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Introduction

CRIMES OF THE BLACKEST HUE

I am black, but comely.

—SONG OF SOLOMON 1:5

Moments before his execution on July 26, 1822, Jack Purcell exclaimed, “If it had not been for the cunning of that old villain Vesey, I should not now be in my present situation.”¹ Purchased and enslaved by Ann Smith Bonsell Purcell of Charleston, South Carolina, Jack was one of the twenty-two men hanged that day for participating in a massive plot to liberate enslaved persons. Allegedly, the conspirators had planned to seize a cache of weapons from the local armory, set fires around Charleston, slaughter the city’s white population, and escape to Haiti.² But the plot was uncovered and suppressed before it could get started. On July 2, three weeks before the mass executions, Denmark Vesey, the alleged leader of the plot, was hanged along with five enslaved men accused of being his fellow ring-leaders. Still others were hanged on July 12, July 30, and August 9. In total, 131 people of African descent were arrested, 37 were banished, and 35 were executed.³

Vesey's plot could have led to the largest insurrection against slaveholders in the history of the United States. According to court records, the organizers anticipated that an army of thousands would join them. On July 25, 1822, one day before Jack Purcell's execution, Mary Lamboll Beach, a local slaveholding widow, wrote to her sister Elizabeth L. Gilchrist. In the letter, she explains how Jack came to join Vesey's conspiracy. According to Beach, he resisted Vesey's recruitment efforts at first, but then, "Vesey again came to him & with the Bible to quote different passages to prove the lawfulness of it."⁴ Beach wrote several letters to her sister that summer. In a letter dated July 5, 1822, three days after Vesey was hanged, she described the contents of confiscated documents related to the plot, particularly those alluding to the biblical stories of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt and Samson's struggles against the Philistines. In these documents, she explained, the alleged conspirators "speak of their cause as one they expect the Lord will assist them in as he did the Israelites from their Master's & speak of their deliverance from the hand of the Philistines."⁵ In the same letter, Beach claimed that after Vesey's arrest she was told that "the Negroes were under the impression that Denmark Vesey the free black *would* be delivered & if in *no* other way the Jail doors opened by a Supernatural Power."⁶ This statement alludes to the New Testament story of Paul and Silas's miraculous deliverance from prison: "And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed" (Acts 16:26). Beach goes on to describe how Vesey spent his final hours immersed in the psalms, singing like his imprisoned biblical counterparts Paul and Silas. "I heard that Vesey said in the Jail that it was a Glorious

cause he was to die in & the singing of the Psalms &c in there the night before was carried on to a *great* extent.”⁷ Within days of Vesey’s death, Beach used biblical texts as a prism through which she interpreted the aspirations of the leader of the suppressed plot.

One of the more effective ways that Vesey was able to recruit people like Jack Purcell to his cause was through his impassioned appeals to the Bible. At the trials of those accused of involvement in Vesey’s plot, several witnesses testified that he read from the Bible at planning meetings held at his house. Rolla Bennett, who was enslaved by South Carolina Governor Thomas Bennett Jr., was one of the five alleged ringleaders executed alongside Vesey on the fateful day of July 2. According to court documents, he confessed during his own trial that Vesey “*read to us from the Bible, how the Children of Israel were delivered out of Egypt from bondage.*”⁸ As I discuss in chapter 1, Rolla’s allusion to a biblical text does not identify it by chapter or verse but uses language that appears in several biblical texts related to the story of Israelites’ deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Even if Rolla could not identify the exact biblical text that Vesey read, references to this story occur frequently in early African American literature.⁹ Jesse Blackwood was another of the five ringleaders who died alongside Vesey. Jesse, who was enslaved by a local bank president named Thomas Blackwood, allegedly confessed after he was sentenced to death. He claimed that during a planning meeting at Vesey’s house, Vesey instructed those present to kill the white men, women, and children of Charleston “for he said, God had so commanded it in the scriptures.”¹⁰ The first witness in Vesey’s trial was a man named William Paul, who was enslaved by a local grocer named John Paul. On June 19, William testified that Vesey “studies all he can to put it into the heads of the blacks to have a rising against the whites.”¹¹ William elaborated, “he

studies the Bible a great deal and tries to prove from it that slavery and bondage is against the Bible.”¹²

Vesey was not alone in appealing to the Bible at these meetings. Jacob Glen, also known as Jack, was enslaved by a planter named John S. Glen and was one of the twenty-two enslaved men executed on July 26. Charleston’s mayor, James Hamilton Jr., identified Jacob as “a Preacher.”¹³ At Jacob’s trial, Charles Drayton, a cook who was enslaved by former South Carolina governor, John Drayton, testified that during a meeting at Vesey’s house Jacob “quoted Scripture to prove he would not be condemned for raising against the Whites.”¹⁴ Similarly, Bacchus Hammet, who was enslaved by a merchant named Benjamin Hammet, testified, “I saw Jack [Jacob] at Vesey’s the first time I met there—he was the man who read the Bible—he passed the hat round that night for the contribution.”¹⁵ Bacchus’s testimony did not save his life. He was hanged on the same day as Jack Purcell, Jacob Glen, and many others.

