For enslaved members of the African diaspora in America, the biblical story of Exodus provided a way of understanding and framing discussions about slavery. Enslaved people would eventually use the Exodus story to shape their arguments for the abolition of slavery. If enslaved people found comparisons between their situation and that of the children of Israel, might not contemporary literary scholarship turn to the Moses narrative to understand and frame discussions, especially theological ones, about the enslaved experience as recounted in slave narratives, whether narratives of the African diaspora in America, of modern-day sex trafficking, or other instances of slavery?

Answering this question affirmatively requires identifying points of connection between the Moses story and slave narratives. One prominent connection emerges between the Exodus text and Harriet Jacobs’s 1861 slave narrative Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. In both Exodus and Incidents, there exists what might be called the hiding place, that place or collection of places between slavery and full freedom where enslaved individuals hide away until they are able to acquire, if not complete freedom or civil liberties, at least a measure of freedom. Long before Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt, he spent time hidden from those intent on killing him, in part because he represented a marginalized, oppressed group. Harriet Jacobs spent seven years hidden in an attic crawlspace in order to escape the sexual harassment of a plantation owner and eventually acquire freedom in the North for herself and her children. For Moses in Exodus and Jacobs in Incidents, their hiding places become necessary but temporary habituations that strengthen their sense of personal identity and that allow them, even as they live in hiddenness, to experience God’s protection and comforting presence. These divine encounters reveal the complexity of hiding places, both their sacredness and their undesirability, and point to a richer understanding of the omnipresence of God.

Ancient Hebrews and the enslaved in early America

Enslaved people of the African diaspora in early America saw the figures and events of biblical narratives not as historically distant, but as immediately present. They connected scriptural narratives to their experiences as slaves. As Virgil Wood says, for the enslaved, “the Bible came to represent a body of literature that contained stories of enslavement and liberation.” Of particular importance to them in the Bible was the story of Exodus with its focus on the Egyptian enslavement of the Israelites and their eventual liberation through the leadership of Moses. According to Wood, “As slaves became increasingly familiar with the Bible, they interpreted their experiences as parallel to the sufferings of the Israelites while they were in bondage in Egypt.” In comparing their experience to that of the Hebrews, the enslaved hoped for freedom and gained, according to Albert Raboteau, a greater sense of themselves as a collective:

Slaves prayed for the future day of deliverance to come, and they kept hope alive by incorporating as part of their mythic past the Old Testament exodus of Israel out of slavery. The appropriation of the Exodus story was for the slaves a way of articulating their sense of historical identity as a people. That identity was also based, of course, upon their common heritage of enslavement. The Christian slaves applied the Exodus story, whose end they knew, to their own experience of slavery, which had not ended. In identifying with the Exodus story, they created meaning and purpose out of the chaotic and senseless experience of slavery. Exodus functioned as an archetypal event for the slaves. The sacred history of God’s liberation of his people would be or was being repeated in the American south.

African American preachers and abolitionists were on the forefront of highlighting the parallels between their people and the enslaved Hebrews. They used Exodus to frame their discussions about slavery, oppression, and freedom, and they often equated cultural heroes known for freedom fighting to Exodus’s key figure, Moses. In the early 1800s, African American preachers, some who had been slaves, were pointing to the similarities between black slaves and the children of Israel. Absalom Jones, the first African American to be ordained as an Episcopal priest, delivered an 1808 sermon in which he described the US Congress’s prohibition against slave importation as God’s divine deliverance, a deliverance similar to that of the Hebrews. Another Episcopal minister, Alexander Crummell, who had been born to free parents and went on to teach at Howard University, argued in an 1877 sermon that, just as God allowed the Hebrews to endure slavery in order to purify them and make of them a great nation, God was allowing slavery, no matter how vile an institution, to shape qualities in blacks that would shape them into a great people.

