

THE BIBLE AND IRONY IN JAMES BALDWIN'S
GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

by

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INTRODUCTION

Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953), James Baldwin's first novel, was chosen for this report because of the concern it shows for the black American's search for an identity and a heritage. Two techniques used by Baldwin to show this concern are the focus of this paper: the symbolic implications of the names of his characters and the frequent allusions to the Old Testament and to the Revelation of St. John. The novel deals primarily with the story of a sensitive adolescent boy as he comes to grips with his environment and as he searches for his heritage and his identity. A secondary theme is a possible metaphor of race relations in the United States.

The concern with the names and the meanings they attach to the person to whom they are given is ancient. The Old Testament Hebrews manifested this concern, and George Buttrick in The Interpreter's Bible discusses it:

In all Jewish thought and immemorial practice, the giving of a name meant much more than attaching a casual label. In a very intimate and vital way the name must be appropriate to the person. Names and facts should correspond. Note the special practice of O[ld] T[estament] names such as those of Isaac (Genesis 21:3, 6), of Jacob (Genesis 27:36), or Moses (Exodus 2:10), and the extraordinary symbolical names given to their children by Isaiah and Hosea. Consider, too, the names that were changed to indicate some new phase of an individual's destiny: the name of Abram changed to Abraham; Jacob changed to Israel; Cephas changed to Peter; Saul changed to Paul.¹

The concern of changing names to indicate a new status was shared by many of the newly emancipated slaves in the United

States. At first the ex-slave merely took the surname of his former master. Gradually the idea that a freeman should have his own name arose and many of the blacks changed their names. Booker T. Washington describes this change in his autobiography, Up From Slavery (1903).

In some way a feeling got among the coloured people that it was far from proper for them to bear the surname of their former owners, and a great many of them took other surnames. This was one of the first signs of freedom. When they were slaves, a coloured person was simply called "John" or "Susan." There was seldom occasion for more than the use of one name. If "John" or "Susan" belonged to a white man by the name of "Hatcher," sometimes he was called "John Hatcher," or as often, "Hatcher's John." But there was a feeling that "John Hatcher" or "Hatcher's John" was not the proper title by which to denote a freeman; and so in many cases "John Hatcher" was changed to "John S. Lincoln" or "John S. Sherman," the initial "S" standing for no name, it being simply a part of what the coloured man proudly called his "entitles."²

The reluctance to bear a name that once belonged to someone else is still a concern of the Black Muslims. Like the Hebrews, the Black Muslim convert takes a new name to symbolize his or her new identity.

Contemporary black authors share this concern with both the ancient Hebrews and the Black Muslims. Such titles as Baldwin's Nobody Knows My Name and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man emphasize the anonymity and invisibleness of the black American in a white society. Ellison is also fascinated by the connection between his name, Ralph Waldo Ellison, and the fact that he chose writing as a career:

Instead, he [Ellison's father] named me after someone called Ralph Waldo Emerson, and then, when I was three, he died. It was too early for me to have understood his choice, although I'm sure he must have explained it many times, and it was also too soon for me to have made the connection between my name and my father's love for

reading. Much later, after I began to write and work with words, I came to suspect that he was aware of the suggestive powers of names and of the magic involved in naming.³

It is only natural that this shared concern with names be carried over into the writings of Baldwin and Ellison. Another black author, Richard Wright, in Native Son (1940) names his main character Bigger Thomas which indicates "only the subhuman, the physical dimensions of the hero's ghetto existence. It is emblematic of the exclusive biological standards which have been the only means left to Bigger and his kind for the definition of manhood and self-respect."⁴

This kind of symbolic implication in characters' names is particularly important in Go Tell It on the Mountain. Most of the characters have Biblical names. This is not unusual, especially in the context of the novel, where religion pervades the atmosphere. Names are used ironically; Gabriel's is the most obvious. Deborah's and Esther's names are used ironically, but John, Elizabeth, and Elisha have names which seem to indicate their character. Frank, Florence, and Richard are not Biblical names, and neither are these characters religious. These names are used ironically, however. The family name, Grimes, is extremely important symbolically, since the connotation is one of dirt or filth.

Names are important to one's understanding of Go Tell It on the Mountain, and so is apocalypticism. The definition of apocalypticism used in The Interpreter's Bible sums up the beliefs of the saints, people who are members of the Temple of the Fire Baptized:

. . . apocalypticism may be defined as the eschatological belief that the power of evil (Satan), who is now in control of this temporal and hopelessly evil age of human history in which the righteous are afflicted by his demonic and human agents, is soon to be overcome and his evil rule ended by the direct intervention of God, who is the power of good, and who thereupon will create an entirely new, perfect and eternal age under his immediate control for the everlasting enjoyment of his righteous followers from among the living and the resurrected dead.⁵

This definition of apocalypticism will be used throughout this paper. An understanding of this type of belief is important because it deeply influences all of Baldwin's characters. It is also the object of Baldwin's attack, since the characters who take it seriously are emotionally and psychologically crippled. When judging the actions of characters such as Gabriel who accept such beliefs, one should remember that apocalypticism places emphasis on ritual and form rather than ethics and morality.

The second section of Baldwin's novel, "The Prayers of the Saints," particularly illustrates the influence of apocalyptic thought. This section contains flashbacks to the early lives of Gabriel, Florence, and Elizabeth. Baldwin introduces these prayers by quoting Revelation 6:9-11, "And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" This part of Revelation describes the breaking of the six seals, the first four of which looses a series of catastrophes on the earth. The quotation Baldwin uses comes at the breaking of the fifth seal, and Buttrick interprets it as follows:

The breaking of the fifth seal provides a glimpse of the martyrs under the altar in heaven crying out at God for justice and for vengeance upon their persecutors, but they are told to be quiet for a little while longer until their

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predetermined number is completed. By means of this scene the author assures his persecuted readers that they who persecute and kill them will surely and quickly be punished by God. This tableau is also a pledge that the souls of the martyrs go to heaven, not to Hades, there to await the first resurrection.⁶

The significance of the quotation Baldwin uses is apparent in his attitude towards the Negro church. A belief that nothing can be done about the state of the world except wait for God to intervene and avenge those who have wronged His chosen people does nothing to encourage those persecuted to attempt to better their lives on earth. This is the attitude Baldwin condemns and which finally drove him from the Church: ". . . 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."⁷

The circumstances surrounding the writing of the Revelation of St. John shows some interesting similarities to circumstances surrounding the Negro church. The Revelation was written at a crucial time for the early Christians, who were being severely persecuted and even being put to death for refusing to worship the emperor-gods. St. John, who was probably not the apostle John, had to convince these people that death for their beliefs was better than defecting from their faith. In order to do that, he described a vision of a New Jerusalem which was reserved for the faithful. In addition, he promised that the Lord would avenge sins against His chosen people. According to Buttrick, the prospect of being assured a place in heaven and of having the Lord himself avenge the persecutors was probably one of the most effective means of keeping Christians

faithful and willing to die for their faith rather than denying Christ and worshiping the emperor-gods.⁸

The people of the Temple of the Fire Baptized are concerned about the temptations of worldly wealth rather than emperor-gods. The characters in Go Tell It on the Mountain are all very poor, but their church teaches that suffering will be rewarded and that the world is the instrument of the devil; the riches to be found there can only be gotten by sinful means. The same prospects that kept the early Christians faithful are used to keep the black people complacent that they can do nothing about life on earth.

This attitude of the Church is especially apparent to John Grimes, who has decided that he will not be like his father. John wishes to attain some worldly wealth, but all his life he has been taught that wealth comes only from the devil:

But he did not long for the narrow way, where all his people walked. . . . In the narrow way, the way of the cross, there awaited him only humiliation forever; there awaited him, one day, a house like his father's house, and a church like his father's and a job like his father's where he would grow old and black with hunger and toil. The way of the cross had given him a belly⁹ filled with wind and had bent his mother's back. . . .

Baldwin condemns this attitude in his novel by showing how Gabriel's family reacts to such a belief. Gabriel's firm commitment to a life in the other world has estranged him from his family.

Baldwin's attitude towards the Negro Church is further shown by his having all his characters come to the church out of fear, not from the love or joy one normally associates with Christianity. Baldwin also joined the church out of fear.

I underwent, during the summer that I became fourteen, a prolonged religious crisis . . . and I supposed that God and safety were synonymous. The word "safety" brings us to the real meaning of the word "religious" as we use it. Therefore, to state it in another, more accurate way, I became, during my fourteenth year, for the first time in my life, afraid--afraid of the evil within me and afraid of the evil without. . . .¹⁰

But the church did not give Baldwin any sexual and racial freedom in exchange for the power of the Word. Robert Bone in The Negro Novel in America analyzes the pressures which forced Baldwin and John Grimes into the church:

As the twin pressures of sex and race began to mount, the adolescent boy struck a desperate bargain with God. In exchange for sanctuary, he surrendered his sexuality, and abandoned any aspirations that might bring him into conflict with white power. He was safe, but walled off from the world; saved, but isolated from experience. This to Baldwin is the historical betrayal of the Negro church. In exchange for the power of the Word, the Negro trades away the personal power of his sex and the social power of his people.¹¹

Religion is also related to the secondary meaning of Go Tell It on the Mountain, a metaphor of race relations in America. A fundamentalist religion like the one preached at the Temple of the Fire Baptized emphasizes the blackness of sin and the whiteness and purity of being forgiven. When a man is black and believes as firmly in such symbolism as Gabriel does, he can only subconsciously hate himself for his color. This hatred is then visited on his innocent stepson, John, and the theme of guilty father and rejected son runs through the book. Gabriel is not only guilty in his relationship to John, but also in his refusal to acknowledge an illegitimate son. Bone sees this relationship as symbolizing the relationship between blacks and whites.

