the past and trusts in the future”.¹ Sanders’s comment is important as he acknowledges Job’s belief in the pre-injustice, steadfast Hebrew God. Without an understanding of religious doctrine and commands, there is no quest for greater knowledge by Job and there is no urge to comprehend his suffering afforded by God. Job must believe and hope for the God of his pre-suffering world in order to survive in his new world of wisdom. The God of Job’s pre-traumatic environment surfaces as a result of the friends’ poorly established scriptural authority over Job.

The friends’ weak use of scriptural authority pushes Job to develop a sophisticated understanding of God and God’s actions—the biblical notion of wisdom. Sanders illuminates: “A seventh-century ‘Law of Moses’…could exhibit deeply moral insight and at the same time, by attaching ‘blessing’ and ‘curses’ to specific actions, encourage a simplistic legalism” (6). Sanders explains that because of simplistic legalism the prophets recognize individual punishment of sin rather than vast punishment. Connections between the Law of Moses to the Book of Job are found in the friends’ explanations of his suffering as they claim he is punished
for actions committed against God, and his suffering is personal. Because his suffering is individual it is only his request for forgiveness of his unknown sins that will save him. The Law of Moses is also seen in the Book of Jeremiah—a book echoed throughout the Book of Job and is reflected in the friends’ advice. The Book of Jeremiah teaches:

In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.
But every one shall die for his own iniquity: every man that eateth the sour grape, his teeth shall be set on edge. (Jer. 31.29-30)

Here scripture explains that individual suffering is only induced by sin. Job’s friends’—Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad—are able to use the Book of Jeremiah to help underscore their familiarity of individual suffering and establish authority over Job’s quest to know God’s purpose.

The awareness of scripture and the Book of Jeremiah by the Book of Job’s author is shown by Sanders who states, “From his work we can deduce something of the author. He is the most learned writer in the Bible, at ease in more languages than his own, and acquainted with the natural environment, thought, and literary resources of the vast cultural complex from Egypt to Mesopotamia” (12). The Book of Job’s use of Jeremiah is perplexing since Jeremiah is located after the Book of Job in the Old Testament with Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Isaiah in between. However, the Book of Job’s likely use of Jeremiah is illustrated through a parallel passage that exposes Job’s growing angst. In the passage, Job echoes the Book of Jeremiah in his desire for death. Job 3:3 demands: “Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived” and Jeremiah 20:14 proclaims: “Cursed be the day wherein I was born: let not the day wherein my mother bare me be blessed.” An early reference to scripture by Job from the Book of Jeremiah helps to solidify the importance of scripture used by Job’s friends to exert authority.
Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu serve both as a symbol of scriptural authority and as the stimulating element for Job’s formation of biblical wisdom. While the friends are primarily viewed as irritatingly insistent upon Job’s repentance, Job appeals to his friends for help. Biblical scholar Richard Sewall details Job’s initial request of his friends: “He asks of them neither material aid nor deliverance….What he wants is instruction.”

Job’s invitation of the friends’ instruction is found in chapter six: “Teach me, and I will hold my tongue: and cause me to understand wherein I have erred” (Job 6.24). Upon Job’s appeal to the friends, the Law of Moses surfaces and Job is shocked by their reasoning regarding the suffering of man. G. Buchanan Gray uses the Law of Moses to explain the friends’ response when he notes: “The ready answer of his old faith would have been: men are not born to suffer; they only suffer if they sin; but [Job’s] experience has proved this false in his own case, and, as he is now ready to believe, it would also be false in the case of countless others.”

As Job’s friends continue to answer his call for advice, “they had brought with them the same old faith as Job’s, but not the direct personal experience which had proved to Job its inadequacy” (39). Here Job’s friends attempt to call him back to his former faith. However, Job’s newfound experience suffering does not allow his humble acceptance, as he is unaware of his sins against God.

Any acceptance of the friends’ advice during this portion of the book damages Job’s spiritual integrity and hinders any development of wisdom. As Buchanan Gray correctly suggests, “[the friends] are not introduced to represent many existing theories; but the three of them, expounding the same theory, represent that as the unchallenged judgment of ancient and still current opinion” (40). Buchanan Gray’s observation focuses on the failure of developing scriptural authority by the friends. Because Eliphaz, Zophar, Bildad, and eventually, Elihu fail to convince Job of his individual sin according to the Law of Moses, Job is able to acquire his own
sense of understanding and knowledge of human suffering. Sewall indicates, “By chapter 28 Job has achieved an ironic reversal of roles: the Counselors who came to teach him are now being taught by him—and on the subject of Wisdom” (31). Any knowledge Job previously sought directly from God to justify his suffering now comes from within, as he comes to know wisdom and human suffering personally. Sewall notes, “He grows in stature as [the friends] shrink. He knows that he has achieved a vision, through suffering beyond anything they can know” (31). Through his newly gained wisdom, Job recognizes an alternative relationship between God and God’s followers that is different from the relationships described by Old Testament prophets and the Law of Moses.

Both Sanders and Sewall address Job’s wisdom regarding humanity at the close of the book. Sewall writes, “Job has achieved a state of what Aristotle called catharsis. He had challenged the Almighty, made his case, and purged his spirit” (32). Once Job moves past catharsis, he becomes a religious figure that is abject in repentance and self-abhorrence. Job learns to become an individual with his own convictions regarding God’s justice, and understands that the universe is “a realm of infinite complexity and power” (34). Outside his friends’ scriptural authority, Job realizes that God is unjust, but the inherent hope that God will one day recognize him as a faithful servant lingers. Sanders remarks the Book of Job is, “Broadly humane in spirit, [as] it ranges widely or man’s place in nature and society and wrestles with the perplexities no one escapes in the quest for a satisfying existence” (3). As Job reconciles with God, he holds new knowledge: All mankind suffers and there are unexplained “perplexities” dictated by God that are unavoidable.

Job only gains wisdom at the outset of the friends’ use of scripture. Job’s response to the use of scriptural authority by his friends is a self-analysis of his beliefs. Nat Turner and Frederick
Douglass similarly experience this type of self-reflection upon the use of scripture to create authority. However, unlike Job, Douglass’s self-reflection matures to a societal-reflection on the use of Christianity and Turner’s self-reflection solidifies his declared role as prophet. Still, a connection to Job exists in Douglass’s rejection of Southern Christianity, and in Turner’s use of scripture to rationalize resistance.

**Frederick Douglass: rejecting the scriptural authority of Southern Slaveholders**

Beginning at the close of the eighteenth century, the Second Great Awakening inspired manumissions in portions of slaveholding America. Othniel A. Pendleton Jr. observes, “There are many instances where the quickening of a man’s spirit led to the quickening of his conscience and the resulting emancipation of his slaves.” However, individual manumissions did not lead to the overall emancipation of slaves, as Christianity and scripture remained an instrument of suppression used by many white slaveowners throughout the South. Ferguson again enters this discussion as she explains the flexibility of Christianity in a culture of violence; she states: “Christianity, a religion having connections to the imperialistic slaveholding European culture from which the American slave owners descended, serves the goal of psychological control especially well” (298). Frederick Douglass echoes Ferguson’s statement as he forms the same opinion of the Christianity used by violent slaveholders. Douglass writes in the Appendix of *Narrative*: “I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land” (153). His sentiments are further developed by Donald Gibson as he writes: “Though Douglass certainly seems committed to Christian belief during his narrative, there is some reason to believe he felt a more than passing hostility to Christianity.”

5 Gibson exposes
Douglass’s anguish regarding the use of scripture by slaveholding Christians. Douglass’s disapproval leads to his belief that scriptural authority must be taken away from the Christian church of slavery.

The South’s malleable Christianity validated a slaveowners’ cruel treatment of his slaves. Douglass’s anger toward organized Christianity is enhanced by “his own experience and knowledge [which] led him to believe that the more religious a slaveowner, the more mean, vicious, and cruel he is likely to be” (Gibson 89). Viciousness supported by scripture is illustrated in Douglass’s master Thomas Auld’s actions following his conversion to Christianity. Douglass portrays one particular event in *Narrative*:

I have said my master found religious sanction for his cruelty. As an example, I will state one of the many facts going to prove this charge. I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture—“He that knoweth his master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.” (99)

During the lashing of Henny, Auld repeats scripture typically directed to slaves: Luke 12:47, as noted above, and Ephesians 6:5: “Servants, be obedient to them that are *your* masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.” Ferguson helps to explain this authoritative tendency of basing supremacy with scripture as she states: “Christian dogma predisposes some believers, whether despotic slavemasters or glory-bound parish priests, to seek Jesus-like sufferers onto whom they can project their own vices and through whom they can exorcise their own demons, thereby becoming gods themselves” (300). With scriptural justification, such as Luke 12:47, slaveowners were able to transfer their wickedness to the disobedient slave while they assumed the role of God and functioned as the provider of justice.

