From Chosen People to Irredeemable

by

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From Chosen People to Irredeemable: A Study of the African American Jeremiad from Antebellum America to the Present

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A thesis presented for the B. A. degree

with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Winter 2018

For Christ, who came.

Acknowledgments

There are so many people to thank for their role in the completion of this project. First, to Professor Dana Nichols and Professor Scott Lyons, to whom I am greatly indebted. Thank you for being steady in your support, wisdom, and encouragement. Thank you for being better mentors than I ever could have asked for or imagined. You have encouraged me to do the work that requires courage in academia, and I have truly been blessed by God Himself through you both. Both within and outside of my thesis, you have been incredible academic mentors, and I am a better thinker, writer, and scholar because of your investment in me. Thank you to my parents, brothers, and friends for their patience and grace. Special thanks to my mom, whose comments have been both sweet and helpful, and David, who listened to many one-ended brainstorms. To Ms. Nugent, thank you for intentionally investing in me early and encouraging me to pursue my passions in academia. To my classmates and the professors of this year's thesis writing classes, Professor Gillian White and Professor Madhumita Lahiri, thank you for your genuine investment in this project and its completion. This thesis would not be what it is without you all. Finally, to God, whose love is better than life. All glory be to Christ, my King.

Abstract

The African American jeremiad is a literary tradition that looks at the promises of America, the unkept nature of those promises in America at present, and future hope Americans can have. The form has historically been used by black American activists because it has been able to effectively show national brokenness and inspire action. Activists have often used Christian principles to support their arguments because of the literary form's Biblical origins. Over time, America has moved towards secularism, and the foundations of the form have thus changed. This thesis aims to track the evolution of the form by studying jeremiads from the African American jeremiad's inception in antebellum America, its resurgence in the Civil Rights Era, and its modern manifestations in the twenty-first century. Specifically, this thesis will compare Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?," Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* to see how the argumentation of promise, brokenness, and hope have changed with America's secularization. This thesis will argue that the African American jeremiad has moved away from its historical Christian focus and towards race essentialism. This change limits the form by making a call to action and vision of a unified, multiracial nation impossible.

Keywords: African American Jeremiad, Christian Foundationalism, Racial Essentialism, David Howard-Pitney, Willie Harrell, Jr., Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ta-Nehisi Coates

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Introduction

This project will focus on the jeremiad, an important form in African American literary history. The form originated from the prophet Jeremiah's Biblical books, which prophesy the divine judgment to come because of the sins of God's people. The jeremiad is first used in modern-day America by Puritan preachers to discuss the Puritans' imperfection despite their status as a chosen people. The Puritan jeremiad, which was historically used by white preachers, is later utilized by black Americans to speak out against slavery and its injustices. From there, black American activists[1] began to shape the form into a tool of activism that took on a new purpose and had different components than the Puritan jeremiad—the African American jeremiad.[2] The African American jeremiad is a literary form that recognizes the promises of freedom at the core of America, explicitly criticizes the lack of maintenance of these promises (Vander Lei and Miller 88), and looks forward with a prophetic promise of hope (89). The form is important because it has been an essential tool in fighting racial inequality in America from its inception through the twenty-first century; however, as America has secularized, the form appears to be shifting away from its Christian roots because secular writers have started using it in their activism. As American society moves away from Christian traditions and into a secular

[1] "Black American activism" was chosen to encompass the work of Walker, Douglass, King, Coates, and others mentioned throughout this project. The term is intended to be inclusive, but the identifier of "black" could have also been one of the following: "African American," "race-based," or another term. The term is intended to talk about those who identify as black and/or African American. The terms are not interchangeable, as an individual may identify as black without identifying as African American and vice versa. Neither African American nor black would fully encompass the community that is being discussed in this project. However, one needed to be chosen to appropriately proceed with the work being done. Ultimately, this term is intended to represent a large, inclusive community.

[2] The term chosen for the literary form at the center of this thesis is "African American jeremiad". However, critical discourse also employs different terms to discuss similar forms. These terms include the Afro American jeremiad, black jeremiad, and Obama Jeremiad. There may be other terms to describe similar if not identical rhetorical strategies. This thesis will use the term "African American jeremiad" while recognizing that other terms might also be appropriate.

and post-truth[3] age, the question of what happens to this very Christian rhetorical tradition becomes important. This project will address the evolution of the African American jeremiad in black American activism by looking at the various ways foundationalism has changed and affected the form over time. The thesis aims to answer the following: How has the African American jeremiad functioned in black American activism over time, and what is its status now? This project will track the evolution of the African American jeremiad in America from the abolition period through the twenty-first century.

I. Critical Scholarship

Scholarship on the African American jeremiad has long been centered on the political and social work that the literary form has accomplished. The most thorough study of the African American jeremiad comes from David Howard-Pitney, namely in his book, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America*. Howard-Pitney's book provides a comprehensive study of jeremiads from pre-Civil War America through the Civil Rights movement. He tends to focus on the optimism and promise that is central to the form, and he comments on the evolving state of hope in American history. He ultimately argues that the literary tradition underscores that "jeremiahs"[4] struggle to reconcile racism with a sustainable vision of America's democratic future (Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad* 14)[5]. Howard-Pitney's extensive study of the African American jeremiad looks at Frederick Douglass's antebellum jeremiad that worked against slavery (15), Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, jeremiads in the Second Reconstruction (139) and in the late 1960s (185), and Malcolm X's damnation of white Americans and focus on the form as it relates to black Americans (161).

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[3] See Malhotra for information on current rhetors who argue for the post-truth nature of the world at present.
[4] A jeremiah is simply one who uses a jeremiad in their work.
[5] Henceforth, in-text citations referring to Howard-Pitney's *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* will be shorted to *AAJ* followed by the page number.

Howard-Pitney's work is very thorough and is central to the critical conversation about the African American jeremiad.

Another key critic in the conversation is Willie Harrell, Jr., who expands on Howard-Pitney's claims. Harrell speaks about the jeremiad's prophetic insight and social criticism, ultimately arguing that the form points to an American "sociopolitical consciousness" ("A Call to Consciousness" 149). Much of his work focuses on the African American jeremiad's manifestations in antebellum America (Harrell, *Origins* 2). Harrell notes that the jeremiad has been used for religious purposes, such as in the first chapter of his book, *Origins of the African American Jeremiad: The Rhetorical Strategy of Social Protest and Activism, 1760-1861*; however, his analysis of the jeremiad mainly focuses on the political and social results of the Christian literary tradition. Harrell also looks at the twenty-first century jeremiad by looking to Barack Obama's jeremiads, arguing that Obama's jeremiads comment on the uneasy state of American economics (Harrell, "'21st Century Economic Agenda'" 299). Harrell's work has expanded off Howard-Pitney's claims and has been focused on the African American jeremiad's contributions to protest in the antebellum period and on Obama's jeremiads as they relate to American economics.

Like Howard-Pitney and Harrell, other critics have looked to the jeremiad as a means of producing political, economic, and social change. Some have studied the balance of honor and shame that the jeremiad can produce at a national level (Henry 303). Other critics, such as Elizabeth Vander Lei and Keith Miller, have looked at the pattern of tying national holidays with African American jeremiads to show the brokenness of the nation more effectively. While these scholars and others have studied the African American jeremiad at great length, they appear to pass over the necessity and impact of a jeremiad's foundations. Specifically, critical scholarship

appears to be missing a study of the effect of a jeremiad's foundationalism on its construction and effectiveness. Critics have looked at the effect the jeremiad produces because of the ways it calls an audience to act, but they have forgotten to look at what informs jeremiahs and the evolution of the underlying support informing their arguments about promise, brokenness, and hope. The goal of this project is to recover the importance of the underlying truths that inform the African American jeremiad by examining three works by black activists in order to see how the choice of foundationalism is intricately tied to the effectiveness of the form. I will suggest that the African American jeremiad is informed by Christian foundationalism from its origins through the Civil Rights Era and that this fuels the effectiveness of the form. I will also argue that the twenty-first African American jeremiad is informed by race essentialism and that this change has affected the effectiveness of the literary form's ability to reach its audience and to point to a hopeful future, ultimately limiting the form.

II. The Biblical Origins of the Jeremiad

The African American jeremiad is, like all jeremiads, fundamentally based on the writings of Jeremiah in the Holy Bible. The prophet Jeremiah is the author of two Old Testament books—Jeremiah and Lamentations. Jeremiah comments on the Kingdom of Judah's inability to maintain its covenant with God and speaks of the imminent downfall of the Kingdom of Judah because of their unfaithfulness to God in the book of Jeremiah. In Lamentations, Jeremiah mourns the Kingdom of Judah's sinfulness and predicts Judah's overtaking. Jeremiah laments the people's unfaithfulness to God, calling them "heartless" (*New International Version*, Lam. 4.11) and grief-inducing for the prophetic onlooker (3.51). In both books, Jeremiah cries out against the sins of God's people, who God has set apart from long ago through a covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15). The people's rebellion and disobedience make them guilty of sin. The

consequences of their unfaithfulness are dire: the Lord promises to bring “disaster on [them] and to destroy all” (Jer. 44.11) and says that the people will “lie deserted and in ruins because of the evil they have done” (44.2-3). Jeremiah asks God’s people to respond to this prophetic vision of doom by stopping their evil conduct and instead to praise God for His faithfulness to the covenant despite their unfaithfulness (30). Jeremiah calls God’s people to correct their evil ways and praise God, and this directive is intended to correct the wrong patterns of God’s people and put the people back on right terms with God.

Despite the sinful nature of God’s people, there is still some vision of hope for them in Jeremiah’s writings. The source of this hope is predominantly the covenant that God has made with the people via Abraham (Gen. 15). The covenant ensures that these people do not lose their status as God’s people when they sin. The Lord provides correction through prophets like Jeremiah to help lead them back to righteousness, and He is faithful to the covenant and does not leave them despite their faithlessness. God is said to be on His people’s side because of His unwavering faithfulness to the covenant. Their sin does not undo the covenant. Rather, God is merciful to His chosen people and upholds His end of the covenant. Jeremiah writes, “yet their Redeemer is strong;/ the LORD Almighty is his name. / He will vigorously defend their cause/ so that he may bring rest to their land” (Jer. 50.34). The Lord is also recorded saying, “In those days, at that time…search will be made for Israel’s guilt, / but there will be none,/ and for the sins of Judah,/ but not will be found,/ for I will forgive the remnant I spare” (50.20). His mercy goes so far as to pardon their iniquities. The mercy of Lord is evident in that He continues to be on His people’s side via the covenant and pardons their iniquities despite their unfaithfulness. The prophecy of Jeremiah is hopeful in the end, and it highlights the faithfulness and mercy of

God despite the people's shortcomings. The underlying principle of the faithfulness of God becomes a key principle supporting the Puritan jeremiad.

