

## BOOK REVIEW

**Denmark Vesey's Bible:**  
**The Thwarted Revolt that Put Slavery and Scripture on Trial**  
 by Jeremy Schipper  
 Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022, 207 pages

*I read the bible often, I tries to read it right  
 And far as I could understand, nothin' but a burnin' light*

(Blind Willie Johnson, 'Soul of a Man')

On June 1, 2020, one week following the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, then-President of the United States Donald Trump posed for a photo op in front of St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. In his hand, he held a Bible. His path to the church had been forcefully cleared by law enforcement officers using tear gas and riot control tactics against peaceful protestors, in an act of violence condemned by both religious and military leaders, and by representatives of both Republican and Democrat parties. Historian John Fea of Messiah College commented on these events: "looking back through history, whenever you see someone in authority using the Bible to justify law and order, it ends badly" (Teague 2020). *Denmark Vesey's Bible*, by University of Toronto professor Jeremy Schipper, provides one poignant example of this statement, in light of what was potentially the largest insurrection against slaveholders in American history.

Vesey, who may have been born in West Africa, first appears in the historical records as a teen in Bermuda. Sold in Saint-Domingue and then returned to his slaveholder Joseph Vesey, Denmark came to Charleston SC, where he was able to purchase his freedom as the result of winning a lottery in November 1799. As a freed man, Vesey then went on to fight against slavery, demonstrating a deep knowledge of both political and biblical arguments fueling his righteous cause.

However, the book focuses primarily on the discourse surrounding Vesey's hanging on July 2, 1822, after he was convicted as the ringleader of a growing revolt which included 35 other Blacks (22 of whom were executed at one time). Vesey was accused of two crimes: treason and the perversion of God's word. In short, the trial put both slavery and biblical interpretation on the stand, as both prosecution and defense drew on the Bible to support and decry slavery. Schipper's goal in this book is to understand "how various parties used the Bible

to interpret the plot and define Vesey's legacy in the immediate aftermath of his trial and execution" (xxix), based on a careful examination of primary sources including trial documents, sermons, newspaper articles and pamphlets. In doing so, Schipper reveals two very different interpretations of scripture, with profound implications.

On the one hand, Vesey and his supporters likened their cause to that of the enslaved Israelites in the Old Testament, with Charleston being a sort of 'Egypt': "an example of a city facing severe and divinely ordained punishment" (32). This interpretation was 'radical' in contrast to that of his opponents, moving beyond theological arguments and calling on readers of scripture to "take on the role of biblical characters and to act as they do" (31). Schipper writes that Vesey and his colleagues "were not as interested in determining what the Bible means in the abstract as they were in what it implies for the deadly struggle against or the brutal enforcement of American white supremacy" (127). Drawing on scripture from both the Old and New Testaments (Exodus 1, Isaiah 19, Joshua 6:21), Vesey saw the entire Bible as a key source for racial equality (40), along with "other texts and religious practices," including those from Greek mythology and Africa (23).

In contrast, Vesey's opponents and prosecutors argued that slavery was either a divine institution or a necessary evil, due to the perceived lack of moral and intellectual development of Black people, who were often viewed as children (106). Slaveholders were portrayed as benevolent patriarchs, who were responsible for teaching religion to slaves in the 'correct manner' (under White supervision). Slaves were meant to recognize this, and pro-slavery advocates were shocked that slaves did not realize how good their lives were (105). Slavery, the court system, and slaveholders were presented as divinely ordained, and those who challenged these institutions and people were perceived as committing blasphemy against man and God. Thus, Vesey's plot was seen as "a blatant violation of the natural order of things" (66), and his use of scripture a 'perversion' of the holy word. Schipper also notes that "for those who held to a paternalistic understanding of slavery, Vesey's plot represented a direct challenge to the pretense that enslaved people consented to this system" (105).

The book is well-organized, and begins with a timeline of key events, followed by six chapters, and an appendix consisting of three death sentences as administered to Vesey and others. Each chapter begins with a scripture passage serving as an epigraph. Following a biographical sketch of Vesey's life and death, the book describes the political and religious climate of the Charleston area. The remaining chapters provide an in-depth examination of the ways in which Vesey and his opponents used the bible to support their positions. In the final chapter, Schipper provides a clear connection between Vesey's trial and execution, and violence against Blacks in America today.

Schipper provides a nuanced and sophisticated analysis and addresses our need for a strong historical analysis in order to understand racism today, particularly its relation to biblical scripture. However, he also acknowledges that his source material is 'lopsided' (xxx), primarily reflecting the perspectives of pro-slavery advocates, and an understanding of Vesey's use of scripture is obscured by vague allusions in some documents (34). While at times this reader longed for some broader social and historical context, and/or engagement with social theory, Schipper makes it clear at the beginning that his task is to present the primary documents without much reference to secondary sources. As such, the book doesn't attend to broader developments in the history of either American Christianity, scriptural interpretation, or the antislavery movement. Overall, this is a very important book for students of American or African American history and scriptural interpretation. As the incident with Trump reveals, the Bible is still used to both condemn and justify racism and violence. Scriptural interpretation, especially at the frontlines of race and racism, may be a matter of life and death.

### References

Teague, Matthew. "Trump's Bible photo op splits white evangelical loyalists into two camps." *The Guardian*, June 4, 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/04/trumps-bible-photo-op-splits-white-evangelical>. Accessed March 13, 2023.

Timothy Epp  
Redeemer University