William Paul also read from the Bible during planning meetings. During the trial of Mingo Harth, who was enslaved by a lumber merchant named William Harth, William Paul testified, “At Mingo’s house I took up the Bible and read two chapters from the prophet Tobit.”¹⁶ Others alluded to well-known biblical passages even if they did not read from them directly. Joe La Roche, who was enslaved by a local widow named Mary La Roche, described how he cited one of the Ten Commandments when resisting Rolla’s repeated efforts to recruit him. La Roche explained, “About three months ago he asked me to join with him in slaying the whites, I asked him to give me time to consider of it.” He continued, “he again came to me on the same subject. I told him ‘take care, God says we must not kill.’” Whether he knew the exact origins of this divine command, La Roche alludes to Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17, which the King James Version

renders as “Thou shalt not kill.” Several decades later, Archibald Henry Grimké wrote a twenty-four-page history of Vesey’s plot titled *Right on the Scaffold: or, The Martyrs of 1822*.¹⁷ Grimké was a Harvard-educated lawyer and vice president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) who was born into slavery in Charleston. “He [Vesey] ransacked the Bible for apposite and terrible texts,” Grimké vividly declared, “whose commands in the olden times, to the olden people, were no less imperative upon the new times and the new people [i.e., people of African descent in Charleston].”¹⁸

Vesey’s extensive engagement with the Bible did not go unnoticed by those presiding at his trial. Lionel Henry Kennedy, a Yale-educated lawyer and representative in the South Carolina legislature who, at the time of his death, held twenty-two persons in slavery, was a presiding magistrate of the first court organized for the trials of those allegedly involved in the plot.¹⁹ When sentencing Vesey to death, Kennedy went beyond the formal charge of “attempting to raise an Insurrection amongst the Blacks against the Whites.”²⁰ To Vesey, he sternly remarked, “In addition to treason, you have committed the grossest impiety, in attempting to pervert the sacred words of God into a sanction for crimes of the blackest hue.”²¹ Kennedy and presumably the other members of the court were shocked and appalled by how Vesey had found support for his plot in the pages of the Bible. Over the next several months, the slaveholding elites in Charleston would write letters, print newspaper editorials and pamphlets, preach sermons, and publish trial transcripts that included biblical defenses of slavery. The legitimacy of Vesey’s plot quickly became a matter of serious and detailed biblical interpretation.

Denmark Vesey's Bible survives as an idea but not as a document. Official court records report, "Vesey had a variety of papers and books relating to this transaction [the plot], *which he burnt when the discovery of the intended attempt was made.*"²² Witnesses at the trials claimed that the alleged ringleaders kept lists of the names of those committed to the insurrection. In a confession dated July 12, Bacchus Hammet allegedly stated that at one meeting "a large Book like a Bible was open before them at Denmarks house" but that he did "not know whether it was to sign names in or what purpose."²³ If Vesey kept a list of his co-conspirators in his Bible, it is possible his Bible was among the many books and papers that Vesey destroyed once the plot was uncovered. Alternatively, he could have hidden his Bible, buried it, or given it to someone else for safekeeping, because some of the alleged conspirators buried supplies, including arms and powder. Bacchus Hammet also stated that he was told, "Gullah Jack had buried the powder, and I think Perault knows where it is."²⁴ In a letter from Lydia Maria Child, a prominent white abolitionist, to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a Unitarian minister and abolitionist, dated March 17, 1860, decades after Vesey's death, Child recalled rumors that she "heard, at the time, of arms being buried in coffins."²⁵ The 1856 novel *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* by the celebrated antislavery author Harriet Beecher Stowe, best known for her classic *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, features a fictional son of Vesey named Dred, whom Stowe imagines as inheriting and studying his father's Bible after his father's death.²⁶ Ultimately, we may never know what actually happened to Vesey's Bible. Since no writings from Vesey's own hand survive, we do not possess his own, firsthand interpretations of the Bible. All we have are biblical interpretations attributed to him at the trials in the summer of 1822—from the trial transcripts prepared by James Hamilton Jr.,

Charleston's intendant (or mayor), and by Lionel Henry Kennedy and Thomas Parker, the magistrates at Vesey's trial.

