CHAPTER -IV
BLACK EVANGELISM
(Go Tell It on the Mountain)

In the introduction to The Amen Corner, James Baldwin writes about an editor of Go Tell It on the Mountain who asks him to remove “all that come-to-Jesus stuff” from the novel (xiv). Baldwin explains that the novel “is the study of a Negro evangelist and his family. They do, indeed, talk in a ‘come-to-Jesus’ idiom, but to ‘take it out’ could only mean that my editor was suggesting that I burn the book” (xiv). Religion, particularly the charismatic evangelical flavour of the Black Holiness tradition, is indeed central to the novel. This is not to say that Baldwin uses the novel as a tool to preach the “Gospel” and convert the “lost”, quite the contrary. In the novel, Baldwin examines how the theology and practices of the Black Holiness tradition interact with the racial inequality of the 1930s. The religious experiences in the novel become a focal point for this examination. Characters speak in tongues, fall to the floor in trances, have visions, and hear voices. While the characters themselves interpret the experiences in a way consistent with the Black Holiness tradition, the novel seems to point to different meanings, meanings which expose the potential harm the tradition poses to African – Americans.

Racial stereotypes, violence and other forms of injustice permeate every aspect of character’s lives in Go Tell It on the Mountain. Racial injustice
impacts the way characters view their own sexuality, the level of poverty they must endure, and their religious practices. The novel focuses on the latter, even though it overlaps with both poverty and sexuality. The Black Holiness tradition, as Baldwin represents it in the novel, is religious tradition that is predominantly a reaction to racial injustice, rather than encourages people to stand up and fight this injustice. It offers them a false sense of security and the promise of a better life after death; in many ways. It works to acclimate African – Americans to subjugation, and teaches them to endure and survive rather than thrive. Baldwin is careful in the novel not to dismiss the belief in the Christian God, or the validity of the experiences characters have of God. Instead, he addresses the impact of the Black Holiness theodicy (theology which addresses God’s relationship to suffering) on the lives of African – Americans. The religious experiences in the novel, John’s conversion experience in particular, become the central events Baldwin uses to examine the intersection between issues of race, sexuality, and the Black Holiness tradition, and the impact of this intersection on the lives of the characters in the novel.

By knowing and understanding what has been said about Go Tell It on the Mountain, one can perceive what needs to be comprehended about it. These sources represent a menagerie of opinion and interpretation that was detrimental in the formulation of the examiner’s cognitive approach to James Baldwin and his relationship to his first novel.
Anyone familiar with Baldwin’s life must be aware of how *Go tell It on the Mountain* had strong autobiographical nuances. W.J. Weather by stated that the novel was about James Baldwin’s “painful family memories.” The resemblance of the characters in the novel to those in Baldwin’s real life was very close. Weather by stated that the most accurate of the characters was the father Gabriel Grimes. However, Weather by has a flawed statement when he says, “He (James Baldwin) had no difficulty now in writing about his painful family memories.” (W.J. Weather by, *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire*, 105). Validity of this statement is shaky. The novel was so painful and hard for Baldwin to write primarily because he was dealing with his family memories and lack thereof.

The novel exudes a strong religious theme. Roger Rosenblatt observes that everyone in the novel “wants to change, because everybody wants to be saved, and salvation here is connected with change. Rosenblatt makes a solid observation that illuminates how salvation is related to a form of liberation from the expository character’s former selves. Rosenblatt goes on to say that, there is supposed to be salvation and safety in the church. The characters use the church as a form of escape from the pressures and realities of the outside world. However, the characters, especially Gabriel, find in their religion an escape from the darkness and shame of their past lives. Thus, religion for each character is a
form of survival and escape. However, in using religion in this way each character's grip of reality is weakened and damaged.

The novel contains three sections. Part I, “The Seventh Day,” defines the author’s focus; Creation, Fall, Flight, Curse, and Reconciliation. Part II, “The Prayers of the Saints,” examines the inner lives of John’s aunt, his father, and his mother; they have gathered in “The Temple of the Fire Baptized” for a tarry service. This section draws a portrait of humanity “cut off” from life; bound in pride and hatred, shame and guilt, fear. These emotions, too, dominate the larger society; the “Prayers” encompass slavery, abrupt emancipation, segregation, murder. Part III, “The Threshing Floor,” recounts the journey of John’s soul through the hell (chaos) imposed by his father and white society. Unlike the adults in his life, this boy tears away the ‘covering’ that separates his interior from that of humanity. He reaches a ‘higher consciousness.’

“And the spirit and bride say, come.
And let him that is athirst, come.
And let him that is a athirst come.
And whosoever will, let him take
The water of life freely…” (78).

The words above are the first words in go tell it on the mountain, and they appear in the first and the last words of the Christian Bible. These words and
their significance for Baldwin will be discussed shortly, but before turning to page 1 of the novel, the reader must recognize that Baldwin has used the title for the book to situate his story in two context-first, that of the experience of the earliest African in the Americas; and second, that of the New Testament writings about the birth of Jesus. This dual contextualization is achieved in Baldwin’s choice for naming his novel.

This chapter provides the context for re-reading the grimes family and Baldwin’s use of the bible in telling their story. The main questions for this chapter relate to the basic premise of the book: the conversion of John grimes to Christianity. I am suggesting a broadening of the conversation related to John’s conversion “to consider the experience as a type of “transformation.” There are several questions to be asked, all of which John grimes confronts throughout the novel. First, what is the purpose of transformation for John? Why is transformation necessary? What power does it offer? Furthermore, Baldwin’s protagonist, John Grimes is to be read as representative of all people like John. We learn about them as we study John grimes world. It was the interpretation of the birth of Jesus in the song, Go Tell It On The Mountain that supplied the title for Baldwin’s novel.

So, too, then are the experiences of the African enslavement in America present as work reinterprets the New Testament, writing a Christmas song for
black Americans through their experiences, and the same holds true for Baldwin. There is one important difference. Baldwin is not writing about the birth of Jesus; he is writing the story of an African American boy’s “rebirth” as a way of reading and writing African American boys “rebirth” as a way of reading and writing African American formation.

Baldwin’s Recreation

“Go tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere,
Go tell it on the mountain that

Jesus Christ is born” (78).

In reading Baldwin’s novel, what is the most striking is that even though he chose the title of work’s song as the title for his novel, he did not use the lyrics anywhere in his book. Also, there is no mention of the title or the NT story of Jesus’ birth in the novel. The absence of the two from Baldwin’s Interpretation should not be viewed as an oversight on Baldwin’s part; instead, both support my thesis that Baldwin begins with the familiar story of Jesus’ birth to create a new story of origins through John’s transformation.

Baldwin establishes the importance of John’s transformation by drawing on biblical ideas about creation through the use of “the seventh day.” The phrase “the seventh day “is present through the bible, but Baldwin is interested in its
connection to creation. In Genesis, god created the world in six days and then rested on “the seventh day” (2:2) in GTM, Baldwin uses the “seventh day” as the occasion for John Grime’s birthday. Below, I will show how Baldwin uses the passage from revelation (the verse in the epigraph) to introduce John’s story as he struggles to wake up on the day in which the novel takes place. This will be followed by focusing on how Baldwin shifts from Genesis as a motif of creation to John as representation of creation to what I view as Baldwin’s effort to show why rebirth is necessary.

On page I of his novel, Baldwin did not cite the source of his verse, but the text taken from Rev 22:17. This particular verse has special significance among Christians because of its call for the return of Jesus Christ. In re-telling his story, Baldwin, then, found resonance between his Depression-era origins and the end-time (or beginning) language of the Bible to begin his novel.

In GTM, Rev 22:17 opens a section of thick description told through the novel’s main character, John grimes, as he moves in and out of vision-like experiences while he tries to wake up to begin “the seventh day.” the day is a Saturday and it is John’s fourteenth birthday, which is another play on the number “seven”. John’s first thought turns to his future. John, and apparently many of the people who knew him, wondered if he would grow up to be a preacher, like his father Gabriel. He does not arrive at a point of affirmation. Instead, John shifts his thoughts to Sunday morning. Those mornings were his
earliest memories. It was the hurry and the brightness of Sunday that John remembered the most vividly, and for the next fourteen pages Baldwin’s ethnographic work focuses on retelling the story of Sunday mornings.

John recalls Sunday as the one day in which the entire family arose together. His father did not go to work on that day, he led the family in prayer, and his mother dressed up. She wore a close-fitting white cap, which, from John’s respective, ‘was the uniform of holy women.’ This was true for the entire family all of whom wore special clothing on that day. Then John remembers their church, ‘temple of the fire baptized,’ which was the reason for their preparation on Sunday mornings. Even though they only visited the church once or twice each week, John things of it as the place that centers them seven days a week. This is hinted at as John begins his reflections on the church. He thinks of the temple of the fire Baptized as “not far away.” It is located about four blocks up Lenox Avenue and near the hospital where his younger siblings (Roy, Sarah, and Ruth) were born.

Sunday mornings were the time when the entire Grimes family took to the streets on their way to the Temple of the fire baptized. John recalled that “Sinners” watched them as they moved along the street. Here, a particulars circle is drawn. The Grimes family represents those who are “not sinners,” those who watched them walk to church on Sunday mornings are “sinners.” As the main character describes those who watched his family travel along the avenue, John
supplies, implicitly, a description of the individuals who were considered “sinners”.

Here, Baldwin begins to point to the main action of the book, John’s conversation to Christianity. The question about whether John is to “be saved” from “Sin” is the question throughout the entire novel. To answer that question, Baldwin introduces his readers to “sin” and “sinners” through the men and women who watch the grime’s family on Sunday mornings. So Baldwin uses the biblical concepts of “Sinner” and “Saved” to show how the Grimes family understands of Christianity creates, for them, a world within a word. In this case, they exist in the same “world” as the “sinners” they encounter along Lenox Avenues, and yet they are not a part of that World, the world inhabited by “sinners.” On the other land, they are a part of the world as created by and through their involvement with the temple of the fire Baptized.

