

“Both Read the Same Bible and Pray to the Same God”



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Coversheet:

This unidentified mosaic of Ham, Shem, and Japheth uncovering Noah's feet can be found at <http://www.racematters.org/noahscurseslaverysrational.htm>.

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Introduction

As the slaveholding states plotted their response to the presidential election of 1860, publishers in New York were preparing two salvos (or, as it turned out, bottle rockets) against the “ultra-abolitionists,” whose radical opposition to Southern slavery, so some argued, was driving the slaveholding states to secession. Both, published in January 1861, were written by prominent Northern Episcopal clergymen and were of little interest to the general population. They added nothing to the debate over the morality of slavery, at least nothing that the majority of American Protestants would have considered relevant (*i.e.*, matters of tradition and reason). Even within the Episcopal Church, they seem to have been ignored. Both publications would, no doubt, have slipped into deeper obscurity but for the republication of one of them in August 1863, “just on the eve of a sharply-contested political campaign”² (probably the gubernatorial election, in which the state’s first Republican governor and a strong supporter of Lincoln’s war policies ran for reelection).³

The controversy surrounding the election saved only one of the works from abject obscurity, a tract by the Bishop of the Diocese of Vermont, John Henry Hopkins, entitled “Bible View of Slavery.”⁴ (The other, a book written by Samuel Seabury, grandson of the first bishop in the

¹ Abraham Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address, Saturday, March 4, 1865,” in *Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. G.P.O., 1989; Bartleby.com, 2001, accessed 19 July 2006; available from www.bartleby.com/124/).

² Daniel R. Goodwin, *Southern Slavery in Its Present Aspects: Containing a Reply to a Late Work of the Bishop of Vermont on Slavery* (New York: J. P. Lippincott; Negro Universities, 1864; reprint, 1969), 13.

³ See *Pennsylvania History: The Era of Industrial Ascendancy: 1861-1945*, [Internet] (Pennsylvania General Assembly, 23 July 2006); available from http://www.legis.state.pa.us/WU01/VC/visitor_info/pa_history/pa_history.htm; *Pennsylvania Politics & the Election of 1863*, [Internet] (Virginia Center for Digital History, 23 July 2006); available from <http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu/HIUS403/77pa/Chad/election.html>.

⁴ John Henry Hopkins, *Letter from the Right Rev. John H. Hopkins, D.D., LL.D., Bishop of Vermont, on the Bible View of Slavery*, [Internet] (W.F. Kost, 1861, accessed 23 July 2006); available from http://dlxs.library.cornell.edu/m/mayantislavery/browse_H.html; John Henry Hopkins, *Bible View of Slavery*, [Internet] (Society for the Diffusion of Political Knowledge, 1863, accessed 24 July 2006); available from <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/aapchtml/rbaapcbibAuthors02.html>; John Henry Hopkins, *Bible View of Slavery*, [In-

Episcopal Church, entitled *American Slavery Distinguished from the Slavery of the English Theorists*,⁵ though more artfully written, escaped serious controversy and enduring notice.) Hopkins, a prolific writer of the Hobartian school,⁶ had originally written his tract as a letter, responding to a request by several men of New York. Concerned about the national crisis produced by “the persevering agitation of the question of Slavery” and believing that patriots had a duty to give “a right direction to the public mind,” they had sought his “opinions upon the Scriptural authority for Slavery and the constitutional position of the contending parties.”⁷ He gave them not only his opinion that slavery is not *per se* sinful, but also his opinion that the Southern states had a “sovereign prerogative of secession,”⁸ an opinion prudently omitted in 1863. Whatever affect the letter or Seabury’s book might have had was overwhelmed by the secession of five Southern states in the very month of their publication. Even Hopkins’ opponents seem to have ignored his letter.⁹

During Pennsylvania’s political campaign of 1863, however, some prominent Pennsylvania Democrats sought and obtained Hopkins’ permission to republish his letter, because of their belief “that false teachings on this subject [*i.e.*, the Scriptural aspect of Slavery] have had a great deal to do with bringing on the unhappy strife” between the North and the South and that his

ternet] (n.p., 1863, accessed 9 July 2006); available from

http://dlxs.library.cornell.edu/m/mayantislavery/browse_H.html; John Henry Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery, from the Days of the Patriarch Abraham, to the Nineteenth Century. Addressed to the Right Rev. Alonzo Potter, Bishop of the Prot. Episcopal Church, in the Diocese of Pennsylvania*, The Michigan Historical Reprint Series (New York: W.I. Pooley, 1864; reprint, n.d.), 5-41.

⁵ Samuel Seabury, *American Slavery Distinguished from the Slavery of English Theorists* (New York: Mason Brothers; reprint, Kessinger, 1861; reprint, n.d.).

