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NOTES

Frederick Douglass, Preacher

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As scholarly interest increases in Frederick Douglass as a man of letters, the vagueness of his literary origins becomes increasingly frustrating to those who wish to trace the intellectual background of the author of America's classic slave autobiography. In the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Douglass gives priority in his early intellectual development to *The Columbian Orator*, an eloquence manual and anthology of speeches, which he bought when he was about twelve or thirteen years old.¹ In addition to teaching him anti-slavery arguments, this volume may well have pointed Douglass in the direction of oratory as his mode, and polemics as his sphere, of public expression. However, while a teenager in Baltimore, young Frederick Bailey also read and copied from the Bible, a Methodist hymnbook, an unspecified Webster's spelling book, "and other books which had accumulated on my hands" (*MBMF*, p. 172). Equally important to his evolving sense of his destiny as an orator was the advice that thirteen-year-old Frederick received from a man he called "Father Lawson," a black Baltimore drayman to whom the youth had become "deeply attached." Lawson told his protégé "that he had been shown that I

¹ Benjamin Quarles, ed., *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), p. 66. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York and Auburn: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), p. 157. Further quotations from these two texts will be cited parenthetically as *NLFD* and *MBMF*, respectively. *The Columbian Orator* was first published by its compiler, Caleb Bingham, in Boston in 1797. It went through many editions during the next two decades and became a standard work of its type. In both his 1845 and 1855 autobiographies, Douglass recalls having been inspired by a speech in the volume on the emancipation of Catholics. Douglass attributed this speech to Sheridan, but it was actually "Part of Mr. O'Connor's Speech in the Irish House of Commons, in Favour of the Bill for Emancipating the Roman Catholics, 1795," *The Columbian Orator* (Middlebury, Vermont: William Slade, Jr., 1816), pp. 243-48.

must preach the gospel.” Because this pious old man had become Frederick’s “spiritual father,” “his words made a deep impression on my mind, and I verily felt that some such work was before me” (*MBMF*, pp. 168–69).

In slavery Douglass had little opportunity to pursue a preaching career. A member of white Methodist congregations in Baltimore and St. Michael’s, Maryland, since 1831,² he found opportunities “in which to exercise my gifts” (*MBMF*, p. 264) only when he involved himself in sub rosa Sabbath schools for blacks. On Thomas Auld’s plantation in 1833 and again on William Freeland’s farm in 1835, Douglass took leadership roles in clandestine religious institutions designed to teach slaves to read the Bible. Each of these short-lived schools was forcibly dissolved by panicky slaveholders, but not before they had influenced the young teacher profoundly. In the second school, which Douglass founded and conducted entirely on his own, he experienced a greater sense of common purpose and emotional solidarity with other blacks than he had ever felt before. He wrote in 1855: “I have had various employments during my short life; but I look back to *none* with more satisfaction, than to that afforded by my Sunday school” (*MBMF*, p. 267).

It is not surprising, therefore, that after having been jim-crowed at the altar of a white Methodist church in New Bedford, Massachusetts, a few months after his escape from slavery, Douglass united with “a small body of colored Methodists, known as the Zion Methodists” (*MBMF*, p. 353). No doubt his experience as the head of a black Sunday school in the South had something to do with his being “soon made a class-leader and a local preacher” among the Zion Methodists (*MBMF*, p. 353). The fact that Douglass’s first public speaking in the North was religious in nature and for black congregations is something that he first specified in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. In the memorable climax to the *Narrative*, he refers vaguely to his having spoken “in the colored people’s meeting at New Bedford” before addressing whites for the first time at a Nantucket anti-slavery convention in August, 1841 (*NLFD*, p. 153). But critics have ignored the precedence of preaching over polemics in the evolution of Douglass’s self-concept as man speaking. The

² Benjamin Quarles, *Frederick Douglass* (Washington, D. C.: Associated Publishers, 1948), p. 11.

language and structure of the *Narrative*'s conclusion invite the reader to see the ex-slave before the Nantucket abolitionists as "a man . . . first finding his voice and then, as sure as light follows dawn, speaking 'with considerable ease.'"³

We may never know to what extent and in what ways Douglass found his voice as a black preacher among the Zion Methodists before he began to make his fame addressing white anti-slavery audiences. However, we can document his situation in this all-black church in more detail than has previously been brought out. Douglass's preaching role among the Zion Methodists was attested in the *Wonderful Eventful Life of Rev. Thomas James* (1804–1891), the narrative of a black Rochester, New York, clergyman active in the anti-slavery movement. James recalls Douglass as a member of the New Bedford Zion Methodists in 1840, the year James took charge of the church. Douglass "had been given authority to act as an exhorter by the church before my coming," wrote James, "and I some time afterwards licensed him to preach. . . . On one occasion, after I had addressed a white audience on the slavery question, I called upon Fred. Douglass, whom I saw among the auditors, to relate his story. He did so, and in a year from that time he was in the lecture field with Parker Pillsbury and other leading abolitionist orators."⁴ Since James provides no specifics about this occasion, it is impossible to determine the accuracy of this anecdote or to tell whether this black minister, not the white abolitionist William C. Coffin, was actually the first to steer Frederick Douglass into anti-slavery oratory.⁵ At any rate, James's recollections concur with Douglass's autobiography in showing him a preacher before he was a polemicist, while also suggesting how the obscure black preacher in New Bedford could have found his way to the abolitionist platform.

