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NAMING A PLACE NICODEMUS

ROSAMOND C. RODMAN

Names are the turning point of who shall be master.
—Walt Whitman, “The Primer of Words”¹

Nicodemus, one of the first all-black settlements in Kansas, and the sole remaining western town founded by and for African Americans at the end of Reconstruction, has received a good deal of scholarly attention.² Yet one basic matter about it remains unclear: how the town came by its unusual name. Most scholars now think that the name of the town derives from a legendary slave rather than the biblical character.

This essay challenges that consensus, contending the name Nicodemus indeed refers to the biblical character, and in doing so exempli-

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fies the way that the dominated disguise their speech, making it cryptic and coded.³ The biblical reference to Nicodemus conveys, in veiled form, significant meanings for African Americans. On the surface, Nicodemus referred to a legendary slave remembered as the Civil War was drawing to its bitter end; but in its veiled and biblical deployment, the name communicates protest and defiance of the dominant culture and its dominant white Bible. By choosing a name with multiple meanings, the founders of Nicodemus were able to resist the identity conferred upon them (as slaves). In its coded form, the name Nicodemus provided subterfuge, a “sheltered site for subversive meanings.”⁴ The pressing question here is just what resistant, indirect, and euphemistic meanings the biblical Nicodemus, a minor New Testament character, affords.

Examining the encoded biblical reference to Nicodemus allows for a richer, more textured understanding of the town's rather curious name and illuminates the arts of resistance that likely guided these settlers' decision to name their

town Nicodemus. Stripping the name of its biblical resonance, as most researchers have, reduces and simplifies the complex imagery of the African American settlers in Kansas.

The interdisciplinary approach taken in this essay combines methodological threads from a range of academic disciplines, including place-name studies; regional and ethnic studies; and literary and biblical studies.⁵ Briefly, the argument advanced here is that naming a place Nicodemus exemplifies the tension between the mandate of received America—a biblically formulated place if ever there was one—and the effort by enslaved peoples to produce counter-readings of the dominant white culture and its dominant white Bible.

I proceed by examining first how the majority of scholars have come to the conclusion that the settlement was named for a slave rather than the biblical character. Then I challenge that consensus by noting the prominence of biblical themes, characters, and tropes in nineteenth-century settlements, and, more pointedly, the important role of the Bible in black life in this period. Finally, I examine the significance of the biblical Nicodemus, arguing that he stands for two matters of critical import to African Americans: first, that Nicodemus came to Jesus *at night*; and second, that Jesus told him that to reach the kingdom of heaven he had to *be born again*. As will be seen, these functioned as key signifiers in the African American experience.

THE SLAVE NICODEMUS

The great proper names used in America must commemorate things belonging to America. . . . Because what is America for? To commemorate the old myths and the gods? To repeat the Mediterranean here? Or the uses and growths of Europe here? No; but to destroy those from the purposes of the earth, and to erect a new earth in their place.

—Walt Whitman, “The Primer of Words”

In 1861, after a fierce and bloody struggle, “Bleeding Kansas” entered the Union as a free

state. In the years following the Homestead Act (1862), the Emancipation Proclamation (1863), and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment (1865), thousands of newly freed slaves left the South. The tide of immigration peaked in 1879-80 with a mass immigration known as the “Kansas Fever Exodus.”⁶

Several black settlements were established before the peak of the Kansas Fever Exodus, and Nicodemus was one of them.⁷ Located in north-central Kansas, Nicodemus was founded and incorporated in the spring of 1877. The idea for the establishment of Nicodemus “belonged originally to William Smith and Thomas Harris, two black ministers from Clarksville, Tennessee.”⁸ These African American ministers were joined by William R. Hill, an experienced Kansas land speculator and townsite developer, originally from Indiana.⁹ These men, along with a small group of investors, formed the Nicodemus Town Company.

For five dollars, two of which were paid to the government as a filing fee, the founding members of the town sold plots on the site.¹⁰ In July of 1877, an initial group of thirty arrived from Kentucky, taking the railroad to the end of the line in Ellis, Kansas, and walking the remaining thirty-five miles to the Nicodemus townsite. Another 350 or so, also from Kentucky, arrived in the autumn of 1877, with more to follow the next year.¹¹

At the height of its popularity, in the early years of the twentieth century, Nicodemus claimed some seven hundred to eight hundred denizens. Most of the original colonists hailed from Kentucky; some also came from Mississippi, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Within five years of its founding, Nicodemus had a newspaper, a hotel, two churches (African Methodist Episcopal and Baptist), and a post office. The citizens of the colony applied for and got township status and the civic offices that came with it. Indeed, the men of Nicodemus made significant headway in the struggle for African American political and civic self-governance during the period between Reconstruction and Jim Crow.¹²

Economically, the township initially flourished, swept up in the economic boom reverberating through western Kansas at the time. The Missouri Pacific Railroad planned a route through Nicodemus, a possibility that tinged an already rosy picture even pinker. Not for long, however. The railroad plans fell through, and Nicodemus subsequently fell on hard times. By 1950, Nicodemus was almost a ghost town. In the 1990s, then-senator Bob Dole oversaw legislation naming Nicodemus a National Historic Site under the auspices of the National Park Service.¹³ Today, approximately thirty-six people still live and work in Nicodemus. There is a visitor center, full-time staff, and a thin trickle of government funding.