Moses and America’s enslaved

For many of the enslaved Moses was an ideal man and Christ was a second Moses. As an ideal, Moses became one whose life was a pattern, a pattern for understanding the unique circumstances of the oppressed, especially those risking their lives to free the enslaved. Interestingly, in identifying with the Exodus story, enslaved members of the African diaspora equated the story’s key figure, Moses, not with men primarily, but with a woman. The African American cultural hero Harriet Tubman was referred to as “Moses” because of her life-risking travels carrying slaves to freedom at the Canadian border. By 1855, after she had helped over forty slaves escape, her reputation for these adventures had grown. She began referring to herself as Moses, and she was called by that name when she was asked to speak at events. This title
grew not only out of her successful travels but also because of the spiritual "Go Down Moses" that she often sang as she walked near slave cabins announcing her arrival. In calling her Moses, slaves believed Tubman was blessed, meaning, as Beverly Lowry says, that she had "the charm and the God-given anointment to be the deliverer they [had] been waiting for in their particular corner of the hellish world of slavery. . . ."11

The hiding places of the enslaved

Considering the moniker "Moses" given to Tubman and considering the enslaved community's general paralleling of the black experience with that of the ancient Israelites, Raboteau's argument that Exodus functioned as an "archetypal event for slaves" appears valid. As such, this ancient biblical story can be viewed as an appropriate tool for understanding slave narratives, not only when discussing slavery and freedom in general, but also when examining unique aspects of the slave experience. One such aspect or place is "the hiding place," the place between slavery and freedom inhabited by an enslaved person in defiance of and usually unbeknownst to their oppressors. This place emerges in the Exodus story with Moses. Moses himself avoids slavery only through the clandestine activities of his biological mother and his adoptive mother; the former hides him in a basket and the latter hides him in full view within the Egyptian palace. Given this experience and his eventual identification with his people, Moses can be thought of as an ancient model of the enslaved person, the enslaved person who spends time in hiding places. In the early African American literary tradition, one enslaved individual who stands out in terms of his hidden experience is Harriet Jacobs. As recounted in her narrative Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Jacobs spends an extraordinary seven years in hiding. These years follow several shorter periods in which Jacobs had remained hidden—all experiences of her ancient predecessor, Moses, that reveal the way in which time spent in solitude can strengthen the personal identity of enslaved individuals and can allow them to connect intimately with God in places with less-than-ideal conditions.

The five hiding places of Moses

As recorded in Exodus 2–20, Moses inhabits a series of five hiding places. He is born under an edict issued by Pharaoh calling for the murder of all Hebrew male babies by throwing them into the Nile River. However, his mother ignores the edict and hides him within her own household—the first hiding place. After a few months, Moses's mother places him in a basket and among the reeds on the banks of the Nile in hopes that someone in Pharaoh's court will have compassion on Moses, refusing to heed Pharaoh's edict—the second hiding place. When Pharaoh's daughter discovers the baby in the basket, Moses's sister, Miriam, who had witnessed the discovery, runs to her and volunteers to "find" a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby for her, knowing that this Hebrew woman will be Moses's own mother. Pharaoh's daughter agrees and offers payment for this service. Thus Moses is sent into hiding, this third hiding place being the same as the first—the home of his Hebrew family. After being weaned there, Moses is taken to his fourth hiding place. He enters the Egyptian palace and becomes the son of Pharaoh's daughter. This palace functions for Moses as yet another hiding place, for there, Moses, as a Hebrew, is spared possible death of body and mind under Egyptian slavery. Yet, despite this advantage, Moses still grows up to identify with his people the Hebrews. When he steps away from the Egyptian palace one day, he sees the hard labor of his people and becomes so upset after noticing an Egyptian overseer beating a Hebrew that he murders the Egyptian. Later, when Moses realizes that Pharaoh is seeking to kill him because of the murder, Moses flees the grand, urban center of Egypt and enters his fifth and final hiding place, rural Midian. He lives there many years, getting married, having children, laboring as a shepherd, and eventually having an encounter with God.