Douglass's three scholarly biographers have not confirmed James's claim that Douglass was a black Methodist minister in New Bedford; two of them have not taken Douglass's own word for it in the

³ Robert B. Stepto, "Narration, Authentication, and Authorial Control in Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* of 1845," in Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto, eds., *Afro-American Literature* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1978), p. 190.

⁴ Thomas James, *Wonderful Eventful Life of Rev. Thomas James* (1887; rpt. Rochester, N.Y.: Rochester Public Library, 1975), pp. 7–8.

⁵ Coffin is given the credit in Douglass's autobiographies.

matter.⁶ In his ground-breaking and highly respected study of Douglass's life, Benjamin Quarles would only say that Douglass had been "a leading member" of the Zion Methodists. Quarles checked James's statements against an official list of the African Methodist Episcopal clergy in 1842 but could not find Douglass's name recorded there.⁷ Philip Foner borrowed from Quarles the term "leading member" of the Zion Methodists to describe Douglass in New Bedford, but he accepted Douglass's claim in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that he had been "a local preacher" in the area. Foner took note of Quarles's evidence that raised doubts about Douglass as a licensed preacher, but he could not resolve the question.⁸ In the recently published *Slave and Citizen: The Life of Frederick Douglass*, Nathan I. Huggins skirts the problem by terming Douglass simply "a class leader" in the Zion Methodist church, without specifying what sort of leadership this was.⁹ At present, therefore, there is considerable scholarly doubt about whether Frederick Douglass was ever a licensed preacher at all.

The solution to this problem lies in the realization that Quarles erred in looking for Douglass's name in the ranks of the African Methodist Episcopal clergy in 1842—or any other year. For as Douglass and Thomas James both stated, the black Methodists whom Douglass joined in 1838 in New Bedford were *Zion* Methodists. That is, they were affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and thus quite distinct from their rival denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The A.M.E. Church has never claimed Douglass as one of its illustrious members, but the A. M. E. Z. Church has consistently done so. At least three of the church's major historians identify Douglass as a licensed preacher in New Bedford, noting the role of Thomas James (an A. M. E. Z. minister) in bringing him into the clergy.¹⁰ The earliest of these three historians, Bishop

⁶ In discussing the work of Benjamin Quarles, Philip Foner, and Nathan I. Huggins, I do not mention Dickson J. Preston's excellent *Young Frederick Douglass* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1980) because, as its subtitle indicates, it treats only "the Maryland years."

⁷ Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 11.

⁸ Philip S. Foner, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Citadel Press, 1964), p. 25, n. 21.

⁹ Nathan I. Huggins, *Slave and Citizen*, ed. Oscar Handlin (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), p. 16.

¹⁰ See James W. Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: A. M. E. Zion Book Concern, 1895), pp. 541–542; David Henry Bradley, Sr., *A History of the A. M. E. Zion Church, Part I 1796–1872* (Nashville, Tennessee, Parthenon, 1956), pp. 111–12; William J. Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (Charlotte, N.C.: A. M. E. Zion Publishing House, 1974), pp. 149–50.

James W. Hood (1831–1918), solicited from Douglass in 1894 a letter in which the great man reminisced briefly about his past work in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church of New Bedford. Published for the first time in Hood's *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*, this long-forgotten letter of Frederick Douglass reads as follows:

My connection with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church began in 1838. This was soon after my escape from slavery and my arrival in New Bedford. Before leaving Maryland I was a member of the Methodist Church in Dallas Street, Baltimore, and should have joined a branch of that Church in New Bedford, Mass., had I not discovered the spirit of prejudice and the unholy connection of that Church with slavery. Hence I joined a little branch of Zion, of which Rev. William Serrington was the minister. I found him a man of deep piety, and of high intelligence. His character attracted me, and I received from him much excellent advice and brotherly sympathy. When he was removed to another station Bishop Rush sent us a very different man, in the person of Rev. Peter Ross, a man of high character, but of very little education. After him came Rev. Thomas James. I was deeply interested not only in these ministers, but also in Revs. Jehill Beman, Dempsy Kennedy, John P. Thompson, and Leven Smith, all of whom visited and preached in the little schoolhouse on Second Street, New Bedford, while I resided there. My acquaintance with Bishop Rush was also formed while I was in New Bedford.

It is impossible for me to tell how far my connection with these devoted men influenced my career. As early as 1839 I obtained a license from the Quarterly Conference as a local preacher, and often occupied the pulpit by request of the preacher in charge. No doubt that the exercise of my gifts in this vocation, and my association with the excellent men to whom I have referred, helped to prepare me for the wider sphere of usefulness which I have since occupied. It was from this Zion church that I went forth to the work of delivering my brethren from bondage, and this new vocation, which separated me from New Bedford and finally so enlarged my views of duty, separated me also from the calling of a local preacher. My connection with the little church continued long after I was in the antislavery field. I look back to the days I spent in little Zion, New Bedford, in the several capacities of sexton, steward, class leader, clerk, and local preacher, as among the happiest days of my life.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS¹¹

¹¹ Hood, pp. 541–42.

Besides shedding new light on Douglass's life in New Bedford and on his attitude toward the A. M. E. Z. Church, this letter indicates Douglass's own evaluation of his early training as a preacher. Such evidence of Douglass's oratorical origins may encourage other critics to follow Robert G. O'Meally in viewing the *Narrative* as a "text [that] was meant to be preached."¹²

¹² Robert G. O'Meally, "Frederick Douglass' 1845 *Narrative*: The Text Was Meant to Be Preached," in Fisher and Stepto, *Afro-American Literature*, pp. 192–211.