The derivation of the town's name has been debated over the years. Although most researchers now agree the name derives from the legendary slave, it has also been linked with the biblical character. For example, Mr. W. L. Sayers, who was the county attorney for Graham County and lived in Nicodemus all his life, maintained that "the leaders of the colony were religious men, hence the name was taken from the scriptures. . . . Nicodemus, the ruler of the Jews, came to Jesus by night."¹⁴ However, scholars dismiss these sources in favor of another explanation: "The colony's name is commonly believed to have biblical origins, but there is a stronger argument for the claim that it commemorated a legendary slave."¹⁵ This determination echoes among nearly every researcher, with minor variations and emendations (that tend to grant this legendary slave either princely status or financial independence, or both).¹⁶

The National Park Service at Nicodemus provides the most accurate version of the slave-name attribution: the name Nicodemus comes from "a popular slave era song published 1864 by Henry Clay Work called 'Wake Nicodemus.' Later, his song was slightly modified and used to promote the settlement of Nicodemus."¹⁷ Indeed, as it turns out, the legendary slave taken for granted by most researchers turns out to be the fictional title character in a song written by a white abolitionist, Henry Clay Work.

Work was born in 1832. When he was a child, his family moved from Connecticut to Illinois, where his father was convicted of aiding and abetting runaway slaves. After serving jail time, the elder Work moved his family back to Connecticut. As a teen, Henry Work apprenticed as a printer there, teaching himself music on the side. As a young adult, Henry moved to Chicago to work as a typesetter in the printing industry. He continued his musical hobby, and even submitted an early tune to the famous minstrel E. P. Christy. Work was really "discovered" by the music publisher George Root, to whom Work showed one of his abolitionist songs, "Kingdom Coming!" Root, duly impressed with Work's ear for what he called the "darkey dialect," hired him immediately.¹⁸ Work was able to quit his printing career, as he earned a good living and a good profit for Root and Cady's musical publishing house.¹⁹ Music publishers played an important role during the Civil War, indeed "almost as important a part as journalism," as they produced sheet music that influenced the emotions of Union sympathizers in the North and Confederate sympathizers in the South.²⁰

Work wrote and published "Wake Nicodemus!" in 1864, the year following the Emancipation Proclamation, when optimism regarding the end of the Civil War was high. Many of Work's songs, including "Wake Nicodemus!" became further popularized in minstrelsy. "Kingdom Coming" was introduced by Christy's Minstrels in Chicago with much promotional fanfare in April 1862, and it came to be widely known by both black and white audiences.²¹ "Wake Nicodemus!" though not as popular as his earlier song "Kingdom Coming!" nor his later hit "Marching Through Georgia," nevertheless reached wide audiences in minstrelsy (Fig. 1).²²

Work's song featured Nicodemus, a proud slave "of African birth," now dead and buried in "an old gum tree." The song celebrated the anticipated end of the Civil War—hence, the titular imperative to "wake" Nicodemus, who in the song had foretold the jubilee day when the slaves would be freed. Work's Nicodemus was



WAKE NICODEMUS

SONG AND CHORUS:

Nicodemus, the slave, was of African birth.
And was bought for a bagful of gold;
He was reckoned as part of the salt of the earth,
But he died years ago, very old.

'Twas his last sad request—so we laid him away
In the trunk of an old hollow tree;
"Wake me up!" was his charge, "at the first break of day—
Wake me up for the great Jubilee!"

Words and Music by
HENRY CLAY WORK.

CLEVELAND: -31-

Published by S. BRAINARD'S SONS, 203 Superior Street.

Entered according to Act of Congress, 1864, by Dent & Chely, in the Clerk's Office of the District Court for the Northern District of Ohio

BAKER - CHICAGO

LETTER & DENTON
MUSIC STORE
203 MAIN ST.
CLEVELAND

FIG. 1. "Wake Nicodemus!" sheet music. Courtesy of The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

prophetic (“for he told of the battles to come”), brave (“never the sport of the lash, though the bullet has oft crossed his path,”) and obedient only to Jesus (“He obeyed who was born to command”). Surely, in its inception “Wake Nicodemus!” functioned as a protest song by an abolitionist composer.

The Nicodemus of popular song came to be associated with the town by way of a handbill composed to advertise the settlement to would-be immigrants. Handbills, fliers, circulars, and broadsheets were commonly used to advertise settlements and colonies being founded during and after Reconstruction. They were read aloud in church and pasted up at railroad stations.²³ In April of 1877, the Nicodemus Town Company founders’ white business partner, William R. Hill, created a handbill advertising plots at the Nicodemus townsite to would-be immigrants. Hill’s circular, dated April 16, 1877, makes no mention of a legendary slave named Nicodemus.²⁴

A few months later, in July of 1877, the secretary of the town company, a man by the name of Simon P. Roundtree, produced another circular to advertise the availability of land in Nicodemus. That task, and indeed, the role of secretary of the Nicodemus Town Company almost certainly fell to Roundtree because he was one of two founding “colored” members who could read and write.²⁵ Unfortunately, little is known about Roundtree, although the few pieces of information about him provide some compelling things to consider. First of all, like the other founders of Nicodemus, Roundtree too was a preacher. Apparently, Reverend Roundtree was also known for his “sense of musical harmony,” his “high falsetto voice,” and his penchant for singing, accompanied by his own banjo playing.²⁶ It is said that the good Reverend Roundtree met migrants to Nicodemus at the railroad terminus in Ellis, Kansas (some thirty-five miles north of Nicodemus), and led them the remaining distance to the townsite, singing all the way. “We can imagine them singing folk songs such as ‘Little David, play on your harp,’ ‘I’m sometimes low, sometimes high, yes Lord,’ and ‘I’m stand-

ing in the need or prayer.”²⁷ Roundtree’s repertoire might also have included a song called “Wake Nicodemus!” for the lyrics to that song figured prominently in the circular Roundtree composed.