In mid-August 1822, Hamilton published some of the court documents as a forty-six-page pamphlet titled *An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection among a Portion of the Blacks of the City* (hereafter *Account*).²⁷ In October 1822, Kennedy and Parker published a more extensive version as the 202-page *An Official Report of the Trials of Sundry Negroes, Charged with an Attempt to Raise an Insurrection in the State of South-Carolina* (hereafter *Official Report*).²⁸ At the request of South Carolina Governor Thomas Bennett Jr., Kennedy and Parker also prepared trial transcripts for the South Carolina House of Representatives, docketed as "Document B House of Representatives" and a longer version for the South Carolina Senate, docketed as "Evidence Document B."²⁹ The transcription of these documents was not completed until November 1822.³⁰ All four versions of the court documents suggest that Vesey appealed to certain biblical texts to promote and justify his plot without, however, recording direct testimony from Vesey himself.

We know very little about the man behind the insurrection plot that rocked Charleston in the summer of 1822. Most of our information about Denmark Vesey's life comes from a 524-word footnote buried deep within Hamilton's *Account*. The footnote served as a primary source for early biographical sketches of Vesey. In 1849, Henry Bibb, a prominent abolitionist who escaped slavery in Kentucky, published *Slave Insurrection in 1831, in Southampton County, VA., Headed by Nat Turner, also a Conspiracy of Slaves, in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1822*, which relies heavily on Hamilton's footnote for its overview of Vesey's

life.³¹ The same is true for the biographical material in Grimké's *Right on the Scaffold* in 1901.³² Grimké's account, in turn, served as the main source for other biographical sketches of Vesey by African American intellectuals in the early twentieth century, such as Benjamin Griffith Brawley, a Harvard-educated writer and the first dean of Morehouse College, or the famed sociologist W.E.B. DuBois.³³

In all likelihood, Joseph Vesey, Denmark's former slaveholder, was Hamilton's source of information for Hamilton's biographical footnote, since he was still living in Charleston in the summer of 1822. A native of Bermuda, Joseph Vesey commanded a ship that sailed between St. Thomas and Saint-Domingue before he settled in Charleston. During one of his voyages in 1781, he transported 390 enslaved persons to Saint-Domingue. Among them was a young man thought to be about fourteen years old. According to Hamilton, he had a "beauty, alertness and intelligence" that caught the attention of Captain Vesey and his officers. Once aboard, they took him to the ship's cabin, changed his clothes, and renamed him Telemaque (there is no record of his earlier name). But when the ship reached Saint-Domingue, Telemaque was sold along with the other enslaved men, women, and children.

That would have been the end of his story if Telemaque had not been returned to Joseph Vesey upon his next trip to Saint-Domingue in the spring of 1782. According to Hamilton's account, the planter who had purchased Telemaque said that he was "unsound, and subject to epileptic fits." Some have speculated that Telemaque feigned these seizures to avoid a lifetime of forced labor on a plantation because, by local law, enslaved persons who were imported had to be disease-free. Otherwise, the purchasers could return them to the seller. We may never know whether the young man feigned his illness, but there is