Baldwin sees the Negro quite literally as the bastard child of American civilization. In Gabriel's double involvement with bastardy we have a re-enactment of the white man's historic crime. In Johnny, the innocent victim of Gabriel's hatred, we have an archetypal image of the Negro child. Obliquely, by means of an extended metaphor, Baldwin approaches the very essence of the Negro Experience. That essence is rejection, and its most destructive consequence is shame.¹²

Baldwin also indicates this metaphorical level by allusions to the Old Testament Jews and by parallels between their experiences and the experiences of Black people in the United States. The most obvious allusions to the Old Testament Jews are the names Baldwin has chosen for his characters. There is also an allusion to Ishmael, the archetypal outcast, when Gabriel refers to John as "the son of the bondwoman."

Within the context of the novel such parallels are only natural, especially to Florence and Gabriel. One of the major influences on their thinking is the storytelling of their mother Rachel, who was born in slavery. She parallels her own experience with that of the Jewish bondage in Egypt.

Another attraction of the Old Testament for the black people is the direct intervention of God when times were troubled for His chosen people. The Old Testament prophets were the original hellfire and brimstone preachers, and they hold great attraction for people like Gabriel. Both the direct intervention of God in human affairs and hellfire and brimstone are included in the apocalyptic religion of the Temple of the Fire Baptized.

The approach to this paper will be to devote a chapter to each of the main characters in this order: Gabriel, Florence,

Elizabeth, and John. Minor characters will be discussed with the major characters they influenced, i.e., Deborah and Esther with Gabriel; Rachel with Florence; Elisha with John. In each chapter, the implications of the character's name and the influences of religion on that character will be discussed.

CHAPTER I

GABRIEL GRIMES

Gabriel Grimes' name symbolizes the division in himself, a division he recognizes but cannot bring himself to admit. Gabriel's first name is also the name of one of the seven archangels. According to Hasting's Dictionary of the Bible, the name "Gabriel" means "man of God."¹³ Davidson's A Dictionary of Angels gives the meaning of Gabriel's name as "God is my strength" and explains "He is the angel of annunciation, resurrection, mercy, vengeance, death, revelation."¹⁴

The Biblical Gabriel is a messenger angel and appears three times in the Bible. In the Old Testament he appears to Daniel to explain some visions. In the New Testament he brings the message of John the Baptist's birth to Zacharias, and he is the angel who announces to the Virgin Mary the forthcoming birth of Christ. Gabriel Grimes aspires to the status of "man of God," although he never lives up to his aspirations.

Since Gabriel Grimes is a preacher, he can be considered a messenger of God. But the message he brings is one of hatred. He hates white people and this is passed on to his family. His son Roy goes out of his way to fight white boys, but his stepson John tries to understand why he should hate all white people, especially since some have been kind to the child.

The Grimes family lives in Harlem and the novel contains a

number of descriptions of the filth that surrounds them in the physical environment. When John wakes on his fourteenth birthday, he notices the dirt that has accumulated in the kitchen, in spite of his mother's constant efforts to keep it clean.

The room was narrow and dirty; nothing could alter its dimensions, no labor could ever make it clean. Dirt was in the walls and the floorboards, and triumphed beneath the sink where roaches spawned; was in the fine ridges of the pots and pans, scoured daily, was in the wall against which they hung, and revealed itself where the paints had cracked and leaned outward in stiff squares and fragments, the paperthin underside webbed with black. Dirt was in every corner angle, crevice of the monstrous stove, and lived behind it in delirious communion with the corrupted wall. Dirt was in the baseboard that John scrubbed every Saturday and roughened the cupboard shelves that held the cracked and gleaming dishes.¹⁵

The name "Grimes" is closely related to "grimy" which denotes dirt and filth. It is significant, then, that Gabriel's sermons often deal with those topics. At the first revival he preaches, his text is from Isaiah 5:6, "Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts." Another of his favorite texts is from Revelation 22:11, "He who is filthy, let him be filthy still." This concern with corruption can be attributed to several things. The Calvinistic, fundamentalist religion which has pervaded his life since childhood emphasizes the blackness of sin and the purity and whiteness of a person when his sins are forgiven. To a man such as Gabriel, who accepts this symbolism, his outward color is a sign of his inward state. So he can only subconsciously hate himself. Consciously, he concerns himself with his sins and seeks to be forgiven. When

a young man in his early twenties, Gabriel spent his nights drinking and whoring, but he could not escape the guilt feelings that followed his debauchery.

For he desired in his soul, with fear and trembling, all the glories that his mother prayed he should find. Yes, he wanted power--he wanted power to know himself, to be the Lord's anointed. . . . He hated the evil that lived in his body, and he feared it, as he feared and hated the lions of lust and longing that prowled the defenseless city of his mind. . . .¹⁶

Gabriel's self-hatred vents itself on the women in his life. Partly in response to his guilt feelings, he married his first wife, Deborah, after his conversion. He does not recognize these as guilt feelings, but he felt that he was an instrument of God, sent to release Deborah from her shame. Gabriel regards Deborah as instrumental in saving his soul because she prayed with his mother for his salvation. The name Baldwin chose for this character is significant. The Hebrew meaning of the name Deborah is "bee" and there are three Deborahs mentioned in the Bible. Two Deborahs are minor characters; one was Rebekah's nurse, who accompanied her mistress to her new home when she married Isaac. The other Deborah is mentioned in the apocryphal book of Tobit. She was Tobit's paternal grandmother and taught him the duty of almsgiving.¹⁷ The most famous Deborah is the Jewish prophetess who was the real deliverer of her people from the Canaanites. Deborah the Judge was an inspired woman, a prophetess and one to whom others turned for guidance and judgment.

Deborah in Go Tell It on the Mountain is regarded with something like fear. She is conscious of her shame of being

raped at the age of sixteen by a gang of white men and she seeks to redeem herself by good works.

. . . And she moved, therefore, through their small community like a woman mysteriously visited by God, like a terrible example of humility, or like a holy fool. No ornament ever graced her body; there was about her no tinkling, no shining, and no softness. . . . There were people in the church, and even men carrying the gospel, who mocked Deborah behind her back; but their mockery was uneasy; they could never be certain that they might be holding up to scorn the greatest saint among them, the Lord's peculiar treasure and most holy vessel.¹⁸

Deborah's name is used ironically in Go Tell It on the Mountain. Like her namesake in the Old Testament, Deborah Grimes can offer guidance and judgment and save Gabriel. When Gabriel commits his worst sin, that of not acknowledging his illegitimate son by another woman, he destroys the chance that Deborah had to redeem him. Deborah knows about the son and after the son's death told Gabriel of her wish that she could have reared him as their own. Had Gabriel humbled himself and confessed to Deborah, his life might have been better.

The mother of Gabriel's illegitimate son, Royal, is Esther, a beautiful young girl with whom he works. Esther's namesake in the Old Testament is a beautiful Jewess, and like the Biblical Deborah is responsible for averting a massacre of her people. The meaning of Esther's name in Hebrew is "star."¹⁹ She came to town shortly after Gabriel and Deborah were married. Gabriel considered her a sinner because she lived with her mother and stepfather who drank and sang the blues. Esther and her mother accept an invitation from Gabriel to hear him preach, but she steadfastly resists his attempts to convert her. Instead, Esther seduces him. Their affair lasts for nine days, and it

is during this time that his son Royal is conceived.

The story of the Biblical Esther is a familiar one, and there are some interesting parallels between the Old Testament story and Baldwin's novel. Both Esthers are beautiful; both are of races which have been severely persecuted. Esther in the Bible took the place of the Queen Vashti when Vashti was disgraced. Baldwin's Esther took the place of Deborah Grimes for nine days, and Deborah had been disgraced in earlier years. Again Baldwin uses the name ironically. Gabriel loses his chance at salvation by not giving Esther the emotional support she needs, by refusing to have anything to do with her when she becomes pregnant and by refusing to acknowledge their illegitimate son. Unlike Deborah and Gabriel, Esther has no trouble accepting her color or her sexuality. She had no connections with the church and does not therefore accept the symbolism of black being wicked and white pure.

Gabriel's relationship with his second wife, Elizabeth, will be covered in a later chapter. But it is interesting to note that he married Elizabeth for the same reasons he married Deborah. He saw in his second marriage a chance to redeem himself from past sins, particularly the sin of adultery with Esther. He believed that Elizabeth was a sign from the Lord that he had been forgiven and that he had been given a second chance. He saw in Elizabeth the wife he had lost and in John the son he had rejected.

