Reading Zora Neale Hurston's Works Through an Islamic Lens: The Absence of Islam in Moses, Man of the Mountain and Jonah's Gourd Vine

Asma Abdullah Saud Alqahahtani
Wright State University

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READING ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S WORKS THROUGH AN ISLAMIC LENS: THE ABSENCE OF ISLAM IN *MOSES, MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN* AND *JONAH’S GOURD VINE*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

by

ASMA ABDULLAH SAUD ALQAHTANI

Bach., King Khalid University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016

2023
Wright State University
WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF GRADUATE PROGRAMS AND HONORS STUDIES

December 14, 2023

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION
BY Asma Abdullah Saud Alqahtani ENTITLED Reading Zora Neale Hurston’s Works Through
an Islamic Lens: The Absence of Islam in Moses, Man of the Mountain and Jonah’s Gourd Vine
BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF Master of Arts.

________________________________
Crystal B. Lake, Ph.D.
Thesis Director

________________________________
Alpana Sharma, Ph.D.
Chair, School of Humanities and Cultural Studies

Committee on Final Examination:

________________________________
Shengrong Cai, Ph.D.

________________________________
Andrew Strombeck, Ph.D.

________________________________
Shu Schiller, Ph.D.
Interim Dean, College of
Graduate Programs & Honors Studies
ABSTRACT


Zora Neale Hurston is an African-American writer, anthropologist, and ethnographer of the Harlem Renaissance. She is distinguished for documenting and celebrating the religions of African Americans in the South. In this study, the author argues that Hurston represents the practiced religions in Southern African-American communities in Jonah’s Gourd Vine and Moses, Man of the Mountain while noticeably omitting Islam, despite the fact that Islam predominated in more Northern African-American Communities as a reclaimed religious history and practice. Hurston’s exclusion prompts inquiries into the history of Islamic erasures in Southern African-American communities and introduces ambiguity in interpreting the metaphors found in Jonah’s Gourd Vine because of the differences between the Biblical and Quranic narratives surrounding the figure of Jonah. The author concludes that Hurston omits Islam because it was not noticeably practiced in the South among the African-American community. Finally, the author argues that Muslim readers must understand the Biblical Jonah to understand the metaphorical meanings of the vine relative to the protagonist John Buddy Pearson in Hurston’s Jonah’s Gourd Vine.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am profoundly grateful, first and foremost, to Allah, the bestower of countless blessings upon me.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis advisor, Professor Crystal Lake, for her support and guidance throughout my research journey. Her expertise and encouragement have been a significant influence in shaping this paper. I extend my appreciation to the members of my thesis committee, Professor Andrew Strombeck and Professor Shengrong Cai, for their insightful feedback and valuable contributions, which greatly enriched the quality of this work.

To my family, I owe a debt of gratitude for your love, encouragement, and understanding during the challenges and demands of this academic journey. Your love and support have been a constant source of strength as I pursued my studies abroad. A special thanks to my twin sister, Arwa; your presence means everything to me.

Lastly, I acknowledge King Khalid University and the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission to the US for funding my scholarship and their support during my sabbatical leave.
To my beloved parents, Abdullah and Fatimah
I. INTRODUCTION

I was born into a Muslim household, where night after night, my mother shared the stories of the prophets of God from the holy Quran with my twin and me, nurturing our hearts and minds with the pearls of wisdom and ethics of those stories. She used to tell us the stories of Noah, Ibrahim, Joseph, Moses, and Jonah—or Nuh, Ibrahim, Yusuf, Musa, and Yunus, in Islam. Those stories have been lingering in my ears ever since, and they have influenced my enthusiasm for learning more about those prophets and their messages to humanity. Growing up, I realized those prophets are universal and exist in other Abrahamic religions such as Judaism and Christianity. Every religion has its own stories of those prophets that suit its doctrine, and each has its uniqueness. Despite the differences in these stories among these religions, what is important is that they carry similar messages, wisdom, and guidance to humanity, and I highly respect all these religions, their followers, their sacred books and literature.

My admiration and fascination with the stories of those Abrahamic prophets in the Quran led me to explore them through literary works during my academic research journey. I found what I sought in the African-American literature of the Harlem Renaissance because African-American literature of that time is abundant with religious and spiritual works that incorporate Abrahamic figures, such as Jonah’s Gourd Vine and Moses, Man of the Mountain by the African-American writer Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston’s novels revolve around African-American culture and traditions, especially religions and spirituality, in the early twentieth century, a key theme in many African-American literary texts. In her works, Hurston not only focuses on Christianity
and preaching but also introduces other spiritual practices, such as the New Orleans Voodoo—or Hoodoo, Hurston’s preferred term—and embeds her freethought and religious skepticism throughout. However, Islam is not among these religions that Hurston documents in her works, whether as a practiced religion by the African-Americans in the South or as a religion that we might reasonably expect Hurston to consider in her texts. Therefore, I argue that Hurston strategically employs Christianity as well as Hoodoo practiced in the African-American community in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* while noticeably omitting Islam despite the fact that Islam predominated in more Northern African-American Communities as a reclaimed religious history and practice. This omission raises questions about the lack of representation of Islam in Hurston’s works and, more specifically, introduces ambiguity in readers’ interpretations of the Biblical metaphors used in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* generated from the differences between the Biblical and the Quranic narratives of Jonah, of which Hurston was likely aware.

Why, then, did Zora Neale Hurston not leave any trace of Islam in her fiction and folklore collections despite being a religion practiced by African Americans in the early twentieth century? Why does it matter that Islam is absent in Hurston’s work in particular, but present in many of her contemporaries’ texts—especially given the fact that many aspects of the Harlem Renaissance engaged explicitly religious themes? Finally, how does the omission of Islam influence our reading of Hurston’s works?