The hiding places of Harriet Jacobs

Each hiding place that Moses enters spares him from physical death, revealing the nature of hiding places in general. At the very least, they provide physical protection for oppressed individuals whose death at the hands of their oppressors could be justified easily. This protective quality is revealed in Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. As outlined in the narrative, Jacobs goes into several short-term hiding places before entering a long-term one. Her tenure within these hiding places begins when she escapes from her plantation, for on that plantation her children would suffer the worst abuses of slavery and be used to keep her from trying to run away. She hides in the home of several friends and then at the home of a slave trader's wife who is sympathetic to her situation. Fearing that she may be caught, her friends help her hide in an area known as Snaky Swamp, so named because of its abundance of large snakes and mosquitoes. When these rough conditions eventually sicken Jacobs, she is taken to her grandmother's home and placed in a crawlspace. Jacobs does not know that this room will be her hiding place for seven years before she finally escapes to the North. These hiding places enable Jacobs to escape what likely would have been her death had she been found and had she resisted being returned to slavery.

Personal identity and Moses

For both Jacobs and Moses, the period in which they, as members of an oppressed group, inhabit their respective hiding places serves not only as an oasis of safety but also as a place to develop a greater sense of identity.

The fact that Moses defends a Hebrew against Egyptian abuse and then seeks to help two fighting Hebrews reconcile suggests that, in his first hiding place among his Hebrew family, Moses learned identification with the Hebrews despite not later growing up among them. Evidence of this identification is revealed first in his willingness to leave the Egyptian palace and notice the oppression of the Hebrews by the Egyptians.

Some critics, such as Ernst Neufeld, argue that Moses did not identify with the Hebrews. However, Neufeld overlooks the significance of the narrative's details: Moses steps away from the Egyptian palace, witnesses the labor of the Hebrews, kills an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew, and then later tries to bring peace between two Hebrews who are fighting. These details alone reveal Moses's compassion for the Hebrews. He could have hidden himself within the luxurious Egyptian palace, isolating himself from the oppression of the Hebrews. He might have witnessed the
As a grandfather, Moses knew what it felt like to be despised. Rather, he gets involved.

Neufeld and other critics also suggest that Moses’s actions on behalf of the Hebrews reflect his naturally compassionate nature, not his identification with the Hebrews. According to Neufeld, Moses, soon after arriving in Midian from his flight from Pharaoh’s death threat, fights off shepherds who are attempting to drive away the daughters of Jethro, the man into whose family Moses eventually marries. According to Neufeld, “Here is an instance in which all the participants were non-Hebrews, but Moses needed no self-identification with them in order to help the defenseless, convincingly demonstrating that he well might have acted similarly in the case of the Hebrews in Egypt, out of feelings of common humanity.”

Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper make a similar assertion, proposing that Moses’s identification with the Hebrews is not revealed in his willingness to kill an Egyptian for abusing a Hebrew, for Moses “saves the Midianite women although he has no knowledge of any kinship ties with them at the time.”

However, the argument that Moses’s concern for the Israelites in Egypt reflects general compassion rather than identification actually supports the notion that Moses identifies with the Hebrews. Where did Moses learn this compassion, especially considering that he grew up in a palace whose government was rooted in oppressive practices? Were compassion merely inherent to humanity, perhaps the actual practice of Hebrew slavery would have never existed. The fact that it did exist, though, points to compassion, at least in part, being learned. In the case of Moses, his tendency toward compassion seems rooted in his upbringing, in the feelings of outsidership that he must have experienced.

While no evidence exists that Moses knew he was a Hebrew until God revealed it to him at the burning bush, Neufeld suggests that Pharaoh did know:

Pharaoh knew from the beginning that Moses was a Hebrew child whom his daughter had saved despite Pharaoh’s decree of extermination, and he could hardly have considered him a true Egyptian. Thus, he knew what Moses may well not have. He knew that Moses, by slaying the Egyptian, had committed himself, whether he knew it or not, to the cause of the Israelites.

Patricia Berlyn suggests that Moses’s identity as a Hebrew was known, not only to Pharaoh, but throughout Pharaoh’s court: “it was not merely Pharaoh who knew that Moses came from the Israelites, but so did many in the Egyptian palace. Moses’s origins must have been known at court, since so many attendants had seen their royal mistress draw him from the water, so [Moses] himself must have known from an early age that he was an Israelite.”

