

**LIVING IN GOD'S TIME: AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAITH AND  
POLITICS IN POST-EMANCIPATION NORTH CAROLINA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Matthew James Zacharias Harper: Living in God's Time: African-American Faith and Politics in Post-Emancipation North Carolina  
(Under the direction of W. Fitzhugh Brundage)

This dissertation argues that black southerners' theology guided their collective action from emancipation to the beginning of the Jim Crow era. Black theology in this time produced both conservative and radical political agendas and set the terms for political debates within African-American communities. This project makes their rich, diverse, and at times confusing religious thought intelligible to the twenty-first-century reader and demonstrates the weight of those theological ideas on the ground in particular places and particular times. The branch of their theology that located them within a divine plan for the race—their eschatology—gave black political leaders more hope and confidence than a mere secular reading of their circumstances could justify. The dissertation focuses on one southern state, North Carolina, to reveal the importance of black theology to local and statewide political issues: emancipation and Reconstruction, migration and black land ownership, temperance and prohibition, and disfranchisement and segregation.

*To Elizabeth*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As an extrovert, I was hardly prepared when this dissertation sentenced me to countless hours alone in a library carrel. Surprisingly, I found the company of nineteenth-century people to be quite satisfying. But during the course of writing this dissertation, I communed with plenty of folks from the twenty-first century as well, and it's to them that I owe this work.

Librarians are a historian's best friends. I want to thank the many archivists and librarians who helped me along the way, especially Nicholas Graham, Eileen McGrath, Jason Tomberlin, and the entire staff at UNC's North Carolina Collection; Linda Simmons-Henry at St. Augustine's College; Phyllis Galloway at Livingstone College; Monika Rhue at Johnson C. Smith University; Jane Johnson at the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County; Bill Kreuger at the Iowa Masonic Library; and all the reference librarians at UNC's Davis Library. Thank you for making my life easier.

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If readers occasionally find my prose easy or inviting, they have only Emily Brewer to thank. I know of no other editor with such a perceptive eye. If there are any grammatical, orthographical, or citation mistakes in this final copy, it is only because I failed to key in one of Emily’s edits.

My adviser, Fitz Brundage, read numerous drafts of each chapter, and each time, his comments sent my work in new directions. He has had the uncanny ability to say

clearly what I wanted to say but couldn't. Thank you. The other members of my committee demonstrated great patience with me as my topic changed and changed again; I hope they feel their patience has been rewarded. I owe a number of my ideas to J. Cameron Carter, who wouldn't even let me buy him coffee for his wisdom. Christopher Cameron, Rosalie Genova, Elizabeth Harper, and Heather Branstetter offered reader responses at important points along the way. Countless friends let me use them as sounding boards; I have room to name only some of them: Elizabeth Harper, Andei Williams, Hilary Green, Todd Granger, and Benjamin Sammons.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	ix
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER ONE	
A Theology of Emancipation and the Politics of Reconstruction .....	24
CHAPTER TWO	
A Theology of Racial Independence and Denominational Politics .....	58
CHAPTER THREE	
Exodus and Jubilee: The Politics of Land and Migration .....	110
CHAPTER FOUR	
A Jeremiad: Temperance and Prohibition Politics .....	161
CHAPTER FIVE	
A Persistent Theology of Hope and the Politics of Jim Crow .....	210
CONCLUSION .....	248
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	255



## LIST OF FIGURES

### Figures

1.1	“Address to the Colored People of North Carolina” (1870).....	57
4.1	“Anti-Prohibition Speech” (1905).....	208

## An Introduction

In 1867, Edwin Jones, an African-American political leader, addressed a mixed-race audience in North Carolina about black voting rights. The topic could hardly have been more important or more timely. Jones spoke two years after emancipation but before black men in North Carolina won the right to vote. Jones told the crowd “that the negro was about to get his equal rights.” He was confident that African Americans would soon secure the right to vote. As evidence, Jones cited “references to the II and IV chapters of Joshua” which, he explained, offered a “full accomplishment of the principles and destiny of the race.” At this point, we might imagine, the white justice of the peace who recorded the speech must have been scratching his head. Why had Jones’s speech abruptly switched from black political rights to the Book of Joshua? More confusing was the passage itself. The second and fourth chapters of Joshua offered no prophecy and said nothing of “destiny,” much less of African-American destiny. What did this Old Testament account, which described the siege of Jericho and the crossing of the Jordan River by ancient Hebrews, have to say about black politics in North Carolina?<sup>1</sup>

This dissertation is an attempt to explain the connections that leaders like Edwin Jones saw between theology and politics—to understand, for example, why passages like

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<sup>1</sup>Report of Speech by Edwin Jones, Aug. 22, 1867, Letters Received, Oaths of Office, and Records Relating to Registration and Elections, 1865-1869, ser. 1380, Post of Wilmington, Record Group 393 Pt. 4, National Archives, quoted in Eric Foner, “Reconstruction and the Black Political Tradition,” in Richard L. McCormick, ed., *Political Parties and the Modern State* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1984) 62.

the second chapter of Joshua mattered to black life in the decades between emancipation and Jim Crow. In his speech, Jones made two related theological moves, moves that his colleagues made throughout the late nineteenth century. First, he wrote black experience into a biblical story, in this case, the siege of Jericho and the crossing of the Jordan River. Jones knew that the second and fourth chapters of Joshua recounted an ancient event in the early national history of Israel; but he also claimed that the passage described the emancipation of southern slaves and their fight for citizenship rights. Black Protestants saw biblical stories like these not as distant history that offered only moral lessons, but as living, ongoing stories that spoke directly to African-American experience. Because the stories were, in a meaningful way, about *them*, black Protestants could use biblical narratives to interpret their own future and not just recount the ancient Hebrew past.

In Jones's second theological move, he did just that. He spoke of "the destiny of the race" with confidence, as if he knew the future. Jones used biblical passages to discern the future of African Americans in the South. He believed God had specific plans for the race's future. And the future he forecast was a better one: "the negro was about to get his equal rights." Jones' two theological moves—(1) writing black experience into religious narratives, and (2) confidently prophesying a better future for the race—were commonplace among black Protestant leaders in the post-emancipation South. And, as Jones did, they applied that theology directly to the political issues at hand.

In this dissertation, I concern myself with two tasks. First, I try to make black Protestant leaders' rich, diverse, and at times confusing religious thought intelligible to the twenty-first-century reader. Their writings and speeches describe many different views on God's plan for human history, the ongoing relevance of biblical stories to black

life in America, and fulfillment of biblical prophecies. Only a handful of the black authors who appear in this dissertation wrote theology at length, and fewer still feature in intellectual histories. Most of the black Protestant leaders I discuss never wrote a book or theological treatise. In making sense of their ideas I offer them the kind of analysis that intellectual historians of religion used to reserve for published theologians or the prolific New England Puritans. I treat both the well-educated bishop and the partially-literate rural minister as theological thinkers in their own right. So, this project operates at a different level than most intellectual histories. Though my research intersects with the national discourse of the most prominent black leaders, I focus on the conversations of local leaders for whom local issues seemed most pressing.

Which brings us to my second task: to demonstrate the weight of those theological ideas. How did black Protestants work out their theology on the ground in particular places for particular issues? To answer that question, this project narrows in on the practical and political concerns of African Americans in one southern state. How did theology make a difference for black freedom, political power, and economic standing in North Carolina? This dissertation looks closely at black North Carolinians' experience and participation in the state's politics and public life in the four decades following emancipation. Each chapter argues for the significance of black theology to a different era or issue in African-American life: emancipation and Reconstruction politics (Chapter 1); the establishment of racially independent churches (Chapter 2); black attempts to acquire land, reform landlord-tenant relations, and emigrate in search of a better land (Chapter 3); temperance and prohibition politics (Chapter 4); and the onset of the Jim Crow era (Chapter 5). Theology played a large part in these arenas of African-American

life; theological ideas provided a substantial framework with which black southerners interpreted the world around them and debated a path forward.

What matters most to my inquiry is black Protestants' eschatological thought. *Eschatology*. If the word means anything to the general reader, it conjures up the image of someone walking the streets wearing a sandwich board that reads, "The End is Near." Eschatology literally means the study of the *end* times. But the sandwich-board prophet peddles a narrow and unrepresentative version of eschatology. If the word means anything to the specialized reader, it is the branch of formal Christian theology that deals with the final things: death, the second coming, Judgment Day, and the millennium.<sup>2</sup> The term encompasses both those who say the end is near and those who say it is far, far away. Eschatology surfaces in funeral sermons and anytime Christians speak of what is to come.

I employ the term more broadly to include how nineteenth-century African-American Christians understood the intersections of divine history and human history. Eschatology describes black Protestants' attempts to locate themselves within God's plan for human history—past, present, and future. They wrote themselves into biblical and supernatural narratives. These narratives offered them both an identification with the past and a window into their future. As they located their experience within biblical stories and predicted their future, they spoke often of the destiny of the race, as well as traditional eschatological topics like the second coming of Christ or the millennium.

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<sup>2</sup>The *Oxford Companion to the Bible* defines eschatology as "The teaching concerning last things, such as the resurrection of the dead, the Last Judgment, the end of this world, and the creation of a new one." *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, s.v. "Eschatology," <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?entry=t120.e0229> (accessed July 28, 2008). The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* defines it more broadly, similar to my own definition: "the doctrine of the last things, that is the ultimate destiny both of the individual soul and of the whole created order." *Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. "Eschatology," <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?entry=t95.e1976> (accessed July 29, 2008).

Their eschatology included an understanding of the progress and decline of God's kingdom on earth and the destiny of peoples, nations, and races in God's plan for human history. Black leaders interpreted events of their era as turning points in biblical stories, in supernatural battles of good and evil, and in millennial prophecies.

For nineteenth-century black Protestants, the clearest intersection of divine history and human history was the emancipation of southern slaves in 1862-65. They interpreted emancipation as an act of divine intervention in history. The event carried many theological meanings. It proved to them that God was on their side and at work in the world. The event and its many commemorations emboldened their belief that God had already begun a plan to vindicate and elevate the race. Black ministers saw emancipation as the fulfillment of biblical prophecies and the sign of things to come. When black Protestant leaders struggled to interpret God's purpose for the race in a particular situation, they returned to emancipation as the surest example that divine history and human history were inseparably intertwined.

Because black eschatology drew from multiple stories—Exodus, Jubilee, Exile, Tribulation, Crucifixion and Resurrection, Pentecost, Millennium, etc.—African-American leaders, while often in agreement, nevertheless interpreted moments differently. Therefore, they held varying expectations of the future. Their different theological interpretations of emancipation and subsequent events had broad ramifications for their political efforts to define and defend black freedom.

The dissertation's central thesis, then, is that black southerners' theology, in particular their eschatology, guided their collective action from emancipation to the beginning of the Jim Crow era. Not merely a language to communicate political ideas, or

a tool to persuade would-be followers, or a justification for decisions made on other grounds, African-American eschatology functioned as a determinant in the events of the post-emancipation South. Its primary function was to give black southerners more hope and confidence than a secular reading of their circumstances could justify. Without understanding that black Protestant leaders saw earthly events as part of a divine story, their actions seem incongruent with the realities they and their followers faced. It produced both radical and conservative political agendas. Radical, for example, when eschatological beliefs prompted black southerners to expect and demand property redistribution in the winter of 1865-66, or when leaders like Edwin Jones foresaw and expected an imminent expansion of black political rights. Conservative, when black leaders, assured of divine protection and a larger purpose at work, advised sharecroppers laboring under oppressive conditions to wait it out.

For all black Protestant leaders, emancipation loomed large in the sacred historical design. In fact, emancipation became so significant in African Americans' eschatology that it enabled many to predict better times ahead even as conditions for southern blacks deteriorated in the late nineteenth century. After 1862-65, African Americans in North Carolina lived not in Reconstruction, Redemption, or the Jim Crow era, but in the age of emancipation. The divine act of emancipation spoke louder than any subsequent event; that is, in black Christian theology, freedom was always more significant than lynching, disfranchisement, or segregation. The strand of southern history that narrates the end of the nineteenth century as declension from a radical experiment in racial equality to the dark night of Jim Crow would have been a story unrecognizable to black Protestant leaders. By highlighting the way black Protestants

understood their own history—as both human and divine—this dissertation tells a story that hopefully they would recognize as their own.

This project bridges two bodies of scholarship: intellectual histories of black religion and social-political histories of the post-emancipation South. Though few intellectual historians have written about black eschatology, per se, they have approached the concept from different angles. Their approaches offer different points of entrance into a discussion of divine history and human history in African-American thought. They have analyzed African-American identification with the Exodus story, black millennial thought, the religious origins of black nationalism, and two literary genres, the communal narrative and the jeremiad.<sup>3</sup> This project owes much to the revelations about black

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<sup>3</sup>Albert J. Raboteau's work serves as a starting point for almost all inquiries into nineteenth-century black religion. Eschatology is no exception. His essay "African-Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel," traces out the deep connections that African Americans saw between themselves and Old Testament Israel, and Raboteau suggests that their reading of the Old Testament, in particular the Exodus story, had ramifications for nineteenth-century politics. In Paul E. Johnson, ed., *African-American Christianity: Essays in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 9ff. Allen Dwight Callahan's new interdisciplinary work *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006) details the centrality of biblical narratives to black experience and to black understandings of justice. Raboteau's essay on black Christians' use of Psalm 68:31 ("Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God.") develops briefly the second part of black eschatology that I want to highlight, beliefs in the race's destiny. "'Ethiopia Shall Soon Stretch Forth Her Hands to God': Black Destiny in Nineteenth-Century America," in Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., eds. *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 397-413. Timothy Fulop delves deeper into this topic, examining the various millennial beliefs that black Christians espoused in the late nineteenth century. His approach is one of high intellectual history; he is concerned with millennialism, in the traditional and narrow definition and not the more expansive topic of eschatology as a whole, and he draws heavily on the most educated and published of black authors. Fulop argues, quite convincingly, that the traditional categories of millennial thought that pay attention to timing/dating do little to illuminate black thought, and offers instead a categorization based on the character of the millennium. "The Future Golden Day of the Race: Millennialism and Black Americans in the Nadir, 1877-1901," *Harvard Theological Review* 84:1 (1991):75-99. Wilson Moses and Eddie Glaude both pay attention to black identification with Old Testament Israel and black notions of race destiny in their attempts to understand the religious origins of black nationalism. Both draw from Eugene Genovese' thesis in *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974) that black Christianity gave African Americans the tools to conceive of themselves as a nation. Those tools were the stuff of eschatology. Black Americans found in their appropriation of biblical narratives a common history and a common destiny. This allowed them to undertake the project of nationalism. Glaude largely finds this project laudatory, and wants to rescue it as an alternate to the kind of black nationalist ideology that relies on biological race or that necessitates a rejection of all things white and American. *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). 3-43. In contrast, Moses sees black appropriation of passages like the



theology that these studies offer. Their varied approaches have worked well to explain the contours of black religious thought, but they have been less concerned with events on the ground. How did ideas shape African Americans' conversations and decisions in particular political moments?

Social-political historians of the post-emancipation South have tried to answer that question. In attempts to explain the political outlook of the freedpeople, historians have turned to proletarian consciousness, to the culture of political activism formed in slavery, or to black southerners' grip on republican ideology and equality before the law. They have not, however, given much attention to the role theology played in black southerners' political actions. Historians of Reconstruction and Jim Crow are aware of the ubiquitous theological references in black-authored documents. The section titles, chapter titles, and epigraphs in their scholarly work repeat those references— words like Jubilee, Zion, the Valley of Dry Bones, the New Jerusalem, etc. But they rarely attempt

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Exodus story and Psalm 68:31 as inherently “racially chauvinistic.” The belief in a common history or common destiny, in Moses' estimation, necessitated a belief in consanguinity and shared the false assumptions of whites that blood or biological origins or a people endowed them with shared characteristics or a certain place in society. *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993) and *Classic Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey* (New York: New York University Press, 1996). For Glaude's critique of Moses, see *Exodus!*, 12-15. Studies of two African-American literary and oratory genres shed further light on black eschatological thought. Most important are studies of an intriguing nineteenth-century black literary genre: race histories, or African-American communal narratives. In these histories, black authors charted the development and trajectory of the race, often beginning in antiquity, climaxing with emancipation, and forecasting a better day coming. Studies of this genre, though few compared to those of slave narratives, reveal black Americans' differing ideas of the race's past and future. And many of these authors wrote with an emphasis on discerning God's purpose and plan for the race in human history, the same preoccupation that I have found in the writings of black North Carolinians. My entrance to this genre comes from Laurie Maffly-Kipp's work. See n.18 of this chapter. *African-American Communal Narratives: Religion, Race, and Memory in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming). Another genre, that of the African-American jeremiad, has likewise garnered scholarly attention and speaks to black understandings of human and divine history. In the jeremiad, African Americans positioned themselves as prophets, declaring God's favor upon specific peoples while warning them of impending judgment if they failed to amend their ways. David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005). For more on jeremiads, see Chapter 4.

to explain the theological concepts or biblical stories that those references mean to invoke.<sup>4</sup> Would we expect frequent references to republican ideology or class conflict to similarly go unexplained? In bridging these two bodies of scholarship, my project seeks first to explain the theology that lies at the center of post-emancipation African-American history, and second, to ground discussions of black religious thought in the nitty-gritty of local and state politics.

Aspects of my approach, in particular its scope, warrant some explanation. Because much of the defining and defending of black freedom in the nineteenth century took place on the level of individual states, it makes sense to bring a discussion of theology down-to-earth by looking at the politics of one southern state. North Carolina makes a good choice for a number of reasons. It was home to many outspoken leaders of African-American Protestantism. The state boasted four of the earliest black religious

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<sup>4</sup>Let me offer some prominent examples. W. E. B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* offers a Marxist reading of black political consciousness in the aftermath of freedom. The work concerns the interests and actions of the black worker but does not look deeply into black southerners' religious or theological outlook. *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1935). Eric Foner's *Reconstruction* in many ways follows Du Bois' work, by centering black experience and by critiquing the Dunning School of Reconstruction history. Foner, unlike Du Bois shifts attention from blacks as the proletariat to black use of republican ideology. Foner also differs from Du Bois in his attention to religion. Foner recognizes that religious language was as common as republican ideology in the articulations of black leaders in Reconstruction. But though he attempts to give religion its fair share of attention, he fails to give it its fair share of analysis. Foner recognizes the prevalence of religious language but does not delve deeper. Religion, in Foner's analysis, is a language with which African Americans convey political messages or inspire political action. But religion does not seem to have much content that deserves unpacking. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-77* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). Steven Hahn's *A Nation under Our Feet*, takes its title from the forty-seventh Psalm and its middle section title "To Build a New Jerusalem" from the last two chapters of Revelation, but you would not know it from reading Hahn. In the introduction, Hahn explains that the book began with his attempt to understand why and how African-Americans were so politically motivated in the years immediately following emancipation. Where did such an active political culture come from? Hahn answers the question by reaching back to the political culture of slavery and tracing its development into the twentieth century. Along the way, he encounters and recounts numerous theological references, but leaves them unexplained. I argue that the frequent references to biblical stories and theological concepts give us insight to black political culture, and find it surprising, given his questions and the title of his book, that Hahn does not. *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

colleges and the longest-running black religious newspaper in the South. African Americans in North Carolina did not necessarily discuss theology and politics more often than other black southerners did; but when they did, a number of black institutions were there to keep a record. And black North Carolinians by their own admission benefited from a greater degree of political freedom than did African Americans elsewhere in the South. Their wider array of political choices offers us more examples of how black Protestants worked out their theology on the ground. Also, North Carolina served as a nexus between rural and urban black religion. North Carolina had nationally-known black leaders who were well-connected with the northeastern hubs of black urban religion as well a large population of black agricultural workers who gathered in rural churches. North Carolina showcased a broader spectrum of black religion than did, say, Philadelphia or the Mississippi Delta. The conversations black religious leaders held were at times confined to the state and other times national or international in scope. Nevertheless, the dissertation's focus on one state allows me to ask questions that national studies of black religion cannot answer.