While he used Hill’s earlier handbill as a template, Roundtree also departed from it. For example, Roundtree emphasized in glowing terms the natural resources and climate of Kansas, knowing that immigrants from Kentucky would find Kansas soil and weather extreme in comparison to the lush cotton and tobacco plantations with which they were familiar. The more notable and, for our purposes, more important addition, however, is this: at the very bottom of his circular, Roundtree included a little ditty about a slave named Nicodemus (see Fig. 2).

That ditty reveals that Roundtree combined the first and second stanzas of the song “Wake Nicodemus!” and changed the chorus slightly, adapting the popular song for the purposes of advertising the Nicodemus Town Company.

Refrain from Henry Clay Work’s “Wake Nicodemus!”	Refrain from Rev. Simon P. Roundtree’s circular
The Good Time Coming is almost here!	Good time coming, good time coming,
It was long, long, long on the way!	Long, long time on the way;
Now, run and tell Elijah to hurry up Pomp,	Run and tell Elija to hurry up Pomp,
And meet us at the gum-tree down in the swamp,	To meet us under the cottonwood tree, In the Great Solomon Valley
To wake Nicodemus to-day.	At the first break of day.

As is well known, white songwriters often used bits of black spirituals or slave songs in crafting their minstrel tunes; in turn minstrel songs were reappropriated and reintegrated into the black tradition.²⁸ Clearly, Roundtree knew the song and used it to his own purposes: the

1872 KANSAS STATE
HISTORICAL SOCIETY. 3327

To the Colored Citizens of the United States.

NICODEMUS, GRAHAM CO., KAN., July 2d, 1877.

We, the Nicodemus Town Company of Graham County, Kan., are now in possession of our lands and the Town Site of Nicodemus, which is beautifully located on the N. W. quarter of Section 1, Town 8, Range 21, in Graham Co., Kansas, in the great Solomon Valley, 240 miles west of Topeka, and we are proud to say it is the finest country we ever saw. The soil is of a rich, black, sandy loam. The country is rather rolling, and looks most pleasing to the human eye. The south fork of the Solomon river flows through Graham County, nearly directly east and west and has an abundance of excellent water, while there are numerous springs of living water abounding throughout the Valley. There is an abundance of fine Magnesian stone for building purposes, which is much easier handled than the rough sand or hard stone. There is also some timber; plenty for fire use, while we have no fear but what we will find plenty of coal.

Now is your time to secure your home on Government Land in the Great Solomon Valley of Western Kansas.

Remember, we have secured the service of W. R. Hill, a man of energy and ability, to locate our Colony.

Not quite 90 days ago we secured our charter for locating the town site of Nicodemus. We then became an organized body, with only three dollars in the treasury and twelve members, but under the careful management of our officers, we have now nearly 300 good and reliable members, with several members permanently located on their claims—with plenty of provisions for the colony—while we are daily receiving letters from all parts of the country from parties desiring to locate in the great Solomon Valley of Western Kansas.

For Maps, Circulars, and Passenger rates, address our General Manager, W. R. HILL, North Topeka, Kansas, until August 1st, 1877, then at Hill City, Graham Co., via Trego.

The name of our post-office will be Nicodemus, and Mr. Z. T. Fletcher will be our "Nasby."

REV. S. P. ROUNDTREE, Sec'y.

NICODEMUS.

Nicodemus was a slave of African birth,
And was bought for a bag full of gold;
He was reckoned a part of the salt of the earth,
But he died years ago, very old.

Nicodemus was a prophet, at least he was as wise,
For he told of the battles to come;
How we trembled with fear, when he rolled up his eyes,
And we heeded the shake of his thumb.

CHORUS: Good time coming, good time coming,
 Long, long time on the way;
 Run and tell Elija to hurry up Pomp,
 To meet us under the cottonwood tree,
 In the Great Solomon Valley
 At the first break of day.

FIG. 2. Circular advertising Nicodemus. Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society.

advertisement of an all-black settlement in Kansas. Arrogating the song lyrics for his own purposes, Roundtree celebrated not the end of the war (as was probably intended by the com-

poser)—the founding of Nicodemus took place more than a decade after the end of the war, and indeed, in the waning years of Reconstruction. Rather, Roundtree's Nicodemus signifies some-

thing other than what Work's protest song (and later, popular minstrel tune) signifies. Roundtree, along with the other founders—all of them preachers—must have had the biblical Nicodemus in mind.

Roundtree disguised the biblical Nicodemus within the majority cultural expression (the “public transcript”) that the popular song afforded him. By virtue of the multivalence inherent in the name Nicodemus, he insinuated meaning to his audience (recently freed slaves), a meaning that was disguised to the audience of the dominant culture.²⁹ Understanding the associations of the biblical Nicodemus is key to understanding how Roundtree was crafting a place in America—a place intended specifically for African Americans, a place of “reborn selves.”