If Pharaoh knew from the beginning that Moses was a Hebrew, it seems highly probable that Pharaoh, in subtle ways, made Moses feel his difference, his outsidership. Thus, it seems likely that the compassion Moses exhibited for the oppressed, for the marginalized, probably grew out of his time in the Egyptian palace where he did not feel fully accepted. Living with Pharaoh as a grandfather, Moses knew what it felt like to be despised. Moses’s position as Pharaoh’s grandson kept Pharaoh from killing Moses earlier. However, after Moses kills an overseer, Pharaoh’s simmering dislike for Moses bursts forth. As Berlyn says, “Perhaps to Pharaoh and his inner circle the heinous offense was not the killing of a mere overseer, but the ingratitude of a young man who was given a high place in the palace, raised and educated as an upper-class Egyptian, and yet chose to align himself to the despised but still-feared children of Israel.” This display of hatred for Moses was probably not the first time Pharaoh exhibited hostility toward Moses, therein reminding Moses of his outsidership. However, it was probably the first time that Pharaoh had an excuse finally to seek the death of this Hebrew boy who he felt should have been killed at birth. Had Pharaoh fully embraced Moses, Moses could have identified easily with the oppressors, therein remaining distant from or oblivious to the pains of the Israelites. Instead, as one rejected, he learns compassion.

**Personal identity and Harriet Jacobs**

Moses’s hiding-place experience in the palace as well as his hidden experiences before then, as a weaned child within the Israelite household, allow him to grow up with a solid sense of his identity and to develop compassion for his people. For Moses’s counterpart Jacobs, having to go into hiding also enables her to deal with identity concerns. While Moses’s hiding places enable him to deal with ethnic identity issues, Jacobs’s hiding places enable her to confront concerns that are of a moral nature, allowing her to reclaim and maintain what she deems to be her moral identity.

Outside of hiding, in the everyday life of slavery, Jacobs struggles to live according to the moral values that she believes most affirming. As a slave, her dignity is ever under assault because of the constant sexual advances of her owner, Dr. Flint. He refuses to allow her to marry. Instead, he offers to establish her and her child in a home, an offer Jacobs knows is an attempt to push her into concubinage. Yet, in order to escape from Flint’s harassment and to acquire some measure of what she considers a respectable life, she enters into a semi-committed relationship with slave owner Samuel Tredwell, with whom she eventually has two children. Though Jacobs feels that this relationship allows her some measure of respectability, she still feels ashamed of this choice. After her first child with Tredwell, Jacobs says, “I shed bitter tears that I was no longer worthy of being respected by the good and pure. Alas! Slavery still held me in its poisonous grasp. There was no chance for me to be respectable. There was no prospect of being able to lead a better life.”

Jacobs’s feelings of shame come from two sources. She lived during the Victorian era, a period in which women were judged according to a set of ideals known as the cult of true womanhood. As Laurie Kaiser says, “According to the cult of true womanhood, the ideal woman was a moral wife, mother, and daughter. Her place was in the home. She was religious, submissive, and pure. A great issue was made of purity. Women were expected to maintain virtue at all costs.” Black women were not seen as virtuous. Instead, they were thought to have an “animal sexuality” and were viewed as “temptresses with insatiable sexual appetites.” Jacobs expresses her shame and sadness at having entered into a relationship with Tredwell, a relationship she chose because...

---

*Priscilla Papers* • Vol. 29, No. 3 • Summer 2015
slavery prevented her from living what was considered the virtuous, pure life of a wife. In her narrative, addressed primarily to a white northern female audience, Jacobs relates her sadness over her choice:

But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection . . . do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice…. I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me.23