If my geographic scope is narrow, my conceptual scope is broad. I define politics broadly as attempts to organize people and effect changes on community-wide issues, frequently but not necessarily involving interaction with government. Chapters 1 and 5 focus on party and electoral politics; Chapter 2 eyes denominational politics and interracial relationships; Chapter 3 handles the politics of property redistribution, black land ownership, and emigration; Chapter 4 turns to the moral politics of temperance work and the party politics of prohibition. By engaging a wide range of issues facing black life

in the post-emancipation South, the dissertation argues for the pervasive and widespread influence of theology upon black Protestant leaders.

Who were black Protestant leaders?<sup>5</sup> Many of the movers and shakers in this dissertation come from the ranks of the ordained clergy. African-American ministers took the helm of black religious institutions—schools, churches, and newspapers. And they were well represented among black office-holders and convention delegates. Ministers lived in the worlds of theology and politics, and made significant contributions to both. But they were hardly the only ones to inhabit both worlds. Edwin Jones, for example, was not a minister. Neither was the long-standing editor of the state’s most important black newspaper. These lay African-American leaders drew deeply from black Protestantism and were highly involved in the state’s politics. Even though they were not clergy, they merged politics and theology as often as did their clerical colleagues. When I refer to black Protestant leaders, I mean to include ministers and laypeople alike. As a group, these leaders had significantly more education and money than the average black North Carolinian. But individually, they varied widely by education level and class. The most outspoken leaders—bishops, newspaper editors, college presidents—held postgraduate degrees; yet even some of these leaders began life as slaves or sharecroppers. And they certainly remained in conversation with other working-class African Americans who filled both the pew and the pulpit.

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<sup>5</sup>There were so few black Catholics in nineteenth-century North Carolina and fewer still in the historical record that I cannot presume to speak to their experience when I analyze the actions of black Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists. So, I use the signifier *Protestant* more often than I use *Christian* to be more precise. To be consistent with twenty-first-century usage, I use the terms *black* and *African-American* interchangeably—even though both were rarely used in the nineteenth century—to signify all persons of African descent who identified with others of African descent, especially those living in the United States.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, some black churches in North Carolina began advancing arguments for women's ordination. African-American clergy, however, remained overwhelmingly male. Furthermore, women's lack of basic political rights in nineteenth-century North Carolina, along with social norms that limited women's access to the public sphere, ensured that men outnumbered women almost everywhere that black Protestant leaders spoke on behalf of the race. Women, however, are hardly absent in this story. Claiming a majority of those who sat in the pews, black women organized themselves into women's missionary associations and auxiliaries. Their lobbying for greater leadership roles within black churches no doubt led some churches to consider women's ordination. African-American women also involved themselves in North Carolina politics, forming organizations to lobby for particular policies like prohibition, and issuing directives to black men. Black women's very active public presence in North Carolina has been well-documented by others.<sup>6</sup> So, in this dissertation, black Protestant leaders comprised a group that was predominantly but not exclusively male.

Because African-American eschatological thought was so central to post-emancipation politics, it makes sense to analyze its contours and themes at some length. Mid-nineteenth-century African-American eschatological thought defied the theological categories of white Protestantism. When analyzing eschatology, scholars normally zoom in on millennial beliefs, and they categorize them as premillennial, postmillennial, and amillennial. These categories refer to the dating of the second coming of Christ vis-à-vis

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<sup>6</sup>Glenda Gilmore, *Gender & Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Anastatia Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women's Organizations and Politics in North Carolina, 1880-1930* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997). In fact, one could argue, black women's role in North Carolina politics may be more well-known than black men's.

his prophesied 1,000-year reign of peace. Premillennialists believed Jesus would return to earth before the millennium. Archetypal premillennialists, the Millerites, climbed hilltops on October 22, 1844, because they expected Jesus' dramatic return. Other premillennialists were less certain about the date but shared the Millerites' conviction that the second coming was imminent. Some, like dispensational premillennialists, spelled out clearly how the apocalypse would unfold. First, a dramatic return of Jesus Christ to rapture the faithful into heaven; then a seven-year period of tribulation when Satan would be unleashed on the world; then another return of Jesus Christ, this time as a victor riding on a white horse to defeat Satan and inaugurate the millennium.<sup>7</sup> Whether they believed Jesus was coming next Tuesday or after a seven-year tribulation, premillennialists expected a sharp break between the present and the future.

Postmillennialism, the dominant strain of eschatology among late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century white Protestants, led followers not to mountaintops but to soup kitchens and settlement houses. These white Protestants expected the second coming of Christ to follow an earthly millennium. Earlier this belief found expression in notions of Manifest Destiny, that God had preordained American prosperity and expansion.<sup>8</sup> But by the 1880s and 1890s, northern white Protestants interpreted the millennial reign of Jesus described in the Revelation to St. John figuratively as the world's destiny to achieve peace and justice through the progress and perfecting of human institutions. The earthly work of the church would usher in a golden age, the millennium, after which Jesus would

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<sup>7</sup>Ronald Numbers and Jon Butler, eds., *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1993). Dispensationalism began in the early nineteenth century, but did not gain significant popular following until after the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909. Dispensational premillennialism is today the most popularized and most visible eschatology of conservative American Protestants.

<sup>8</sup>Timothy Miller, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1976, c1957).

return.<sup>9</sup> So, they put their energy into bringing about the millennium through social reform, working in sanitation efforts, education, temperance, and orphanages. Unlike premillennialists, they saw continuity between the present and the future.

A third option, amillennialism, uncommon among American Protestant thinkers, eschewed debates over the timing of the millennium. Amillennialists rejected the belief in a literal millennium. Rather, they understood the book of Revelation's prophecy symbolically as referring to Christ's rule in their own day and not to the apocalypse or some future golden age. The millennium, they argued, had arrived at Jesus's first coming in Palestine and would end with his second coming at the end of human history. Amillennialists, like Lutheran and Dutch Reformed immigrants, were not looking for the millennium in city slums or on hilltops. The millennium, they believed, was in the church or in the hearts of believers.

Black Protestants agreed on the millennium no more than white Protestants did. As historian Timothy E. Fulop argues, late nineteenth-century black millennialism "exhibits great variety." AME minister T. G. Steward's 1888 *The End of the World* displayed classic tenets of premillennial thought, envisioning the return of Christ before the coming millennium. Many racial "uplifters" held to postmillennialism, believing that their work to educate, reform, and evangelize would usher in the millennium. James Walker Hood, the only black author to pen a theological commentary on Revelation

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<sup>9</sup>Their faith in human progress and in the essential goodness of human nature inspired the Progressive reforms of the early twentieth century and faltered in the face of the two world wars that followed. Please see James H. Morehead, *World Without End: Mainstream American Protestant Visions of the Last Things, 1880-1925* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1999); Susan Curtis, *Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

during the period, sided with amillennialism. And as Fulop writes, an ever greater diversity of opinion existed in debates over what, not when, the millennium would be.<sup>10</sup>

Most black Protestants held views of the end times that did not fall neatly into these categories. Rather, they blended elements from premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism. For example, Hood, whose formal writings were amillennialist, in other venues gave dire warnings of an imminent day of judgment akin to those of premillennialists. In his addresses to other ministers and congregations, Hood routinely connected the earthly work of God's people with a future golden age, clearly a postmillennial way of thinking. Black theologians, pastors, and lay people simply did not feel confined by existing eschatological categories.

Some of the difficulty in categorizing black millennialism lay in black Protestants' peculiar mix of hope and sorrow. Unlike many premillennialists, African American Christians almost never despaired over the future of the world. One North Carolina Baptist, Rev. C. J. W. Fisher, admitted that "The world appears so corrupt that Christians sometimes think it is going over into the hands of the devil." But Fisher told his audience that appearances could be deceiving and that Christianity, not the devil, was gaining power in the world.<sup>11</sup> Fisher and his colleagues did not easily retreat into an otherworldly passivity. Rather, they fully expected to be vindicated and see progress in their own day. This hope in earthly progress differed significantly, however, from the postmillennialism of white reformers. Black Protestants tempered their hope with a

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<sup>10</sup>Fulop, "The Future Golden Day of the Race"; A. G. Steward, *The End of the World, or Clearing the Way for the Fullness of the Gentiles* (Philadelphia: A. M. E. Church Book Rooms, 1888); James Walker Hood, *The Plan of the Apocalypse* (York, PA: P. Anstadt & Sons, 1900).

<sup>11</sup>*Proceedings of the Joint Sessions of the Baptist Educational and Missionary Convention, The Ministerial Union, the Hayes-Fleming Foreign Missionary Society, and the State Sunday School Convention of North Carolina* (hereafter cited as NCBEMC Proceedings), October 1894, p.17.



good deal of mourning. They sang mournful slave spirituals and lamented the persistent forms of oppression that marred their experience of freedom. Black churchgoers had reason to doubt the inevitability of human progress. They were decidedly less optimistic and held more sober assessments of human nature than did most white postmillennialists.

For this reason, many black Protestants make a better comparison with seventeenth-century Puritans. New England Puritans were, one could argue, postmillennialists. They believed in earthly progress; they named their children Increase and Truth Shall Prevayl; they placed Christ's return after the millennium. Yet a firm belief in human depravity tempered their optimism. God Himself, not human progress, would inaugurate a *literal* millennium with favor upon his chosen people, the New Israel. Puritans, especially those that immigrated to America, were prone to believe themselves the heirs of Israel's promise. Their journey to the New World mirrored the arrival of Israel in the Promised Land. Black Americans, too, believed that God, in a decisive moment of history, would usher in a new era, and show special favor to a specific people. But for them, as Albert Raboteau has argued, "the Christian imagery is reversed." Crossing the Atlantic, for African-American Christians, was not the start of the millennium but the beginning of tribulation. Raboteau continues: "This is, as Vincent Harding remarked, one of the abiding and tragic ironies of our history: the nation's claim to be the New Israel was contradicted by the Old Israel still enslaved in her midst."<sup>12</sup> African Americans' belief in the destiny of their race to rise from slavery to prosperity and cultural achievement ran counter to white American nationalism and eschatology.

Because late nineteenth-century black thought did not fit well into the categories of white eschatology, we must arrive at a different way to talk of black eschatology. First,

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<sup>12</sup>Raboteau, "African-Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel," 9.

we must move beyond a narrow focus on the millennium. We need to take into account stories of the past, not just the future. According to twentieth-century black theologian James Cone, the reading of biblical stories enabled black people to be “taken from the present to the past and then thrust back into their contemporary history with divine power to transform the sociopolitical context.” That is, in many African-American religious traditions, the people do more than retell stories. They relive them. Black Protestants, in the words of Cone, “break the barriers of time and space as they walk and talk with Jesus in Palestine.”<sup>13</sup> Slave spirituals expressed this living experience of the past:

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

In this song, the singers ask one another if they have witnessed the crucifixion. The question assumes that it would have been possible for nineteenth-century Americans to have actually been there. The song collapses all the distance of time and space, such that African Americans in the nineteenth century might find themselves outside Jerusalem early in the first century A.D.

The experience of straddling the past and the present empowered black believers to resist the oppression of their own day. It had real-world application. Cone explained its relevance to twentieth-century black religion: “Through the experience of moving back and forth between the first and twentieth centuries, the Bible is transformed from just a report of what the disciples believed about Jesus to black people’s personal story of God’s will to liberate the oppressed in the contemporary context.”<sup>14</sup> We can similarly

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<sup>13</sup>James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997; orig. 1975), 102-03.

<sup>14</sup>Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 103.

characterize nineteenth-century black Christianity. By placing their experience in the stories of Old Testament Israel or of Jesus, black Protestants resisted the dominant narratives of their day that worked to subjugate African Americans. By placing themselves inside stories of the past, black Protestants were able to offer different interpretations of the present and different predictions of the future than those offered by their oppressors.

Furthermore, their predictions of the future carried more real-world urgency and political significance than theologians have typically attributed to eschatological thought. German theologian Jurgen Moltmann lamented that eschatology in western Christian theology became “a loosely attached appendix that wandered off into obscure irrelevancies.” Because theologians talked about the second coming and the millennium as events that broke into human history at the end of time from somewhere outside human history, it was possible for Christians to segregate their eschatological beliefs from the rest of their religious lives. Although Moltmann did not believe in an imminent second coming or a sudden rapture, he protested against the definition of eschatology as the study of the distant future. “Eschatology,” he argued, “means the doctrine of Christian hope . . . From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue.” With Moltmann’s definition, believers would not relegate hope to some distant age but let hope “suffuse everything here” and now.<sup>15</sup> James Cone noted that black people talked about this kind of Christian hope long before Moltmann and his German colleagues did.<sup>16</sup> Nineteenth-century black Protestants wrote their experiences into stories about the future, just as they

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<sup>15</sup>Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965; trans. 1967 by James W. Leitch), 15-16.

<sup>16</sup>Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 116.

did with stories about the past. For them, as for Moltmann, eschatology was not just about distant events. It held the power to transform the present.

For African-American thinkers, and for Moltmann, eschatology was largely about hope. Hope for what? Black eschatology had two primary answers: an end to race prejudice and a special role for the African race within Christian history. These two hopes, or strains of thought, sometimes went hand in hand; but at other times, they existed in tension with each other and fueled debate among black religious leaders. These debates existed within and between denominations and within and between local congregations.

The hope in an end to racism found biblical support in Acts 17: 26: “God hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the earth.” This verse, black Protestants argued, supported their claim of the monogenetic origins of the human race and laid out God’s intentions for all races to dwell together in harmony. Some saw evidence around them of the eroding of white racism. Others considered it black Americans’ duty to Christianize the nation, and thus, rid it of race prejudice. Expounders on this eschatological theme found further proof in John’s vision in Revelation of “a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues,” all gathered around God’s throne.<sup>17</sup>

The second and competing theme in black eschatology—belief in a special role or destiny for the race—drew heavily on Psalm 68:31: “Princes shall come out of Egypt;

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<sup>17</sup>Acts 17:26, KJV; Rev. 7:9 KJV; see, for example, Editorial, *Star of Zion*, 26 January 1899; “Dangerous Advice,” *Star of Zion*, 17 November 1898; Butler Harrison Peterson, “Is the Negro Morally Depraved as he is Reputed to Be?” in D. W. Culp, ed., *Twentieth-Century Negro Literature*, 240; Morgan London Latta, *The History of My Life and Work* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards and Broughton, 1903), 198-99; *Journal of Freedom*, 30 September 1865; George W. Clinton, *Christianity under the Searchlight* (Nashville, TN: National Baptist Publishing Board, 1909), 54-56; Francis Grimke, “Christianization of America,” in D.W. Culp, comp., *Twentieth Century Negro Literature*, 431-33.

Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God.” In this verse, black ministers interpreted Ethiopia and Egypt as the entire “Negro race.” For some, it was a prophecy that those of African descent would turn from their “sin; idolatry – forgetfulness of God” and embrace Christianity. Many interpreted the passage as an imperative for black Americans to evangelize Africa, and others envisioned a future black ascendancy to rival the powerful nations of the world. Many hopes stemmed from this oft-quoted verse in Psalm 68.<sup>18</sup>

Other narratives likewise offered black Americans a designation as God’s special people. Southern slaves’ identification with the Hebrews in Egypt, Moses, and the Exodus is well known.<sup>19</sup> Raboteau notices that slaves’ religious vision of their own Exodus was eerily prescient. “Black Christians,” he writes, “warned antebellum America (in terms strikingly prophetic of the Civil War) that it stood in peril of divine judgment unless it quickly repented the sin of slavery (an interpretation belatedly shared by Lincoln).” It is not surprising that when emancipation did come in the 1860s, many black

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<sup>18</sup>Fulop, “Future Golden Day of the Race”; A particular reading of history accompanied these interpretations of Psalm 68. In numerous race histories, black Americans wrote of a mythic glorious past that placed their ancestors in the ancient civilizations Egypt and Ethiopia, civilizations that predated and outstripped the West. And as Raboteau argues, it was “surely as legitimate a fictive pedigree as white American claims of descent from Greco-Roman civilization.” Albert J. Raboteau, “Ethiopia Shall Soon Stretch Forth Her Hands to God.” “African participation in ancient history,” Laurie Maffly-Kipp explains, “was a useful counter to the white claim that the Negro had always been, and would remain, a degraded race.” Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, “Mapping the World, Mapping the Race: The Negro Race History, 1874-1915” *Church History* 64:4 (Dec. 1995), 618; and Maffly-Kipp, “Redeeming Southern Memory: The Negro Race History, 1874-1915” in W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Where These Memories Grow: History Memory, and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2000), 170, 179, 184. According to Maffly-Kipp, these race histories exhibited the many tensions within the black community. Often writers were well-educated middle-class northern blacks who criticized southern blacks for their primitive spirituality. Moreover, these black elites rarely held approval for the actions and beliefs of the black masses. Race historians also disagreed among themselves. And in one sense, their histories removed Negro history from the realm of a personal God favoring His people to a liberal understanding of inevitable progress. But Maffly-Kipp concludes that race historians had more in common than not. Their common message was that African Americans had a prominent place in history and the future, and their common purpose was to foster the building of a successful free black community.

<sup>19</sup>See Glaude, *Exodus!*.

believers understood it to have theological significance. That black Americans, like ancient Hebrews, had experienced a dramatic emancipation, served only to confirm their belief that Africans or African Americans were God's chosen people.<sup>20</sup>

Black identification with Israel went beyond the story of Exodus. Edwin Jones wrote black experience into the siege of Jericho and the crossing of the Jordan River. Similarly, black Americans routinely appropriated the Day of Jubilee, a feature of Israel's Levitical law, as their own struggle for freedom and economic justice. Black Protestants at times understood themselves in exile, identifying with the Israelites' suffering in Assyrian or Babylonian captivity. The Old Testament prophets and New Testament church history gave black leaders numerous other narratives within which to situate their people's experience. There were many stories to choose from.

Finally and most significantly, they identified with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus' suffering and triumph over death spoke deeply to black southerners' experience. Christian theologians for a long time have understood Jesus to be an embodiment, or type, of Israel and vice versa. That is, they believed, the Old Testament promises about Israel the nation found fulfillment in Jesus the person, and Jesus' life summarized the history of the people of Israel. As described in the Gospels, Jesus mirrors major figures like Moses, David, and Elijah and the nation as a whole. New Testament writers chose Old Testament imagery to identify Jesus as a symbol or

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<sup>20</sup>Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 12. Rev. Morgan Latta, of Raleigh, North Carolina, for example, invited a direct comparison between ancient Hebrews and African-Americans: "people have said that God was not just, allowing other nationalities to predominate over them [Hebrews] and hold them as slaves. . . God works things to suit Himself, and if God, in His own mysterious ways, in managing things, has promoted the Hebrews to prosperity, then it is prima facie evidence that the same God that promoted the Hebrews will promote the negro race." *History of My Life and Work* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards and Broughton, 1903), 53-54.

culmination of the nation's history.<sup>21</sup> Given the close relationship between Israel the nation and Jesus the person in Christian theology and New Testament writings, it was not hard for black Protestants to identify with both Israel and Jesus. It was this belief in Jesus as fulfillment of Israel that set up black theologians to say "Jesus is black." Because the people of Israel, embodied in Jesus, became the outcast and the oppressed of society, Cone argued, Jesus (or Israel) in any contemporary situation remains the outcast and oppressed of society. So, in Cone's words, "Jesus is black."<sup>22</sup> That controversial claim was peculiar to twentieth-century black theology. However, nineteenth-century black Americans' identification with Jesus was strong enough that Cone could claim his ideas had a history. Nineteenth-century African-American identification with Jesus Christ, though historians pay it less attention, rivaled their identification with the Hebrews of the Exodus. And in both cases, black theologians claimed for the race a peculiar mission or destiny.