There is ongoing tension between these two “worlds”. This is especially true for young John Grimes, especially; and yet, Baldwin creates this tension throughout the text by use of words such as “watch” or “watching” and “eye” or “eyes”. The results is an indication of how once position in one of these two worlds perpetuates feelings of superiority and empowerment or inferiority and disempowerment. This is clear as we consider John’s thoughts about himself in the context of his family. He is not “Saved” and yet he belongs to a family of “Saved” people, so John straddles both worlds and is a threat to those who are
‘Saved’ because of his indecisiveness. Nobody feels this more than John, who really things of himself as functioning in one world, the world of the “saved” but not completely embraced by its inhabitants and not entirely sure he wants join them, The results is a type of imprisonment. Now, I will revisit aspects of John’s reflections to highlight his sense of imprisonment.

The concluding sentence shows John’s position in the world of the “saved”. He reflects on the moment at the beginning of worship as “a time when [he]… sat watching the saints ....” The observation results in two emotions: terror and wonder. Those two opposing reactions are the results John’s position – he it not yet one of the “saved” and he is not yet certain that he should join. Ultimately, what is at stake of John is the answer to the question: what is the purpose of transformation? (89).

John knows that he and has family exist in the margins of society. He makes this clear as he leaves his home in Harlem later in the day to spend the afternoon in central park (which I will discuss later in the chapter). As we shall see, the city, then, becomes a metaphor for isolation – both for John, his family, and those closest to him. For now, John has questions about the push toward transformation he recognizes contradictions in the world of the “Saved”. No greater example of this is what John remembers about father James’ public reprimand of “disorderly walking” between brother Elisha and Ella Mae
Washington, the 17 years old granddaughter of Praying Mother Washington, who is described as a “Powerful evangelist” and a “Pillar of the Church.”

One Sunday morning, John remembers that the pastor, father James, had announced to the congregation that there was “sin among them”. He tells them that he has “Uncovered sin in the congregation of the righteous.” The guilty parties: Elisha (Father James’s 17 years old nephew from Georgia) and Ella Mae Washington (the 17 years old granddaughter of praying mother Washington). Both Elisha and Ella Mae are called to the altar, which is where father James makes their crime known to them and to the congregation: they had been found “walking disorderly.” They according to Father James “were in danger of straying from truth.” Father James said that he “knew that sin was not in their minds – not yet: sin was in the flesh: and should they continue with their walking out alone together, their secrets and laughter, and toughing of hands, they would surely sin a sin beyond all forgiveness.” The public reprimand caused John to question Elisha. He wondered ‘Had he sinned?’ John realizes that the reprimand was not without repercussions for Elisha and Ella Mae. The two no longer met after school, no longer spent Saturday afternoons wandering through Central Park, or lying on the beach and John realize that “all of that was over for them. If they came together, again it would be in wedlock. They would have children and raise them in the church.” There was another result: John begins to think of
himself as less likely to become one of ‘the saved’” this is what he thinks about the situation:

The public reprimand of Elisha and Ella Mae causes John to question the benefits of joining the ranks of the “the saved.” For him, the problem is that Father James, who told the congregation “the way of holiness was hard” as he reprimanded the couple, caused question to be raised about Elisha and Ella Mae. He is particularly focused on Elisha because he had thought about Elisha’s life as one worthy of emulating. In fact, prior to the reprimand, John had wondered “if he would ever be holy as Elisha was holy.” John’s thoughts about Elisha are not significantly harmed by this moment because later John begs Elisha for his prayer, but the scene does seem to reinforce John’s suspicions about “the saved” and what purpose “being saved” might serve in his own life. Still, he is a part of “the saved” and he is imprisoned by their ideals.

Furthermore, John is certain that his natural disposition leans in the direction of “the sinner.” Again, while trying to awaken for his birthday; John recalls an important moment in his own blossoming sense of self. First, as he wakes up, he describes the moment as one, which feels as though there is menace in the air around him; that something irrevocable had occurred in him. John, as he wakes up, remembers two things: that it is his fourteenth birthday and that he had sinned. He does not reveal “the sin” but he does say that “he had sinned in spite of the saints.”
The rejection of the past occurs as John embraces a future world where his individual existence would carve out another world. In his vision, John had within himself a power that others lacked. He would use that power to “save” himself. That power was discovered one day as he sat in school when the principal entered his classroom and distinguished John as “a very bright boy.” All this is recalled while John is still asleep; once he awakens, the narrative begins anew.

This, then, is how Baldwin sets up his “new creation,” which focuses on John as the figure of rebirth. After drawing a connection between the Bible and John’s birth, which includes the reflections about Sunday mornings, his file with his family, Elisha, Ella Mae, and as well as the “sinners” along Lenox Avenue, Baldwin then quickly moves to show why transformation is necessary as he moves his story from one extreme, that of devastation as demonstration as demonstrated through the lives of “the saints,” to the next, that of transformation through John. Baldwin begins to work in the direction of this shift by immediately focusing on the condition of John’s family members. In so doing, as I will show in the following section. Baldwin begins to position John as re-born in the image of a divine conqueror.

**From “serpent” to “conqueror”**

John finally awakens to “the seventh day,” his fourth teeth birthday to find his mother, Elizabeth and his younger brother, his sister, Sarah, and the baby,
Ruth, in the kitchen. His father, Gabriel, is at work. The family is gathered in the kitchen for breakfast. John arrives in the kitchen just as Roy and Elizabeth are discussing Gabriel. John interrupts the banter by asking his mother a starting question.

Shortly, Johns is sent into the living room by his mother to sweep and dust the furniture, which is where Baldwin continues his dialogue with the Genesis creation story.

What is noticeably absent is any commentary on the biblical passage. John reflects on the two mottoes as he thinks about his life in the context of his family, which is where there is significant contrast to be found between John 3; 16 and “the green metal serpent.” Baldwin’s citation of John 3; 16 is the only time he gives a specific reference and citation for a biblical text in the novel. This suggests that the NT Gospel of John has a special role in Baldwin’s project. I will give some attention to NT scholarship on John, commonly referred to as The Fourth Gospel, as a way of unveiling more about Baldwin’s wider project—reading and writing African American formation through John’s rebirth—and to discover how the Bible was read in Baldwin’s social context.

According to Gail O’Day, the unknown author of John tells his story by interweaving narrative, dialogue, and discourse to create dramatic scenes. Most view John 21 as an appendix of second ending. For O’ Day, two lines from the Prologue: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the
“Word was God” (1:1) and “the word became flesh and lived among us” (1:4) are the two claims upon which the rest of the Gospel is built: Jesus is the incarnate word of God. Her argument is worth mentioning in detail because of what she states about revelation: But after Jesus’ death, Says Gail O’ Day, the idea of his life as the revelation of God becomes the crisis for the writer of the Gospel and his community. The reason is that Jesus’ death marked the end of the incarnation:

In the Gospel of John, O’Day argues, the Paraclete means that revelation does not end with Jesus’ death; it is ongoing through the Spirit/ Paraclete. In Baldwin’s text, an encounter with the Spirit is the objective of the “tarry” service; it is prayer meeting where the primary concern is encountering Spirit is the objective of the ‘tarry’ service; it is a prayer meeting where the primary concern is encountering the Spirit. In GTM, the encounter with ‘the Spirit’ as we shall see, is highly sought after at the Temple of the Fire Baptized.

For O’Day, what is crucial about the Paraclete in John is that the Paraclete is not a private possession; it is given to the community. This understanding is expressed in GTM as those who are at the ‘tarry’ service take on various roles. As Baldwin relates, at the Temple of the Fire Baptized certain individuals assist as others seek to an encounter with “the Spirit”. So, everyone present – the community – has a role to play in bringing about the encounter and once that happens the encounter is interpreted as having significance for the community.
Here, I want to suggest, that we regard the Gospel of John has a possible model for the manner in which Baldwin brings about John’s rebirth. In GTM, John is the center of Baldwin’s story of crisis, a tale of multiple layers of devastation.

In Baldwin’s novel, the biblical vocabulary of “sin” is important to the development of the story, but it is ultimately reinterpreted as “devastation.” This is clear as the lives of John’s family members are examined. That examination reveals layers of devastation and destruction. Perhaps the best example of this is the story of Richard, who is John’s father. Richard’s life took a tragic turn one night in 1921, when he was wrongly identified as a participant in the robbery of a white man’s store. He was arrested and suffered several beatings while incarcerated. A trial finds him not guilty and he is released. Upon his release, Richard returns to his rented room with Elizabeth, John’s mother. Elizabeth though pregnant with John, does not tell Richard about the child. When she leaves Richard’s room for home later the night, she does so without revealing her pregnancy to him. The following morning Richard is found by his landlord. A pool of blood surrounded his lifeless body. He had cut his wrists at some point during the night.

Devastation had begun to run its course in Richard’s life well before that moment. Once in response to Elizabeth’s question about his childhood, Richard told her that “I just got moved from one place to another. When one asset of folks got tried of me they sent me down the line.” Richard tells her that his
mother died when he was born. His father was “nowhere to be found.” The result was that Richard took care of himself, no there was little opportunity for formal education. Still, Richard taught himself, because he wanted to know everything white people knew. That, from Richard’s perspective, would be his protection “so could no white [person] 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” (emphasis Baldwin’s). Baldwin situates Elizabeth’s introduction to Richard after she, too has been sent down the line.

In Elizabeth’s case, the death of her mother also led to a series of devastating events. Those tragedies started when her mother’s sister petitioned the court for custody of Elizabeth. According to the aunt, the idea of having her niece raised by her father, even though Elizabeth adored him, was unthinkable, So, Elizabeth was taken from her father and “passed on” to her aunt.

At the age of 8, Elizabeth did not recognize her mother’s death as a disaster “since she had scarcely known her mother and had certainly never loved her.” As a child, Elizabeth thought of her mother as beautiful, but chronically ill. She spent much of her lifetime in bed reading “spiritualist pamphlets concerning the benefits of disease and complaining to Elizabeth’s father of how she suffered.” It is both Elizabeth’s removal from her father and the events related to Richard’s death that situates the world as a problem for her; for Richard, the problem is racial injustice. Elizabeth, who seemingly held no opinion about race
prior to Richard’s imprisonment, visits him in jail and leaves disillusioned. This is the point; she begins to understand the world as a problem. The devastation in Richard’s life, and hers, is directly connected to “world.” Within three years of Richard’s death, Elizabeth meets Florence, who eventually introduces Elizabeth and her child, John to Gabriel Grimes.