⁶ See Robert Bruce Mullin, *Episcopal Vision/American Reality: High Church Theology and Social Thought in Evangelical America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 101, 115-16, 178.

⁷ Hopkins, *Letter (1861)*, 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹ See Goodwin, iii; James May, *Remarks on Bishop Hopkins' Letter on the Bible View of Slavery*, [Internet] (Library of Congress, 1863, accessed 23 July 2006); available from

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/aaphtml/rbaapcbibAuthors03.html>, 3; Louis Christian Newman (“Biblicus”), *The Bible View of Slavery Reconsidered: A Letter to the Right Rev. Bishop Hopkins*, 2nd [Internet] (Henry B. Ashmead, 1863, accessed 9 July 2006); available from http://dlxs.library.cornell.edu/m/mayantislavery/browse_B.html, 3.

views as a Christian bishop would help relieve lamentable ignorance on the subject.¹⁰ (One wonders how the Pennsylvanians had remained so lamentably ignorant of what the Scriptures said about slavery, given the previous decades of debate.¹¹)

If Hopkins' letter had been ignored or overshadowed in January of 1861, it did not suffer the same fate in August of 1863. In September, Alonzo Potter, Bishop of the Diocese of Pennsylvania, published a sharp protest to Hopkins' letter. It declared that Hopkins' attempt "to apologize for slavery in the abstract" and "to advocate it as it exists in the cotton States, and in States which sell men and women in the open market as their staple product" was "unworthy of any servant of Jesus Christ."¹² Another 163 of the clergy of the Diocese joined Potter's protest.¹³ Only 49 who could have signed did not, and three of them subsequently endorsed the protest.¹⁴ The list of signers included Phillips Brooks and several who separately wrote extended responses: John P. Lundy (who wrote anonymously as "a presbyter of the church in Philadelphia"),¹⁵ Louis C. Newman (whose *nom de plume* was *Biblicus*),¹⁶ D.R. Goodwin,¹⁷ and James May.¹⁸ (Others also wrote responses. One, by an anonymous Episcopal clergyman, has been attributed to one G.W. Hyer.¹⁹ Another was by the noted Classics scholar at New York's Columbia College, Hen-

¹⁰ Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View*, 4, 55.

¹¹ See E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 494ff; Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University, 2002), 370ff.

¹² Goodwin, 10, 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10-12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

¹⁵ John Patterson Lundy, *Review of Bishop Hopkins' Bible View of Slavery, by a Presbyter of the Church in Philadelphia*, [Internet] (1863, accessed 9 July 2006); available from <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/aaphtml/aapchome.html>.

¹⁶ Newman ("Biblicus").

¹⁷ Goodwin.

¹⁸ May.

¹⁹ G.W. Hyer, *Bishop Hopkins' Letter on Slavery Ripped up and His Misuse of the Sacred Scriptures Exposed by a Clergyman of the Protestant Episcopal Church* (New York: John F. Trow, 1863). For an unexplained attribution to G.W. Hyer, see http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0008ALYQG/ref=sr_11_1/102-6540485-3112932?ie=UTF8.

ry Drisler, an ardent and articulate opponent of slavery.²⁰ An anonymous layman, who had read Hopkins' letter in one of Philadelphia's weekly newspapers, and other clergy also wrote responses.²¹)

Hopkins, quick to defend his honor and his foray into Pennsylvania, wrote Potter early in October, claiming insult and misunderstanding. He denied that his 1861 letter supported any political party or the perpetual bondage of Africans. To the contrary, in an earlier lecture (1850) and book (1857), he had set forth a plan for the gradual abolition of slavery "whenever the South should consent." His only purpose in writing the letter was "to prove, *from the Bible*, that in the *relation* of master and slave there was necessarily no sin whatever." He acknowledged the possibility of abuse, but opined that it was "certain that thousands of our Christian brethren who held slaves were treating them with kindness and justice ... and earnestly laboring to improve the comforts and ameliorate the hardships of the institution." He was completely unwilling to question the piety of Southern slaveholders, especially those who were Episcopal bishops. He promised a book in which he would prove "by the most unquestionable authorities, that slaves and slaveholders were in the Church from the beginning; that slavery was held to be consistent with

²⁰ Henry Drisler, "*Bible View of Slavery by John H. Hopkins, D.D., Bishop of the Diocese of Vermont*" Examined, [Internet] (Loyal Publication Society, 1863, accessed 9 July 2006); available from http://dlxs.library.cornell.edu/m/mayantislavery/browse_D.html. Drisler's familiarity with Episcopal worship ("How can any minister of the Episcopal Church read in his place Sunday after Sunday those consoling words of the glorious communion service, "for that Thou of thy tender mercy didst give thy only son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption, who made there ... a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world," and then deliberately write and publish to the world, that the slavery of the *negro race in the Southern States* is justified by the curse pronounced by Noah upon Canaan?" – Drisler, 9) suggests that he may have been an Episcopalian, as does his interest in the work of an Episcopal bishop. See, however, the following references, which indicate that Drisler was born on Staten Island and that some persons named Drisler were on the rolls of a Dutch Reformed Church on Staten Island: *Henry Drisler*, [Internet] (Wikipedia, 2006, accessed 24 July 2006); available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Drisler; *Records of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church in Tompkinsville, Staten Island, Richmond County, NY*, [Internet] (2004, accessed 24 July 2006); available from http://www.rootsweb.com/~nyrichmo/misc/vosburgh_rdc_tompkinsville.html.