Many nineteenth-century black Christians held comfortably in tandem the two themes within black eschatology—race destiny and an end to racism. Others, however, saw them in conflict. The belief in a special destiny for Africans or African Americans necessitated some sort of racial essentialism. Even though most black ministers affirmed the monogenetic origins of the human race, beliefs in race destiny implied that the races had distinctive aggregate character traits and peculiar God-ordained futures. Some black Protestants were uncomfortable with the race essentialism of their colleagues and shied

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<sup>21</sup>Modern theologians to work on Jesus-as-Israel include N.T. Wright, M.D. Goulder, Robert Horton Gundar, G. B. Caird, and Peter Leithart. As a starting point, see G. B. Caird, *Jesus and the Jewish Nation* (London: Athlone Press, 1965) and Caird, "The One and the Many in Mark and John," in Horton Davies, ed., *Studies of the Church in History: Essays Honoring Robert S. Paul on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Allison Park, Pennsylvania: Pickwick, 1983), 43-46.

<sup>22</sup>Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 122-26.

away from proclaiming a separate black destiny. Other leaders thought it hopeless to reform America from the inside and staked their millennial hopes not on an end to racism in the United States but in solidarity with people of color around the world. The method behind black eschatology was remarkably regular. African-American Christians wrote themselves into biblical narratives, found evidence of God's favor in current events, and predicted a triumphant future. The themes they emphasized and the conclusions they made, however, at times diverged widely.<sup>23</sup>

Despite their different emphases, black Protestants agreed that the future looked bright, not merely because of favorable political circumstances but because of God's plan for human history. Emancipation, the growth of black churches, and Christianity's power to end prejudice all signaled a new God-ordained era of progress and racial justice. When black Protestant leaders assessed the situation around them, they saw more than meets the eye. They saw intersections between human history and divine history, and with that vision came real-world political agendas.

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<sup>23</sup>See Glaude, *Exodus!*, 12-15.



## Chapter One

### A Theology of Emancipation and the Politics of Reconstruction

On February 22, 1865, Union troops, many of them African-American, occupied the port city of Wilmington, North Carolina. As they marched through the streets, they sang, “Christ died to make men holy, let us die to make men free.” Slaves and free blacks lined the streets to cheer, dance, and celebrate.<sup>1</sup> The troops’ presence meant the end of slavery. As one observer recalled, “[Union Army] horsemen were dashing in hot haste through all the streets picking up the Confederate stragglers who had fallen behind.”<sup>2</sup> And white civilians stood aghast as black soldiers secured the city. For local whites, the control of Wilmington by armed black men was apocalyptic, a doomsday. One elderly white man witnessed the event and exclaimed with “mingled horror and disgust”: “Blow Gabriel, blow, for God’s sake blow.”<sup>3</sup>

For local blacks, too, this day was apocalyptic, though in a much different sense. It was the prophesied Day of Jubilee. African-American members of the biracial Methodist church on Front Street gathered the next Sunday morning, as they usually did,

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<sup>1</sup>William McKee Evans, *Ballots and Fence Rails: Reconstruction on the Lower Cape Fear* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 22. *Ballots and Fence Rails* provides a detailed account of the capture of Wilmington and of Reconstruction in the Wilmington area.

<sup>2</sup>Rev. L. S. Burkhead, “History of the Difficulties of the Pastorate of the Front Street Methodist Church, Wilmington, NC, For the Year 1865,” *An Annual Publication of Historical Papers Published by the Historical Society of Trinity College*, Series VIII (1908-09): 37.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Evans, *Ballots and Fence Rails*, 22.

for a sunrise prayer meeting. But it was no ordinary prayer service. “The whole congregation was wild with excitement,” observed a white Methodist pastor, “with shouts, groans, amens, and unseemly demonstrations.” A leader named Charles chose the scripture lesson from the ninth Psalm:

Thou hast rebuked the heathen, thou hast destroyed the wicked, thou hast put out their name for ever and ever.

Charles told the people to “study over this morning lesson on this the day of Jubilee.”

After the scripture reading, a black U. S. Army chaplain, Rev. W. Hunter, proclaimed, “One week ago you were all slaves; now you are all free.” The congregation responded with “uproarious screamings.” Hunter continued, “Thank God the armies of the Lord and Gideon has triumphed and the Rebels have been driven back in confusion and scattered like chaff before the wind.”<sup>4</sup> The emancipation of southern slaves clearly held prophetic meaning for black believers—not as a Day of Doom but as a day of reckoning and judgment, a divinely appointed climax of history. Emancipation was the end times, the end of one age and the beginning of another.

This chapter seeks to understand the eschatological meaning of emancipation for black Christians in North Carolina and the significance of that eschatological thinking for black political activity during Reconstruction. In their immediate experience of freedom and in their retrospective commemorations, black North Carolinians described emancipation as a decisive, world-altering intervention of God on their behalf. They wrote their experiences into biblical narratives and saw themselves at the center of a God-orchestrated drama. The theological meaning they attributed to emancipation shaped the

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<sup>4</sup>Burkhead, “History of the Difficulties,” 37-43; Ps. 9:6, King James Version (hereafter cited as KJV).

way black Protestants understood the world around them. It guided black leaders' entrance into the electoral and party politics of the state.

To explain the political significance of African-American theological thinking, this chapter analyzes two moments in the history of Reconstruction in North Carolina. Early in Reconstruction, in the 1865 Freedmen's Convention, black leaders charted a strategic course to encode racial equality into law and to maintain amiable relations with leading whites. In 1869-1871, they resisted attempts by white Democrats to "redeem" the state from northern influence and notions of racial equality. For both of these moments, understanding eschatology—the religious narratives that black leaders placed themselves within—is key to interpreting African-American political behavior. Eschatological thinking had both conservative and radicalizing effects on black Reconstruction politics. At some times and for some leaders, the certainty of a God-ordained victory translated into a willingness to accept (temporary) curtailments of black freedom. At other times, black leaders felt emboldened, unwilling to tolerate what they construed as demonic aims contrary to God's plan for history. This bipolar effect found expression in the words and actions of the same people. What one minister or politician was willing to tolerate in 1865 gave cause for a holy and unfettered resistance in 1870—and for the same reason: that he knew the future.

So, this chapter answers Paul Harvey's call for historians to "take religion seriously as a central part" of Reconstruction and to analyze "how religious discourse shaped the ways . . . black Southerners understood Reconstruction and Redemption."<sup>5</sup> In Reconstruction and Redemption, black leaders placed themselves inside religious stories,

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<sup>5</sup>Paul Harvey, "'That Was About Equalization after Freedom': Southern Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reconstruction and Redemption, 1861-1900," in Edward Blum and W. Scott Poole, eds., *Vale of Tears: New Essays on Religion and Reconstruction* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 76.

articulated their visions for the future, and expressed their confidence in a providential God. From the vantage of such theological interpretation, they told their followers what to do and believe during times of significant political change. African-American leaders were not just responding pragmatically to protect their race and class interests; they acted out of theological commitments.

### **A Theology of Emancipation**

African Americans in Wilmington did not end their celebrations with the sunrise prayer meeting. An hour or so after the service, the white pastor of Front Street Methodist gathered together lay leaders of the church to discuss the “never-to-be-forgotten sunrise prayer-meeting” he had just witnessed. As they met, Rev. L. S. Burkhead could still hear “the shouting and general demonstrations of joy at the jubilee . . . along the streets in the vicinity of Front Street Church.” The celebrations continued throughout the day. During the regular morning service, when Burkhead led a service for the white church members, the congregation heard the noises of celebration outside. That afternoon, Burkhead preached before the church’s black members, and he picked a somber passage of scripture in a vain attempt to calm the passions of the congregation. The worshippers were so excited, Burkhead wrote, that “an impassioned appeal would have almost thrown them into convulsions; at least they would have raised an uproar.”<sup>6</sup>

In the days and weeks that followed that “tumultuously jubilant” Sunday, Burkhead noticed profound changes in the city’s black population. “On all the streets of our City might be seen the exhibitions of the spirit of the newly acquired boon of freedom,” he wrote. African Americans had for some time outnumbered whites in

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<sup>6</sup>Burkhead, “History of the Difficulties,” 43-44.

Wilmington, but with their newly acquired freedom, they seemed to increase in number. Burkhead observed, “The whole city seems to be alive with ‘Africans.’” Some rural blacks made their way into the city when they heard news of the Union occupation. But longstanding residents made their presence known in new and bold ways. They flagrantly violated rules of deference to whites. Black women, for example, no longer ceded the sidewalk to white women. Burkhead complained, “They sing and shout; and preach and pray; and drink and swear; and fiddle and dance; and laugh and yell—‘Ye-ah, ye-ah, the bottom rail on the top at last!’” The sudden change in the behavior of African Americans, whom white southerners thought they knew well, mystified Burkhead and others. Burkhead was shocked to observe how quickly his black parishioners’ experience of emancipation, with its “pure ‘anti-slavery gospel’ dashed with the radical spirit of political intrigue,” had begun “to unsettle all their former principles and ideas of subordination.”<sup>7</sup>

As Burkhead tried to understand and explain the radical changes he saw around him, he turned to the theological meaning that black Methodists in his church gave to emancipation. Burkhead jealously guarded his pulpit and in his own writing appears suspect of and at times hostile to any teaching in the church other than his own. He openly mocked the working theology of his black parishioners. Yet despite its mocking tone, Burkhead’s description of the theology of emancipation that gripped black Protestants in Wilmington revealed a great deal. That theology, as Burkhead admitted, was expansive and powerful enough to change African Americans’ attitudes and behaviors and to instill in them “bright visions” of some glorious future for the race. The theology he encountered at Front Street Church could be found across the state and the

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 64-65.

nation. In that theology, emancipation came to mean many things: an act of Providence, an answer to prayer, a fulfillment of prophecy, a reenactment of biblical stories, and a sign of good things—in some cases, the millennium—to come.

Slaves greeted emancipation as the work of God. Like other American Protestants, black Protestants believed in a providential God, a being actively at work in human affairs, showing favor to some and displeasure to others. As Albert Raboteau put it, they believed in a “God of History, a God who lifted up and cast down nations and peoples, a God whose sovereign will was directing all things toward an ultimate end, drawing good out of evil.”<sup>8</sup> This providentialism led nineteenth-century Protestants—white and black—to look for divine meanings in all earthly affairs. This was especially true in major events like war, natural disaster, or national politics.<sup>9</sup>

For black Protestants, however, emancipation was a providential event of a different order and magnitude. Emancipation had been the prayer of African Americans for generations. Black southerners expected God to emancipate them, and when freedom came, they considered it an answer to prayer and a fulfillment of prophecy. When the 27<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Regiment landed in northeastern North Carolina, an elderly slave woman greeted the troops with dancing. She told them, “Bless the Lord, Massa! I’ve been praying for you these forty years! I thought you never coming at all! but you come at last! Bless the Lord.”<sup>10</sup> Rev. Morgan Latta, born a slave south of Raleigh, recalled the

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<sup>8</sup>Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 17.

<sup>9</sup>See Randall Miller, C. R. Wilson, and Harry Stout, eds., *Religion in the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), and Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), and *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

reaction to emancipation on his and neighboring plantations: “I heard the shouts all over the plantations, ‘We are free!’ ‘Free from slavery!’ ‘God has heard our prayers. We have been praying for twenty-five or thirty years that we should be free, and God has answered our prayers at His own appointed time; He has bursted the bonds of slavery and set us all free.’”<sup>11</sup>

African-American ministers interpreted the Civil War and emancipation as fulfillment of prophecies. Before the Civil War, black abolitionists, as Raboteau explains, “warned antebellum America (in terms strikingly prophetic of the Civil War) that it stood in peril of divine judgment unless it quickly repented the sin of slavery (an interpretation belatedly shared by Lincoln).”<sup>12</sup> Northern free black clergy wrote about the Civil War as divine punishment for slavery. “The God of the Universe is a just God,” wrote a minister in 1862, “and he is pouring out his wrath upon the country in political dissension, rebellion and cruel war: to avenge for the many wrongs inflicted upon an oppressed and helpless race.” They expected freedom to come from the war, and described that expectation in millennial terms, a “future glory” to soon follow the present tribulation: “ere long the bright sun of our destiny will break forth from behind the dark cloud of oppression and adversity.”<sup>13</sup> The Emancipation Proclamation confirmed their

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<sup>10</sup>W. P. Derby, *Bearing Arms in the Twenty-seventh Massachusetts Regiment of Volunteer Infantry during the Civil War, 1861-1865* (Boston: Wright and Potter Printing Company, 1883), 94-95, quoted in Joe A. Mobley, *James City: A Black Community in North Carolina, 1863-1900* (Raleigh: NC Division of Archives and History, 1981), 2. Here I have taken the liberty to edit the derogatory dialect transcription that nineteenth- and early-twentieth century whites sometimes used when recording the words of African Americans. I have changed the spelling but none of the words.

<sup>11</sup>Morgan London Latta, *The History of My Life and Work* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards and Broughton, 1903), 169-70.

<sup>12</sup>Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 12.

expectations. When northern whites grumbled against the proclamation, one minister retorted, “It is the Lord’s doings, and who shall hinder it?” Emancipation was prophecy fulfilled: “The time has come; it is written by the prophet Jeremiah.”<sup>14</sup> Emancipation-era black ministers believed they were living in important days, watching the fulfillment of divine prophecies.

The black residents of Wilmington who gathered at Front Street Methodist certainly agreed that emancipation was an answer to prayer and a fulfillment of prophecy. They also wrote their experience of emancipation into biblical stories, in particular, the Day of Jubilee and the Exodus. The leader at the sunrise prayer meeting called the Sunday following the capture of Wilmington “the day of Jubilee.” Burkhead noted that many black worshippers referred to emancipation as “Jubilee”: “To these colored people this was their great jubilee.”<sup>15</sup> Levitical law commanded ancient Israel to celebrate every fiftieth year as Jubilee. That year began with priests’ trumpets announcing a Day of Atonement, a day when all slaves were freed, all debts were forgiven, and all the property the wealthy had amassed was returned to its original owner. The practice of Jubilee no doubt brought significant upheaval to social and economic order. The commandment was intended to remind ancient Israelites that land and people belonged to God and not to those who held title. Black North Carolinians greeted the social and economic upheaval of emancipation as their own long-awaited Jubilee.

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<sup>13</sup>*Christian Recorder*, November 15, 1862. Some nineteenth-century newspapers and the databases that have collected them vary in the amount of publication information they provide. I have tried, wherever possible, to include as such information (article, page number, etc.).

<sup>14</sup>*Christian Recorder*, October 11, 1862.

<sup>15</sup>Burkhead, “History of the Difficulties,” 44.



They also understood emancipation as a reenactment of the Exodus story. Freed slaves saw themselves in the Old Testament story of the Hebrews' flight from Egypt. After four hundred years of bondage, the Hebrews followed Moses out of Egypt into the Sinai desert. As they fled, God caused Moses to part the Red Sea to provide an escape from the Egyptian army. After the Israelites passed through on dry land, the waters returned to drown Pharaoh's soldiers. Black southerners relived this story in their own experience of freedom from slavery as occasioned by the military defeat of their enemies. Burkhead explained his black congregation's excitement: "They had just crossed the 'Red Sea' dry-shod. In their estimation Pharaoh's hosts had been engulfed in ruin—gone down in a sea of blood! Hence they rejoiced with exceeding rejoicing."<sup>16</sup>

Placing themselves within biblical stories helped black Protestants to chart their future. They could appropriate the plot of biblical narratives—reliving the plight of enslaved Israelites, for instance—and take comfort in the well-known resolution that lay ahead. Burkhead noted black worshippers' confidence in the future. By seeing emancipation as an event in these ancient biblical stories, African Americans at Front Street Methodist "now looked ahead with protruding eyes and swelling hearts to the dazzling lights of their coming glories." Burkhead mocked them for the quick jump from reading ancient stories to imagining a future that he considered quite fanciful. That future included full participation in the body politic on terms of equality and "fine churches and residences . . . and plenty to eat and drink and wear." The theologically-inspired visions of the future differed within black religious communities, though most all included acquisition of land, education, and political power. What Burkhead found both laughable and dangerous was the power of black eschatology to counter the logic of

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 44.

subordination.<sup>17</sup> By placing themselves in biblical stories, and thus in a promise of better days, black Protestants contested the racial narratives of the day that forecast the future of blacks in America as one of slavery, perpetual childhood, dependence, or doom.

Emancipation became the sign from heaven that they were living out a much different story.

Over time, emancipation served as a reminder of that story. Black North Carolinians turned again and again to recall the event, and in recalling it, they reaffirmed the glorious future that awaited them. So, the importance of emancipation did not fade with time. Black communities commemorated the event each year in public celebrations across the state and the nation. These parades and festivals, with their marching militia units, floats, songs, and speeches, were meant, according to W. Fitzhugh Brundage, to “counter the dominant white version of the past.” Black ministers, whose “powerful influence” often dictated the forms of the celebrations, “cast both the distant and recent past as scenes in a familiar spiritual drama.” In their orations, ministers and other leaders looked back on emancipation as a divine act of redemption and many “anticipated . . . an even more profound, imminent, and millennial transformation in the status of black people.”<sup>18</sup> These frequent commemorations ensured that emancipation’s eschatological significance among black Protestants waxed rather than waned in the decades following the Civil War.

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>18</sup>W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 89, 94. See also Kathleen Clark, *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration & Political Culture in the South, 1863-1913* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

Those commemorations became hotly contested. During and immediately after the Civil War, blacks and whites held widely divergent views on emancipation. While the black congregation at Front Street Methodist interpreted emancipation as Jubilee, Exodus, and the sign of good things to come, Burkhead and his white parishioners considered the social upheaval “a tribulation” to be patiently endured. The white and black members of the church shared much of the same theological worldview.<sup>19</sup> They invested the past with providential meaning, and their theological expectations for the future gave them the ability to weather the present. But their radically different interpretations of emancipation left them unable to speak to one another.<sup>20</sup> And with the passage of time and regular commemorations, the white and black memories of emancipation became irreconcilable. Religious southern whites mourned the Confederate defeat as God’s chastisement of his beloved people while southern blacks hailed it as God’s long-delayed deliverance.

These mutually exclusive memories of emancipation fueled political and violent clashes. In Oxford, North Carolina, on January 1, 1874, the African-American community gathered to celebrate emancipation. The day involved a parade led by black militiamen in full regalia through the town center. The marching of black soldiers to remember emancipation seemed appropriate, because for many black North Carolinians freedom came when the black soldiers did. It also reminded ex-Confederates of their recent military defeat, and the white community in Oxford balked. County officials rushed in to stop the parade. The black community subsequently brought suit, and the

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<sup>19</sup>Chapter 2 analyzes black Christians’ post-emancipation departure from biracial churches in North Carolina, and tells the story of Front Street Methodist, Wilmington, in greater detail.

<sup>20</sup>Burkhead, “History of the Difficulties,” 64-65.

state's Supreme Court ruled that "the laws allow great latitude to do public demonstrations, whether political, social or moral."<sup>21</sup> The ability to publicly celebrate emancipation allowed black North Carolinians to continue to ascribe theological meaning to the historical event.

At one emancipation celebration, C. R. Harris, an AME Zion minister from North Carolina, explained what was at stake in his providential interpretation of emancipation. At the 1892 Agricultural and Industrial Fair in Alexandria, Virginia, Harris said, "This anniversary [of emancipation] deserves to be perpetuated as a memorial of the fervent zeal, indomitable energy, and sublime faith of the abolitionist, who, like Abraham of old, 'against hope believed in hope,' that the soil of America might be purged of the foul stain of human slavery." The memorial celebration would reinvigorate black Americans' hope for the future: "It will also remind us of that truth, so signally impressed by the lessons of the civil war, that God hears the cry of the oppressed, of whatever color or clime, and in due time comes to deliver them."<sup>22</sup> This religious confidence countered depressing news when it came; remembering emancipation lent weight to black claims that God was actively working on their behalf.

Within African-American discourse, emancipation became a benchmark in time. Laurie Maffly-Kipp writes that late nineteenth-century race histories "hinged on the acts of civil war and emancipation as the harbingers of a worldwide spiritual and social transformation." In black Americans' retelling of world history, the "climax . . . came with the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation." As early Medieval Christians (and

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<sup>21</sup>Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 194.