Despite feeling some shame at her choice, she makes the choice, as Kaiser says, in hopes of maintaining some dignity.24 Her feelings of shame and sadness arise not only from being unable to live up to the ideals of the cult of true womanhood, but also from her being unable to live according to what she considers Christian values. Jacobs's views about sex are in line with those views common to Christians at the time. Yet she does not embrace Christianity as practiced by the slave holders around her; rather, as Ann Taves suggests, Jacobs's Christian practice and views are those that allow her to align herself with individuals who are Christian and who support and love her: “The connection which Jacobs makes between sexual purity and spirituality, a connection which lies at the heart of her narrative and indeed was prevalent among Christians of her era, was grounded in her relationships with her mother, her grandmother, and her first mistress."25 Because of her relationship with these three women, she comes to believe that marriage and childbirth within marriage are the most appropriate and excellent practices. Her mother was a free woman who had the privilege of getting married. Thus, the shame that Jacobs feels after entering into a relationship with Tredwell also grows out of having violated a Christian code of ethics and moving out of ideological alignment with her supporters. While the cult-of-womanhood ideals were indeed connected to Christian views of sexual purity, they were socially biased and prevented Jacobs, as a black woman, from living up to them. Thus, it is to a humanistic code that Jacobs turns. This humanistic code is her own unorthodox Christianity, revised from her grandmother's and her mistress's teachings, and that, freed from racism, allowed Jacobs to aspire to excellence. According to Taves, “Although Jacobs was critical of both her grandmother's and her first mistress's willingness to consider slavery as the will of God, she appropriated their attitudes toward purity and impurity."26 Yet, Jacobs recognizes, as Taves says, that slavery limited how well she could live up to those ideals: "Jacobs' narrative reveals that in a context where women were literally the sexual property of their masters, her religious convictions about purity were a powerful, albeit ultimately limited weapon in service of female autonomy."27 Jacobs seems to agree with and clarify what the African American pastor Richard Allen preached twenty years earlier, in 1820, when he argued against slavery, saying that it prevented slaves from cultivating morals.28

When Jacobs escapes the plantation and goes into hiding in her grandmother's attic crawlspace, she no longer has to worry about entering concubinage, a state in which sex outside of marriage was permitted in violation of social and Christian standards. Her hiding place allows Jacobs to live according to her closely held social and religious values about sex and marriage. Thus, while slavery may have prevented her from assuming the identity of a virtuous wife, the crawlspace enables her to identify herself as a virtuous woman. Thus she is able to follow the path of a handful of black women during her time who sought, as Beth Doriani notes, to be “shapers of their own identities and destinies and . . . individuals who need not meet the standards of whites and males to achieve their own personhood."29

The sacredness of the hiding place

The hiding place appears to be, then, a space which impacts personal identity, enabling Moses to possess a clearer sense of ethnic identity and enabling Jacobs to live out an identity grounded in the moral standards that she most values. All of this counters what might seem an inevitable conclusion—that the hiding place is void of any redeeming qualities given the fact that the oppressed individual usually comes to inhabit it under the threat of death. Yet the hiding place is actually redemptive, helping individuals such as Moses and Jacobs to grapple with their unique identities. The redemptive ability of the hiding place, despite the distressing circumstances that lead to it, arises from the divine activity that occurs within it, activity that transforms it from being merely a location where one escapes capture and possible death to a place of sacred growth. As a sacred space, it is, as Donald McKim defines the term “sacred," that “which is regarded and revered as holy or able to induce an experience of the divine."30 Thus the hiding places of Moses and Jacobs become locations wherein the experience of the divine is induced, places wherein God's presence manifests itself in various forms, including motherly love, the love of family and friends, and, in the case of Moses, a burning bush.

The sacred in Moses's hiding places

For Moses, the burning bush experience in Midian is obviously a moment of divine encounter. Yet, long before this encounter, Moses had experienced God's presence in his other hiding places. While living in Egypt, both the Hebrew home where he is hidden as an infant and the palace where he resides as an adopted son become sacred places wherein divine activity manifests itself in the love of both his biological mother and his adoptive mother. Their love proves to be redemptive, rescuing Moses from an unjust death, enabling him to grow up, allowing him to become educated in, as Berlyn says, "palace schools, among sons and nephews of pharaohs and sons of Canaanite vassal-kings."31

Both Testaments speak of this ability and willingness of God to manifest herself in motherly nurture and care. In Isa 66:13, the writer gives voice to God as a mother who desires to comfort her children, her children being, in one sense, Jerusalem, and, in another sense, the larger faith community: “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem” (NRSV). In Luke 13:34, Christ, the manifestation of God in human flesh, speaks of wanting to love and protect his people like a mother even though his people uhave rejected him: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones people like a mother even though his people uhave rejected him: Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones people like a mother even though his people uhave rejected him: How often have I desired to gather your
children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (NRSV). According to Paul Smith, the image of a mother is among the various metaphors, similes, analogies, and symbols used to describe God in scripture: “In the Bible, God is referred to in human analogies such as shepherd, father, mother, redeemer, judge, deliverer, friend, lover, and helper, as well as in animal analogies such as mother bear, eagle, and mother hen.” 