The literary tradition of the jeremiad comes from the prophet Jeremiah's writings. It is the prophet Jeremiah's recognition of sinfulness, naming of brokenness, and prophetic vision of the future that become the foundations for the literary jeremiad. The prophet Jeremiah produces works that intend to change the unrighteous ways of Israel, and literary jeremiahs intend to generate the same sort of change in their own social contexts by following a similar narrative arc. The narrative arc of the works of Jeremiah creates the literary jeremiad, which is used in England and later in America with the arrival of the Puritans.

III. The Puritan Jeremiad

In America, the jeremiad dates back to the seventeenth century with the Puritans' arrival to the new republic (*AAJ* 5). The Puritan jeremiad consists of the following elements: recognition of the promise of excellence of the Puritan people, criticism of the society's present immorality and sins, and the impending judgment to come as a consequence of this immorality (7). Two important scholars of the Puritan jeremiad are Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch. They speak about the errand of the Puritans and the evolution of the Puritan jeremiad in the early American republic. The jeremiad existed in England before the establishment of New England. However, the form manifests itself differently in the early American republic after the Puritans chose to leave England (Miller 6). The Puritans left England because they believed God had set the Puritan people off as a unique people (Miller 6). The Puritans recognized themselves as a "chosen people" of God (*AAJ* 5). They were self-proclaimed as "God's new Israel" and saw themselves as the light intended to lead a generation of people to God's promises (6). The Puritans also believed that they were protected and in a righteous relationship with God in their

courageous endeavor into the New World (Bercovitch 3), and they believed that like the Israelites, they were in a covenant with God that marked their uniqueness (Miller 6). They were a vision of excellence because they were God's chosen people, and this was the promise they recognized in the first of their jeremiads. Their recognition of themselves as a chosen people led the Puritans to hold themselves to a high standard and falling short of this high standard led to the jeremiad's use.

The Puritan jeremiad came to bear because the Puritans began to fall short of their end of their special covenant with God and chose sin over righteous living (8). The Puritans' sins were numerous and ghastly. They had fallen away from righteousness (9), become heretical, slept during sermons, and chose alcohol and sex above God just to name a few of their sinful patterns (10). As the people fell into imperfection, clergymen[6] speaking from the pulpit began to speak with intense fury and exhortation using the jeremiad form, encouraging their people to stay on the straight, narrow, and righteous path so as to not anger God (Bercovitch 3). The people fell from a "mighty designation," as Miller puts it, when they sinned (4) and thus rightfully elicited the righteous wrath of God (Bercovitch 3). The Puritans believed that God's wrath was made manifest in everything from the state of their children to their lack of success in farming (Miller 8). His wrath was not only warranted because of their sins against Him but because they believed God wanted to use them as an example for the world. They had a "peculiar mission" in this way

[6] All the activists spoken about in this project are male. The goal of this work is not to discuss gender's place in terms of use of the form or in terms of black American activism; however, it would be inappropriate to move forward without recognizing and acknowledging the gendered nature of the jeremiad and the selection of male canonical writers. This gendering is simply an artifact of the form's male domination. This male-domination is explained the low literacy rates among African Americans in antebellum America, which is when the form first came to bear in America (see Elliot for more information on gendering in antebellum Era), and the literary form coming from the Puritan jeremiad. The Puritan jeremiad was used by clergymen, who were exclusively male in New England. See Howard-Pitney's *The African American Jeremiad* (specifically page 6) for more information on this. While this thesis does not aim to address the gendered nature of the form, it does acknowledge that the form is gendered and predominantly male.

(Bercovitch 14), and their sinfulness meant their high status would show the God's wrath against the Puritans as an example to others who were tempted to sin against God (Miller 14). Thus, Puritan jeremiads focus on the social failures of the society and predict the divine doom to come in light of these shortcomings.

Finally, the Puritan jeremiahs prophesy the punishment to come as a result of the Puritans' sinfulness (*AAJ* 6). Despite the prediction of divine punishment, the Puritan jeremiad still has a note of optimism because it emphasizes that the Puritans are a set apart, unique, and chosen people despite their sins. Though the jeremiad was used to call out the shortcomings of the Puritans, it affirmed that these people were still set apart (6). This optimism arose because the Puritans turned God's wrath into an affirmation of their uniqueness in their jeremiads, leading them to see the impending punishment and wrath of God as a means to successfully being an example to the rest of the world (6). Therefore, the wrath of God was entirely loving since pointed to their election as a chosen people and their higher moral standard (Bercovitch 9). The Puritan jeremiad was ultimately intended to correct the Puritan people (not wipe them out) in order to quicken the fulfillment of their role (8). The jeremiad is thus not simply wrathful but hopeful in its prophecy, as the faithful God of Israel will be the faithful God of the Puritans. The Puritan jeremiad places hope in the Lord's faithfulness and His election of His people despite their sinful ways. Thus, the Puritan jeremiad generates a great sense of confidence and hope for the Puritans—not hope in themselves, but in an ever-faithful and loving God.

The Puritan jeremiad is a Christian literary tradition, and this is not just an artifact of its origins being in the Bible. This is also because it mimics the overarching story of the Bible. The overarching story of the Puritan jeremiad is that God's chosen people have a righteous God whose desire is to protect and care for them. However, despite their chosen status, they sin and

disobey God. Thus, jeremiahs predict the imminent doom and wrath to come because of the people's immorality. Alongside that, though, there is also a note of hope because they are still God's chosen people. The arc of the jeremiad appears to be the promise of God, the brokenness of man, and the wrath of God against sin but hope in Him because of their chosen status.

This Puritan jeremiad's arc mimics that of the Bible. The Bible shows that people are loved by God and intended to dwell in perfect harmony with Him. However, people fall into sin and ruin their relationship with God. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, paves the way for people to come back into a relationship with God because He lived perfectly on earth and sacrificed Himself on the cross to pay for the sins of mankind for all of eternity. Thus, those who accept Christ as their personal Lord and Savior and submit their lives to Him are back in perfect communion with God from the moment of acceptance and forevermore, as God sees Christ's righteousness in place of people's sins. The two storylines—that of the Bible and that of the Puritan jeremiad—are quite similar. Both the Bible and the Puritan jeremiad follow the following structure: a beginning of promise from God, the sinfulness of man, and a concluding note of hope for God's people in that God will still choose them as His own despite their brokenness.

What these Christian principles and their alignment with the Puritan jeremiad indicate is that the jeremiad is rooted in Christian foundations. The jeremiad's origins are not only Christian because of their relationship to the books written by the prophet Jeremiah. Rather, the whole form is informed by Christian principles. The foundations that support the literary form are inherently Christian. It is important to recognize that the Puritan jeremiad is Christian not only because of its utilization of Christian language or origins but because of its parallels to the overall arc of the Christian story, as the Puritan jeremiad is the predecessor to the African American jeremiad.

In this project, this major idea will be referred to by the term "Christian foundationalism."[7] Christian foundationalism is a shared belief in the fundamental truths and principles of Christianity as they are laid out in the Biblical Scriptures. This term indicates that a group of people is unified under the grand narrative of Christianity and that this narrative that becomes the story of those who identify as Christian, uniting them. The term is intended to include the entirety of God's promises and truths about humanity and God Himself as a basis for understanding a relationship with God, self, and others. In textual practice, this can include but is not limited to a shared sense of purpose, shared standards, references to the Bible or its contents, and the emergence of Biblical themes in the text. These principles will become the foundation for the African American jeremiad through the Civil Rights Era, as this thesis will show.

IV. The African American Jeremiad

The African American jeremiad came out of the Puritan jeremiad as black Americans began to utilize the form in the fight against slavery (*AAJ* 10). As slavery developed in America, white Americans understood part of their role in the covenant as the job of "deal[ing] justly with blacks." Seeing the injustice in this, the black American community sought to fight against this mentality. They believed that white America's national sin was slavery (Moses 30-31), and black Americans wanted white America to see the sinful nature of their ways. As a result, the African American jeremiad specifically rose up first in the free black community in the North in this fight against slavery as a result (Howard-Pitney, "The Enduring Black Jeremiad" 483).

More specifically, black activists began to use the form in the fight against racial injustice because they wanted to communicate that they were a "chosen people *within* a chosen people"

[7] The term "foundationalism" here is intended to refer to the objective, stable truths that inform the jeremiad. This thesis will address the importance and effects of this on the African American jeremiad.

(*AAJ* 13). Black Americans believed that they were chosen amongst the chosen people of America. Howard-Pitney explains this concept by stating the following: "the Biblical motif of the Exodus of the chosen people from Egyptian slavery to a Promised Land of freedom was central to the black socioreligious imagination. African Americans, by virtue of their unjust bondage, felt that they had a similar messianic role in achieving their own and others' redemption" (11). While the Puritans believed they were a chosen people because they were God's example to the world, black Americans believed they were a chosen people within the chosen white America because of the unjust treatment that they received. This unfair treatment set them out as a unique people because they had to fight against injustice to save both themselves and others, similarly to the Messiah—Christ. They were part of a missionary race (12), not an exemplary race (as the Puritans were) since their job was to save others rather than be the best examples they could be. Black Americans did not aim to make themselves as self-righteous as they could so that they could be the holiest people on the planet, which was the Puritans' goal. They were not chosen as an example to be followed by the world as the Puritans were. Rather, they were chosen to follow in Christ's footsteps and save the oppressed and outcast, making them a new chosen people.

The differences between the Puritan and African American jeremiads do not end with the underlying motivation. The forms are also different in their three structural components. The African American jeremiad consists of three major parts— the recognition of the promises of freedom at the core of America, an explicit criticism of the lack of maintenance of these promises (Vander Lei and Miller 88), and a prophetic vision of hope because Americans will change their ways (89). A Puritan jeremiad's final part focuses on damnation while the African American jeremiad ends by talking about hope. For example, David Walker's *The Appeal*, a

Puritan jeremiad, ends with threats of violence and the prophecy that God will destroy the unrepentant nation. The African American jeremiad by Martin Luther King, Jr., in his "I Have a Dream" speech, however, focuses on the hope of a better tomorrow its final part. The prophetic moment in the African American jeremiad does not predict doom from God but hope for the nation. Overall, the African American jeremiad is a distinct literary tradition from the Puritan jeremiad, but its origins in the Puritan jeremiad and the Old Testament are evident.