<sup>22</sup>C. R. Harris, "The Negro's Mission in America," *African Methodist Episcopal Zion Quarterly* 3:1 (October 1892): 48.

eventually most of the world) marked time by the birth of Christ, African Americans marked time by emancipation. Within black communities, the years 1863-1865 held a place akin the B.C. / A.D. divide. African-American writers reported events and race progress in relation to emancipation: “Ten years since emancipation” or “only thirty-five years after slavery,” or “only a generation from slavery.” Titles from African-American literature, like Katherine Tillman’s *Thirty Years of Freedom: A Drama in Four Acts* (1902) or her *Fifty Years of Freedom, or From Cabin to Congress: A Drama in Five Acts* (1910) and James Weldon Johnson’s poem “Fifty Years,” (1917) bear this out.<sup>23</sup>

Emancipation marked a key moment in the history of African-American churches. The tale of a prominent player in North Carolina history illustrates how significant emancipation was for some denominations. In 1863, Rev. James Walker Hood, a Northern free black preacher, left a comfortable pulpit in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and took a train south to North Carolina in the middle of intense fighting. Delayed by a shifting war front and frozen rivers, Hood arrived in January 1864, and immediately began planting churches right behind the troops. His missionary efforts often took place fewer than fifteen miles behind the frontlines. In Washington, North Carolina, he and his congregation twice had to retreat as Confederate forces advanced, only to resume missionary activities when Union forces regained control of the town. Such plucky tactics did not go without reward. In 1864 when he arrived in North Carolina, Hood was the only member of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church in the state. Less

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<sup>23</sup>Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, “Mapping the World, Mapping the Race: The Negro Race History, 1874-1915” *Church History* 64:4 (December 1995): 618ff; the *Star of Zion*, passim; J. A. Whitted, *A History of the Negro Baptists of North Carolina* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton Printing Co., 1908), 164; I am indebted to Andrea N. Williams for alerting me to the way African-American literature used emancipation to track time.

than ten years later, he presided over 366 churches in North Carolina with upwards of 20,000 members.<sup>24</sup>

Hood was not alone. Hundreds of missionaries from northern denominations organized independent congregations of freedpeople during and after the war. Though few black believers worshipped without white oversight in the antebellum South, ninety percent of all black churchgoers attended independent black congregations by the 1870s. It was a boon for northern church plants in the South, but southern whites had trouble believing the mass exodus from their churches. In fact, Burkhead soon found Hood at the doorstep of his parsonage in Wilmington, and Burkhead praised Hood's "practical spirit." But there was no secret as to why Hood was in Wilmington: he was planting independent black churches. Burkhead watched as his own congregation fell apart in 1865. Six hundred members of Front Street Methodist petitioned to join the AME, and in doing so, fought to take the church property with them.<sup>25</sup> Emancipation marked a new way of doing church for black North Carolinians.

An editorialist for the *Christian Recorder* considered the significant growth of the AME Church in 1865 as evidence that the church had entered "upon a new epoch, and is destined to illuminate her pathway by the dazzling splendor of millennial glory." The editorial boasted of church plants all across the country, especially in the South. "In Virginia and the Carolinas," the writer explained, "she [the AME Church] now follows in the war path of Grant, Sherman and Sheridan, applying the Balm of Gilead to the wounded and dying soldier, and publishing salvation to the forsaken and heartbroken

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<sup>24</sup>James Walker Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, or the Centennial of African Methodism* (New York: AME Zion Book Concern, 1895), 185-88, 289-300.

<sup>25</sup>Burkhead, "History of the Difficulties," 47-50, 56, 61, 73.

contraband.”<sup>26</sup> The church organizers who oversaw this influx of black worshippers into northern denominations ascribed eschatological significance to emancipation. Hood viewed the growth of black churches following emancipation as fulfillment of prophecy, a sign that black Americans were rising to meet an important destiny, and first fruits of “the millennial glory of the Christian Church.”<sup>27</sup>

The theology of emancipation, which black northerners, like Hood, shared with black southerners, like the worshippers at Front Street Methodist, influenced the way African-American leaders entered North Carolina state politics. The empowering logic of black eschatology worked in convention halls and the senate floor in much the same way it operated in prayer meetings. Eschatological thinking produced in African-American leaders a strong political will and clear visions for the future of the race. Black Protestant leaders entered party and electoral politics with the confidence of prophets. They believed they knew the future and had God on their side. This confidence both radicalized and constrained black politics. Reliving biblical stories emboldened black North Carolinians to accept nothing less than the outcome they expected—full political equality, for example—and afforded them the patience to move slowly and carefully.

### **The Freedmen’s Convention of 1865**

Reconstruction was short-lived in North Carolina. During Presidential Reconstruction, Andrew Johnson appointed William Woods Holden as provisional

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<sup>26</sup>*Christian Recorder*, 1 April 1865.

<sup>27</sup>Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 55-56; see Katherine Dvorak, *African-American Exodus: the Segregation of Southern Churches* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1991). See also Paul Harvey, *Freedom’s Comin’’: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 8-19.

governor. A Republican, Holden wrested political power from the former slaveholding elite. His plans to democratize the state, however, sidestepped African Americans. Holden's first Reconstruction administration sought to define black freedom in the 1865 State Constitutional Convention without consulting black North Carolinians. His successor, Democrat and former slaveholder-planter Jonathan Worth, backpeddled and reversed Holden's reforms. Worth and his allies sought to return power to antebellum elites and to replace slavery with some type of black serfdom. Not until 1868, in a biracial convention under Congressional Reconstruction, did North Carolina revise its Constitution to embrace emancipation. For two years under Holden's second Reconstruction administration, a biracial Republican party held the balance of power. By 1870, however, white Democrats had retaken control of the state legislature, and in 1871, they impeached Holden. Reconstruction, the twelve-year national experiment in black freedom and political power, translated into fewer than three years of reform in the Old North State.<sup>28</sup> Between 1865 and 1871, black North Carolinians applied their theology of emancipation to Reconstruction politics in North Carolina. Two moments in particular—the Freedmen's Convention of 1865 and the impeachment crisis of 1870-1871—demonstrated clearly theology's central role in black politics.

After emancipation, black North Carolinians struggled to make clear demands for equal rights without arousing ire from leading whites. In 1865, throughout North Carolina cities, small towns, and rural counties, freedpeople gathered in mass meetings to send delegates to the first Freedman's Convention. It was more than a historic moment. The organizers for the Wilmington mass meeting published this call in the papers:

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<sup>28</sup>For more on Reconstruction in North Carolina, see Evans, *Ballots and Fence Rails*; Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion*; and, at last resort, Joseph Gregoire de Roulhac Hamilton, *Reconstruction in North Carolina* (1914; repr., Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971).



“Freedmen of North Carolina, Arouse!! . . . These are the times foretold by the Prophets, ‘when a Nation shall be born in a day’ . . . The time has arrived when we can strike one blow to secure those rights of Freemen that have been so long withheld from us.”<sup>29</sup> This call appropriated Isaiah’s prophecy in which the Lord asks a rhetorical question: “Can a nation be born in a day?” The obvious answer—of course not, it takes years—the Lord casts aside, and announces plans to bring Israel back from exile and restore the nation in a day. The prophecy of building a nation in a day came accompanied with a promise from God. The scripture reads, “‘Shall I bring to the birth, and not cause to bring forth?’ saith the LORD.”<sup>30</sup> The organizers of Wilmington’s mass meeting claimed Isaiah’s prophecy for themselves; they planned to build a nation in a day, to leap immediately from emancipation to political action. In emancipation, God had brought the race to the moment of birth. As the prophecy promised, God would not fail to finish the job. The Freedmen’s Convention was the first step in the political organization of a recently emancipated people. It contained, according to the organizers, great political and eschatological import.

In September 1865, the delegates from Wilmington joined others from across the state at Raleigh’s African Methodist Church. Of the 120 delegates, “the great majority of them were freedmen, not freemen,” observed Sidney Andrews, a Boston journalist. The men were “not only North-Carolinians by birth, but slaves by growth,” and the convention organizers wanted it known that this was a home-grown movement, not the machinations of outsiders. Contrary to these objectives, they elected Hood, a northerner, as their president. Hood, however, self-identified as a local, though he claimed a little

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<sup>29</sup>*Wilmington Herald*, September 8, 1865, quoted in Evans, *Ballots and Fence Rails*, 87.

<sup>30</sup>Isa. 66: 6-9, KJV.

less than two years' residence in the state. More importantly, the organizing committee stressed, and others reported, as Andrews did, that it was "really a Convention of colored men, not a colored men's Convention engineered by white men."<sup>31</sup> Any appearance of being the puppets of other political actors would have undermined the Convention's goal of writing equal rights into the North Carolina Constitution.

In his presidential address to the Convention, Hood urged the delegates to find a balance between radical demands and patience. The delegates, he encouraged, should not feel afraid to say why they had assembled, "holding up the motto before God and men, 'Equal rights before the law.'" He told them to "assert always that we want three things": the right to testify, the right to serve on juries, and the right to vote. That agenda was radical enough that, Hood argued, it had to be accompanied with "faith, and patience and moderation," and without "harsh expressions . . . about any line of policy."<sup>32</sup> Hood's address, indeed, set the tone for the Convention. Conveners debated about how patient to be in their demands for equal rights and how respectfully or deferentially such demands should be articulated.

Those debates had actually begun weeks and days before the delegates convened. Famous abolitionist Horace Greeley, in a public letter declining an invitation to the Convention, urged the "colored people of North Carolina" to place this moment in an eschatological context. "Looking back at the momentous history," he wrote, "the stupendous transformation of the last five years, we must reverently say, 'This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.' Let us unwaveringly trust that the great

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<sup>31</sup>Sidney Andrews, *The South Since the War as Shown by Fourteen Weeks of Travel and Observation in Georgia and the Carolinas* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1866), 121, 124.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 122.

work will be prosecuted to its legitimate and logical consummation.” Greeley urged trust, accompanied by patience. So, even though Greeley supported black leaders’ “righteous demand of enfranchisement,” he cautioned, “this is not the work of a day, and we must learn to labor, and if need be to wait.” Greeley reminded his readers of how long emancipation was in coming, how he had worked for it for nearly thirty years. He applied the lessons of the abolitionist movement to Reconstruction: “We may not win a full recognition of your rights directly; but the effort will never be abandoned until its success is assured.”<sup>33</sup> The reality of emancipation argued that in God’s timing patience did not preclude success.

Some black North Carolinians agreed with Greeley, telling him not to worry. Edward Brooks, editor of Raleigh’s short-lived black newspaper the *Journal of Freedom*, assured Greeley, “No one who is acquainted with the character of the freedmen, can for a moment doubt that he will be hopeful, patient, and peaceful.” Whereas Greeley’s letter referred to the long abolitionist struggle as an example of hope and patience, Brooks cited instead the experience of slaves: “Years of unrequited toil and servitude, patiently and peacefully endured, hoping for the ‘day of jubilee,’ prove this.”<sup>34</sup> Brooks and Greeley drew upon different pasts, white abolitionism and black slavery, but both recommended patience in light of God’s action in the world. Both pointed to emancipation as proof that God would ultimately grant them success.

Despite Brooks’s statement that “Mr. Greeley need not be afraid,” many at the 1865 Freedmen’s Convention in Raleigh did not want to wait patiently for political equality. Even Hood thought that patience had its limits. “We have waited long enough

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<sup>33</sup>Horace Greeley, “To the Colored People of North Carolina,” *Journal of Freedom*, September 30, 1865.

<sup>34</sup>“Mr. Greeley’s Address,” *Journal of Freedom*, September 30, 1865.

for our rights,” he told a cheering audience. “People used to say it was not the time to abolish slavery, and used to tell us to wait until the proper time arrived.” By 1865, the time had come, and black Americans had little to wait for. Hood thought that African Americans should “gain all we want at once,” even as he admitted that God’s timing might be slower.<sup>35</sup> Two delegates in particular had less tolerance for talk of waiting and moderation. An observer characterized Abraham H. Galloway as being “of exceedingly radical and Jacobinical spirit” and accused John P. Sampson of “somewhat wordy radicalism.” Both of these men were born in North Carolina and educated in the North. Both would later serve as state legislators in the 1870s, and for the 1865 Convention, both tried to edit out deferential language from the official communications. They countered the moderate views of Fayetteville barber Isham Sweet and Greensboro carpenter and teacher John Randolph Jr., who though, according to Andrews, were “radical in desire” were in fact “conservative in action, longing for much, but content to make haste slowly.”<sup>36</sup> It was a debate over timing and tact.

Outside the Convention, radical whites encouraged the freedmen to make bolder claims for racial equality. Walker Pearce, a northern white Republican recently relocated to Newbern, assured the delegates that their freedom was on firm footing: “The great question of your right to liberty, or otherwise citizenship, has already been affirmatively decided on the congressional forum and on the battlefield, and been ratified by the unanimous consent of Christendom.” He told the delegates not to worry about securing the blessings of former slaveholders. According to Pearce, white rebels resisted black suffrage in order to postpone retribution: “whatever punishment a righteous Providence

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<sup>35</sup>*Journal of Freedom*, October 7, 1865.

<sup>36</sup>Andrews, *The South Since the War*, 124-25.

may see fit to inflict.”<sup>37</sup> Several of the delegates expressed gratitude for Pearce’s sentiments, but few repeated his words.

In the end, the moderates won. The committee that drafted the letter to the Constitutional Convention and state legislature included Isham Sweet and John Randolph, along with Rev. George Rue, a Union Army chaplain. James H. Harris, a self-educated former slave who became the most important black Reconstruction politician in the state, chaired the committee and likely penned the communication himself. The document began with the utmost deference, qualifying every appeal with the words “humbly” or “reverently.” The writers went further, admitting they “possess[ed] no power to control legislation in our behalf, and that we must depend wholly upon moral appeal to [your] hearts and consciences.”<sup>38</sup> Democratic newspapers reported none of the document’s demands but applauded its submissive posture. The Convention, which unanimously approved the document, had tipped the balance in favor of securing good relations with white leaders.

The Convention leaders’ deferential tone was surely pragmatic. But theology and pragmatism were not mutually exclusive. Their theology of emancipation gave them confidence in the success of their political agenda. In the meantime, black leaders saw room for pragmatism and prayer. In fact, the Convention’s communication argued from providentialism to secure “kindly ties” with North Carolina whites. To accomplish this, Harris downplayed the role that black southerners played in securing their own freedom. Instead he wanted white southerners to accept Confederate defeat as the act of God: “Though it was impossible for us to remain indifferent spectators of such a struggle, you

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<sup>37</sup>“Letter from Walker Pearce,” *Journal of Freedom*, October 7, 1865.

<sup>38</sup>Andrews, *The South Since the War*, 128.

will do us the justice to admit that we have . . . [acted] the part only as has been assigned us, and calmly awaiting upon Providence.” In the document, Harris asked the (white) readers, “Do you blame us that we have, in the meantime, prayed for the freedom of our race?” Because “God bestowed freedom,” Harris reasoned, there was no reason why whites should feel animosity toward the freed people. Within the doors of the Convention, a providential view of emancipation emboldened black demands for equal rights. Publicly, that view helped to curtail white vitriol.<sup>39</sup>

The 1865 Freedmen’s Convention, as the first statewide caucus organized by black North Carolinians, holds several lessons for how African-American leaders worked out their theology on the ground. Even though it was a non-sectarian political event, the Convention gave Protestant Christianity a prominent place. The Convention met in a church and elected a minister as president. A large number of the delegates were ministers, and delegates routinely appealed to other delegates’ Christian beliefs and consciences. As their last act, the Convention established the Equal Rights League to serve as the year-round institutional structure for black political organizing in the state. The League made provision for Church organizations and societies to serve as auxiliaries, broadening the League’s influence by using existing church infrastructure. Non-sectarian Protestantism quickly became the established religion of black politics in North Carolina.

Also, the delegates at the Freedmen’s Convention expected reforms to align with a divine plan and within God’s timing. In this view, God’s ordained plan left room for human maneuvering, and many black leaders tried to walk in steps already laid out for them. Their political action could serve as God’s way of instituting change or fulfilling

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<sup>39</sup>Andrews, *The South Since the War*, 128. At another time, Harris emphasized the contribution of black soldiers in emancipation to prove the political astuteness of slave populations. “Official Proceedings of the Convention,” *Raleigh Weekly Standard*, February 5, 1868.

prophecy. Hood believed that the Reconstruction-era political reforms fulfilled biblical prophecies. In his *Plan of the Apocalypse*, he wrote, “this symbol of a plentiful harvest [from Revelation 11:15] may refer to our own times . . . [it] seems to signify the next great period of prosperity, human progress, human liberty and human happiness. We are now having a great harvest of reforms of every kind.”<sup>40</sup> That Hood himself had participated in these reforms did not diminish his claim that they were fulfillment of prophecy. Hood and his colleagues interpreted political actions, even their own actions, as events in a spiritual drama.

Eschatology, then, provided a clear vision for the post-emancipation political scene. Because of biblical stories, prophecies, and God’s work in emancipation, black North Carolinians knew their future. Their confidence in the race’s future allowed Convention delegates to openly agitate for a righteous cause. No one present doubted that black North Carolinians would secure suffrage and equality before the law. On the other hand, the certainty of victory released moderates from a sense of urgency and commended a slower, more deferential path of reforms.

After the Convention, progress did not come fast enough for either radicals or moderates. Both groups expressed disappointment with white responses to their 1865 convention. Most disturbingly, neither gubernatorial candidate in 1865 seemed ready to concede to black demands for citizenship rights. Black commentators lamented that both candidates held positions on race “virtually as they did previous to the war.” “So,” wrote editor Edward Brooks, “all charges that either party are for or against [equal rights] are mere bosh. To us it looks like a struggle for plunder and position, and we are like the old man who looked on while his wife fought the bear, remarking that he ‘did’nt care a d--n

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<sup>40</sup>James Walker Hood, *The Plan of the Apocalypse* (York, PA: P. Anstadt & Sons, 1900), 119

which whipped.”<sup>41</sup> African Americans remained outside a political process that ignored their demands to enter.

By 1868, however, the delegates saw at least partial fulfillment of their post-emancipation expectations. Under Congressional Reconstruction, black men voted in elections for a new constitutional convention. North Carolina sent fifteen black delegates to a Republican-dominated state constitutional convention in Raleigh. Among them were Galloway, Harris, Sweet, and Hood. They faced constant harassment from a handful of conservative Democrats who refused to tolerate the black delegates’ presence. After one conservative proposed revising the constitution to ensure that the white race not be degraded to the level of blacks, James Harris arose to give the hostile delegate a history lesson because he had “ignored the events of the past six years, or supposed that Grant had surrendered to Lee, or that the so-called Confederacy was a success.” Harris’s point was clear: recent history foretold a triumph for blacks and radicals. It was in vain that conservatives sought a victory. To make his point clearer, Harris drew an analogy between the current political strife and supernatural warfare: “When Lucifer had rebelled against Almighty God—had been vanquished and hurled over the battlements of Heaven—he too considered the laws unwise and unjust. But he had been forced to accept the situation.”<sup>42</sup> The Republican majority erupted in laughter and applause. Harris laughed, too, it seemed, because his theological reading of the past opened for him a window onto the future. He laughed, we can assume, because, through that window, he saw God on his side.

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<sup>41</sup>*Journal of Freedom*, October 21 1865, and October 28, 1865.

<sup>42</sup>Qtd. in *Raleigh Weekly Standard*, January 22, 1868.



## Fighting “Redemption” in 1869-1871

Even when their political opponents turned violent, leading black North Carolinians remained convinced that God was on their side. To make sense of their suffering and setbacks, black Protestant leaders interpreted Klan violence and Democratic Party success as the frightening but ultimately futile work of demons to thwart the plans of God. In the years 1869-1870, black leaders noticed that, although their allies controlled the state legislature, their enemies controlled the state on the ground. Conservative white leaders launched a terror campaign in the Piedmont, using the Ku Klux Klan to intimidate black and white Republicans. By early 1870, the Klan dominated several counties in the Piedmont, and as one local recalled, Klan members rode openly through city streets, “enquiring the whereabouts of the negroes and white radicals.”<sup>43</sup> In Alamance County, Klan members hanged Wyatt Outlaw, a leading black Republican, from a tree on the courthouse lawn, writing on his dead body, “Beware all guilty, black and white.” Shortly thereafter, in Caswell County, the Klan deceived Republican Senator John W. Stephens into attending a Democratic convention, where they lured him into a back room of the courthouse, choked him, and stabbed him to death. By their violent acts, conservatives and Klan leaders aimed to retake or, in their words, “redeem” the state government.<sup>44</sup>

The violence of 1869-1870 was, according to Harris, a sad “commentary upon the character of the so-called superior white race.” The supposedly inferior race acted on “an

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<sup>43</sup>Qtd. in William D. Snider, *Light on the Hill: A History of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 82-83.

