

Digital Humanities in Biblical Early Jewish and Christian Studies
November 23, 2019
Society of Biblical Literature
San Diego, California

Freedom Narratives and Artifacts of African American Interpretation of Deuteronomy: Digital
Humanities Approach

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Introduction

The Book of Deuteronomy often lives in the shadow of Genesis¹ and Exodus.² Slavery provides the first period of interpretation of African American of the Book of Deuteronomy. Another source of African American interpretation comes out of the music of African American communities. A third source of interpretation is the preaching of the civil rights era culminating in the “Mountain Top” speech of Martin Luther King Jr.

The assumption that African and African American interpretation began with the twentieth century turns a blind eye to pre-critical interpretation by African people, namely people from African and the African Diaspora. This essay will partially remedy that deficit.

Black theology already in the 1990s understood the importance of the so-called slave narratives.³ The relatively new appreciation of academic biblical scholars and theologians reading Scriptures with so-called regular readers provides a backdrop for this project.⁴

About the resources

The Documenting the South Digital collection by the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. The data includes texts, images and other materials. Two collections are relevant for biblical interpretation of African Americans “The Church in the Southern Black Community” and “North American Slave Narratives.” The “North American Slave Narratives collection includes books and articles recounting the individual and collective move from bondage to freedom. The collection includes broadsides,

¹ Emerson B. Powery and Rodney S. Sadler Jr., *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved* Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016.

² Herbert Robinson Marbury *Pillars of Cloud and Fire: The Politics of Exodus in African American Biblical Interpretation* New York: New York University Press, 2015.

³ Dwight N. Hopkins and George Cummings, eds. *Cut Loose the Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the 4 Slave Narratives*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992; Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993; _____, *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology* Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000.

⁴ Gerald O. West, ed. *Reading Other-Wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities*, Semeia Studies 62 Atlanta: SBL Press, 2007.

pamphlets, as well as books in English up to 1920. While most of the material is nonfiction some of the narratives are fiction.

One can browse the collection alphabetically. One can also browse the images by subjects using the categories of the Library of Congress. William L. Andrews and E. Maynard Adams constructed an Introduction to the Scholarly Bibliography of Slave and Ex-Slave Narratives. As two lists, one alphabetical and the other chronological. Both the alphabetical chronological list has three parts autobiographies of sales and ex-slaves, biographies of slaves of ex-slaves, and finally on fictionalized slave narratives.

Authors include non-African American writers such as John Quincy Adams, Sarah Hopkins Bradford, and Mark Twain. So, the materials must be carefully scrutinized.

From Slave Narratives to Freedom Narratives

American fiction has immortalized by European American writers of the nineteenth century Harriet Beecher Stowe *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Later William Styron returned to the topic in his *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). African American writer Toni Morrison explores slavery in her novel *Beloved* (1987). But there is another voice. The University of North Carolina has collected North American Slave Narratives. Slave narratives chronicle the evolution of white supremacy in the South from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century. For the white readers in the North these narratives such as Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*, first published in 1853 pulled back the curtain and revealed the brutality of slavery. These documents give a voice to often marginalized people.

A moment to glimpse the historical place this material. Lerone Bennett Jr. wrote *Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America, 1619-1962*⁵ that made the point that enslavement of Africans emerged on the North American coast before the Mayflower. The four hundredth anniversary of chattel slavery in North America occurred in 2019. Kidnaped Africans arrived on the shores at Jamestown in 1619. [The New York Times](#) has produced an interesting set of materials on the impact of race-based chattel slavery. The enslavement of Africans remained a debated topic in the common square. Slavery was baked into the U.S. constitution (article 4, Section 2, Clause 3). One artifact of this challenge was the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 guaranteed a right for a slaveholder to recover an escaped enslaved person. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was part of the Compromise of 1850. The Law persisted even into the Civil War. Union forces often returned formerly enslaved persons. General Benjamin Butler and other Union Generals balked at this. He designated the enslaved persons as contraband and freed them. President Lincoln was persuaded the wisdom of such a policy. In August 1861, the U.S. Congress enacted the Confiscation Act which barred slave owners from re-enslaving runaways. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was officially repealed in June 1864.

From Slave Narratives to Freedom Narratives. Powery and Sadler pioneered a syntactically awkward strategy of replacing the language of "slave" with the term "formerly enslaved." They eschew the general convention to label these stories as "slave narratives" for the "freedom narratives."⁶ The

⁵ Lerone Bennett Jr. *Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America, 1619-1962*. Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1962)

⁶ Powery and Sadler, *Genesis*, 1.

readership of these stories was primarily European Americans. The form critical category of the material reflects such a readership. Hence the name slave narratives emerged and stuck. These were stories of slavery. From the perspective of the African American writer these were freedom narratives. The song by Mahalia Jackson points to the process in her song "How I got Over." Slave narratives are about slavery. Freedom narratives are stories about how Africans "got over" how they moved to freedom.