This belief that he has been forgiven makes Gabriel extremely self-righteous. He cannot quite forgive Elizabeth her sin of having Johnny and he refuses to admit his own sins.

As Robert Bone sees it, Gabriel's most important task becomes preserving his outward image as one of the saints.

From self-hatred flows not only self-righteousness but self-glorification as well. From the time of his conversion Gabriel has been living in a world of compensatory fantasy. He sees the Negro race as a chosen people and himself as prophet and founder of a royal line. . . .²⁰

From his point of view, Gabriel has a reason to believe that he is among the elect. After preaching at the Twenty-Four Elders Revival and while he is considering marriage to Deborah, he experiences a vision in which he is led up a mountain. After a long and tortuous climb he reaches the top:

He began to walk. Now he was wearing long, white robes. He heard singing: "Walked in the valley, it looked so fine, I asked my Lord was all this mine." But he knew that it was his. A voice said: "Follow me." And he walked, and he was again on the edge of a high place, but bathed and blessed and glorified in the blazing sun, so that he stood like God, all golden, and looked down, down, at the long race he had run, at the steep side of the mountain he had climbed. And now up this mountain, in white robes, singing, the elect came. "Touch them not," the voice said, "my seal is on them." And Gabriel turned and fell on his face, and the voice said again: "So shall thy seed be."²¹

In an apocalyptic religion, a vision is considered the highest form of spiritual experience. The soul comes directly in touch with God Himself or truth. R. H. Charles says that according to such a belief the vision can "come only to the soul that has fitted itself for its reception."²²

Much of Gabriel's vision can be interpreted in light of apocalyptic scriptures. First, he is clothed in white robes. This is a sign of the elect as shown in Revelation 7:13-14, "And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, what are these which are arrayed in white robes? and when came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are

they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." According to R. H. Charles, the white garments are the spiritual bodies which the faithful are to receive.²³

The seal which is on the elect is also a sign of their salvation. The seal is an outward sign that they are the property of God and are to be given the Lord's protection in the coming of the Last Days. It marks the elect as one of God's property and assures him of God's protection during the coming struggle of Satan for the world. Most important, the sealing is the outward sign of the hidden goodness of the elect. Buttrick explains the significance of the sealing: "The hidden goodness of God's servants is at last blazoned outwardly, and the divine name, which has been written secretly by God's spirit on their hearts, is now engraven openly on their brows. . . ." ²⁴

Against such vivid signs of God's salvation in his dreams, it is no wonder that Gabriel is convinced of his election. He goes through the outward form of his religion faithfully, following the rituals, but he never shows any of the compassion and love one normally associates with Christianity. However, as R. H. Charles points out, the emphasis in the apocalyptic books of the Bible is not on ethical and moral conduct, but on the outward forms of religion.²⁵

There are, however, some indications that Gabriel has misinterpreted his dream. He is not told in the vision that he is of the elect, but that his seed will be. This is the same

misinterpretation that is often made of Noah's curse of Ham. Ham is traditionally considered to be the father of the Negro race, and the fact that he was cursed by his father has been used to justify the slavery of Negroes. But in Genesis 9:24-25 the curse reads, "And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren." Gabriel is not specifically told that he is of the elect, and Ham is not specifically cursed. The curse was upon Canaan, the son of Ham.

Another indication that Gabriel has perhaps misinterpreted his dream comes from the events surrounding it. According to R. H. Charles, the value of such experiences is judged "by the source from which they sprang, the environment in which they were produced, and the influence they exercised on the will and character."²⁶ The source of Gabriel's vision seems to be reawakened sexual desires. His successful sermon at the Twenty-Four Elders revival was an emotional experience and he has begun to consider marriage to Deborah. He is emotionally distraught and unable to sleep. Finally, he falls into a fitful sleep, but is awakened by a wet dream. After this experience he again falls asleep and his vision occurs.

The moral environment is ambiguous. Gabriel has just returned from a revival, but prior to his vision there are two examples of his self-righteousness. One is in his attitude toward the other ministers. He feels morally superior to them, seeing them as grown fat and careless, joking about the number

of souls they have saved. The other is his feeling that he should marry Deborah and be her deliverance from shame, when, in fact, his sins are far worse than hers. Apparently, Gabriel is so certain of his salvation that he is incapable of feeling shame for his past debauchery. Deborah has been a local saint whose "sin" was being raped by a gang of white men.

There is at least one other sign to Gabriel that he is of the elect. The name of the revival, Twenty-Four Elders, is an allusion to Revelation 4:1-4 where St. John is led by the Holy Spirit into Heaven. He describes the throne, the one upon the throne, and states: "In a circle about this throne were twenty-four elders, robed in white and wearing crowns of gold." The implication, of course, is that the elders preaching at this revival are of the elect. These twenty-four elders have their origin in the twenty-four elders of the Jewish priesthood as set forth in I Chronicles 24:4-6.²⁷ It is significant that Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, was a priest of the division of Abijah, the eighth of these twenty-four divisions.

Gabirle's conviction that he is of the elect is shown again when he tells Esther that his son will be of royal blood. Esther uses this information to mock Gabriel when she names their illegitimate son Royal. Gabriel's son by Elizabeth is named Roy, a shortened form of Royal. The ultimate irony is that neither of the sons behaves as if they are of the elect. Royal comes to a bad end, and it seems as if Roy is headed in that direction. The stepson that Gabriel rejects as being the fruit of the devil is everything that he wanted in a son.

The relationship between John and Gabriel will be discussed further in the chapter on John. But it is important to note that Gabriel does not consider John a son, although he has promised to treat him as such.

Neither of his sons was here tonight, had ever cried on the threshing floor. One had been dead for nearly fourteen years--dead in a Chicago tavern, a knife kicking in his throat. And the living son, the child, Roy, was headlong already, and hardhearted: he lay at home, silent now, and bitter against his father, a bandage on his forehead. They were not here. Only the son of the bondwoman stood where the rightful heir should stand.²⁸

By referring to Johnny as the son of the bondwoman, Baldwin is alerting the reader to metaphorical possibilities. This is an allusion to Genesis 21:9-10, "And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking. Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac." The son of Hagar is Ishamel, the archetypal outcast.

The portrayal of Gabriel is one of sustained irony. Gabriel lacks true self-perception; he sees himself as a saint, but the people closest to him see him as a cruel, merciless sinner. Central to his delusion and his self-hatred is the symbolism of the church; black is evil, white is good.

Given this attack on the core of the self, how can the Negro respond? If he accepts the white man's equation of blackness with evil, he is lost. Hating his true self, he will undertake the construction of a counterself along the line that everything "black" he now disowns. To such a man, Christ is a kind of spiritual bleaching cream. Only if the Negro challenges the white man's moral categories can he hope to survive on honorable terms. This involves the sentiment that everything "black" he now embraces, however painfully, as his.²⁹

Gabriel cannot challenge these moral categories; he believes

too firmly in them. He is doomed to spend the rest of his life deluding himself and destroying his family with his hatred.

CHAPTER II

FLORENCE

Florence's life has been one of frustration, disappointment, and thwarted ambition. As a result she is now full of bitterness, hatred, and a desire for revenge against her brother Gabriel. There are three major influences on Florence, each of which has contributed to her miserable life: her mother Rachel, who is deeply religious and tells her children stories of Jewish bondage; her brother Gabriel, whom she hates and thus extends her hatred to all men; and the fundamentalist, apocalyptic religion of her childhood.

Rachel Grimes was born in slavery and her influence over her children stems from that fact. Her tales of her own slavery and parallel tales from the Old Testament about Jewish bondage reinforce Rachel's own belief that one only has to be patient and the Word of God will fulfill itself. This has been her experience and she passes it on to her children. Rachel interprets all happenings in light of the scriptures and in her mind there is no doubt that her freedom from slavery was a direct response to the prayers of the faithful.

. . . She had only to endure and trust in God. She knew that the big house, the house of pride where the white folks lived, would come down. . . . They who walked so proudly now, had not fashioned for themselves or their children so sure a foundation as was hers. They walked on the edge of a steep place and their eyes were

sightless--God would cause them to rush down, as the herd of swine had rushed down, into the sea.³⁰

Rachel's prayers and stories to her children are filled with allusions to the Old Testament Jews. Praying for Florence the night after Deborah's rape, she asked the Lord to "sprinkle the doorpost of this house with the blood of the Lamb."³¹ This is a direct reference to the story of the Passover. In Exodus 12:21-27, the Jews are told to put the blood of a lamb on the doorpost to identify their homes so that the angel of death will not kill their firstborn. Again, Rachel is certain that the Lord has directly answered her prayer when the white men ride by her home.

The story that influences Florence the most is the story of the day Rachel gained her freedom. Rachel does not realize this influence and certainly does not intend it in the way it was taken.

The word was fulfilled one morning, before she was awake. Many of the stories her mother told meant nothing to Florence; she knew them for what they were; tales told by an old black woman in a cabin in the evening to distract her children from their cold and hunger. But the story of this day she was never to forget; it was a day for which she lived. . . . She [Rachel] tied her things in a cloth that she put on her head, and walked out through the gate, never to see that country any more.³²

Rachel has escaped from her Egypt and was content, but Florence saw her own life as another kind of slavery and she too wished to escape from Egypt, the South, and go North.