Thus, simply because God is described in scripture as being like a father, does not mean also, as Smith says, that God should be viewed as male or having masculine traits or having gender. The metaphors in scripture describing God as father draw upon attributes of fathers during biblical times in order to point to certain truths about God. This is true also of the metaphors describing God as a mother. Yet, as McKim says, “God is not gendered, so a range of biblical images can be used to describe God.” The motherhood of God as presented in Isaiah and Luke points to God as one who lavishes upon her children protection and comfort, particularly in difficult situations. This is exactly what Moses receives in each of his hiding places. In both his Hebrew home and his palace home, his mothers protect him from Pharaoh’s death decree and provide him with necessary comforts such as food to sustain his physical life and education to enrich his intellectual life. Thus these hiding places, the Hebrew home and the Egyptian palace, become sacred places where God’s divine presence resides.

When Moses flees Egypt, he arrives at yet another hiding place. This place, Midian, becomes sacred just as his previous hiding places do. Not only does Moses find protection there from Pharaoh’s threat to kill him, he also receives comfort, especially the comfort of family and community. Instead of having to live the life of a fugitive, always isolated from community, he marries into the family of Jethro. Jethro becomes his father-in-law; Zipporah, his wife. Here, God mediates through a father-in-law and a wife, rather than through a mother. Later in Midian, Moses has his first direct encounter with God. Instead of relating to Moses indirectly through human sources such as his mothers or his father-in-law or his wife, God speaks directly to him. This God calls himself in Exod 3:14, Yahweh, “I AM THAT I AM,” a name which points to a constant, loving presence. According to Oliver Davies, the “Rabbinic understandings of this [name] focus on the idea within it: ‘I shall be with you always,’ or ‘I shall always come to your aid.’” These understandings of the name Yahweh again point to God as providing protection and comfort. Thus, not only is Midian in general a sacred place for Moses, but this particular place is also where God speaks to Moses through the burning bush. This is reinforced by Exod 3:5, where God tells Moses as he approaches the burning bush, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (NRSV). This place of the burning bush is sacred because God is there.

The sacred in Jacobs’s hiding places

Just as Moses’s initial divine encounter is through the protective and comforting love of his mothers, so too does Jacobs experience parental love from both her grandmother and aunt. In addition to maternal love, Jacobs experiences God’s protection and comforting presence in her various hiding places through the protective support of family and friends who help her as she seeks freedom.

Jacobs’s first divine encounter occurs when her grandmother hides her in order to keep her from being captured and returned to slavery. Jacobs continues to experience God’s comfort through her Aunt Marthy who, while Jacobs is in the crawlspace, takes on the Christ-like role of bringing food to her, this feeding becoming divine manifestation. For Jacobs, divine activity becomes associated with the willingness to feed others, both literally and metaphorically. This association is due, at least in part, to the way in which she, while still in slavery, notices the Flints, churchgoing slaveholders, abusing slaves by not giving them sufficient food or by punishing slave cooks when the food they serve is viewed as unsatisfactory. Jacobs contrasts these sinful behaviors with the figure of Christ who calls himself the bread of life and asks that the hungry come to him. As the bread of life, Christ dies so that others may live eternally. To be bread, to feed others, whether physically or spiritually, is to give them life, to sustain life. The life that Jacobs receives comes not only through the food that Aunt Marthy feeds her but also through the food that she serves others. At one point, when officials come searching for Jacobs in the very house wherein she is hiding, Aunt Marthy feeds them in the hopes of distracting them from searching for Jacobs. By nourishing and sustaining their lives she also sustains Jacobs’s life. These officials eventually leave, never knowing how close Jacobs was to them.