Gabriel Grimes arrived in New York after having lived with his mother until her death, and later, his wife, Deborah, until her death. Neither Gabriel nor Florence had spent much time with their own father, who left their home just shortly after Gabriel’s birth. After being forced to be baptized at the age of 12, Gabriel spent much of the next decade listening to his mother’s prayers that he might be “saved his sin.” Even though he had been baptized, there was resistance to live as his mother thought he should live. The turning point in his life occurred when Florence, then about 26, decided that she no longer wanted to live in the South. In one day, her white boss proposed that she become his concubine, she stopped by the train station and purchased a ticket to New York, went home and packed her bags, and announced her departure to her mother and Gabriel.

At the age of 21, Gabriel begins to preach and he marries Deborah, who throughout the novel is socially dead as a result of having been raped in a field by a group of white men. She is described as one who “moved through their community like a woman mysteriously visited by God, like a terrible example of
humility, or like a holy fool.” She and Florence grew to develop a friendship out of their mutual hatred toward men during their teen-age years, but after Florence’s departure from the South it is Deborah who assists Gabriel with caring for his mother. To Gabriel, she is one who cares for the sick and those who are dying. But after his mother dies, Deborah continues to assist him by taking care of his clothes and discussing his sermons with him. Gabriel eventually becomes involved with another woman, a co-worker named Esther.

Gabriel and Esther’s relationship lasts nine days and ends after Esther tells Gabriel that she is pregnant. Gabriel questions whether he is the father, but resigns himself to solving the problem by giving Esther money to leave town. She eventually travels to Chicago alone and has her baby, but she dies during childbirth. The child, Royal, returns to the South to be raised by Esther’s parents, who live in the same town as Gabriel and Deborah. Gabriel learns all this after Deborah (unaware of the relationship between Esther and Gabriel and without knowing that Royal is her husband’s child) tells him the story of Esther’s death. When Gabriel meets Elizabeth, Esther, Royal, and Deborah are dead. He has recently arrived from the South to join his sister in New York City. It is with the figure Gabriel that Baldwin works through his interpretation of “sin.”

It is the language of “sin,” here referred to as ‘stinking corruption,” that is the focus. Notice that Gabriel views himself as having a “birth.” In his first birth Gabriel was “wrapped in darkness,” in the second, Gabriel was “redeemed.” For
Baldwin, “sin” and “stinking corruption” are engagements with Paul’s writings, however, Baldwin does not follow commonly held NT scholarly notions in this regard. In NT scholarship, Paul’s writing about “corruption” (1 Cor 15:42ff) is studied as a way of probing his ideas about resurrection; in Baldwin, the same material is interpreted as Paul’s ongoing conversation about “sin.” Throughout GTM, Baldwin develops his strongest ideas about “sin” and “corruption” in Gabriel’s character. But how does one transcend “sin” and “corruption?” In GTM, it is done through John Grimes.

**Hosanna!**

Baldwin, like the biblical writers, transitions from ‘sin” and the “serpent” to a “Savior.” In the NT that figure is Jesus; in GTM the figure is John Grimes. We see this as John prepares to leave home late Saturday. After he finishes cleaning the family living room, his mother calls him back into the kitchen. Up to this point in the narrative, no one in the family has acknowledged the day as John’s fourteenth birthday. His mother does as she and John are alone in the kitchen:

On the heels of this discussion, John emerges in Central Park. Immediately, John envisions himself as “conqueror.” Later, this role will be challenged as John walks along Fifth Avenue, which is where the Avenue and its symbols of affluence only serve to drive wedge between Johns’s emerging self-understanding as “conqueror” and his current condition of isolation and
disempowerment. Before this happens, John sees himself as a “conqueror.” This passage is where Baldwin sets up his main character, John, as Jesus of the NT Gospels. In the text above, there are several allusions to the NT Passions Narratives, which may be considered one of the sources for Baldwin’s recreation.

In the New Testament narratives, Jesus’ role as “conqueror” marks the beginning of a new orientation. Furthermore, it arises from the cauldron of suffering to stand as a defiant symbol of transformation, which resonates with Baldwin’s image of John.

In GTM, John who is the “outsider.” He is beyond the circle of power and so maintains a position of “observer” to actions of the powerful. John, the “outsider,” “watches’ throughout part 1 of GTM; and yet, ironically, John is the source of transformation. What is true in GTM for John is true in the NT for Jesus. In the NT, Jesus who is the “outsider.” He is beyond the circle of power, but he like John, becomes the source of transformation. He becomes the source of praise and adoration (Mark 11:8-10). Still, there is a notable difference between the two interpretations of “conquerors.”

As Jesus approaches Jerusalem, he is welcomed as a long-awaited “conqueror.” AS John approaches Manhattan, he looks down on it from his summit in Central Park and realizes that he is not certain about how he might rule. He thinks of himself as having a choice: he can be a tyrant and crush the
In the contemporary situation, the image of John as “conqueror” yields new questions about a new orientation to the world. This becomes apparent as we consider what happens when John descends the summit in Central Park. After John’s new vision of himself as “conqueror,” there is a change in the setting... He leaves Central Park by running down the summit to exit the park at Fifth Avenue. Then, he begins to dream of owning his own horse, of having a beautiful wife, and children, for whom he would buy electric trains at Christmas. He would also have a closet full of whisky and wine. He wonders about what church they would go to and what he would teach his children as they gathered around him in the evenings. As he does so, he looks ahead, down Fifth Avenue, observing the women in fur coats as they looked into windows that held silk dresses, watches and rings. His wonders: What church did they go to? Did they read a verse from the Bible every night and fall on their knees to pray? His answer: “But no, for their thoughts were not of God, and their way was not God’s way. They were in the world, and of the world, and their feet laid hold on Hell.” Once again, the scene changes, as John lands on 42 Street and reflects on
his love for visits to the New York Public Library. Then, he heads to a movie theater. He makes the decision to buy a ticket and heads inside. But once inside, there is thick description of the place, which John names a “dark palace.”

Here is where we begin to see John’s isolation. He, and those like himself, participates on the fringes of New York City culture, not at center. While he can glimpse what the city has to offer, he becomes even more isolated as he tries to participate. Baldwin takes the inherent isolation and turns it into a dilemma. John confronts the dilemma by the end of the film. He admits to himself that it would have been “blasphemous” for him to think that “it was the Lord who had led him into the theater to show him examples of the wages of sin.” This leads to thoughts of hell and redemption. Eventually, John’s conscious reveals to him that he “had been raised in the truth.” John could not claim “as African savages might be able to claim, that no one had brought him he gospel. His father and mother and all the saints had taught him from this earliest childhood what was the will of God.” This meant that “he either rose from this theater, never to return, putting behind him the world and its pleasures, its honors, and its glories, or he remained here with the wicked and partook of their certain punishment. Yes, it was a narrow way – and John stirred in his seat, not daring to feel it God’s injustice that he must make so cruel a choice.

Next, the scene changes again. Over the next nine pages, the crisis of the novel unfolds. John arrives at home and finds that his younger brother, Roy, has
been stabbed. His entire family is present and his aunt, Florence, is there. Eventually, the attention to caring for Roy’s wound turns as Gabriel blames his wife, Elizabeth, for the trouble. Elizabeth resists this and tells her husband: “Ain’t nobody to blame Gabriel. You just better pray God to stop him before somebody puts another knife in him and puts him in his grave.” At that point, Gabriel slaps Elizabeth and Roy, then, rises to threaten his father’s life if he ever slaps his mother again. Elizabeth pleads with Gabriel and says: “Gabriel, let’s pray.” Gabriel begins to beat Roy, but his sister, Florence, steps in and stops him: “Yes, Lord. You was born wild, and you’s going to die wild. But ain’t no use trying to take the world with you. You can’t change nothing, Gabriel. You ought to know that by now.” Florence’s comment ends the scene.

On page 44, Baldwin begins to close part 1 and to move the story to the place where all of the action will take place—the Temple of the Fire Baptized. Again, the scene changes as John moves from the crisis at home to the church. John alone arrives at the church at 6 p.m. He unlocks the church with his father’s keys to clean the building in preparation for the “tarry” service, which was to start at 8 p.m. Both the name of the church and the ritual are in conversation with the Bible. At Acts 1:3-5, Jesus appears to his followers for a forty-day period after his resurrection. Later, in the same chapter, Peter connects the baptism by the Spirit with the prophetical Book of Joel. In quoting Joel 2:28-32, Peter makes the event at Pentecost a fulfillment of prophecy. After Pentecost, the followers of
Jesus begin to move out from Jerusalem and the central figure to this movement shifts from the disciples who were called by Jesus to Paul, a Jew. The events of Pentecost and the instructions to Jesus’ followers factor into Baldwin’s novel as a way of placing his “saints” in the lineage of the New Testament story of the Holy Spirit. He does this most directly by naming the church in his novel the Temple of the Fire Baptized and by using the tarry service as the main event in the book. The word “tarry” is commonly used in African American Christian traditions and it is common to the language found in the King James Version of the Bible.

**GTM’s “chosen ones”**

To end the chapter, I will return to what I view as Baldwin’s special interest in Luke-Acts from his story of rebirth. My aim is to focus on the names of Baldwin’s main characters and the roles that those characters are assigned. This consideration of the names and relationships allows for important links to be made between the Bible’s story of Jesus’ origins and those of Baldwin’s hero, John Grimes.

These are several important figures in the story, but John Grimes is the main character. With the exception of a third—person narrator, the entire story is told from John’s perspective and we become familiar with a select group of people through John. Those individuals are John’s mother, Elizabeth; his stepfather Gabriel; his aunt, Florence; and his friend, Elisha, the nephew of
Father James. Of these main characters, only one is not given a name with biblical connections. That character is Aunt Florence. The remaining characters-John, Elizabeth, Gabriel, and Elisha-all have names with significant connection to the Bible. Furthermore, the book in the Bible in which all four names appear in significant context is the Gospel of Luke. This suggests several possibilities for understanding Baldwin’s reading of the Bible.