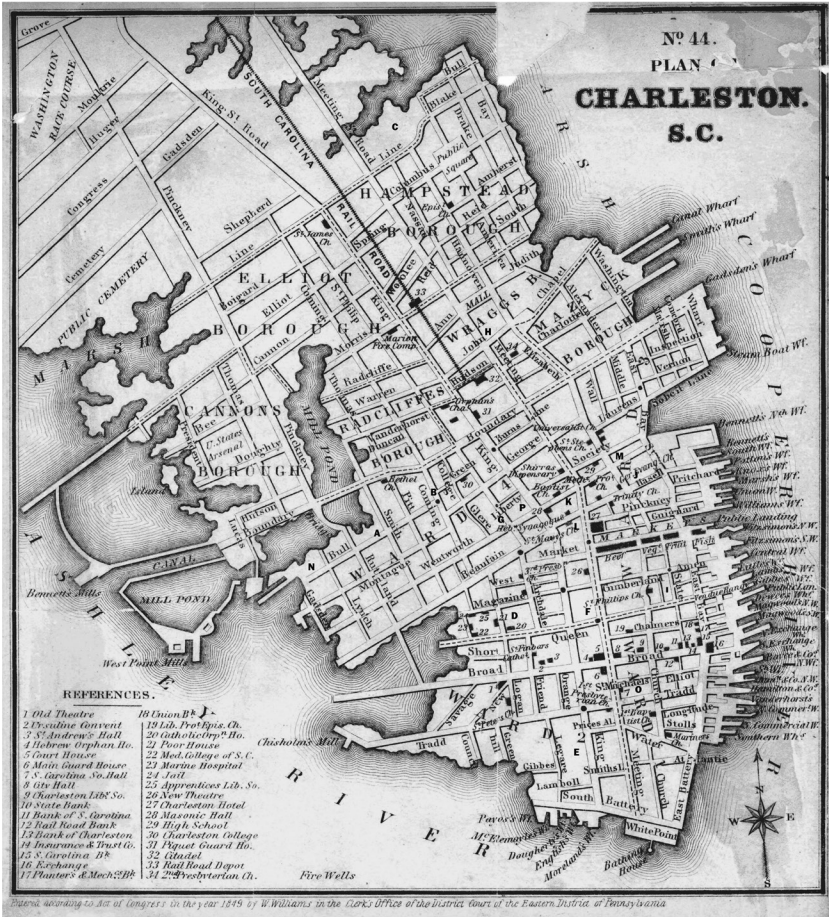


FIGURE 1. Map titled “Plan of Charleston” (1849).

no evidence that Telemaque had epilepsy or any other severe health conditions before or after those few months in Saint-Domingue.³⁴ Telemaque remained enslaved by Joseph Vesey when the ship captain settled in Charleston.

Telemaque’s life changed dramatically in Charleston when he “drew a prize of \$1500 in the East-Bay-Street Lottery” in

November 1799. He used \$600 of his prize money to purchase his freedom. On December 31, 1799, Mary Clodner Vesey, the wife of Joseph Vesey, had papers drawn up which stated that “from the yoke of Servitude” she had “set free and discharged a certain negro man named Telemaque with all his goods and chattel.”³⁵ With the remaining \$900, Telemaque established a thriving carpentry business and became a respected member of his community.³⁶ “Among his colour,” Hamilton wrote, “he was always looked up to with awe and respect.” As a free man, he retained the surname Vesey but eventually abandoned the name given to him on the slave ship in favor of a variation used by those of African descent in Charleston. As Hamilton explained, “among the negroes,” the name Telemaque was eventually “changed to Denmark, or sometimes Telmak.”

Court documents identify Vesey as “a free black man” but do not mention his country of origin.³⁷ Thomas Cilavan Brown, a free man of African descent, was a carpenter who worked with Vesey. He was a native of Charleston who migrated to Liberia before returning to the United States and settling in Philadelphia. Years after Vesey’s death, Brown described him to Lydia Maria Child. “Denmark Vesey, sometimes called Telemachus, was a Corromantee negro,” Brown reported. “He was brought from the [gold] coast [of west Africa] by Capt Vesey, and bought himself for a low price, on account of his good conduct. He was a large, stout man.”³⁸ As historians Douglas R. Egerton and Robert L. Paquette explain, “Enslaved Africans from the Gold Coast were often called, with variant spellings, Coromantee, after an English trading post created there in the seventeenth century.”³⁹ Because Joseph Vesey imported enslaved persons from west Africa and St. Thomas, Denmark Vesey could have been born in Africa rather than the Caribbean. Unfortunately, no record of his birthplace survives. Later sources

refer to Vesey as “a mulatto from Saint Domingo,” but this claim conflicts with our earliest evidence.⁴⁰

When sentencing Vesey to death, Kennedy was dumbstruck that Vesey would have even attempted to organize an insurrection. Somewhat stupefied, he exclaimed, “It is difficult to imagine what *infatuation* could have prompted you to attempt an enterprise so wild and visionary. You were a free man; were comparatively wealthy; and enjoyed every comfort, compatible with your situation. You had, therefore, much to risk, and little to gain. From your age and experience, you *ought* to have known, that success was impracticable.”⁴¹ Yet, his family situation as well as certain political and religious developments over the previous several years, may have also convinced Vesey that the insurrection’s time had come.

Vesey had married three times (to Beck, Dolly, and then Susan) and had fathered multiple children. Despite the income from his lottery winnings and his carpentry business, he did not have enough money to purchase freedom for his enslaved family members. According to a confession by Monday Gell, an enslaved harness-maker who provided the court with the names of forty-two alleged conspirators several days after Vesey and the five other accused ringleaders were executed, Vesey’s desire for insurrection was driven by a concern for his family. Sometime in mid-July, Monday informed the court: “Vesey said he was satisfied with his own condition, being free, but as all his children were slaves, he wished to see what could be done for them.”⁴²