What is more, as Aunt Marty sustains her, Jacobs too becomes one who not only encounters, but also grants, the divine blessing of sustenance. As Linda Naranjo-Huebl suggests, Jacobs herself takes on the Christ-like role of sustainer:

Harriet Jacobs, in her own attempt to facilitate her children’s freedom, hides for seven years in the tiny attic space in which she has barely enough room to turn over, and where she suffers the debilitating effects of extreme cold and heat . . . . Appropriately, Jacobs’ hiding place lies above the storeroom; she becomes the food store that nourishes her children’s freedom.

Even before Jacobs settles into her grandmother’s crawlspace, she receives support from the community. Once she escapes from the plantation, the wife of a sympathetic slave owner allows her to hide in her house. Later, after she is forced to leave this place, her uncle hides her in a swamp. All of this comforting and protective support given to Jacobs as she seeks her freedom may be described as divine activity, activity that comforts and protects, connecting her to the comforting and protective Mother God of Is 66:13. However, it is not only the motherly nature of this activity that makes it divine. It is also the way in which this activity seeks to honor the authority of God within social conditions that do not.
Stephen Marshall notes, in his discussion of St. Augustine's Book XV in *The City of God*, that sin is rooted in the desire of human beings to assume mastery, supplanting the divine authority of God, throwing off what was originally designed to be human subjection to God's rule. This desire produces practices and ways of communicating that glorify the pursuit of human sovereignty, making this sinful pursuit appear honorable, encouraging even society's marginalized to aspire to it. To resist this temptation toward mastery, St. Augustine promoted exilic virtue; that is, living in subjection to human masters. This sort of living enables an individual to avoid the corruption that comes both in pursuing mastery and in engaging in practices and in communicative acts that endorse mastery. The individual who submits to human masters avoids corruption and develops, instead, a heroic, great soul.

However, achieving a heroic soul in a world bent on mastery might be viewed differently. According to Marshall, enslaved individuals can and have achieved greatness of soul through resistance, not submission, to human masters. When they have resisted slave masters, they have opposed an institution built upon the sinful desire to reject sovereign authority. Those who have helped them in this resistance have also sought to usher in the divine, and have also worked in such a way that the will of God has been done in heaven as well as on earth.

God's will points to human beings submitting to him, not to those, like Dr. Flint in *Incidents*, who have sought to dethrone God. Dr. Flint, in opposition to Jacob's own moral sensibilities, seeks to play a god-like role in Jacob's life when he prevents her marrying in order to force her into concubinage. However, when she resists his persistent attempts at mastery, as best she can, according to Christian principles of morality, she achieves greatness of soul. In other words, in resisting, she draws nearer to the divine, not only morally but in terms of a life lived in subjection to God, not in subjection to Dr. Flint, the false god, the nineteenth-century Baal. This is true also for the family and friends who support her. In helping her, they too resist the human drive toward mastery and thereby affirm God's ultimate authority and rule, ushering in the divine despite the base circumstances of slavery.

### The undesirability of sacred places

While the hiding places of Moses and Jacobs are filled with divine activity, they are also undesirable places, places of material lack, of separation, and of discomfort. This undesirability is due to Moses and Jacobs being members of oppressed, marginalized groups. Philip Sheldrake speaks to the issues of place and marginalization:

> Human places themselves can be read as landscapes of exclusion. So, the way people describe particular places as central or peripheral tends to accord with whether they are associated with high or low culture. Power is expressed in the monopolization of central places by socially strong groups and the recognition of weaker groups in society to less desirable environments.