²¹See [Layman], *Bible View of Slavery; or, Bishop Hopkins Reviewed by a Layman*, [Internet] (1864, accessed 9 July 2006); available from http://dlxs.library.cornell.edu/m/mayantislavery/browse_D.html (indexed under Drisler); David Lynn Holmes, *A Brief History of the Episcopal Church* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1993), 80-81.

Christian principles by the fathers and councils, and by all Protestant divines and commentators, up to the very close of the last century, and that this fact was universal among all churches and sects throughout the Christian world.”²² His book, which appeared in 1864, elaborated the biblical arguments of his letter and amassed an array of extra-biblical authorities to support his position.

From our perspective (as well as from that of many of his contemporaries²³), his position on slavery is mind-boggling and extreme. From his perspective, however, his opponents’ readiness to cast aside tradition and to sacrifice the unity of the church for the sake of “daring and impious innovation” was scandalous and flirted with superstition and “infidel rationalism.” In good Hobartian fashion, he professed solidarity with the primitive church (the “pure church”²⁴) and protested that his primary concern was the “stability and unity of the Church of God.”²⁵ Moreover, pointing to Potter’s own cordial relations with Southern bishops, he contended that, within the Episcopal Church, ultra-abolitionism (*i.e.*, advocacy of immediate emancipation without the South’s consent based on the view that slavery is evil in itself²⁶) was a recent development.²⁷ Nothing new could be of God.

Indeed, even Potter did not advocate an immediate end to slavery.²⁸ Hopkins shared concern for the church’s unity with his fellow bishops. As Mullin observes, “The high church emphasis upon the sacred nature of the church, its fear of schism, and its concern with unity as a

²² Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View*, 47.

²³ In addition to the works cited herein that responded to Hopkins’ letter, prominent Episcopalians who had long decried slavery included William Jay and John Jay, the son and grandson, respectively, of the first Chief Justice of the United States. Extensive examples of their antislavery writings are included in Cornell University’s Samuel J. May Anti-Slavery Collection at http://dlxs.library.cornell.edu/m/mayantislavery/browse_J.html.

²⁴ Mullin, 101, 127.

²⁵ Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View*, 48-49.

²⁶ See Mullin, 112, 127.

²⁷ Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View*, 46.

²⁸ Holmes, 81.

mark of the spirit of God retarded any radical action on the question of slavery.”²⁹ Nevertheless, Hopkins’ vigorous defense of the righteousness of Southern slavery, Southern slaveholders, and the slave trade, not to mention his incursion into the Diocese of Pennsylvania and its politics, scandalized Potter and most of the clergy of the Diocese.³⁰

Hopkins failed to stay the advance of ultra-abolitionism, but his insistence on the maintenance of cordial, non-judgmental relations with Southern Episcopalians (of which his defense of them and their institution was undoubtedly a large part) played an important role in the quick reunification of the Episcopal Church once the war ended,³¹ as did the church’s steadfast refusal to take an official position on slavery. Even the Bishops’ Pastoral Letter (1862) that condemned secession (and which Hopkins refused to join) refrained from condemning slavery and omitted it from its enumeration of sins for which the nation deserved God’s chastisement.³²

Full consideration of the arguments exchanged among Episcopalians on the issue of slavery or of the considerations that determined the church’s stance is beyond the scope of this essay. This essay aims only to describe Hopkins’ view of Scripture and his hermeneutic and to contrast his approach with that of his opponents, who held fundamentally the same view of Scripture and its interpretation but differed with Hopkins in their application of Scripture to the issue of slavery.

The Proslavery Arguments

Much of this essay will examine what Hopkins said about his approach to biblical interpretation, but it will be helpful to put his hermeneutical claims in the context of his actual pro-

²⁹ Mullin, 125.

³⁰ See Lundy, 3-4; Newman ("Biblicus"), 3.

³¹ See Holmes, 82.