Extreme violence, such as that shown to Henny, is necessary for owners to complete their transformation from slaveholder to god-like figure. Again Ferguson explains:
It is significant that the beating continues until blood flows freely...since only then does Auld have physical evidence that she has assumed the burden of his sins. Only then does he self-righteously cite the Bible and conveniently identify his own will with regard to the African American slave woman as that of the Christian God. (301)

Unfortunately, Auld’s “beating his way to salvation” and the scriptural justification of his violent actions toward Henny are not the only incidents of scripture used to authorize violence in Douglass’s Narrative. Due to an urban upbringing and his educational development, Douglass notes his inability to simply exist as a slave: “It has almost ruined me for every good purpose, and fitted me for every thing which was bad” (99). Douglass’s failure to remain content within slavery leads to more significant examples of scriptural violence as Auld attempts to correct the effects of Douglass’s education. His corrective solution results in Douglass’s challenging scriptural authority and his development of wisdom and manhood.

On January 1, 1833, Thomas Auld sends Douglass to the brutal slave-breaker Edward Covey to reverse the effects of education. Douglass immediately notes Covey’s Christianity in his Narrative, along with the violence that stems from his religion. Upon entering Covey’s custody, Douglass announces:

Added to the natural good qualities of Mr. Covey, he was a professor of religion—a pious soul—a member and a class-leader in the Methodist church.... He would make a short prayer in the morning, and a long prayer at night; and strange as it may seem, few men would at times appear more devotional than he...Such was his disposition that he sometimes deceived himself into the solemn belief, that he was a sincere worshipper of the most high God. (100-104)

After marking Covey a pious soul for his audience, Douglass discusses severe beatings received from Covey before refocusing on the overseer’s self-serving Christianity. Covey and Auld mirror each other in their belief that violence is a valid response to disobedience or inability. Covey’s violent principles are shown in his repeated whippings of Douglass for refusing to succumb to orders. Because Douglass paints Covey’s character as a Christian, with each violent incident the
cruel overseer becomes a symbol of insincere Southern Christianity. At this point in Narrative, Covey’s symbolic character functions much like Job’s friends, since Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and Elihu are symbolic of an inadequate Mosaic Law. Douglass’s acknowledgement of Covey’s insincerity leads to his Job-like self-reflections in Narrative. His reflective moment concentrates on the suffering of slavery and generates a new understanding of Christianity and God’s relationship to humanity.

During his reflective moment on a typical Sabbath morning, Douglass echoes Job’s hopelessness as he ponders his “wretched condition.” Douglass writes, “At times, I would rise up, a flash of energetic freedom would dart through my soul, accompanied with a faint beam of hope, that flickered for a moment, and then vanished” (106). As Job and Douglass search for justification of their conditions, both men demand responses from God. For Douglass, this occurs in his challenging of God as he states, “O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave?” (107) In his demands, Douglass becomes aware that the answers lie within his experiences. Where Job’s friends lack wisdom and God’s response lacks substance, it is through his experience that Job understands bad things happen to good people. In other words, Job rejects the Law of Moses. In his questioning of God, Douglass comes to the same realization and comments: “It may be my misery in slavery will only increase my happiness when I get free. There is a better day coming” (107). Douglass also rejects the Law of Moses and understands that neither man nor God is solely responsible for suffering and injustice. With his new understanding of God, Douglass knows he must deliver himself from slavery, just as Job’s persistence delivered him from suffering. In reshaping his knowledge of God and his physical manifestation of rejecting white Southern Christianity, Douglass begins his first step toward freedom.
Douglass’s rejection of slave-promoting Christianity is exemplified in his physical altercation with Covey. Following his ineffective appeal to Auld regarding the slave-breaker’s treatment, Douglass is physically confronted by Covey. However, Douglass does not allow the scripture-wielding overseer to mistreat him any longer. Douglass writes: “Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don’t know—I resolved to fight” (112). His denial of mistreatment is significant. Gibson explains, “The literal conflict between them, in Douglass’s eyes, is a microcosmic conflict between all true religions and false ones” (89). Through his fight with Covey, Douglass metaphorically strips the overseer of scriptural authority. Covey no longer holds scriptural authority over the slave, and Douglass is free to apply his new understanding of God and humanity: His thirst for freedom is reignited. Douglass states, “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me my sense of my own manhood” (113). Beyond his sense of manhood, Douglass’s new understanding of God and Christianity is also strengthened. Like Job, Douglass’s rejection of his former understanding of God causes the development of wisdom. Further echoing Job, Douglass’s beliefs and wisdom are shaped by experience. Without developing a personal theology, Douglass cannot successfully highlight in his Appendix the absence of “proper Christianity” within the “slaveholding religion” of America (Narrative 153). When a slave is able achieve a personal understanding of God that is free of violence as Douglass does, they are able to “embrace a naturalistic, universal Providence unlimited by the boundaries of Western culture” (Ferguson 308). Conversely, the same void of violence allows select slaves to use their own version of spiritual authority to justify their own use of violence.
An example is seen in Nat Turner’s use of scriptural authority to justify his insurrection and accept his role as prophet.

**Nat Turner: scriptural authorized to revolt**

As was the case with Douglass, the Second Great Awakening at the birth of the nineteenth century is fundamental in understanding Nat Turner’s narrative. Turner Scholar Laura Thiemann Scales states, “While the transformations of the first Great Awakening were primarily about who…could receive and transmit the divine word, the prophets of the Second Great Awakening focused on the authority to narrate God’s word, to author scripture—to intermingle one’s own human authority with divine language.” The use of human authority supported by divine language, or the use of scripture, is critical to the success of Nat Turner and his justification of insurrection. Scales explains that for Turner, “a radical claim to scriptural authority, the power to author or narrate scripture,” is the core of his narrative and the difficult step toward, “interpretation, translation, and transcription that transform divine language into its human form” (207). In order for Turner to “transform divine language into its human form,” he must reject the religious structure maintained in early nineteenth-century America. Like Job and Douglass, Turner must develop his own understanding of God outside established institutions in order to fulfill his self-understood destiny of prophecy. However, where Douglass and Job dismiss the use of biblical and scriptural authority as a means of justification through God, Turner does not. Biblical scholar Randolph Scully states, “Turner crafted his prophetic leadership by adopting evangelical rhetoric and styles of authority, while rejecting the institutional framework of the church community and the white paternal oversight that framework entailed.” Like the slaveowner, Turner embraces scriptural authority as a tool of
legitimacy; however, he does so outside Southern Christianity by developing a personal understanding of scripture.

Through scriptural authority, Turner adopts the tactics of slaveowners to justify violence in his deadly insurrection. Anthony Santoro details Turner’s appropriation of authority as he notes: “He uses the Bible both to stake his spiritual authority to lead such a rebellion and to claim temporal leadership over the revolt, both ideologically and operationally.” Turner paraphrases scripture from the New Testament, specifically Matthew 20:16, to authorize his revolt when he confesses to Thomas R. Gray:

I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said, the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had lain down the yoke he had born for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last, and the last should be first. (5)

While Turner uses the New Testament to justify the insurrection, his prophetic and physical methods stem from the Old Testament tradition of the holy war. Santoro explains that Old Testament prophecy was used as a weapon to diminish the morale of enemies, and made victory easier. Prophecy is also paired with the word “terror” repeatedly in the Old Testament. According to Santoro, “terror” appears in the Old Testament twenty-eight times within the King James Bible and “is the means by which the enemies of God are brought to conversion” (124). The Old Testament pairing of prophecy and terror also materializes in Confessions as Turner shifts from constructing his role as prophet to detailing his murderous night. Turner confesses:

I took my station in the rear, and as it ’twas my object to carry terror and devastation wherever we went, I placed fifteen or twenty of the best armed and most to be relied on, in front, who generally approached the houses as fast as their horses could run; this was for two purposes, to prevent their escape and strike terror to the inhabitants. (8)

Turner turns to the Old Testament as a guide to combine prophecy and terror in his mission to lead and execute his 1831 revolt. Although, Turner’s use of the Old Testament is not as easily
recognizable as his use of the New Testament, it is still a form of scriptural authority. Furthermore, Turner’s use of the Old Testament moves beyond the tradition of holy war.