The main reason Florence regards her life as a kind of slavery is her brother Gabriel. Gabriel was born when she was five, and, soon after his birth, her father deserted the family to go North. Gabriel became the center of the household and

Florence was relegated to second place. Everything was sacrificed to Gabriel. There was only one future with which to be concerned--Gabriel's. Since Florence was a girl, she would one day be married with a husband and family of her own. The best education for her was her life in the cabin.

Florence's resentment of Gabriel is so deep that she joins forces with Deborah who has been brutally raped by a gang of white men, and the two of them reinforce each other in the belief that men are animals whose thoughts rise no higher than sex. This attitude that men are no good and live only to gratify themselves with the bodies of women carried over into Florence's disastrous marriage to Frank. At first Florence was under the impression that Frank was easily controlled. He conformed outwardly to her demands that he look like a respectable middle-class Negro. He would cut his hair, put on a clean shirt and go to Uplift meetings with her, where "they heard speeches by prominent Negroes about the future and duties of the Negro race."³³ For more than ten years, Frank and Florence battled; finally he deserted her to live with another woman until he was killed during World War I. To add insult to injury, Frank had given the other woman as next of kin and it was she who had told Florence.

Florence could not accept Frank for what he was and her constant efforts to improve him only ran into resistance. There are indications in the novel that had Florence only accepted Frank and had not tried so hard to change him, their life together might have been happy. In spite of Florence's insults,

he always comes back to her and when he does he is "pentulant and penitent," thus reinforcing Florence's belief that she has power over him.

If Florence could not accept Frank's failures neither can she accept her own shortcomings. This is indicated by her story to Elizabeth about Frank.

Florence told Elizabeth that Frank had adored her and had satisfied her every whim, although he was somewhat irresponsible and had neglected to buy life insurance. When he died, he left her penniless. This story is a blatant lie and indicates just how much Florence has deceived herself. Florence has even come to half-believe her story. One of her desires is to go to France and visit Frank's grave. "Wearing deep mourning, she would have laid on it, perhaps, a wreath of flowers, as other women did; and stood for a moment, head bowed, considering the unspeaking ground."³⁴

One of the methods Frank used to infuriate her in the midst of their battles was to inquire, "'And what you want me to do, Florence? You want me to turn white?"³⁵ The question was extremely painful to Florence because it got too close to the truth. Florence would have liked to turn white. Her ambitions and aspirations are those of the white middle class, but the people around her, including Frank, are content to stay black. She wants a home, for which Frank never saves enough money. She also shows her desire to be white by her use of bleaching creams. Frank's comments to her one time: "' . . . Don't know why you keep wasting all your time and my money on all them old

skin whiteners. You as black now as you was the day you was born.'" Florence's reply is illuminating: "'You wasn't there the day I was born. And I know you don't want a coal-black woman.'"³⁶ Actually Frank does not care if Florence is coal-black. He can accept her color and his without difficulty.

Florence and Gabriel's difficulties accepting their color have the same basis: the symbolism of the church. The Psalmist in Psalm 51:5-7 deplores his sinfulness and asks to be forgiven in these terms: "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." Florence does what she can to change her color by using bleaching creams and she attempts to overcome her physical blackness by attending the Uplift meetings and by being careful not to associate with "common niggers." She chooses her church in the North very carefully to be certain that the congregation is not emotional like the Southern congregation. "It was indecent, the practice of common niggers to cry aloud at the foot of the altar, tears streaming for all the world to see. She had never done it, not even as a girl down home in the church they had gone to in those days."³⁷ While Florence is struggling to accept her color, Esther and Frank accept the same color with no difficulty. They have no connection with the church and resist the efforts of Gabriel and Florence to bring them to it. Frank's response is a cynical "'Me and the Lord . . . don't always get along too well. He running the world like He thinks I ain't got good sense.'"³⁸

Florence's return to the church is a last resort against

death. She apparently has cancer, but she visits doctors, then women and men who traffic with the devil and give her powders to take or herbs with which to make tea. Only after these fail, does she turn to God. This illness makes the epigram Baldwin uses to introduce her prayer ironic. The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations (2nd ed.) lists two possible allusions. One is to Malachi 4:2, "But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in his wings."³⁹ The other is Cowper's Olney Hymns, number 44:

Sometimes a light surprises
A Christian when he sings
It is the Lord who rises
With healing in his wings;
When comforts are declining
He grants the soul again
A season of clear shining
To cheer it after rain.⁴⁰

However, Baldwin quotes directly from the third verse of "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing," written by Charles Wesley in 1743.

Hail, the heav'n born Prince of Peace
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness
Light and life to all He brings
Ris'n with healing in His wings.
.....⁴¹

Although Baldwin quotes "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" directly, all three have ironic possibilities. The two with the most possibilities are Malachi and Wesley's hymn.

The context out of which the quotation from Malachi was taken shows some similarities to Florence's situation and also shows some parallels between the situation of the Old Testament Jews at the time of Malachi and the black Americans at the time of the Great Migration in the early twentieth century. The

Great Migration was the movement of American Negroes from the farm to the city during the years 1890-1920.⁴² Harlem was itself a product of this movement and it was during this time that Florence went North.

Malachi was the last of the Twelve Prophets and during his time the religious situation was rapidly degenerating. Particularly distressing was the laxness of the priests in helping sustain the religious faith of the Jews in a very difficult time. At the time Malachi was writing, the Jews were facing the reality of re-establishing a Jewish nation in Palestine. When permission had been granted for this nation, the Jews had unrealistic hopes for it. They believed that "the land would become miraculously fruitful and the rain would never fail to come when needed."⁴³ With this prosperity would come a great increase in population. As might be expected, these unrealistic hopes were not realized and then the Jews became discouraged and cynical. The rains would not come when expected and famine and drought would follow. Naturally disappointment was followed by depression and then cynicism and impiety.⁴⁴

Florence's hopes for her journey North were also unrealistic. Unlike her mother who was content only to be free, Florence wanted freedom, material wealth, and some degree of respectability. Her last words to Gabriel before she leaves the South, "'If you ever see me again . . . I won't be wearing rags like yours,'" indicate to some extent her expectations.⁴⁵ Florence confidently expects to find all that she has anticipated in the North. But her hopes are unrealized, including

the hope that a man from the North would make a better husband than the ones she had refused in the South. Instead, she marries Frank, who is even more immature than the men she left. Florence's reaction to her disappointments is the same as the Old Testament Jews, bitterness and disillusionment. Like them she questions the wisdom of God in preferring her mother and brother.

And the thought filled her with terror and rage; the tears dried on her face and the heart within her shook, divided between a terrible longing to surrender and a desire to call God into account. Why had he preferred her mother and brother, the old, black woman, and the low, black man, while she, who had sought only to walk upright, was come to die, alone and in poverty, in a dirty, furnished room?⁴⁶

Florence is asking the same questions that the Jews were asking of Malachi, and one of his tasks was to answer these questions dealing with God's justice. Buttrick paraphrases the question and the answer: "If God loves us, why does he not show it? If he is good and righteous, why are not the rewards of life more equitably distributed?"⁴⁷ Malachi's answer to the question is the same as any of the saints would have given Florence: "The hard conditions of the times are largely justified by the people's disloyalty to God and the prevalent neglect of his service. . . . Suffering is the consequence of sin."⁴⁸ This answer is extremely simplistic, but it does contain at least a grain of truth.

. . . Much of the suffering in life is as a matter of fact quite clearly the result of sin--the obvious consequence of self-indulgence and self-centeredness in thought and behavior. It is also true that even where misfortune cannot be directly traced to sin, suffering is greatly increased by the fretfulness of mind which arises when the heart is estranged from God. . . .⁴⁹

This is a good description of Florence's situation. She cannot find it in her heart to forgive Gabriel his sins and she intends as her last earthly act to tell Elizabeth about Gabriel's illegitimate son.

The possible allusion to the hymn written by Cowper is ironic in the sense that it offers hope to the person coming to God. Florence is beyond hope. Even in her turning to God, she is hopeless and she realizes that God does not hear the prayers of those who are not sincere. "Neither love nor humility had led her to the altar, but only fear. And God did not hear the prayers of the fearful, for the hearts of the fearful held no belief. Such prayers could rise no higher than the lips that uttered them."⁵⁰

Considering the name of Florence's brother, Gabriel, one can hardly miss the irony of Baldwin's choosing to quote from the hymn "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" for Florence's epigram. The angel referred to in the quotation would be, of course, Gabriel, and he is hardly "rising with healing in his wings." Florence is mortally ill, but Gabriel is incapable of healing the breach between them, even in her last days. Gabriel is a divider, not a healer; a messenger of hate, not of love and reconciliation. He is only glad to see her suffering.

Certainly Florence is a sinner in some respects. She is far too proud and cannot admit some of her mistakes. But some of her guilt feelings are over events which she really should not feel guilty. As Baldwin clearly shows in the novel, if she is to have any life of her own, she must leave her mother and her brother. She has desires and ambitions that cannot be

fulfilled if she stays in the South. Leaving her family takes a great deal of courage.

