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## The biblical foundation of James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues"

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## THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION OF JAMES BALDWIN'S "SONNY'S BLUES"

**S**ONNY'S Blues" is James Baldwin's most anthologized and most critically discussed short story. Most critical analyses of "Sonny's Blues" have centered on the story's unnamed narrator's identity issues (Bieganowski, Reid, Murray) and Baldwin's use of blues / jazz music within the story (Jones, Sherard, Byerman, Goldman). Surprisingly, few critical discussions of "Sonny's Blues" have focused on the story's religious themes. Robert Reid, in an article devoted mainly to Baldwin's narrator's identity concerns, compares the narrator to the biblical Ishmael and Sonny to Isaac (444-45); Jim Sanderson discusses the role of grace in the story; and Marlene Mosher, in a very short essay, explicates the biblical allusion in the story's final image — the "cup of trembling" glowing and shaking above Sonny's head as he plays the piano (Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues" 141). But no critical analysis of "Sonny's Blues" has identified the two main biblical texts that form the foundation of Baldwin's story: the Cain and Abel story from the Book of Genesis and the parable of the Prodigal Son from Luke's gospel.

That Baldwin would use Bible stories as a foundation for his fiction should not be surprising. Like so many Christian African Americans, Baldwin knew the Bible intimately and once claimed, "I was born in the church" ("Notes" 14). Indeed, the King James Bible became his signal literary text during his Harlem childhood. In his biography of Baldwin, James Campbell states that Baldwin's "moral world" was "fortified and sanctioned by generations of deep believers" and that "the vocabulary and cadence of the King James Bible and the rhetoric of the pulpit were at the heart of his literary style" (4). According to Campbell, Baldwin "knew the Bible so well that he coloured his phrases with Old Testament rhetoric and poetry, with full conviction" (10), and Baldwin's "personal theology" was drawn from the Bible (11). Baldwin grew up listening to sermons in the storefront churches of Harlem, reading the Bible, and living in fear of the wrath of his religiously puritanical stepfather, David Baldwin, a self-ordained minister.

At the age of fourteen, Baldwin underwent a dramatic religious conversion in a Harlem church, an event described in detail in "The Fire Next Time" and used in his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. As he explains in "The Fire Next Time," Baldwin escaped the hazards of the Harlem streets by fleeing to the safety of the church (20). Soon after his conversion, he began preaching regularly in Harlem's churches as a Ju-

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nior Minister. By the age of seventeen, however, Baldwin would become disillusioned with religion and leave the church, as the Bible gave way to the novels of Feodor Dostoevsky. But Campbell is correct when he states that "although he [Baldwin] left the church, the church never left him" (4). Indeed, religious and biblical themes and motifs are at the center of Baldwin's best literary efforts, including "Sonny's Blues."

Considering Baldwin's personal experiences in the Christian church — which are discussed in the standard biographies of Baldwin and generally noted in Baldwin criticism — and the vital role that religion has played in African American letters, it seems puzzling that critics have not discussed the biblical foundation of a key Baldwin text such as "Sonny's Blues." African American writers since Phillis Wheatley have been incorporating biblical themes and references into their literary texts; by using the Bible to shape his literary works, Baldwin was following a long tradition that includes, for example, David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Claude McKay, Margaret Walker, and Martin Luther King, Jr. In the case of Baldwin, however, perhaps most critics prefer to view him as a civil rights writer rather than as a Christian writer with his Bible close at hand. Certainly, Baldwin played a spokesman's role during the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, and much of his most poignant writing is devoted to the racial issues of his time. Furthermore, the mature Baldwin, in interviews and in his writings, often attempted to distance himself from his childhood religious zeal. In both *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and "The Fire Next Time," Baldwin sharply criticizes the religious fanaticism of his father David Baldwin (who served as the model for Gabriel Grimes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*). And in "The Fire Next Time," Baldwin details the religious skepticism that overcame him during his later teenage years and prompted his departure from the Christian church:

[T]he blood of the Lamb had not cleansed me in any way whatever. I was just as black as I had been the day that I was born. Therefore, when I faced a congregation, it began to take all the strength I had not to stammer, not to curse, not to tell them to throw away their Bibles and get off their knees and go home and organize, for example, a rent strike. When I watched all the children, their copper, brown, and beige faces staring up at me as I taught Sunday school, I felt that I was committing a crime in talking about the gentle Jesus, in telling them to reconcile themselves to their misery on earth in order to gain the crown of eternal life. . . . I had been in the pulpit too long and I had seen too many monstrous things. I don't refer merely to the glaring fact that the minister eventually acquires houses and Cadillacs while the faithful continue to scrub floors and drop their dimes and quarters into the plate. I really

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mean that there was no love in the church. It was a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair. (Fire 38-39)

Before he describes his meeting with Elijah Muhammad in "The Fire Next Time," Baldwin asserts that "whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being . . . must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church" (47).

These kinds of comments about religion have prompted some literary critics to compare Baldwin to Richard Wright, Baldwin's first literary mentor, who sharply criticized Christianity in *Black Boy*, *Native Son*, and other works, and who focused his literary efforts on racial and social issues, not on the pathways toward religious salvation. Hence, many critics, viewing Baldwin, perhaps, as the second coming of Wright, might not have explored fully the religious dimensions of some of Baldwin's key literary works. That might be the case with "Sonny's Blues."

Despite walking away from the church as a young man, however, Baldwin created Christian texts throughout his literary career. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* recounts the quest for salvation of John Grimes, a fictional James Baldwin. The novel's title, its section headings ("The Seventh Day," "The Prayers of the Saints," and "The Threshing Floor"), and its richly symbolic language suggest Baldwin's debt to the Bible and the Christian church. "The Fire Next Time," Baldwin's most forceful analysis of the racial landscape of the United States, is a contemporary jeremiad — a stirring sermon delivered by preacher-author Baldwin to warn his countrymen that the evils of racism might destroy their nation and bring upon it God's condemnation and vengeful fury. Baldwin ends the text with the same kind of rhetorical flourish with which he undoubtedly ended the church sermons that he delivered as a Junior Minister:

If we — and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others — do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!* (105-06)

"The Fire Next Time" suggests that the rhetoric and substance of the Bible remained with Baldwin long after he walked away from the Christian church.

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"Sonny's Blues," published six years before "The Fire Next Time," is a contemporary retelling of the parable of the Prodigal Son. That parable from Luke's gospel records the story of a man with two sons. The younger son asks for the inheritance promised him by his father and leaves home; he "took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living" (Luke 15.13). The elder son remains with the father. A famine prompts the prodigal son to return home and beg for a job as a field hand on his father's estate, where he might at least enjoy regular meals. "Father," he says, "I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son" (Luke 15.21). But the father happily welcomes back his wayward son, ordering that a fatted calf be killed for a celebration of the young man's return. When the older son returns from work in the field and hears the celebration, he becomes angry and confronts his father: "Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment; and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: but as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf" (Luke 15.29-30). The father wisely replies, "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should be merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found" (Luke 15.31-32).

Like the Prodigal Son parable, "Sonny's Blues" features two brothers, an older brother who has remained on the straight and narrow path and a younger brother who has engaged in riotous living. The narrator, who has escaped the dangers of Harlem's streets to become a solid family man and a mathematics teacher in a Harlem high school, tells the tale of his younger brother Sonny, a jazz / blues musician trapped in heroin addiction. As the story opens, the narrator reads in the newspaper about Sonny's arrest for drug possession and sale. The narrator had been out of contact with Sonny for some time because he disapproved of Sonny's friends and his lifestyle. "I didn't like the way he carried himself, loose and dreamlike all the time," the narrator says about Sonny, "and I didn't like his friends, and his music seemed to be merely an excuse for the life he led. It just sounded weird and disordered" (126). After a major argument with Sonny, the narrator explains, "So I got mad and then he got mad, and then I told him that he might as well be dead as live the way he was living" (126). Like the younger brother in the Prodigal Son parable, Sonny is lost; and Sonny's older brother, like his self-righteous counterpart in the New Testament story, has little sympathy or concern for his wayward brother's situation.