Connections between the Book of Job and \textit{Confessions} surface by considering the rhetorical curtain created by Turner’s scriptural authorization of resistance when he exercises the same strategy as Job’s friends. Turner uses the authority of the Old Testament much like Job’s friends’ use the Law of Moses. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar develop scriptural authority via unstated scriptural teachings—the same approach repeated in \textit{Confessions}. The use of the New Testament in Turner’s \textit{Confessions} is undeniably clear. Santoro highlights, “The Old Testament allusions are left unmarked, not placed into questions, as are the renderings of Turner’s communication from the Spirit and his New Testament citations” (125). An example of Turner’s unmarked reference to the Old Testament with a quoted New Testament reference comes in consecutive statements to Gray:

As I was praying one day at my plough, the Spirit spoke to me, saying: ‘Seek ye the kingdom of heaven and all things shall be added unto you.’
Question.—What do you mean by the Spirit?
Answer.—The Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days. (4)

As seen here, and throughout \textit{Confessions}, Turner abstains from directly citing Old Testament scripture. In the first line of the provided excerpt, Turner directly quotes Matthew 6:33. However, in his second response to Gray, Turner indirectly references the Old Testament and its prophets. Santoro explains, “Turner is showcasing the supremacy of the Bible, of heavenly aims over earthly desires and sufferings” (132). If Turner directly quotes Old Testament prophets, or a book like Job, in his discussion of suffering with his personal sufferings as a slave, he loses his authority of prophecy and narrows his audience. Santoro states, “he would have been understood only as a slave so motivated by hatred, so inflamed by wrongs suffered, that he struck back indiscriminately” (132). Turner does not restrict his audience through an avoidance of directly
discussing suffering, which is essential for his prophetic self-characterization. As Scales asserts, “Prophecy is necessarily bound up with narration; by definition, a prophet must pronounce his or her message to a wider audience” (206). Turner’s wider audience here is not the community in which he intends to recruit for his rebellion, but the audience of Thomas R. Gray. Turner aims to scripturally validate his inspired revolt for the readers of Confessions.

For Turner, prophecy serves a fundamental purpose from birth, and functions as a realm outside society. He establishes his own sense of authority, as prophecy becomes the motivating element of his revolution. Scales helps to explain stating: “Nat Turner’s…terrible testaments against the institution of slavery, provide obvious examples of how divine authority might, at least momentarily, supersede both the authority of the law and the bounds of accepted moral code” (210). Turner uses his community’s early visionary ideas of prophecy to encourage his supporters to commit murder. While Turner’s scripturally supported acts are horrendous, he does succeed in obtaining separation from slavery and his slave identity. Turner generates freedom in prophecy: “Prophetic personhood provides an alternative to liberal individuality and interrogates the very value of individuality” (221). Because prophecy allows Turner to function outside reality, Turner freely commits acts against slaveowners and functions, if only briefly, outside societal restrictions.

Existing outside of slavery for the early nineteenth-century African American slave is arduous, yet possible. M. Cooper Harriss highlights the truth of this assertion as he observes, “Nat casts himself as the historical culmination of biblical prophecy, and from this we may deduce that the distinctive feature of African-American ‘self-understanding’ and ‘self-affirmation,’ is the revolt against historically sanctioned justifications of American slavery.”

Though Harriss speaks exclusively of Turner, the same applies to Douglass. According to
Harriss, the establishment of identity outside of the slave institution is the true revolt. Turner’s identity as a prophet results in physical violence against whites and Douglass’s identity as a believer in God beyond Southern Christianity results in physical violence against the overseer Covey. Both authors’ interactions with scriptural authority result in the establishment of physical power over their current enslavement and constraining realities. Douglass’s and Turner’s narratives are developed and committed to history because of their successful creation of physical authority. Therefore, authorial control concerning their individual experiences is also generated in the pages of their narratives.
Chapter Three
Control and Authenticity: Abolitionist testimony and its effects on Frederick Douglass’s and Nat Turner’s Slave Narratives

The Book of Job’s author, Frederick Douglass, and Nat Turner all have a problem with authority. Of these texts, each one has been confronted with questions of authorial control and authenticity. For example, the Book of Job appears to have an original author, but a new author, “the poet,” takes control of Job’s character upon entering chapter three. The authenticity of Job’s character becomes clearer when biblical scholar David Robertson explains that the Persian poet, “lifted out part of its middle (the dialogues between Job and the friends) and inserted his own version of their conversation…and a reply to Job from God”.1 With the poet’s insertion, Job’s impatient character is made plausible and becomes representative of everyman. In other words, Job’s character develops authenticity and believability. Similar instances of promoting authenticity occur within relationships between a slave narrator and an abolitionist. However, in the nineteenth century, abolitionists also restricted slave writers, such as Douglass, from obtaining full control and establishing complete authenticity within their personal histories through prefaces and introductions at the start of each narrative. Moreover, restriction did not rest with abolitionists, as Nat Turner orally provided his confession Thomas R. Gray, a young lawyer who attempted to control white hysteria following Turner’s deadly insurrection. Due to textual uncertainty, how does an audience decipher who controls a text? Character or poet, abolitionist or narrator, confessor or lawyer? Abolitionist testimony and the typical slave-narrative outline help to answer this question for the Book of Job, Frederick Douglass, and Nat
Turner. The slave narrative helps to emphasize authenticity within the Book of Job, and the Book of Job helps to reveal how testimony hinders and/or helps Douglass and Turner in their quests to achieve authority and authenticity within their autobiographical texts.

The importance of the King James Bible in nineteenth-century American literary culture is evident through the style and language used by slave narrators like Douglass and Turner. Robert Alter explains that appreciation for language was not restricted to high culture and that, “thorough familiarity in this period with the strong and eloquent language of the King James Bible provided an important resource, beyond the vital inventiveness of spoken American English, that nourished the general sense of style”.² As a general style resource, narrators and authors who used the King James Bible would have also been influenced by its content. Ilana Pardes explains that nineteenth-century literature highlights, “the anomalies and oddities of the Hebrew canon, countertraditions such as Job, Jonah, and Ecclesiastes that challenge predominant presuppositions of biblical belief” (2).³ Scholars such as Anthony Santoro have touched on the relationship between the Book of Jonah and the Book of Ecclesiastes to slave literature, but the Book of Job is equally important.⁴ The Book of Job’s counter-traditions presented during the poetic portions of the book provide divergence from typical Hebrew beliefs. Job’s rejection of the Law of Moses forms a connection to nineteenth-century slave narratives. This connection allowed the Book of Job to be a flexible and pertinent book available to authors of nineteenth-century slave narratives, and serve as a platform for discovering control and authenticity.

Slave narrators in the nineteenth century established authority through the use of biblical scripture and through abolitionist testimony provided by educated white males. White abolitionists verified the slaves’ stories with restrictive prefaces to provide the highest probability of publishing success. James Olney lays out the typical pattern of a slave narrative
published in the nineteenth century. The narrating slave or ex-slave begins to form believability through an engraved portrait, a title page including “Written by Himself” statement, a testimonial of an abolitionist, and a poetic epigraph. It is through the abolitionist preface that the slave and his text are revealed to the audience. Slave narratives typically provide their experiences in a twelve-step fashion following the abolitionist preface. Olney provides this twelve-step outline:

1. First sentence: “I was born…” specifying place, but not date of birth
2. A sketchy/shaky account of parenthood: white fathers, etc.
3. Description of cruel master
4. Account of strong slave who refuses to be whipped
5. Record of barriers raised against slave literacy
6. Description of “Christian” slaveholder
7. Description of the amount and kinds of food and clothing, work, pattern of day/year
8. Account of slave auction, families separated, mothers and children clinging
9. Description of patrols, failed attempts to escape
10. Description of successful attempt to escape
11. Taking on a new last name
12. Reflections on slavery

With the preface and Olney’s outline, the slave’s voice is filtered through a white sieve, meaning that authorial control and authenticity become problematic. As a result, questions arise over which aspects of the black writer’s experiences were cut, altered, or enhanced in order to please white audiences.