Baldwin encodes clues about the social dynamics at work within the Grimes family circle through names in several ways, but the most valid message relates to Aunt Florence. Her “not biblical” name underscores her role as critic of the Grimes’s reading of the Bible, especially of her brother, Gabriel Grimes. What should not be missed is that within the family circle Aunt Florence is the other.” She is the one who rejects the “conventional script,” which renders her social power both desirable and undesirable. She is “not chosen,” but she is “chosen” by Baldwin to speak and to act. She is the one who tells Gabriel: “Of all the men I ever knew, You’s the man who ought to be hoping the Bible’s all a lie-’cause if that trumpet ever sounds, you going to spend eternity talking” (emphasis his).

Aunt Florence’s position within the social world of the novel helps to “excavate” Baldwin’s criticisms, but so does his work the Gospel of Luke. Baldwin begins this interpretation by situating his characters within the “conventional script” of Luke, but the result is an “unconventional” reading. This
is developed as Baldwin turns to what NT scholarship refers to as the “special material” in Luke. As was the case with the Gospel of John, I will discuss the Lukan material to unevil more about Baldwin’s naming project with the intention of illuminating Baldwin’s wider project – reading and writing African American formation through John’s rebirth – and to discover how the Bible was read in Baldwin’s social context

“The Prayers of the Saints”: Riding on the Wind

“Lord! Her mother cried; and at the sound her heart turned over; she and Gabriel, arrested, stared at the bed. “Lord, Lord, lord! Lord, have mercy on my sinful daughter! Stretch out your hand and hold her back from the lake that burns forever! Oh, my lord my lord!” and her voiced dropped, and broke, and tears ran down her face. “Lord, I done My best with all the children what you give me. Lord, have mercy on my children, and my children, and my children’s children” (italics his).-James Baldwin, GTM

A stunned Rachel cries out in prayer from her sickbed, but her only daughter Florence, is not moved to change her mind; indeed, Florence picks up her traveling bag, which had been sitting in the middle of the cabin floor, walks out the door, down the steps, though the gate, and takes the next North to New York. This snapshot of Florence’s departure from “the South” at the age of 26 in 1900 is among her first memories some 40 years later as she kneels before the altar at the Temple of the Fire Baptized on Lenox Avenue is Harlem. Her
memories, along with those of Gabriel and Elizabeth, make up “Part Two: The Prayers of the Saints” in GTM. Here, Baldwin uses the altar as a space for the assemblage of life stories. In that compilation, we find that the Bible is woven throughout the discourse of prayer as the past encounters the present. We consider Florence’s memories of her mother’s enslavement and the quest for a life away from the plantation. But Florence leaves the land of her birth for New York City, which both Gabriel and Elizabeth also will do.

Part 2 of GTM begins as Florence, accompanied by Gabriel and Elizabeth, arrives at The Temple of the Fire Baptized just as the weekly Saturday night “tarry” service is about to begin. The day had been eventful. All three had been embroiled in a family crisis just moments before arriving at the church. The trouble centered on Roy, Gabriel and Elizabeth’s youngest son. He had been stabbed that afternoon during a fight with “white folks.” The blade barely missed Roy’s left eye and it gave Gabriel an opportunity to turn on John: “You come here, boy,” he said, “and see what them white folks done to your brother.” Soon, Gabriel shifts his focus from John to Elizabeth. While nursing Roy’s wound, Gabriel turns on Elizabeth and blames her for Roy’s troubles. Gabriel argues she had not been a good mother. The result is an emotional exchange between the couple, which ends in a chain of verbal and physical violence: Gabriel slaps Elizabeth, Roy curses his father, and Gabriel responds by lashing Roy with a leather belt. The turmoil ends when Florence catches Gabriel’s belt from behind
and tells him “You was born wild, and you’s going to die wild. But ain’t no use
to try to take the whole world with you. You can’t change anything, Gabriel. You
ought to know that by now.” Florence’s comments are the final words spoken in
the Grimes apartment for the entirety of the novel. After this, the story moves to
The Temple of the Fire Baptized, and it is there that “Florence’s Prayer” begins
the remaining two-thirds of the novel. Florence, then, is where the focus begins
and her words, particularly “You can’t change nothing, Gabriel,” suggest a
strategy for re-reading the “prayers” in part2, which is the next place where
Gabriel, Elizabeth, and Florence appear in the novel. With this in mind,
Florence’s words provide the rationale for reading the “Prayers of the Saints” as
a collective struggle toward formation. It is in the retelling of the antecedents at
the altar that we find the contours of the struggles of the marginalized. The late
afternoon had turned into evening by the time Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth
arrived at the church. The final thoughts in the section are John’s, but the focus is
on Florence:

To John, the presence of his parents was nothing unusual. It is Florence’s
presence that suggests something extraordinary. He speculates that because she
had not attended before, something as extraordinary as her presence might occur.
To him, she had been “summoned to witness a bloody act.” The reference to
“The Lord riding on the wind” seems to set up what will happen during the
prayer service. This is particularly important as the “wind” is given a type of
physicality. In the last two sentences of the quotation, John thinks about the wind as having a body (“The Lord was riding ….”) and as having the ability to speak (What might the wind have spoken…?). In GTM, “the wind” is another way of speaking about “the Holy Spirit.” This is significant because the “tarry” service is a “prayer” meeting in which individuals who are recognized as skilled at having experiences with the Holy Spirit assist others who wish to have such an encounter. In both cases, the name of the service (“tarry”) and an orientation to “the wind” as anthropomorphic, represent an important encounter – African religion as reinterpreted by African Americans and the Bible as an artifact of dominant Western culture.

But there are important distinctions to be made between “spirit possession” of African religion and that to which Baldwin refers to as “the spirit” in GTM.

A commonly among African societies was “a belief in a High God, or Supreme Creator.” Typically, the High God was considered removed from daily activities of human, which was the concern of lesser gods who functioned as mediators between people and the High God. It was the mediator role that connects to Baldwin’s conceptualization of “the Lord riding on the wind” and the “tarry” service as the place where individuals assisted others in experiences with the spirits as well as takes on distinctive shape in the Western context.
In GTM, the Holy Spirit is the method of empowerment which brings with it formation. The quest for the spirit becomes clearer in “Part Two: The Prayers of the Saints,” and the person who leads the way is Florence. Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth’s prayers are the subject below, but first I will comment on the manner in which part 2 begins because the introduction to the material reveals how Baldwin manipulates “the spirit” as he writes his story of formation. What is most striking about the material is that Baldwin’s interpretation brings about a shift from disempowerment to empowerment in his otherwise powerless characters. This is the way in which Baldwin begins the second part of GTM:

“Florence’s Prayer”

The blending of an African American Spiritual and her mother’s voice give Florence the tools for praying: Florence raised her voice in the only song she could remember that her mother used to sing:

*It’s me, it’s me, it’s me, oh, Lord,*

*Standing in the need of prayer ...*

*Not my father, not mother,*

*But it’s me, oh, Lord ...*

*Standing in the need of prayer ... (69).*

The spiritual provides the gateway to the past for Florence. Then, she does what she recalled her mother doing before praying: she sings the old song. The
spiritual helps to move her in the direction of giving voice to her situation. This begins with Florence recalling the words of her mother’s spiritual. She “raised her voice,” says Baldwin, “in the only song she could remember that her mother used to sing: *It’s me, it’s me, it’s me, oh, Lord, Standing in the need of prayer...*” (85).

The song is noteworthy for many reasons, beginning with its connection to Florence’s life in the south with her mother. While the song offers some sense of comfort, it also reconnects Florence to pain. She left home (in 1900 at the age of 26) with her mother on her dying bed. The departure was precipitated by her white male employer’s offer to her that she be his “concubine.” That offer led Florence to take her day’s pay, combined with what little she had been able to save, stop by the train station on her way home, and purchase a ticket to New York City. She went home, packed her “traveling bag,” and dropped it in the middle of the floor long enough to say goodbye to her mother, Rachel, and her brother, Gabriel, then 21. Neither Rachel nor Gabriel thought that Florence could leave her mother on her death bed with only a son to care for her, but Florence had decided that the time to go was about to pass her by. She had known that she had no interest in “exchanging cabins” moving from her mother’s cabin to that of a husband’s, and she knew that her mother preferred and prayed for her brother’s well being, not hers. But the song helps Florence to restore a lost memory – how to pray.
In the scene at the altar of the Temple of the Fire Baptized, “the saints” surround her. They do what it is that the tradition tells them to do: they assist her in praying. This happens without any prior discussion about Florence or her experience with prayer. Her nephew, John, was astonished to see her walk through the church doors. John lets us know that his aunt had not been in the church before that moment, which implies that there had not been any prior relationships with the other non-family members present. What is striking is that it is the non-family members, “the saints,” who assist Florence as she is at the altar: “As she beat her first on the altar, the old women above her laid hands on her shoulders, crying: ‘Call on Him, daughter! Call on the Lord!’” Praying Mother Washington, who is assisting Florence, does not know anything about Florence’s story. The only connection is that of that of the altar and the belief, on Praying Mother Washington’s part, that she can help Florence to get an answer to her prayer. The prayer itself is a memory from Florence’s early adolescence.

This prayer takes place at the beginning of the flashbacks at the altar in GTM. During the “tarry” service, Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth all have moments at the altar and all three experiences flashbacks. Those flashbacks connect each of their life stories, but Florence is the only character to recall a prayer and prays that prayer.