But while Sonny serves time in prison for his crimes, the narrator ruminates about his obligation to his lost brother, whom he promised to watch over after their mother's death. At first, the narrator ignores Sonny; he does

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not visit Sonny in prison, or even write to him during his imprisonment. But the death of the narrator's daughter, Grace, prompts the narrator to write to Sonny and then welcome his prodigal brother into his home after Sonny is released from prison. The two brothers reconcile. In the story's final scene, which takes place in a jazz club where Sonny is performing, the narrator comes to understand Sonny's blues — his dark moods and the music that sustains him through them. After Sonny's performance, the narrator salutes Sonny by sending him a drink, which, sitting atop Sonny's piano, glows above Sonny's head "like the very cup of trembling" (141).

Like the parable of the Prodigal Son, "Sonny's Blues" is a tale of sin and redemption. In both stories, the lost son ultimately returns to the family fold and is saved. In Baldwin's story, the event that initiates Sonny's safe return home and the reconciliation between the brothers is the death of the narrator's daughter, Grace, of polio. Sitting alone in his dark living room after Grace's funeral, Baldwin's narrator "suddenly thought of Sonny. My trouble made his real" (127). The narrator, whose respectable lifestyle has shielded him from the kind of troubles that Sonny has faced, writes a letter of reconciliation to Sonny in prison that very day. As Ronald Bieganowski suggests, "Though Sonny's brother's preoccupation with himself makes him intolerant of Sonny's troubles, the pain and mystery of his daughter's death waken him to his wife's wound and to Sonny's need" (71). The narrator's awakening on the day of his daughter's funeral opens a path toward both reconciliation with Sonny and his own redemption.

The narrator's daughter's name is, of course, highly symbolic. When the narrator loses his daughter Grace, he simultaneously identifies with the pain and darkness in Sonny's life and realizes his own loss of grace, resulting from the broken promise that he made to his mother the last time he saw her. When the narrator was on furlough from the army, he had a discussion with his mother about Sonny. The brothers' father had already died, and their mother worried about who would care for Sonny after she was gone. "If anything happens to me he ain't going to have nobody to look out for him," she tells her oldest son. The narrator tries to assure his mother that Sonny is "a good boy and he's got good sense" (116), but his mother drives home her point with a poignant story about the death of her husband's younger brother, who was killed in a car accident on a dark night many years earlier. "You got to hold on to your brother," the woman tells her son, "and don't let him fall, no matter what it looks like is happening to him and no matter how evil you gets with him" (118). The narrator promises that he will care for Sonny, but later confesses, "I pretty well forgot my promise to Mama until I got shipped home on a special furlough for her funeral" (119).

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By neglecting his younger brother, Baldwin's narrator has become a contemporary Cain. In Genesis, after Cain kills his younger brother Abel, God asks Cain about Abel's whereabouts. "I know not," Cain replies. "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen. 4.9). That last conversation between Baldwin's narrator and his mother suggests that he should be his brother's keeper, but the narrator has failed miserably at that duty, which is apparent in the telling opening sentence of "Sonny's Blues": "I read about it [Sonny's arrest] in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work" (103). If the narrator had to rely on a newspaper report to become aware of Sonny's trouble, he could not have been keeping his promise to his mother to care for his younger brother. Sonny did not even bother to call his older brother after the arrest.