To answer questions of authorial intent and control within Douglass’s and Turner’s texts specifically, before considering the actual narrative one must consider how each narrator reacts to abolitionist testimony provided on behalf of the slave. Therefore, Olney’s outline of the slave narrative is significant, because if the slave strays from Olney’s twelve-step frame then the slave is attempting to break any restriction placed within the testimonial preface or introduction. Olney’s outline for the slave narrative is an appropriate guideline for analyzing Douglass and Turner as each of their narratives contain special outliers within their texts that help secure a
form of authority—Douglass smoothly invokes the literate self when narrating the illiterate self, and Turner’s confession seemingly commandeers Thomas R. Gray’s attempt to suppress the insurrection’s character and voice. The development of authority and authenticity within each text is essential to its historical and literal existence beyond the writer, confessor, ex-slave, insurrectionist, and abolitionist.

For the purposes of this chapter, Olney is related to the Book of Job because Olney’s map of the typical slave narrative helps to demystify the biblical text. Pardes notes the following on nineteenth-century biblical scholarship:

In a forceful demystification of the origin of Scripture, biblical scholarship shattered the traditional notion of the Bible as the Word of God, a unified text of divine inspiration, and suggested that it be treated as a composite work, a product of human endeavor, whose intricate history of composition may be examined like that of any other ancient text. (5)

Like Olney, who points to the slave narrative as a composite work of many, so does the biblical scholar in the early nineteenth century. As every modern biblical scholar makes clear, one must consider the biblical text of Job not simply the work of one, but a composite work of many. The same concept applies to the slave narrative. It is important to understand the composite work of slave narratives when considering the authorial control of the slave. Through applying Olney’s twelve qualifications to the Book of Job, authenticity emerges, despite the presence of an unknown author. With direct parallels formed between the Book of Job and Olney’s slave narrative checklist, the Book of Job provides a sufficient lens to consider Douglass’s and Turner’s formation of authority and authenticity.
The Book of Job: a slave’s narrative

Exegesis allows the uncovering of insightful messages within the Book of Job—an understanding of the Book of Job that is relatable to modern literature, as well as the nineteenth-century slave narrative. Pardes writes: “The primary objective of many exegetical traditions from antiquity on has been to draw out of Scripture its presumably deeper and less accessible latent meaning” (11). Olney’s presentation of the slave narrative is essential in uncovering Job’s deeper and less accessible meaning. Before delving into the twelve-item checklist, it is important to note the Book of Job does not align point for point with the nineteenth-century slave narrative. For example, the original author’s introduction in the Book of Job does not serve as abolitionist-like testimony. Instead, the author’s commentary on Job’s mythic character in chapters one and two is equivalent to the racist conventional assumptions of slavery during the nineteenth century. However, the poet’s symbolic everyman that enters in chapter three can, and does, serve as Job’s authentic slave narrative. While chapters one and two do not exactly function as abolitionist testimony, they do help to establish Job’s initial character and somewhat align with Olney’s introductory pattern. There is no title page with “Written by Himself,” but there are relatable examples of the engraved portrait and the poetic epigraph. These examples appear in the first two chapters, or as David Robertson deems, the folktale portion of the Book of Job.

As the unknown author of the Book of Job begins his tale, Job’s character is described as pious and devoted Hebrew. While the reader never comes to know Job’s physical features that an actual engraved portrait provides, the book’s author does create a literal illustration:

There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil. / And there was born unto him seven sons and three daughters. / His substance also was seven thousand sheep, and three thousand camels, and five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she asses, and a very great household; so that this man was the greatest of all the men of the east. (Job 1.1-3)
This early description is broad and lacking in aspects such as eye color, hair, physique, or age; still, it is possible to envision a matured and wise Job facing his audience just as the hardened slave narrator with knowing eyes and a stern expression prepares readers to experience the injustices of slavery. The addition of his wealth in verse three creates the appearance of dedication, hard work, and capability—attributes that are often captured within a man’s portrait. Following the three-verse portrait of Job in chapter one, the reader is exposed to the unknown writer’s conventional and pious character of Job.

The opening chapter is the product of an unknown writer certifying the character’s worthiness before God willingly challenges Job’s faith. As the story progresses the author provides verification with intermittent proclamations such as: “In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly” (1.22). The initial author’s testimonial within the Book of Job continues into chapter two as Satan spares Job’s wife and Job denies his wife’s wishes to curse God. In the close of chapter two, Job’s character provides canonical Hebrew verse paired with the original author’s last injection conventional wisdom:

What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips. (2.10)

This last verification by the author occurs prior to a shift from folktale/fairytale to real world applicable experiences by Job in chapters three through thirty-seven. This shift forced by the Persian poet develops a sense of authenticity for Job’s character. Job exists solely within an ancient biblical text and can be considered nothing more than a character; however, a combination of the unknown original author’s folktale and the poet’s interjection creates authenticity for Job as he questions God’s allowed torment. The poet’s interjection held historical immediacy as it caused Job’s character to shift from an ancient symbol of conventional wisdom to a contemporary symbol of everyman. The Book of Job’s poet provides Job’s
character the opportunity to authenticate his experiences of injustice and suffering. Similarly, the timely testimonials of white abolitionists made ex-slaves human and provided the slim possibility for narrators to author and control their personal experiences. Therefore, when Job’s character is humanized and is compared to Olney’s outline, he is relatable to the slave narrator.

Relatability must be present for Job’s character to form authenticity. Robertson helps to highlight the Book of Job’s relatability in its transition from folktale to reality at the beginning of chapter three. Robertson points to the audience’s desire for Job to bless God and for God to win the wager; however, when Job curses the day of his birth, and therefore God, in chapter three, the reader’s identification with Job’s character is enhanced. Robertson states that in shifting from a fairytale-like world to the real world, “Job so gives voice to our own fears, doubts, and frustrations that we cannot help but sympathize with him” (450). The audience’s unacknowledged fears, doubts and frustrations allow a partnership to form between ancient biblical text and modern reader. Exegesis via Olney’s outline, the twelve-step narrative, forms a solid connection between Job’s character and the nineteenth-century slave narrative or narrator. The Book of Job comes to its audience as a hybrid of Olney’s outline. Steps one, two, and three all appear in the opening chapter of the book, before the reality of Job’s situation is developed. To start, step one: “I was born…” specifying place but not date,” is given in the first verse of the Book of Job: “There was a man in the land of Uz…” (1:1). Step two: “a shaky account of parenthood,” is an adaptive reversal from the slave narrative. Instead of detailing Job’s parents, the author presents Job as the worried parent in light of his children’s persistent drinking and eating. Finally, step three: “description of cruel master,” is God’s allowance of Satan to unfairly punish Job in Satan’s attempt to disprove Job’s loyalty to God. The first three steps come quickly
and directly, while steps four through twelve develop slowly, helping to establish Job’s character as the relatable human.

Olney’s steps four through twelve consist of the slave who refuses to be whipped, a record of barriers raised against slave literacy, a description of “Christian” slaveholder, a description of food and clothing (found in Job 1:20), an account of slave auction or separation of families, a description of failed attempts to escape, a description of successful escape, a taking of a new last name, and lastly, a reflection on slavery. For the purposes of this comparison, it is important to note that step eight does not align chronologically. Step eight consists of: “an account of families separated due to slavery.” This comes out of order for the Book of Job as it corresponds with chapter one’s loss of possessions and children. It is also important to note that step twelve is not applicable to the Book of Job, as the author does not provide Job’s character the opportunity to reflect on his sufferings following the restoration of his wealth by God. However, beginning with step four: “the slave who refuses to be whipped,” there are many connections to be established between the Book of Job and Olney’s slave narrative outline. Like the strong slave who is too proud to succumb to wrongful beatings from slaveholders, Job refuses to yield without an explanation of the torture forced upon him by Satan and approved by God. As for the records of barriers against literacy and the description of the “Christian” slaveholder, connections develop with the existence of Job’s comforters and their traditional Hebrew beliefs.