Although the names of Frank and Florence are not Biblical, they are significant. Frank's name means "freeman" and that is what he is--free of the symbolism of the church, free of worries about his color and free of any desire to be other than he is.⁵¹ His is a complete self-acceptance. Florence's name means "bloom, prosperity" and it is obviously used ironically.⁵² Her name signifies two of the things for which Florence spends her life searching and which she never finds.

The final irony of Florence's life is her mother's attitude that she had prepared her children for life with a good foundation in religion. It is that religion which ultimately leads to the downfall of both Florence and Gabriel.

CHAPTER III

ELIZABETH

Elizabeth's name is one of the few in the novel which are not used ironically. In her case, it is a matter of the name fitting the person. George Alexander's Handbook of Biblical Personalities gives the meaning of Elizabeth's name as "God is swearer" which is probably best translated as "God is my oath, the one by whom I swear."⁵³ The Biblical Elizabeth is the mother of John the Baptist, and a descendant of Aaron, the half-brother of Moses. She is of priestly descent. Elizabeth's husband and the father of John the Baptist is Zacharias, a priest of the division of Abijah. The Jewish priests were divided into twenty-four divisions, each responsible for the conduct of temple worship at certain intervals.⁵⁴ Their son John is born of their old age and after an announcement from the angel Gabriel. John is, therefore, of priestly descent on both sides of the family.

Elizabeth Grimes' life has not been easy, although her childhood was happy, in direct contrast to Florence's and Gabriel's childhoods. The Grimes' father deserted soon after Gabriel's birth, but the focus of Elizabeth's childhood was her father, whom she loved deeply. It is probably because of her father's influence that Elizabeth has very little difficulty accepting her color. Her father was young, handsome, kind, and

generous. His character was extremely strong, and it is possible that she draws part of her tremendous strength in adversity from him. "It was he who had told her to weep, when she wept, alone; never to let the world see, never to ask for mercy; if one had to die, to go ahead and die, but never to let oneself be beaten."⁵⁵

Another thing Elizabeth did not have in common with Gabriel and Florence was poverty. As long as she was able to stay with her father, Elizabeth was quite comfortable, if not wealthy. Her father doted on her and bought her things to wear and to play with. The source of his income was a house of ill-repute and this is what ultimately leads to her separation from him.

If Elizabeth was close to her father, she barely knew her mother, who was very beautiful, light-skinned, and ill most of the time. She spent her time reading spiritualist pamphlets about the benefits of disease and complaining about her suffering. The greatest impact she had on Elizabeth was the realization that her mother did not love her. Elizabeth suspected that the reason was her own dark color and the fact that she was not nearly so beautiful.⁵⁶ For these reasons, Elizabeth did not recognize her mother's death as a crisis. When Elizabeth's aunt came to visit after her mother's death, she was appalled at Elizabeth's lack of training and declared the father unfit to raise a child, especially a girl. The aunt got a court order and Elizabeth was taken from her father. It is with her aunt that Elizabeth first experiences the kind of love

she finds later with Gabriel.

She sensed that what her aunt spoke of as love was something else--a bribe, a threat, an indecent will to power. She knew that the kind of imprisonment that love might impose was also, mysteriously a freedom for the soul and spirit, was water in a dry place, and had nothing to do with the prisons, churches, laws, rewards, and punishments, that so positively cluttered the landscape of her aunt's mind.⁵⁷

It was while she was living with her aunt that Elizabeth met Richard, whose name means "strong in rule."⁵⁸ Like Florence and Frank whose names are not Biblical, Richard was not a religious person. He did not search for his identity in the Bible with its parallels between Jewish bondage and American Negro slavery, but in New York's Museum of Natural History or the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In the Museum of Natural History he would gaze at African statuettes or totem poles as if searching for some contact with his ancient past. Perhaps in that African past Richard's ancestors had been "strong in rule," but he is only a second-class citizen. Despite his name, Richard's strength failed when Elizabeth needed him most.

Richard and Elizabeth had planned to be married as soon as they went North, but their marriage kept being postponed for lack of money. Richard was going to night school, and his tenseness and nervousness were exceeded only by his passion for learning. He had his own private war with the white world which he planned to conquer not by violence, but by knowledge.

". . . I just decided me one day that I was going to get to know everything them white bastards knew, and I was going to get to know it better than them, so could no white son-of-a-bitch nowhere never talk me down, and never make me feel like I was dirt, when I could read him the alphabet, back, front, and sideways. . . ." ⁵⁹

The postponement of their marriage meant that Elizabeth had to face the possibility of sexual relations with Richard. In the South, there had been no opportunities, and Elizabeth had feared small-town gossip. But in New York, no one seemed to care and she no longer resisted. Elizabeth has some guilt feelings about this, which is only natural. She was taken away from her father because he ran a brothel and she wonders if she has become one of those hardened women.

. . . The world in which she now found herself was not unlike the world from which she had, so long ago, been rescued. Here were the women who had been the cause of her aunt's most passionate condemnation of her father--hard-drinking, hard-talking, with whisky- and cigarette-breath. . . . And was she, Elizabeth, so sweetly fallen, so tightly chained, one of these women now?⁶⁰

Her sense of sinfulness about their relationship is not explicitly mentioned and apparently it is secondary to the fear that she will in some way bring more shame to her father.

As Elizabeth looks back, she sees that her greatest mistake with Richard was not telling him of her pregnancy. That summer was one of uncertainty for Richard. He was confused, searching for himself, and Elizabeth had no wish to add to his burdens.

And yet perhaps it was, after all this--this failure to demand of his strength what it might then, most miraculously, have been found able to bear; by which--indeed, how could she know?--his strength might have been strengthened, for which she prayed tonight to be forgiven. Perhaps she had lost her love because she had not, in the end, believed in it enough.⁶¹

The pressures that had been building on Richard culminated that summer when he was unjustly accused of robbing a store by a white man who believed that all black men look alike. He

spent time in jail and was finally acquitted through testimony of the three robbers, his own protestation of innocence and the uncertainty of the storekeeper. It was the final blow for Richard and he had no wish to live in such an unjust society. After his trial he was so depressed that Elizabeth could not bring herself to tell him of the child. That night he cut his wrists and bled to death.

The third man in Elizabeth's life is Gabriel, her husband. She met him through Florence while they were working as night cleaning women on Wall Street. Although Florence had introduced Elizabeth and Gabriel, she did not approve of the romance and said so frequently. Elizabeth decided that the only reason was that Florence did not like her brother. "But even had Florence been able to find a language unmistakable in which to convey her prophecies, Elizabeth could not have heeded her because Gabriel had become her strength."⁶² This time, however, love was not the motivating force. Richard had been an orphan and had been passed from one foster home to another; Elizabeth was determined that this would not happen to their child. Gabriel's attitude towards John and his promise to treat him as his own won her over. So she married Gabriel out of a desire for safety, and in spite of her momentary dread of having him as her husband. She now realizes that he does not love her or John and she often thinks that it would have been better to have given John away to strangers.

Elizabeth has become a religious person, but her attitude and background are quite different from Gabriel's. The only

religion she had been exposed to before going to live with her aunt was the spiritualist pamphlets her mother read. Her aunt's religion was apparently more conventional, but it was not the pervasive power that Florence and Gabriel experienced. Her aunt preached little sermons at her, mainly on the topic of "pride goeth before a fall," and when she met Richard she was on her way to a church picnic. She had been influenced enough by religion to have some guilt feelings about her relationship with Richard and to timidly mention Jesus to him. His reply was, "'You can tell that puking bastard to kiss my big black ass.'"⁶³ Later when he was jailed, he remarked sarcastically, "'Maybe you ought to pray to that Jesus of yours and get Him to come down and tell these white men something.'"⁶⁴

The overall impression one gets of Elizabeth's attitude toward religion is confusion. None of her experiences with religion has been happy, and she turns to the church immediately before her marriage to Gabriel and at his insistence. A hymn reminds her of "the voices that had driven her to this dark place."⁶⁵ Elizabeth is searching for hope in religion, because she recognizes the sinfulness of her past and wants to be forgiven. She hated her aunt, but she also realizes that without that hatred she could not have survived the years there. She listened to her aunt talking about the sacrifices she has made so that her sister's daughter would be raised as a good Christian girl, and how much she loved Elizabeth. Yet Elizabeth recognized her aunt's hypocrisy; even her own mother could not fool her with protestations of love. Elizabeth also recognizes

the sinfulness of her relationship with Richard, but even after many years she still loves him and she realizes that she will never regret their love affair. Had she been forced to choose between Richard and God, "she could only, even with weeping, have turned away from God."⁶⁶

Originally Elizabeth had seen in her marriage to Gabriel a chance to atone for her sins, just as he had seen a chance to regain the wife and son he had lost. But she has come to regard her marriage as punishment for her past. She has realized long ago that if Gabriel loves her at all, which is doubtful, it is only because she is the mother of his son, Roy.