On the day that the narrator reads of Sonny's arrest, he has a conversation with one of Sonny's friends that highlights the narrator's troubled relationship with Sonny. When the narrator's teaching day is over, he leaves the school building and sees a friend of Sonny in the school courtyard. The boy looks just like Sonny — the narrator almost calls out Sonny's name — and the narrator flatly states, "I'd never liked him. . . . But now, abruptly, I hated him" (105). The mere appearance of someone who resembles Sonny provokes a response of hatred from the narrator. After the narrator engages the street kid in conversation, the boy asks the narrator what he will do about Sonny, and the narrator's response echoes the response, in Genesis, that Cain gave to God when He asked Cain about Abel's whereabouts: "Look. I haven't seen Sonny for over a year," Baldwin's narrator tells Sonny's friend. "I'm not sure I'm going to do anything. Anyway, what the hell can I do?" (106). In other words, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Toward the end of his conversation with Sonny's friend, the narrator says about Sonny's trouble, "Well, I guess it's none of my business" (108).

Genesis is often referred to as the story of The Fall, and Baldwin's reliance on that biblical text is evident in the many prominent places where Baldwin uses the verb "to fall" in "Sonny's Blues." When he greets Sonny on his release from prison, the narrator thinks back to Sonny's first steps: "I had been there when he was born; and I had heard the first words he had ever spoken. When he started to walk, he walked from our mother straight to me. I caught him before he fell when he took the first steps he ever took in this world" (111). The memory serves as a reminder to the narrator that the duty of an older brother is to keep his younger brother from falling — a responsibility at which the narrator has certainly failed. The last request of the narrator's mother of her older son is "to hold on to your brother . . . and don't let him fall" (118). The narrator uses the verb "to fall" again when he describes the first evidence of the disease that caused his daughter's death: "Isabel was in the kitchen fixing lunch for the two boys when they'd come

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home from school, and she heard Grace fall down in the living room. . . . And she ran to the living room and there was little Grace on the floor, all twisted up, and the reason she hadn't screamed was that she couldn't get her breath" (127). Grace's fall reminds the narrator of both Sonny's fall and his own fall from grace for ignoring the promise that he made to his mother not to let Sonny fall.

Unlike the Cain of Genesis, however, the narrator of "Sonny's Blues" has the possibility of redemption. To redeem himself, however, the narrator must save his prodigal younger brother. As Reid suggests, the narrator discovers "that he cannot free himself from responsibility for his brother. He is his brother's keeper" (445). The narrator's understanding of that sacred responsibility becomes evident in a conversation that the narrator has with Sonny after Sonny has been released from prison and has joined the narrator's household. One Sunday afternoon, the two brothers look out a window of the narrator's apartment at a gospel singer performing on the Harlem street corner below. Sonny tells his brother that the singer's voice reminded him of the feeling of heroin in his veins — "warm and cool at the same time" (131). The narrator is troubled when Sonny states, "Sometimes you've got to have that feeling"; Sonny explains that he needs that feeling to keep from suffering, "to keep from shaking to pieces" (131). The narrator, still mourning his daughter's death, suggests to Sonny that "there's no way not to suffer" (132), but he does not want to see Sonny take up drug use again and "die — trying not to suffer" (133).

Then, the narrator tries to renew his promise to take care of Sonny, to become his brother's keeper:

I wanted to say more, but I couldn't. I wanted to talk about will power and how life could be — well, beautiful. I wanted to say that it was all within; but was it? or, rather, wasn't that exactly the trouble? And I wanted to promise that I would never fail him again. But it would all have sounded — empty words and lies.

So I made the promise to myself and prayed that I would keep it. (133)

Having made the promise to himself, the narrator conveys to Sonny, in that muted language of men, that he understands Sonny's troubles and his own responsibility as an older brother. When Sonny confesses that his need for heroin "can come again" (135), the narrator, after a pause, responds with genuine understanding to Sonny's statement:

"All right," I said, at last. "So it can come again. All right."

He smiled, but the smile was sorrowful. "I had to try to tell you," he said.



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"Yes," I said. "I understand that."

"You're my brother," he said, looking straight at me, and not smiling at all.

"Yes," I repeated, "yes. I understand that." (135)

The narrator now understands his younger brother's vulnerability and is ready to fulfill the promise that he made to his mother to care for Sonny in her absence.