In 1820, the United States Congress reached what became known as the Missouri Compromise. Missouri’s request for admission to the Union as a slaveholding state was granted on the

condition that Maine be granted admission as a state in which slavery was prohibited. At the time, Rufus King, an influential senator from New York, was among the fiercest opponents of slavery in Congress. His passionate speeches on the Senate floor were circulated throughout the United States. They made their way to Charleston and, eventually, into the hands of Denmark Vesey. In addition to the Bible, Vesey used these speeches to persuade others to join the conspiracy. For example, in the aforementioned confession that Jack Purcell gave shortly before his execution, he claimed that Vesey would read to him from various newspaper articles. “He one day brought me a speech which he told me had been delivered in Congress by a *Mr. King* on the subject of slavery; he told me this Mr. King was the black man’s friend.”⁴³ In their introductory narrative to the *Official Report*, Kennedy and Parker claim that by appealing to these speeches, Vesey “persuaded but too many that Congress had actually declared them free, and that they were held in bondage contrary to the laws of the land.”⁴⁴ According to Kennedy and Parker, Vesey used biblical texts to convince Jack of the divine endorsement of the insurrection and Senator King’s speeches to convince him of the unlawfulness of slavery.

The establishment of what became known as the African Church in Charleston a few years earlier also played an important role in the timing of Vesey’s plot. In 1816, Morris Brown, a free mixed-race native of Charleston, and Henry Drayton, a formerly enslaved mixed-race man, traveled to Philadelphia to meet with Richard Allen, a founder and the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.⁴⁵ Shortly after their return to Charleston, two independent African Methodist churches were built in the city. These churches, commonly referred to as the African Church at the time, would become the forerunner of the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episco-



FIGURE 2. Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church (present day).

pal Church. In 1817, over four thousand congregants of African descent left the Methodist church led by white clergy in Charleston. In 1830, James Osgood Andrew, a local slaveholding clergyman at the Trinity Methodist Church, wrote a brief history of Methodism in Charleston in which he provided a vivid description of services in the aftermath of this mass departure. “In the galleries, once crowded with attentive and prayerful hearers, now only a few faces were seen; and instead of the full chorus of happy voices, which used to hymn the praises of God, the preacher was called to witness a silent and mournful solitude.”⁴⁶

But soon after the African Church opened its doors, Charleston’s white slaveholding elites viewed it as fostering antislavery sentiments among those of African descent. On Sunday, June 7, 1818, the City Guard disrupted services and arrested 143 free and enslaved persons of African descent. Two years later, over one hundred white citizens signed a petition to the South Carolina legislature, dated October 16, 1820, which called for further restrictions on people of African descent. Among other stated concerns, the petition warned that the African Church in Charleston was supported by “Abolition Societies in the Eastern and Northern States.”

Your petitioners beg leave to invite the attention of the Legislature to other existing evils, in communicating which they have first to state, that a spacious Building has lately been erected in the immediate neighbourhood of Charleston for the *exclusive* worship of Negroes and coloured people, from means supplied them by Abolition Societies in the Eastern and Northern States, as your petitioners are credibly informed, this Establishment is no less impolitick than unnecessary in as much as ample accommodation is, and has al-

ways been provided and afforded the Negroes and coloured people in the numerous Churches and places of Publick worship in the City of Charleston and its neighbourhood.⁴⁷

Although this petition does not provide specifics about the religious practices or instruction in the African Church, it shows concerns over worship unsupervised by white people. The suspicion that the African Methodist Episcopal Church and antislavery missionaries in Philadelphia unduly influenced the African Church grew among Charleston's white elites once Vesey's plot was discovered. On June 29, 1822, the day after Denmark Vesey's conviction, a local merchant and banker named John Porter wrote to Langdon Cleves, a former South Carolina congressman who was serving as the president of the Second Bank of the United States in Philadelphia at the time. "Their meetings Commenced, and were held under the perfidious Cover of Religion—and I cannot doubt," Porter declared, "they were aided by the black missionaries from *Your City!*"⁴⁸ A few months later, on September 23, the board of the Charleston Bible Society drafted a letter (which I discuss further in chapter 5) to Governor Thomas Bennett Jr., echoing Porter's claim: "the most leading Characters among [those involved in Vesey's plot], & the chief of the rest, were members of an irregular Association, which called itself the African Church, & was intimately connected with a similar Body in Philadelphia, from which their sentiments & directions in Matters of Religion were chiefly derived."⁴⁹

According to the records of Charleston's Second Presbyterian Church, Vesey was one of "three people of Colour" admitted to the congregation's communion on April 12, 1817. At the time, this was not unusual, considering that a report of the board of managers of the local Bible Society of Charleston

estimated that by 1819 “one-fourth of the communicants of the Presbyterian churches of Charleston were colored.”⁵⁰ Unlike the other two new congregants of color, however, Vesey was not baptized on that day, and there is no further record of his involvement with the Second Presbyterian Church. Sometime within the next few years, Vesey became actively involved in the African Church, which Hamilton referred to as “a hot-bed, in which the germ [of Vesey’s plot] might well be expected to spring into life and vigour.” Hamilton further noted, “Among the conspirators a majority of them belonged to the *African Church* and among those executed were several who had been Class Leaders.”⁵¹