V. Chapter Organization

This project will attempt to track the changes in the African American jeremiad from its origins through the twenty-first century by looking at three different African American jeremiads. The first chapter will look at an antebellum African American jeremiad—which is when the first iterations of the African American jeremiad came to be—by studying Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" The Puritan jeremiad gets picked by the black Americans when David Walker utilizes the Puritan jeremiad in his *Appeal.* This pamphlet marks the use of the jeremiad by black American activists, which allows other black American activists to pick up the form and ultimately shape the African American jeremiad as a tool of activism. The African American jeremiad begins in antebellum America, and Douglass is one of the most famous and well-studied jeremiahs of the early African American jeremiad period. This chapter will show that Douglass's African American jeremiad in his speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July," highlights a future multiracial, unified nation. This chapter will also argue that Douglass's African American jeremiad is effective because he and his audience share their belief system, and this comes through in each part of his African American jeremiad.

After Douglass's passing, the African American jeremiad's use diminishes until the Civil Rights Era (Howard-Pitney, "The Enduring Black Jeremiad" 486). Thus, the second chapter of this

thesis will look at the work of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Unlike Howard-Pitney, I will read King's jeremiad as one that follows the guidelines of an African American jeremiad but that differs from Douglass's jeremiad because it highlights national sin and hope through its use of Christianity. Moreover, this chapter will reiterate the importance of the common ground of the Christian belief system in this manifestation of the jeremiad. This analysis of King's letter will indicate that King, like Douglass, sees a multiracial, unified nation in America, and his hope is set on that very bright future.

To move from the Civil Rights Era into the twenty-first century, the final chapter will look at Ta-Nehisi Coates's popular memoir, *Between the World and Me*. Coates's memoir will be argued to be an African American jeremiad. However, he abandons Christianity in his use of the form. Coates's African American jeremiad will be argued as one informed by race essentialism. The effect of this is that his jeremiad will show itself as a weaker, less impactful tool in activism. He does not have the benefit of a shared set of beliefs between himself, the jeremiah, and his audience, yielding a less enticing and convicting jeremiad. Each component of his jeremiad falls flat, and his final note of hope offers little solace to the oppressed. Moreover, there will be a sense of division that cannot be overcome in Coates's jeremiad. While King and Douglass could hope for the unity of black and white America because of Christian principles, Coates cannot. This will call into question the ways the underlying truths of an argument affects the effectiveness of the African American jeremiad's ability to call out brokenness and produce a vision of a hopeful, unified America.

These chapters are all intended to capture the effect of the foundationalism that informs the African American jeremiad from its origins. Ultimately, this project will suggest that modern secular works, like Coates's memoir, are attempting to engage with a rhetorical form while

abandoning the form's traditional Christian foundations and ends. The project will recover the importance of the Christian origins and Biblical beliefs of the African American jeremiad and will demonstrate that race essentialism leaves the African American jeremiad a less hopeful form in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 1: Frederick Douglass and the Beginning of the African American Jeremiad

The African American jeremiad is comprised of three main parts: the naming of the promises of freedom, an explicit recognition of America's inability to uphold these promises (Vander Lei and Miller 88), and a prophetic vision about the hopeful future of America (89). On the surface, it appears the work of the African American jeremiad is accomplished in merely communicating the three parts of the jeremiad. However, with this project's intervention, the importance of Christian principles to the work of the African American jeremiad will be uncovered.

This chapter will look at the use of the Puritan jeremiad by David Walker, a black American activist. The use of the jeremiad by Walker allows other black activists, such as Frederick Douglass, to utilize the form and make it into what is now the African American jeremiad. After looking at Walker to follow this transition from the Puritan jeremiad to the African American jeremiad, this chapter will closely examine Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" and highlight the importance of Christianity to this jeremiad's effectiveness.

The jeremiad was originally used by white Puritans but was later used by David Walker in his fight against racial injustice. The Puritan jeremiad is a religious form that intertwines the idea of the new nation—America—and the Christian ideals that the Puritans felt pressure to uphold as the chosen people. Perhaps one of the most well-known black Puritan jeremiahs is David Walker, a black American activist.[8] David Walker held a complex identity—he and his mother were both free, but his father was a slave. After fleeing the slavery-ridden South circa

[8] Some critics, such as Harrell, claim that Walker's work is an African American jeremiad. However, this project will follow with the recognition of *The Appeal* as a Puritan jeremiad because of its prophetic vision of doom, as critics like Howard-Pitney claim.

1815, he pledged to avenge the horrors of slavery for other black Americans. He is often hailed by critics like Howard-Pitney for his "fiery rhetoric" in *The Appeal*, a pamphlet he wrote in 1829 (Howard-Pitney 11).

The Appeal was written as a petition against racial inequality and a plea to recall the promises in the country's founding documents. In this pamphlet, Walker says that slavery must end immediately, stating that the practice is cruel and barbaric. Subsequently, Walker calls out white America, stating that though it is Christian, it is hypocritical. The pro-slavery actions of white America are contradictory to the Christian values and ethics as they are explained in the Bible. Walker goes so far as to say that compared to all of human history, slavery is at its worst in America. He pleads with black Americans to act against the institution of slavery, challenging them to fight against their enslavement mentally and physically. Walker claims that racism is only growing, and he names the so-called reforms of America as evidence of this growth; however, he predicts that divine punishment will come in the end, and white America will be punished in the hands of God Himself. Throughout his pamphlet, he cites the Declaration of Independence and the Bible to support his fight against racial injustice and plea for equality.

Walker's pamphlet follows the traditional Puritan jeremiad format. His pamphlet consists of the fundamental Puritan jeremiad components: the naming of the promises of America, recognition of the broken status of the promises, and prophecy about the downfall of the nation (*AAJ* 7). Walker uses the form to criticize the racist ways of America in 1829. He calls white Americans both ignorant and wretched (Walker 4), stating that they are the cause of the terrible state of the nation at present. In his *Appeal*, Walker calls out the sins of the nation by looking at the founding documents of America. He specifically speaks about the Declaration of Independence because it outlines the promise of freedom for all Americans (84). Walker's goal

is to show that the language of white America's own documents has displayed the standard that they have broken. For example, he states:

> "We hold these truths to be self evident—ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL!! That they *are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable* rights. . ."Compare your own language above. . .with your cruelties and murders inflicted by your cruel and unmerciful fathers and yourselves on our fathers and on us—men who have never given your fathers or you the least provocation. (85)

Walker drastically emphasizes that all men are created equal through his capitalization in order to highlight the promises of America. He sees that the promise of freedom as outlined in the Declaration of Independence is not evident in the state of the nation at present, and he is trying to communicate that there is a sense of unfulfillment between the law and the reality of America. Walker can only name these promises and their brokenness because he has access to the Declaration of Independence and ideals of the United States. The Puritans did not have this available to them. The Puritans' early jeremiads had to be based entirely on religion and unofficial norms within the Puritan community because they did not yet have founding documents. Walker, on the other hand, uses the nation's foundational documents to point to America's promises in this part of the jeremiad.

Walker also emphatically prophesies about the imminent doom of the nation, as all Puritan jeremiahs do. Walker's pamphlet predicts the doom to come because of America's wretched ways. He writes:

> Notice, I said in the concluding clause…I call God, I call Angels, I call men to witness, that the destruction of Americans is at hand, and will be speedily consummated unless they repent. Now I wonder if the world thinks that I would take the name of God in this

> way in vain? What do they think I take God to be? Do they suppose that I would trifle with that God who will not have his Holy name taken in vain?—He will show you and the world, in due time, whether this book is for his glory, or written by me through envy as to the whites as some have represented. (80)

Walker first calls on Americans to watch as their destruction plays out before them. He tells them that the name of the Lord is too great and holy for such injustice to ensue without punishment. Walker even goes so far as to say that the Lord will show the world that racial justice is His work and not simply Walker building up bitterness or resentment. By stating this, Walker is showing that the fight for racial equality is the work of the Lord and not just that of man. Seeing justice as God's and not his own, Walker points to God in the chaos and recognizes that God will eventually deal with injustice once and for all. Walker predicts the doom of America in this part of his Puritan jeremiad by looking to God Himself.

This prophetic doom is important because it integrates the end of racism with divine retribution. Walker's pamphlet is about naming white Christian America's racist ways through Christian morals, and the very ideology of racism is tied to the white understanding of Christianity before the Civil War. White Americans use Christian morals to promote racism, but Walker is doing the opposite of that in his pamphlet. In his pamphlet, Walker shows that Christianity actually promotes racial equality rather than racism by stating that God will destroy the unjust and show that His name cannot be "taken in vain." Although white Americans had long been using the Puritan jeremiad for their own advancement of white supremacy and racism, Walker uses it to fight against racism and white, exclusive Christianity. Walker uses the tools that white America used for racist ends to create anti-racist activist material (Harrell, *Origins*

11). Walker lays the foundation for other black activists to pick up a historically white tradition and shape it into a tool of activism.

This passage also shows how Walker innovates the predominantly white Puritan jeremiad by creating a new construct available for critique in black American activism. In his discussion of the brokenness of the nation, Walker generates the idea of a white America as a construct available for critique by stating that it is "the whites" who will see divine retribution. The Puritans did not the possibility of critiquing part or all of a fully formed nation since America was not a fully formed nation. Puritan jeremiahs had to rely solely on religious argumentation to make their points. Walker, however, uses the Puritan jeremiad to create a fully formed nation that is divided among racial lines, generating black America and white America. From there, he critiques white America, laying out white America as a construct available for critique. This is important for those who later utilize the African American jeremiad because black American activists rely on the idea that white America is available as a point of critique in their African American jeremiads.

Walker is predicting the future of this national construct that he creates in this passage. His vision for white America is bleak and underscores a totally irredeemable white America, stating that "destruction" is imminent and by refraining from offering redemption. In his final notes of talking about the nation, Walker offers a prophetic vision of a broken, fractured, and hypocritical nation that will suffer because of God's wrath. He has a bleak vision of a separatist nation destined for divine punishment. He does not see unity as a possibility, and his jeremiad looks forward only to see the ways in which God's punishment will destroy white America once and for all. The future of the nation is different than what the African American jeremiahs, who often envision a future of unity, will later depict. Walker sees separation as the ultimate state of

the nation, while Douglass and King will shape a future that is hopeful and inspiring for its audience. Walker calls his audience to act and change by predicting the punishment that will come as retribution, while African American jeremiahs often use a vision of hope to inspire change in their activism.