We will designate our database Documenting the South Freedom Narratives (DSFN). Through a process of data mining I examined freedom narratives from the digitized collection housed at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. With the help of Joshua Been of Baylor University, we retrieved every occurrence of the text of Deuteronomy using the KJV as the base text. He wrote a program to find quotations of Deuteronomy in the freedom narratives. Reid then reviewed these passages in order to determine patterned of use.

The text fall into two, sometimes overlapping genres. The first is autobiography, memoir. The second is the didactic material meant for improvement of the race. The styles of each of these genres works slightly differently. Deuteronomy amongst the ruins of autobiography provided interpretative clues for reading of an enslaved life as well as reading of a particular text. When the writers through speeches and sermons use Deuteronomy didactically, they trade on the esteem of the Bible and Deuteronomy but with a more straightforward hermeneutic.

The freedom narrative focus on a few different passages. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 received by far the most references. The challenge of the office and the need for distributed power described in Dt 1:9-13 received some attention. A few (four) references to Dt 10:20 focus on faithfulness to God. The final group reflect on the call for decision, "choose life" in Deuteronomy 30:15-20.

Preliminary Results

Don Benjamin editor of the *Oxford Handbook of Deuteronomy* asked me to write the entry on African American Interpretation of Deuteronomy. I decided to include early African American interpretation as well as contemporary interpretation. This project allows me to examine the passages that caught the imagination of the writers of the freedom narratives.

The entry will review the key passages of Deuteronomy shaped by the readers early and contemporary. The chapter examines seven passages. Deuteronomy 1:9-13; 5:6; 6:4-9; 10:20; 18:9; 30:9, 15-20. The passages that Reid and Bennett treatment of Deuteronomy and African American experience differ from what we found in the DSFN. We discovered more women writers.

Approximately 15% of the authors were women.

The text mining did the distant reading, but it fell to me to review the matches. We created a text files showing potential similarities as well as a spreadsheet. We examined each of the seven passages and first reflect on the aggregate frequently used terms and then drill down into two specific witnesses.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God *is* one LORD: ⁵ And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. ⁶ And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: ⁷ And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when

thou risest up. ⁸ And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. ⁹ And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates. (Deut. 6:4-9 KJV)

This passage in Judaism is called the *shema* after the first word of the passage. In several Hebrew Bibles, the first letter *shin* is printed in an extra-large font. In some Jewish traditions the *shema* should be recited three times a day, as an affirmation of faith.

Frequently Occurring Terms in the Deuteronomy 6:4-9 Data Set

We grouped the narratives by their use of various passages. We created a [word cloud](#) that visualized the word frequency. The chart below list the most frequently appearing words in the freedom narratives that connect to Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

Word	Occurrence
Time	12508
People	9149
God	8940
Day	8348
Slave	7975
Life	6331
Master	7533
House	6385
Church	5923

However, the constellation of words looks different when we lemmatize the results. If we include slaves and slavery to the occurrences of slave, then this cluster of terms figure more prominently. The cluster master and white figures less prominently. The next step moves back from this aggregate to the look at two texts. One notices that most of the frequently occurring words fall outside the words of the passage itself.

While the collection includes famous writers such as Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglas, Nat Love (the first African American Cowboy), Harriet Jacobs. Two writers give clear passages that allow an exploration of the hermeneutical moves of the writers of the freedom narratives. The Baptist educator Jared Maurice Arter and the Methodist Bishop Lucius Henry Holsey.

Jared Maurice Arter D.D.

He was born in Jefferson County West Virginia into slavery in January 27, 1850. His father Jeremiah Arter was enslaved working in the mills of Jefferson County. Arter the father fell down a stair at the mill leaving him paralyzed. He later died from his injuries. His mother Hannah Frances Stephenson Arter was thirty-eight years younger than her husband. At age nine Jared Maurice Arter witnessed the hanging of four of the abolitionists (Cook, Copple, Green, and Stephens) who participated in the John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. Arter's master at the time worked at the arsenal that Brown attacked.

After emancipation in 1863 his mother moved the family to Washington D.C. A businessman Ayer offered to finance the education of Arter and his brother in exchange for their service until they were twenty-one years old. After leaving the Ayer household Arter attended Newfield and Ithaca, a private school in New York, Washington D.C. Storer College in Harper's Ferry. He received a BD from Hillsdale College and Chicago Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. from Pennsylvania State College.