³² See Charles Pettit McIlvaine, *Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America to the Clergy and Laity of the Same, Delivered before the General Convention, October 17, 1862*, [Internet] (Baker & Godwin, 1862, accessed 9 July 2006); available from <http://anglicanhistory.org/usa/mcilvaine/pastoral1862.html>; Mullin, 204.

slavery arguments. Hopkins' basic argument is that the Bible nowhere condemns the institution of slavery as such. Rather, from Genesis to Paul, the Bible sanctions slavery. Noah (who spoke as God's prophet) punished Ham's disrespect by cursing the descendants of Ham's son Canaan to slavery. Abraham held slaves, the Tenth Commandment forbade coveting the slaves of another, and the Law regulated slavery.³³ Jesus said nothing about slavery, either for it or against it, and must therefore have approved it.³⁴ Paul instructed slaves to obey their masters and sent Onesimus, a runaway slave, back to his master Philemon.³⁵ The conclusion of the argument is that, since the Bible sanctions slavery, it must not have been wrong *per se* for the people of the Bible, and if it was not wrong for them, it is not necessarily wrong for anybody, anywhere, anytime.

Hopkins' Hermeneutic

While Hopkins recognizes that he and his opponents are interpreters of Scripture, he casts their disagreement on slavery as much more than a hermeneutical difference. He does not call his fellow churchmen infidels but does easily associate their contention that slavery is a sin with modern infidelity. Aware of the attacks of some radical abolitionists on the authority of the Bible,³⁶ he damns all radical opposition to slavery by association with the "increasing clamor against the Bible," "geological speculation," and the denial of prophecy and miracle.³⁷ Ultra-abolitionism is one with "the modern discovery of those Eastern philanthropists who deny the divinity of our Redeemer, and attach no importance to the Bible except as it may suit them-

³³ Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View*, 7-11.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12, 15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 13-15.

³⁶ See J. Albert Harrill, "The Use of the New Testament in the American Slave Controversy: A Case History in the Hermeneutical Tension between Biblical Criticism and Christian Moral Debate," *Religion and American Culture* 10, no. 2 (2000): 159-60.

³⁷ Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View*, 48.

selves.”³⁸ Hopkins, by contrast, has cast his lot “with the old martyrs and confessors of the primitive Church, and with their true successors.”³⁹ Hopkins, like many other Christians of the period, reduces this wide-ranging political, social, legal, and moral debate to a theological issue, polarized as “a forced dichotomy – either orthodoxy and slavery, or heresy and antislavery.”⁴⁰

Such confidence may offend postmodern ears, but the hermeneutic on which it rests warrants close attention. Understanding the characteristics of a hermeneutic that drives one to equate conflicting applications of the Bible to political, social, legal, or moral issues with heresy or infidelity may illumine today’s polarizing debates.

1. The Bible is God’s legislation for humanity conveyed through human instruments.

Hopkins and his responders are grounded in traditional faith in Scripture as the Word of God. Hopkins proclaims this belief more insistently than his responders, repeatedly using the adjective “inspired” to refer to Scripture and its human authors.⁴¹ He never gives an extended explanation of what he means by “inspired,” but the following excerpts are instructive:

[E]very Christian is bound to assent to the rule of the inspired Apostle, that "sin is the transgression of the law," namely, the law laid down in the Scriptures by the authority of God – the supreme “Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy.” From his Word there can be no appeal.⁴²

*St. Paul was inspired, and knew the will of the Lord Jesus Christ, and was only intent on obeying it. And who are we, that in our modern wisdom presume to set aside the Word of God, and scorn the example of the divine Redeemer, and spurn the preaching and the conduct of the apostles, and invent for ourselves a “higher law” than those holy Scriptures which are given to us as "a light to our feet and a lamp to our paths," in the darkness of a sinful and a polluted world? Who are we that virtually blot out the language of the sacred record, and dictate to the majesty of heaven what HE shall regard as sin and reward as duty? Who are we that are ready to trample on the doctrine of the Bible ...?*⁴³

³⁸ Ibid., 47.

³⁹ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁰ Noll, 395.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View*, 13, 15, 16, 39, 47, 63, 148, 149, 159, 202, 203, 231, 348, 353.

⁴² Ibid., 6.

⁴³ Ibid., 16.

To the foregoing, add his characterization of Paul as “the inspired organ of the divine Lawgiver” and of the “whole Bible” as “the Word of inspiration,”⁴⁴ and a clear picture of his view of inspiration emerges. God’s giving of Scripture is the direct legislative act of the supreme Lawgiver. The human organs were instruments, not authors. To disregard anything written by the inspired Apostle is to set aside the Word of God. The very “language of the sacred record” must be honored. It is not a stretch to conclude that, for Hopkins, Scripture is completely inspired by God in all its precepts, its teachings, and its laws, right down to its language. Even though the human instruments were solidly located in place, time, and culture, the precepts, teachings, and laws of Scripture are unmixed with any human error (though Scripture reports much human error).