In the case of Florence, the immediate need is for physical healing. She has become ill and found little relief from “doctors.” In the story, she goes from
one type of healer to the next in search of help. The presence of “healers” or “spiritualist” runs throughout the novel. Elizabeth’s memory of her mother is that of someone who “read spiritualist pamphlets” and she lived with “Madame Williams, a spiritualist” who regularly held séances in her home. The point is that there is a blending of various types of traditions and beliefs in the context of a ‘Christian’ orientation. In the moments before Florence’s prayer, she remembers stories of healing from the Bible:

In the olden days God had healed His children. He had caused the blind to see, the lame to walk, and He had raised dead men from the grave… But Florence remembered one phrase, which now she muttered against the knuckles that bruised her lips: ‘Lord, help my unbelief’ (128).

Baldwin uses 2 Kings 20:1 (KJV) to establish the extent to which Florence is suffering. He places her in line with Hezekiah as he states, “the message had come to Florence that had come to Hezekiah.” The story of Hezekiah’s illness originates in the Book of 2 Kings, but the prophetic tradition makes use of the text again in Isaiah. The first instance for the text is found at 2 kings 20:1. The king, Hezekiah, had become ill and was at the point of death when the prophet Isaiah appears to him and says: “In those days was Hezekiah sick unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live.” After this message spoken by Isaiah, Hezekiah turns his face to the wall and prayed: “Then he turned his face to the wall, and prayed unto the LORD, saying, I
beseech thee, O LORD, remember now how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight, And Hezekiah wept sore” (2 Kings 20:2-3, KJV). The result is a miraculous healing. Isaiah is instructed to return to Hezekiah with the message: “Thus says the lord, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; indeed, I will heal you; on the third day you shall go up to the house of the Lord. [6] I will add fifteen years to your life….‘” (2 Kings 20:5-6 NRSV). Baldwin’s use of scripture stands in line with what happens to the story of Hezekiah’s illness, prayer, and healing. The story of King Hezekiah is told in Isaiah 36-39, but the passage related to his illness found at 38:1-9. While the passage in the Bible gives indication of a favorable outcome, the same is not the case for Florence. In her case, the same message, that of “Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live,” So for Florence, the favour extended to Hezekiah does not appear to be hers. This then leads her to continue her quest for healing.

She turns to “the women she knew for remedies,” but her pain increased. She turns to doctors and “when the doctors did no good she had climbed stairs all over town to rooms where incense burned and where men or women on traffic with the Devil gave her white powders or herbs to male tea, and cast spells upon her to take the sickness away.” The problem persists and she has an encounter with “death standing in the room.” Her encounter with ‘death’ drivers her to the altar, but the altar resurrects more pain. It is the place where she finds a good
memory, that of her mother praying for her, and a bad memory, that of why her mother “demanded the protection of God more passionately for her than she demanded it for her daughter.”

The old song is used to “transport” Florence from the storefront church on Lenox Avenue in Harlem to a night in her mother’s cabin in the South. This psychic journey from the altar of the Temple of the Fire Baptized to the darkened, barricaded cabin is a return to a series of traumatic moments in the span of another memorable day in the life of the Grimes family. On that night, Rachel and her two children hid in fear inside their cabin with the windows shut tightly, shades drawn, and “the great table was pushed against the door.

His mother turned, one hand raised. “You hush, now!”

In “Florence’s Prayer” the altar, then, is the place where suffering confronts suffering. It is the place where agony in Florence’s physical body meets with psychic agony “as she beat her fists on the altar, the old woman above her laid hands on her shoulders, crying: ‘Call on Him, daughter! Call on the Lord’”

**Gabriel’s Prayer**

*Now I been introduced*

*To the Father and the Son,*

*And I ain’t*

*No stranger now.*
But for now, the focus turns to Gabriel, who tries to gain perspective on his life through memories. I will focus on a memory in the first flashback, that being Gabriel’s place among the “Twenty-Four Elders.”

The year was 1900 and Gabriel was not yet 21-years-old. He was living in “the south,” his mother had died, and he had begun to preach. In fact, he had only just started to preach when he received an invitation to participate in a “monster revival meeting.” The event was to attract evangelists from “all the surrounding countries, from as far south as Florida and as far north as Chicago.” The name, the “Twenty-Four Elders Revival Meeting,” was named as such because twenty-four men would speak. Each one would have a night to preach, and Gabriel had been asked to speak on the twelfth night. With the exception of Gabriel, all of the other men were considered to be of great fame: My interest in the revival relates to the name of the event, the “Twenty-Four Elders Revival Meeting,” and Gabriel’s performance.”

In the I will shew thee things which must be hereafter(1); And immediately I was in the spirit: and behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne(2); And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and their was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald (3); And round about the throne were four an twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting , clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold(4).
The elders are like an angelic host who may be thought of representing the twelve apostles and twelve unnamed individuals. [Luke 22:29-30 suggests that twelve of those sitting on thrones will be the disciples, but there is no mention of the remaining “elders.”] They, then, can be thought of as the unification of the shapes of both Judaism and Christianity before the heavenly throne. The place of the elders (heaven) and their dress (white robes, golden crowns) each has significance throughout the text of GTM. The aim for “heaven” is constantly present throughout the novel, but perhaps made most vivid as Rachel makes a plea for her son from yet another “altar” – her death bed:

This passage begins Gabriel’s series of flashbacks and it highlights his mother’s plea that he “enters the communion of the saints.” Even though Gabriel had been baptized at the age of 12, at the will of his mother and against his own desire, his young adulthood was filled with liquor and women. Gabriel does surrender, thus his invitation to participate as an “elder” To do so places him on a “throne” of his own.

The revival meeting took place nightly in a rented lodge hall. On the night in which Gabriel was to preach, lights flowed from the hall into the streets, music filled the air, and passers-by peeked in “though half-open doors.” Upon arrival, Gabriel found the pulpit filled with “big, comfortable, ordained men” who told him “want to see you make them holler tonight”. Then, Gabriel took his place. He “knelt down at his throne like chair to pray” before sitting in his “throne like
The sermon begins with Gabriel’s interpretation of the prophet Isaiah as “the Eagle-eyed,” one who looked down dark centuries and foreseen the birth of Christ. The one who prophesied, “unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder.’ Then, shortly after this introduction, Gabriel shifts to focus on “sin.” He speaks of wages of sin death” the” soul that sinneth, it shall die”; “in sin did our mothers conceive us”; sin reigns in all our members”; and, “sin… the only heritage of the natural man” early in the sermon. There are no citations given for the references, but Gabriel’s thoughts are shaped around Paul’s writings on “sin,” particularly his writings about the first and second “Adam” as found in Romans and 1 Corinthians. There are references to Genesis as Gabriel points to Adam as having been cast out of Eden by sin (Gen 3); that sin caused Cain to slay his brother; and that sin built the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9); that sin caused the fire to fall on Sodom (Gen 19:24). It is the references to Paul’s writings in Rom 5 that serve as Gabriel’s aids in both establishing himself as an elder and his perspective on Adam in relation to “sin.”
The first twenty-two pages of “Gabriel’s Prayer” primarily are focused on the revival and Gabriel’s reflections. Gabriel’s critique of the “twenty-four elders” did not result in his exit from the pulpit. In the next flashback, which lasts nearly 30 pages, the second and final sermon in the book by Gabriel is based on 2 Sam 18. Unlike the first sermon, this sermon only takes up two pages in the book. Its main point seems to have been to serve as a way of introducing Esther to the story. Esther, a young woman employed by the same family as Gabriel, has a relationship with Gabriel and becomes pregnant. Gabriel, married to Deborah, does not choose to leave his wife for Esther, so Esther agrees to leave town for Chicago. Once there, she has the child. She names the child Royal, but dies shortly after giving birth. Esther’s parents travel to Chicago to claim her body and to take custody of the child. They return to the South and raise Royal in the same town in which Gabriel and Deborah live. Gabriel never identifies himself as Royal’s father and royal dies in a barroom fight upon his return to Chicago as an adult. 

The story of Royal and Esther haunts Gabriel throughout the novel. They are the “sin” for which he seeks “redemption.” From her sick bed, Deborah admits to Gabriel her own knowledge about her husband’s relationship with Esther and their child. She then urges him to beg for forgiveness. She tells him: “you better pray God forgive you. You better not let go until He make you know
you been forgiven” (italics his). It is this idea that Gabriel must “know” that he has been forgiven that leads to his relationship with Elizabeth.

At the close of the section, Gabriel begins to rise from the altar. He reflects on how he arrived at the Temple of the Fire Baptized and how he met Elizabeth. His sister, Florence, had introduced her to him upon his arrival from the South. On a Sunday afternoon, Elizabeth and her baby, John, were invited to Florence’s apartment for dinner and to meet her brother, a preacher from the south. Later, after hearing Gabriel preach, Elizabeth “had walked this long aisle to the altar, to repent before God her sin.

Gabriel’s memory of his life as a young preacher and that of his later years are unified by this bridge of a “sign.” Deborah, his sister’s childhood friend and the woman who would care for his mother after his sister left home for New York City, tells Gabriel that he must ask for forgiveness and that he “better not let go until He make you know you been forgiven.” The only way Gabriel would know that he had been forgiven would be through a sign. After Deborah’s death, Gabriel moves to New York City (about 1924) and marries Elizabeth, his long-awaited sign of forgiveness. Gabriel’s prayer ends with a silent confrontation between Gabriel and John, the child he had promised to care for and to raise as his own in eleven years prior to that moment. John had risen from his knees to stare at his friend, Elisha, who had fallen on the floor in a trance. Elisha “begun to speak in a tongue of fire, under the power of the Holy Ghost,” as John and his
father stared at each other. Then, Gabriel tells John to kneel down and John and his father stared at each other. Then, Gabriel tells John to kneel down and John “turned suddenly, the movement like a curse,” and knelt again before the altar.