In the light of the questions raised above, this paper will explore, analyze, and provide insights into the absence of Islam in Hurston’s texts—and consider how Hurston’s representations of Biblical figures in fiction challenge readers’ understanding of the subtext and metaphors implied in the text, especially for those readers who are not familiar with the Biblical
narrative of the story or who have another narrative of the Abrahamic prophets. The following chapters, therefore, will explore the Harlem Renaissance and its influence on Hurston, delve into the history of Islam in the African-American community, and shed light on the reasons behind the apparent absence of Islam in Hurston’s work by reading closely *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Moses, Man of the Mountain*.

This study thereby seeks to contribute to the field of African-American literature by providing a deep understanding of the complex relationship between religion and literature in the African-American context and uncovering unexplored themes in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance.
II. HARLEM RENAISSANCE

The Harlem Renaissance was an influential movement of African-American intellectuals, writers, artists, actors, and musicians that flourished in the early 1920s and lasted until the end of the 1930s. It was a moment when Black writers, musicians, and artists decided to tell the world who they were and carve into American history the work of African-American intellectuals—their ideas and ideals, their folklore and religions, their gifted musicians and actors, and their rhythms and melodies. This chapter will shed light on the rise of the Harlem Renaissance, its pioneer intellectuals and writers, and their influence on African-American literature. It also explores the importance of African-American religions and spirituality in the works of the Harlem intellectuals. Further, it will bring a contrasting perspective by examining the work of a contemporary writer of Hurston, Nella Larsen, who introduces Islam in one of her most famous novels, *Quicksand*.

The Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to the industrial cities of the North, such as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Kansas City, was the early spark of the Harlem Renaissance. Many factors contributed to the migration of African Americans from the South, such as the tremendous violence under the boot of Jim Crow law in the South and the labor job opportunities promised by the lack of immigrant workforce in the North due to the United States’ involvement in World War I. Further, the heightened conflict in the North with the continuous racial confrontations between blacks and whites—such as the Red Summer Riots that ensued after the return of the African-American soldiers from the war, lynchings, and the rise of Ku Klux Klan—were significant factors that contributed to the rise of Harlem Renaissance. African Americans in Harlem were eager to make their voices heard, redefine themselves, and assert their new political and social consciousness nationally and internationally.
Intellectuals and political activists, such as W. E. B. Du Bois and sociologists like Charles S. Johnson and Alain LeRoy Locke moved the Harlem Renaissance forward through their writings and publications. They established platforms to express their ideologies and political views, which attracted African-American writers, poets, artists, and musicians who significantly made a quantum leap in American literature, music, theater, and art. For example, in 1910, Du Bois founded the magazine *The Crisis* and devoted his social and political position as a Harvard-graduate sociologist to work for the integration between blacks and whites as equal American citizens and recognition of African Americans during that time. *The Crisis* helped many young African-American writers publish their works within its pages.

Ernest Julius Mitchell II explains that at the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance, Du Bois engaged in a debate with Lothrop Stoddard, a white American journalist and political scientist. In his book *The Rising Tide of Color* (1920), Stoddard doubted African Americans’ ability to begin a Black renaissance because he believed every Black man was “a facile, even eager, imitator; but there he stops. He adopts; but he does not adapt, assimilate, and give forth creatively again”; “no black ‘renaissance’” was forthcoming, according to Stoddard (100-102). However, in response to Stoddard, Du Bois listed many Black artists and authors of that time in *The Crisis* and urged the need for more Black writers to let their voices be heard, writing:

> We have today all too few writers, for the reason that there is small market for their ideas among whites, and their energies are being called to other and more lucrative ways of earning a living. Nevertheless, we have literary ability and the race needs it. A renaissance of American Negro literature is due; the material about us in the strange, heart-rending race tangle is rich beyond dream and only we can tell the tale and sing the song from the heart. (quoted in Mitchell 643)
Du Bois aimed to encourage African-American writers and intellectuals to pour their ideas and literary abilities into *The Crisis*, and he succeeded. The magazine’s pages became filled with works by Jessi Fauset, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, and Zora Neale Hurston.

Additionally, Locke contributed to the rise of influential African-American writers and poets. Locke was a Harvard graduate philosopher and taught for forty years at Howard University, where Zora Neale Hurston first met him. In 1925, he published *The New Negro*, which shed light on African Americans’ cultural development and included an anthology that listed the works of Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, writers, and artists. Charles Molesworth characterizes Locke’s book as “a clarion call for cultural re-energizing and a subtle analysis of the then-current state of African American society and its political possibilities” (xii). Locke’s work aimed to focus on the aesthetic productions of African-American intellectuals and artists in order to represent what it meant to be an African-American in the United States—and to revoke the stereotypes attached to African Americans during that period. Moreover, Locke made every effort to financially support young poets and writers such as Hughes and Hurston by finding them patrons. Locke also mentored Hurston when she joined Zeta Phi Beta Sorority and *The Stylus*, a literary club chaired by Locke.

Participants in the Harlem Renaissance, accordingly, harnessed their literary prowess to bring their religions and spirituality to the fore, glorifying this cultural feature of their community and criticizing it in equal measure. As James Coleman explains, “[r]eligious and biblical traditions that engender faith are arguably the most important cultural feature to African Americans, and therefore also to African American writers who write about black culture” (1). Consequently, religion and spirituality played a paramount role in African-American
communities and profoundly influenced African-American writers of the Harlem Renaissance in their depictions of black culture. The emergence of African-American writers in the context of the diversity of cultures and religions that characterized Harlem and other urban areas, besides their existence in a secular world, allowed them to infuse spirituality into their writings openly and freely.

Du Bois infused religion and spirituality into his publications in order to emphasize the importance of religion in African-American scholarly and social matters. Edward J. Blum asserts that Du Bois “addressed the intricate web of religion's role in society, economic relationships, racial imaginations, and national identities. He approached religion in creative and searching ways. Concepts of the sacred, divine, and eternal penetrated every aspect of his writing and theorizing” (13). Indeed, Du Bois’s works, poems, and short stories crafted and reflected his approach that manifests the importance of religion, especially Christianity, in the life of African Americans. In such works as *The Negro Church, The Negro in the South, and The Soul of Black Folk*, Du Bois’s interests are particularly evident in Christianity and the black churches. However, his contemporary African-American intellectuals and writers went beyond Christianity. In their writings, they explored and brought other practiced religions in the African-American community to the fore and introduced universal religions.