A system of “class leaders” in local Methodist churches facilitated gatherings of free or enslaved people of African descent. In addition to Sunday services, classes were held on weekday evenings, led by a lay “coloured preacher or leader,” as explained in the introductory narrative in the *Official Report*. Kennedy and Parker crafted their description to suggest that these meetings were dangerously radical events held under the guise of religious instruction. The class meetings were “held usually at night in some retired building, avowedly for religious instruction and worship.” As “no white person attended,” Kennedy and Parker surmised, “they were to be used as places of rendezvous and rallying points, for communicating to all, the exact night and hour, on which the first blow was to be struck.”⁵² Martha Proctor Richardson, a white widow living in Savannah, Georgia, wrote a letter, dated Saturday, July 6, 1822, to James Screven, her nephew and future plantation owner in Charleston.⁵³ Referring to Vesey and those who died with him, she informed Screven, “Six were condemned and executed on 2d July—it is said that the leaders in this conspiracy were class leaders of religious societies.” A few lines later she reiterated, “The Ring

Leaders of the conspiracy were all of them Class Leaders or Deacons.”⁵⁴ This assertion is corroborated in part by testimony during the trial of Mingo Harth, when William Paul claimed, “Peter, Ned and Charles I know to be class leaders in the African Church.”⁵⁵ As observed earlier, several witnesses testified about class meetings held in Vesey’s home.

By mid-August 1822, the African Church in Charleston was razed and sold off for lumber, or, in the words of Hamilton, “voluntarily dissolved.”⁵⁶ Morris Brown and Henry Drayton were forced into exile. On August 6, 1822, Judge John B. White ruled that Brown and Drayton had violated an 1821 South Carolina law prohibiting free persons of African descent from leaving and then returning to the state. Judge White declared, “I do hereby order the said Morris Brown and Henry Drayton, to leave this State within fifteen days from this date, under the pains and penalties which await them in case of their disobedience.”⁵⁷ Brown fled to Philadelphia, where he would eventually become the second bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, succeeding Richard Allen.

It was the afternoon of May 22, 1822. Peter Prioleau, a mixed-race cook who was enslaved by Colonel John Cordes Prioleau, was returning from the market when he was approached by William Paul. After some initial small talk, William cut to the chase. “Do you know that something serious is about to take place?” he asked, “many of us are determined to right ourselves!”⁵⁸ When Peter pressed him for details, William replied, “if you will go with me, I will show you the man, who has the list of names who will take yours down.”⁵⁹ But Peter resisted. Later, he testified, “I would have nothing to do with this business, that

I was satisfied with my condition, that I was grateful to my master for his kindness and wished no change.”⁶⁰ After consulting with William Penceel, a free man who belonged to the Brown Society Fellowship, a mutual aid organization whose members identified as “mulatto,” Peter decided to inform his slaveholder. When Colonel Prioleau returned from out-of-town business a few days later, Peter told him about the plot. The information was passed along to James Hamilton, who ordered the arrest of William Paul. When interrogated, William implicated Mingo Harth and Paul Poyas. On May 31, Mingo and Paul were questioned but released.

Just over a week later, on June 9, Joe La Roche and Ned Bennett attempted unsuccessfully to recruit George Wilson, a class leader in the African Church who was enslaved by Major John Wilson. Five days later, George told his slaveholder of the plot. Major Wilson informed Hamilton, who then informed Governor Bennett. The next day, Governor Bennett ordered the arrests of Mingo Harth, Paul Poyas, and Rolla Bennett. Initially, the governor was skeptical about the allegations, but after Rolla confessed, the militia was deployed.

Out of all the witnesses at the trials, Monday Gell stood out. In his *Account*, Hamilton declared, “It would be difficult to name any individual more actively engaged in the plot than [Monday], or more able to aid Denmark Vesey, from his uncommon sagacity and knowledge.”⁶¹ After his conviction, Monday was offered a reduced sentence of banishment rather than death in exchange for his confessions. According to Monday, Vesey had originally intended the insurrection to take place on July 14. Vesey, who spoke French, probably selected this date because it was Bastille Day, the celebration of the storming of the Bastille during the French Revolution. Monday told the court, “*Vesey originally proposed the second Sunday, or the 14th of*

July, as the day for rising, but afterwards changed it to the 16th of June.”⁶² Yet, when the new date arrived, an alleged ringleader named Jack Pritchard informed others that the timetable was to be delayed. Jack, who was enslaved by Paul Pritchard, was one of Vesey’s close associates. He was also known as Gullah Jack or sometimes Couter Jack. As Yorrick Cross, who was enslaved by Vesey’s attorney George W. Cross, testified at Jack’s trial, “On that day he [Jack] came to me and said they would not break out that night as the patrol was too strong.”⁶³ Jack was hanged on July 12.