Arter accepted Christianity in 1873 and was ordained to the Gospel ministry in 1887 serving Curtis Free Baptist Church. He also served as instructor at Virginia Theological Seminary and College in Lynchburg Virginia, Storer College. He was superintendent of a school in Hilltop in Fayette County Virginia.

Below is the relevant excerpt from *Echoes from Pioneer Life*

Sermon Delivered to the Woman's Baptist State Convention in the Session at Hinton, West Virginia, August 1917

2. Why a life of complete and full service to Christ should be given.

(a) Because God commands it.

"Hear, O Israel! the Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul and with all thy might." "And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do with thy might." "Life is the time to serve the Lord; the time to insure the great reward." "She hath done what she could." "This measures up to the exact requirement." "She built for herself and for the world a monument and obtained the approval and the praise of Jesus." "She built better than she knew." "Jesus said: 'Verily I say unto you wheresoever this Gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also, that this woman hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her.'"⁷

The text of the sermon was Mark 14:6,8 "Let her alone; why trouble ye her? She hath done what she could. The second movement of the sermon was a reflection on "Life of Complete Service to Christ." The reflection on Deuteronomy 6:4 is in the subsection Why it (complete service to Christ) should be given. Arter provides as a rationale for complete devotion to Christ a chain of biblical passages beginning with Deuteronomy 6:4.

Deuteronomy 6:4 is used in the NT. The juxtaposition of the admonition to love God completely and the love of the neighbor. Now the list of passages may reflect a sermonic delivery tradition in African American churches that presents a sermon more in outline than manuscript.

Lucius Henry Holsey (1842-1920)

From the Autobiography of Bishop L. H. Holsey

He was born in July 3, 1842 near Columbus Georgia. His mother Louisa, an enslaved African and James Holsey, her enslaver. At the death of James Holsey Lucius was enslaved by his cousin T.L. Lynn in Hancock county, Georgia. A few days before his death Lynn Holsey to select his next enslaver, Holsey selected Richard Malcolm Johnston, a planter and educator, who later took a position as an English

⁷ Jared Maurice Arter, *Echoes from a Pioneer Life* (Atlanta: A.B. Caldwell Publishing, 1922) p.102

professor at the University of Georgia in Athens Georgia prompting a relocation to that city. Holsey worked for Johnston as a as a house slave, carriage driver, and gardener. He lived with that family from 1857 until the abolition of slavery.

Holsey did not go to school. His early collection of books two Websters blue spellers, a common dictionary, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and a Bible. He was able to buy these by collecting and selling rags to a junk house in the city.

Holsey married Harriet Turner, an enslaved fifteen-year-old on November 8, 1862. She lived in the home of Bishop George Foster Pierce of the Methodist Episcopal Church (Now the United Methodist Church). Holsey converted to Methodism and served as the fourth bishop Colored (now Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church. He served in that position for almost fifty years. Harriet and Lucius had fourteen children nine who survived.

Johnston gave Holsey land in Hancock County near Sparta Georgia where Holsey farmed and ran a boarding house named Rockby Academy. Harriet Holsey provided laundry for the students at the academy.

When Holsey sought ordination in 1868 with the blessing of Bishop Pierce. Holsey was assigned to the Hancock circuit in Georgia. Holsey was selected a delegate to the first General Conference of the Colored Methodist Church, South. During the conference Holsey was appointed to the Trinity Colored Methodist Church in Augusta, Georgia. Holsey was elected bishop in 1873 when he was thirty years old. The family of eleven lived in a two-room house with a coal stove for heat.

Bishop Holsey with other leaders of the Methodist Episcopal Church South and the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church founded Paine College located in Augusta Georgia. Lane College in Jackson Tennessee, the Holsey Normal and Industrial Academy, a secondary school in Cordele Georgia and the Helena B. Cobb Institute for Girls in Barnesville, Georgia.

During 1891-1904 he compiled and publishes *Songs of Love and Mercy*. Holsey also served as editor-in-chief of the periodical *The Gospel Trumpet*, the church paper.

The excerpt below is taken from Holsey's Autobiography.

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one Lord," and so it might be said, "Hear, all ye religions of the nations and ages, the Lord thy God is one God and one Father." From him all truth must come, since he is "the only true God," and the only One in the universe that can dictate to the will and conscience and moral and religious proclivities of men and angels, and whatever other intelligences may reside in his dominions. All truth is from God, and must lead to God. Every thread and line and living cable that ramifies and thrills the living entities, though sometimes hidden and broken and covered with the débris and scoria of the wear and tear of the centuries, will take us back to God, the great Original, chaining all to the rock-ribbed mountains of the eternal shore. If there were ten thousand religions, and ten times ten thousand forms of worship, to be true and beneficial to mankind, they must all point to God and own him as the true and only proper and rightful object of prayer, praise and adoration. "All things are yours," to lead you to God and plant you on the solid rock of truth and the eternal shore.