Most Renaissance writers had a religious family upbringing, which later enriched their writing backgrounds. Hughes, Cullen, and Hurston, for example, all used Christian themes and characters in their works, and some of them even went beyond representing black churches by introducing other religions practiced by African Americans. One of the most influential female writers of the Renaissance, Nella Larsen, was neither a preacher's daughter nor raised within the black churches, yet she infused Christianity and black church rituals in her novels and introduced
Islam in her novel, *Quicksand*. Here, I chose to bring Larsen to the fore because she depicts Islam in her work whereas Hurston did not—despite Hurston’s reputation for celebrating African-American religions in her works and also her experiences as an anthropologist and ethnographer.

Larsen integrated Islam into *Quicksand* by mentioning *Saïd the Fisherman* (1903), a novel by Marmaduke Pickthall. *Saïd the Fisherman* is a picaresque that revolves around the escapades of an Arab Muslim character in the Near East in the late nineteenth century. Likewise, Pickthall was a well-known author for his translation of the Holy Quran and his literary works inspired by his extended travels in the Near East. In *Quicksand*, Larsen’s narrator says, “[o]f the books which she had taken from their places she had decided on Marmaduke Pickthall’s *Saïd the Fisherman*. She wanted forgetfulness, complete mental relaxation, rest from thought of any kind” (2). Larsen’s reference to this novel does not suggest that she practiced Islam, but it brings depth to her work by distracting the protagonist from an intense moment. Deborah E. McDowell, the editor of *Quicksand* and Larsen’s *Passing*, assumes that Larsen embeds Pickthall’s novel in *Quicksand*’s plot because it “has Eastern color, movement, and sharp authenticity. Perhaps Larsen intends an ironic contrast to the dull sobriety and sterility of Naxos” (Larsen 243). In his biography, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*, George Hutchinson maintains that the reference to Pickthall reflects Larsen’s “orientalist interests” (142).

However, Pickthall’s *Saïd the Fisherman* was not the only book that Larsen knew of that revolved around the East and Islam. Lothrop Stoddard’s *New World of Islam* was on her application list to *The New York Public Library*, along with the magazine *Asia* (Hutchinson 141). Taken together, Pickthall’s novel, Stoddard’s book, and the magazine indicate that Larsen had a
more in-depth knowledge of Islam than critics have presumed—and suggests a relatively high familiarity with Islam among the African-American writers of the Renaissance.

To sum up, the Harlem Renaissance is a significant movement in African-American literature, and its pioneers contributed to spotlighting the African-American religions and beliefs in their writings. Most African-American writers of the Harlem Renaissance devoted their talents to writing about the topic of religion regardless of their religious affiliation or belief tendencies, including Islam, as the case was for Larsen. However, one of the most influential writers of that movement who interrogated African-American religions extensively in her writings, Hurston, did not incorporate Islam as a practiced religion in the American South by her people. Why not?
III. HISTORY OF ISLAM IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA

To grasp the absence of Islam in Hurston's works as a practiced religion by African-Americans in the diaspora, I argue that we must delve into the history of Islam in America: including as it was practiced by the enslaved African Muslims who were deported to America in the Atlantic slave trade and, afterwards, in early twentieth-century America. By recovering this history, this chapter will also offer potential reasons why Hurston did not include direct references to Islam in her novels.

According to the National Museum of African American History and Culture’s webpage, Islam “has been a piece of the American religious fabric since the first settlers arrived in North America.” Michel A. Gomez elaborates and explains that “[a]mong the beliefs introduced into the Americas by Africans was the religion of Islam. Indeed,” he continues, “Frederick Douglass, may have himself been a descendant of Muslims” (Exchanging 59). Gomez, in other words, pinpoints the origins of Islam brought to America by attributing it to African slave Muslims who were deported to America in the Atlantic slave trade. Gomez, further specifies that enslaved African Muslims were brought primarily to the British colonies of Georgia and South Carolina, while the Spanish and French deported African Muslims to Florida and Louisiana, respectively too (69). Islam, in short, was one of the prominent African religions brought by Africans and practiced by them in the South.

However, slavery impacted the practices of Islam in the American South, and the Islam circulating by the early twentieth century was not a perfectly direct descendant of that practiced by enslaved Africans. Enslaved Muslims experienced hostility and were stripped of their rights to practice their religion upon their arrival. They struggled to keep the Islamic traditions flowing
from generation to generation because they could not access the Quran and Hadith. Gomez argues that:

The continuity of the Islamic tradition was heavily dependent upon a cultural transfer within existing Muslim families and over generations… African-born Muslims may have been unable to communicate with their children and grandchildren because they could not speak a common language well enough to convey detailed information and would therefore have been frustrated in their attempts to convey the tenets of Islam adequately. (Muslims in Early America 706)

This means that many factors, such as linguistic challenges, lack of Islamic educational resources, and forcible conversion to Christianity, challenged Islam’s continuity in the South.

However, despite the suffering and pressure to convert to Christianity in the plantations, many enslaved African-American Muslims maintained their belief in Islam. In Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes, Malcolm Bell Jr. interviewed the descendants of African-enslaved Muslims in Sapelo Island, Georgia, in the 1940s in order to better understand the existence of African-enslaved Muslims in the antebellum South and the absence of practiced Islam in the 1940s. In an interview with Katie, a descendant of a formerly-enslaved African Muslim called Bilali Muhammed, Garner asks her about Bilali, and she confirms that she knows that

Margret an uh daughtuh Cotto use tuh say dat Belali an he wife phoebe pray on duh bead. Dey wuz bery puhtichluh bout duh time dey pray an dey bery regluh
bout duh hour. Wen du sun come up, wen it straight obuh head an went it set, das
duh time dey pray. Dey bow tuh duh sun and hab lill mat tuh kneel. (134)
This confirms that Islam was among the practiced religions in the South and simultaneously
suggests the absence of Islamic practice on that island at the time of the interview, since the
descendants of Bilali Muhammed self-identify as Christians and attend church. Even though the
Muslim community that Bilali was leading on the Island continued to thrive, the Islamic beliefs
and practices of his descendants and the descendants of his followers faded away and became
history. Building upon the previous discussion, evidence like that gathered by Bell confirms that
Islam was circulating in the African communities in the antebellum South but did not survive
among the African-American community of the South in the postbellum.