From Walker's Puritan jeremiad comes the African American jeremiad. One important nineteenth-century jeremiah is Frederick Douglass, who is hailed as the "era's outstanding African American jeremiah." Most critical scholarship on the African American jeremiads written by Douglass highlights his anti-separatist ideas. For example, critics note that he prioritizes and advocates for racial unity over racial nationalism in his work (23). Critics also note the importance of jeremiad use on holidays by Douglass, as holidays are often established to celebrate some sort of freedom or right that all Americans experience (Vander Lei and Miller 87). Currently, scholars recognize that he spoke on many nationally recognized days of celebration, such as the commemoration of the Emancipation Proclamation (85). As a result, Douglass's speeches have called out national injustice on days that are supposed to be celebrating national unity and progress. His jeremiads are about more than just the perfection of America's democracy and the effects of circumstances on the effectiveness of his jeremiad, though. His jeremiads are also quintessentially Christian, and this religious belief plays out in his jeremiad in important ways.

This thesis will address Douglass's famous 1852 speech, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" to look at the effect of Biblical beliefs on the African American jeremiad, which is currently unaddressed by critical scholarship that surveys the evolution of the African American jeremiad. In this speech, Douglass discusses the unrealized promise of freedom for black Americans on a holiday intended to celebrate freedom. Douglass's speech is recognized by

critics, such as Vander Lei and Miller, as an African American jeremiad, and critics often look to it to study its political goals. However, this project will argue that the speech is a jeremiad that utilizes Christian beliefs in its argumentation, intertwining the form and religious system. Douglass's speech is an African American jeremiad in form, and each component of the jeremiad underscores the contributions of Christian beliefs to Douglass's jeremiad. Moreover, the unified, multiracial vision of the future that Douglass can envision will be shown as a hopeful prophecy available because of divine, Biblical promise.

The African American jeremiad is delineated into three parts: the naming of the promises of freedom as described in America's fundamental documents, an explicit and overt naming of America's inability to uphold these promises (Vander Lei and Miller 88), and a prophetic vision about the future of America (89). In terms of meeting the three standard components of the jeremiad, Douglass's speech accomplishes all three overtly. In the first part of his oration, he speaks of the promises that America has for its people. He comments on freedom and its promise to Americans by looking to the Bible. He states, "it is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom. This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God. It carries your minds back to the day, and to the act of your great deliverance" ("Fourth"). Douglass is comparing the national holiday with the Passover celebration. By paralleling the American promises of freedom with the Passover, a Biblical moment in which the Israelites remember the deliverance and freedom that God has promised them, he speaks with Christian promise in mind.

In this passage, Douglass is showing how the political and spiritual are intertwined in the promises of America. Douglass is asking his audience to "[carry] their minds" back to the day of the Passover in the Bible. By asking the audience to transport themselves to a story that connects

them all so long as they are Christian, he indicates that what is at stake is more than simply political. He is showing that the promise and celebration of freedom are tied to God's fulfillment of His promises to the Israelites. America's celebration should mimic the Israelites and thus should be a celebration centered on the fulfillment of God's promises. Therefore, freedom is not simply a political or civic standing but a spiritual right, as it was for the Israelites. The shared belief in Christianity means that both black and white Americans should be able to celebrate on this joyous occasion because of the reality of God's promise in their political and spiritual lives. However, inequality has prevented that celebration from being possible. Douglass's focus is both political and religious in this passage, indicating that work of justice for Douglass is intricately tied to Christian values. Douglass is utilizing both the religious argumentation of the Puritans with Walker's construct and subsequent national critique, building a new and distinct literary tradition—the African American jeremiad.

What this first use of the jeremiad marks in this speech is the importance of Christianity to the effectiveness of the African American jeremiad. Douglass's calling out of the distance between him and white America on the Fourth of July highlights this. This holiday is one that both black and white Americans should be able to tie back to the Passover celebration, but the "your minds" phrase indicates that this is exclusive and only possible for white America. With Walker preceding him, Douglass shows that white America has exclusive access to an experience that should belong to all Christians. Without Walker's generation of white America as a construct available for critique in jeremiads, this would not be possible.

Douglass is also tying the celebration to a Biblical one and assuming that both black and white America are Christian. This is a prophetic moment from Douglass. Douglass is showing that America should be unified and multiracial. He shows this by speaking of a shared

inheritance for black and white Americans rather than separate ones based on race. The African American jeremiad that Douglass presents is thus presenting a new construct for critique: the multiracial Christian nation that should be but currently does not exist. The multiracial, unified nation is the far-distant ideal that is Douglass's foundations for his prophetic vision of the bright future. At this moment, Douglass is prophesying about a future multiracial nation and inspiring his audience to look forward with great hope.

In this passage, Douglass is also highlighting the importance of an assumed shared belief system between a jeremiah and audience. In this passage, Douglass is saying that he and his audience all share their Christian belief. This common tie between them all—between black and white Americans—that should unite them. By saying that there is a celebration that reminds them all of the Bible and of the "Passover" in particular, Douglass is suggesting that both black and white America have a connection to the story. Both parts of America, though separated presently, are united under the grand narrative of Christianity. As a result, Douglass is recognizing their faith as common ground that he and his white counterparts share. Douglass can thus appeal to them on the grounds of their shared faith. These people are all Christian and all have ties back to this religious tradition. The tying link between the oppressed and the oppressors is Christianity. Douglass is speaking to them on the grounds of their shared religion, hope, and understanding of promise. Douglass can reach them through their shared identity. This makes the African American jeremiad an incredibly effective literary form of activism. This shared religion allows Douglass to reach his white audience on common ground so that he can call out their injustice in the following part of his jeremiad.

After writing about the promises America has made for its people and underscoring these shared Biblical beliefs, Douglass moves on to call out America for falling of these promises,

accomplishing the second part of the jeremiad. Douglass speaks about the national state of inequality in Christian terms, stating the following about his inability to celebrate the holiday because of racial injustice:

> Am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us? Would to God, both for your sakes and ours, that an affirmative answer could be truthfully returned to these questions! Then would my task be light, and my burden easy." ("Fourth")

In this part of his speech, Douglass is commenting on the broken promises of freedom to black Americans specifically by speaking in terms of sacrifice, altars, and burdens. The phrase he coins—"national altar"—is very particular and very religious. The altar has historically been a place of sacrifice for God's people, and the Bible refers to the altar as a place where people honor or praise God with their sacrifices. Douglass brings this very religious motif to the political conversation about race in America. He claims that though he is a Christian, is unable to offer a sacrifice of praise because he cannot praise the nation. There is no occasion to joyfully submit to the national leadership and offer praise to them because of the racial injustice running rampant and unactualized promises of freedom. Though he and his white counterparts should both be able to submit and honor the national leadership and subsequently sacrifice at the national altar, he is unable to. Douglass is talking in terms of altars, making a direct religious reference to the altars on which Jews were called to sacrifice to God (Exod. 20.24). This allusion places national sin and shame in light of spirituality, thus placing the broken promises of America in the same line as the altar of sacrifice. This comparison brings the political conversation to a spiritual level, indicating that the political sins produce both social injustice

and spiritual consequences. Douglass is unifying the civic and religious together, showing that the soul and the nation are both in need of redemption.

In this passage, Douglass is also commenting on the weight of these broken promises in direct reference to the words of Christ. Douglass speaking of his easy burden and light task is a direct reference to the teachings of Jesus Christ. When Jesus speaks in Matthew 11, he says the following to encourage the people who follow him: "'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (11.28-30). Douglass's allusion to this passage from Scripture implies that this burden is not simply political but additionally spiritual. It shows that the political and spiritual motivations are connected and inseparable. Douglass says his burden is intended to be easy, as Christ has offered, but that it is not because of the injustices he and other black Americans have suffered. Racial inequality affects his experience of a spiritual blessing by God. The lack of political freedom makes his spiritual burden unbiblically heavy. Racial inequality has thus affected his life as a political citizen and as a follower of Jesus Christ. The broken promises of America as he describes them are yielding spiritual consequences.

This part of his speech makes an interesting turn from his discussion of their shared Christianity because he highlights the separatist state of America at present. For example, he uses divisive diction by stating that it is for, "your sakes and ours," and in stating that then his burden and yoke would be lightened rather than a national, shared, collective yoke would be lightened. He is separating himself from white America. The blessings that Douglass lays out in this division—the light yoke and easy burden—are not supposed to exclusively belong to any sect of Christians but to all who follow Jesus, and these unfulfilled promises of freedom are preventing

some Christians from experiencing the light walk Christ has promised to His people. The intended unity among God's people and equal experiences of blessings amongst God's people is lost, and this is a result of racism according to Douglass. The blessings that should be shared are exclusively white America's. By stating that his burden is heavy, Douglass is constructing a Christian nation as his audience. His audience shares the value system that he uses in his jeremiad, making his pleas against racism particularly effective. Since he has used Christianity to relate to his audience on the grounds of shared religion, Douglass is able to truly reach his audience with this allusion here.

This part of Douglass's jeremiad shows that Douglass looks at the promises of America to explain the brokenness of America. He looks at what is promised to people in order to show how broken the nation truly is. Douglass uses the first part of his jeremiad—the naming of promises—to effectively demonstrate what is broken and wrong with America at present. Douglass explains the first part of his jeremiad in great detail in order to have a standard to hold America up to, thus making it possible for Douglass to call the nation brokenness at present. Douglass needs this standard to compare the nation at present to in order to show the ways in which the nation is acting unjustly. Douglass uses the first part the jeremiad, the naming of promise, as the point of comparison for the second part of his jeremiad, the recognition of brokenness in America at present.

Douglass also uses references to historical, Biblical moments in the second part of his jeremiad as he shows the lack of equality for black Americans. Douglass talks about the experiences of black Americans by quoting the Bible, stating:

> "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yea! We wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there, they that carried us

> away captive, required of us a song; and they who wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forgot thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth." Fellow citizens, above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are, to-day, rendered more intolerable by the jubilee shouts that reach them. If I do forget, if I do not faithfully remember those bleeding children of sorrow this day, "may my right hand forget her cunning, and may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth!" ("Fourth")

Douglass is quoting the first six verses of Psalm 137, a song in which the Lord's people are lamenting over their captivity. In Psalm 137, the Israelites speak of how they are mocked by their captors, who ask them to sing songs about the Lord and His goodness in their captivity. Douglass believes that he is in the same position when asked to speak on the national holiday. His speech is making a mockery of him and black America because he is asked to speak about freedom while he and his people are oppressed. Black America thus is captive as white America stands free and torments black Americans by taunting them with opportunities to speak about a freedom they do not have. The division that Douglass alludes to throughout is producing an oppressor-oppressed norm in a group of people that should be unified.