THE BIBLICAL NICODEMUS

The history of a race may be folded in a word.
—Walt Whitman, “Words”

Early European settlers often configured their new world identity in biblical terms. They justified their appropriation of the New World as a response to a biblical mandate. One outcome of this understanding is that “[t]hroughout the nineteenth century American settlers regularly named their communities after biblical places: Zoar, Ohio (Gen 13:10); Ruma, Illinois (2 Kings 23:36); Mount Tirzah, North Carolina (Joshua 12:24); and Zela, West Virginia (Joshua 18:28), as well as 47 variations on Bethel, 61 on Eden and 95 on Salem.”³⁰

The conceptual frame of the biblical Exodus was especially important to early settlers. At first used by European settlers, Exodus later powerfully framed for blacks a narrative that symbolized, politicized, and authorized their migrations.³¹ Harriet Tubman, for example, was often referred to as “the Moses of her people.” Kansas, known as the “Negro Canaan,” represented freedom and autonomy for emancipated blacks still virtually imprisoned by white supremacist economics and racial terrorizing in the years following the Civil War and during

the collapse of Reconstruction. Eventually, thousands left the South in the Kansas Fever Exodus. These freedmen and women were called Exodusters, a term combining the biblical Exodus with the dusty land of the Kansas plains. In her magisterial study of the mass migration to Kansas after Reconstruction, historian Nell Irvin Painter argued that these Exodusters deeply identified with the biblical story of Exodus. They found, in the story of the beleaguered Israelites who had been freed from bondage and provided for by God, a profound biblical parallel to their own situation. Indeed, it provided impetus to leave the South. “[B]eyond providing colorful terminology for the Exodus, the identification between Blacks and the biblical Chosen People enhanced many Blacks’ conviction that the time had come for them to be taken out of the South.”³²

Beyond the charter myth of Exodus, the Bible was critically important in the battle for independence by blacks—it was both weapon in the hands of slaveholders fighting to keep blacks enslaved and ammunition in hands of the oppressed fighting for emancipation.³³ One essential tool in that fight for liberation was, of course, literacy and education. The book often used to administer lessons was the Bible. “[D]espite the illiteracy of the vast majority, the slaves were greatly attracted to what they considered ‘the sacred book’ and they gave rapt attention to its reading by missionaries and their own black preachers, many of whom had learned the Bible ‘by heart.’”³⁴ Yet it was not just social mobility through literacy that drew African Americans to the Bible. “To most enslaved African Americans the Bible and the black church gave central identity to their communities and their lives.”³⁵ That identity, of course, was formed in defiance to the dominants that enslaved them. In this respect, even those who were not given any opportunity to learn to read or write knew of the Bible’s power. Learning to read (or otherwise access) the Bible meant that slaves could mobilize passages directly contradicting those the white slavers’ preferred, passages used to legitimize slavery such as Ephesians 6:5 and 1 Peter 3:18ff.

The practical allure of literacy, combined with the potentially revolutionary contents of the Bible, made it nearly impossible to resist. Slave owners also knew that if the slaves could access the Bible they would find ample material with which to challenge biblical readings upholding slave trading and slaveholding.³⁶

Bible reading became a popular locus for resistance to white oppression, although learning to read it was quite dangerous.

Folks did tell 'bout some of de owners dat cut off one finger evvy time dey cotch a slave tryin' to git larnin'. How-some-ever, dere was some Niggers dat wanted larnin' so bad dey would slip out at night and meet in a deep gully whar dey would study by de light of light'ood torchers; but one thing sho, dey better not let no white folks find out 'bout it, and if dey was lucky 'nough 'til dey larned to read de Bible, dey kept it a close secret.³⁷

For their part, slavemasters worked hard to prevent slaves from learning to read, and especially from access to the Bible. As a result, slaves met clandestinely, *in secret areas and at night* to pursue religious worship and/or Bible reading.³⁸ The effort to conceal themselves was due to reprisals they faced should they be discovered trying to learn to read—especially the Bible.

In the antebellum years, southern states passed myriad laws making it illegal for slaves to learn to read. The North Carolina legislature passed a law preventing “all persons from teaching slaves to read or write” on the basis that such activities have a “tendency to excite dissatisfaction in their minds, and to produce insurrection and rebellion.”³⁹ Whippings and fines were administered to those caught teaching slaves to read or write. Many of those laws specifically mention night, before day, or after sunset, for this was the time when many stole away to engage in learning. “According to former slaves, who usually had to learn at night, one of the great difficulties was getting enough light to read by.”⁴⁰ Nighttime, then,

came to confer the secrecy and covert operations required of slaves seeking literacy.

Yet they persisted, in spite of danger to life and limb, in spite of eyestrain and exhaustion. It was crucial to learn to read in order to effectively reject the Christianity of the slaveholders, and to “take the Bible back,” to read what it really said.⁴¹ With literacy, and especially with the ability to read the Bible, blacks used the sacred texts they had accessed to craft slave religion into “a progressive force and a shield against white domination.”⁴²

It is precisely here that Roundtree's encoded, biblical Nicodemus becomes apparent. A relatively minor character (he appears only in the Gospel of John), Nicodemus is identified as a leader of the Jews who comes to Jesus at night, apparently out of fear of reprisals by other Jews who were (so goes the story) seeking to arrest, condemn, and kill Jesus.⁴³ Thus, Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the same way African Americans came to the Bible: at night and in secret, understandably afraid of the consequences. In this way, the story of Nicodemus mirrored the way that many African Americans had themselves come to the Bible—that is, *in secret, fearful of reprisal, and at night*. This analogy gave Nicodemus special resonance for African Americans.