In early twentieth-century America, Islam was represented by the two prominent black
nationalistic organizations: the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam. Thomas Drew,
also known as Noble Drew Ali, founded the Moorish Science Temple in 1925 in Chicago, and
Wallace Fard Muhammad established the Nation of Islam in early 1930s Detroit. Both of these
Islamic organizations were founded to offer the African-American community an alternative
religion to Christianity. These organizations were founded not only to disseminate Islam but also
to support black nationalistic initiatives, which can be summarized as the empowerment of the
African-American community by determining an African-American religious unity as
represented by Islam.

However, these institutions often spread misleading and inaccurate information to support
their nationalistic endeavors. One of the most confusing claims was made by Drew Ali regarding
the origins of African Americans, whom he believed to be Asiatic. Edward E. Curtis IV says that
Drew Ali argued that African Americans “were Moors, a nation that emerged out of a more
general group of Asiatic peoples. While Moors possessed national heritage, according to Drew Ali, they shared a common religion, Islam, with all nations of Asiatic descent” (46). This inaccurate claim made by Drew Ali is not the first one that misclassified the origins of African Americans and African-American Muslims. African-American Muslims, particularly, were misclassified as Arabs or Asians. Consequently, Islam was not classified as a practiced religion by Africans in the diaspora in the early history of Islam in America. Kambiz Ghaneabassiri, in *A History of Islam in America*, argues that because many enslaved African Muslims were descendants of Arabs of Northern Africa, early historians of Islam in America misclassified them, not listing them among black Africans but as Moors or Arab descendants.

To bring this all together, Islam was one of the practiced religions that African enslaved peoples brought to America. However, Islam did not perfectly survive in the era of slavery in the South nor the postbellum because of many factors, such as the unavailability of Islamic texts and the forcible conversion of enslaved peoples to Christianity. The Islam that circulated in the early twentieth century was not a direct descendant of that practiced by enslaved peoples, but a result of the rise of black nationalistic organizations such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam in the American North. Moreover, African-American Muslims were misclassified as Arabs or Asians by historians of the early history of America, and therefore, Islam was not classified as a practiced religion by African Americans. Therefore, it is likely that Hurston neglected to depict Islam as a practiced religion in the South because there were no noticeable practices of Islam in the African-American communities of the South, where the American South served as the primary focus of her literary works.
IV.  HURSTON AND RELIGIOUS FAITH: AN OVERVIEW

Although Zora Neal Hurston may have neglected to engage Islam in her works because its practice had changed as a consequence of enslavement and later commentators had severed its association with Black America, Zora Neale Hurston’s experience as an ethnographer and anthropologist, along with the focus she pays to religious beliefs and practices in her novels, still beg for further analysis—especially since so much of her work does engage with the topics of religious beliefs and practices.

Hurston, in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*, says, “As I told you before, I had been pitched head-foremost into the Baptist Church when I was born. I had heard the singing, the preaching, and the prayers. They were a part of me” (Walker 68). Gray Ciuba attributes Hurston’s integration of religions and spiritual practices in her works to her family’s upbringing: “Daughter of a Baptist preacher, Zora Neale Hurston spoke from the pulpit every time that she wrote” (119). Besides her literary prowess, Hurston was also a folklorist, ethnographer, and anthropologist, and that helped her to represent African Americans’ religious and spiritual practices in most of her works, such as her novels *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and her folklore collections *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Eatonville Anthology* (1926), and of course her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942).

Furthermore, due to her religious upbringing, Hurston had been exposed to a cultural milieu deeply rooted in Christian traditions and beliefs. However, even though most of her works are inspired by the Bible and black church traditions, Hurston found her way, learned about other practiced religions by the African-Americans of the South, and celebrated them in her works.

Rhonda Collier writes,
It is not strange that the Bible would be the source of inspiration for a wandering preacher’s daughter, novelist and anthropologist who, in terms of religion and religious practice, saw similarities in many great religions and these intersections were apparent in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. (146)

What Collier means here is that being a novelist with a keen eye on religion and spiritual practices and storytelling mastery and an ethnographer who understands the religions of her people, Hurston was able to produce works that embrace multiple religions, such as *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. Of course, being a novelist, anthropologist, and ethnographer helped Hurston to write stories encompassing various beliefs and religions harmoniously, such as the monotheistic religions Judaism and Christianity, and African diasporic religions like Hoodoo not only in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* but also in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*.

By incorporating Abrahamic religions and the African diasporic religions in her works, Hurston elevates Hoodoo practices and rituals and gives them as much value in her writing as the Abrahamic religions. What this means is that Hurston celebrated these religions side by side despite their contradictions for reasons. On the one hand, Hurston’s celebration of these religious practices and rituals went against the ideology of some Harlem Renaissance elite intellectuals who urged writers and artists to avoid depicting the cultures of the laboring classes because doing so risked affirming negative stereotypes. Tiffany R. Patterson argues that Hurston, however:

chose to represent the beauty of black culture using the very group of people that black intellectuals of the time considered the underbelly of black life. She did so by not only celebrating the music and the poetry of their language but also by
sanctioning the legitimacy of hoodoo and voodoo, an underground world of peasant cosmology that terrified and embarrassed the elite. (8)

This indicates that Hurston presented African Americans’ religions and spiritual practices without embarrassment or fear of criticism. Hurston aimed to represent and celebrate Black life in the South truthfully, considering her scientific integrity as an ethnographer and anthropologist.

