

THE DISGRACE OF SLAVERY AND A DYNAMIC BOOK (HARRIET BEECHER STOWE'S UNCLE TOM'S CABIN)

Slavery! For sheer barbarism and cruelty, few things equal it, let alone surpass it. Yet in America, Christians and non-Christians alike practiced it, some with qualms and some with no apparent feeling of wrong-doing. Patrick Henry, who thundered, "Give me liberty or give me death," also wrote: "Would anyone believe that I am Master of Slaves of my own purchase! I am drawn along by the general inconvenience of living without them. I will not, I cannot justify it." During the Civil War, preachers on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line assured their congregations that their side was the right side – the side with God as an ally. At times, they even tried to justify their opinion from the Bible. By 1860, there were nearly 4,000,000 slaves in the United States. One of every seven Americans was "owned" by another.

While it is hard for us in the 21st century to understand how anyone could justify slavery, or that any true Christian could possibly participate in it, here is a point that is often overlooked: almost all of the abolitionists – people who were actively working, preaching, writing, or assisting in the rescue of slaves and the destruction of slavery – were either Christians or people motivated by Christian principles. (And by the way, you would be hard



The Auction

pressed to find even **one** case during this period of someone's becoming an abolitionist because he had embraced atheism and was *motivated by his beliefs*). That was apparent earlier in England: William Wilberforce, John Newton, and Granville Sharp were evangelical Christians who worked tirelessly for the abolition of slavery. That was equally true here in the United States.

For example, Levi Coffin, an American Quaker referred to as the "President of the Underground Railroad," was involved in the escape of about 3000 slaves. Questioned about why he aided slaves, Coffin said "The Bible, in bidding us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, said nothing about color, and I should try to follow out the teachings of that good book." John Allen, a preacher in Boston, trumpeted: "Every tie of nature ... every compassion as a Christian, engages me to speak for the personal liberty and freedom of those who are the most distressed of all human beings, the natives of Africa ... For mankind to be distressed and kept in slavery by Christians, by those who love the gospel of Christ, for such to buy their brethren ... be astonished, ye Christians, at this!" Matthew Simpson, president of what is now known as De Paul University, was a Circuit-riding preacher. He was an abolitionist, a close friend of Abraham Lincoln, with whom he often prayed, and was asked to speak at the President's funeral. John Rankin was a Presbyterian minister and was called the Underground Railroad's "Conductor." Harriet Tubman, the ex-slave who was called the "Moses" of her people, said she would listen carefully to the voice of God as she led slaves north, and she would only go where she felt God was leading her. Theodore Dwight Weld wrote the very influential book: "The Bible against Slavery." And the list goes on.

And on that list must be included Harriet Beecher Stowe. Born in Litchfield, CT, on June 14, 1811, she was the seventh of 12 children of Lyman Beecher, a nationally known preacher of the old Puritan stock. A noted revivalist and reformer, he had graduated from Yale in 1797, having been greatly influenced by the orthodox preaching of its President, Timothy Dwight (grandson of Jonathan Edwards). After her birth, Lyman commented: "Wisht it had been a boy." Although he doted on his daughters, he desired sons who could become preachers and soul-winners. He little realized the impact his little girl would have on America. In 1820 Lyman preached anti-slavery sermons in response to the issue of whether Missouri should be admitted to the union as a slave or a free state. His dynamic preaching, religious energy, and commitment had a profound impact on all of his children, most of whom would become involved in the fight against slavery.



The Stowe/Lincoln Statue, Hartford, CT
At the Lincoln Financial Sculpture Walk

“If I could use my pen as you can, I would write something that would make this whole nation feel what an accursed thing slavery is,” Harriet Beecher Stowe’s sister wrote her. Harriet vowed to write something. The result was Uncle Tom’s Cabin. An international bestseller, it was adored by abolitionists but vilified by the South. It so enflamed popular opinion that when she met President Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War he said, *“So this is the little lady who made this big war!”*

Professing faith in Christ at age 14, Harriet later pled with her husband, Calvin Stowe, to seek Christ with the same burning devotion with which he sought knowledge:

“If you had studied Christ with half the energy that you have studied Luther ... then would He be formed in you ... ”

She published her most famous book in 1852, having commenced writing on it in Brunswick, Maine, in Bowdoin College’s Appleton Hall. We know some of the things that influenced her:

