

Bible Politics: Denial, Division & Exclusion in the Nineteenth-Century Religious Publishing Industry

Aiden Faust

When did people of African descent begin to own personal copies of the Bible? This question focuses on the widespread distribution of Bibles by Evangelical Christians throughout the nineteenth century and considers the politics of African American access to information. In the United States, the nineteenth century Evangelical movement made a commitment to placing a copy of the Christian Bible in every home. This crusade was funded largely through fledgling national religious organizations, including the American Bible Society (ABS) and the American Tract Society (ATS). Although both ABS and ATS maintained centralized publication centers in New York City, control of distribution networks was decidedly more diffused. Dissemination of texts was handled by local auxiliaries across the country, and these groups tended to reflect the regional sentiments that so sharply divided the nation regarding slavery.

If the Bible movement sought to provide copies of the foundational Christian text to

every American, under what circumstances prior to the Civil War were people of African descent, both slave and free, largely excluded? Issues of literacy, autonomy, agency, and power are tightly intertwined in the concept of the right to own a Bible. Despite the abolitionist leanings of many northern Bible societies that spearheaded this movement, local southern auxiliaries remained unmoved in their opposition to literate slaves or freedmen. National organizations bowed to these local auxiliaries prior to the Civil War and in the years after, failed to build significant coalitions with Black church networks.

An examination of two of the largest and most influential Bible societies illustrates the extent to which this struggle over access to information—in the form of religious texts—mirrored the national struggle over the fundamental human rights of people of African descent in the United States. The American Bible Society and the American Tract Society were both national organizations that generally sought to publicly ignore and avoid the issues

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both ABS and ATS maintained centralized publication centers in New York City control of distribution networks was decidedly more difficult. Discrimination of texts was handled by local auxiliaries across the country and these groups tended to reflect the regional sentiments that so sharply divided the nation regarding slavery. If the Bible movement sought to provide copies of the foundational Christian text to

associated with distribution of religious literature to African Americans until after the Civil War, when attention briefly shifted to freedmen's education. By the close of the nineteenth century, that attention had turned to newly arrived European immigrants and their need of religious texts in foreign translations.

The American Bible Society was founded in New York City in 1816 and grew into a major national religious publisher in the 1820s.¹ Centered in the printing and financial capital of the United States during this period, ABS had access to state-of-the-art printing technology, including stereotypography, steam-powered printing, and machine-made paper. Their business model relied on both selling and giving away copies of the Bible.² The first general supply—a phrase used by ABS to describe their goal of ensuring every American had a Bible—was launched in 1829. Centralized production was successful, but regional distribution by auxiliary societies had uneven results. The economic strength of local auxiliaries was problematic in universal distribution, since wealthier areas tended to thrive, while poor areas languished. Although ABS used the word “systematic” to describe their auxiliary system, Peter Nord characterizes it as “fairly haphazard” through the 1820s and 1830s.³ Over time, the American Bible Society evolved into an increasingly bureaucratic organization with administrative oversight handled at the national level.

The reports of colporteurs, or travelling book salesmen, provide some insight into the reading practices and rates of book ownership among Americans. These statistics from annual reports published by ABS and other religious publishing organizations reveal the failures in their distribution systems, including dissemination in rural areas, the South, and to African Americans.⁴ The American Bible Society's insistence upon allowing distribution decisions to be made at a local level gave power to the

“conservative, slaveholder-dominated auxiliaries in the South.”⁵

Both internal and external political pressures tried to sway the ABS from its policy of avoidance and deferral regarding slavery. Abolitionists attempted to pressure the ABS into shifting their position through donations made specifically to provide Bibles to slaves. The “Bibles for Slaves” campaign was led by Joshua Leavitt, a Congregationalist minister and editor of the Boston *Emancipator*.⁶ The American Anti-Slavery Society (AAS), the first national abolitionist organization, offered ABS twenty thousand dollars in 1834 and again in 1835, which ABS declined.⁷ Other organizations formed to fill the gap left by the major Bible societies. The American Missionary Association (AMA), formed in 1846 by leading northern abolitionists Arthur and Lewis Tappan, identified “provid[ing] abolitionists with a society which would subsidize antislavery ministers, send[ing] Bibles to Negroes, and pointedly refus[ing] aid to churches with slaveholders” as its primary mission.⁸

Within the American Bible Society itself, a proposal was introduced and subsequently defeated at the organization's semi-annual meeting in Cincinnati in 1844 that called for the distribution of Bibles to slaves. The 1845 ABS annual report addresses donations earmarked for slaves. Although these donations were officially discouraged, thousands of dollars of such donations from individuals and organizations were accepted by the Society. ABS financial records indicate most earmarked funds recorded prior to the Civil War remained unutilized for their intended purpose.⁹ While the “Bibles for Slaves” campaign failed to sway the American Bible Society's policies, it “nevertheless helped to expose the toleration of slavery by the nation's religious institutions.”¹⁰