On the other hand, however, Hurston did not find the God, as celebrated in the Black church, to be sufficient—and she was frustrated by the prospect of a deity who failed to mitigate Black suffering. In her autobiography Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston indicated that she began to doubt Christianity and emphasized its failure to answer her innate, innocent questions. Hurston’s writings reflected her religious skepticism and inclination for freethought. Christopher Cameron, in Zora Neale Hurston, Freethought, and African American Religion, argues that Hurston’s writings “provide some of the best examinations of Black freethought during the twentieth century and demonstrate that a significant strain of skepticism and doubt has been a part of African American religious and intellectual life from the era of slavery to the present” (237).

Herbert Robinson Marbury argues that Hurston “wanted more than a religion that made status quo life more bearable” (119). Consequently, Hurston remained fascinated by the God of Judaism compared to her church’s God. In Dust Track on a Road, Hurston writes, “The New Testament still plays a poor second to the Old Testament for me. The Jews had a God who laid about Him when they needed Him” (37). Similarly, in a letter to her patron Mrs. Anne Nathan Meyer, Hurston expressed her admiration of the Old Testament, saying, “The Old Testament is my only reason for ever opening the Bible at all” (Kaplan 62). This indicates that Christianity disappointed Hurston, and she found that other religions more compelling, like Judaism and
African-American diasporic beliefs such as Hoodoo. Furthermore, Hurston, in a letter to Herbert Sheen, argued explicitly that Islam was “a much realistic religion. It goes along with nature instead of inventing sins to suffer for. Human beings invented sin, not God” (ibid 700). This indicates that Hurston was aware of Islam after all and held a positive view of Islamic beliefs.

Babacar M’Baye finds that Hurston’s *Mules and Men* contains African Islamic elements intertwined with representations of Hoodoo in Hurston’s attempt to represent a “spiritual retreat.” Hurston documented one of her trips to a Hoodoo doctor in *Mules and Men*, in which she isolated herself in order to acquire power and knowledge. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston describes her experience: “Three days my body must lie silent and fasting while my spirit went wherever spirits must go that seek answers never given to men as men…I could have no food, but a pitcher of water” (*Mules and Men* 199). M’Baye claims that “Hurston’s seclusion is parallel to the West African Islamic practice known as *khalwa*. A Sufi term, *khalwa* is an Islamic ritual in which a person retreats in loneliness in an attempt to seek knowledge from a higher power” (446).

Although I agree with M’Baye that spiritual retreat is an Islamic Sufism ritual, I cannot accept his overall conclusion that Islamic Sufism directly influences the ritual Hurston experienced. On the one hand, spiritual retreat is a ritual practiced in Catholicism as well as the other religions that Hoodoo is derived from, and not limited to Islamic Sufism. According to Tammie Jenkins, Hoodoo combines religious rituals and spiritual practices from enslaved Africans in Haiti and New Orleans. They “combined rituals and ceremonial traditions with Catholicism and Native American shamanism to create a form of spiritual expression, merging the deities of Africa with saints, icons, and zemis found in their new environments” (217). That means Sufi Islamic practice does not necessarily influence the spiritual retreat in the Hoodoo ritual that Hurston experienced. On the other hand, Hurston did not mention that Islamic Sufism
influenced this ritual at all. In fact, she describes it as “formal as the Catholic church anywhere” 
(Mules and Men 320).

In conclusion, Hurston wrote from a Christian background because she was raised as a 
preacher's daughter—while, at the same time, she often called Christianity into question. Hurston 
also used her literary works to express her freethought and religious skepticism. Moreover, 
Hurston’s interest in Christianity did not prevent her from celebrating controversial practices, 
such as Hoodoo, in her texts; likewise, Hurston did not refrain from expressing her appreciation 
for other religions, such as Judaism and Islam.
V. THE ABSENCE OF ISLAM IN MOSES, MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN

Hurston’s religious interests are especially evident in her novel Moses, Man of the Mountain. In this novel, Hurston rewrites the Biblical Exodus, which has been an important text for African-American communities since enslavement. In Pillars of Cloud and Fire: The Politics of Exodus in African American Biblical Interpretation, Marbury explains the importance of the Exodus narrative in the African-American community, saying,

For most African Americans, the Bible’s stories, particularly exodus [sic], grounded their religious knowledge. African Americans readily transferred its themes of bondage and freedom to their own context. Black religious imagination endowed Moses, Pharaoh, the Egyptians, and the Children of Israel with iconic status. Such imaginations summoned the Bible’s stories to mediate the textuality of Western history with their own counter-history. (5)

The Biblical Exodus has been a vital source of inspiration for African Americans' imagination of freedom and equality from enslavement through the time of grinding segregation and oppressive racism, to the Civil Rights Movement. Many members of the Black community have seen parallels between their experience and those of the Hebrews under the boot of a cruel ruler and iniquitous regime.

Scholars such as Robert J. Morris notably claim, however, that Hurston uses extrabiblical sources to assemble her Moses story, such as Flavius Josephus’s Jewish Antiquities (315). The incorporation of different religious perspectives, including Christianity and Judaism, to rewrite the Exodus indicates that Hurston uses her novel to formulate a story of Moses from an African-American perspective. Considering its importance to the African-American readerships, Hurston
integrates not only the Judeo-Christian narrative of the Exodus into her novel but also the African-American spiritual tenets of Hoodoo.

Hurston starts *Moses, Man of the Mountain* with a controversial introduction. She minimalizes Moses’s role in Christianity, characterizing him as an “Old man with a beard” and a law-giver who led the Children of Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land—while she elevates the African legend, Moses, as a god worshipped by Africans like the Haitian god of Voodoo, Damballa. As Hurston puts it, the “worship of Moses as the greatest one of magic is not confined to Africa. Wherever the children of Africa have been scattered by slavery, there is the acceptance of Moses as the foundation of mystic power” (*Moses* 8). This juxtaposition between the Abrahamic and the African diasporic religions denotes Hurston’s appreciation of Hoodoo as a cultural product of the enslaved Africans in the diaspora. Hoodoo represents the African heritage enslaved Africans brought to the diaspora and gives them a unique voice with which they may tell the story of their history and survival.