► **She grew up listening to her father’s preaching from the Bible and his anti-slavery sermons.** In defense of her book she once replied: *“I wrote what I did because as a woman, as a mother, I was oppressed & brokenhearted, with the sorrows & injustice I saw, because as a **Christian** I felt the dishonor to Christianity--because as a lover of my country I trembled at the coming day of wrath.”*

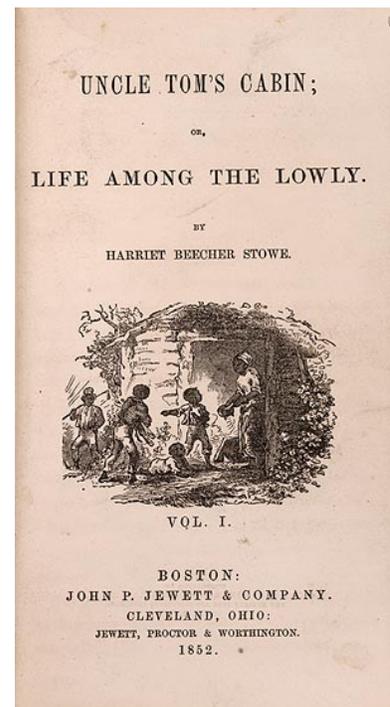
► **She faced trials in her own life:** *“I have been the mother of seven children, the most beautiful and most loved of whom lies buried near my Cincinnati residence. It was at his dying bed and at his grave that I learned what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn away from her ... this crushing of my own heart might enable me to work out some great good to others.”* She said that much of what was in her book “had its root in the awful scenes and bitter sorrow of that summer.”

► **She had personal experience with the horrors of slavery and the yearning of slaves to be free.** She knew the escaped slave, Josiah Henson, and his biography. It is likely that her book was based on his experience. Henson said: *“If my humble words in any way inspired that gifted lady to write such a plaintive story, I have not lived in vain; for I believe that her book was the beginning of the glorious end.”* Also, her fictional description of Eliza’s escape is based on her knowledge of a real Eliza (Harris) and her frantic dash to freedom and John Rankin’s house on the Ohio side.

Here is Stowe’s fictional version: *“A thousand lives seemed to be concentrated in that one moment to Eliza ... She caught her child and sprang down the steps towards it [the river]. The trader caught a full glimpse of her, just as she was disappearing down the bank; and throwing himself from his horse, and calling loudly to Sam and Andy, he was after her like a hound after a deer. In that dizzy moment her feet to her scarce seemed to touch the ground, and a moment brought her to the water’s edge. Right on behind they came; and, nerved with strength such as God gives only to the desperate, with one wild cry and flying leap, she vaulted sheer over the turbid current by the shore on to the raft of ice beyond. It was a desperate leap—impossible to anything but madness and despair ... the huge green fragment of ice on which she alighted pitched and creaked as her weight came on it, but she stayed there not a moment. With wild cries and desperate energy she leaped to another and still another cake;—stumbling—leaping—slipping—springing upwards again! Her shoes are gone—her stockings cut from her feet—while blood marked every step; but she saw nothing, felt nothing, till dimly, as in a dream, she saw the Ohio side, and a man helping her up the bank.”*



► **She knew the Bible and Christian teaching:** Many people viewed slaves as having no rights; they were treated as animals because that's how their owners saw them – nothing more than livestock for breeding, buying, and selling. But in Uncle Tom's Cabin, blacks are shown as fully human and, more importantly, as created in the image of Christ. The book contains close to 100 quotations from or direct allusions to the Bible; eight chapter epigraphs, for example, are scriptural texts. Among the characters, the one that most often cites scripture is (not surprisingly) Tom. The character who evokes or quotes the Bible the second most often is Augustine St. Clare. These references occur in 38 of the novel's 45 chapters. Chapter 27 – right after Eva's death – contains the most (8), Chapter 12 – in which several people cite scripture both to defend and attack slavery – the second-most (6), and Chapter 38 – in which Tom wins his "victory" at Legree's – the third most (5)



"[Tom's] Bible seemed to him all of this life that remained" (From Chapter 14).



"How would ye like to be tied to a tree, and have a slow fire lit up around ye?" asked Legree. *"Wouldn't that be pleasant, eh, Tom?"* "Mas'r," said Tom, "I know ye can do dreadful things, but" — he stretched himself upward and clasped his hands — **"but after ye've killed the body, there ain't no more ye can do. And oh! there's all eternity to come after that!"** (From Chapter 36).