Hopkins does acknowledge that Scripture reflects some human discretion, but only when Scripture itself does. Thus, the Old Testament’s permitting divorce and polygamy are cases of divinely allowed human discretion to accommodate the hardness of human hearts. Jesus makes this clear when he bases his teaching about divorce on God’s original plan for marriage.⁴⁵ Similarly, Paul once states that “he speaks merely of his own mind.”⁴⁶ Nothing that the Bible says about slavery acknowledges the exercise of human discretion, however. Thus, Hopkins treats everything that the Bible says about slavery as God’s word.

2. *As God’s law, the Bible is the only infallible guide for life and the only infallible criterion for judging the lawfulness of slavery.*

Based on this view of Scripture, Hopkins holds that Scripture is the sole infallible guide to the will of God. It is the “standard of all Christian faith,”⁴⁷ “the only infallible criterion.”⁴⁸ It is

⁴⁴ Ibid., 311.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 36ff.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 231.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 51.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 6-7.

a binding guide for life.⁴⁹ Together the Old and New Testaments are “the written Word of God” and afford “the only infallible standard of moral rights and obligations.”⁵⁰ This rule of life and faith does not change.⁵¹ The Bible is not only God’s Word to the people to whom the words of Scripture were first uttered, but those same words are also God’s Word to all people in every age. Scripture is omni-competent. For all people in all times and all places, it is the “supreme directory in every moral and religious duty.”⁵² Thus, “the true aspect of the [slavery] controversy ... can only be settled by the Bible.”⁵³

Hopkins does not reject tradition or reason. Indeed, he makes full use of both as far as they square with his reading of Scripture, which, he contends, conforms to the way the church has always read Scripture. His position rests firmly “upon the rock of faith in the Word of God, as it was interpreted by the whole Church from the beginning up to our own day.”⁵⁴ His position states “the teaching of the inspired Apostles, and ... the Holy Catholic (or universal) Church,” which “was clear and unanimous on the *lawfulness* of slavery for eighteen centuries together.”⁵⁵ He is especially fond of tradition that maintains “the primitive rule of catholic consent and abjures all novelties.”⁵⁶ Anti-slavery is a “modern doctrine” and is contrary to the sacred Scriptures,⁵⁷ and it is “hostile to the divine authority of the Bible, hostile to the Church of God.”⁵⁸

⁴⁹ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁵¹ Ibid., 46.

⁵² Ibid., 41.

⁵³ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 49.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 53.

3. *The Bible is without error or internal contradiction, and all parts must be interpreted as a consistent, coherent whole.*

While Hopkins' insistence on the authority of Scripture does not necessarily announce his hermeneutic, his preference for the term "infallible" and his refusal to acknowledge a middle ground that both confesses the authority of Scripture and questions the contemporary relevance of biblical statements concerning slavery suggest a flat, literalist hermeneutic that will not countenance the possibility of internal conflict or error in biblical statements. This characterization becomes more certain as one examines his use of Scripture and what little he says explicitly about interpretive method.

For instance, on that premise that the Law of Moses is divine legislation,⁵⁹ Hopkins turns to his training as a lawyer for principles of legislative interpretation and applies them directly to provision of the Law of Moses. He says:

It is a well-know maxim, in the interpretation of all laws, that each sentence shall be so construed as to give a consistent meaning to the whole. And assuredly, if we are bound to follow this rule in the legislation of earth, we can not be less bound to follow this rule in the legislation of the Almighty.⁶⁰

His application of this principle, which makes perfect sense in the interpretation of a single legislative act but not across multiple acts from various times, is instructive, for he treats the entirety of the Mosaic Law as a single act, which must be interpreted with complete internal consistency. This move is remarkable, not only for its analogy between the Bible and human legislation, but also for its explicit reliance on an extra-biblical interpretive principle. He seems oblivious to the inconsistency between his contention that the Bible supplies the only infallible criterion for life and his turn to a human, and therefore fallible, criterion for interpretation of this infallible book.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

We see this hermeneutic at work in his interpretation of a passage in Deuteronomy that was troublesome to defenders of the Fugitive Slave Act: “Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee” (Deut 23:15-16). In Leviticus, he finds, along with severe restriction on the terms under which a fellow Israelite can be held in servitude, permission to buy, sell, and inherit bondmen and bondmaids of “the heathen race” (Lev 39:40-46, 55). Given this permission for Israelites to enslave the heathen, he argues, Deuteronomy’s prohibition of return, though unqualified, must apply only to those who have escaped from “a *foreign heathen master*, and can not, with any sound reason, be applied to the slaves of the Israelites themselves.” Why? “For it is manifest that if it were so applied, it would nullify the other enactments of the divine Lawgiver,”⁶¹ namely, the permission to own heathen slaves. We may find gaps in his logic, but his hermeneutic is clear.