Hurston, accordingly, calls Moses “the finest hoodoo man in the world” (*Moses* 147). What makes Hoodoo distinctive for Hurston is that it preserves the traditional African practices that enslaved Africans brought to the diaspora, practices that helped them to survive the hardships of slavery. As “the finest hoodoo man in the world,” Moses frees the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. As Robert J. Morrisby explains, Hurston “toyed with biblical story” (312) by integrating stories from her perspective that do not exist in the Biblical or Quranic narratives and inventing new characters and new narratives that help her twist the Biblical narrative and recontextualize it within the framework of Hoodoo to manifest that “Africa has her mouth on Moses” (*Moses* 7).
Hurston starts the novel with Moses’s birth story interwoven with many untold stories, neither in the Bible nor the Quran, until he becomes an Egyptian prince in Pharaoh’s royal palace and later a “Commander-in-Chief of the armies of Egypt” (*Moses* 76), which is an invented heroic title not derived from the Bible but of “the Moses legend found in the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities*, in which Moses is an Egyptian general” (Morris 315). This recontextualization of the Biblical narrative aims to create a magical and more powerful Moses than the one who existed in the Bible. In other words, Hurston’s novel offers its readers new narratives and characters that are not strictly Biblical. Hurston’s portrayal of Moses unfolds in the context of Hoodoo when Mentu teaches Moses magic with the assistance of a group of priests. Under the eyes of Mentu and the priests, Moses “learned to feed the sacred snakes and handle the altar fires without hurt to himself” (*Moses* 61). Further, Mentu advises Moses to read the “*Book of Thoth,*” an ancient Egyptian magic book, so that Moses will

> enchant the heavens, the earth, the abyss, the mountain, and the sea. [He] will know what the birds of the air and the creeping things are saying. [He] will know the secrets of the deep because the power is there to bring them to [him]…

> [He] can go into the world of ghosts and come back to the shape [he was] on earth. [He] will see the sun shining in the sky with all the gods, and the full moon.

(*Moses* 73)

In Hurston’s narrative, the supernatural powers that the *Book of Thoth* promises to offer its readers are originally the knowledge and miracles God pledged to and revealed to Moses in his mission as a prophet to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Hurston reinterprets these divinely-granted miracles in favor of Hoodoo practices and beliefs, thereby manifesting her pursuit of freethought by challenging the concept of God and criticizing conventional theology. She
elevates Moses to a deity worshiped by her people in Africa, America, and the West Indies, saying:

So all across Africa, America, the West Indies, there are tales of the powers of Moses and great worship of him and his powers. But it does not flow from the Ten Commandments. It is his rod of power, the terror he shadowed before all Israel and to Pharaoh, and THAT MIGHTY HAND. (Moses 8)

This elevation of Moses goes beyond the Biblical representation of him as a prophet, which denotes Hurston’s intention to celebrate the beliefs and practices of African Americans in diasporic conditions, such Hoodoo—without repudiating Judeo-Christian beliefs and practices, but rather attenuating and criticizing them.

Notably, Hurston’s introduction does not explicitly mention Moses's story in Islam. However, she admits that “there are other concepts of Moses abroad in the World. Asia and all the Near East are sown with legends of this character” (Moses 7; emphasis added). While there are minor differences between the story of Moses in Islam compared to the other Abrahamic religions, Moses—or Musa in Islam—has more stories than those reported in the Bible, such as Moses's stories with Al-khidr and the Story of the Cow. Hurston does not use any of these stories in retelling Moses’s story from an African-American perspective.

Hurston, in a letter to Herbert Sheen, asks: “Why so many religions? Why ‘reveal; Himself to an Arab in one light and to Caucasian in another? And to a Hindu in still another and to a Mongol in still another?’” (Kaplan 699). Here, Hurston’s idea of Islam emerges as an “Arab” religion, closely associated with Asiatic religions—and implicitly contrary to Judaism, Christianity, and Hoodoo. In other words, Hurston does not consider Islam to be an African religion, in-line with the misclassification of African Muslims by early historians of Islam in
America and the claims made by black nationalist religious organizations in the American North in the early twentieth century. In other words, Hurston considers Islam to be an Asiatic religion and does not, therefore, see the relatability of using Asiatic religions to tell an African-American story.

In summary, Hurston rewrites the Biblical Exodus and the character of the Abrahamic prophet Moses by incorporating extrabiblical stories of Moses, such as *Jewish Antiquities* and the Hoodoo perspective of Moses. She also elevates Moses to the status of a deity, which contradicts conventional theologies of both the Bible and the Quran, in order to celebrate the African diasporic spiritual practices over the Abrahamic religions and to formulate a unique story of Moses from an African-American perspective. In the introduction to *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Hurston connotes that Islam is an Asiatic religion—“Asia and all the Near East are sown with legends of this character” (*Moses* 7, quoted above)—and, in these other religious traditions, Moses tenders a story that differs from those of Africans and African religions and spirituality, which may explain the absence of Musa and Islam in her novel.
VI. THE METAPHORICAL CHALLENGE IN *JONAH’S GOURD VINE*

In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Zora Hurston also uses a Biblical figure—or, more accurately, an Abrahamic figure, Jonah, introduced in the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam)—as an extended metaphor represented by the protagonist, John Pearson Buddy. However, here, as in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Hurston does not consider the differences in the narratives between Christianity and Islam. For Cameron, Hurston’s interest in “Black freethought” would seem to explain both her elevation of Moses as a deity to be worshipped in *Moses, Man of the Mountain* and her intentional mischaracterization of the Biblical Jonah in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, however, Hurston’s lack of engagement with Islam introduces ambiguity when it comes to interpreting John Pearson Buddy’s character.