The impact of this division is quite drastic, as all of God's people are supposed to be a unified body as God's chosen people. Douglass shows that the joy belongs to white America alone, and the "mournful wail of millions" are the cries of black Americas who are suffering at the hands of their white counterparts ("Fourth"). Racism is separating white America from black America, generating two different chosen peoples. White America is becoming the oppressor

against God's people, but black Americans are still considered God's people. Thus, white America's sin is separating them from the chosen ones of God and disintegrating them from half of God's people. Racism is creating a spiritual divide on top of the already evident political divide. The unity of all of God's chosen individuals under the banner of Christianity is harmed by racial inequality. Therefore, Douglass is indicating that this national sin has spiritual consequence. Howard-Pitney discusses a similar notion of there being two chosen peoples through the use of the jeremiad. He writes that the African American jeremiad, "conceives of blacks as a chosen people *within* a chosen people" (*AAJ* 13). This appears to be what Douglass is underscoring in his work, as well. Howard-Pitney argues that these two chosen peoples are supposed to be two distinct groups. I, however, argue that the African American jeremiad is actually attempting to reunite the people. Douglass does not appear to indicate that the people should stay divided or not unified. Rather, he appears to be calling this disunity injustice and against what God would have, indicating a unified destiny for all of God's people once racism is ended. The African American jeremiad is attempting to generate unity between blacks and whites, leading to a multiracial Christian nation as the future of America. By strongly referencing division in a group of people that are supposed to be unified, Douglass is setting the norms of the genre. He is establishing that jeremiahs can call out racist audiences on the grounds of unaccomplished and unactualized unity when people are supposed to be unified, and this will also be made evident through the last part of Douglass's jeremiad.

In the final part of his jeremiad, Douglass looks forward with prophetic insight at the hope Americans can have in the future. Douglass predicts the future of America as being one with racial equality and promise. He sees that the promises of freedom will be fulfilled, and black American's dignity and respect will be restored. Douglass states, "I do not despair of this

country. There are forces in operation, which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery…I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope…the doom of slavery is certain" (Douglass, "Fourth"). Douglass looks forward at the hope Americans can have in the future actualized promises of freedom. He recognizes that there is a divine force, which he names as "forces in operation," that he can hope in despite present disappointment in American society. With full confidence, Douglass asserts that slavery will certainly fall, calling slavery's "doom…certain." His diction makes clear that he believes that future of American is bright despite its unjust current circumstances, and he points to an unstoppable force that will bring this injustice to an end. This appears to hint at an unfathomably powerful Being that can ensure the end of injustice. Douglass's confidence appears to be not in the political system but in the God he follows, and Douglass is certain that slavery will end. This indicates that the chosen people will ultimately be reunited and that their destiny is a combined unity. By infusing the ending of his oration with hope and confidence in the future of America, Douglass sets the precedent that the African American jeremiad is a hope-infused form that looks forward with prophetic insight and hopes in the agency and action of the just Christian God.

From this study of Walker followed by Douglass, important distinctions between the historically white Puritan jeremiad, the black Puritan jeremiad, and the later emerging African American jeremiad are made evident. Unlike his white Puritan predecessors, Walker uses both religious principles and national founding documents to inform his jeremiad, laying the ground for Douglass to do the same in his African American jeremiad. From Walker, the construct of white America emerges, and Walker shows that this construct is one that is available for critique. Future jeremiahs, such as Douglass, take this now-available construct and use a shared foundationalism (Christianity for Douglass) to implore for change. Moreover, Walker uses both

his jeremiad to support racial equality through Christian values, demonstrating that the jeremiad and Christianity were both usable for anti-racist ends. Though white Americans in Walker's time used the form and their Christian beliefs to support racism, Walker does the precise opposite, opening the door for black activists to speak out on the grounds of Christianity through the jeremiad form.

Douglass's speech marks a different literary tradition than Walker's Puritan jeremiad, but it is not possible without the work of Walker, who lays the foundations for Douglass's Christian African American jeremiad. In his speech "What to the Slave is the fourth of July," Douglass names the promises of freedom, their broken nature in America at present (Vander Lei and Miller 88), and the hope to be had in the future of restored promises (89). Douglass's speech is important to the study of his African American jeremiad because it shows the importance of shared beliefs, specifically Christianity, to the effectiveness of the African American jeremiad. This speech talks about the right to freedom, broken nature of America at present, and the future hope all in Christian terms. All the consequences and rights that Douglass lists are both political and spiritual. Douglass demonstrates that the need for political change is derived from Christian values, indicating that Biblical principles have informed the jeremiah's understanding of promise and brokenness in the nation. Another important concept to glean from Douglass's incorporation of Christianity in his work is that this shared religion is what lays the groundwork for Douglass to speak to his audience. By incorporating these shared religious ties and collective memories to himself and to white America, Douglass is demonstrating that he can speak to them because they share the same foundations or religion. The effectiveness of the jeremiad comes from the shared foundation between the jeremiah and the audience. This concept of shared foundationalism between jeremiah and audience will be important for future work as the nation secularizes and

these shared religious beliefs become less prevalent. The work of Douglass sets the foundation for other black American activists to engage with the literary form as they battle racial inequality in America after the end of the legal reign of slavery. Finally, the African American jeremiad as Douglass presents it in his speech envisions a future with a multiracial, Christian nation, and this is the center of his hope.

Chapter 2: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

Douglass's work shows the success of a relatively new literary tradition in activist work. The work of Douglass shows that jeremiahs can integrate Christian foundationalism into each point of their African American jeremiads to effectively name promise, brokenness, and hope. This is because for activists like Douglass, there is a shared religious belief between the jeremiah and the audience, and this serves as a key part of the form's effectiveness in calling people to repentance, action, and hope. Douglass's jeremiad also envisions a future of hope—a multiracial nation that is unified under Christianity—for Douglass and his audience. The use of the African American jeremiad does not stop with abolitionists like Douglass. The form was used in the Civil Rights Movement with the goal of ending racial injustice once and for all in America.[9] This chapter will show that the King's African American jeremiad in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" shows how Biblical ethics can be used to highlight national shame and sin, national, and a unified American future.

Martin Luther King, Jr., is one voice of many in the Civil Rights Movement, but he is arguably the most well-known. King's work is recognized as an integral part of the black American activist tradition. His work is not simply the product of a well-versed mind and a well-trained orator (Dyson 4). Rather, his work is the product of the African American rhetorical

[9]It is important to note that Civil Rights activists did not directly pick up the tradition from abolitions and pre-Civil War activists. This is because following the death of Douglass in 1895, the African American jeremiad takes a brief hiatus from common discourse. During this time, Booker T. Washington's work grew in popularity, and the genre of black American activism was still alive despite the form's disappearance. See Howard-Pitney, "The Enduring Black Jeremiad" 486 for more on this. The form ultimately reemerges, beginning with the work of W.E.B. DuBois. DuBois wrote eloquently about the status of the nation and the nation's future in traditional jeremiad form, predominantly through The Crisis. The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races was published by the NAACP in 1910 as a monthly magazine that aimed to clearly mark the harm of racial injustice and discrimination. DuBois's title reflects the urgency with which he believed issues should be resolved. The monthly publication gained popularity and was discussed outside of the NAACP often, and it used art as a tool to discuss the politics of race in America See Kirschke 34 for more information.

tradition that preceded him, including the work of Douglass and other antebellum activists. Vander Lei and Miller are two critics who comment on King's work in light of the African American jeremiad literary tradition. Vander Lei and Miller show that the work of abolitions and other antebellum era jeremiahs solidified the African American jeremiad in black American activism before King emerges as an activist (84). Katherine Henry, an African American jeremiad scholar, notes that King's iterations of the African American jeremiad have specifically focused on shame and blame in order to promote racial equality (312), and I will argue that this is evident in King's focus on national sin and redemption through Christianity in his African American jeremiad. Moreover, David Howard-Pitney recognizes King's use of the jeremiad as a traditional jeremiad in form (*AAJ* 13). I will argue against Howard-Pitney's claim and show that King modifies the form and differentiates himself from others before him by using future redemption as a point of comparison as opposed to promise, and these claims will be made through this study of King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

King wrote the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" on April 16, 1963, after receiving a letter from white clergymen about the fight for racial equality in America. While imprisoned, King responded to the clergymen with his "Letter from Birmingham Jail." King's letter includes the three hallmarks of the African American jeremiad form, which are as follows: the recognition of the promises of freedom at the core of America, an explicit criticism of the lack of maintenance of these promises (Vander Lei and Miller 88), and the prophetic promise of hope that will be achieved if Americans change their ways (89). The goal of this chapter is to show that King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" utilizes the African American jeremiad form in a way that focuses on national hope and sin through Christianity and that looks at national hope as a point of comparison.

King employs the jeremiad form by first commenting on the promises of America to Americans. He specifically accomplishes this when he talks about the law by saying, “law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice” (King 5). King sees the law as a way by which the promises of America for justice are actualized. The whole purpose of the law is to ensure that justice is upheld. This indicates to the audience that King sees justice as a promise of America to all its people because it is part of the national law. In stating this, King fulfills the first part of the African American jeremiad.

The first part of King’s jeremiad differs greatly from Douglass’s. While Douglass fleshed out the first part of his jeremiad by talking about the Passover and celebrating freedom in America, King accomplishes his in a quick sentence. His explication of the first part of his jeremiad is simply that the law shows that promises of justice are made to all Americans. That is the end of the first portion of his jeremiad. Another notable difference between King and Douglass is that King’s discussion of the promise of America does not use Biblical ideas to appeal to its audience. King talks about the law’s promises of justice and freedom, and Douglass uses the Biblical promises of freedom to support his argument.

After discussing the promises of America, King describes the brokenness in America at present. King writes about the brokenness of America when he talks about the reason for his imprisonment. He states that like many great Christians that have preceded him, he is in jail because of “injustice.” He recognizes that his imprisonment is similar to the Apostle Paul’s, who had to leave Tarsus to carry the good news of Jesus Christ to other parts of the world (King 1). King shows that America is broken by calling his imprisonment unjust, fulfilling the second component of the jeremiad.