For Moses and Jacobs, every undesirable aspect of their hiding place is connected to their being part of a disenfranchised group, making their hiding places a mix of sacred protection and undesirability. For Moses, his biological family's home in the slave quarters is obviously less desirable materially in comparison to the opulence of the Egyptian palace in which he eventually comes to live. Yet even this palace stands as an undesirable place, for by living there, Moses must remain separated from his people—a separation that he obviously dislikes, for he eventually leaves the palace to connect with them. When he enters Midian, he experiences deeper separation, for not only is he separated from his biological family, but he is also separated from his adoptive mother. While he has a newly formed family to assuage some of this loss, the fact remains that he must live apart from the only people and the only home place that he has known—Egypt. This issue of loss is also relevant in Jacobs's situation. While her time in the crawlspace does spare her children from being sent to a plantation and enables her to watch their development from her view through the crawlspace, she is still prevented from interacting with them and the rest of her family normally, openly. In addition to the pain of separation, Jacobs must face the discomfort of living in a cramped space that leaves her with physical ailments that linger long after she escapes. Thus, for Jacobs and Moses, this condition of undesirability within their hidden, sacred places clarifies, in part, what the Apostle Paul says in Rom 8:38–39, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (NRSV). The love of God can and does dwell in the hiding places of the disenfranchised, despite the undesirable conditions of these places and despite the circumstances that have led the marginalized to inhabit them. To say that God is omnipresent is to recognize this very fact—that God also dwells, moves, and acts in undesirable places.

### Conclusions

The connection that enslaved members of the African diaspora in America recognized between their condition and the ancient Hebrews points contemporary scholars to a more nuanced theological view of what it means to describe a place as sacred. One slave narrative in particular, when understood through the framework of Exodus, reveals the presence of a unique, sacred area that can be described as "the hiding place," an area that serves as more than a temporary harbor for those seeking to escape slavery. Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, like Exodus, highlights various hiding places, those areas where enslaved individuals flee, usually under the threat of death. For Moses and Jacobs, their hiding places become areas wherein their sense of personal identity is strengthened and where they encounter the divine as manifested through the protection and comfort of mothers, of other family members, and of friends who support them in their resistance against slavery, an institution that sought to institutionalize the usurpation of God. This manifestation of the divine endows their hiding places with sacredness. However, this sacredness does not ignore the fact that these places are also undesirable dwelling areas because of the poverty, separation, and discomfort always associated with oppression and marginalization. This co-existence of God's protection and undesirability in the hiding places of the oppressed
reinforces the fact that God is, indeed, omnipresent, dwelling and moving even in those places where there is pain and discomfort of all kinds. In those sacred, undesirable places, God does not forsake an individual. For Moses, God provides a floating basket to replace what could have been a watery grave had Pharaoh’s killing order been followed. For Jacobs, God provides a cramped crawlspace with a measure of freedom to replace what could have been plantation slave quarters or a house set aside for forced concubinage. Despite this, one could ask why God chose not to end Pharaoh’s killing, rending the floating basket unnecessary, or why God chose to allow the continuation of slavery, making the crawlspace a necessary refuge for Jacobs. To approach the examination of hidden places with those questions first, no matter how important, is to allow human sin to occlude one’s view of God’s omnipotence and omnipresence.

Notes
7. Alexander Crummell, “The Destined Superiority of the Negro,” in Preaching with Fire, 124–34. Unlike Jones and Crummell, Richard Allen made a less glorious connection between the Exodus and the African diaspora in America. In an 1820 sermon aimed at slaveholders and other supporters of slavery, Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, argued that slavery inhibited slaves from developing moral and intellectual excellence. This agenesis caused by slavery, he said, was found among the ancient Hebrews, for even though God delivered them from Egyptian slavery, they eventually complained, wanting to return to Egypt and preferring to worship idol gods. Allen said that this fear of freedom was the consequence of them having been forced to live in an institution wherein they could not develop their hearts and souls. In America, he said, slaves would also experience the stunting of hearts and souls because of their enslavement. See Richard Allen, “An Address to Those Who Keep Slaves and Approve of the Practice,” in Preaching with Fire, 107.
11. Lowry, Harriet Tubman, 209.
34. McKim, Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms, 205.

FRANCINE ALLEN is assistant professor of English at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. She has an MA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a PhD from Georgia State University. Her research focuses, in part, on how narratives of scripture can be seen as archetypes for exploring the way modern narratives revise ancient narratives. Her blog and other information can be viewed at www.drfran.org. She is a member of Atlanta’s Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church.