*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* revolves around the story of John Pearson Buddy, who escapes from poverty and his stepfather’s violence in Notasulga, Alabama, by preaching at Zion Hope Church and becoming a minister in Eatonville, central Florida. Hurston parallels John’s journey with that of the Abrahamic prophet, Jonah. In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, although John succeeds in many aspects of his life, especially in preaching, his sexual urges and infidelity are the sins that ruin his family’s life and career. As Collier, in her assessment of Hurston’s use of biblical references, puts it, “John’s sin [keeps] him from being a good father, husband and preacher” (146). I concur with Collier’s claim that John’s sexuality and infidelity harm his life and career. His sexual transgressions led to tarnished credibility, particularly as a preacher. Consequently, he lost his place in the Eatonville community, like the Biblical Jonah who lost his dignity in the Biblical narrative because of his disrespect of God and reluctance to fulfill his obligation—before God forgave him and allowed him to repent.
Even though she is a preacher’s daughter, Hurston mischaracterizes the Biblical Jonah by comparing him to John. Collier argues that “Hurston’s John is much more complicated than the Biblical Jonah, who most readers recall from the ‘Jonah and the Whale’ story. Hurston’s main character is a sinner who is called to do the right thing and in the end does not” (145-146). Both characters are called to similar missions; whereas Jonah refuses to carry out God's command and flees from his divine calling, John emotionally neglects his wife, Lucy, and their children—and John’s sexual promiscuity causes him to lose his calling to righteousness in the Zion Hope Church. However, even though John is more complicated than the Biblical Jonah, Hurston’s novel implies that the Biblical prophet and John are the same as sinners, regardless of the differences that inhere between their specific sins. Hurston’s humiliation of John by stigmatizing him with infidelity and egocentrism is a portrayal of Black Christian church preachers who exploit the pulpits for their personal gain—rather than fulfill their calling to faith. Peter K. Powers claims that “what seems to fit John for leadership is not his devotion to a Christian morality or doctrine but rather his physical strength, sexual energy, and creativity with language” (240).

John first learned to preach in a railway camp when he “preached the sermon himself for the entertainment of the men who had stayed in camp and he aped the gestures of the preacher so accurately that the crowd hung half-way between laughter and awe” (Jonah’s 107). This moment is a turning point in John’s life. His preaching impresses his friends, and one says: “You kin mark folks,” “Dass jes’ lak dat preacher fuh de world” (Jonah’s 107). Another character suggests that John should go to Eatonville, Florida to preach. John’s journey is like that of a prophet suddenly called to preach to a particular people. Elizabeth J. West infers that “John emerges as a larger-than-life figure just as many biblical heroes — through a divine call” (154). In addition to his
Baptist heritage, John has a poetic prowess and intense emotions that paved his way into preaching.

John, however, overestimates himself as a product of Black Baptist preaching traditions and a talented poet. One Sunday in church, he says, “Brothers and Sisters, Ah rise befo’ yuh tuhday tuh tell yuh, God done called me tuh preach” and proceeds saying: “He called me long uhgo, but Ah wouldn’t heed tuh de voice, but brothers and sisters, God done whipped me tuh it, and like Peter and Paul Ah means tuh preach Christ and Him crucified” (Jonah’s 111). While the Biblical Jonah is a chosen prophet by God, Hurston makes John choose himself to preach—John, ultimately, had to “heed tuh de voice” calling him to preach, a turn of phrase that indicates he assumes too much personal agency over his calling and implies Hurston’s critique of Black church preachers who use their pulpits to gain power and recognition.

Hurston's interest in the character of John as a foil for the Biblical Jonah—and the critique of Black Christianity her novel advances—is evident from the novel’s title. Hurston explains the title in one of her letters to Carl Van Veghten: “You see the prophet of God sat up under a gourd vine that had grown up in one night. But a cut worm came along and cut it down. Great and sudden growth. One act of malice and it is withered and gone” (Kaplan 291). Many scholars read the “gourd vine” as a symbol for John. However, others argue that it represents his wife, Lucy, and the worm represents his sins that caused his wife’s demise. Jenkins finds that the “gourd vine is a symbol for the relationship between Lucy and John. Lucy was the ‘gourd vine’ that provided John with the fruits of her labor, such as children, love, devotion, and encouragement; however, she was cut down—died—by John’s unrelenting desire for other women” (220). Although I agree with Jenkins that Lucy was John’s “gourd vine” that protected him for a long time and his obduracy was the worm that withers her, I argue that the gourd vine
in this novel represents not just John’s first wife, Lucy, or their relationship, but also John’s children, his congregation, and his wealth.

The first time Jonah’s gourd vine appears in the novel is when Harris, a loyal friend of John’s second wife, Hattie, says, “Iss uh shame, Sister. Ah’d cut down dat Jonah’s gourd vine in uh minute, if Ah had all de say-so” (Jonah’s 146). Here, Harris is comforting Hattie after an argument with John, and the gourd vine symbolizes Lucy and John’s reputation, including the influence they have in their community and, most importantly, over John’s congregation. Recognizing that this gourd vine alludes to that in the Biblical story of Jonah in which God provides Jonah with a vine that shades him from the sun but then plants a worm, killing the vine that Jonah failed to appreciate as a symbol of divine compassion and proof of divine power; readers may surmise that John’s gourd vine has been cut by his second wife, Hattie, leaving him in a dire situation to collapse. However, God gives John another chance in Plant City, Florida, but his infidelity again cuts his newly growing gourd vine, leaving him to die.