After Peter Prioleau and George Wilson betrayed those involved in Vesey’s plot, a series of arrests followed quickly. On June 19, Hamilton organized a Court of Magistrates and Freeholders with Lionel Henry Kennedy and Thomas Parker serving as magistrates. On June 22, William Dove, the captain of the City Guard, arrested Vesey. On June 27, the court tried Vesey. On June 28, Kennedy sentenced Vesey to death. On July 2, 1822, Denmark Vesey was hanged.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, interpreters of Vesey’s plot have focused on Kennedy and Parker’s *Official Report* as a primary source from which to reconstruct Vesey’s use of biblical texts. In her novel *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, Stowe quotes from the *Official Report* directly to support her claim that Vesey’s “great instrument of influence was a book that has always been prolific in insurrectionary movements, under all systems of despotism.”⁶⁴ In 1861, Thomas Wentworth Higginson wrote an influential article in the *Atlantic Monthly* that also quoted from Kennedy and Parker when discussing Vesey’s biblical interpretation.⁶⁵

Even Grimké's *Right on the Scaffold* relied on Kennedy and Parker's summary of Vesey's favorite biblical texts. Grimké explained that Vesey interpreted a verse from the book of Joshua as applicable to those of African descent in Charleston. Like their ancient Israelite counterparts, they were "also commanded to arise and destroy their enemies and the city in which they dwelt 'both man and woman, young and old, . . . with the edge of the sword' [Joshua 6:21]." ⁶⁶ Grimké continues, "He looked confidently for a day of vengeance and retribution for the blacks. He felt . . . in the stern and exultant prophecy of Zachariah, fierce and sanguinary words, which were constantly in his mouth 'Then shall the Lord go forth, and fight against those nations, as when he fought in the day of battle' [Zechariah 14:3]. According to Vesey's lurid exegesis 'those nations' meant, beyond a peradventure, the cruel masters."⁶⁷ Grimké's comments and biblical quotations are consistent with what Kennedy and Parker write in the *Official Report*, as is discussed in the next chapter.

All of the trial transcripts that Kennedy and Parker prepared for publication use the King James Version of the Bible, even when recording the testimony or statements made by witnesses at the trials. For example, according to their transcription of a confession, John Enslow, who was enslaved by a cooper named Joseph Enslow, quoted from the King James Version by chapter and verse. He stated, "Denmark had several Meetings at different times, he generally opened them by reading the 21st Chapter of *Exodus* and exhorting them from the 16th verse; he that Stealeth a man and Selleth, or if he be found in his hands shall surely be put to death."⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the biblical translations used by Vesey and his associates were not necessarily limited to the King James Version. As mentioned earlier, William Paul testified that he read from the book of Tobit during a meeting

at Mingo Harth's home. Tobit is found among the fourteen Apocryphal or Deuterocanonical books, which are not included in most Protestant editions of the King James Version. William did not indicate whether the Bible from which he read belonged to Mingo, Vesey, or someone else. Moreover, local newspapers advertised the availability of Bibles with the Apocrypha.⁶⁹ So it is entirely possible that whoever owned that particular Bible, regardless of her or his particular church affiliation, just happened to acquire one with the Apocrypha, since they were readily available in Charleston at the time.

Vesey and his associates may have read from the Apocrypha, but the biblical texts that they cited to support the insurrection came largely from the Old Testament.⁷⁰ Yet, although many of the biblical texts that Charleston's white elites used to defend slavery came from the New Testament Epistles, Vesey and his associates also utilized a few texts from the New Testament. According to the testimony of Monday Gell, a meeting was held at the home of a man identified only as Philip. Philip was a preacher who would quote from John 14:27 ("Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid") to encourage recruits whose resolve was wavering. "It is probable that the timid and the wavering were brought [presumably by Vesey or one of his associates] to this High Priest of sedition, to be confirmed in *good resolutions*," Kennedy and Parker speculated, "and would then shew how applicable the text was 'let not thy heart be troubled, neither be afraid.'"⁷¹ An 1823 proslavery pamphlet by Frederick Dalcho, discussed in detail in chapter 6, alleges that one of men executed for his participation in the plot used John 14 as a source of comfort. Dalcho exclaims, "one of the convicts, the day before his execution, was overheard expounding to his wife, the beginning of the 14th chapter of St. John, and applying it to himself. It was necessary, he said, that he should go to prepare

a place in heaven for his wife!”⁷² In the introductory narrative to the *Official Report*, Kennedy and Parker claim that Vesey and his colleagues used a verse from the Gospel of Luke as their creed, although none of the witnesses in the trials mentions this text. Kennedy and Parker write, “the City was to have been fired, and an indiscriminate slaughter of the whites to commence, and also of those of their own colour who had not joined them, or did not immediately do so. It was determined that no one should be neuter; ‘he that is not with me is against me’ [Luke 11:23] was their creed.”⁷³