<sup>44</sup>Paul Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 154; see also Hamilton, *Reconstruction in North Carolina*, 469ff; and Daniel Stowell, “Why Redemption?” in Blum, ed., *Vale of Tears*.

instinct of right, justice and humanity,” and tried to bring violent offenders to justice. The supposedly superior race, Harris claimed, witnessed “blood-shed, murder, and assassination and outrage committed on a defenseless and unoffending race” and did nothing. “Oh, what a commentary!” Whites, Harris found it ironic, “then claim superiority over the colored race. God knows they are welcome to this kind of superiority over us.”<sup>45</sup>

James Harris, who two years earlier had laughed at conservatives for their vain attempt at political victory, remained baffled by his opponents’ unwillingness to admit defeat. “Reconstruction is a fixed fact,” he reminded his opponents on the floor of the North Carolina General Assembly. Harris saw Reconstruction reforms, including black suffrage and racial equality, as the inevitable consequence of emancipation. He and the other delegates to the 1865 Freedmen’s Convention assumed that those reforms were what God had in store for the race. But conservative Democrats never saw the reforms as inevitable or permanent. They resisted, Harris reasoned, not just Reconstruction reforms but God’s plan for human history.

Harris began to call the Democratic Party the “machinery of the devil,” as he did in a speech on the House floor. He gave examples of the kind of terror blacks faced from Democrats in white Klan hoods. In Johnston County, a black minister “was dragged from his own house and severely and unmercifully whipped,” and, Harris reported, “the only objection against him was that he established in that County a negro school and a negro Church.” In Statesville, North Carolina, a “party of disguised villains” nearly whipped an African American to death for “being in favor of negro schools.” The same

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<sup>45</sup>James H. Harris, *Speech of Hon. James H. Harris on the Militia Bill, Delivered in the North Carolina House of Representatives Monday, January 17, 1870* (Raleigh: North Carolina Standard, 1870), 22.

night, Harris reported, the Klan “for the purpose of gratifying their devilish spleen on another defenseless man,” fired bird shot into a boy’s face because his father wanted public schools for black children. With each example of atrocious violence, Harris referred to the Klan and its allies as “devils” or “demons.”<sup>46</sup> It was more than just a metaphor. Black Protestants in North Carolina interpreted local conflicts during “Redemption” as supernatural battles, where the forces of heaven and hell took sides.

The supernatural battles that Harris described were also earthly. Harris told his opponents that black North Carolinians were prepared to fight the “devils in human flesh.” “I have always counseled peace,” Harris warned, “but will say that if the Conservatives expect to drive the colored people into a support of their party by a system of intimidation, they will be mistaken.” His warning sounded like a threat: “It cannot be expected that colored men will stand idly by and see men of their race hanged and shot in cold blood.”<sup>47</sup> A race war did not ensue, but Republican measures to suppress the Klan brought about accusations of race war. Harris’s speech on the House floor supported the passage of the militia bill, which would give the governor power to declare martial law in counties overrun with the Klan. In July 1870, Republican Governor William Holden declared Orange and Alamance counties to be in a state of insurrection. He asked Col. George W. Kirk to assemble militia companies from the white Republican strongholds in the western part of the state, while he sent for black militia companies from the eastern counties. Holden’s critics called it the Kirk-Holden War; conservative newspapers reported on the advance of black troops on vulnerable white populations in central North Carolina. Black militiamen fired no shots in the Kirk-Holden War, but when

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<sup>46</sup>Harris, *Speech of Hon. James Harris*, 12-13.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

conservative Democrats gained a majority in the legislature later that year, the affair became grounds for the legislature to impeach Holden.

African-American reactions to Holden’s impeachment trial and “Redemption” displayed just how integrated black theology and politics were. In late 1870, during Holden’s impeachment trial, seventeen black state legislators sent a circular “To the Colored People of North Carolina,” hoping that all the ministers would read it to their congregations. The circular (Figure 1.1) compared the impeachment trial with the persecution of Mordecai in the Old Testament account of Esther. According to the biblical account, when the Hebrews lived in exile, Haman, a Persian official, became outraged because Mordecai, a prominent Jew, would not bow down before him. Haman began to persecute the Jews and to devise ways to kill Mordecai and his fellow Jews. Mordecai’s cousin Esther, who kept her Hebrew nationality secret, gained the favor of the king and became one of his queens. While Haman built gallows to hang Mordecai, Esther proclaimed a three-day fast among the Jews. After the fast, when the king heard Esther’s plea for safety for all of her people, Haman was hanged on the gallows he built for Mordecai. “Indeed,” the circular read, “there is some analogy between our case and that of the Jews at that time.” In the comparison, not since Haman’s time had there been such “wickedness” as “proposed by the dominant party in the present General Assembly.” Governor Holden, facing impeachment, was the persecuted Mordecai. If he fell into the hands of the Democrats, the modern-day Haman, “those whom he protected will be the next victims.” And the African-American legislators themselves, as leaders of an oppressed minority, played the role of Queen Esther.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>“Address to the Colored People of North Carolina,” circular, December 19, 1870; Esther 2:6 – 7:10, KJV.

The legislators explained the motives of their political opponents and warned their constituents of the imminent danger. They chalked up resistance to Reconstruction reforms to former slaveholders' anger at losing "their slave property." The black legislators argued that Republicans were persecuted only because "we refuse to bow the knee to them [Democrats or former slaveholders]." A political takeover by conservative Democrats, they argued, would have disastrous consequences. They alerted the readers to a new "system of disfranchisement" and the repeal of the militia law. The close links between conservative leaders and the Ku Klux Klan worried black lawmakers that their opponents "propose[d] to let loose their murderous band upon us and thus secure a majority." "When this is done," they lamented, "our liberties are at an end." The circular issued such a dire warning in order to "arouse [black North Carolinians] to such action as may tend to avert" the impeachment of Holden and a complete Democratic takeover.

The action the circular's authors recommended was not the usual political response: no conventions, no committees, no canvasses or coalitions, and no militias. Instead, their plan for political action was to pray and fast. "To avert the impending evil we see no power in the arm of flesh," the circular contended. "We feel that we have too long neglected to seek aid at that source that never fails. The laws of righteous retribution have not been repealed, but are in force upon the statutes of the Almighty. Justice will not sleep forever. If we call upon God he will hear and answer us."<sup>49</sup> They appointed January 13, 1871 as the day for all black North Carolinians to take off work, to assemble in churches, and "to cry unto the Lord." By calling for prayer and fasting, the leaders

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<sup>49</sup>"Address to the Colored People of North Carolina," circular, December 19, 1870.

alluded to Jesus' words in the Gospels ("This kind [of demon] cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting."<sup>50</sup>), and thus they equated the "Redeemers" with demons.

Prayer and fasting were political acts because, to black Protestants, Reconstruction and Redemption were eschatological moments. African-American leaders saw themselves, their opponents, and the forces of heaven and hell, as actors in spiritual wars and in earthly politics. The grand struggles between God's plan for human history and those who resisted it were being played out in Raleigh and across the state.

In *Black Reconstruction*, W. E. B. Du Bois quoted two paragraphs from the North Carolina circular to display the political motivations behind Holden's impeachment and to argue that black leaders were faithfully representing black interests in the struggle. But Du Bois chose the only two paragraphs in the circular that did not mention God, supernatural forces, or the biblical story that frames the entire document. Du Bois was not the first historian to edit out the religious references from this thoroughly religious document. Dunning-school historian and conservative white southerner Joseph Gregoire de Roulhac Hamilton, took the same quotations out of their religious context. Hamilton and Du Bois offered diametrically opposed interpretations of the time period, but they both relegated black religion to the background of Reconstruction politics.

Modern historian Eric Foner seemed more ready to leave religion in the story. Foner mentioned the reference to Esther, Mordecai, and Haman as evidence that black leaders used the Bible to help constituents understand public events. The appearance of biblical references in political discourse gave credence to Foner's argument that "during Reconstruction, black Christianity inspired not inaction but political commitment." Surprisingly, Foner, too, failed to mention the purpose of the circular: a call to prayer and

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<sup>50</sup>Matt. 17:21, KJV.

fasting. That is, black leaders were not using the Bible to encourage black voting or some other typical form of political commitment. They were asking for prayer. As Foner argued, black leaders were trying to help their followers understand political events, but not in the way he suggested. Black politicians wanted the people to see Reconstruction politics as a supernatural drama. Some scholars tend to treat religious language as a medium to convey the political messages that secular language, albeit less powerfully, could also transmit. The 1870 circular demonstrates the shortcomings of this kind of interpretation. Christianity did not serve the end of Reconstruction reforms so much as Reconstruction reforms served religious ends. Black religion did inspire political action, as Foner argued. But it also changed political action in such a way as to blur the categories of “inaction” and “political commitment.” Where do we, as interpreters, place prayer and fasting?<sup>51</sup>

The extent to which theology informed black political consciousness necessitates a reinterpretation of Reconstruction politics. That reinterpretation, which this chapter begins, would carry over into the decades following Reconstruction. When prayer and fasting failed to halt Holden’s impeachment, black Protestants did not abandon their theological or eschatological worldview. Historian Daniel Stowell noted that black southerners’ “providential understanding of history . . . rendered the end of reconstruction all the more devastating.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, the loss of a political majority and the subsequent encroachment on black liberties were hard to reconcile with their millennial hopes.

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<sup>51</sup>Du Bois, “Border and Frontier,” *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*, rev. ed. (1935; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 534-35; Hamilton, *Reconstruction in North Carolina*, 365; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-77* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 94-95.

<sup>52</sup>Daniel W. Stowell, *Rebuilding Zion: The Religious Reconstruction of the South, 1863-77* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 150.

Those hopes, however, remained intact. In their ongoing participation in state politics—as well as their efforts to acquire land and build institutions—African Americans in North Carolina remained committed to a political vision derived from their theology of emancipation. Even as black North Carolinians watched the reversal of Reconstruction reforms, many refused to believe that things would end badly. Three years after Holden’s impeachment, the editor of the *Fayetteville Educator* remained hopeful. He began by decrying the Democrats’ use of extralegal violence. A black legislator had been shot in the streets; a local white judge had murdered a black man with impunity. But the editor told his readers not to despair: “Revolutions never turn backwards.”<sup>53</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In emancipation, Reconstruction, and Redemption, black Protestant leaders wrote themselves into religious narratives. In 1865, they identified with stories of Exodus, divine judgment, and Jubilee. Their experience of emancipation as a providential, prophetic, and even millennial event led to a theology that significantly informed their political action. In 1870, they placed their experiences within battles between the forces of heaven and hell and within the exile story of Esther. Where within these religious narratives black Protestants saw themselves led them to particular political actions and redefined certain religious acts as political.

Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, eschatological confidence emboldened and radicalized black politics even as it placed limits on that radicalism. Perhaps more importantly, eschatology allowed African-American Protestants to place themselves and

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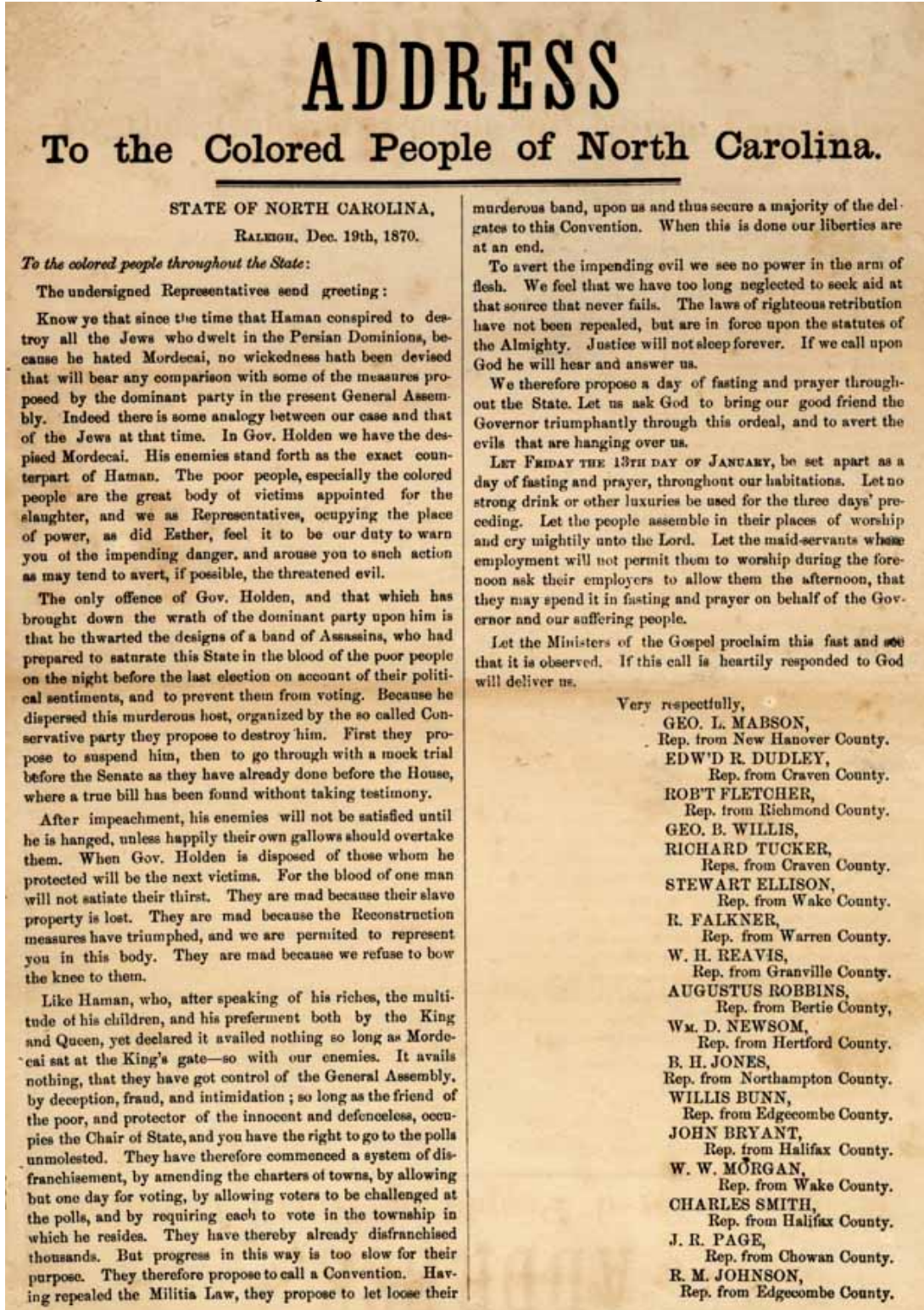
<sup>53</sup>*The Fayetteville Educator*, 17 October 1874.



their circumstances within narratives that countered southern white narratives, such as “Redemption.”

These stories offered more than inspiration. Certainly, religious thinking and language inspired nineteenth-century black politics. But the significance of black religious narratives goes deeper. Once propelled into politics by religion, African-American actors carried their religion with them, transforming political activity into a part of a larger religious narrative. As the 1870 circular illustrates, these religious narratives redefined political behavior, making prayer and fasting acts of political strategy. Taking seriously these religious narratives requires means placing black theology at the center of our descriptions of black life in the post-emancipation period.

Figure 1.1  
 "Address to the Colored People of North Carolina"



Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2004. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/address/image.html>

## Chapter Two

### A Theology of Racial Independence and Denominational Politics

Almost immediately after emancipation, black Protestants in North Carolina declared their independence from white-controlled churches. It was one of their very first acts as freedpeople. By 1866, two-thirds of southern black Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians had left southern white denominations. By 1871, only a tiny portion of black churchgoers attended white-led churches. The separation was sudden, dramatic, and, to many, completely unanticipated. White southerners experienced shock and confusion as they watched black church members leave in droves.<sup>1</sup> To black southerners, however, the move came as no surprise. Their desire to separate from white churches extended back into the antebellum period.<sup>2</sup> They anticipated their departure as an important, even eschatological, event.

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<sup>1</sup>For narratives and analyses of independent black church movements, see J. Gordon Melton, *A Will to Choose: The Origins of African-American Methodism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); Will Gravely, "African Methodisms and the Rise of Black Denominationalism," in Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey, eds., *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretative Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 239-63; William Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993); Katherine Dvorak, *An African-American Exodus: The Segregation of the Southern Churches* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Pub., 1991); and Harry V. Richardson, *Dark Salvation: The Story of Methodism as It Developed Among Blacks in America* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1976).

<sup>2</sup>The antebellum desire to separate from white southern churches, coupled with slaves' long history of secret, independent worship (the "invisible institution") prepared black worshippers to assume and assert their independence during the Civil War and Reconstruction. See Dvorak, *An African-American Exodus*; and Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

In recounting the history of black Baptists in North Carolina, nineteenth-century Baptist preacher J. A. Whitted used a curious phrase to describe the church under emancipation: “When the time came for a separation.” With these words, Whitted implied that the movement out of white churches was an inevitable one, as if the establishment of independent black churches followed a preordained script. Whitted described the separation of black and white Protestants in the 1860s and 1870s, like emancipation itself, as a divinely appointed moment, one foretold by prophets. According to his account, “The prayer which [our] fathers prayed was ‘Grant the day Lord when we may worship God under our own vine and fig tree,’ and this prayer meant to them a separation from the white churches.” Whitted’s reference to vines and fig trees was not his own word-image; nineteenth-century black churchgoers frequently made this biblical allusion to describe racial and religious independence. The image alludes to Old Testament prophecies of the “last days,” when God would judge the nations, restore Israel to its glory, and show favor to the oppressed. The prophet Micah told of “these last days”: “they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken it.”<sup>3</sup>

Like Whitted, AME Zion Bishop James Walker Hood invested the separation from white churches with eschatological meaning. He described the establishment of independent black churches—both the move by black southerners in the 1860s and 1870s and the move by black northerners earlier in the century— as the *telos* of the race’s entire history, ancient and modern. All of God’s prophecies and providential dealings with the “Negro race,” in Hood’s account, anticipated the race’s ultimate purpose: “the Negro

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<sup>3</sup>J. A. Whitted, *A History of the Negro Baptists of North Carolina* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton Printing Co., 1908), 14-15; Mic. 4:1-4, KJV.

Church.”<sup>4</sup> The success of racially independent churches served as both the sign of the new era and the vehicle for attaining the progress predicted for that era. In both Hood’s and Whitted’s denominational histories, the extensive church building efforts flowed out of black Protestants’ theological reading of emancipation; black Protestants imagined a glorious future for the race to follow freedom. The separation from white churches was one of the first and most significant of the changes that freedom brought. Black church leaders considered the change a sign of “a new epoch” in history, a foretaste of “millennial glory.”<sup>5</sup>

Hood’s and Whitted’s denominations, however, lived out their religious independence in very different ways. Independent black Methodists (the AME and AME Zion Churches) jealously guarded their racial autonomy and eyed close relationships with white Protestants suspiciously. Black Baptists and Presbyterians in the state, while maintaining their racial independence, nevertheless valued and gave millennial significance to their churches’ efforts to remove racial barriers between white and black Protestants. In contrast to Hood’s AME Zion Church, Baptists and Presbyterians in North Carolina nourished close interracial alliances with white Protestants throughout the late nineteenth century. Despite the popular and scholarly tendency to downplay differences between black religious traditions, denominational and theological differences mattered a great deal to nineteenth-century African-American churches. Black church leaders saw the future of their churches, and the future of the race, through a denominational lens.

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<sup>4</sup>James Walker Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; or, The Centennial of African Methodism* (New York: AME Zion Book Concern, 1895), 55, passim.