This final part in “Part Two: The Prayers of the Saints” does not begin with a passage from the Bible. Instead, the text begins with Elizabeth looking at Elisha, who is on the floor “under the power of the Holy Ghost” and speaking “in a tongue of fire.” She believes that the “fiery visitation” is meant for her. That, perhaps, “the Lord was speaking a message to her heart.” But Elizabeth decides that there must be a barrier between the visitation and the message. In her mind, she is her own barrier. She is what hinders interpretation of the message, which is the point of Elisha’s being on the floor under the power of the Holy Ghost and speaking in a tongue—from Elizabeth’s perspective—that she might receive a special message through the Holy Spirit. She identifies the barrier as her lack of humility. She tells herself that if she could humble herself, then God would give her the interpretation. This manner of thinking and speaking about oneself is not unique to Elizabeth; in fact, it serves as an important tool for Baldwin’s story. It is how Baldwin nuances a particular aspect of his characters’ interpretations of the Bible, of what it means to be “Christian,” and of what it means to be powerless. In GTM, to be “brought low” appears to be a result of one’s decisions or circumstances in the face of a failure to be “humble.”
Elizabeth’s opening reflection about herself as needing it be “humbled” is just one example of this particular way of thinking. At others moments, individual characters think that others need to be more “humble” or that the person will have to be “brought low” in order to be “humbled.” The need for being “humbled” does appear in some of the material on Gabriel and John, but the characters most frequently regarded as in need of being “humbled” are the two primary female characters, Elizabeth and Florence.

It is in “Florence Prayer” that the need for humility or “to be brought low” first appears. Florence, in her first thoughts while at the altar, feels that even while she is seeking to pray, she knows that Gabriel is rejoicing. He is rejoicing “not that her humility might lead to her grace, but only that some private anguish had brought her low…” The same type of reflection happens as Florence herself reflects on their mother’s life. Her memories of her mother are of a woman who “had often been brought low, but she had never been forsaken.”

This passage shows how Rachel had been “brought low” and yet “not forsaken.” The structure of the passage could be thought of as Baldwin’s interpretation of Hebrews 13:5b: “I will never leave you or forsake you,” which is followed by a quotation from Psalm 118.6: “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?” This is the tone of what follows in Florence’s memory. She knows that her mother was “brought low,” but she also knows that “the prayers of the faithful” (i.e.: Rachel) resulted in freedom.
In Elizabeth’s story, which is written mostly as a flashback with brief interruption of thought about her present situation, there is the thought that her decision to leave the South for New York City with Richard was “the first in the sordid series of mistakes which was to cause her to fall so low.” During her first visit to Florence’s apartment, she tells Florence’s attempt to comfort by saying “… You try not to fret, honey. The Lord, He ain’t going to let you fall but so low.” In Elizabeth, this recognition of ‘falling but so low’ becomes the place where devastation begins to seem like the past and formation arises as the future. That formation is fully developed in John, but Elizabeth is the source of its origins. She is the link between what had been and what would be. We see this most clearly in her role as the link – which has dualistic purposes in that she both unites and separates-Gabriel and John as contrasting archetype, the former he symbol of devastation and the latter the symbol of formation. Two moments in the text illustrate this point most vividly. The first takes place at the beginning of the novel as the crisis related to Roy’s stabbing unfolds. I will elaborate.

As previously mentioned, in “Part One: The Seventh Day,” John returned home from his daylong outing in the city to find his home in turmoil. The source of the problem is John’s younger brother, Roy, who had been stabbed. It is Elizabeth who attempts to be a calming presence in the midst of the drama as Gabriel tries to pinpoint “the cause” of the problem. Gabriel argues with Elizabeth and Florence as he nurses the wound just above Roy’s left eye. In the
turmoil, Gabriel eventually pinpoints the problem to be Elizabeth, whom, we later learn in the following passage, he views as “the bondwoman.”

The reflection takes place during “Gabriel’s Prayer,” but it does provide a particularly context for understanding how Gabriel thinks about Elizabeth, which is central to why it is that I view Elizabeth as the one who represents the link between devastation and formation. She is the one who will only “fall but so low” and Gabriel’s thoughts about her point to her “fall.” He views himself as her redeemer, but ironically, so, his entire life is interpreted through the story of “the fall.” Gabriel’s view of Elizabeth as “the bondwoman” is a reference to Hagar in the Abraham and Sarah story in Genesis. This comparison names a hidden irony: though Gabriel thinks of Elizabeth as a “bondwoman,” a servant, it is her sense of freedom and the refusal to submit to devastation as manifested in Gabriel that causes him to strike her. That eruption leads the family to the “tarry” service.

Finally, the eruption between Gabriel and Elizabeth is a continuation of the Roy crisis, but Gabriel pinpoints Elizabeth as the source of the trouble. In the following excerpt, the dialogue is between Gabriel and Elizabeth as she tries to respond to Gabriel’s harsh criticisms about her lack of care for Roy, which then causes Roy to have a troubled young life:
They in her eyes. Then, with all his might, he reached out and slapped her across the face. She crumpled at once, hiding her face with one thin hand, and Aunt Florence moved to hold her up….

This scene is where Elizabeth, as the victim of Gabriel’s violence, represents both resistance to an orientation to sacrifice of self by defending herself and begins to push beyond Gabriel’s self-understanding, which really is a lack of a true sense of self. The notion of sacrifice a sense of self. Perhaps Gabriel’s biblical model demonstrates this best. Gabriel identifies Elizabeth as Hagar. Hagar, whom Gabriel views as the ‘bondwoman.’ Is the convergence of devastation and formation. She has to sacrifice her sense of self in the midst of devastation (pregnancy as a result of another woman’s wished) in order to bring about formation (a new nation through her unborn son). But the formation does not take place until after Hagar, who by all appearances, is at depths of having been “brought low.” At Genesis chapter 16, she is the servant to another woman who has the authority to give her husband as a “concubine.” Hagar runs away from Abram and Sarai’s household, but she encounters “the angel of the LORD” (16:7) who eventually tells her to return. Even though Hagar does return, the very fact of her attempt to flee suggests a strong sense of self in the midst of devastation. Her return, then, should be viewed – not as a passive act of submission – but as a sacrifice of self in order to bring about formation. So, the place at which Hagar seems to have been “brought low” actually turns out to be
another very important link in her story of devastation. In the same way, it is Gabriel’s violence against Elizabeth that brings about Elizabeth’s role as the link between the past and future. It is the scene that leads to the “tarry” service. In fact, just after Gabriel strikes her, it is Elizabeth who pleads with him to pray: “Gabriel,” said his mother [Elizabeth], “Gabriel. Let us pray…..” Elizabeth’s plea goes unanswered, but she is the one who calls the family to prayer.

The final reference to “fall so low” is near the end of “Elizabeth’s Prayer and the phrase is spoken as during Elizabeth’s first visit to Florence’s apartment. Florence and Elizabeth met while working to clean office buildings at night. After weeks of meeting for coffee and doughnuts after work in the mornings, Florence invited Elizabeth to her apartment for Sunday dinner. After arriving with her young son, John then 3, Elizabeth tells Florence about Richard. Her memories about him, particularly her confession about not having been married to him, lead to tears. Then, in an effort to comfort her, Florence then tells her: “The Lord, He ain’t going to let you fall but so low,”

After Elizabeth’s first visit to Florence’s apartment, the next occasion would be to meet Gabriel, whom Florence describes as a widowed preacher from the South. Elizabeth reflects on that meeting near the end of her time at the altar: “She, who had descended with such joy and pain, had begun her upward climb – upward, with her baby, on the steep, steep side of the mountain.”
In the middle of “Elizabeth’s Prayer,” we find indication of Elizabeth’s role as the site of the shift from devastation to formation, which is to be fully realized in John’s threshing floor experience. The moment in the text where I see this most clearly is in Elizabeth reflections about her son. In the novel, this thought is framed on the one hand by Elizabeth’s memory of Richard’s imprisonment, release and suicide, all of which occurred during the early stage of her pregnancy with John and before she had the opportunity to tell Richard about the pregnancy; and, on the other hand, her thoughts about her departure from Madame William’s home, which took place immediately after Richard’s death. Suddenly, Elizabeth steps her reflections and centers herself in her present context, the altar. She observes:

And now they were singing:

“Somebody needs you, Lord, Come by here” (123).

In part two, I explored how Baldwin manipulates “the spirit” in an effort toward formation. From a sense of disempowerment to empowerment, on this otherwise powerless characters. I have argued that sacrifice of self in the midst of devastation the underlying message of what is meant by “brought low” in GTM. He develops the need for formation through “One: Florence’s Prayer” and Two: Gabriel’s Prayer,” but uses “Three: Elizabeth’s Prayer” as the link between devastation (as told through “Florence’s Prayer” and “Gabriel’s Prayer”) and
formation (John’s “The Threshing-Floor”). This then, allows Elizabeth Grimes’ story to prepare the way for formation “Part Three: The Threshing-Floor.”

In part 2, we gained access to the traumatic life stories of the main characters—Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth—through their flashbacks at the altar of the Temple of the Fire Baptized. Baldwin allows the “tarry” service to function as the place where individual strivings meet with a collective quest for formation. This is true even as Aunt Florence closes part I by telling her younger brother: “You can’t change nothing. Gabriel, “In a sense, she is correct because Gabriel is not the character upon whom Baldwin bestows the future, the future, as we will see in the next chapter, belongs to John.