Elizabeth has come through her trials without the bitterness and hatred that mark Gabriel and Florence. She has adopted as her text, "Everything works together for them that love the Lord," which is taken from Romans 8:38: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." Not only is this amazingly optimistic in light of her experiences, but it is in direct contrast to Gabriel's text, "Set thine house in order," which is taken from Isaiah 38:1, a death warning: ". . . Thus said the Lord, Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live." It is also significant that Elizabeth's text is from the New Testament and Gabriel's from the Old Testament.

Elizabeth has come to self-acceptance, and through that self-acceptance she has achieved significance in the lives of others, especially her children. According to Howard Harper, she has done this through a "personal process in which each man

must try to discover his own nature, accept what he finds and then involve this other nature with other people, through love. Each stage of the process requires so much courage that few of Baldwin's characters can ever achieve genuine involvement."⁶⁷

Elizabeth Grimes illustrates Christian love to her family, but she is not about to be a doormat for Gabriel. She stands up to him and refuses to accept the blame for Roy's excursion with a gang of boys looking for a fight with white boys. This escapade has ended with Roy's coming home with his forehead slashed with a knife.

"You ain't got but one child," she said, "that's liable to go out and break his neck, and that's Roy, and you know it. And I don't know how in the world you expect me to run this house, and look after these children, and keep running around the block after Roy. No, I can't stop him, I done told you that, and you can't stop him neither. You don't know what to do with this boy, and that's why you all the time trying to fix the blame on somebody. Ain't nobody to blame, Gabriel. You better pray God to stop him before somebody puts another knife in him and puts him in his grave."⁶⁸

Gabriel's reaction to this is violent; he slaps Elizabeth and for that he is cursed by Roy. Roy is, of course, beaten for this, but it illustrates the great love and respect that Elizabeth's children have for her.

The irony of this is the reader's realization that Elizabeth does not know of Gabriel's illegitimate son or his death by stabbing. Her comments are unwitting and completely innocent. Before his marriage to Elizabeth, Gabriel insisted that she publicly confess her sin of having John, but he has never confessed, even in the privacy of his home, his similar sin.

Elizabeth's life has not been easy and her greatest hope is that her children's lives will be easier. Her epigram, "Lord I wish I had of died / In Egypt land!" indicates the depth of her sorrows. She is sometimes troubled by Gabriel's lack of forgiveness and by her own lack of remorse over her past. Somehow she cannot quite believe in the God of wrath and punishment preached by Gabriel and she searches "in her husband's religion for an ultimate kindness."⁶⁹ But Elizabeth has achieved what no other main character has: self-acceptance.

CHAPTER IV

JOHN GRIMES

John is searching for the self-acceptance his mother has, but this is a particularly difficult task. Adolescence is one of the hardest periods of life for any person and for someone as sensitive as John it is twice as hard. The pleasures normal for most adolescents are either forbidden or unattainable to him. He is short, unattractive, non-athletic, and introverted. John is more intelligent than his peers, a fact he recognizes as the key to his identity.

John is doubly isolated from society. He is isolated from the mainstream of white society by the very fact that he is black. However, as he has not yet had much contact with white society, this does not really bother him. What little contact he has had with white people has been good. His teachers, all white, notice his intelligence and at least one teacher goes out of her way to care for him while he is sick. This shapes his attitude towards white people and he cannot accept his father's edict that they are all doomed to hell. But John is also isolated from the black people around him. Gabriel's religious beliefs forbid contact with sinners, so John cannot play in the street with other children, go to movies, dance, or do any of the other things adolescents normally enjoy. John is intelligent enough to be aware of his isolation and in some ways

he welcomes it. He knows he is different and that people expect more of him than of his brother Roy. His intelligence and sensitivity set him apart from other people.

John's parents and the saints expect him to be a preacher like Gabriel and to do great things for his people. John is aware of other people's ambitions for him, but he has his own dreams--of being rich and respected, owning horses and having power. Somehow he cannot reconcile the conflicting ambitions. His dreams of success in the white world are always interrupted by his religious beliefs that the city is controlled by Satan and only by compromising with him can one become materially successful. Since this means giving up his soul and since John is particularly worried about the state of his soul, he is thrown into confusion. However, he is determined that his life will not be like his parents, in which the results of religious belief have been hunger, misery, and a constant struggle for survival.

John's confusion about his ambitions are paralleled by his identity confusion and his name is used to emphasize this. The names of his parents, Elizabeth and Gabriel, identify him with John the Baptist, who pointed the way for the Messiah and who was himself mistaken for the Messiah. John Grimes is expected to be a Leader of His People and to do great things for his race, although he actually has no desire to lead his people anywhere. He wants to escape them. The title of the novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain, also identifies him with John the Baptist. The spiritual of the same name proclaims the birth of Christ, and

of course John the Baptist proclaimed Christ the Messiah. The apocalyptic religion practiced at the Temple of the Fire Baptized points to an identification with St. John who wrote the most famous apocalyptic book in the Bible, the Revelation. John Grimes experiences a revelation of sorts when he is on the threshing floor, and this would seem to further identify him with St. John. The visions he has are strikingly similar to St. John's, and that fits the context of the novel. There is confusion about the identity of St. John. Tradition holds that John the Apostle wrote the Revelation, but scholars now believe that another John was responsible. There is no internal evidence that John who wrote the Revelation ever knew Christ and there is also evidence that John the Apostle and his brother James were martyred before the year 70, long before the Revelation was written.⁷⁰ Then, too, the Revelation, with its emphasis on revenge, persecution, and punishment, is not of the highest ethical order of Christianity.

The allusions to the two Biblical Johns reemphasize John Grimes' confusion about his goals. On one hand, he is expected to be a preacher, a leader, perhaps a prophet of better things to come for the black people. Within John there is a desire to please other people and he is flattered by their expectations of him. On the other hand, John feels a desire for power that can be used "to crumble this city with his anger . . . crush this city beneath his heel. . . ." ⁷¹ John the Baptist is competing with John the revenger.

Although John is not aware of it, he has inherited an

identity from his parents and his aunt. He has something in common with each of his elders. With his mother, Elizabeth, John shares the love of one parent and the hatred of the other. Elizabeth met the same rejection from her mother that John meets with Gabriel and she shared the same strong bond with her father that John shares with her. John and Florence have in common their hatred of Gabriel, their stubbornness, and their problem accepting their color. Florence can never overcome her prejudice towards other blacks and she will die resenting the fact that she was born black. Gabriel's influence is shown by John's concern with sin and salvation.

It is the relationship between John and Gabriel that is the central conflict of the novel. Gabriel can never forget that John is not his own son and he cannot accept the fact that his wife's illegitimate son is everything he expects of his own son. Gabriel has impressed upon John that the mark of Satan is upon him and for one of John's sensitivity the result is devastating.

His father had always said that his face was the face of Satan--and was there not something--in the lift of the eyebrows, in the way his rough hair formed a V on his brow--that bore witness to his father's words? . . . and the barely perceptible cleft in his chin, which was, his father said, the mark of the devil's little finger.⁷²

John is certain that unless things change he is doomed to hell. Gabriel has taught him well, and he identifies easily with other people who are, by his standards, damned. When Elizabeth gives him money for his birthday, John uses it to go to a movie, which is forbidden. He is certain that the heavens are going to open and the wrath of God descend on him when he enters the theatre, but this does not happen and as he watches the movie,

he quickly identifies with and sympathizes with the wicked girl in the film. ". . . He wanted to be like her, only more powerful, more thorough, and more cruel; to make those around him, all who hurt him, suffer as she made the student suffer. . . ."73 But her death is terrible and John sees it as his own unless he reforms.

Until he does reform, John returns Gabriel's hatred with equal passion. His intelligence and his hatred of his father feed on each other and John looks forward to the day when he can curse his father on Gabriel's deathbed. Gabriel can beat John and make him tremble, but he cannot reach John's hatred or his intelligence. John's fears can be traced directly to this poisonous relationship with his stepfather. He feels guilty about hating Gabriel, because according to what he has been taught he can never be saved until he learns to love his father. These guilt feelings are closely tied to his other guilt feelings about sex.

John is a normal adolescent boy who is becoming aware of his developing sexuality. However, in the atmosphere which surrounds him, sex is considered evil and dirty. His introduction to sex, although vicarious, was a terrible experience for him. John and his younger brother Roy watched a couple in an abandoned house; when the woman demanded fifty cents, the man drew a razor on her. John had been frightened and did not watch any more, but Roy had no such fears. He continued watching and told John that he had done it with some girls down the street. John's fears are not calmed by the realization that

his parents, who go to church every Sunday, have sexual intercourse, too. He believes so completely that sex is evil that he cannot accept it even within marriage. His mother adds to his fears because John feels somehow guilty for the change in her from a beautiful young girl to a careworn woman and vaguely feels that this is somehow connected with sex. He dreads each time she becomes pregnant; with each child, Elizabeth becomes more of a stranger to him.

His other preoccupation connects sex with race. The conflict between Gabriel and John is constantly referred to in terms of the conflict between Noah and his son Ham. John has been hearing this story since he was small and he is aware that Noah cursed his son for looking upon his father's nakedness. John has also looked upon his father's nakedness while scrubbing his back. To him, the sight is hideous, "secret, like sin, and slimy, like the serpent, and heavy, like the rod."⁷⁴ This reinforces his hatred of Gabriel. He also realizes that Ham is considered the father of the Negro race and it was for this sin that the black people were cursed to be servants.