<sup>5</sup>*Christian Recorder*, April 1, 1865. Chapter 1 examines at greater length black Protestants’ theological reading of emancipation.

One of the clearest examples of the import of denominationalism was black Protestants' varying perspectives on racial identity and independence. In North Carolina, the most outspoken leaders of independent black Methodist churches, namely the AME and AME Zion, understood the church's racial segregation as essential to God's plan for the race. In their theology, the destiny of the African-American race and the mission of the church were one and the same. Despite their praise for instances of interracial harmony and cooperation, they resisted substantial alliances with white Methodists as pathways to subordination and dependence. Outspoken black Baptists and Presbyterians, however, constructed their racial identity in different ways. They heralded independent black churches as answers to prayers or as fulfillment of prophecies, but they hoped for a future in which differences of color between Christians mattered little. And they hoped that their relationships with white Protestants would contribute to the erosion of racism and inequality.

In this chapter, I do not mean to imply that one's denominational affiliation had a one-to-one correlation with a particular idea of racial independence. It would be too much to argue that every Zion Methodist valued black autonomy more than every Baptist did. But at least in North Carolina, theological and denominational differences went a long way toward explaining African Americans' differing approaches to white Protestants. This chapter examines black North Carolinians' experiences of religious independence, attempts at interracial cooperation, and theologies of race—starting first with independent black Methodists and then turning to Baptists and Presbyterians. At the center of black Protestant debates over racial independence and interracial cooperation were their eschatological beliefs. That is, the same eschatology that shaped black political

action in Reconstruction also guided black Protestants' creation of independent churches and their relationships with whites. Lastly, this chapter analyzes the relationships between black denominations in the state and argues for more scholarly attention to the themes of diversity, conflict, and competition in black church history.

### **Emphasis on Racial Independence: the AME and AME Zion**

In 1863, black Methodists in New Bern, North Carolina, left the Methodist Episcopal Church South (ME South). Black worshippers in Andrews Chapel, New Bern, originally heard sermons from a white preacher in the ME South. That minister abandoned his pulpit when Union forces took control of the city in 1862. With the church's white congregants "having nearly all gone into rebeldom," an African-American traveler from Pennsylvania noted, the black members simply came down from the balcony and claimed the church as theirs.<sup>6</sup> For Andrews Chapel and other ME South churches whose clergy had fled in support of the Confederacy, military authorities ceded jurisdiction to northern Methodist Episcopal Church (ME) bishops. ME Bishop Osman Baker therefore appointed J. E. Round, a white Methodist minister, to take charge of the African-American congregation that met at Andrews Chapel. At first, it seemed the congregation would soon affiliate with the majority-white northern denomination. However, a white Congregationalist began to win the hearts of many of the congregants, and in late 1863, the two white ministers competed for control of the black church.<sup>7</sup>

The competition became more intense one day in early 1864 when an AME Zion minister and two AME ministers arrived in town. James Walker Hood, the AME Zion

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<sup>6</sup>"Letter from Rev. J. C. Gibbs," *Christian Recorder*, May 6, 1865.

<sup>7</sup>Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 289-93.

minister, recounted that “it soon became evident . . . so far as the colored people were concerned, the two white men were not considered. The contest was between the two colored organizations.” The congregation wanted racial independence. Hood, the two AME ministers, and the two white ministers continued to compete for the loyalty of the congregation. After an open debate between Hood and the AME ministers, the congregation elected to affiliate with the AME Zion denomination.<sup>8</sup>

The congregants’ vote triggered another controversy. Did the congregation’s choice of pastor trump the ME Church’s official appointment? Round maintained that he had authority over the congregation by virtue of Bishop Baker’s appointment, which was backed, theoretically, by the U.S. War Department. Moreover, Chaplain Horace James, Superintendent of Negro Affairs in North Carolina, gave his approval to Round. Hood and Round then sent arguments to Secretary of War E. M. Stanton. General Benjamin Butler forwarded his recommendation with the ministers’ arguments: “So far as I am informed both Hood and Round are regularly ordained ministers, and are both men of good character. The point at issue is, shall a congregation of colored people . . . have the right to elect their own pastor, or are they compelled to have a pastor forced upon them by Bishop Baker’s delegate?” While the congregation waited for the official word, Hood paid a visit to the office of the Secretary of War in Washington, DC. Two months later, the congregation received Secretary Stanton’s terse reply: “The congregation worshipping in the Andrews Chapel are permitted to select their own pastor.”<sup>9</sup>

Secretary Stanton’s short statement established an important legal precedent. Although civil courts had yet to decide ownership of church buildings, churches like

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 292-94.



Andrews Chapel were, at least temporarily, in the hands of the black churchgoers who occupied them. One contemporary estimated the value of Andrews Chapel at \$70,000. The story repeated itself in different cities. Black Presbyterian minister J. C. Gibbs explained that the autonomy of Andrews Chapel translated into more success for his Methodist friends: “There is a Methodist church in Newbern that the military authorities have handed over to the colored people for present use; they likewise showed us the same kindness at Wilmington, but the final possession of all these churches must be settled by the civil courts.” Gibbs recounted the rationale Andrews Chapel members gave for retaining ownership of the church building. White southern Methodists seceded from the Methodist Episcopal Church, seceded from the Union, and “ran off with the rebel army,” the remaining black members explained. And in a biting and triumphant reversal of *Dred Scot*, they argued “that rebels have no rights that loyal men are bound to respect.”<sup>10</sup> Even though the black members of Andrews Chapel were under white authority only months before, they now boldly articulated arguments for exclusive control of the church.

L. S. Burkhead, the ME South pastor of Wilmington’s Front Street Methodist Church, expressed shock at the sudden spirit of independence among black worshippers in his church. Before the city fell to Union forces, Burkhead recalled, the African-American lay leaders of the church agreed to submit to his authority. Shortly after emancipation, however, they petitioned for control not only over the church’s black members but also of the church property. As black members outnumbered whites in Front Street Methodist, black leaders argued that the will of the majority should prevail. And their will, the leaders told the military authorities, was to affiliate with the AME Church. Like the congregation in New Bern, they reminded Union officials of their

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<sup>10</sup>“Letter from Rev. J. C. Gibb,” *Christian Recorder*, May 6, 1865.

loyalty to the union and of the rebellious actions of the ME South. Their numerical majority and their rights as loyal citizens overruled the objections of Rev. Burkhead and argued instead for racial independence.<sup>11</sup>

The arguments of black Methodists in New Bern and Wilmington went beyond wartime politics. Their pedigree as African Methodists became crucial to their argument for autonomy. The founder of Andrews Chapel had envisioned a Methodist church for Africans, Gibbs wrote, and by affiliating with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the “blacks claim that they are simply carrying out the original idea of the founder.”<sup>12</sup> Engraved on the front of the church were the words “African Methodist Church.” In Wilmington, black members of Front Street Methodist also pointed to evidence in the edifice itself. The inscription on their church’s cornerstone read, “In Memory of the Rev. William Meredith, Founder of the African Church, in Wilmington, N.C.”<sup>13</sup> African-American leaders argued that the inscription guaranteed that the building was intended, as they told military authorities, “for the use of the African race from age to age.”<sup>14</sup> In both cities, black Methodists claimed the right to church property by virtue of their race and denomination. The buildings were for the use of African Methodists, they argued, and they aligned with African Methodist denominations.

Although title to the property depended on later decisions of less sympathetic civil courts, both black congregations won control over their churches in 1864–1865. They

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<sup>11</sup>Rev. L. S. Burkhead, “History of the Difficulties of the Pastorate of the Front Street Methodist Church, Wilmington, NC, For the Year 1865,” *An Annual Publication of Historical Papers Published by the Historical Society of Trinity College* Series VIII (1908-1909): 48-49.

<sup>12</sup>“Letter from Rev. J. C. Gibbs.”

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Burkhead, “History of the Difficulties,” 95.

celebrated their racial autonomy. Hood described his victory securing Andrews Chapel for the AME Zion: “The occasion was great; a preacher had come to serve his own race, a new thing under the sun.” To celebrate the event, Hood invited his bishop, J. J. Clinton, to visit. “Great was the joy of the people,” Hood recalled, “at being permitted to see a bishop of their own race.”<sup>15</sup> Andrews Chapel parishioners’ victory carved out a new space for black self-determination. The African-American lay leaders of Front Street Methodist likewise considered their racial independence cause for celebration. Control over the church was “a gift of God through our Lord Jesus Christ which no man can buy or sell from us,” they wrote.<sup>16</sup> They understood their religious and racial independence as a divine act.

Leaders of AME and AME Zion churches in North Carolina wrote extensively about their separation from whites and the theological importance of racially independent churches. Hood, who worked to establish independent black churches in North Carolina, grew up in northern black Methodist churches that had declared their independence earlier in the century. He saw both bids for independence—the northern movement in the early 1800s and the southern movement in the 1860s and 1870s—as momentous, prophetic, and millennial. In his centennial history of the AME Zion denomination, Hood began with a description of the first exodus from white churches in northeastern cities at the turn of the nineteenth century. That movement, Hood wrote, “was widespread and nearly simultaneous”: the AME Zion in New York, the AME in

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<sup>15</sup>Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 288-297.

<sup>16</sup>Burkhead, “History of the Difficulties,” 95.

Philadelphia, the African Union Methodists in Delaware, Joy Street Baptist in Boston, and First African Presbyterian in Philadelphia all formed around 1800.<sup>17</sup>

In his description of black northerners' bid for religious independence and black southerners' departure from white churches after emancipation, Hood deliberately conflated the two movements. He likened the African-American experience within white-controlled churches to slavery itself. In those churches, black members' "chains" were fastened "tightly;" they were "oppressed and fettered." "We cannot wonder," Hood mused, that when slavery ended so did black membership in white churches.<sup>18</sup> Both movements were, in Hood's account, acts of emancipation. For Hood, the emancipation from white churches was "a most remarkable movement, and, we repeat, unparalleled in the history of the Christian Church."<sup>19</sup>

To find a worthy parallel for the movement, Hood reached back to biblical history. In October 1896, the bishop traveled from his home in Fayetteville, North Carolina, to New York, where he delivered a sermon at the denomination's centennial celebration. In that sermon, Hood expounded upon two Old Testament texts that dealt with God's relationship to the nation of Israel, "the only people whose history bears any resemblance to that of the Africo-American race." Like the Israelites, African Americans were God's "highly favored" people. To understand God's plan for black churches, Hood preached, black men and women had to study Israel's past. The first passage he chose, the song of Moses found in the book of Deuteronomy, referred to the Hebrew Exodus from Egypt to

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<sup>17</sup>Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 5-7.

<sup>18</sup>Hood, "Centennial Sermon," *AME Zion Quarterly Review* 8:1 (January 1898): 7-8. Much of this sermon overlapped with Hood's denominational history, *One Hundred Years*, 5-13. At times, the two share entire paragraphs word for word. I quote from both because the two do vary.

<sup>19</sup>Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 5.

Canaan, which, according to Hood, shed light upon the independent black church movement. In making this comparison, he was hardly alone; black Protestants retold their departure from white churches as the “Exodus” so often that scholars casually use the term to describe independent black church movements.

The second passage, regarding the establishment of Jerusalem as the capital, Hood applied to the black church’s mission in America.<sup>20</sup>

As Hood laid out the parallels between the independent black church movement and the story of Exodus, he cast God as the protagonist. Just as God used oppression as motivation for Israel to flee Egypt, God used racism in white churches to “stir up the nest” and to send black Christians into “a separate organization.” For both the Hebrews and African Americans, God used negative circumstances to “form them into a people for himself—that he might make them an elect race—that he might, through them, make himself known to the nations of the earth,” Hood explained.<sup>21</sup> Underneath the “rough and unchristian” treatment that black worshippers received from their white brothers and sisters, Hood argued, “was a divine purpose.”<sup>22</sup>

That purpose was nation-building. Hood believed that the race needed racially separate churches in order to establish itself as a distinct people. Independent black churches broke the ties of dependence and servitude that bound black Americans to whites. And churches became the arena wherein African Americans developed the skills of institution-building, fundraising, and leadership. The independent black church movement formed the race, Hood argued, into a people—separate, distinct, and self-

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<sup>20</sup>Hood, “Centennial Sermon,” 4.

<sup>21</sup>Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 11-12.

<sup>22</sup>Hood, “Centennial Sermon,” 5, 8.

reliant. He preached, “The Negro Church has given the Negro the opportunity he needed; it has set before him an open door which no man can shut; . . . All of this and more, much more, has God done for us [as] a people, as a Church.”<sup>23</sup> Here Hood equated people with Church, underscoring his belief that the formation of independent black churches marked the beginning of African Americans’ history as a people or nation. In his description of the race as a distinct people, Hood maintained the parallel with the Exodus story. Israelites looked back to the flight from Egypt as the beginning of their history *as a nation*.

The second passage that Hood chose for his sermon at the denominational commemoration also highlighted a significant event in the national life of Israel. He read from Psalm 149, a song that mentioned Jerusalem, the holy city on Mt. Zion, which Israelites captured and made their capital city under the reign of King David, and where they built their temple under King Solomon, his son. Hood explained that in Christian theology “Zion” and “Church” are synonymous terms. Therefore, he argued, Christians rightly understood the line from the psalm—“Let the children of Zion be joyful in their king”—to refer to them. Hood told his audience to claim the psalm as their own. They were the people who fled Egypt and the people who worshipped on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem.<sup>24</sup>

Hood went one step further. He referred to a prophecy of Isaiah that foretold a time when a dispersed Ethiopian people would assemble together on Mt. Zion. The prophecy began with a reference to a people who lived beyond the rivers of Ethiopia. It concluded, “In that time shall the present be brought unto the Lord of Hosts of a people

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 10-12; Ps. 149:2, KJV.

scattered and peeled, and from a people terrible from the beginning hitherto; a nation meted out and trodden under foot, whose land the rivers have spoiled, to the place of the name of the Lord of Hosts, the Mount Zion.” For Hood, the meaning of the passage was clear. It spoke about “the Negro race in this country” that certainly had been “meted out and trodden under foot.” The “most remarkable fulfillment” of this prophecy, Hood continued, was that this nation of people had been brought together to Mt. Zion—that is, to “Church.” What made the scattered and downtrodden Ethiopian people into a nation, Hood argued, was this gathering together. Now their task, as a new nation, was to be “joyful in their king.” The establishment of independent black churches in America gave evidence of God’s favor, and Hood urged his audience to take comfort and encouragement from that favor.<sup>25</sup>

In the first passage quoted in the sermon, Hood identified African Americans with the Hebrews fleeing Egypt. In the second passage, he identified them with Ethiopians gathered at Jerusalem. In the first, black Protestants’ theological standing as the favored people of God afforded them the identification with Israel. In the second passage, it seemed, their racial heritage as descendants of Ethiopians, claimed for them a role in the story. For Hood, these two identities—one religious, one racial—were completely intertwined. He spoke of the race and the church interchangeably. The prophetic destiny of the race, he argued, was to be a church. Therefore, the move by black Americans to form racially independent churches was of the utmost eschatological significance. In his denominational history, Hood wrote, “It is a remarkable fact that the development of the black man has come almost wholly through his Church. This cannot be said of any other

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<sup>25</sup>Hood, “Centennial Sermon,” 12-13; Isa. 18:7, KJV.

race on the globe.”<sup>26</sup> Black Americans could not be a race—a nation—without being a church; and the purpose of the church was to forge African Americans as an independent people.

In this belief, Hood was not alone. George W. Clinton, a Charlotte minister who later became an AME Zion bishop, also turned to Isaiah’s prophecy to describe the relationship between the race and the church: “Surely the words of the prophet in which he speaks of a people ‘scattered and peeled,’ ‘a nation meted out and trodden down,’ seem fittingly applicable to the condition of the Negro just emerged from slavery.” He continued, “It was this people, thus situated that the Negro pulpit took hold of and formed into church societies and religious denominations.” The success of those independent denominations, Clinton believed, served as the best example of what God was doing for the race.<sup>27</sup>

Clinton gave the most credit for race advancement not to the work of the church or to its influence in black communities, but to its “separate and distinctly racial” organization. As he wrote:

In organizing the Negro into separate and distinctly racial societies for the conduct of religious worship and church government the Negro pulpit did a work which has given the race greater prestige and more clearly demonstrated its capabilities and possibilities than any other work which has been done by or for the race toward uplifting it.<sup>28</sup>

Hood’s and Clinton’s interpretation of black church history put a high premium on racial independence. The ancient biblical narratives that Hood and Clinton used to retell the

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<sup>26</sup>Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 13.

<sup>27</sup>George W. Clinton, “To What Extent is the Negro Pulpit Uplifting the Race?” in D.W. Culp, comp., *Twentieth Century Negro Literature, or, A Cyclopaedia of Thought on the Vital Topics Relating to the American Negro, By One Hundred of America’s Greatest Negroes* (Naperville, IL: J. L. Nichols & Co., 1902), 116-17.

<sup>28</sup>George W. Clinton, editorial, *Star of Zion*, October 11, 1884.



story of the independent black church movement played no small part in their emphasis on racial independence. In the book of Exodus and in the prophecies of Isaiah, the religious community (those serving Yahweh) and the ethnic community (the Hebrews) were one and the same. In these stories, when God acted on behalf of his people, it was an action that both secured religious fidelity and shored up the standing of Israel as a nation. Hood and Clinton understood their own church's history in light of these stories. Consequently, for them the "Church" and the "race" became synonymous; and the church's mission in large measure became racial independence and advancement.

Independent black Methodists like Hood and Clinton articulated a theology of racial independence that left little room for cooperation or close relationships with white Protestants, at least not on the institutional level. Implicit, and sometimes explicit, in this theology of racial independence was a rejection of majority-white denominations. If the mission of black churches was in large part to establish African Americans as a distinct and self-reliant people, then black congregations in majority-white denominations were somehow inadequate or illegitimate. For black Christians in majority-white denominations, Hood had harsh words. White churches, he argued, relegated black Christians to positions of submission and dependence, truncating their spiritual growth. "The Methodist Episcopal Church is a poor soil in which to raise black episcopal timber," he wrote. To prove his point, he provided the example of an unnamed African-American minister in the ME Church who reportedly belittled his race's intellectual achievements: "Only one reared in hopeless bondage to the idea of the white man's superiority could exhibit such shameful ignorance of the excellencies of his own race." The unnamed man had talent, intellect, and culture, but, Hood regretted, "he belonged to the white Church,

and the shadow of the white man was upon him so that he could not discern even his own brightness.”<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, only completely independent denominations removed African-American Protestants from racial dependence and inferiority.

J. C. Price, a native North Carolinian who grew up in New Bern’s Andrews Chapel (AME Zion) and became well-known as an orator, believed some black churches qualified as independent while others did not. “The independent church work of the Negro represents one of the best examples of the self-directing and self-reliant organizations of the Race,” he boasted. By “independent church,” he qualified, he meant something rather specific: “those religious bodies that are not owned, controlled, or connected with white organizations. The two principal churches of this kind are the A. M. E. and the A. M. E. Zion connections.”<sup>30</sup> With this definition, Price excluded a substantial section of African-American Protestantism. Black Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists belonged to majority-white denominations. Price also meant to cast aspersions on the racial autonomy of other Methodists—those in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, which held close ties with its parent denomination, the ME South, and also those in the ME Church. In Baptist polity, local congregations are independent and autonomous; so, at least theoretically, any black Baptist church with a black clergyman would have met Price’s definition as “independent.” But when Price spoke of “independent churches,” he had in mind an organized religious body—national churches like the AME and AME Zion—not the loosely affiliated associations of Baptists. Price’s

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<sup>29</sup>Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 12.

<sup>30</sup>J. C. Price, “The Race Question in the South,” *African Methodist Episcopal Zion Quarterly* 2:3 (April 1892): 326. Price was very well-known as a temperance orator. As such, he features prominently in Chapter 4.

discussion of “independent churches” and Hood’s description of “the Negro Church” sounded expansive, but they were in reality denomination-specific.