The story's final scene, which takes place in the nightclub where Sonny's band is scheduled to play and culminates with the symbolic drink that the narrator sends to Sonny, provides evidence that Sonny's redemption is certainly possible. As the band jams, the music "hit something" in the narrator; the band "began to tell us what the blues were all about." Somehow the music conveys to Baldwin's narrator "the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph," and that tale, the narrator realizes, is "the only light we've got in all this darkness" (139). Then Sonny, at the piano, takes control of the song that the band is playing — "Am I Blue" — and the reader senses that Sonny has found a new drug, that music has become his new fix that can keep him from shaking to pieces. The narrator acknowledges that no human being is completely safe — "I was yet aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky" (140) — but for that moment, at the piano in that nightclub, the prodigal Sonny is in control; he is not shaking to pieces and not dying trying not to shake to pieces. And his older brother, the narrator, is carefully and lovingly watching over him, serving as his brother's keeper.

When Sonny's band takes a break, the narrator beckons a waitress and asks her to send drinks to the band members. The narrator watches as the waitress "put a Scotch and milk on top of the piano for Sonny." Sonny does not immediately notice the drink, "but just before they started playing again," the narrator states, "he [Sonny] sipped from it and looked toward me, and nodded. Then he put it back on top of the piano. For me, then, as they began to play again, it glowed and shook above my brother's head like the very cup of trembling" (140-41).

Mosher argues that the story's final image — the drink glowing above Sonny's head — signals "first, that Sonny has completely overcome his weakness for drugs and can now remain a successful musician. Second, it reinforces the idea that the elder brother will no longer attempt to 'control' Sonny's behavior and will no longer show his disapproval when Sonny falls short of the elder brother's expectations." Now, according to Mosher, "Sonny has achieved full freedom" (59). But more can be said about this Old Testament allusion that concludes Baldwin's story. The drink represents more than Sonny's freedom; it symbolizes Sonny's redemption — a

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redemption born of sin. The term "cup of trembling" comes from the book of Isaiah. God pledges to aid the people of Jerusalem, even though they had sinned. Having sinned, they had "drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of his fury," even "the dregs of the cup of trembling." God's Chosen People have erred, yet a forgiving God "pleadeth the cause of his people, Behold, I have taken out of thine hand the cup of trembling, even the dregs of the cup of my fury; thou shalt no more drink it again: but I will put it into the hand of them that afflict thee" (Isa. 51.17, 22-23). From now on, the people of Jerusalem, despite their past sins, are under God's special care, and the cup of trembling has become a symbol of God's special protection; He will put the cup in the hands of those who afflict His Chosen People. As Sanderson suggests, the narrator, "puts himself in the role of the Lord and, by offering Sonny the drink, takes the cup of wrath from him" (94).

Like the sinners in the book of Isaiah, Sonny has sinned; he has, indeed, drunk from the cup of trembling. And like the people of Jerusalem in the Old Testament story, Sonny has suffered God's fury, but is now free from affliction. The glowing glass on the piano above Sonny, his personal cup of trembling, has become, in effect, a shining halo above Sonny's head; his sinning and suffering and redemption, in some way, have sainted Sonny. What the father of the prodigal son in Luke's gospel said to his older son about his reckless younger sibling applies to Baldwin's narrator and to Sonny: "for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found" (Luke 15.31-32). The narrator bought Sonny the drink that now glows above Sonny like the cup of trembling, and the drink becomes a symbol of the special protection that the narrator will now extend to Sonny as Sonny struggles to confront the darkness surrounding him. Hence, the narrator, too, is redeemed in Baldwin's story, for he, unlike the Cain of Genesis, has accepted the responsibility to be his brother's keeper.

Critical discussion of "Sonny's Blues" has centered on secular matters — the narrator's identity issues and Baldwin's use of music. Acknowledging the complex interweaving of biblical texts that forms the foundation of Baldwin's most noteworthy short story allows readers to understand and to appreciate in a small way Baldwin's significant debt to biblical literature and to grapple with the religious and moral issues at the core of this Christian writer's most important literary efforts.

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