Job’s comforters appear in books four through thirty-seven: Eliphaz in four, five, fifteen, and twenty-two; Bildad in eight, eighteen, twenty-five and twenty-six; Zophar in eleven and twenty; and lastly, Elihu in thirty-two through thirty-seven, respectively. Each comforter repeats the Law of Moses, stating that Job only suffers because he has somehow sinned and he must
repent. Their faithfulness to the Hebrew canon regarding sin and suffering is equivalent to the slaveholder’s commitment to Old Testament scripture regarding slavery. As an Old Testament text, the Book of Job does not contain the “Christian” slaveholder; but, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu are equivalent to the scripture-wielding slave owners of the South. The second half of Olney’s list that addresses descriptions of failed and successful attempts at escape solidify Job’s relation to the slave narrator. The Book of Job’s unknown author provides failed attempts of escaping injustice throughout the book until chapter thirty-eight. Between chapter three and thirty-seven, Job’s quest for knowledge and understanding stands as a symbol of the freedom-seeking slave. Job repeatedly attempts to explain his innocence to his friends, while he again and again requests an explanation directly from God to escape his suffering. Job fails continually until chapter thirty-eight, or the whirlwind poem, and God messily supplies an explanation to Job’s character. God’s haphazard justification for suffering leads to Job’s successful escape. While his return to justice is far from judiciously satisfying, Job’s suffering ends and his belongings are replenished. Job’s return to personhood is the Olney counterpart to step eleven: taking on a new last name. With a name change, the slave narrator detaches himself from misery and begins a new life free from the confines of slavery. With the addition of new riches and children, Job begins a new and prosperous life outside of God’s unjust wrath.

Through Olney, the nineteenth-century reader and the modern reader can apply the Book of Job to any culture of inequality and suffering. Wayne C. Booth states: “No story will ever work as a story unless the flesh-and-blood listener will join an authorial audience that shares with the implied author at least a fair number of basic assumptions about life and its realities.” The character of Job is just that, a character. However, it is his character that establishes gains authority within the text; therefore, Job’s character allows Olney’s outline to function within the
ancient biblical text. Olney’s outline forces the Book of Job’s basic assumptions of life and its realities to rise to the forefront of the text as it addresses identity-formation motivated by suffering and injustice. No matter who authored the Book of Job, Job’s character must receive some sort of testimonial by the unknown writer in order to establish precedent and become the implied author who holds his own assumptions about life and reality. When a reader is able to share in a character’s or narrator’s reality, the audience is also able to recognize authority over detailed experiences. The Book of Job’s use of testimony and its accessibility, by way of Olney’s twelve-step narration, is important because it helps to link Douglass’s and Turner’s efforts to control their realities. The Book of Job acknowledges the usefulness of testimony in relation to narrative, and magnifies testimony’s damaging effects when compared to Douglass and Turner. For these two nineteenth-century slaves, it is their reaction to testimony that gains the control and authority they seek.

**Douglass: abolitionist testimonials and the formation of authority through revision**

Abolitionists’ testimonies preceding slave narratives are both helpful and hurtful for the slave attempting to establish control over his or her experiences. Clearly, writers and narrators had to be aware of their audience if they were to convey their personal experiences to the masses. White abolitionists, like William Lloyd Garrison, helped to break barriers between black writers and multi-racial audiences. On the surface, Garrison creates a manageable bridge between white readers and Douglass’s slave account. If Douglass had a predecessor like himself, then he would not have depended on Garrison to publish his *Narrative*. For issues of approachability, Garrison’s initial preface is necessary. And, like the Book of Job’s author whose testimony serves to highlight his characters’ wrongful treatment, Garrison’s testimony stresses the
injustices of slavery. However, Garrisonian testimony forces the “other” upon the slave writer and narrator. When recounting the moment he met the ex-slave, Garrison quickly notes Douglass’s otherness:

There stood one, in physical proportion and stature commanding and exact—in intellect richly endowed—in natural eloquence a prodigy—in soul manifestly “created but a little lower than the angels”—yet a slave, ay, a fugitive slave,—trembling for his safety, hardly daring to believe that on the American soil, a single white person could be found who would befriend him at all hazards, for the love of God and humanity! (34)

In forcing the “other” upon Douglass, Garrison does not allow him to truly achieve authority over his experiences. Mirroring Olney’s twelve-step frame, Garrison never hands Douglass the reigns to his personal story, but strictly outlines Douglass’s text for the reader prior to encountering the actual narrative.

Garrison’s restriction of Douglass’s Narrative is explained by Henry A. Giroux’s comments on authority: “What meanings are considered the most important, what experiences are deemed the most legitimate, and what forms of writing and reading matter are largely determined by those groups who control the economic and cultural apparatuses of a given society.”8 In the nineteenth century, whites undeniably dominate society, which included the production of texts like Douglass’s. Giroux’s statement was a reality for the narrators who committed their stories to history following the lead of white abolitionists. This reality was noticed by early reviewers of Douglass’s text such as Lynn Pioneer, who published a review in The Liberator. Pioneer writes the following of Narrative: “The picture it presents of slavery is too horrible to look upon, and yet it is but a faint picture of what to millions is a vivid life. It is evidently drawn with a nice eye, and the coloring is chaste and subdued, rather than extravagant or overwrought.”9 Pioneer understands Giroux’s reality of white dominance over slave literature soon after Narrative’s publication, and so does Douglass. In response to white restriction, he
slightly strays from Olney’s outline in *Narrative* and through his 1855 revision—*My Bondage and My Freedom*. Douglass’s determination to control his personal narrative within the white abolitionist movement is exposed by Giroux’s explanation of subordinate writers within the dominate society: “At the same time, voices forged in opposition and struggle provide the crucial conditions by which subordinate individuals and groups reclaim their own memories, stories, and histories as part of an ongoing attempt to challenge those power structures that attempt to silence them” (71). With James McCune Smith’s introduction to *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Garrisonian restraint over Douglass’s text weakens as McCune Smith helps to reclaim Douglass’s memories, stories, and history. In his introduction, McCune Smith does not restrict Douglass to Olney’s twelve-step outline. McCune Smith helps to portray Douglass as an individual and American worth learning from and honoring. McCune Smith writes: “WHEN a man raises himself from the lowest condition in society to the highest, mankind pay him the tribute of their admiration; when he accomplishes this elevation by native energy, guided by prudence and wisdom, their admiration is increased…. To such a man, dear reader, it is my privilege to introduce you” (xvii). McCune Smith allows Douglass to stand as the authority over the text to come; therefore, Smith helps to explain Douglass’s revision ten years following *Narrative*. *My Bondage and My Freedom* is Douglass’s attempt to control and freely author his reality. A thorough consideration of each abolitionist testimonial helps to illustrate the effects of testimony and its influence over authorial control.

William Lloyd Garrison’s American Anti-Slavery Society connected with Douglass at just the right moment, each party benefiting from the other in the push to end slavery. At the onset, Douglass needed Garrison on a greater scale in his attempt to become an individual rather than a slave. Houston Baker notes, “Instead of the ebullient sense of a new land offering limitless
opportunities, the slave, staring into the heart of whiteness around him, must have felt as though
he had been flung into existence without a human purpose.”

Garris
don’s push to create
Douglass’s narrative supplied him the opportunity to become a man of purpose. The educated
slave cannot remain in slavery, and the educated ex-slave cannot remain voiceless and without
purpose. As an educated slave, Douglass aligns with the Book of Job as the book forces Job’s
character to reconsider his existence because of his new understanding of God. Douglass
develops a new awareness of his existence and purpose through his multiple revisions of his
autobiography. *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*
(1881) allow Douglass to develop his identity outside of slavery as a free man.

Whereas Garrison is fundamental in igniting Douglass’s reflection of himself and his
realized purpose as a free man, Douglass is also important in Garrison’s attempt to paint a true
picture of the “suffering slave.” Garrison creates Douglass as a character that is approachable
and one that audiences appreciate as the unjust sufferer. As seen in *Narrative’s* original preface,
Garrison achieves his preferred image of Douglass, the slave, with passages such as the
following:

> Capable of high attainments as an intellectual and moral being--needing nothing but a
comparatively small amount of cultivation to make him an ornament to society and a
blessing to his race--by the law of the land, by the voice of the people, by the terms of the
slave code, he was only a piece of property, a beast of burden, a chattel personal,
nevertheless! (34)

In this passage, Garrison agonizes over the undeserved torment slavery causes an “intellectual.”
He is dramatic and calculated. Where he credits Douglass with abilities, he also notes his
incompleteness as a result of being the former property of another human.