In the beginning of *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, young John Grimes imagined himself to be a “long awaited conqueror” at whose feet “multitudes cried, Hosanna!” John’s forebears looked back over their lives to revisit devastation from one generation to the next as the past reckoned with the present for his Aunt Florence and his parents, Gabriel and Elizabeth Grimes. Now, while lying on the floor in front of the altar, John is the turning point for the Grimes family. His “formation” does not come before the past is revisited again, but this time the journey requires a death is told and formation occurs as Baldwin weaves his story together with passages from the *King James Version* of the Bible. He does so by moving beyond “damnation,” and John represents another beginning.
In GTM, the final chapter is a continuation of the last in that the “tarry” service is the context for the action. By this time, Saturday evening, which is when the prayer meeting started, has turned into late Saturday night. All attention has turned to John, who pulled Elizabeth back from her memories when she suddenly heard “not the cry of the child, newborn, before the common light of earth; but the cry of the man–child, bestial, before the light that comes down from Heaven.” To her amazement, the cry came from John. Even though John is at the same altar as Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth, his experience in the closing part of the book, called “part three: the Threshing-Floor” is altogether different. The most striking change is that while the “The Prayers of the Saints” is primarily the assemblage of John’s family members’ memories, the focus shifts in “The Threshing-Floor.” John does not look back on own life; instead, his altar experience bring visions, which draw from the lives of forebears–both known and unknown to John. In the Following material, I will give attention to how Baldwin crafts new creation through John’s moment at the altar of the Temple of the Fire Baptized. Elizabeth’s prayer becomes the link between the devastation found in Gabriel story to rebirth in John’s threshing-floor experience. John represents a type of divine harvester. The use of the term “threshing-floor” is how Baldwin establishes this connection–from the old image of “wrath,” “sin,” and “corruption” in Gabriel to formation in John, who represents a new way of beginning in the world, and therefore offers a new starting point. The threshing imagery is Baldwin’s “gate” to formation.
In the OT, two threshing floors suggest importance from Baldwin’s project. The first appears in one chronicles21. The second is found in the book of Ruth, at 3:2 which states: “And now is not Boaz of our kindred with whose maidens thou waste? Behold, winnoweth barley to night in the threshing floor [sic].” Even though the phrase “threshing floor” has limited appearances in the Bible, in idea of threshing is mentioned throughout the OT and NT. And, in one instance in the NT, there is a radical re-orientation to threshing. The reference relates to what I view as Jesus’ self-understanding as a “divine harvester.” This re-presentation threshing by Jesus is significant to the manner in which Baldwin makes use of the same concept in his novel.

Following the title page, Baldwin began the final section of the novel with the passage quoted above. John has fallen onto the floor before the altar. He is described as being “like a rock, a dead man’s body, a dying bird, fallen from an awful height; something that had no power of itself, any more to turn.” The imagery closely mirrors what is found throughout the prophetic Book of Ezekiel. At 1:28, Ezekiel falls on his face at the appearance of the likeness of the Lord. Then he reports that he heard a voice. John, like Ezekiel, hears a voice, but the difference is that John’s is a malicious, ironic voice,” which challenges him to rise from “the temple and go out into the world.” In the physical struggle between John and the power that invaded his body, comparison may be seen in relation to Ezekiel.
The reference to John’s physical condition, specifically the loss in control of his body, mirrors Ezekiel’s condition. In 2:2, Ezekiel writes that the “spirit entered into me,” which renders his body no longer under his control, but, in fact, it becomes the control of “the spirit.” John is “invaded, set at naught, possessed.” Ezekiel is “caused to eat” the scroll at 3:3. In GTM, there is significant attention to John’s mouth, too. In his case, John’s mouth receives attention as the “dusty” floor makes him “cough and retch.” John’s threshing –floor experience is constantly described as taking place “in the dusty space before the altar.” Finally, there is a significant connection in the opening section of part 3 to a motif in Ezekiel. In the second paragraph on the first page, John is described as having been “cracked open as wood beneath the axe cracks down the middle.” In Ezekiel, the term “middle” is used to bring about unraveled literary presentation of imaginary space. For instance, at 1:16, as Ezekiel describes the appearance of the wheel, he mentions that the appearance was “a wheel in the middle of a wheel.” Throughout the book; there are myriad examples of this same use of “middle.” I mention this because part 3 of GTM relies on the “middle” in a similar way. This is especially true near the conclusion of the novel, which is there is significant blending of the Bible and African American spirituals.

The connection being drawn to the spiritual and the novel is the style of communication –the Bible is interpreted and speaks with and to an entire corpus of early African American engagement with the Hebrew Bible’s prophetic
tradition. Through different forms, the Bible is used to negotiate “world.” W.E.B. DuBois identified an important distinction in this early African/African American engagement in his ‘the sorrow sons,’ the closing essay in *The Souls of Back Folk*, DuBois wrote, “the things evidently borrowed from the surrounding world undergo characteristic change when they enter the mouth of the slave. Especially is this true of Bible phrases…. and the wheels of Ezekiel are turned every way in the mystic dreaming of the slave, till he says: ‘there’s a little wheel a-turning’ in-a-my heart.”

In quoting from the spiritual, “there’s a little wheel a-Turnin,’” DuBois suggests that the hymns “improved” or “paraphrased” the Bible to “breathe hope” that “sometime, somewhere, men {sic} will judge men by their souls and not by their skins.” In so doing, DuBois offers early observation about how African and their descendants negotiated the Bible as they shaped their own space in the new context. In part 2 of GTM, Baldwin began to establish the anticipated change – from powerlessness to power – through the memories of John’s forebears. Now, in part 3, the project becomes one of establishing formation with an orientation to “self” as power; however, the former sense of self as demonstrated in Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth, must die. The re-interpretation begins with the return to Isaiah’s call narrative (6:5) at the beginning of part 3, but the most dramatic evidence is found in what Baldwin wrote about as “the vision of John’s soul,” to which I will turn next.
As John’s vision begin, he experiences and inner struggle with a “malicious ironic voice” The voice challenges John to get up off the floor, leave the temple, and to go out into the world. John tries to reassure the voice that he wants to rise, but his ability to do so is unsuccessful because there seems to be external constraint due to some type of physical force. To John, his bodily movements are restricted “as through God’s toe had touched him lightly.” Still, the ironic voice returns to challenge John to rise from floor and leave. The voice insisted that John flee “if he did not want to become like all the other niggers.” In the moments before the vision, John continues to struggle for his freedom. He turns on the floor and finds himself kneeling at alter, facing the golden cross, staring at the “gigantic legend adorning the cross: Jesus Saves.”

After the crisis in John’s home involving his brother, Roy, John goes to the church alone. He is there for some time before “saints” begin to arrive. The expression,” saint,” is what is used as individuals greet one another. John refers to “Praise the Lord Saint,” as the standard greeting among those who frequented the Temple of the fire Baptized. Soon John greets the first to arrive for the “tarry” service, Elisha. The two teens spend time alone, discussing various matters, when a physical fight takes place between the two. The fight concludes with Elisha’s challenge to John about being “saved.” What Elisha says to John: “just fall on your knees one day and ask him to help you to pray?” I view this as
significant because Elisha’s question to John: “Do you want to be saved, Johnny?” Elisha makes it clear, implicitly, that one is saved” through “prayer.”

The death of Jesus is what Baldwin used to set up the tarry service, which is where John Grimes “Dies” and is “Born” again. First, I want to give more attention to the passage above. The New Testament’s Passion Narratives depicting the death of Jesus are what Baldwin used to set up his main character’s “death.” Here John reflects on several significant aspects of the death of Jesus as told in the New Testament gospels.

John reflects on the space as a “high field, ready for the harvest.” As previously maintained, in the Gospel of Luke, the language of “harvest” appears in several place as Jesus tells his disciples that the “fields are ripe for harvest.” Then, John shifts his attention from the space to ritual. Only in this case he turns to the ritual of Holy Communion, which is observed once a month on the first Sunday in the month. The ritual, which takes place on what John refers to as “a Communion Sunday,” is described as the time when “the saints, dressed all in white, ate flat, unsalted Jewish bread, which was the body of the Lord and drank red grape juice, which was His blood.” Again, this describes what the NT reference to as the last meal shared by Jesus and his disciples, who are instructed by Jesus to continue the ritual has a way of remembering him. In Paul’s writings, the same instructions are followed as “the Lord’s Supper.” This is described in Corinthians. This, for Baldwin, is a continuation of what was established in part
1 as John reflected on his “saints.” There the connection between the devastated saints in John’s life and saints of the NT gospel narratives is used to bring about an orientation to powerlessness in the face of power. In the case of John’s family they are the marginalized inhabitants of Harlem; in the NT the emphasis is one a powerless Jesus who is unjustly arrested and executed at the hands of the powerful.

In GTM John, after reflecting on the ritual, remember that following the observance of Holy Communion the group turned to another moment in the final scenes from Jesus’ file. This time it is the foot-washing scene of the Gospel of John (13:1-5). In John, the foot washing takes place in conjunction with the Lord’s Supper. Jesus told his disciples that they were to submit the washing as a way of demonstrating humility and to prove that they were, in fact, his disciples. In NT stories of Jesus life, the foot-washing scene appears only in John gospel. Baldwin demonstrates that the Temple of the Fire Baptized had its own unique version of the same ritual I am specifically referring to the separation of men and women. They see themselves has doing this “as Christ had commended His disciples to do”; however there is no indication of such a division in the Gospel of John. John remembers that they concluded their ceremony by “Kissing each other with a holy kisses.” The closing is not found in John’s gospel, but they are instructions for this type of parting in NT sources. Those instructions are found in several of Paul’s writings, specifically at Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor
30:12; 1 Thes 5:26. In Baldwin’s story, John soon shifts his thoughts from the space, a “high field, ready for the harvest,” to Elisha. Elisha provides the challenge to John regarding being “saved.”

**Journey of the soul**

To answer Elisha’s question. “Are you saved?” John has to make his own transformative journey. I will explore John’s journey by returning to unexamined aspects of “part One; The Seventh Day” for assistance in discussing how Baldwin creates John has the site of formation through the question of “being saved.” First, we find that at the end of John’s time on the threshing floor, Elisha says, “Rise up, Johnny. Are you saved, boy?” The concept and the question are the overarching context for John’s journey into the grave. After seeing the words “Jesus saves” on the altar John begins descent. “Under the power,” John travels down.

He decently renders the body more and more distant. Then, suddenly, the attention to John’s struggle shifts to identify the point of departure for John’s vision. In so doing, Baldwin identifies a story found in the Book of Genesis and its meaning by, once again, making use of the malicious ironic voice.

But there is preliminary explanation just prior to the vision. In that explanation, John surmises “a curse was renewed from moment to moment from father to son. Time was indifferent, like snow and ice; but the heart, crazed wanderer in the driving waste, carried the curse forever.” The vision is where Baldwin uses the
imagination to bring about a re-telling of the story by using several sections of the Bible. But before turning to the vision, we should note that the previously cited passage makes an important move in the direction of time. First, there is the question about the curse: “Did it live in time, or in the moment?” There is the line about John being “in the moment, and out of time.”