Beyond the language of the data set one notices the prominence of God language in keeping with the data set. The prominence of true and truth represents vocabulary that is not as frequently used in the data set. The use of father language figures into this passage but does not occur widely in the data set.

This deity “dictates” four things: 1) will, 2) conscience, 3) moral and religion “proclivities” and 4) intelligences. Each of these elements played a major role in the theological and moral discourse. Holsey welded these elements of human character to the one true God.

Holsey gestures again to the divine origin of “truth” that comes from and ever returns “back to God, the great Original.” Holsey does not describe the scourges of slavery but rather points to the way that functions of history “sometimes hidden and broken and covered with the debris and scoria of wear and tear of the centuries.” In other words, the flotsam and jetsam of life and history can obscure the “truth”.

The Process

The Bible for African Americans of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the King James Version (KJV). Even when African Americans were forbidden from learning to read, the oral biblical text came from the KJV. Using the *North American Slave Narratives* digital collection from the University of North Carolina’s *Documenting the American South* public archive (<https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>). The *North American Slave Narratives* provides over 300 transcribed accounts from fugitive and former North American slaves. These accounts are transcribed from broadsides, pamphlets, biographies, and books in English up to 1920.

Understanding that any references within these narratives to the Book of Deuteronomy may not be word-for-word from the KJV, we relied on both distant reading using text data mining (TDM) methodology, as well as a close and actual reading, to identify fuzzy references. Fuzzy references are those whose similarity to Deuteronomy sections meet a minimum threshold.

The TDM methodology we implemented consists of seven procedures. The procedures detailed below were completed with a custom Python 3.6 script, leveraging the spaCy natural language processing (NLP) library (<https://spacy.io/>), and the FuzzyWuzzy text matching library (<https://github.com/seatgeek/fuzzywuzzy>).

1. **Identify Sources for Our Corpus:** Our corpus consisted of the 309 transcribed accounts downloaded from the *Documenting the American South* public archive and the KJV.
2. **Prepare for Reading and Parsing:** All corpus documents were stored as utf-8 encoded text files with line breaks and punctuation removed.
3. **Enrich the Corpus:** This procedure enriches texts with additional information, such as parts of speech tags or named entity recognition. This was not necessary for this research.
4. **Preprocess the Corpus:** Common stop words were removed from both the narratives and the KJV. Additionally, all words were lemmatized to the root form of the word. This was completed using the spaCy NLP library.

5. **Term Frequencies & Keyword Extraction:** This procedure creates a bag of words with frequencies and significant keywords. This was not necessary for this research.
6. **Transformations & Analysis:**

A collection of all five, six, and seven-word n-grams were created from the preprocessed corpus. An n-gram is a list of consecutive words. All n-grams from the narratives were compared with all n-grams from the KJV using the FuzzyWuzzy text matching library. Of the four primary fuzzy text matching algorithms, we implemented the Token Sort similarity method. Using this method, n-grams are tokenized, meaning each word is separated, and then sorted alphabetically. The percent of each n-gram's alphabetized words that match are calculated as the percent similarity. (Fuzzy text matching algorithms we tested and found less accurate for this project are: Ratio, Partial Ratio, and Token Set.)

All fuzzy text matches with a similarity score of at least 50% were stored in a separate text file, noting the source narrative, the source n-gram along with approximately a paragraph of context on either side of the n-gram, the similarity score, and the matching n-gram from the Book of Deuteronomy. This provided us with sufficient information to manually remove all false positive matches from the results.

Using the narrative authors' names, we then manually recorded which were male, female, or un-identifiable.

7. **Visualizations:** Using Microsoft Power BI, a data reporting and visualization tool, we created a data report consisting of three visualizations (http://bit.ly/freedom_narratives). First, a column chart representing the proportion of male, female, and un-identifiable. Second, a treemap representing the proportion of Deuteronomy passages cited by the narratives. Third, a word cloud representing the top 75 words from narratives, with stop words removed. Using Power BI interactivity, selecting any of the features in these three visualizations will filter the other two visualizations.

Conclusion

In the Twi language of Ghana Sankofa translates “go back and get it.” Paraphrasing the proverb, there is nothing wrong going back to retrieve what you have forgotten. Sankofa is an African virtue. The Adinkra symbol sometimes has a stylized heart shape or by a bird with its head turned backwards while its feet face forward. The recovery of the voices of interpreters is an act of Sankofa, memory.

Text mining, a combination of distant reading and close reading allows biblical scholars to recover voices in biblical interpretation that lost to contemporary biblical scholars.