Though both men benefit from their relationship initially, Garrison’s presence and
validation of Douglass ultimately limits Douglass’s full development as an author and as an
authority of his former self. Olney argues that Douglass’s relationship with Garrison did not affect his original narrative. However, one cannot expect this to be wholly true when Garrison strictly outlines Douglass’s text according to abolitionist expectations. Olney himself confesses:

When the abolitionists invited an ex-slave to tell his story of experience in slavery to an anti-slavery convention, and when they subsequently sponsored the appearance of that story in print, they had certain clear expectations, well understood by themselves and well understood by the ex-slave too, about the proper content to be observed, the proper theme to be developed, and the proper form to be followed. (Olney 159)

These very abolitionist expectations are detailed in Garrison’s opening preface for Narrative when Garrison pins Douglass to the slave narrative checklist that Olney defined.

Olney’s outline—consisting of: the place of birth; the cruel master; a refusal to be whipped; noted barriers to literacy; a description of the “Christian” slaveholder; accounts of attempted escape, and reflections on slaver—is framed in the following excerpt from Garrison’s preface:

The experience of FREDERICK DOUGLASS, as a slave, was not a peculiar one; his lot was not especially a hard one; his case may be regarded as a very fair specimen of the treatment of slaves in Maryland….Yet how deplorable was his situation! what terrible chastisements were inflicted upon his person! what still more shocking outrages were perpetrated upon his mind! with all his noble powers and sublime aspirations, how like a brute was he treated, even by those professing to have the same mind in them that was in Christ Jesus!...what longings after freedom took possession of his breast, and how his misery augmented, in proportion as he grew reflective and intelligent,—thus demonstrating that a happy slave is an extinct man! how he thought, reasoned, felt, under the lash of the driver, with the chains upon his limbs! what perils he encountered in his endeavors to escape from his horrible doom! (38)

Garrison’s shift from helpful testimony, such as that found in the Book of Job, to an Olney-like code of slave narratives completely prohibits Douglass’s development beyond the wishes of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Garrison withholds granting Douglass the characteristics of an intellect, and simply renders him an intelligent ex-slave. In limiting Douglass’s image, Garrison magnifies Douglass’s “otherness,” and he continues to develop Douglass’s “otherness” in
affirming the fortitude of African Americans. Garrison states that no other race could have “endured the privations, sufferings and horrors of slavery, without having become more degraded in the scale of humanity than the slaves of African descent” (37). By branding Douglass, Garrison’s testimony imprisons him within the “other” category and partially withholds authority over Douglass’s personal experiences in his *Narrative*.

However, Garrison’s limitations on Douglass’s authority does not last as James McCune Smith provides the introduction to Douglass’s 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom*. In his introduction, McCune Smith presents the keys to authority through complementary testimony on behalf of the narrator. John Stauffer tells that McCune Smith joined the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1837. At this date, the society “was committed to the principles of non-resistance (nonvoting and nonviolence) considered politics and government to be corrupt, and relied solely on moral suasion to bring about immediate abolition of slavery.” However, the American Anti-Slavery Society was not without racism and prejudice toward black intelligence and ability. Because of this, McCune Smith and Douglass both detached themselves from the organization. Stauffer explains McCune Smith’s skepticism of the society stating, “McCune Smith concluded that these white-run abolitionists organizations defined freedom, equality, and independence differently than blacks did…. They needed to shed their faith in white supremacy and renounce their belief in skin color as a marker of aptitude and social status” (xxv). McCune Smith’s feelings toward Garrisonians explain his attempts to verify Douglass as an intelligent individual who was successful in his mission of emancipation, rather than a former slave who received marginal education in unbearable circumstances.

McCune Smith thoroughly characterizes Douglass as a mentor-worthy individual and American citizen throughout his introduction for *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Much like the
Book of Job’s unknown author and his positive testimony of God’s troubled worshiper, McCune Smith creates Douglass as a relatable personality. McCune Smith illuminates Douglass as self-taught in the school of slavery without ever limiting Douglass’s qualifications as a writer.

McCune Smith notes:

I feel joy in introducing to you my brother, who has rent his own bonds, and who, in his every relation—as a public man, as a husband and as a father—is such as does honor to the land which gave him birth…. It is an American book, for Americans, in the fullest sense of the idea. It shows that the worst of our institutions, in its worst aspect, cannot keep down energy, truthfulness, and earnest struggle for the right. (xxxi)

Throughout his introduction of My Bondage and My Freedom, McCune Smith constructs Douglass as a qualified author and refrains from pinning him as the “other.” McCune Smith justifies himself as a commendable witness to Douglass the individual; consequently, his testimony is positive without any slights against Douglass. Finally, McCune Smith also experienced racism and restriction by the very abolitionist fighting for freedom; therefore, he holds no aims of rhetorically stifling Douglass’s authority.

While Douglass receives help from McCune Smith in the second edition of his narrative, Douglass does develop some control within his 1845 Narrative. Garrison’s testimony may limit his authority, but he cannot completely silence Douglass as writer and narrator. Douglass seeks control in and of itself—a personal control—a personal freedom so that his narrative becomes unrestricted by abolitionist conventions. Lisa Sisco states that, “in writing the narrative (as in any autobiographical act) Douglass is asserting his identity as a human being and defining himself as a man, not a slave, a very personal and potentially liberating act.”\(^{13}\) Douglass begins this liberating act with stylistic choices that exist outside Olney’s expected twelve-step checklist. These choices help create an authority separate from Garrison. Olney helps to detail how Douglass forms control as he indicates: “In narrating the events that produced both change and
continuity in his life, Douglass regularly reflects back and forth...from the person written about to the person writing, from a narrative of past events to a present narrator grown out of those events” (158). Olney highlights Douglass’s refusal to submit wholly to abolitionist preferred themes and style. For when Douglass asserts his mature, experienced voice over the details of his youth, he asserts his personal style and identity.

The omniscient narrator is one that abolitionists cannot control. The narrator that possesses the ability to fluctuate from the former self to the present self is also the narrator that possesses his or her own voice and authority. Olney spends time discussing how Douglass focuses on the actual pen he uses to transfer experience to paper—the laying of his pen in the crack of his feet as the result of the severe conditions of slavery: “My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes” (Douglass, Narrative 72). While Olney is correct in saying the pen serves as a reminder that the literate person writing the story is vastly different from the individual who acquired the experiences, the pen also stands as a reminder that Douglass is the individual who controls the creation of his text outside of Garrison. When Douglass inserts commentary like that of the pen—or later, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (107)—he develops himself beyond the slave character created by Garrison’s preface. Though Douglass fills the expected themes detailed by Olney, he moves beyond them and becomes the writer and narrator of his personal story and self-defines manhood. However, Douglass’s minor nonconformity to the abolitionist outline is not enough to fulfill his attempt to gain authority. As a result, My Bondage and My Freedom is published in 1855 with McCune Smith’s introduction. Not only is there a different testimony, but also ten additional years of autobiography, including a large revision of his fight with the white overseer, Mr. Covey.
In arguing that Douglass revises his text to further assimilate into genteel society, David Leverenz writes, “The revision emphasizes Douglass’s discovery of manhood, which he now equates with power and moral dignity. Using a striking new voice filled with genteel self-consciousness, literary allusions, and sophisticated ironies, Douglass plays down his original representation of his anxiety and desperation.”14 Leverenz may have a point in saying Douglass revises to pompously emphasize his sophisticated command of writing, but he is not entirely accurate. In his revision of Narrative, Douglass attempts to exclusively control his personal narrative. While scholars view Narrative as the better and more successful piece, it is not in the eyes of Douglass due to Garrison’s established control in his preface. Leverenz notes the following of Douglass’s first narrative:

Douglass’s voice is simple, direct, familiar, yet with a certain balanced formality…. The strength and limitations of the fight description in the Narrative, which most readers find more gripping, lies in his restriction of the drama to the struggle between him and Covey, without articulating the implied struggle for respect from his readers. (342)

Leverenz implies that Douglass’s restriction is a greater use of textual control and authorship in his first version. However, Douglass does not create restriction of drama as the author; it is a restriction placed upon him by Garrison. Douglass reevaluated his fight with Covey in My Bondage and My Freedom because the implied struggle for respect was of greater importance to him.