The culmination of all of John's guilt feelings--hatred of his father and fear of sex--comes when he masturbates. Apparently this has happened only once "in the school lavatory, alone, thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver . . . he had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak."⁷⁵ Once is enough for John, who is certain now that he is doomed unless he changes. This underlies all his guilt feelings and is mostly responsible for getting him into

the church. Yet he cannot decide which is the worse sin, seeing his father's nakedness or masturbation.

. . . he scrubbed his father's back; and looked, as the accursed son of Noah had looked, on his father's hideous nakedness. . . . Was this why he lay here, thrust out from all human or heavenly help tonight? This, and not that other, his deadly sin, having looked on his father's nakedness and mocked and cursed him in his heart?⁷⁶

Obviously John is concerned about his race, although it is secondary to his other fears of sex, of sin, and of the people he meets on the street. In the atmosphere around him, John is sure to have absorbed the symbolism of the church. This process has been mostly unconscious, and there is no sign that John is really aware of it. He does believe that the opinions of white people are more important, since both black and white people have noticed and commented on his intelligence. "It was not only colored people who praised John, since they could not, John felt, in any case really know, but white people also said it, in fact had said it first and said it still."⁷⁷ While he is on the threshing floor, he dreams that his father takes him for a walk down a straight and narrow street. While on this street they meet a "woman, very old and black, coming toward them, staggering on the crooked stones. . . . he had never seen anyone so black."⁷⁸ The name of the woman is Sin.

With all the pressures mounting, John needs somewhere to go. For him there is only one place and that is the church. It offers him refuge and escape from the world just as it offered the same to his parents. But John has an additional motive for turning to the church. He desperately needs a father who will love him. He also wants to be his father's

equal so that Gabriel will no longer be able to beat him. John realizes this while he is on the threshing floor:

Then he would no longer be the son of his father, but the son of his Heavenly Father. . . . Then he and his father would be equals, in the sight, and the sound, and the love of God. Then his father could not beat him anymore, or despise him anymore, or mock him anymore. . . .⁷⁹

John lacks a strong father-son relationship, but Elisha, the seventeen-year-old nephew of the pastor of the Temple of the Fire Baptized, is like a big brother to him. Their relationship is free and easy-going, and with Elisha, John can indulge in mock wrestling matches and the fooling around that adolescents normally enjoy.

Elisha's name means "God is salvation" and connects him to the Old Testament prophet by the same name.⁸⁰ The Biblical Elisha was the disciple of Elijah and when Elijah was taken to heaven, his mantle and his power fell on Elisha. Elisha was a good example of the younger generation of Old Testament prophets. Where Elijah was hard, Elisha was gentler and more diplomatic.⁸¹ Baldwin may be implying that the difference between Elijah and Elisha is also the difference between Gabriel Grimes and Elisha. Certainly the character Elisha is gentler than Gabriel. While Gabriel attempts to beat the sin out of his children and constantly lectures them on the wages of sin, Elisha has a quiet talk with John about the state of his soul and how hard it is to give up worldly living. Elisha is also referred to as "a young man in the Lord; who a priest after the order of Melchizedek, had been given power over death and Hell."⁸² Melchizedek was a priest-king in the Old Testament who met

Abraham on his return from a battle and gave Abraham and his servants bread and wine. For this Abraham gave Melchizedek a tenth of the spoils. Melchizedek was not from Israel, but his name has come to mean a man of exceptional distinction, combining the duties of sovereign and priest.⁸³ There is no indication that Baldwin is using this ironically, although Elisha is seen only through John's very admiring eyes.

But even Elisha adds to John's sexual confusion. One Sunday Father James had felt it necessary to expose sin among the saints. Elisha and Ella Mae Washington had been seen walking together and Father James warned them before the congregation of Satan's evil ways. He was obviously referring to sex and John felt the unfairness. Later Elisha told John that he and Ella Mae were completely innocent and he was very angry with his uncle. He has overcome his anger and claims to be grateful to Father James for what was done. Elisha, unlike Gabriel, can admit his anger and is at least partly aware of John's confusion and his feelings.

With pressures and guilt feelings mounting, John succumbs and is saved. His time on the threshing floor is a combination of all his repressions--sexual feelings, hatred for Gabriel, guilt feelings over these, and apocalyptic imagery of demons crawling everywhere. There are also allusions to the sufferings of the Jews, the early Christians, and all oppressed peoples. He feels that he has descended deep into the grave, where the demons are ready to attack him. There is no one to help him; he sees his parents, but they are looking backward, or else

Gabriel and John are struggling. In his dreams, John sees Gabriel approaching him, threatening, "I'm going to beat sin out of him. I'm going to beat it out." John is subconsciously worried that by looking on his father's nakedness he has continued the curse which he believes Noah put on Ham, therefore dooming Negroes to slavery. "Then his father stood just above him, looking down. Then John knew that a curse was renewed from moment to moment, from father to son."⁸⁴ The struggle between John and Gabriel continues through the threshing floor sequence until John is emotionally exhausted. Then he becomes aware of a sound in the darkness that he has heard all his life, a sound of weeping and moaning.

. . . It was in his father's anger, and in his mother's calm insistence, and in the vehement mockery of his aunt; it had rung, so oddly, in Roy's voice this afternoon, and when Elisha played the piano it was there. . . . It was a sound of rage and weeping which filled the grave, rage and weeping from time set free, but bound now in eternity; rage that had no language, weeping with no voice--which yet spoke now, to John's startled soul, of boundless melancholy, of the bitterest patience, and the longest night; of the deepest water, the strongest chains, the most cruel lash; of humility most wretched, the dungeon most absolute, of love's bed defiled, and birth dishonored, and most bloody, unspeakable, sudden death. . . .⁸⁵

John recognizes this bitter sound and tries to escape it. It is part of his heritage, his birthright because he is one of the oppressed peoples of the earth. He is in the company of "the despised and the rejected, the wretched and spat upon, the earth's offscouring. . . ."⁸⁶

Fear was upon him, a more deadly fear than he had ever known. . . . The stripes they had endured would scar his back, their punishment would be his, their portion his, his their humiliation, anguish, chains, their dungeon his, their death his. . . .⁸⁷

Once he has conquered his fear, he realizes that the multitude is made up of those people who suffered for their beliefs, but had been rewarded for their sufferings: Job, Abraham, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, David, Jeremiah, Ezekial, John, Judas, Thomas, Peter, Stephen, and Paul. These famous people were joined by countless nameless people who had also suffered on earth to be rewarded in heaven. John must accept his bitter heritage which he shares with the Jews, the early Christians, and all the other oppressed people of the earth, including black people. It is only when he accepts this that he comes through and is saved.

The ending of the novel is ambiguous. John has accepted these things, but without fully understanding them. It is doubtful that he will remain in the church, content to accept the past and do nothing about the future. He has used the church as an escape, but the realities are still there. Gabriel hates John enough to hope he would not be saved and nothing between them has changed. John cannot overcome such hatred.

Immediately after he has come through, John experiences a premonition: ". . . something began to knock in that listening, astonished, newborn, and fragile heart of his; something recalling the terrors of the night which were not finished, his heart seemed to say; which in this company, were now to begin."⁸⁸ Another indication that John's salvation is merely temporary is Baldwin's description of the filthy environment outside the church when the saints leave early Sunday morning. To John's

eyes, the avenue on which he lives looks different, cleansed as he feels his soul has been. It looks "exhausted, clean and new. Not again, forever, could it return to the avenue it once had been."⁸⁹ But in the next paragraph is a warning that John is not seeing clearly:

Yet the houses were there, as they had been. . . . The water ran in the gutters with a small, discontented sound; on the water traveled paper, burnt matches, sodden cigarette-ends; gobs of spittle, green-yellow, brown, and pearly; the leavings of a dog, the vomit of a drunken man, the dead sperm, trapped in rubber, of one abandoned to his lust. . . .⁹⁰

John has found a temporary refuge from his fears, and he has learned that he cannot escape the heritage he shares with so many others. Eventually his intelligence and sensitivity will overcome his fears and he will realize that his is a unique heritage which cannot be found in the church. He has accepted part of his heritage, the bitterness and the suffering, but he will come to realize that much of the rich heritage which is his as a Black man lies outside the church.

CONCLUSION

In his essays, novels, and short stories, James Baldwin is constantly searching for his own identity and a heritage to which he can point with pride. By extension, he is searching for these things for his race. Seemingly, when John Grimes in Go Tell It on the Mountain accepts the church he accepts his identity with it and also the suffering that is his heritage both as a Christian and as a black man. But the fact that John shares this heritage with other people who have been oppressed at one time, means that it is not unique to the black people. For that reason, one suspects that Go Tell It on the Mountain is not as simple as it seems on first reading. John's experience is also Baldwin's experience and that provides another clue to the complexity of the novel. A close examination reveals that Baldwin's message is that his people are searching in the wrong place for the identity and heritage which are uniquely theirs.