Clearly the biblical Nicodemus was well known. His character cut a broad social swath. In the 1860s African American Sam Lucas formed a minstrel troupe that performed a song called “Ole' Nicker Demus, De Ruler ob de Jews.”⁴⁴ At the other end of the social continuum was African Methodist Episcopal bishop and scholar Benjamin Tanner (1835-1935), whose studies led him to conclude that the exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus was “one of three notable incidents of . . . Jesus' public ministry.”⁴⁵ Bishop Tanner's son, the famous portraitist Henry Ossawa Tanner, also found Nicodemus a character of special import. The younger Tanner painted a number of biblical scenes, but found Nicodemus a particularly worthwhile subject.⁴⁶ According to art historian Jennifer Harper, Tanner's painting of Nicodemus “deals with a number of concepts

important to . . . African American leaders, the most significant of which is rebirth.”⁴⁷

Indeed, beyond the depiction of Nicodemus coming to Jesus secretly, at night, rebirth is another reason that Nicodemus appealed widely to African Americans. For Nicodemus is the one to whom Jesus says, “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, ‘Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God’” (John 3:3 KJV), and “Marvel not that I said unto thee, ‘Ye must be born again.’” (John 3:7 KJV).⁴⁸

Certainly the language and conceptual apparatus of “born again” was well known to African Americans by the end of the nineteenth century. “Rebirth” had emerged with great fervor in the First and Second Great Awakenings in the 1730s-1740s and the early years of the nineteenth-century, respectively. It had enormous resonance among slaves:

Above all, the core experience of the black sacred cosmos was the personal conversion of the individual believer. The Christianity that was spread among slaves during the First and Second Awakenings was an evangelical Christianity that stressed personal conversion through a deep regenerating experience, that of being saved, or “born again.”⁴⁹

Scholars suggest that conversion or “rebirth” was important to slaves because it allowed them to shed the negative and conferred identity of slave. “Blacks were anxious to be reborn,” avers one scholar, “to put off their slave identities and slave names, and to find a better self, a social self truer to their internal image.”⁵⁰ In fact, the mandate to be “born again” was explicitly linked with preparation for emigration. In the later eighteenth century, for example, the black abolitionist John Marrant argued that black preachers ought to assist those who wanted to emigrate from the South by repeatedly emphasizing “the doctrine of the necessity of the conversion . . . from [the] classical biblical reference, John 3:5.”⁵¹ In that reference, Jesus says to Nicodemus: “no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born

of water and Spirit,” a statement book-ended by the two imperatives to be “born again” in 3:3 and 3:7.

Both the secret, nighttime encounter that characterizes Nicodemus’s audience with Jesus, and Jesus’ imperative to Nicodemus to be “born again,” made Nicodemus a particularly poignant figure for slaves. Biblical scholars have long configured Nicodemus negatively: Nicodemus reflects a theological lack or lag, Nicodemus is a rube, and at best his ambiguity is instructive.⁵² But the former slaves who founded the Kansas settlement found the biblical Nicodemus a positive figure, one with import for and resonance with their own experience.

On the surface, naming the settlement Nicodemus signified an identification between westward immigrants and a legendary slave. Surely those immigrants were aware of the long-term psychic damage of continuing to identify as slaves. Why continue to identify as such on leaving the Confederacy for a free state? The encoded biblical signifier, lurking within the “public transcript” of the slave Nicodemus, undermined and resisted slave identity. As James Scott has argued, the arts of disguise commonly occur among the subordinated. “So long as subordinate groups cannot reliably and fully penetrate the hidden transcript of the powerful, they are obliged to make inferences from the text of power presented to them in the public transcript.”⁵³ In this case the “text of power” was the assumption of ongoing identification as (former) slaves. The biblical Nicodemus provided a site of subterfuge.

African Americans read, heard, and interpreted the Bible “differently than those who introduced them to it, ironically and audaciously seeing in it—the most powerful of the ideological weapons used to legitimize their enslavement and disenfranchisement—a mirroring of themselves and their experiences.”⁵⁴ The Bible became a virtual storehouse of names, narratives, and characters readily appropriated by African Americans for their own uses and stories: not only Exodus, nor just Moses. Nicodemus, too.

CONCLUSION

*But it is no small thing, no quick growth;
not a matter of rubbing out one word and
writing another.*

Real names never come so easily.

—Walt Whitman, "The Primer of Words"

Nicodemus the biblical character provided the Kansas settlers a point of identification with which to configure themselves both positively and authoritatively: not in this case as modern-day Israelites seeking Canaan, but as those who had to come to the Bible, to Jesus, and to freedom in covert, secret, nighttime ways; and with the result that they were born again, reborn as nonslave selves. The significance of naming this Kansas town Nicodemus sheds light on the enormously creative process by which freed slaves came into selfhood, and the tools they used to do so. While researchers have privileged the attribution of the name of the settlement in Kansas as stemming from a legendary African slave, there are good reasons to reconsider the "more likely" status this version enjoys. First, the legendary slave is in fact a reference to a popular song that Reverend Roundtree used to advertise a settlement founded by and for African Americans. The lyrics featured on the circular are not a direct reference to a real, historical slave named Nicodemus. Further, the founders of the town were also preachers, which would seem to warrant against stripping the origins of the town's name of any biblical resonance whatsoever. Finally, engagements of Nicodemus by other African Americans across the social spectrum make it quite likely that the biblical Nicodemus was in mind when the town's founders decided upon an appropriate name for their settlement.

Naming this place Nicodemus is a poignant example of how African Americans arrogated to themselves the Bible that had been used, in the hands of slaveholding whites, to justify their enslavement and domination. It signifies their endurance and ultimate victory over those forces, and reveals their intellectual and creative appropriation of "America's

iconic book."⁵⁵ Naming a place Nicodemus indicates that they were engaged in complex negotiation, engagement, and resistance to dominant American culture and (one of) the foundational texts upon which it lies. African Americans redefined texts and traditions more typically used to justify their domination or provide a theological rationale for their plight. Naming a place Nicodemus reveals the arts of resistance and disguise enacted by peoples to retain their own distinctive history, to make the Bible suit them and their own imaginations.⁵⁶

NOTES

1. All epigraphs in this essay derive from Walt Whitman's "Words" and "The Primer of Words," in *Daybooks and Notebooks*, ed. William White, vol. 3 (New York: New York University Press, 1978) 664-757.