One particular revision made within the Covey scene helps to illustrate Douglass’s newfound authority in My Bondage and My Freedom. In his 1845 Narrative, Douglass addresses the overseer as “Mr. Covey” eight times within the span of their altercation. Douglass’s use of the title disappears entirely in My Bondage and My Freedom. Leverenz explains this revision stating, “Douglass’s continuing ambivalence about authority quietly manifests itself once more in his alternation between ‘Mr. Covey’ and ‘Covey’” (349). Dropping “Mr.” signifies Douglass
is the author of the text and of the fight; therefore, the courteous formality of “Mr.” is no longer observed. However, the loss of “Mr.” may not solely signify feelings of superiority or the manifestation of ambivalence toward authority, but it could also signify Douglass’s maturing identity. In a much longer and dramatic sequence of the fight, Douglass aims to thoroughly reveal his crafted personal authority and individuality in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Douglass creates himself as an individual outside Garrisonian control and his ability to control is sparked by the positive testimony provided by McCune Smith’s introduction. Echoing the positive testimony provided by the Book of Job’s author for his character, McCune Smith delivers Douglass to his audience as an individual independent of slavery and its miseries. Also like Job’s author, McCune Smith’s testimony establishes Douglass as a dedicated man who is worthy of admiration. Since the reader comes to know Douglass as a progressive, capable intellect from the start, Douglass’s mission of securing authority over his personal experiences is attainable.

**Turner: rising from the words of the white slaveholder**

Many slave narratives, and the Book of Job, fit into Olney’s structure. Since Turner exists exclusively in the words of another, he needs Olney’s model most to establish authority and authenticity. However, in the end, Olney’s framework is less about what exists following the testimony of a qualified abolitionist, and more about the effect the testimony has on the narrative itself. Turner is never a writer and is more than a character; he is a confessor trying to form authority over his personal history and actions. Similar to Job’s character whose friends struggle to push the guilt of sin upon him in an effort to explain God’s warranted suffering and pain, Turner also experiences a push of guilt by Thomas R. Gray. In pushing guilt, Gray temporarily
holds authority over Turner’s confession. Turner does not have the luxury of revision like Douglass and must quickly generate authority and control over his narrative. When responding to Gray, Turner’s narrative-like response creates control, but it does not create authenticity. Like Job and Douglass, first person testimony is significant as it dictates Turner’s ability to establish authenticity within Confessions. Turner holds a luxury that Douglass does not in that Gray’s testimony is fragmented; fragmentation, therefore, allows Turner to easily assert himself as the authority of his narrative.

Gray’s testimony in Confessions is interesting in that it is twofold. He provides a brief testimonial at the start of Confessions with his “To the Public” introduction. Gray’s intent is to build Turner’s character as religiously mad and unclassifiable within society. This first portion of testimony is small and voiceless. Gray holds virtually no more authority than the simple legal confirmations alluded to within his testament. Gray writes: “That this is a faithful record of his confessions, the annexed certificate of the County Court of Southampton, will attest” (1). Gray is not only verifying Turner’s confession, but he is also trying to authenticate his own credibility. Because Gray offers a moment to consider his legitimacy at the onset of the Confessions, Turner immediately breaks down Gray’s control once the question-and-answer segment begins. Turner’s narrative starts with Gray prompting the slave to give an account of the historical insurrection. However, this is not what Turner decides to immediately divulge. William L. Andrews acknowledges, “The simple but unprecedented import of the ‘confession’ Turner recounts, when compared with earlier treatments of blacks in southern narrative, lies in Turner’s making a history of himself, when all his white interviewer asked him for was ‘a history of the motives’ that led to his uprising.” Andrews asserts that Turner places himself “irreversibly into history” when he orates his age and place of birth followed by a personal story that contains a clear
beginning middle and end “bearing the authority and sense of reality that seem immanent in the structure of narrative itself” (305). Here, Andrews essentially affirms Turner indirectly begins to follow Olney’s twelve-step narrative frame, but does so through the manner of confession rather than traditional autobiographical narrative.

Indirect fulfillment of Olney’s narrative frame through confession provides Turner a sense of authorial control over his narrative. He captures authority and denies Gray the ability to direct his experiences when he very nearly follows Olney’s narrative outline through satisfying, in some manner, the following categories: The first sentence “I was born…” specifying place, but not date of birth; a sketchy/shaky account of parenthood; record of barriers raised against slave literacy; description of “Christian” slaveholder; description of the amount and kinds of food and clothing, work, pattern of day/year; description of patrols, failed attempts to escape; description of successful attempt to escape; and reflections on slavery, or in this case, rebellion. While the abolitionists use Olney’s frame to restrict slave narratives like Douglass’s, Turner uses it to his advantage in a successful coup to seize authorial control in spite of Gray. Following Turner’s narrative-like confession that converges with Olney’s outline, Gray reenters to complete the second portion of his testimony.

Before addressing the effect of Gray’s second testimony, it is important to recognize Gray’s reason for collecting Turner’s account, since his reason is the true motivation for Turner to resist. Andrews states that Gray’s intention for recording Turner’s confession was an effort to calm the white, slaveholding public and unquestionably attribute accountability to Turner. Gray writes, “Public curiosity has been on the stretch to understand the origin and progress of this dreadful conspiracy, and the motives which influenced its diabolical actors” (1). Through attributing blame to “diabolical actors” who are religiously mad, Gray tries to force guilt upon
Turner and his followers. For Gray and the remainder of white slaveholders in Southampton County, their actions toward slaves cannot be viewed as justification for the insurrection. The forced injustices of slavery cannot be the cause of an uprising, and, therefore, the cause of white deaths. Gray’s attempt to label Turner as responsible stands as reassurance for Gray and other slaveholding members of society.

Andrews also notes that Gray immediately pins the term “insurrection” on Turner’s actions (302). The use of “insurrection” in what can be considered Gray’s preliminary testimony is the demonization of Turner’s character before the reader comes into contact with the individual. Yet, once the actual narrative begins, Turner clearly aims to personally construct his own character. Bringing Turner’s opposition to Gray’s authorship full circle, Turner’s refusal of guilt is a result of his uncommon life within the realm of slavery. Turner states, “Since the commence of 1830, I had been living with Mr. Joseph Travis, who was to me a kind master, and placed the greatest confidence in me; in fact, I had no cause to complain of his treatment to me” (6). Travis’s greatest confidence in Turner pushes him outside slave culture, as he is afforded respect and acclaim by both whites and blacks because of his great intelligence and religious devotion (Andrews 302). Turner provides instances of respect and limited freedoms as he takes command of Confessions to create his narrative. The combination of Turner’s refusing to accept and his provided personal narrative allows Turner’s audience to know him directly and to form a personal understanding of him as an individual. A personal understanding of Turner by the audience of Confessions is extremely important to the final formation of authenticity.