By comparing himself to Paul, King brings Christian figures into his discussion of brokenness in America. He is directly paralleling himself to one of the most profound evangelicals in the Bible and is calling himself Pauline in nature. The injustice he experiences brings him back to Paul's suffering that arose when Paul he was trying to bring the good news of the Gospel to other people. King puts racial injustice and Paul's oppression next to each other to show that what King is suffering for—racial equality—is similar to what Paul suffered for—the spread of Christianity. He shows that he is "Pauline" in nature because he works towards racial reconciliation. Because Paul worked for the true Christian message, King shows that racial equality is part of the true Christian message by placing his work and Paul's in equal terms in his comparison of himself to Paul. King puts racial reconciliation in line with Christian work. Racial equality is thus a just and Christian cause, and those who put him in prison are like the unjust people who imprisoned Paul for sharing his faith with others. When Paul did Christian work and spread the message of the gospel, he was imprisoned by those oppressing the work of God Himself. By saying that his imprisonment is like Paul's, King is showing that those who oppress him are oppressing God's work. King is showing that he and other activists are doing work similar to Paul's Christian work and that those who are oppressing him, though they claim to be Christian, are opposing the work of the Lord. In his comparison, King is showing that racial reconciliation is Christian work and its suppression by white, Christian America works against God's work.

King compares himself and others to Christian laborers throughout the second part of his jeremiad. He compares black American activists like himself to Christian extremists. King comments on how he has been categorized as an extremist and writes:

> Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan…And Abraham Lincoln…And Thomas Jefferson…So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be…We must never forget that all three were crucified [at Calvary] for the same crime—the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality…The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth, and goodness and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists. (6)

In this passage, King is directly comparing both himself and the South to past extremists. He is calling every individual an extremist and giving the reader the opportunity to reflect on the kind of extremist he wishes to be. When he is called an extremist, King compares himself to a long line of Christians. He says he not unlike Jefferson, Lincoln, Bunyan, the Apostle Paul, and even Christ Himself. As a result, King places his work—the work of race-based activism—in the line of famous Christians and their work. In doing this, King reinforces that the work of racial reconciliation is not unlike the work of other famous Christians, showing once more that racial equality is a just Christian cause. Ultimately, King is marking that to work for racial reconciliation is to do Christian work. In making this point, King is intertwining the political and the spiritual. By strongly linking the activism and Christ-like extremism, King shows that race-

based activism is the work that every Christian should commit himself to. The correct and Christian thing is thus to be an activist, and the sinful thing is thus to not be an activist.

King makes a similar point about the Christian nature of racial equality in the second part of his jeremiad when he discusses where the promise of freedom truly comes from. King states that "[black Americans] have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter" (2). King's comment is intended to show how long rights have been withheld from black Americans, calling the right to freedom not only constitutional but one promised by the Christian God. By elevating the rights promised to Americans as not only constitutional but promised by God himself, King, like Douglass, is showing the interconnectedness of the political and the spiritual. The promises that King sees as broken are those that the nation has promised its citizens and that God has promised to every follower of Him. Thus, the brokenness of America affects the nation at large and every Christian, and the consequences of brokenness are thus not only political but spiritual. Christians, who are supposed to be able to experience freedom, cannot experience a blessing promised by God. Through Christianity, King is able to tie the spiritual and political together.

Overall, the second component of King's jeremiad—the recognition of the brokenness of America at present—reinforces a change in the genre from Douglass's jeremiad. Compared to the first part of his jeremiad, King's second part of his jeremiad is fleshed out in greater detail and uses Biblical principles and characters much more. Unlike Douglass, who focused fairly equitably on all three parts of his jeremiad, King focuses his jeremiad on national shame more than other parts of his African American jeremiad. Henry has already established that King's

work does not shy away from shame and explicit naming of America as racist to promote the advancement of equality in America (Henry 312). This focus on national shame that Henry notes is supported by King's stronger focus on the second part of his jeremiad than the first part of it. This strong focus on national shame indicates a shift in the genre from Douglass. King's focus is on the brokenness of America and national sin rather than the promises it has made to its people. The third part of King's jeremiad will indicate that the point of comparison for King is the multiracial, Christian future that he sees rather than the past promises.

In the third part of his jeremiad, King looks forward at the hope of America and of the end of racial inequality with hope that is fueled by divine promise. King writes:

> I also hope…to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty. (King 9)

In the ending of his letter, King writes and appeals to the audience as his brothers in Christ. He does not just call them fellow clergymen or co-laborers in the faith but actual brothers in Christ. He elevates them calls them family rather than merely naming them as people who share the Christian name. Then, he moves on to say that they can all hope in the justice and equality to come to America. He writes, "let us all," to indicate that this shared hope is one that both black and white Americans can hold onto. By first calling them family in Christ and subsequently saying they share the same hope, King is tying the hope of his African American jeremiad to the hope of Christianity. The hope that King holds onto is one that is shared between him and his

family in the faith. King is underscoring the Christian hope that he and his brothers can hold onto in this season of chaos and despair.

King's vision of the future is bright specifically because of this Christian familial tie. King can envision a unified, multiracial, and Christian future because Christ calls all of His followers family in Christ; therefore, it is Christianity that unites them and fuels the hope that King points to, and this is made most evident when he calls his oppressors and white counterparts "Christian brothers." This hope is only possible because of their shared beliefs that call them family in faith. Like Douglass's jeremiad, having a shared religious belief system is important to King's jeremiad, specifically in its call to hope. Without this shared idea of a spiritual family, they could not have a shared hope in the future unity of the family. This spiritual family is only available to King as a point of hope because of this shared Christian value.

Moreover, in this part of his jeremiad, King is envisioning a new chosen people—the family of God. These people are a new sort of chosen people because they can have hope in the future. They are brothers in the faith, have a unified national project, and a shared hope. King's predecessors, the Puritans, claim the chosen people of God are white Americans. Black Americans before King saw black Americans as a select chosen group within the chosen people of white America. Douglass did envision a similar future, but he did not depict white and black America's unity in terms of chosen personhood. Neither the Puritan nor previous black Americans explicitly depict a multiracial nation as a new chosen people. King, though, envisions a new chosen people—the multiracial body of God in America—that can have hope in the future actualization of integration. King is constructing a new chosen people and is able to see a multiracial unified nation in America's future.

By explaining this third component more than the first component of his jeremiad, King is showing that he compares America's present and future rather than America's promises and present. Jeremiahs must show an ideal standard and compare the nation to that to show brokenness in the nation. Before the Civil Rights Era, activists like Douglass highlight the brokenness of the nation through the first part of the jeremiad with the promise of freedom serving as the point of comparison. By showing what should be true of America and subsequently highlighting the status of America presently, Douglass shows what is lacking in the nation at present. Thus, past jeremiahs inspire change and generate a call to action in their audience through the lens of past promises. King, on the other hand, does not give the past promises a large emphasis, showing that this is not his point of comparison. He does, however, give great emphasis to national hope, allowing him to make this his point of comparison in his jeremiad. He calls his audience to envision the day when their family is united and to work towards that. He even goes so far as to say that this future is "not so distant" after all to inspire his audience to change. King inspires his audience to action through the future of restoration of the nation rather than the promises of the past, as Douglass did. King's jeremiad is different than Douglass's because its point of comparison is shifted from past promises of freedom to a future unified nation.

King's 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is a key point of analysis when considering the evolution of the African American jeremiad in black American activism. Between this reading of the text and the established critical consensus of the African American jeremiad appearing in much of King's other work, it is clear that King's jeremiad is clearly supported by Christianity and focuses on national shame and hope through this perspective. In supporting Christianity, King explicates the work of Douglass and others before him who demonstrate that

the jeremiad is effective when paired with Biblical support. He is able to successfully name promises, call out national sin, and point to future hope with this shared belief system. King's jeremiad manifests itself in different ways than his predecessors, though. King's refined focus on the ideas of sin and hope indicate that utilization of Christian foundationalism is particularly important for calling out national shame and a shared, national hope. King also looks at hope as the point of comparison in his jeremiad, while his predecessor, Douglass, looked to past promises, showing a change in argumentation methods. Through this letter, it becomes clear that King paves the way for a bold, African American jeremiad—one that prioritizes the sin of America at present and the hope of a future nation that is unified, multiracial, and comprised of a new chosen people—God's family.

Chapter 3: Ta-Nehisi Coates's Race Essentialist African American Jeremiad

The first two chapters of this project show the effects of the use of Christian foundationalism with the African American jeremiad. Douglass's jeremiad shows the effectiveness of a shared belief system between a jeremiah and the audience. It also highlights the interconnectedness of the spiritual and political through Christianity. King's jeremiad shows how the African American jeremiad is a tool of activism that is specifically helpful in calling out national sin and hope. King's jeremiad shows that there are a new chosen people—God's children—that will be the foundation of the multiracial and unified future nation. Both Douglass and King envision a multiracial, integrated, and hopeful future for America, and this hope in a renewed nation is only possible because of the Christianity's divine promise.

As the United States has moved away from a shared religious belief, the employment of the African American jeremiad in black American activism enters new terrain. This chapter will look at Ta-Nehisi Coates's memoir *Between the World and Me* and focus on the memoir's twenty-first-century African American jeremiad. It will argue that the memoir is an African American jeremiad, as critical scholarship has yet to classify it as one, and it will examine what kind of work this jeremiad does. It will show Coates's jeremiad as one that steps away from Christianity and subsequently studies the effect of Coates's shift away from Biblical foundations.

Ta-Nehisi Coates is a twenty-first-century journalist and blogger whose work is highly circulated because it touches on the status of race in America. The popularity of Coates among young Americans has made him a well-heard voice in current conversations about race in America (Rambsy II 196). Coates began garnering his audience when he started working for *The Atlantic* in 2008, which was before his memoir was published. Most authors gather loyal audiences after publishing popular books, but Coates began establishing his audience before he

even published his memoir, allowing him to rise to fame quickly (197). Coates published his memoir, *Between the World and Me*, in 2016, and the book gained popularity quickly. A week after its public release, the memoir already had over 100 reviews written and published about it, and it received a nomination for the National Book Award just a few months later (202). Coates has made several television appearances and has been praised by famous figures like Stephen Colbert, Toni Morrison, and Oprah Winfrey. *Between the World and Me* was even named as one of Oprah's favorite books in 2015 (Akintoye). Reviews like the Washington Post call his memoir "radical[ly] chic" and "a must-read among liberal elites" (Lozada). Coates has quickly become one of the most prominent voices in the twenty-first-century conversation about race in America.