2. A representative sample of scholarly work on Nicodemus includes Robert G. Athearn, *In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879-80* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978); Daniel Chu and Bill Shaw, *Going Home to Nicodemus* (Morristown, NJ: J. Messner, 1994); and Kenneth M. Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1877-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991). See also Kenneth M. Hamilton, "The Origins and Early Promotion of Nicodemus: A Pre-Exodus, All-Black Town," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* Winter (1982): 220-42; William Katz, *The Black West*, rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973); Orval L. McDaniel, "A History of Nicodemus, Graham County, Kansas" (master's thesis, Fort Hays State College, 1950); Craig Miner, *West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865-1890* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1986); U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Promised Land on the Solomon: Black Settlement at Nicodemus, Kansas* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986); Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976); Glen Schwedemann, "Nicodemus: Negro Haven on the Solomon," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 34 (1968): 10-31; Van Shaw, "Nicodemus: A Study in Isolation" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1951); and finally, Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).

3. Here I am informed by the brilliant work of James C. Scott's *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990). Scott's deservedly oft-cited work posits a "public transcript," which is "the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate." The private or "hidden transcript," on the other hand, "characterize[s] discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by power holders . . . and functions to confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript." The subordinated must register their ideological resistance to the public transcript by way of disguise, or veiled forms of speech and expression (2-5, 137-82).

4. *Ibid.*, 159.

5. Place-name studies, also known as toponymy or onomastics, are well represented in the United Kingdom and United States. One source for such studies can be found in *NAMES: A Journal of Onomastics*, a quarterly published by the American Name Society, "a non-profit organization that seeks to find out what really is in a name, and to investigate cultural insights, settlement history, and linguistic characteristics revealed in names." See note 2 for a list of regional and ethnic studies. Other relevant studies include: Burton Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 369-70. See also Nathan Hatch and Mark Noll, eds., *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977); Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1977); Charles Mabee, *Reading Sacred Texts through American Eyes: Biblical Interpretation as Cultural Critique* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1991); and Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (New York: Continuum, 2000).

6. See Painter, *Exodusters*.

7. By 1877, there were other sizable African American settlements on Homestead Act lands such as Mound Bayou and Boley in Oklahoma and Singleton and Dunlap in Kansas.

8. Norman I. Crockett, *The Black Towns* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1979), 2.

9. According to one source, white business partner and land speculator William R. Hill was also a preacher (Athearn, *In Search of Canaan*, 76).

10. Kenneth M. Hamilton, "The Settlement of Nicodemus: Its Origins and Early Promotion," in *Promised Land on the Solomon: Black Settlement at Nicodemus, Kansas*, U.S. Department of the

Interior, National Park Service (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986), 1-10.

11. Athearn, *In Search of Canaan*, 76.

12. Several men who hailed from Nicodemus went on to hold positions in state and county offices, such as E. P. McCabe, who served two terms as state auditor (1892-1886); W. L. Sayers and John Q. Sayers, who served as county attorneys; and J. A. Depard, who was Graham County's first county clerk. Myrtle D. Fesler, *Pioneers of Western Kansas* (New York: Carlton Press, 1962), 195.

13. "The U.S. Congress, recognizing the importance of Nicodemus' contribution to our Nation's history, enacted legislation establishing Nicodemus National Historic Site as a unit of the National Park System in November 1996. The legislation directs the National Park Service to cooperate with the people of Nicodemus to preserve its five remaining historic structures—First Baptist Church, African Methodist Episcopal Church, St. Francis Hotel, the First District School, and Nicodemus Township Hall—and keep alive the memory of the many roles African-Americans played throughout the American West," National Park Service Web site, <http://www.nps.gov/archive/nico/History/history6.htm> (accessed 12/8/07).

14. *The Bogue Messenger*, vol. 1, no. 9, February 25, 1932. Another lifelong resident of Nicodemus, Reverend Austin Smith, who "came to Nicodemus as a child in 1879," also attributed the name of the town to the biblical character. Herb Nipson, *Negro Digest*, January 1951, 55.

15. Athearn, *In Search of Canaan*, 76.

16. A comprehensive list of researchers' explanations regarding the town's name consistently favors the legendary slave attribution over the biblical Nicodemus:

- "The town was named for a slave and not for the Biblical character." Nell Blythe Waldron, "Colonization in Kansas from 1861-1890" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1923), 125.

- "According to one explanation, the . . . town was named in honor of an African prince who was brought to the American colonies in 1692 and was sold as a slave. The prince declared that the white people would someday regret having enslaved the black people, and he became famous as the first slave to buy his freedom in America. Nicodemus, the man who achieved freedom through financial success, was an appropriate honoree and symbol to blacks." Hamilton, *Black Towns*, 9.

- "This community was named Nicodemus not for the Biblical character but for the legendary Nicodemus who came to America on a slave ship and later purchased his liberty." Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration,

Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State (New York: Hastings House, 1939), 330.

- [The name] "was not, as popularly believed, derived from the Biblical Nicodemus, but from a legendary slave who was said to have arrived in America aboard the second slave ship and later purchased his freedom." Glen Schwendemann, "Nicodemus: Negro Haven on the Solomon," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 34 (Spring 1968): 13.

- [The town was named to] "honor the legendary slave Nicodemus, who arrived in America aboard the second slave ship and later purchased his freedom." Sondra Van Meter McCoy and Jan Hults, *1001 Kansas Place Names* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 143.