The American Tract Society was founded in 1825 to publish religious tracts, which were typically excerpts under ten pages created for

Figure 2
Russell Lee
Negro mother teaching children numbers and alphabet in home of sharecropper, Transylvania, Louisiana, January 1939.
Farm Security Administration Collection. Louisiana. January 1939. Photograph.
Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

free distribution. Although described as an organization dominated by northerners that saw itself as “an instrument of progressive change,” ATS, too, practiced a “[p]olicy of silent evasion” to preserve “evangelical solidarity and national unity.”¹¹ Annual reports of the Society fail to even mention slavery until the 1850s, and no public statements against slavery were issued prior to the Civil War.¹² In 1853, leading abolitionist William Jay dropped his support of ATS. Other abolitionists followed suit, and in the Northeast, “waves of local successions” fractured and weakened the society.¹³ It wasn’t until 1857 that the American Tract Society struck a compromise on the issue of slavery, making a distinction between the “moral evils and vices slavery produced” and the “political aspects” of slavery.¹⁴ Such intermediate positions, however, failed to appease its divided membership. The American Tract Society and the American Bible Society both suffered successions of northern and southern factions over the moral implications of slavery. This increasingly factionalized environment mirrored larger schisms within American Protestant denominations, as well as the American public as a whole.¹⁵

With national organizations stymied by the issue of slavery, some local and regional Bible societies took matters into their own hands. Ohio’s Cuyahoga County Bible Society began providing Bibles directly to slaves in 1847.¹⁶ The Knoxville Bible Society also involved with direct distribution to slaves in Eastern Tennessee. The correspondence of colporteur Charles Proctor with ABS Secretaries details these activities. Robert Cvornyek identifies leaders working in communities across the American South to provide Bibles to slaves in defiance of state and local laws, including: Reverend W.C. Williams in Savannah, Georgia; William Martin in Columbia, South Carolina; and Reverend Philip Courtney of the Virginia Bible Society.¹⁷

The national Bible societies were effectively crippled by outbreak of the Civil War.

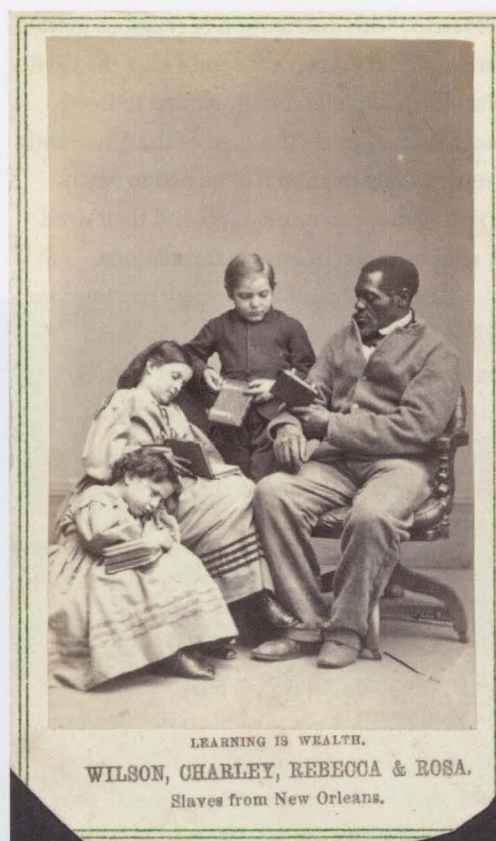


Figure 3

Chas. (Charles) Paxton
(?–1880)

*Learning is wealth. Wilson,
Charley, Rebecca, and Rosa.
Slaves from New Orleans /
Chas. Paxson, photographer,
New York., c. 1864*

Photographic print on carte
de visite mount, albumen,
10 x 6 cm.

The William A. Gladstone
Collection of African
American Photographs,
Library of Congress, Prints and
Photographs Division, LC-DIG-
ppmsca-11128

Northern colporteurs were expelled from southern states and the local distribution networks collapsed in the South. Limited Bible supplies reached escaped slaves who sought refuge at contraband camps at Union military forts. The American Bible Society published texts and coordinated distribution at these camps, often working in conjunction with other groups (including the American Missionary Association, the American Tract Society, and freedmen’s relief organizations).¹⁸