Coates's *Between the World and Me* is a memoir written as a letter to Samori, his son, about what it means to be black in America in the twenty-first century. Coates's book mimics James Baldwin's famous *The Fire Next Time* in structure and gets its title from a poem by Richard Wright (Williams 182, Smith 184). This means that like Baldwin's letter, Coates's memoir is written as a letter to a younger generation and that like both Baldwin and Wright's works, its work will be centrally about race in America. Coates's memoir is about his experiences as a black man in America beginning with his childhood in Baltimore and the unspoken rules of street life. For Coates, both religion and formal education prove themselves useless for life on the streets. After growing up in Baltimore, Coates moves to Howard University for his undergraduate education. Coates constructs Howard as a place in which blackness is celebrated and his understanding of history as it relates to being black in America is challenged. Coates sees blackness celebrated at Howard. Tragically, Coates loses a friend of his from Howard, Prince, due to police brutality. This death leaves Coates angry at the state of racial injustice in America, and Coates writes about America's historic destruction of black bodies in

response to this tragedy in an attempt to warn Samori. In the end, Coates tells Samori to hope that white Americans will change their ways while black America suffers.

It is important to consider why this book is added to the study of Douglass and King as a marker of the evolution of the African American jeremiad. This book, like Douglass's speech and King's letter, mimics the Christian arc of promise, brokenness, and hope. The Christian story starts with the promise of a good and perfect world filled with the presence of God and continues to show the sinfulness and brokenness of man. When Christ comes, though, there is hope for the future because Christ takes the consequences humanity's sin and ushers in a new and everlasting Kingdom—the Kingdom of God. As a result, the people of God can look forward to the perfected world that Christ will usher in when he comes back once and for all. The Christian narrative arc—the promise of a morally good world, brokenness in the actual manifestation of this world, and hope for the future restoration of this perfect world—is evident in Coates's memoir. Coates sees the promise of America as moral perfectionism and brokenness as the unactualized reality of the promise. Finally, he looks forward with hope. The hope he envisions is certainly different than the Biblical hope in the restoration of the world. Regardless of the kind of hope he offers his audience, the arc Coates presents clearly mimics that of the Christian story. Even though Coates does not use Christianity, his memoir mimics the Christian narrative arc (which his predecessors, Douglass and King, did), making his memoir an appropriate point of study for this thesis.

Coates's jeremiad does not employ Christian principles as his predecessors' jeremiads did. In fact, Coates's memoir explicitly rejects Christianity. From the beginning of his letter to Samori, his son, Coates makes his thoughts on the Christian God clear. "We would not kneel before their God. And so I had no sense that any just God was on my side. 'The meek shall

inherit the earth' meant nothing to me" (Coates 28). Coates explicitly rejects Christianity as a belief system by which he can experience encouragement and hope for the future. Coates is addressing the Christian God, as seen when he references the Bible verse[10] that promises inheritance of the earth to the lowly and meek. He makes a similar point when he says, "I think they are fastened to their god, a god whom I cannot know and in whom I do not believe" (142). Coates makes it clear that he does not believe the Christian God can be his God. In his discussions of this Christian God, it is clear that Coates believes that God belongs exclusively to white America despite black Americans', like Douglass and King, previous belief in and reliance on this God. Coates marks the exclusive nature of this God when he says he can neither know or believe in God. Through the development of this them versus us complex, the audience is informed that the Christian God is not Coates'. God belongs to them—to white America—alone rather than to himself and other black Americans despite previous black jeremiahs centering their entire jeremiads on the principles set out by the Christian God.

The them versus us diction that Coates uses is similar to diction that Douglass employs in his African American jeremiad; however, Douglass uses this diction to show the differences between the two groups that are Christian. Douglass uses this sort of diction to show that there was no unity when God's people were intended to be unified. Douglass's diction shows that there is division in God's people when God intended for unity. Because of racism, there is a religious divide where one should not exist according to Douglass, but he envisions unity in the end. For Coates, there is a divide, as well. For example, he makes this evident when he says that there is a "black normal" at Howard that is different than the white normal he experiences outside of the University (142). However, Coates also calls the Christian God "their" (white

[10] See Mat. 5.5.

America's) God and that "we" (black America) cannot bow before that God. (142) Coates's employment of this similar sort of diction is, therefore, for divisive ends. The employment of the us versus them diction reinforces this sense of insurmountable division as Coates says he can never get before their God and worship Him. The God of white America is entirely inaccessible to Coates. With Coates's them versus us complex, there is no sense that the American people can be unified as there is with Douglass's comparable use of this diction. Douglass uses this diction to show a divide that can be overcome in the end because of Christian foundationalism's understanding of future restoration of the world, and he shows his audience that his explication of the future of America, which Douglass presents as racially integrated and harmonious. Coates cannot use this diction and subsequently to point to a future unity but rather to a future riddled with division and exclusivity because of the different experiences generated by race. Coates shows division by race rather than true, actualized racial unity in America.

The division that Coates argues for shows that Coates replaces the religious system with race essentialism, as one critic, George Packer recognizes (qtd. in Chatterton Williams). One philosophy scholar explains race essentialism by stating that, "essentialist conceptions of race hold that the characteristics of physical appearance referred to by racial terms are indicative of more profound characteristics (whether positively or negatively construed) of personality, inclinations, 'culture,' heritage, cognitive abilities, or 'natural talents' that are taken to be shared by all members of a racially defined group" (Stubblefield 341). Race essentialism, therefore, means that the race of an individual determines other important factors, such as heritage, natural abilities, and culture, that are shared exclusively by individuals of that race. It indicates that a person of a race has an experience that is totally inaccessible to someone of another race and thus yields a life experience that is exclusive to people of that demographic. This leads to race-based

division among people because only people of a certain race can understand what it means to be of that race. Coates's jeremiad has evidence of race essentialist thinking throughout. This analysis will show that while Coates's work is an African American jeremiad, many components of the jeremiad that have made the form so effective have fallen flat with race essentialism.

The African American jeremiad manifests itself in Coates's *Between the World and Me* with race essentialism at its core. The three components of the African American jeremiad are as follows: the naming of the promises of America, the broken status of those promises in America at present (Vander Lei and Miller 88), and the hope Americans can have in America's future (89). The first part of the jeremiad is completed as Coates discusses the way America is often hailed for its greatness. Coates states the following about America:

> America believes itself exceptional, the greatest and noblest nation ever to exist, a lone champion standing between the white city of democracy and the terrorists, despots, barbarians, and other enemies of civilization. One cannot, at once, claim to be superhuman and then plead moral error. I propose to take our countrymen's claims of American exceptionalism seriously, which is to say I propose subjecting our country to an exceptional moral standard. (8)

In this passage, Coates is talking about the marvelous title that America claims for itself. Coates says that America calls itself the "greatest," "noblest," and "exceptional." America is thus supposed to be a great and marvelous nation and should be compared to other nations only to show its superiority. America claims that it is great, and Coates holds the nation up to its high, self-proclaimed moral standard.

By naming this moral standard as the promise made to Americans, Coates is accomplishing the first of the jeremiad. Coates sees the promise of America as morality, and the

only way the nation can fulfill this promise is to be totally morally perfect. His claim is not rooted in any overarching religion or even a recognition of the individuals that make up the nation at its core but in a supposed self-proclaimed ideal of the nation. What Coates is communicating here is that perfectionism is the promise that America has made to its people. Because of America's own claims to greatness, Coates believes that the nation promises moral perfectionism to its citizens, and it breaks these promises when it falls short of perfectionism in any way.

Comparing Coates's first part of his jeremiad to those of King and Douglass, a few other key differences and similarities arise. Like King, Coates keeps this first part of his jeremiad short. He does not mention the promises of the nation outside of this passage. Also, like King, he appears to move past this point quickly. King does this in his jeremiad to use the hope of the future to underscore brokenness and subsequently motivate his audience to action. This thesis will show that like King, Coates uses the final point of his jeremiad to support his naming of the brokenness of America.

The foundation of the argument that Coates presents in the first part of his jeremiad differs greatly than those of Douglass and King because Coates utilizes race essentialism instead of Christianity. Douglass and King were both able to tie the promises of America to spirituality. For them, the promises of freedom and morality are not only promised by the nation but by God, thus generating spiritual consequences alongside the already present civic, political, and social consequences that arise from racial inequality. When Coates speaks of the standard that is supposed to be upheld nationally, he is unable to produce the same sort of eternal, spiritual effect. He can only speak in terms of earthly consequences, stating that it all comes down to this implicit "moral standard" that he sees as a promise because of America's self-proclaimed

greatness. He cannot claim that God has any standard for mankind or for America because of his race essentialist foundation. Coates must argue his point from a self-proclaimed status rather than a shared religious principle since "religion could not tell [him]" how the world worked (9). While previous African American jeremiads were able to point to promises of divine and eternal freedom, Coates's jeremiad is only able to offer perfectionism as a promise. The category that Coates presents is likely disorienting for the audience because, through the mid-twentieth century, jeremiahs successfully presented promises that were attainable and feasible. Freedom was a realistic promise (whether or not it was religiously informed).

Although his predecessors had realistic and feasible promises in mind, Coates's standard is unattainable in a nation that is run by and filled with imperfect people. Coates sees the alternative to religious promises as perfectionism for his African American jeremiad, and this is evident in that he sees "exceptional moral[ity]" as the standard, and Coates's text does not allow for the possibility of this promise in reality. He writes that America's driven nature is the "end of the world for [him]" (116). By showing that the ambition of America, including the ambition for perfection, is totally unfeasible. To see it actualized is to see the end of the world. However, he presents a self-proclaimed superhuman national status in the first part of his promise and believes that since America hails itself as great, it must never plead moral error. He also shows his audience that because of his view of America's ambition, this is totally unfeasible. This promise cannot ever be actualized because of the brokenness of humanity. While Coates does speak of the promise made to Americans, he looks at a promise that is unrealistic and not feasible.

Coates uses the second part of the jeremiad—the recognition of the promises not being upheld in American at present—to discuss what he means to be black in America. Coates writes, "In America I was just part of an equation—even if it wasn't a part I relished. I was the one

police stopped on Twenty-third Street in the middle of a workday…I was not just a father but the father of a black boy. I was not just a spouse but the husband of a black woman…I was an alien, I was a sailor—landless and disconnected" (124). Coates sees himself as totally disconnected from America. He is so disconnected that he sees himself as landless. This passage highlights the sense of alienation that Coates feels in a nation that is supposed to be morally uncompromised. The disconnection that Coates describes is alienation that is both communal and individual. He is treated unjustly because people only see his blackness instead of his whole personhood. This disconnection is communal because the blackness he possesses is the blackness of his fellow black Americans, meaning they are all alienated in this nation that should be their home.