He does not, however, limit this hermeneutic of absolute legislative consistency to the interpretation of the Law of Moses, but extends it to the teaching of Christ. Addressing the abolitionists’ contention that the Golden Rule and “the great principle of the Gospel, love to God and love to man” necessarily condemn slavery, Hopkins argues that the Golden Rule and the principle of love were nothing new to Christ, but came from the Law and should not be thought inconsistent with it. Thus, if the Law enjoins love and also permits slavery, slavery cannot be necessarily inconsistent with loving or with treating others as one would like to be treated.⁶² Moreover, Hopkins does not confine his extension of the hermeneutic of consistency to the teachings of Christ that restate the Law. He insists that the Mosaic Law is consistent with the Gospel because

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 12-13, 240.

the Gospel did not abolish the Law.⁶³ Accordingly, nothing that Christ or his apostles taught can properly be interpreted to condemn slavery.

4. *Interpreters should defer to the plain sense of the Bible.*

With the rhetorical assurance of a prosecutor arguing his case to a jury, he urges that his conclusions come from the “plain statements of Scriptures,”⁶⁴ the “plain precepts and practices of the Apostles.”⁶⁵ He is likewise confident that “every candid and sincere inquirer” will reach the same conclusions.⁶⁶ His interpretations are “too plain for controversy.”⁶⁷ There is no room for reasonable doubt concerning the biblical sanction of slavery. Though he examines the work of other interpreters at length, his standard response to disagreement is to charge the commentator with bias, absurdity, or giving his opinion instead of adhering to the text.⁶⁸ He acknowledges no distinction between the Bible and the Bible-as-read-by-Hopkins.⁶⁹ Moreover, he makes no clear distinction between what the text plainly means, *i.e.*, its exegesis, and how the text, once exegeted, applies to contemporary readers or whether it applies at all. What the text plainly meant for its original audience is what it plainly means for us.

Setting aside the rhetoric and the blurring of exegesis and application, however, there is real exegesis at work here. “Plain” does not mean “obvious” or “superficial,” nor does it mean “literal,” as opposed to figurative. It does not mean that the original language or the historical setting should be ignored. Hopkins engages in an interpretive process that might be classified as historical critical exegesis.⁷⁰ He considers the original languages and seeks to understand biblical

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 11; see also 15, 16, 28, 38, 39, 76, 84, 85, 123, 128.

⁶⁸ See, *e.g.*, *Ibid.*, 144, 150, 158.

⁶⁹ Cf. Noll’s observation that “very few Americans could articulate a distinction between the Bible and the Bible-as-read-in-America.” Noll, 376.

⁷⁰ See Harrill: 163-173.

texts in their historical setting and in relation to other texts. For instance, he looks to the Hebrew and the Greek to argue that the term commonly translated “servant” in the English Bible generally means “slave.”⁷¹ He engages in elaborate intertextual, historical, and linguistic argument to make his case that the descendants of Noah’s cursed grandson Canaan migrated to Africa and became the Negro race.⁷² Of course, his method is far from a pure critical approach, for he easily confuses his biases with evidence. For example, he denies one writer’s claim that Melchizedek was a Canaanite, because “I could not conceive” that he could belong to the race cursed by Noah.⁷³ Still, the point holds that adherence to the plain sense does not confine the interpreter to a superficial reading of the English Bible.

With the hermeneutic of plain sense and its servant historical criticism, Hopkins challenges abolitionists’ arguments that the Bible actually condemns slavery. Because they typically entail subversion of the normal meaning of words (particularly, the word “slave”) or the extension of certain biblical teachings to override others, they violate the plain sense of Scripture. In the end, Hopkins’ position is “the more defensible position from the perspective of historical criticism.”⁷⁴

5. *Biblical interpretation is a strictly rational process with no place for intuition or feeling.*

In what Harrill labels as “one of the most revealing passages in proslavery literature, Hopkins acknowledges his own discomfort with slavery, but yields his conscience to the plain sense of Scripture:⁷⁵

With entire correctness, therefore, your letter refers the question to the only infal-
lible criterion – the Word of God. If it were a matter to be determined by my personal

⁷¹ Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View*, 5-6.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 177ff.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁷⁴ See Harrill: 174.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*: 173.

sympathies, tastes, or feelings, I should be as ready as any man to condemn the institution of slavery; for all my prejudices of education, habit, and social position stand entirely opposed to it. But as a Christian, I am solemnly warned not to be “wise in my own conceit,” and not to “lean to my own understanding.” As a Christian, I am compelled to submit my weak and erring intellect to the authority of the Almighty. For then only can I be safe in my conclusions, when I know that they are in accordance with the will of Him, before whose tribunal I must render a strict account in the last great day.⁷⁶