As I discuss throughout this book, whereas Charleston’s white elites often drew clear distinctions between Old and New Testament texts in their proslavery arguments, for whatever reasons, Vesey and his associates did not make these distinctions as precisely, if at all. This may be because many of Vesey’s associates, with varying degrees of literacy, may have had recent or limited exposure to the various Christian orderings of biblical material. Most likely, however, it simply did not matter to Vesey and his associates where in the Bible a text was located if the text proved useful for their cause. In addition to the Bible, Vesey and his associates made use of other texts or religious practices that could convince recruits to join them or strengthen the resolve of those already committed to their cause.⁷⁴ When necessary, Vesey resorted to classic Greek mythology to persuade others to join his plot. At Vesey’s trial, Joe La Roche testified that they met each other on the road one day and Vesey asked him if he was satisfied with his present situation. Vesey then asked if he “remembered the fable of Hercules and the Waggoner whose waggon was stalled, and he began to pray, and Hercules said, you fool put your shoulders to the wheel, whip up the horses and your waggon will be pulled out.” The moral of the story, Vesey concluded, was “that if we did not put our

hand to the work and deliver ourselves, we should never come out of slavery.”⁷⁵

Jack Pritchard, also known as Gullah Jack, helped to recruit others to Vesey’s cause. As discussed in chapter 3, Jack allegedly used traditional African religious and medical practices to encourage his recruits instead of appeals to biblical texts. At the same time, Kennedy and Parker list Jack among the members of the African Church in their introductory narrative to the *Official Report* when they note, “Vesey had been a member, and of which his principal associates, Gullah Jack, Monday, Ned and Peter, were also members.”⁷⁶ This suggests that Vesey and his associates did not base their religious appeals strictly on the Bible and Christianity. Rather, as historian Margaret Washington has argued, Gullah religious practices were “integrating the old ways [traditional African religious practices] into Christianity.”⁷⁷ There is no evidence that Vesey and his associates only recruited among Christians or that they drew a strict division between traditional African religious and medical practices and Christianity. Instead, as historian Eugene Genovese has observed, Vesey was “formulating a flexible religious appeal” based on “both African and classical Christian ideas and appeals.” Genovese continues, “Denmark Vesey most creatively captured the complex tradition of the people he sought to lead.”⁷⁸ Nevertheless, Charleston’s white legal and religious authorities often depicted this complex tradition as either naïve, unchristian superstition or as a malevolent misinterpretation of Christian scripture. For example, Kennedy and Parker refer to Philip, the preacher mentioned earlier who quoted John 14:27, as the “High Priest of sedition,” presumably because Philip also seemed to have utilized traditional African religious practices.⁷⁹

Biographers often remember Vesey through the prism of biblical language—a language Vesey himself invoked and that has been used repeatedly to describe him and his mission. Written nearly eighty years after Vesey’s death, Grimké’s 1901 biography opens with a reference to a line from Song of Solomon 1:5: “He was black but comely.”⁸⁰ Grimké’s citation of this biblical verse does more than simply provide a racial identification for Vesey, since Grimké refers to Vesey as “black” without a reference to the Bible throughout his biography.⁸¹ This opening imbues with biblical significance Hamilton’s earlier claim that, as a young man, Vesey had “beauty, alertness and intelligence.” It also connects Vesey with a tradition, well established by the end of the nineteenth century, of using Song of Solomon 1:5 to celebrate the lives and accomplishments of people of African descent.⁸² A full century later, in what is to date the definitive scholarly biography of Denmark Vesey, Egerton does something similar. The title of this biography, *He Shall Go Out Free*, comes from Exodus 21:2 (“If thou buy an Hebrew servant, six years he shall serve: and in the seventh he shall go out free for nothing”).⁸³ Several of the Egerton’s chapter titles also come from the Bible: chapter 2, “Stranger in a Strange Land” (Exodus 2:22); chapter 5, “Building the House of the Lord” (1 Kings 9:1); chapter 6, “Exodus”; chapter 7, “Lamentations”; and chapter 8, “Judges.” The Bible, in other words, served not only as a tool used by Vesey and his white supremacist adversaries to justify or condemn the insurrection plot in the 1820s. It provides the language through which, to this day, we continue to interpret the life and actions of the controversial and mysterious man at the center of the conspiracy.

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