The failure of the national Bible societies to officially condone the distribution of their publications to Black audiences shifted in the wake of the Civil War (Figure 2). Educational and religious instruction was initially acknowledged as part of the responsibility of the nation to its new freedmen, women, and children (Figure 3). These efforts were short-lived, however. In general, ABS focused more on rebuilding its auxiliary system rather than

forging alliances with either the Freedmen's Bureau or the burgeoning Black church movement in the South.¹⁹ The ATS, meanwhile, aggressively engaged in distribution of religious texts to people of African descent after the Civil War, focusing for a limited time on literacy efforts in freedmen's schools.²⁰

The American Bible Society chose not to align with the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands²¹ and instead focused on restructuring southern agencies after the war. Widespread local resistance to freedmen among the reconstituted southern auxiliaries was commonplace.²² African Americans quickly responded by forming their own religious networks. As the independent Black church movement grew in the South, corresponding Black Bible Societies formed. Although ABS records document active discussion of Black Bible societies between 1866 and 1874, they failed to recognize or include such organizations within their national umbrella.²³ Peter Wosh maintains: "The Society's conservative policy prevented it from establishing a strong connection with the newly freed Black community. [White] Bible societies remained outside the complex institutional network created by freed people."²⁴

Instead of partnering with Black churches, the American Bible Society and the American Tract Society turned their attention to the issue of freedmen's education. After the ATS finally publically condemned slavery in 1862, the organization underwent a radical policy shift regarding the distribution of literature to African Americans. The ATS expanded its team of colporteurs working among freedmen to 80 by 1870. Their activity included literature distribution, Sunday school formation, educational instruction, and preaching. The education and moral reform of freedmen, women, and children became a focus of ATS activity through the 1870s.²⁵ Religious circulars and spiritual primers were vehicles for advancing

moral training and middle class values among millions of new students. According to Karl Valois, half a million ATS spiritual primers were printed by 1875 and were "among the most widely used texts during Reconstruction."²⁶ These texts, however, were laden with racial assumptions and prejudices, as well as religious paternalism.²⁷ For these reasons, the ATS has been characterized as a "vehicle of conservatism, containment, and repression."²⁸

As the 1870s progressed, Bible societies experienced declining support of freedmen's education. The waning of public interest in the socioeconomic integration of people of African descent into American culture significantly hampered all organizational fundraising efforts. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Bible societies shifted their attention to European immigrants in need of foreign translations of religious literature. Eventually, Bible societies looked overseas for "less controversial" missionary audiences to receive their literature.²⁹ Interwoven in this history of religious publishing are issues of race, resources, and power. The politics of access to information were as critical during the rise of mass media in the nineteenth century as they are today, as we witness the evolution of digital communications and internet cultures.

1. See David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Robert Cvornyek, *The Bible in Slavery and Freedom: The American Bible Society and the Afro-American Community, 1816–1960* (New York: American Bible Society, Dept. of Archives/Library Services, 1990).
2. Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 66, 75–76.
3. *Ibid.*, 82–93.
4. Peter J. Wosh, *Spreading the Word: The Bible Business in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 208.
5. Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 152.
6. John R. McKivigan, “The Gospel Will Burst the Bonds of the Slave: The Abolitionists’ Bibles for Slaves Campaign,” *Negro History Bulletin* 45 (September 1982): 62.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Clifford S. Griffin, “The Abolitionists and the Benevolent Societies, 1831–1861,” *Journal of Negro History* 44 (1959): 204.
9. Cvornyek, *The Bible in Slavery and Freedom*, 8–10.
10. McKivigan, “The Gospel Will Burst the Bonds of the Slave,” 62.
11. Karl Eric Valois, *To Revolutionize the World: The American Tract Society and the Regeneration of the Republic, 1825–1877* (New Haven: University of Connecticut, 1994), 299.
12. *Ibid.*, 322, 326.
13. Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 154.
14. Griffin, “Abolitionists and the Benevolent Societies,” 213.
15. Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 152–54.
16. Cvornyek, *The Bible in Slavery and Freedom*, 11.
17. *Ibid.*, 14–16.
18. *Ibid.*, 18–21.
19. *Ibid.*, 23–27, and Wosh, *Spreading the Word*, 221–26.
20. Valois, *To Revolutionize the World*, 337–47.
21. Cvornyek, *The Bible in Slavery and Freedom*, 23.
22. Wosh, *Spreading the Word*, 221–26.
23. Cvornyek, *The Bible in Slavery and Freedom*, 26.
24. Wosh, *Spreading the Word*, 226.
25. Valois, *To Revolutionize the World*, 335–46.
26. *Ibid.*, 342.
27. Jared Bell Waterbury, *Friendly Counsels for Freedmen* (New York: American Tract Society, 186–). This text is freely available through the Internet Archive, “Friendly Counsels for Freedmen,” Library of Congress, accessed March 17, 2013, <http://archive.org/details/friendlycounsels-oowate>.
28. Valois, *To Revolutionize the World*, 347.
29. Wosh, *Spreading the Word*, 227.