- "The town company chose Nicodemus as the name of the new negro town in Graham County. Nicodemus was the name of an African Prince. The prince was brought to the shores of the United States in 1620 and sold as a slave. He declared that the white people would some day regret having enslaved the colored people. He became famous as being the first slave set free in America. He bought his freedom. There has been a popular belief that the name Nicodemus was taken from the Bible because the negroes were religious people. The evidence points to the fact that this is not true [sic]." McDaniel, "History of Nicodemus," 50.

- "They called their settlement Nicodemus, not for the Biblical character, but for the legendary Nicodemus who came to America on a slave ship and purchased his liberty." Lee Ella Black, "The Great Exodus of 1879 and 1880 to Kansas" (bachelor's thesis, Kansas State College, 1928), 55.

The only exception to this list comes from a dissertation whose author found that "many residents were embarrassed by the name. They have been told that it is 'typically Negro,' that it is awkward, and that it is ugly." Its origins were obscure to many of them, and "over the years, many fell into the habit referring to the town as 'Niggerdemus,' or just 'Demus.'" Shaw, "Nicodemus," 97.

17. National Park Service Web site, "Frequently Asked Questions," <http://www.nps.gov/nico/faqs.htm> (accessed 12/8/07).

18. Root remembered: "One day early in the war a quiet and rather solemn-looking young man, poorly clad, was sent up to my room from the store [Root and Cady] with a song for me to examine. I looked at it and then at him in astonishment. It was 'Kingdom Coming,'—elegant in manuscript, full of bright, good sense and comical situations in its 'darkey' dialect—the words fitting the melody almost as aptly and neatly as Gilbert fits Sullivan—the melody decidedly good and taking, and the whole exactly suited to the times. . . . He needed some musical help that I could give him, and we needed just such songs

as he could write. The connection, which continued some years, proved very profitable both to him and to us." George Frederick Root, *The Story of a Musical Life: An Autobiography* (Cincinnati: John Church Co., 1891), 137-38.

19. Richard S. Hill, "The Mysterious Chord of Henry Clay Work," *Notes* 10 (1953): 211-25.

20. This according to Willard and Porter Heaps, *The Singing Sixties: The Spirit of Civil War Days Drawn from the Music of the Times* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 7.

21. "The great tune[,] . . . one of the most memorable of the era, creates a double edge to the satire. How far removed it all is from the gentle dreamworld of Stephen Foster's plantations with their slaves mourning the good master in the cold, cold ground." Richard Jackson, *Popular Songs of Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Dover, 1976), 273.

22. On minstrelsy, see William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996); Robert Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

23. For examples of such advertisements, see Katz, *The Black West*, and John M. Giggie, "'When Jesus Handed Me a Ticket': Images of Railroad Travel and Spiritual Transformations among African Americans, 1865-1917," in *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, ed. David Morgan and Sally M. Promey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 249-66.

24. Hill's broadsheet is reproduced in Hamilton's "Origins and Early Promotion of Nicodemus," 220.

25. Hamilton, "Origins and Early Promotion of Nicodemus," 223.

26. Jim McVey, *Pioneering in the West*, ed. Eugene Patterson (self-published pamphlet, 1923), 22-23.

27. Ibid.

28. "[W]hite minstrels frequently made stage hits out of bits of black songs, spreading them throughout the South where they were heard for the first time by other slaves who in their turn appropriated them and reintegrated them into the black tradition." Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 192. "[M]instrel songs must have been sung by nineteenth-century blacks, because they have been found in oral tradition among twentieth-century black informants." Caroline Moseley, "'When Will Dis Cruel War be Ober?' Attitudes toward Blacks in Popular Song of the Civil War," *American Music* 2 (Autumn 1984): 5.

29. James C. Scott notes that African American Christianity (and, I would add, especially uses of the Bible) contain many wonderful examples of multivalence. "Astute slaveholders undoubtedly realized that the attention to Joshua and Moses in slave Christianity had something to do with their prophetic roles as liberators of the Israelites from bondage. But, since they were, after all, Old Testament prophets, slaves could hardly be punished for revering them as part of their—authorized—Christian faith." While Nicodemus might have been recognized as a biblical referent, he undoubtedly did not mean the same thing to whites as to blacks (*Domination*, 158).

30. Mark A. Noll, "The Bible and American Culture," preface to the Dunham Family Bible in America Museum, http://www.hbu.edu/hbu/The_Bible_and_American_Culture_by_Mark_Noll.asp?SnID=1541948162 (accessed 12/8/07). The names Noll identifies tend to reflect Protestant settlements, but Catholics also named many of their settlements after biblical figures and Christian saints.

31. Euro-Americans used Exodus to frame their struggle for independence from the crown, likening themselves to children of Israel oppressed by "the unreasonable vileness and cruelty of the British tyrant. . . [with] the same wicked temper and disposition operating in Pharaoh king of Egypt 3000 years ago." Nicholas Street, "The American States Acting Over the Part of the Children of Israel in the Wilderness and Thereby Impeding their Entrance Into Canaan's Rest" (April 1777). See also Samuel Langdon's address, "The Republic of the Israelites an Example to the American States," which compares God's preference for Euro-Americans to the chosen people of Israel. "We cannot but acknowledge that God hath graciously patronized our cause and taken us under his special care, as he did his ancient covenant people." The full text of Street's and Langdon's speeches can be found in Conrad Cherry, ed., *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

For more on Exodus as a powerful conceptual framework for African Americans, see Albert J. Raboteau, "African-Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel," in *African-American Christianity: Essays in History*, ed. Paul E. Johnson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 1-17; Eddie S. Glaude, *Exodus! Race, Religion, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Milton C. Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

