



Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

(First edition, 1854; expanded, 1857)

The author of these poems went by the name Frances Ellen Watkins at the time they were published; a few years later, she married and took the additional surname Harper. Harper was a freeborn African American from Maryland, though by the time she published these poems, she had relocated to the northern states. She was a touring anti-slavery lecturer, an essayist, a poet, and a novelist. These selections come from Harper's first commercially successful collection of poetry, which proved so popular that it was reissued repeatedly over the next two decades. The first and second poems presented here appeared in the book's first edition, while the third and fourth poems come from an expanded edition. Religiously, Harper was a Unitarian, but she also frequently contributed to publications and initiatives of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

1. Bible Defence of Slavery^a

Take sackcloth of the darkest dye,
and shroud the pulpits round!
Servants of Him that cannot lie,
sit mourning on the ground.

Let holy horror blanch each cheek,
pale every brow with fears;
and rocks and stones, if ye could speak,
ye well might melt to tears!

Let sorrow breathe in every tone,
in every strain ye raise;
insult not God's majestic throne
with the mockery of praise.

A "reverend" man, whose light should be
the guide of age and youth,
brings to the shrine of Slavery
the sacrifice of truth!

For the direst wrong by man imposed
since Sodom's fearful cry,
the word of life has been unclosed
to give your God the lie.

Oh! when ye pray for heathen lands
and plead for their dark shores,
remember Slavery's cruel hands
make heathens at your doors!

* * *

2. Ethiopia

Yes! Ethiopia yet shall stretch
her bleeding hands abroad;
her cry of agony shall reach
the burning throne of God.

The tyrant's yoke from off her neck,
his fetters from her soul,
the mighty hand of God shall break
and spurn the base control.

Redeemed from dust and freed from chains,
her sons shall lift their eyes;
from cloud-capped hills and verdant plains
shall shouts of triumph rise.

Upon her dark, despairing brow
shall play a smile of peace,

^a Bible Defence of Slavery was the title given to an 1851 reprint of a work of pro-slavery apologetics written by white northerner Josiah Priest. Priest was a layperson, but he was inaccurately credited on the book's title page with the ministerial honorific "Reverend."

for God shall bend unto her woe
and bid her sorrows cease.

'Neath sheltering vines and stately palms
shall laughing children play,
and aged sires with joyous psalms
shall gladden every day.

Secure by night and blest by day
shall pass her happy hours,
nor human tigers hunt for prey
within her peaceful bowers.

Then, Ethiopia! stretch, oh! stretch
thy bleeding hands abroad;
thy cry of agony shall reach
and find redress from God.

* * *

3. Free Labor^b

I wear an easy garment;
o'er it no toiling slave
wept tears of hopeless anguish
in his passage to the grave.

And from its ample folds
shall rise no cry to God;
upon its warp and woof shall be
no stain of tears and blood.

Oh, lightly shall it press my form,
unladen with a sigh;
I shall not 'mid its rustling hear
some sad despairing cry.

This fabric is too light to bear
the weight of bondsmen's tears;
I shall not in its texture trace
the agony of years.

Too light to bear a smothered sigh
from some lorn woman's heart,
whose only wreath of household love
is rudely torn apart.

Then lightly shall it press my form,
unburdened by a sigh;
and from its seams and folds shall rise
no voice to pierce the sky

and witness at the throne of God,
in language deep and strong,
that I have nerved Oppression's hand
for deeds of guilt and wrong.

* * *

4. Lines

At the Portals of the Future,
full of madness, guilt, and gloom,
stood the hateful form of Slavery,
crying, "Give, oh! give me room—

room to smite the earth with cursing;
room to scatter, rend, and slay;
from the trembling mother's bosom,
room to tear her child away;

room to trample on the manhood
of the country far and wide;
room to spread o'er every Eden
Slavery's scorching lava-tide!"

Pale and trembling stood the Future,
quailing 'neath his frown of hate,
as he grasped with bloody clutches
the great keys of Doom and Fate.

In his hand he held a banner
all festooned with blood and tears;

^b The "free labor" movement, also known as the "free produce" movement, was a form of anti-slavery activism: a consumer boycott on goods that were produced using enslaved labor. Among the boycotted products were sugar and, as in Harper's poem, cotton. The boycott was started by Quakers but came to be practiced more widely among opponents of slavery in the United States and Britain.

'twas a fearful ensign, woven
with the grief and wrong of years.

On his brow, he wore a helmet
decked with strange and cruel art;
every jewel was a life-drop
wrung from some poor broken heart.

Though her cheek was pale and anxious,
yet with look and brow sublime,
by the pale and trembling Future
stood the Crisis of our time.

And from many a throbbing bosom
came the words in fear and gloom:
“Tell us, O! thou coming Crisis,
what shall be our country’s doom?”

Shall the wings of dark destruction
brood and hover o’er our land
till we trace the steps of ruin
by their blight from strand to strand?”

With a look and voice prophetic
spake the solemn Crisis then:
“I have only mapped the future
for the erring sons of men.

If ye strive for Truth and Justice,
if ye battle for the Right,
ye shall lay your hands all strengthened
on God’s robe of love and light.

But if ye trample on His children,
to His ear will float each groan;
jar the cords that bind them to Him,
and they’ll vibrate at His throne.

And the land that forges fetters,
binds the weak and poor in chains,
must in blood or tears of sorrow
wash away her guilty stains.”

Source: Frances Ellen Watkins, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Thompson, 1857), 8-9, 11-12, 35-38, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t9q24gn5q>. Public domain.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Spelling and punctuation emended in line with modern American conventions, except that the source publication’s spelling of *defence* is retained to facilitate recognition of the allusion to Josiah Priest’s book. The speeches of characters enclosed here in quotation marks, although unmarked in the source. Some elided vowels spelled out. An exclamatory *oh* lowercased; another converted to a vocative *O*. Capital letters at the beginning of lines converted to lowercase for readability. Small caps for initial words omitted. The capitalization of divine pronouns regularizes the inconsistent usage of the source publication. The capitalizing (or not) of *Slavery*, *Oppression*, *Portals*, *Future*, *Doom*, *Fate*, *Crisis*, *Truth*, *Justice*, and *Right* replicates the source.

These edited selections from Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s poetry are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.

See also: The book to which Harper’s poem “Bible Defence of Slavery” alludes is Josiah Priest, *Bible Defence of Slavery; To Which Is Added, a Faithful Exposition of That System of Pseudo Philanthropy, or Fanaticism, Yclept Modern Abolitionism* [...] (Glasgow, KY: W. S. Brown, 1851), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/chi.22511048>.



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