Although Hurston’s allusion to the “gourd vine” may be clear to readers familiar with the Biblical Jonah, I find it confusing—as did at least one of Hurston’s readers; in the same letter where she documents the title’s Biblical allusion for Carl Van Veghten, she admits, “Oh yes, the title you didn’t understand” (Kaplan 291). Understanding the Biblical Jonah becomes necessary to comprehend the extended metaphor implied in Hurston’s novel. Likewise, to understand the extended metaphor in Jonah’s Gourd Vine, I find it necessary to investigate the story in Biblical hermeneutics as well as Islamic exegetics. Beginning with the Biblical Jonah: when God calls Jonah to deliver a message of repentance to the wicked people of Nineveh, he rejects God’s request and flees to the sea, but he cannot escape God. On a ship in the middle of the ocean, Jonah is thrown from the ship and swallowed by a whale. After asking for forgiveness from God,
God accepts Jonah’s prayers and delivers him to the shore. When Jonah knows that God similarly offers redemption to the sinful inhabitants of Nineveh, he becomes angry with God. Jonah then runs in anguish to the outskirts mountain of Nineveh, where God provides a gourd that grows a vine to relieve Jonah’s discomfort in the hot sun. However, on the next day, God sends a worm that destroys the gourd, and Jonah faints from the sun’s heat, never repents his sin of being angry with God, and wishes he had died. In Christianity, Jonah is introduced as reluctant and rebellious against the commands of his Lord, ungrateful, and unable to bear the burdens of his call to preach and prophesize.

In contrast, Jonah or “Yunus” in Islam is a great prophet; his name is repeated four times in the Quran, and one of the chapters is given his name. Yunus’s story is a lesson in the significance of patience and “Duaa,” or prayers in the life of believers. Allah says, ﴿وَإِسْمَآئِيلَ وَإِلِيَشَأَ وَيُونُسَ وَلُوطَ ﻋَلَىٰ ﻲَلِدِّيْنَ إِنَّهُمْ ﺗُؤْمِنُونَ ۚ وَمَا كَانَ ﻋَلَىٰ ﺗُؤْمِنُونَ إِلَّا ﻋَلَىٰ ﺗُؤْمِنُونَ﴾ (Surah Al-Anam, Ayah 86). This holy verse from the Quran is translated as: “And Isma’il and Elisha, and Jonas, and Lot: and to all We gave favor above the nations” (Quran 6:86). Yunus’s story begins when he gives up and flees from his people of Nineveh in anguish because they disbelieve in Allah; Yunus’s “sin” is that he didn’t have Allah’s permission to leave the city. By Yunus’s leaving, the inhabitants of Nineveh believe in Allah and repent of their sins; therefore, Allah provides them with redemption. During Yunus’s Journey at sea, a violent storm rocked the ship he was on, and he was thrown into the ocean and swallowed by a whale. In the whale, Yunus prays to Allah to forgive his sin and to survive. Allah accepts Yunus’s repentance for fleeing the city without His approval, ordering the whale to cast him to the shore. When Yunus is on the beach, he is alone and sick, and his skin is as weak as a newborn’s skin. Therefore, Allah provides Yunus with a gourd, a shady and insect-repellent plant that can protect the prophets’ skin from the sun, heat, and insects. Then, Allah rewards Yunus for
his repentance with another message to deliver to the inhabitants of Nineveh and a lesson about patience in his preaching journey.

Despite the similarities between the story of Jonah in the two religions, Yunus in Islam is introduced as an obedient prophet, and his only sin is leaving his nation without the Allah’s approval. Yunus obeys Allah and does not become angry or arrogant with him. The gourd is given to him as a reward, and there is no mention of it withering. From this point, I find that the Abrahamic prophets' stories used in literary texts, despite their similarities, can be interpreted differently, affecting the overall understanding of the text and its purpose and meaning.

Integrating prophetic characters in literary texts significantly impacts the meaning of the works and can add unique textures to them. Hiclâl Demir argues that “[p]rophet parables, due to their richness in connotation, are one of the resources used by modern authors,” and they “enable the readers to identify with the story and to avail themselves of the experiences” (335). However, in Jonah’s Gourd Vine, one must understand the Biblical Jonah to understand the allegory impeded in the novel and Hurston's deliberate defamation of the Biblical Jonah.

The differences between Jonah’s story in Christianity and Islam and the confusion in understanding the text bring me to investigate both stories' small but significant details. While the Biblical Jonah and Hurston’s John do not learn God’s lesson from the first time, making Him send His punishment upon them, the Quranic Yunus is a favored prophet that Allah arouses the sea and commands the whale to swallow him in order to convey a moral lesson about patience. Yunus never returns to his sin (fleeing his people before getting Allah’s permission), and he is forgiven and rewarded with a gourd to shade and protect him.

To sum up, by ignoring the Islamic narrative of the prophet Yunus, Hurston overlooks the variations in the narratives of this prophet between Christianity and Islam. This omission
introduces ambiguity when interpreting the primary metaphor she has incorporated into the novel—what or who, ultimately, does the gourd vine symbolize in Hurston’s text? By comparing John to the Biblical Jonah, Hurston’s critique of John’s infidelity and the ways Black Christian church preachers might exploit the pulpits for their personal gain eclipses the messages of obedience and patience encoded in the story of Yunus in Islam. The gourd vine Allah provided Yunus was never withered by a worm in the Quran and Islamic tradition. For Hurston, however, “[o]ne act of malice and it is withered and gone.”
VII. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I argue that the major novels written by Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* incorporate Abrahamic prophets in their narratives. In so doing, Hurston both celebrates and interrogates the religions that African Americans practiced in the South. However, Islam is not among these religions, which is surprising because Hurston is a well-known writer of the Harlem Renaissance for celebrating and integrating African-American religions and spirituality in her works. This leads me to investigate the history of Islam in the African-American community in early twentieth-century America and conclude that Hurston’s omission of Islam might be a result of the misclassification of Islam as a practiced religion by the Africans in the slavery era—and the nonviability of Islam to survive in both antebellum and postbellum America. With the elimination of Islam, Hurston constructs her novels based on the religions practiced by African Americans, Christianity, and Hoodoo, which consequently introduces ambiguity in interpreting the metaphors implied in the novels for Muslim readers.
VIII. WORKS CITED