To the same effect, he repeatedly uses “philanthropists” – false, mistaken, and modern, of course – as a pejorative appellation for abolitionists.⁷⁷ Defending corporal punishment of slaves, for instance, he cites its lawful use “in the case of children and apprentices” and “in the army and the navy,” the “fixed institution” of the whipping post, Moses’ permission of 40 stripes, and Jesus’ use of “a scourge of small cords” to drive the money changers from the temple. Then he asks, “Are our modern philanthropists more merciful than Christ, and wiser than the Almighty?”⁷⁸ The plain sense of Scripture can be trusted. Our moral intuition cannot. “For I can imagine no transgression more odious in the sight of God, and more sure to forfeit His blessing, than the willful determination to distort His revealed Word, and make it speak, not as it truly is, but as men, in their insane pride of superior philanthropy, fancy that it ought to be.”⁷⁹

6. *His hermeneutic adopts cultural presuppositions about race and social structure.*

Hopkins’ hermeneutic assumes the inferiority of black Africans. Speaking of Noah’s curse of Ham’s son Canaan, he attributes the curse to God’s foreseeing the “total degradation of the race.”⁸⁰ While this assertion appears at first to speak of the idolatry of the Canaanites, as reported in the Bible, it becomes clear that Hopkins has black Africans in mind and depends on extra-biblical sources for his opinion. His beliefs about the superiority of the Anglo-Saxons and the inferiority of other races, Africans being the lowest on the scale, are explicit in the following

⁷⁶ Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View*, 6-7.

⁷⁷ See *Ibid.*, 8, 17, 47, 48, 50, 56, 98, 129, 243, 248, 249, 252, 253, 301, 302, 308, 311, 312, 329, 333, 339, 341, 346, 347, 352.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 219-20.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

excerpt from his fierce argument that, the Declaration of Independence notwithstanding, all men are not created equal:

To estimate aright the vast diversity among the races of mankind, we may begin with our own, the highly privileged Anglo-Saxon, which now stands at the head, although our ancestors were heathen barbarians only two thousand years ago. From this we may go down the descending scale through the Turks, the Chinese, the Tartars, the Japanese, the Egyptians, the Hindoos, the Indian tribes, the Laplanders, the Abyssinians, the Africans, and how is it possible to imagine that God has made them all *equal!*⁸¹

Such is the inferiority of Negroes that they are not fitted for “freedom at any age”:

Such, under the rule of the Scriptures and the Constitution of the United States, is the case of the negro. God, in his wisdom and providence, caused the patriarch Noah to predict that he should be the servant of servants to the posterity of Japheth. And the same almighty Ruler, who alone possesses the power, has wonderfully adapted the race to their condition. For every candid observer agrees that the negro is happier and better as a slave than as a free man, and no individual belonging to the Anglo-Saxon stock would acknowledge that the intellect of the negro is equal to his own.⁸²

It is this line of reasoning that allows Hopkins to remain untroubled by the enslavement of black Africans while he would certainly have considered the enslavement of Anglo-Saxon Christians an offense against divine providence. After all, if God fits men, women, and children for the condition of slavery, the loving – indeed, the Christ-like – thing to do is to enslave them.

This racist presupposition is part of a larger presupposition that the entire ordering of society, including the hierarchical classification of peoples and the establishment of patriarchy, is God’s work. God’s providence has arranged the enslavement of the African descendants of Canaan and has even placed Hopkins in New England.⁸³ It seems that everything has been arranged in society just as God intends. Consequently, Christ’s commandment to love our neighbor and the Golden Rule must be interpreted within the framework of the existing, providential social

⁸¹ Ibid., 21.

⁸² Ibid., 31.

⁸³ Ibid., 41. Seabury put it this way: “Why can not men understand that there is a Providence which governs the world, as well as a God that created it, and that, while they reject the appointments of God, they are on the high-road to the denial of His being?” Seabury, 148.

structure. He leaves no room for these commandments to stand in judgment of it. They teach us, not to treat others as we would want to be treated if we were in their position, but to treat them as befits their status, or as they should want to be treated given their providentially determined place in society.⁸⁴

The Anti-Slavery Hermeneutic

Some antislavery arguments consist of arguments over the exegesis of the passages that the proslavery arguments cited.⁸⁵ Some challenge Hopkins' representations regarding the settled teaching of the church.⁸⁶ From such arguments, as well as from explicit statements, it is clear that Hopkins' opponents occupy basically the same position that he does regarding the authority of Scripture and tradition. The differences might well be characterized as differences in the application of reason to Scripture and tradition. The opponents identify key biblical principles and seek to accommodate the rest of Scripture to those principles, while Hopkins constrains application of the principles to fit the rest of Scripture. Both sides try to preserve the authority of Scripture. The opposition is unwilling to say that Scripture's sanction of slavery is simply wrong. Lundy captures the general perspective of the opposition:

“From the Word of God there can be no appeal,” the Bishop tells us; of course there cannot; but from the Bishop's *interpretation* of that word, so much at variance with the universal interpretation of Christendom, there can be a most serious appeal. Is the Bishop infallible?⁸⁷

Hopkins' opponents are not, however, driven by critical exegesis of scripture. When they engage in critical exegesis, it is to undermine Hopkins' literalist reliance on the Bible's apparent sanction of slavery. While they pursue a variety of hermeneutical strategies to counter Hopkins'

⁸⁴ Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View*, 12-13, 240.