In keeping with visions throughout the Bible, Baldwin provides John with a “guide” who leads him throughout the vision. The “guide” in GTM is John’s father, how beckons John to “come with me.” Then, they enter a “straight street” were the buildings were made of “beaten gold and silver.” They encounter a woman how is described as “very old and black … Staggering on crooked stones.” John’s father identifies the woman as “sin”, which is what “the Devil’s son runs after.” Here, as is true throughout the novel, John’s father views John as “the Devil’s son.” At this point in the story, John looks for “deliverance” out of the experience, but does not find a way out. He then rejects his father’s “golden crown” and the “long white robe.” Both of which are mentioned as the much sought after jewels of those who are “saints” as demonstrated through the vision of the writer of the NT Book of Revelation. Once John rejects the crown and the robe, a type of death occurs.

In so doing, Baldwin brings about a new beginning for John with the Abraham and Isaac story. At Gen22:1-19, Abraham places Isaac on an altar as a sacrifice. Even though he does not actually slay Isaac with the knife, Abraham dies to
himself when he places the child on the altar as a burnt offering to God. The return to the Book of Genesis and the story of the Abraham is significant for several reasons; the most important for my work is its emphasis on new beginnings. Formation will not relate to change in John’s name, but it is connected to John’s rebirth. Baldwin does this through John’s journey into the grave.

**The Grave**

John rolls down the white street screaming, “Father! Father! The vision ends and John regains his awareness of the saints who surround him. He recognizes that they are singing, but the tune as a mournful sound. His short experience had left him “with nothing…no lust, no fear, no shame, no hope.” He thinks that the experience has not ended because “the darkness was full of demons crouching, waiting to worry him with their teeth again.”

John’s journey into the grave begins with glimpse of Hebrews and Baldwin’s use of the text continues once John is “free.” At the beginning of the grave tour, Baldwin writes that John’s parents were “looking backward, over their shoulders, at a cloud of witnesses.” It is the elders in this portion of the vision who are “looking back”, representing what had taken place. They are the ones who are viewing the “cloud of witnesses.” For the less fortunate, they were “stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented……” so,
this connection to the “cloud of witnesses” provides a link to the biblical motif of suffering.

As John journeys, he begins to hear something in the grave. It is the sound of murmuring. The murmuring causes him to weep and moan as he realizes that the same sound had “filled John’s life, so it now seemed, from the moment he had first drawn breath. He had heard it everywhere, in prayer and in daily speech, and wherever the saints were gathered, and in the unbelieving streets.” The sound was that of rage. In this section, John’s reflections recall the “deepest water,” “the strongest chains,” “the dungeon,” “birth dishonored,” and “sudden death,” all of which indicate his connection to the earliest experiences of his forebears. “The memory of Rachel in “Florence’s prayer” is where we find mention of the children who were taken away from her during slavery, so “this sound that came from darkness” is representative of her story, too. As John struggles to make sense of what he is seeing, his soul whispers: “who are these? Who are they? And wondered: where shall I go?”

This is where the transition in John’s journey of the soul. He has to make the turn from the past to the future. His guides are a combination of biblical texts and spirituals. John asks: who are these? At Rev 7:13, one of the elders poses a question similar to John’s as John travels on his heavenly quest. The elder ask John: “who are these robed in white, and where have they come from?” John replies, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” But the elder responds, “these are they
who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). John’s answer is that they are the despised and rejected, the wretched, and spat upon. Furthermore, John was with this group of outcasts as he realizes that their stripes would “scar his back.” There would be an existential sharing of experience as their presence in the dungeon would be his and their death his death. The NT is the place where Baldwin turns to give voice to the sufferings John must share in as well as what had been the experience of those described as “despised,” “rejected,” “and “spat upon.”

As John sees the lash before him, he shouts for help. That help would save him from their experiences of fire, water, and it would mean that a “head bowed down forever” would not be his posture. Without the hope of help from his mother or his father, John whispers: “oh, Lord, have mercy on me. Have mercy on me.” the surrounding saint’s return to the journey as they begin to assist John with words of comfort. In one instance, there is someone saying, “yes, go through. Go through.” In another moment, someone said, “Ask him to take you through.” Another, call on Him. call on Him.”

As John nears the end of his journey, he struggles to remember the legend on the cross before the altar, which read, “Jesus saves.” The saints continue to assist, calling out to John: “Jesus saves.” “call on him.” “ask him to take you through.” John remembers the communion service once again, but there is a
significant change. The service has a new setting; it takes place in “a great, high room, a room made golden by the light of the sun; and the room was filled with a multitude of people, all in long, white robes, the women with covered heads.

The multitude, as before, is wearing “long, white robes,” but their feet are stained with blood. This is a return to the explanation given by the elder at Rev. 7:13 – 14. The multitude were those who had “come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). Only here, blood covers their feet and the blood was permanent. In response to the question, “Have you been to the river? John sees the river and the multitude. They had been changed from the long, white robes to rags: “their robes were ragged, and stained with the road they had traveled, and stained with unholy blood ……” Still, each person struggled to get to the river. Then, someone cried: “Sinner, do you love my Lord?” In an instant, “John saw the Lord – for a moment.” Suddenly, he was set free; his tears sprang as from a fountain; his heart, like a fountain of waters, burst. Then he cried: “On, blessed Jesus! Oh, Lord Jesus! Take me through!”

The vision of John’s soul travels downward through the grave to reflect on the past while emerging at the point of a new beginning. Baldwin unites this change by using both the OT and NT. The “I, John, saw a city” is an adaptation of Rev 21:2: “and I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband”. Then, the
second half, “way in the middle of the air,” returns to Ezekiel’s wheel. In fact, as the book ends the narrator makes the connection: “Out of joy strength came, strength that was fashioned to bear sorrow: sorrow brought forth joy forever? This was Ezekiel’s wheel, in the middle of the burning air forever – and the little wheel ran by faith, and the big wheel ran by the grace of God.”

Then, the narrative takes another turn to the OT as the journey of the ancient Israelites is recalled. The story is remembered from the perspective of the NT, specifically the writer of Hebrews. Furthermore, the memory is that sacrifice endured with a favorable end as “the serpent was not their master”, nor was the grave their resting – place, and the “earth was not their home”.

In the concluding pages of the novel, the focus turns to dialogue between John and various individuals. First, there is an important exchange between John and Gabriel. The scene between the new John and the old Gabriel highlights John’s transition from powerlessness to power.

The reference to “his father’s text” is the KJV of Job 16:9: “Also now, behold, my witness is in heaven, and my record is on high”. The turn to Job marks another indication of John’s new self-understanding. First, and perhaps most important, is that John now empowers himself to “repeat his father’s text”. He makes the scripture his without asking permission to do so. Second, the selected “text” is worthy of attention. At this point in the story, Job is defending his innocence in the face of personal calamity. Job’s accusers argue that his
suffering had been caused by sin; Job disagrees. At 16:9, Job is so certain of his innocence that he believes he has a witness in heaven. This witness is standing before God and is meant to be a powerful indication of Job’s position before God. The same can to be said for John. At this point in the test, as he faces his greatest antagonist, his father, he draws from his “father’s text” to silence him. Moments later, John finds encouragement from his Aunt Florence. She tells him, “You fight the good fight,” quoting from 1 Timothy 6:12, John reflects on the “fight” from the previous nigh:

As they walked along the avenue, John asks his friend if he had been praying for him during his time on the threshing floor. John asks, “It was you, “ he said, “wasn’t it, who prayed me through?” Elisha insists that the entire group prayed, but that he was standing over John the entire time. John wants to know how long he prayed. Elisha tells him “ you started praying when it was night and you ain’t stopped praying till it was morning.” John begs Elisha to keep on praying for him. Eventually, the group leaves the church and walks along the busy avenue in the light of a new morning. John and Elisha arrive at John’s apartment building and just as John prepares to enter the building, he says to Elisha: “Elisha, “ he said , “no matter what happens to me, where I go, what folks say about me, no matter what anybody says, you remember – please remember - I was saved. I was there.”
Rebirth

In this chapter, the protagonist, John Grimes, concludes the ‘tarry” service with his time at the altar on the “threshing floor.” Baldwin gave the fewest pages to tell the story of John’s death and rebirth - thirty-three – making part 3 the shortest in the entire book. But the story of John’s threshing-floor experience draws on the life stories of his family members’ devastating journeys. Nevertheless, the final part of the novel places the troubles of the past on John’s shoulders as he “negotiates” the stories of the Bible and African American sacred songs in his family’s history. He, then, takes those experiences and revisits them out in his journey of the soul. In so doing, his journey becomes the journey of the entire family. His sufferings are their sufferings; their sufferings are his sufferings. Eventually, John goes into ‘the grave,” and when he ascends the pain of the past is left in the grave.

In conclusion, John’s journey in GTM should be thought of as a representative symbolic picture of the devastation faced by the entire family. It is the memory of those sufferings that meet John at the altar. While he cannot know what his Aunt Florence’s memories are as she beats her fists on the altar, her story becomes his story. The same can be said for his mother, Elizabeth, and his father, Richard. In a sense, the same is true for Gabriel. Though there is a rejection of Gabriel’s image of powerlessness, his story is a part of John’s journey and formation.
It is a difficult journey, viewing a past filled with agony and despair, but John does it. He gazes upon that which had occurred, but he arises from the dusty space before the altar of the Temple of the Fire Baptized with a new orientation. In the end, John’s ability to withstand the history of devastation “saves” him.

In conclusion, this work has aimed to provide a necessary critical position Baldwin and GTM as a necessary source for those who wish to study all literature as works of social formation. The focus on Baldwin, then, broadens the study of American literature to considerations of the social and cultural implications of world – building. Also, the shift toward foregrounding Baldwin positions his corpus as unavoidable when one considers what texts comprise “American literature.”

In the case of biblical criticism, to date, no known study has been undertaken of Baldwin’s GTM from within the field of biblical studies, and yet, as I discuss in chapter 1, other critics have found it difficult to avoid examination of Baldwin’s reading of the Bible. But perhaps most important is that of the encounter of biblical criticism with Baldwin’s human experience and its written expression - arising from the margins - a provocative mode of “theorizing scriptures.”