32. Painter, *Exodusters*, 195-96. For a quite different reading of black migration from the South

in this period, see Lisa Frehill-Rowe, "Postbellum Race Relations and Rural Land Tenure: Migration of Blacks and Whites to Kansas and Nebraska, 1870-1890," *Social Forces* 72 (September 1993): 77-92. Frehill-Rowe compares the rates of migration to Kansas and Nebraska between blacks and whites in order to consider "the relative merit of racial repression as opposed to economic factors as explanations for this migration." According to Frehill-Rowe, the economic relationship between slaves and owners dissolved at the end of the war, and this dissolution, combined with freed slaves' ability to vote and access to education, empowered them to freely "seek other employment when no longer satisfied with the conditions of employment in a particular location." Beyond the matter of how racial repression and economic factors can be disentangled, a Senate committee that was convened in 1880 to investigate the cause of the "Exodus fever" of 1879 discovered the migration was fueled by legally sanctioned and economic forms of oppression by whites against blacks (cheating, stealing, and preventing former slaves from leaving through claims of indebtedness) as well as outright terrorism and violence. U.S. Senate, *Report of Select Senate Committee of U.S. Senate to Investigate the Causes of Removal of Negroes from Southern States, etc.*, 3 vols., 46th Cong., 2nd sess., Senate Report 693 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880).

33. This is made abundantly clear by Jane Duitsman Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

34. Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), 7. "[Carter] Woodson's statement, 'Negroes . . . almost worshiped the Bible, and their anxiety to read it was their greatest incentive to learn,' is not an exaggeration." Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 240.

35. Cornelius, *When I Can Read*, 73.

36. See the essays by John Saillant, Sterling Stuckey, and Milton Sernett in *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, ed. Vincent Wimbush (New York: Continuum, 2000).

37. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 239. Rev. Simon Roundtree may himself have known this danger all too well judging by the scar on his face. "One of Nicodemus' most able leaders, the Reverend Roundtree—who wore a brand on one cheek as punishment for having received educational instruction from his master's son—taught the new citizens to read and write." Federal Writers' Project,

Kansas, 330-31. Another source notes Roundtree's scar was probably imposed "as punishment for having received educational instruction from his master's son." McVey, *Pioneering in the West*.

38. For more on secrecy, literacy, and religion, see "On the Secret Religious Meetings of Enslaved Persons," excerpts from the digital collection "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nineteen/nkeyinfo/aarsecretmeetings.htm> (accessed 12/8/07).

39. For a list of such laws, and other statutes pertaining to literacy, see the appendix in Heather Andrea Williams's *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 203-13.

40. Cornelius, *When I Can Read*, 74.

41. *Ibid.*, 86.

42. *Ibid.*, 104.

43. Such readings strike a discordant anti-Semitic tone, especially on modern ears. On the matter of Nicodemus's representative identity and other representations of "the Jews" and "Judaism" in John's Gospel, see Raymond F. Collins, "Speaking of the Jews: 'Jews' in the Discourse Material of the Fourth Gospel," and other essays in *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Reimund Bieringer, Didier Pollefeyt, and Frederique Vandecasteele-Vanneuville (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

44. Mary Kay Duggan, "19th Century California Sheet Music," <http://www.ischool.berkeley.edu/~mkduggan/afro.html> (accessed 12/8/07).

45. B. T. Tanner, *Theological Lectures* (Nashville, TN: Publishing House, AME Church Sunday School Union, 1894), 196.

46. Although Tanner is now best known for *The Banjo Lesson*, in his own lifetime *Nicodemus Visiting Jesus* (1899) was among his most famous works. It won the Lippincott Prize at the annual Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1900 and was purchased by a patron of Tanner's for the permanent collection.

47. Jennifer J. Harper, "The Early Religious Paintings of Henry Ossawa Tanner: A Study of the Influences of Church, Family, and Era," *American Art* 6 (Autumn 1992): 78.

48. The Greek words translated into English as "born again" can also be translated as "born from above." Indeed, "born from above" is probably the more accurate of the two options. But the King

James Version, which was almost certainly the translation with which slaves came into contact, renders the Greek as "born again."

49. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 6.

50. Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 101. Raboteau echoes this sentiment: "The conversion experience equipped the slave with a sense of individual value and a personal vocation which contradicted the devaluing and dehumanizing forces of slavery" (*Slave Religion*, 318).

51. John Saillant, "Origins of African American Biblical Hermeneutics in Eighteenth-Century Black Opposition," in *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Continuum, 2000), 247.

52. "Nicodemus appears as a man of inadequate faith and inadequate courage, and as such he represents a group that the author wishes to characterize in this way." David Rensberger, *Overcoming the World: Politics and Community in the Gospel of John* (London: SPCK, 1988), 41.

"Nicodemus plays a well-known role: that of the rather stupid disciple whose maladroitness provides the occasion (a) for the reader to feel superior and (b) for the sage who is questioned to deliver a discourse. The genre is widespread in the Greco-Roman world." Wayne Meeks, "The Man From Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 53.

Biblical scholar Jouette Bassler argues instead that Nicodemus is not entirely negative. He appears at the end of the Gospel to bury Jesus. Thus, she argues, the Gospel uses the ambiguity in the character of Nicodemus to precipitate a better understanding of Jesus. See Jouette Bassler, "Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1989): 635-46.

53. Scott, *Domination*, 67.

54. Vincent L. Wimbush, "Reading Darkness, Reading Scriptures," in Wimbush, *African Americans and the Bible*, 17.

55. Martin Marty calls the Bible "America's iconic book" in his *Religion and Republic: The American Circumstance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

56. "Even the Bible was made over to suit our vivid imagination." Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935; reprint, New York: Harper Perennial, 1963), 3.