Independent black Methodists’ high standard for racial independence and autonomy clearly shaped their racial identity and governed their interaction with white Methodists. Outspoken leaders of the AME Zion in North Carolina praised the virtue of Christian interracialism but also jealously guarded their racial independence and autonomy. The denomination’s relationships with southern and northern white Methodists in the late nineteenth century were particularly illustrative of this.

There were many political and ecclesiastical points of contention between white southern Methodists and the AME Zion Church, yet their common doctrine and church practice opened up the possibility for cooperation. “We have never thought this church right on the slavery question,” the editor of the *Star of Zion* wrote of the ME South, “but we do appreciate its position on the principles of Methodism.” The editor noted recent revivals in the ME South, and approved of its movement toward a less formal and more enthusiastic expression of the faith. “This is a good sign of more religion and less prejudice on the part of their ministry,” he wrote. His tone kept the southern church at a distance but maintained the possibility for future collaboration.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout the late nineteenth century, the ME South and the AME Zion found ways to express their kinship. For example, the ME South pastor in Greenville, North Carolina made a fraternal visit to the 1893 North Carolina Conference of the AME Zion Church and reportedly gave the conference “some words of cheer.”<sup>32</sup> The editor of the

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<sup>31</sup>*Star of Zion*, October 3, 1884.

*AME Zion Quarterly* celebrated “one new feature” of the church’s annual conferences: “the large attendance of white people.” Notables included ME South minister Dr. Solomon Pool, former president of the University of North Carolina, and ex-Governor Thomas J. Jarvis, “whose father was a Methodist preacher.” Both gave well-received addresses before the assembly of AME Zion clergy. Such visits may seem trivial, but black Methodists found them noteworthy. The *Quarterly* editor viewed the visits as “indications of the dawn of a new and brighter and better day. Colored conferences are beginning to attract the attention of the best people in the South.” Zion Methodists rejoiced over relationships with white Methodists in North Carolina, even token ones.<sup>33</sup>

In 1881, Hood and Price crossed the Atlantic to find fellowship with North Carolina white Methodists. At the International Ecumenical Methodist Conference in London, delegates from the many branches of Methodism came together to discuss a loosely held union (without institutional reorganization), a common hymnbook, and a Methodist catechism. There, the delegates from the ME South found themselves sitting beside AME Zion representatives, and dining, lodging, and mingling “on terms of equality.” Hood spoke with southern white Methodists about organic union between the churches, and even though no one acted on those talks, Hood left thinking the conference “a much more important meeting than I had any idea of.” Price, who stayed in England for a month longer to raise funds for Livingstone College, considered the conference to be a significant step in breaking down racial barriers between Methodists. “Our white American brethren, from both North and South” he reported, “associated as freely with us

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<sup>32</sup>*Minutes of the North Carolina Conference of the AME Zion Church. Thirtieth Session. Held in York’s Temple AME Zion Church, Greenville, NC, November 29 - December 4, 1893* (Salisbury, NC: Livingstone College Press, 1894), 22.

<sup>33</sup>“Progressive Thought,” *African Methodist Episcopal Zion Quarterly* 4:2 (January 1894): 184-85.

over there as if they had always been used to it.” As they met and ate together, “they did not seem to think about our color.” Hood and Price hoped that the London conference would translate into better relationships at home.<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, opportunities for interracial cooperation between Zion Methodists and southern white Methodists remained few and far between. The *AME Zion Quarterly* editor summed up the problem: “The Southern people know really very little about the Negro as he is.” To illustrate his point, he described one white southern Methodist who befriended the AME Zion leaders in North Carolina: “we don’t think [he] has been inside a colored school-house or colored church since the war, and yet he does not hesitate to believe himself an eminent authority on the race question.”<sup>35</sup> There were bright moments that hinted at Methodism’s power to overcome racial barriers, but substantive cooperation between the AME Zion and the ME South remained nearly impossible. Neither seriously considered forming an interracial alliance.

Relationships with northern white Methodists, the ME Church, held more promise. In 1868, Bishop-elect Singleton T. Jones of the AME Zion Church began negotiating with Gilbert Haven, a white bishop from the ME Church, about a possible merger of their two denominations. Jones was concerned about maintaining racial autonomy at the congregational level and racial parity among clergy. Bishop Haven promised that if such a consolidation took place, AME Zion bishops would receive proportional representation on the church’s episcopal board and African Americans would have equal voice in all levels of church government, proportional to their numbers. Jones, delighted at the

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<sup>34</sup>J. A. Tyler, comp., *Minutes of the Second Session of the Central North Carolina Conference of the AME Zion Church, in America, Held in Charlotte, North Carolina, November 26th to 29th, 1881* (Concord, NC: Star of Zion Job Office, 1882), 31-33, 35.

<sup>35</sup>“Progressive Thought,” (1894): 185.

prospect, began arrangements to host the 1872 AME Zion Annual Convention in the same week and in the same city as the 1872 ME Annual Convention, in hopes that the two denominations could hammer out the details of the merger.<sup>36</sup>

Jones's fellow bishops, however, remained suspicious of any union with the ME Church. Bishop Hood almost immediately decided against the merger. Hood recalled how he and the other bishops "fully realized that Bishop Haven could not secure for us what he desired," and without proportional representation, the deal would collapse because Hood and others could not "accept less than a full recognition of our Christian manhood." These differing assessments caused a rift within the AME Zion Church, with Bishop Jones hosting an annual conference in New York adjacent to the ME Conference, and with a majority of bishops attending a different annual conference in Charlotte. It seems that a union between the two denominations was far less likely than Bishops Jones and Haven had hoped.<sup>37</sup>

The failed attempt at union shed light on independent black Methodists' racial and denominational identities. In 1880, the AME Zion Episcopal Board issued a statement looking back on the possible merger in 1872 with sorrow. The bishops blamed themselves for "not guard[ing] our people sufficiently against being misled" by leaders of the ME Church; and they blamed ME bishops for taking "advantage of the situation to proselyte [*sic*] our people."<sup>38</sup> On the one hand, that some in the AME Zion seriously considered such a union signaled that their identity as Methodists was strong enough to

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<sup>36</sup>Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 98-101, 119-22; William J. Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: Reality of the Black Church* (Charlotte, NC: AME Zion Publishing House, 1974), 464-66.

<sup>37</sup>Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 119-122.

<sup>38</sup>*Minutes or Daily Journal of the Sixteen Quadrennial Session of the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Clinton Chapel, Montgomery Alabama, May 1880*, (New York: William Knowles, Printer, 1880), 52, quoted in Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*, 466.

make them revisit their much-prized racial independence. The door was not closed to interracial cooperation. On the other hand, the incident confirmed for many Zionites their commitment to racial autonomy. The fear and expectation of paternalism or second-class citizenship within a combined ME-AME Zion church drove AME Zion leaders away. The affair reminded Bishop Hood of his belief that blacks needed independent black churches. “The Methodist Episcopal Church has done a grand, a glorious, yea, a praiseworthy work, in its schools in the South,” he began with admiration. “But,” he qualified, “in its attempt to establish churches among the colored people it has in many places done more harm than good.” Hood explained why: “To care for the spiritual welfare of people you must be of them and among them.” White missionaries of the ME Church were unable in the South to fully be apart of and to live among the people they served, and white ME bishops did not live among the black ministers they oversaw. So, Hood believed, the ME missions to the black South were mostly ineffective.<sup>39</sup>

Hood’s critique of the ME Church went further. Not only did the church do a poor job of ministry to black southerners, Hood charged, “It has, in many places, hindered us from doing what it could not do.” White northern Methodists offered the freedpeople church property and financial stability, Hood claimed, and warned them against affiliating with the AME or AME Zion for fear of being “taxed to death to support the connectional institutions.” Hood viewed this missionary work not as healthy competition but as “[un-]scrupulous.”<sup>40</sup> Common cause alliances between the AME Zion and white Methodists, northern and southern, were possible only in the rarest and most limited circumstances. The failure of such interracial relationships surely can be laid at

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<sup>39</sup>Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 16.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 16-17.

the feet of white paternalism, at the real and perceived lack of racial equality in white Methodists' overtures to members of the AME Zion Church. But independent black Methodists' theology of racial independence played, too, played a large role. How they understood their bid for religious independence and racial autonomy, within a theological and eschatological context, made certain attempts at interracialism intolerable and undesirable.

By steering away from institutional relationships with white Protestants, leaders in the AME Zion Church thought they received concrete benefits. They were able to pursue developments in theology and church government that would be impossible within white churches. Among them, and perhaps most importantly, was women's ordination. In 1894 at the New York Annual Conference, Bishop Hood ordained Julia Foote, who had served the conference as a missionary, to the office of deacon. Foote's ordination sparked debate within the denomination but no organized opposition. The next year, the denomination celebrated its second ordained female deacon, Mary J. Small, the wife of Bishop John B. Small. When Bishop Calvin C. Pettey, a North Carolina native, ordained Small as an elder at the Philadelphia and Baltimore Conference in 1898, the move made headlines. Rev. Mrs. Small became the first ordained woman elder (the office equivalent to pastor or priest) in any Methodist church. Small's ordination prompted a heated exchange in the pages of the denominational newspaper. Not all celebrated the denomination's pioneering move in women's ordination. But those who did celebrate her ordination saw it as evidence that black churches, freed from the



constraints of white Protestantism, were able to reach fuller expressions of the Christian gospel.<sup>41</sup>

Bishop C. R. Harris, a native of Fayetteville, North Carolina, wrote to the *Star of Zion*, wondering what all the controversy was about. Rev. Mrs. Small had already been ordained as a deacon in 1895, and had been licensed to preach in 1892. Those who objected to women's leadership in the church should have voiced that objection much earlier, Harris insisted. Moreover, he continued, gender discrimination in the AME Zion Church had been put to rest in 1876 when the General Conference voted to strike the word "male" from the qualifications for holding office. The ordination of a woman as elder had been anticipated, Harris argued; it was "a logical outcome." It was also a biblical outcome, he wrote. "In Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female," he quoted from Paul's letter to the Galatians. "If it means anything, it is that males and females stand on equal footing in Christ's Church." So, in one way, Harris did not think Small's ordination warranted the "considerable attention" it had attracted. It was logical and biblical, and people should have known it was coming.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, all the attention pleased Harris. It was an opportunity to showcase the advantages of a racially independent church. He wrote, "This act alone evinces the value of a Negro Church in removing men from circumstances in which Negroes are overawed and overshadowed by a so-called 'superior race.'" Freeing black Christians from the confining environment of majority-white churches led directly to the AME Zion's commitment to gender equality. Harris considered the denomination's long

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<sup>41</sup>Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*, 111-12; for the debate in the denominational newspaper, see the July and August 1898 issues of the *Star of Zion*.

<sup>42</sup>C. R. Harris, "Episcopal Dots: Women Elders-Railroad Discrimination-Coleman Factory," *Star of Zion*, August 4, 1898.

history of opposing slavery and racism as preparation for its embrace of gender equality. “Is it any wonder,” he asked his readers, “that we recognize the fact that the same arguments which, as to equality of rights abolish the color line, would also abolish the sex line?” The move toward gender equality conformed to the church’s historical attention to “human rights and Christian liberty.” Small’s ordination, Harris assured his readers, would not have taken place in a church run by white men.<sup>43</sup>

He had a point. While the AME Zion started ordaining women as elders, the ME Church was still debating admitting women as lay delegates to the church’s annual convention. Bishop Hood noted the contrast between the two denominations: “The Methodist Episcopal Church is now agitated over the question of admitting women as delegates to the General Conference. That question did not require an hour’s debate with us.” The AME Zion regularly admitted lay women delegates to annual conferences, “since there are generally more females than males in our churches.” Hood boasted that women faced no official barriers to ministry or leadership within the AME Zion Church. On the local level, they served the church in numerous capacities, and the church’s rules prevented no woman from ordination at any level—deacon, elder, or bishop. As he explained it, “Our idea is that we should not be hindered from using such instrumentalities as God is pleased to raise up, on account of sex.” That women faced such barriers and limitations within the ME Church only demonstrated the need for African Americans to form their own church organizations, he argued. They had to escape the discriminatory practices of white men. The issue of women’s ordination reinforced Hood’s belief in the need for racially independent black churches:

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<sup>43</sup>Harris, “Episcopal Dots.”

In Zion the black minister has shown the height to which he can rise respecting the rights of women when he is where there is nothing to hinder him from following his best convictions. In his own institution he makes his own sentiment, thinks for himself, and takes his own responsibility, keeping pace with the best thought of the age in which he lives.

The same could not be said for black ministers in the ME Church. There, Hood mourned, black ministers had opposed the rights of women within church government. Such a position seemed incongruous with black men's historical advocacy for equality. He held up such incongruity as further example that white-run churches were no place for black Protestants. They needed racial autonomy in order to preach the gospel more fully.<sup>44</sup>

### **Leaving Room for Interracialism: Black Baptists and Presbyterians**

North Carolina black Baptists and Presbyterians, too, felt a need for racial autonomy after emancipation. Their experience of separation from white churches and the theological meaning they ascribed to their racial identities and independence, however, differed in significant ways from those of independent black Methodists. So did their interactions with white Protestants. Although they desired some form of racial independence, their theological beliefs led them to pursue interracial cooperation at least as vigorously—if not more so—than they sought black autonomy.

Nannie Alexander, the (white) wife of a white Presbyterian minister in Charlotte, North Carolina, recorded her memory of the upheaval that emancipation wrought on church organizations in the area. Black members of biracial churches of all denominations began to walk out. As a committed Presbyterian, she worried that independent black Methodists, because of their racial independence and autonomy, would win over African Americans from her own denomination. She bemoaned that “when the

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<sup>44</sup>Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 159-61.

war was ended in 1865, the Freedmen nearly all ceased to attend services in the churches in which they were brought up, but gathered in large crowds to open air meetings conducted by men of their own race [the AME Zion Church].” Black Presbyterians, she feared, were being lured away by “uneducated, sensational, and unsafe leaders”—by independent black Methodists.<sup>45</sup> Alexander’s fear that black Presbyterians would abandon their denominational identity in order to affiliate with a racially independent church was realized in part. Many black Presbyterians switched denominations rather than stay in white-controlled churches.

But not all. Alexander and her husband were among the few white southerners who recognized that churches would have to grant black worshippers a large measure of autonomy if they hoped to retain them. They quickly worked with black Charlotteans to establish Seventh Street Presbyterian, an independent African-American congregation. The members of Seventh Street Presbyterian came out of the southern church, aided by white southerners, and yet they affiliated with the northern majority-white Presbyterian denomination. D. J. Sanders, who eventually became the first black President of Biddle College (Presbyterian) in Charlotte, explained why: “The masses of the negroes have little or no confidence in the religion of the southern white people. They readily trust them in all other matters, but find it utterly impossible to reconcile in their minds that attitude assumed by these people toward themselves with the true spirit of Christianity, as they understand it.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Nannie R. Alexander, “Personal Reminiscences of the Founding of Seventh Street Presbyterian Church and Biddle University by Mrs. Nannie R. Alexander who assisted her husband, the late Rev. S. C. Alexander, D. D., Founder of both Church and School,” handwritten memoir, Willerstown, PA, December 6, 1910, History of JCSU Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, Inez Moore Parker Archives and Research Center, James B. Duke Memorial Library, Johnston C. Smith University (JCSU), 23-24.

Northern whites, however, secured the trust of many black Protestants. Sanders admitted that “but for the influx of the northern churches, with their missionaries, it would be hard to find any representatives of [Presbyterians and Episcopalians] among the colored people of the South today.” Like many other black southerners, Sanders nourished fond memories of the Reconstruction-era missionaries who worked on behalf of the freedpeople’s education and church building.<sup>47</sup> The missionaries’ more liberal attitudes on race and their tireless efforts to build black schools and churches ensured that a fraction of the freedpeople in North Carolina remained members of the Presbyterian Church.

Sanders nevertheless wanted a measure of racial autonomy for African Americans in the northern Presbyterian Church. He worked within the denomination to carve out a space for the independent work of African-American congregations, but he wanted that racial segregation to be voluntary, not discriminatory. Writing to Sanders, white colleague and close friend Rev. H. Alleison protested movements to segregate the church by race. “If it were proposed,” he wrote, “[that] you shall not belong to the same congregation, or presbytery, or synod with us . . . such a scheme would have no more resolute opponent than myself.”<sup>48</sup> Alleison assured Sanders that the northern Presbyterian Church would still make space for black Presbyterians’ racial autonomy while excluding efforts by white segregationists to limit the role of black clerics within

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<sup>46</sup>Dr. D. J. Sanders, “The Africo-American and the Religious Denominations,” *Interior Supplement* (June 7, 1888), clipping, President’s Gallery, Series 1, Box 1, Inez Moore Parker Archives and Research Center, James B. Duke Memorial Library, JCSU.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>H. Alleison to Daniel J. Sanders, handwritten, 28 February 1888, Philadelphia, PA, President’s Gallery, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 15, Inez Moore Parker Archives and Research Center, James B. Duke Memorial Library, JCSU.

the denomination. Sanders and other black Presbyterians, it seemed, agreed with this arrangement. Although Presbyterians normally organized themselves into small, geographical presbyteries and synods, black Presbyterians as early as 1868 met in a racially distinct synod within the northern Presbyterian Church that extended across the South. They kept their Presbyterian affiliation, benefited from shared resources with whites in their denomination, and maintained a degree of racial independence.<sup>49</sup>

As racial minorities within a large denomination, Sanders and his colleagues placed more emphasis on Christian interracialism than on racial autonomy, though they desired a bit of both. Sanders' more famous friend and colleague, Francis Grimke, pastor of Fifteenth Street Presbyterian in Washington, DC, echoed Sanders's sentiment and offered a theological reason for it. Grimke thought that preaching a theology of racial independence did more harm than good. Grimke's theology of race was as eschatological as Hood's or Clinton's; he harbored grand visions for the future. But his message ran up against Hood's and Clinton's eschatology in pointed ways. For Grimke, talk of the destiny of the "Negro race" took attention away from the real obstacle to peace on earth: white Americans. "Christianity shall one day [hold] sway even in Negro-hating America;" he wrote, "the spirit which it inculcates, and which it is capable of producing, is sure, sooner or later, to prevail." Grimke had eschatological confidence: "If Christianity were a mere world influence, I should have no hope . . . . It can do what no mere human power can do. Jesus Christ is yet to reign in this land." Grimke shied away from dating Jesus' millennial reign. "I will not see it, you will not see it," he said, "but it is coming all the same." Hood tied black Americans' fate to the growth of "the Negro

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<sup>49</sup>See Andrew E. Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro: A History* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1966).

Church,” but Grimke thought the accurate barometer of progress was reform within white churches. “In the growth of Christianity, true, real, genuine Christianity in this land, I see the promise of better things for us a race.” “I am hopeful,” he continued, “because I have faith in the power of the religion of the Lord Jesus Christ to conquer all prejudices, to break down all walls of separation, and to weld together men of all races in one great brotherhood.”<sup>50</sup>

Grimke left little room for a separate destiny for his race. And his theology provided little justification for racially separate denominations. Grimke was more concerned with the advancement of Christianity among whites and the removal of racial distinctions: “I have myself, here and there, seen [Christianity’s] mighty transforming power. I have seen white men and women under its regenerating influence lose entirely the caste feeling.” Such confidence encouraged black Protestants to maintain close relationships with white Protestants, because in the breaking down of racial barriers, God’s plan for human history would be fulfilled. Black Presbyterians’ hope in Christian interracialism countered the theology of North Carolina’s AME Zion leaders.

Like black Presbyterians, North Carolina’s black Baptists valued their interracial relationships. In his account of their history, Whitted characterized black Baptists’ separation from white churches as desired, prophetic, and inevitable. But he nevertheless considered the separation a loss. He noted in particular the “Christian spirit” that “grew up between” the white and black members of a Baptist church in Raleigh. While other black Protestants were establishing separate churches, black Baptists in Raleigh “refused to go out from their white brethren, and remained with them for several years afterward.”

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<sup>50</sup>Francis Grimke, “Christianization of America,” in D.W. Culp, comp., *Twentieth Century Negro Literature*, 431, 433.