In "Autobiographical Notes" to Notes of a Native Son, Baldwin writes that while the influences on his writing are many, the most important are the King James Bible, "the rhetoric of the store-front church, something ironic and violent and perpetually understated in Negro speech. . . ." ⁹¹ All these influences are at work in the novel; they can be seen in the speech patterns of the characters and the apocalyptic religion

which is the center of Go Tell It on the Mountain. The names of the characters fit perfectly into the context of the novel and at the same time suit Baldwin's ironic purposes.

Baldwin's techniques are both obvious and subtle. The reader can hardly miss the irony of Gabriel's name, but it takes deeper study to understand that the Jews at the time of Malachi and the black people during the Great Migration both had unrealistic expectations for their new lands and both races were disillusioned and bitterly disappointed. The irony gets heavier when one realizes that the Revelation of St. John was written in response to very difficult times for the early Christian church and that the promises of heaven were made to keep people from deserting during bad times. Baldwin feels that the belief that suffering will be rewarded is what keeps the black people from improving their earthly conditions.

James Baldwin knows the Bible as only a minister can, and he uses his Biblical knowledge to tie together strands of a forceful, ironic argument against religion as an escape from reality and against the Negro church because he sees it as a major factor in inhibiting progress among blacks. This is the ultimate message of Go Tell It on the Mountain. It is inconsistent with the rest of the novel that John should have made a final decision about his religious beliefs. The novel ends on an optimistic note only if one believes that John will eventually leave the church and search elsewhere for his identity.

FOOTNOTES

¹George Arthur Buttrick, et al., eds., The Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abdington Press, 1957), VIII, 44.

²Booker T. Washington, Up From Slavery (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1963), p. 151.

³Ralph Ellison, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," in Shadow and Act (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 151.

⁴Lloyd W. Brown, "Black Entitles: Names as Symbols in Afro-American Literature," Studies in Black Literature, 1:1 (Spring, 1970), 33.

⁵Buttrick, XII, 347.

⁶Buttrick, XII, 362.

⁷James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region of My Mind," in The Fire Next Time (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1962), p. 57.

⁸Buttrick, XII, 362.

⁹James Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), pp. 36-37. (Hereinafter referred to as Mountain.)

¹⁰Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," pp. 27-28.

¹¹Robert A. Bone, The Negro Novel in America, rev. ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 220.

¹²Bone, p. 222.

¹³James Hastings, ed., Dictionary of the Bible (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1939), p. 275.

¹⁴Gustav Davidson, A Dictionary of Angels Including the Fallen Angels (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 117.

¹⁵Baldwin, Mountain, pp. 18-19.

¹⁶Baldwin, Mountain, p. 120.

¹⁷Hastings, pp. 182-83.

- ¹⁸Baldwin, Mountain, pp. 126-27.
- ¹⁹George M. Alexander, The Handbook of Biblical Personalities (Greenwich: The Seabury Press, 1962), p. 85.
- ²⁰Bone, p. 224.
- ²¹Baldwin, Mountain, pp. 146-47.
- ²²R. H. Charles, Studies in the Apocalypse: Being Lectures Delivered Before the University of London, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1915), p. 140.
- ²³Charles, Studies, pp. 142-45.
- ²⁴Buttrick, IXX, 348.
- ²⁵R. H. Charles, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John, The International Critical Commentary, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1920), I, cv.
- ²⁶Charles, I, cvi.
- ²⁷Austin Farrer, The Revelation of St. John the Divine: Commentary on the English Text (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 89.
- ²⁸Baldwin, Mountain, p. 149.
- ²⁹Bone, p. 223.
- ³⁰Baldwin, Mountain, pp. 86-87.
- ³¹Baldwin, Mountain, p. 83.
- ³²Baldwin, Mountain, pp. 88-89.
- ³³Baldwin, Mountain, p. 103.
- ³⁴Baldwin, Mountain, p. 104.
- ³⁵Baldwin, Mountain, p. 109.
- ³⁶Baldwin, Mountain, pp. 114-15.
- ³⁷Baldwin, Mountain, pp. 81-82.
- ³⁸Baldwin, Mountain, p. 104.
- ³⁹Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 56.
- ⁴⁰Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, p. 161.

⁴¹John A. Julian, A Dictionary of Hymnology, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (1907; rpt. New York: Dover Publications, 1957), I, 487.

⁴²Bone, pp. 53-54.

⁴³Buttrick, VI, 1118.

⁴⁴Buttrick, VI, 1118.

⁴⁵Baldwin, Mountain, p. 100.

⁴⁶Baldwin, Mountain, p. 115.

⁴⁷Buttrick, VI, 1119.

⁴⁸Buttrick, VI, 1119.

⁴⁹Buttrick, VI, 1119.

⁵⁰Baldwin, Mountain, p. 81.

⁵¹Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1969), p. 1178.

⁵²Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, p. 1180.

⁵³Alexander, p. 81.

⁵⁴Buttrick, VIII, 30-31.

⁵⁵Baldwin, Mountain, p. 207.

⁵⁶Baldwin, Mountain, p. 205.

⁵⁷Baldwin, Mountain, pp. 209-10.

⁵⁸Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, p. 1179.

⁵⁹Baldwin, Mountain, p. 225-26.

⁶⁰Baldwin, Mountain, pp. 219-20.

⁶¹Baldwin, Mountain, pp. 226-27.

⁶²Baldwin, Mountain, pp. 252-53.

⁶³Baldwin, Mountain, p. 220.

⁶⁴Baldwin, Mountain, p. 233.

⁶⁵Baldwin, Mountain, p. 204.

⁶⁶Baldwin, Mountain, p. 212.

⁶⁷Howard M. Harper, Jr., Desperate Faith: A Study of Bellow, Salinger, Mailer, Baldwin, and Updike (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), p. 160.

⁶⁸Baldwin, Mountain, p. 56.

⁶⁹Marcus Klein, After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century (Cleveland, The World Publishing Co., 1962), p. 180.

⁷⁰Buttrick, XII, 357.

⁷¹Baldwin, Mountain, p. 35.

⁷²Baldwin, Mountain, pp. 26-27.

⁷³Baldwin, Mountain, p. 44.

⁷⁴Baldwin, Mountain, p. 267.

⁷⁵Baldwin, Mountain, p. 166.

⁷⁶Baldwin, Mountain, p. 267.

⁷⁷Baldwin, Mountain, p. 16.

⁷⁸Baldwin, Mountain, p. 268.

⁷⁹Baldwin, Mountain, p. 194.

⁸⁰Hastings, pp. 216-17.

⁸¹Hastings, pp. 216-17.

⁸²Baldwin, Mountain, p. 74.

⁸³Hastings, p. 602.

⁸⁴Baldwin, Mountain, p. 268.

⁸⁵Baldwin, Mountain, pp. 272-73.

⁸⁶Baldwin, Mountain, p. 273.

⁸⁷Baldwin, Mountain, pp. 273-74.

⁸⁸Baldwin, Mountain, p. 281.

⁸⁹Baldwin, Mountain, p. 294.

⁹⁰Baldwin, Mountain, p. 295.

⁹¹James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," in Notes of a Native Son (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 5.

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THE BIBLE AND IRONY IN JAMES BALDWIN'S
GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

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ABSTRACT

James Baldwin's first novel Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953) is a short, complex novel. At first reading it appears to be the story of an adolescent Negro boy who responds to the social and sexual pressures around him by joining an apocalyptic church and who seems to have accepted that religion at the end of the novel. However, a close examination of Baldwin's techniques reveals that the book is a work of sustained irony and the ultimate message to the black people is that they are searching in the wrong place for their identity and their heritage. Suffering is part of the black people's heritage, but it is shared by other oppressed peoples. The part of their heritage which is unique to them must be found outside the church.

Baldwin uses irony in two ways: the Biblical names of his characters and situations which parallel those in the Bible. Gabriel Grimes has the name of the messenger angel, but his message is hatred. The three women in his life also have Biblical names: Deborah, Esther, and Elizabeth. Deborah and Esther could have perhaps saved Gabriel's soul, just as their Jewish counterparts in the Old Testament saved the lives of their people. Elizabeth's name is one of the exceptions. Her name is used to indicate her character. Even names which are not Biblical are used ironically; Florence's and Richard's names

indicate ideals for which they spend their lives searching and never find.

Baldwin's irony is even more subtle when he alludes to Biblical situations. The Great Migration of Negroes to the North has its parallel in the re-establishment of the Jewish nation during the time of the prophet Malachi. In both cases the people had unrealistic expectations for their new homes and in both cases they were bitterly disillusioned. Even more appropriate to Baldwin's purpose is his constant reference to the Revelation of St. John. Scholars now believe that this book was written in response to hard times for the early Christians. In order to keep them from deserting their faith, St. John described a place in heaven reserved for the faithful and gave a promise of divine intervention against the persecutors of His chosen people. Such promises, Baldwin charges, are still being used by the church to keep black people in their places.

The message of Go Tell It on the Mountain is clear once the reader realizes that the novel is one of sustained irony. Baldwin charges the church with holding back the progress of black people and he tells his people that the heritage which is uniquely theirs cannot be found inside that church.