Through the second portion of his confession, Turner constructs himself in such a manner that he forces Gray to relinquish control of the text. Raymond Hedin explains Gray’s disappearance stating: “The question-and-answer format all but disappears halfway through the
interview, and for the last several pages Turner holds sway relatively unchecked; Gray’s earlier intrusions turn his later silence into testimony. Gray’s departure early in the text forces him to return one last time before concluding Confessions. Instead of letting Turner end with “I am here, loaded with chains, and willing to suffer the fate that awaits me,” Gray must reappear to reclaim the narration that Turner hijacked. If Turner is left with the last words, Gray is allowing the audience to make a final judgment of Turner. Gray re-enters stating: “I here proceeded to make some inquiries of him, after assuring him of the certain death that awaited him, and that concealment would only bring destruction on the innocent, as well as the guilty, of his own color, if he knew of any extensive or concerted plan” (10). Gray once more pushes guilt upon Turner as he seeks to affirm there no other planned revolts. Gray’s push of guilt is problematic because the audience has potentially formed its own opinion of Turner due to Gray’s absence. In order for Gray to regain any control and fulfill his original purpose, he cannot let the determination of guilt rest with the audience and must remind them of Turner’s barbaric deeds. Nevertheless, because Gray waits till the end of Confessions to reappear, he cannot reverse the authority and authenticity Turner has created in Gray’s absence. Gray not only lets Turner establish himself for the reader, but also for himself, as he states: “On other subjects he possesses an uncommon share of intelligence, with a mind capable of attaining anything, but warped and perverted by the influence of early impressions” (10). Here, Gray does not blame Turner for his actions; instead, he blames the early interactions of Turner’s youth. Gray now passes blame to the very characters Turner creates at the start of his narrative while simultaneously affirming Turner’s astuteness. Gray’s final testament of Turner inadvertently solidifies Turner’s authority and authenticity as a narrator within African American literature.
Establishing authority over personal sufferings and injustices in order to understand their effects on the individual begins with the symbolic Book of Job, and is reflected in the narratives of Frederick Douglass and Nat Turner. One may note that Turner is a catalyst for both slave narratives and the testimonials that precede them. Hedin explains that, “precisely because of Turner’s status as captive interviewee entirely at the mercy of a hostile interviewer, the Confessions reveal in clearest form the starting point for black voices attempting to speak in the nineteenth century and the negative potential inherent in a black character’s full physical presence” (182). In the eyes of abolitionists, Gray’s Confessions revealed the helpful impact of the black voice in their fight for emancipation, as well as its potential harm when unrestrained. A strong testimonial at the start of a slave narrative, or biblical narrative, guides the audience’s understanding and judgment of the restricted narrator. The Book of Job’s author and Garrison, both functioned as testifiers to expose their speakers in a positive yet restrained manner. Due to restraint, both Job’s character and Douglass are forced to fight for greater authority regarding their experiences. Job’s character accomplishes authority via biblical exegesis, while Douglass resorts to revision and the addition of a positive, unrestrictive testifier in James McCune Smith. Gray aims to portray Turner negatively; however, due to weak testimony, Turner asserts control and counters Gray’s negative portrayal. The development of control and the formation of authenticity by Douglass and Turner ensure their permanent presence within nineteenth-century literature and history.
Notes

Chapter One: Scriptural Literacy: Job, Douglass, Turner


3. Thomas R Gray. The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection In Southampton, Va., As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray, In the Prison Where He Was Confined, and Acknowledged by Him to Be Such, When Read Before the Court of Southampton: with the Certificate, Under Seal of the Court Convened At Jerusalem, Nov. 5, 1831, for His Trial. (1832). Hereafter cited parenthetically throughout text. It is also important to note that Confessions is currently the only historically accepted document relating to Nat Turner and his personhood. His personal bible has been recovered and is possessed by the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. At this time, it is not available for public examination.


Chapter Two: Scriptural Authority: Justifying Violence and Resistance


Chapter Three: Control and Authenticity: Abolitionist testimony and its effects on Frederick Douglass’s and Nat Turner’s Slave Narrative


10. Douglass, Frederick. My Bondage and My Freedom (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855); All quotes from James McCune Smith are cited from his introduction within this edition made available by Documenting the American South: The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2004.


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Primary Sources:


Turner, Nat, and Thomas R Gray. *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection In Southampton, Va., As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray, In the Prison Where He Was Confined, and Acknowledged by Him to Be Such, When Read Before the Court of Southampton : with the Certificate, Under Seal of the Court Convened At Jerusalem, Nov. 5, 1831, for His Trial*. Richmond: T.R. Gray, 1832.

Secondary Sources:


Appendix

Affidavit of Nat Turner’s Bible

THIS DOCUMENT, prepared this day -- the tenth of December Nineteen Hundred Sixty-Nine -- has as its purpose to provide an authentic description of NAT TURNER’S BIBLE. Also included are some fragments of history concerning its significance and where the Bible is today. I consider this to be an appropriate time to furnish this information for many reasons, but mainly because I am approaching eighty-three years of age, still of sound mind, but the body grows weaker.

For those born and raised in Southampton County, Virginia, during the last one hundred odd years, the name "Nat Turner" is a familiar one. For those more distant, it is either unknown or carries with it a different connotation. Nat Turner was a Negro slave born in 1800 a few miles West of "Cross Keys". His enlightened masters, of whom there were several, taught him to read. This placed him in a rather elite status and at an early age he became a leader among the blacks. He acquired an intense interest in religion and preached many sermons. At that time not many blacks were Christians, so conversions were numerous. Nat could be labeled a religious fanatic, for he constantly referred to the scriptures and he kept his Bible with him almost all of the time.

During this period in young America books were not too plentiful except for the few wealthy planters in the area. It was almost unheard of for slaves to have books, but Nat had one. This was his Bible.

Since my birth on March 20, 1887, I have been intimately familiar with Nat Turner's Bible. It has been in my family's possession during this entire period. My mother (1852 - 1926) kept it during her
lifetime. Both her mother and her grandmother had it. It was my
great-grandmother who was visiting the Moore family near the
Nathaniel Francis' home when Nat led a band of blacks in a massacre
of the whites. This was in August 1831, when over sixty white men,
women, and children were brutally murdered. It was followed by
about twice that number of blacks being treated in a similar manner.
Nat eluded his captors for a couple of months, but was caught hiding
in a cave near my home at "Little Texas". He was later tried in the
County Seat and received the death penalty.

I am not aware of the exact manner in which members of my
family received this Bible at about the time of Nat's trial. He was
also wearing a sword at the time of his capture but, to the best of my
knowledge, this was never passed on to a member of my family. With
his Bible, my familiarity is different. I remember well when I was a
girl of just a little over ten years of age and his Bible was photographed
on an oak stump in the yard at my homeplace. This was done by
William S. Drewry when he was engaged in research for a book he was
writing on the insurrection. It was just before the turn of the century.

Nat Turner's Bible was printed in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1782
by the assigns of Alexander Kincaid. It was newly translated out of the
original Greek. This version was revised by "His Majesty's Special
Command" and appointed to be read in churches. It was leather bound,
but the covers are now missing. Leather still remains on the folding
edge. On this are six parallel worn ridges about one-quarter inch wide.
Some pages near the front and back are also missing. On the back side
of the first page of the New Testament are some handwritten notations
in faded black ink, now almost brown in color. These notes read:
"The Property of D° Davis of Wortland. D° Davis was married to Merce Teamons on July 6th, 1794. Merce, the wife of D° Davis, died September 23rd, 1802 and was buried the day following." I do not know whether it was a member of the Davis family, one of Nat's owners, or someone else who gave the Bible to Nat, but this was the one he kept with him for a lengthy period and until just before his death on the gallows.

The paper in this Bible is of very thin stock. The overall dimensions of the Bible are five inches in height, two and three-quarter inches in width, one and one-half inches in thickness, and two columns of about sixty-six lines per page.

Nat Turner's Bible is currently in the possession of Maurice A. Person. He is a native of Southampton who now lives in Portsmouth, Virginia. Maurice's mother, now deceased, was my sister. She received the Bible from our mother and passed it on to Maurice. His grandmother was Ann E. Francis, a granddaughter of Mrs. Nathaniel Francis, the only survivor in her home after Nat Turner's men had entered it. It seems that she hid behind a clothes basket upstairs in a cuddy hole and her whereabouts was not released by loyal slaves. This old house remains until this day and still serves as a reminder of Nat Turner's effort to kill all white people in Southampton and as far beyond as possible.

The precise part his interpretation of the verses in this Bible played in his divinely claimed authority to insure that the blacks overpowered the whites remains a mystery until this day. It is known that they were used in some manner by him to justify his bloody mission. For the people of Southampton, this insurrection of Nat Turner's in
August, 1831, epitomizes the darkest days of their history. Even today, in this area of a gracious, gentle, and friendly culture -- the same as from its beginning -- this infamous act still seems as incongruous as ever.

WITNESS the following signature and seal, this document being executed in triplicate.

HARRIETT E. FRANCIS

STATE OF VIRGINIA

CITY OF Richmond, to wit:

I, [Name], a Notary Public of and for the City aforesaid, in the State of Virginia, do hereby certify that HARRIETT E. FRANCIS, whose name is signed to the foregoing writing, bearing date of 10 December 1969, has this day acknowledged the same before me in my City aforesaid.

My Commission Expires [Signature]

Given under my hand this [Signature]

(Date)

(NOTARY PUBLIC)