⁸⁵ See, e.g., Drisler, 2-8; Hyer; Newman ("Biblicus"), 4-10.

⁸⁶ See, e.g., Drisler, 2; Goodwin, 120ff.

⁸⁷ Lundy, 4.

arguments,⁸⁸ none explicitly challenge Hopkins' view of the Bible. When they are not pitting their critical exegesis against his, they are generally appealing to broader principles or to the general tenor of Holy Scripture.

Only one of the writers examined for this essay comes close to challenging Hopkins' contention that the Bible is to be regarded as an immutable, infallible guidebook for life. James May, a priest in the Diocese of Pennsylvania, argues from "the whole tenor of the Scriptures," as do others, but finally acknowledges that, in so doing, he is giving moral intuition priority over a literal reading of the Bible:

Slavery comes into being by force and wrong, such as could not be, were the spirit of the Gospel to master the hearts of men. There are principles or instincts of common sense, which no subtleties of logic can master. Whatever may be the learning and ingenuity which can bend particular passages of the Bible to the defense of slavery, somehow the whole tenor of the Scriptures, as read by the unsophisticated, common mind, will turn against the institution.... Take off from the Bible the restraint of ingenious criticism, and, after all, it does teach that the oppressor should let the oppressed go free. In the air of the Bible we feel the instincts of freedom. This, it may be said, is yielding not to argument, but to feeling. But, says Coleridge, "feeling is sometimes the deeper reason."⁸⁹

For Hopkins, this approach is neither rational nor orthodox. It forsakes the certainty and predictability of simply following the literal, plain sense reading of Scripture and opens the door to a flood of novelties.

Conclusion

At the root of the biblical battle over slavery are the "opposing values of literalism and moral intuition," which "remain at odds in American religious culture, shaping contemporary debates over race relations, military conflict, capital punishment, poverty, abortion, full emancipation of women, and lesbian and gay rights."⁹⁰ Notwithstanding the passage of more than a century and great strides in our understanding of the historical and cultural mangers in which the

⁸⁸ For a description of these strategies, see Harrill: 150ff.

⁸⁹ May, 8.

⁹⁰ Harrill: 174-75.

Bible was birthed, the shape of the debate is not much changed. The church remains divided over how to read the Bible and particularly over how the Bible applies to contemporary issues. This divide, though often characterized as a conservative-liberal divide, is more of a divide over how to coax the Bible onto our side of the debate. Thus, for example, certain “conservatives” will interpret the Bible literally to support capital punishment, but will appeal to broader principles to oppose abortion, which is not specifically mentioned in the Bible. Certain “liberals,” on the other hand will interpret the Bible literally to show God’s preferential option for the poor but will appeal to broader principles in support of ordination of women, gays, or lesbians.

A skeptic might see a results-oriented hermeneutic at work both in the slavery debate and in contemporary debates. For a variety of reasons, we conclude that a certain course of action is right or wrong and then busy ourselves finding biblical support for our position. Even Hopkins, who claims simply to follow the plain sense of Scripture, argues for a result that suits his cultural and political presuppositions, and one wonders which came first.

In these hermeneutic enterprises, we generally do not address the fundamental question, *viz.*, what are the respective roles of Scripture/tradition and moral intuition in ethical analysis. To address this question requires us first to reconsider the role of the Bible. Is it really an infallible guidebook for all of the issues of life, and is its meaning for ethical reflection the same yesterday, today, and forever? Might we not look to earlier wisdom in the Anglican tradition, which refused to attribute omni-competence to Holy Scripture, but limited its sufficiency to “all things necessary for salvation”?⁹¹ Even in setting forth a doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture much like that of Hopkins, Richard Hooker refused to allow that doctrine to lead to a flat, literalist hermeneutic:

⁹¹ ECUSA, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church*, Personal ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1979), 868.

We all confess that Scripture is God's Word. Every proposition in it, every sentence, is to us a heavenly principle. This is especially so of that truth that leads to our salvation since that is the most certain and most surely infallible part of Scripture.⁹²

Furthermore, if we are to give due regard to Scripture, must we not also look to what it says about the Holy Spirit's work in forming human moral intuition, even when there are no instructions in Scripture?⁹³ Perhaps we all, in our zeal to marshal biblical support for our cherished values, cede to the Bible work that God means for us to do.

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⁹³ See, e.g., John 16:13; Rom 15:14; Heb 5:14; 1 John 2:20.

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