For Coates, the brokenness and amorality are made evident in America's inability to see his and other black Americans as more than their blackness. As a result of this amorality, Coates feels estranged from the very land that was supposed to be his home. This sense of distance from America indicates that Coates did not feel at home in the very place that had promised him justice. Coates even states that in America, "cruelty toward humans who loved at their deepest instincts instructed was a kind of law" (58). He sees himself not as a true citizen of this nation but as an object of cruelty for America. The law has betrayed him. Rather than the law leading to perfectionism, the law of America leads to cruelty for Coates.

This recognition of broken promises differs from both King's and Douglass's African American jeremiads mainly because of the division between black and white America. King and Douglass call out the division as sin through Christian ethics. Coates cannot do that with race essentialism. He calls out their unjust actions and cruelty, but he cannot say that there is a division where there should be unity. With Biblical principles, previous jeremiahs were able to say that division was sinful because God desired unity among His people. Coates is unable to do

that. Previous jeremiahs claimed that God had chosen both black and white Americans as part of the chosen people and thus that people should be unified as God's chosen people. Coates cannot claim that same sort of unity in the second part of his jeremiad. There is no underlying race essentialist principle that makes division based on racial lines an obstruction of the unity that should exist.

In Coates's jeremiad, a new kind of African American jeremiad is being constructed. Coates's jeremiad is setting up a nation that is totally and entirely divided by race. Any hope of unification of the races is impossible because of this. His recognition of brokenness in America leaves his audience hoping in themselves alone, moreover. There is no power except in the hands of the broken and amoral humans and their constructs. Coates building a jeremiad that is much less hopeful than his predecessors, leaving his audience with very little hope for unity and simultaneous peaceful living between racial groups. The final point of the African American jeremiad speaks to this bleak, divided future that Coates hints at throughout his memoir. Coates's hope is thinner, less exciting, and less promising than that which Douglass and King prophesy. This is evident in the final conclusion of his letter to Samori:

> I do not believe that we can stop them, Samori, because they must ultimately stop themselves. And still I urge you to struggle. Struggle for the memory of your ancestors. Struggle for wisdom. Struggle for the warmth of the Mecca. Struggle for your grandmother and grandfather, for your name. But do not struggle for the Dreamers. Hope for them. (151)

Coates calls black Americans to struggle in the end. They are not called to act but to sit passively and wait for white Americans to change their unjust ways.

This appeal falls flat because there is no shared foundationalism between the jeremiah and audience meaning there is no shared national project as there is with Douglass and King. Previous Christian foundationalist jeremiahs call their audiences to join in the Christian project of racial reconciliation because of the shared religious convictions between the black American jeremiah and the audience. There is no common goal with race essentialism. Instead, there are inaccessible experiences that ultimately divide people and a lack of a true call to action, yielding a weak call to hope and no shared national project.

Coates is not only limited by race essentialism. He is also limited by the fact that he does not share this a given set of beliefs with his audience. He cannot assume his audience is also race essentialist like Douglass, who speaks to a predominantly Christian society, and King, who writes to Christian clergymen, can. Through Douglass and King, the importance of audience to the African American jeremiad is evident. Their appeals are based on a shared sense of obligation as informed by their shared religion, yielding an appealing and understandable recognition of brokenness for their audiences. King and Douglass share a set of God-given laws, promises, and hopes that are shared with their audience, allowing them to call their audience to act on brokenness in an effective way. A lack of shared foundationalism affects this final call to action, and Coates merely asks his black American audience to hope for white Americans to change while black Americans struggle. Coates cannot call his audience to act on a similar conviction, though, because there is no shared sense of promise or hope.

The lack of shared beliefs is not the only thing halting a powerful final component of Coates's jeremiad, though. Coates's final part of his jeremiad is weaker than his predecessors' because it does not envision a unified and multiracial American future. King and Douglass envision a future in which all of God's people are unified regardless of race. For Coates, there is

no sense that America should be unified under the title of God's chosen people. Instead of hoping for a unified future, black Americans can only "hope for them." hope is not rooted in promise but in the potential actions and the potential change of white America. While Douglass and King could look to hoping in God's promises and faithfulness to the covenant, Coates cannot point his audience to a similar magnitude of hope. Black Americans can only hope in themselves and in a hypothetical change in white America. Race essentialism means that black Americans and white Americans will always be divided by the inaccessibility of their experiences. There is ultimately no hope for unity. The future of the nation looks bleak and divided. Thus, Coates does fulfill the third jeremiad component, but this prophetic hope ultimately falls flat with race essentialism.

Coates's African American jeremiad indicates a new direction for this historically activist, Christian literary tradition. Coates's *Between the World and Me* presents a new race essentialist jeremiad. As a result, there are several key distinctions between Coates's jeremiads and those of his predecessors. While Douglass and King have the benefit of a shared religion between themselves and their audiences, Coates does not. This leads to inefficiency in his calls to recognize brokenness and hope, as Coates cannot shepherd his audience to any shared principles with his audience. Moreover, with race essentialism, Coates's vision of the future is bleak. There is no ultimate unity to hope in because each race has an experience that is totally inaccessible to others. There is an experience that is exclusively black that white America can never understand and vice versa, yielding division instead of integration. Ultimate hope in a multiracial, unified America is lost in Coates's jeremiad, leaving the audience with little to aspire to or look forward to in the race essentialist African American jeremiad. Without hope, a vision of redemption, or an effective call to change its ways, Coates's memoir leaves his audience

uninspired to action. Without a substantial call or even motivation to action and with little to hope for, Coates's work leaves his audience questioning if the memoir is truly activist at all. Although Coates employs a literary tradition that has long been used for activism, Coates does not create powerful, effective activist literature through his African American jeremiad because of his use of race essentialism.

Conclusion

The African American jeremiad has been a central part of black American activism from the nineteenth century onward. Through many centuries, jeremiahs use the form point out American's brokenness and look forward with prophetic vision and hope. An African American jeremiad names the of the promises of freedom, recognizes the failure of America to uphold those promises (Vander Lei and Miller 88) and looks forward with prophetic insight to the future of the nation (89). For most of its existence, the African American jeremiad has been a hope-filled resolution—it recognizes that respect and equality and is often charged with the full hope of the central Christian message, showing that people are sinful, Christ came to restore people, and hope for people's future restoration is thus possible.

Douglass, King, and Coates all write African American jeremiads to speak up for black Americans who have been unjustly marginalized and discriminated against, but each of their jeremiads is different. Douglass integrates Christian principles into each of the three components of his African American jeremiad. From Douglass's jeremiad, the ability of Christian foundationalism to fuel a hopeful prophesy and the importance of a shared set of beliefs between jeremiah and audience emerge. Douglass envisions a future that is multiracial and unified, and he is able to do so because of Christian principles. Douglass's work also shows the effectiveness of a shared set of beliefs with the use of an African American jeremiad.

King picks up the tradition of the African American jeremiad from Douglass and other pre-Civil Rights activists and writes his own Civil Rights Era jeremiads, such as his "Letter from Birmingham Jail". In this letter, King employs Christian values in several parts of his African American jeremiad. This choice is effective because like Douglass, he shares this belief system with his audience, leading to an effective call to action through a set of shared principles. Unlike

Douglass, though, King uses Christian morals to specifically call out brokenness and hope in his African American jeremiad. King's slight modification of the jeremiad, which focuses on national sin and national hope more than the promises of America, makes the African American jeremiad a flexible tool of activism. This modification by King highlights the effectiveness of Christianity in naming sin and hope. This shared Christian belief in a unified Christian body shows that there is a divide in a family where there should be unity. Like Douglass, King can also imagine and hope for a unified, multiracial nation in the future because Christianity indicates that fellow believers are not merely members of the same religion but family. King provides a new chosen people—God's family—that will eventually be united and live in harmony. Through Christian foundationalism, King is able to show that there is a division where there should be unity and points his audience to a national hope they can hold onto because of Christianity.

In the twenty-first century, Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* shows a different kind of African American jeremiad. Unlike its predecessors, though, Coates's jeremiad is clearly not informed by Christianity because Coates explicitly rejects Christianity throughout his memoir. Instead, his African American jeremiad is informed by race essentialism, which is made evident through his explications of what it means to be black in America. His jeremiad suffers from his implementation of race essentialism. His vision of hope is radically bleak. His hope is in the potential change of white America, leaving his audience with no concrete hope. In saying that white America must be hoped for and black America must struggle, there is no final unity. There is no hope in a final, unified America as Douglass and King have hoped for in their jeremiads. Rather, because of his race essentialist foundations, Coates argues that the division is what will persist. Since race essentialism dictates that there is a unique experience to each race

that is totally inaccessible to people outside of that group, there will always be a divide between the two. The promise of unity is not available to Coates as it was to King and Douglass.

This thesis's study of these three jeremiads indicates that a race essentialist African American jeremiad, which appears to be the jeremiad of the twenty-first century, cannot call for hope in a unified nation. As a result, the African American jeremiad is limited because jeremiahs cannot hope in a unified future. There is no shared, multiracial national project with race essentialism. Instead, every race has a unique and totally inaccessible experience that cannot be overcome. The race essentialist African American jeremiad offers little hope for people to better themselves. Moreover, it cannot call for change from its audience but a weak and uninspiring hope because of race essentialism. This new race essentialist African American jeremiad yields little to hope in and ultimately eliminates any chance of using the form for change-producing activism. Thus, if one wishes to have a future of promise and unity, the foundationalism must have truths and principles that make such a future possible. Without this, hope in a unified, multiracial America is lost.

The effects of the secularization of this form are drastic. Without Christianity's contributions, there is no unity, no call to action, and no real activism through the African American jeremiad. The form is totally debilitated from its initial uses as a tool of activism. With race essentialism, it has become nothing more than a three-part form with a lengthy textual history. It is no longer activist, as its original shapers intended, but a narrative construct available to rhetors. The purposes of this textual practice have become different because no activism is possible. The form can no longer be about the unity of a chosen people, and the form has lost its rhetorical purpose and become something entirely different and less change-producing in the twenty-first century than in the nineteenth century and prior. The African American jeremiad has

become incapacitated with secularization, removing the form as an effective tool of activism. As a result, black activism has lost a powerful, historic tool in the secular age, creating a need for a revival of the Christian African American jeremiad or replacement of this activist tool.

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