They even turned down offers of church property in order to remain with their fellow church members. “So strong was the relation in the case of individuals,” Whitted wrote, that even after black Baptists left to form the colored First Baptist Church of Raleigh, “many retained their membership among their white brethren until their death.” The separation from white Baptists came from African Americans’ own initiative, but it also came with a cost.<sup>51</sup>

The memory of affectionate interracial ties in North Carolina’s antebellum Baptist churches reinforced, and was reinforced by, black Baptists’ ongoing efforts at interracial cooperation with both southern and northern whites. From the onset of emancipation, black North Carolina Baptists partnered with white Baptists to help build schools and churches. Their most important partnership was with an organization of northern white Baptists, the American Home Baptist Mission Society (AHBMS). The AHBMS established Baptist schools for the freedpeople, assisted with church planting, provided Sunday School literature, and provided funding for the establishment of Shaw University in Raleigh. In the earliest extant minutes of the black State Baptist Convention, the delegates officially tendered its “hearty thanks to the American Baptist Home Mission Society, and all Northern friends, for their sacrifices and liberal giving.”<sup>52</sup> In 1881, when the AHBMS decided to fund a full-time missionary in North Carolina to plant churches, the black State Baptist Convention (which later became the NCBEMC) decided to fully cooperate with the missionary, at least in part because of a sense of debt to the Society’s generosity. The convention’s cooperation also came out of denominational loyalty. The delegates were willing to support “every way possible [to] build up and strengthen the

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<sup>51</sup>Whitted, *A History of the Negro Baptists of North Carolina*, 14-15.

<sup>52</sup>*Proceedings of the North Carolina State Baptist Convention (colored)*, October 1878, 14.



Baptist denomination.”<sup>53</sup> A common denominational identity, the ABHMS’s largesse, and the friendships formed over Reconstruction-era institution-building all provided fertile soil for interracial cooperation with northern Baptists.

The ABHMS’s Plan of Cooperation in the 1890s, however, went one step further; it included an alliance with southern white Baptists, though there was cause for hesitation. Despite whatever fond memories black Baptists sustained from their days in interracial antebellum churches, it was the racism in those churches that had prompted black Baptists to form independent churches. And the establishment of independent black churches met resistance from white Baptists in the state. In 1867, the North Carolina (white) Baptist State Convention issued a report that argued black Baptists were not “prepared for separate and independent churches.”<sup>54</sup> Twenty-five years later, an interracial alliance with the state’s white Baptist convention necessitated much more debate for black Baptists than did their ongoing relationship with the ABHMS.

The ABHMS’s Plan of Cooperation seemed innocuous enough. The plan proposed to establish short-term religious training institutes for black Baptists, especially clergy, across the state. Additionally, it called for three African-American missionaries to oversee the work, one for each geographical subdivision of the state—eastern, central, and western. The administration and funding of the plan, the ABHMS proposed, was to be borne by all participating bodies: the ABHMS itself, the (white) Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the (white) Baptist Convention of North Carolina, and the (black) North Carolina Baptist Educational and Missionary Convention (NCBEMC). Early in

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<sup>53</sup>“Appendix,” *Proceedings of the North Carolina State Baptist Convention (colored)*, October 1881, 10.

<sup>54</sup>Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities among Southern Baptists* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 34.

1894, the Southern Baptist Convention agreed to the plan, and the SBC and ABHMS jointly sent the plan to the white and black North Carolina annual conventions for ratification. North Carolina whites agreed to fund the plan and accepted local black oversight, actions that stunned black North Carolinians. Whitted, who served as the first (black) General Missionary under the new plan, recalled his “apprehension” that the plan would meet “with bitter opposition” from local whites. He attributed their cooperative spirit to an act of divine intervention. It was, he explained, a clear example of “God watching over the destiny of His people.” Whitted identified that moment as the climax of God’s unfolding plan for black Baptists in the state. God, he wrote, “had something special in store to be brought to them [black Baptists] in their annual meeting at Oxford, NC.”<sup>55</sup>

When the NCBEMC delegates convened in Oxford in 1895, there was much skepticism about the Plan of Cooperation. Dr. J. O. Crosby warily read over the plan, warning delegates, “Greeks are not to be trusted even when bearing gifts.” Others, too, worried that the plan might be a “Trojan horse.” These statements revealed the underlying hostility between white and black Baptists in the state. Rev. W. J. H. Woodward outright opposed the plan because he thought that the money required to run the plan should instead be invested in Shaw University. Shaw, he argued, would be better equipped to train young men than would the various short-term institutes. Others countered that the institutes would serve as feeders to Shaw because they would inspire rural ministers to seek out more education. Even Crosby conceded that “he saw nothing

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<sup>55</sup>J. A. Whitted, *A History of The Negro Baptists in North Carolina*, 64. Whitted remembered the annual convention in Oxford in the year 1894; but the minutes of the convention show that the 1894 meeting took place in Wilson, NC, and the 1895 meeting in Oxford, NC. The minutes also show that it was at the 1895 meeting in Oxford where the convention debated and ratified the Plan of Cooperation.

misleading or detrimental to our people” in the details of the plan. The convention voted to adopt the Plan of Cooperation for the next three years.<sup>56</sup>

Many hailed the Plan of Cooperation as a brilliant success, but skepticism remained. In 1898, when the plan again came before the NCBEMC, proponent H. L. Morehouse admitted its limitations: “The plan of co-operation is not perfect; it came from an imperfect source.” But Morehouse nevertheless endorsed it, asking, “Who can suggest a better plan?” Whitted, too, acknowledged the opposition: “cooperation in the State has met some objection, we admit,” but he blamed resistance on envious leaders who, unlike himself, had not secured the plans highly sought-after posts as missionaries. The vast majority of black Baptists in North Carolina supported the Plan of Cooperation enthusiastically, Whitted claimed. The alliance with northern and southern whites allowed the convention to undertake projects that their meager finances alone could never have supported. Whitted’s report did include clippings from ABHMS publications that betrayed white churches’ paternalism. In the publications, the ABHMS boasted of its role in helping “colored Baptists [emerge] . . . from their former chaotic condition.” Despite such descriptions, Whitted insisted that black Baptists retained their autonomy under the Plan of Cooperation. White Baptists, he wrote, “in no way . . . wish to dictate in the prosecution of this work, but to come and assist us only as the colored brethren find it a necessity.” The convention, on Whitted’s and Morehouse’s recommendation, voted to extend the plan for another three years.<sup>57</sup>

A number of black Baptists, however, chafed under the Plan of Cooperation, and in 1903, they broke off to form a rival state convention. The new convention met in

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<sup>56</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1895, 11ff.

<sup>57</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1898, 11-13, 35-36.

eastern North Carolina and christened itself the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina. Their grievances, though difficult to ascertain from the limited extant documentation, included allegations that the NCBEMC, the original convention, formed stronger ties with local whites than with the newly-formed black National Baptist Convention (NBC). The NCBEMC had experienced strained relations with the NBC since the latter's formation in 1895, in part because the NBC worried that North Carolina black Baptists were too heavily influenced by white organizations such as the ABHMS and that American Baptist Publication Society, which regularly employed black ministers as salesmen for their Bibles, Sunday School literature, and other church-related merchandise. Now the rival North Carolina convention pointed to the Plan of Cooperation as further proof of the NCBEMC's dependence upon whites. Calvin S. Brown, the president of the NCBEMC, countered the "open rebellion" by reasserting the convention's autonomy: "The missionary and educational work done by the officers, agents and missionaries of this Convention from year to year has been done by direction and command of this Convention. No plan was undertaken without the consent and approval of this body duly assembled." Brown, attempting to avert a "calamity of disastrous consequences," tried to convince the leaders of the rival convention that the Plan of Cooperation had in no way impaired the NCBEMC's racial independence.<sup>58</sup>

Brown and the rest of the NCBEMC did not back away from the Plan of Cooperation. Brown laid out his convention's position in a number of the controversies that separated it from the new rival Baptist State Convention of North Carolina. "We believe in co-operation pure and simple," he stated at the top of the list, and he reaffirmed

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<sup>58</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, November 1903, 11-12; Whitted, *A History of Negro Baptists*, 29-30, 49-50. Similar debates and schisms over cooperation with white Baptists erupted across the South. For examples from Texas, Virginia, and Georgia, see Harvey, *Redeeming the South*, 68-73.

his belief that the Plan of Cooperation was about equity and mutuality, not dependence upon whites. Brown also touted “States’ rights,” a curious phrase to say the least, meaning that the NBC should not interfere with the internal affairs of the NCBEMC or other state Baptist conventions. Lastly, Brown stated for the record his convention’s approach to race: “We deny that color has anything to do with Christianity as a principle; and we believe the clamor on account of color the direct result of sin, and should be reduced to a minimum in the advancement of grace.” Brown’s theology of race contrasted sharply with Hood’s. Brown, arguably the state’s most outspoken black Baptist minister, advanced an ideal of the Christian church in which racial distinctions were minimized at precisely the time when Hood, unquestionably the state’s most outspoken black Methodist minister, argued for wholly separate religious institutions. Brown surely meant this statement about “clamor on account of color” as a criticism against racism in white North Carolina Baptist churches; but his remarks also meant to criticize the strain of thinking within black Protestantism that prioritized racial autonomy over other advancements in church work. For the sake of the gospel and the denomination, Brown contended, interracialism was a good thing.<sup>59</sup>

Others in his denomination agreed. When the NBC and the NCBEMC later reconciled, the movement to maintain a dissenting black state convention fizzled out. The majority of black Baptists had come to embrace the Plan of Cooperation. Nevertheless, black Baptists in North Carolina continued to send mixed messages about their relationship with white Baptists. Before his African-American colleagues, Rev. S. N. Vass, a representative of the American Baptist Publication Society, tried to reconcile his criticism of white Baptists with his support of the convention’s alliance with them:

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<sup>59</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, November 1903, 13.

“We know our white people, that they are not perfect. We know how to forgive and love them.” Some of Vass’s colleagues perhaps found it harder to forgive, and certainly harder to trust, their white counterparts. At the 1903 NCBEMC meeting in Durham, the white pastor of the local First Baptist Church reassured conveners that, “The whites are willing to stand with you, hand in hand, until every child throughout the State has a liberal education.” Immediately following the white pastor’s speech, Rev. W. T. Coleman of First Baptist Church (black) of Raleigh declared in his sermon, probably while the white pastor was still in attendance, that “The Negro Baptists are the only people who can truly preach the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.”<sup>60</sup> The Plan of Cooperation came far short of bridging the racial divide.

The Plan of Cooperation ended in 1907-1908, primarily because whites no longer wished to finance the short-term institutes or the salaries of the missionaries. As a result, the NCBEMC found itself in dire financial straits. Brown lamented, “we are practically doing nothing and . . . the work is speedily declining.”<sup>61</sup> While it lasted, the 12-year Plan of Cooperation revealed how a common denominational identity could bring together black and white southerners, even during a period of extreme racial antagonism. It was rather remarkable. Methodists in the state would not have been able to maintain a similar level of interracial cooperation. Methodist churches’ stronger ties to their own national denominations and independent black Methodists’ commitment to racial autonomy made local efforts at interracialism less successful. The Baptist Plan of Cooperation involved a level of collaboration that rarely existed even within black Protestantism. Black Methodists and Baptists, for example, would never have been able to cooperate on a

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 25-26.

<sup>61</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1908, 26.

statewide religious education program for clergy in the way that white and black Baptists did. In that regard, the Plan of Cooperation spoke to the strength of black Baptists' denominational identity and their belief in Christian interracialism.

### **Relationships between Black Churches**

The significant differences among black Protestant churches on issues like racial autonomy and interracialism argue against more monolithic descriptions of black Protestantism. My work is hardly the first to critique the scholarly inattention to black Protestant diversity. Nevertheless, the use of the rather homogenizing term “the Black Church.” remains commonplace in the writing of African-American history. Bishop Hood and others employed the term “the Negro Church,” (singular and capitalized) as a self-conscious theological move to equate the church and the race. Curiously, historians have been all too willing to make the same move. Twentieth-century historians wrote about black churches with little attention to the denominational differences that divided black Protestantism. In their writing, the term “the Black Church” functions as shorthand for the main branches of independent African-American Protestantism, yet it implies a monolithic institution, a single denomination, or a place that one might visit. Contemporary use of the term represents an inability or reluctance among scholars to differentiate between black Protestant traditions or to ascribe significance to those differences.<sup>62</sup> The tendency to lump together all black Protestants runs counter even to

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<sup>62</sup>For a critique of the term “the Black Church,” see Lawrence N. Jones, “The Black Churches: A New Agenda,” in Milton Sernett, ed., *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), 491.

Hood's expansive use of the term. Hood and his contemporaries emphasized the differences that separated them from other black Protestant traditions.

The scholarly inattention to black denominationalism has a long history.<sup>63</sup> Laurie Maffly-Kipp offers two explanations—both involving race—for the persistent downplaying of differences between black Protestant traditions. Maffly-Kipp identifies “theoretical suppositions about the primacy of a racial identity” that make it difficult for white scholars and students to see past the “black” in black churches. White observers and scholars assume that a shared racial identity outweighed and diminished denominational differences among black Protestants. Yet Maffly-Kipp reminds us that we cannot “take for granted that race consciousness determined other kinds of loyalties, including ecclesiastical and doctrinal identities.”<sup>64</sup>

White assumptions about black racial identity no doubt contributed to monolithic descriptions of diverse black religious communities, but the origin of the term “the Black Church” or “the Negro Church” lies with African-American writers. Maffly-Kipp cites W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Carter G. Woodson as three early

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<sup>63</sup>Denominational histories, which before the mid twentieth century held center stage in the field of American religious history, lost the interest of scholars shortly after World War II. Russell Richey and Robert Bruce Mullin explain that historians began to view denominational history as “quaint, parochial, and evocative of the long-standing but now passé Protestant hegemony.” Religious historians of the late twentieth century pointed to phenomena that transcended denominations as the real crux of American religion. They argued that broad movements, like the Social Gospel, evangelicalism, or civil rights, revealed more of the character of religious groups than did petty institutional differences. Ecumenical movements within American Christianity in the twentieth century furthered this trend, Richey and Mullin argue. See “Introduction” in Mullin and Richey, eds., *Reimagining Denominationalism*, 3-5. By the time social and political movements brought African-American studies to campuses around the United States, denominationalism had already fallen out of the academy's favor. African-American history experienced its boon in religious studies at exactly the same time that denominational history was on its way out. This confluence of historiographical trends guaranteed that there would be no heyday of black denominational studies. See Albert J. Raboteau, David W. Wills, et al., “Retelling Carter Woodson's Story: Archival Sources for Afro-American Church History,” *Journal of American History* 77 (June 1990): 183-99.

<sup>64</sup>Laurie Maffly-Kipp, “Denominationalism and the Black Church,” in Mullin and Richey, eds., *Reimagining Denominationalism*, 59-62.



examples of African Americans who “self-consciously employed this phrase to symbolize racial, cultural, and religious unity, often in ways that have worked to obscure denominational differences.” Du Bois, Washington, and Woodson downplayed differences between African-American religious traditions in order to support their “aspirations for the cultural and racial unity of a people.” White scholars’ assumptions about racial identity and black scholars’ racial aspirations converged to enshrine the historiographical and sociological construct of “the Black Church.” The effect has been to neglect the “division, differentiation, and conflict” so prominent in black church history.<sup>65</sup>

This final section of the chapter attempts to resurrect those neglected themes, without ignoring interdenominational cooperation, by analyzing the relationships between black churches on the ground. In North Carolina, black Protestants of every variety came together to worship at revivals, to lay the cornerstones of new buildings, and to support ministries of mercy. On these occasions, black churchgoers tried hard to put aside denominational differences out of either a common Christian commitment or a shared race interest. But those very same moments also revealed the limits of interdenominational cooperation. Conflict and competition, as much as cooperation, characterized black church history in late nineteenth-century North Carolina. African-American Christians in the state seemed quite at ease with the intense cooperation and competition that existed among churches. All having left white southerners to form independent churches, they shared a common story. They also shared religious and racial identities and championed similar causes. But black Protestants also resisted attempts to flatten out distinctions between them. They fiercely defended and maintained their

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<sup>65</sup>Maffly-Kipp, “Denominationalism,” 59-62, 70.

distinct denominational identities; and in doing so, they nurtured the idea that black communities were heterogeneous, an idea that countered the homogenizing racial logic of Jim Crow.

Cooperation between local black denominations could be quite extensive. In July 1900, for example, almost the entire black community in Franklinton, North Carolina, turned out for the cornerstone laying at the new brick AME Zion Church. Women from the local Household of Ruth club led a long procession of ministers, parishioners, and freemasons to the new site, where teenage girls greeted them with decorations and refreshments. The Prince Hall Masons of the Prince Edward Lodge No. 2091 laid the cornerstone. The new minister, Rev. A. J. McNeill, called the ceremony to order, and an elderly minister of another denomination addressed the crowd for about ten or fifteen minutes. When the elderly minister became too feeble to continue, his wife stepped up, and then their son sang, and their granddaughter played the organ. At the close of the ceremony, the congregation lingered, and before the Odd Fellows, another fraternal order, got up to entertain, another minister from yet another denomination began speaking. When the congregation finally dispersed late that evening, Rev. McNeill left with the support of several other churches, a woman's club, and two fraternal organizations.<sup>66</sup>

Moments like the cornerstone laying in Franklinton caused some black Protestant leaders to describe denominations as complementary parts of the same religious body. One minister compared denominations to army regiments. "All Christians, no matter of what denomination, are one in Christ, and the different denominations or churches remind me of the grand divisions of a vast army." Each regiment appears to be separate,

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<sup>66</sup>Rev. A. J. McNeill, "Corner Stone Laying," *Star of Zion*, July 19, 1900, 2.

moving only according to the commands of its officers, he explained. But the many divisions, he argued, “all are alike under the supervision and direction of the great captain of our salvation.” This minister, Rev. A. Hill, believed in an underlying unity between denominations, rooted in a common story and a common struggle. He told the 1884 Charlotte District Conference of the AME Zion Church, “we are battling side by side in the same great cause, and against the same great enemy, and participating and rejoicing together in the same triumphs.” Hill hoped to remind his colleagues and the visiting ministers from other denominations present at the conference of their kinship, despite the competition and divisions that existed.<sup>67</sup>

Likewise, Rev. A. G. Davis asked the North Carolina Baptist Educational and Missionary Convention (NCBEMC) to focus on the similarities between black churches: “Across the river are three organizations—the AME Zion church, the AME church, and the Presbyterians. These may all differ as to forms of government: there are in fact, these distinctions. We however do agree in the promotion of the gospel and in the saving of the souls of men.” As an outsider to the convention, Davis hoped his remarks would secure friendly relations with the Baptists visiting his hometown. “We welcome you as co-laborers under the banner of our Lord,” he told them. “We welcome you for your consecration of forces to do good.”<sup>68</sup>

Indeed, there were many examples of fraternal relationships among denominations. In Newbern, where Hood had outmaneuvered the AME and another denomination for the pastorate of Andrews Chapel, AME minister Henry McNeal Turner found the AME and AME Zion churches in perfect unity. When Turner arrived in the

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<sup>67</sup>*Star of Zion*, November 7, 1884.

<sup>68</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, November 1901, 6.

city late in 1865, Hood, with “exemplary hospitality,” made “his house feel as welcome as my [Turner’s] own.” Hood also invited George Rue, the AME minister in Newbern, to join their fellowship. Turner was pleased “to find such brotherly unity existing between these two divines [Hood and Rue],” despite their being “strenuous advocates for their own branch of the Church.” The AME and AME Zion were competitors in the same religious market, and Turner’s visit signaled a move by the AME to secure a foothold in a state rapidly becoming the dominion of Zion Methodism. Nevertheless, the brotherly feelings between Hood, Turner, and Rue were genuine.<sup>69</sup>

Such familial feelings existed throughout the late nineteenth century among North Carolina’s black churchgoers. An AME Zion elder in Washington, North Carolina, reported holding services attended by congregants from all the black churches in town: “the different denominations came forward and communed with us; and it seemed as if there was neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, and that all were one in Christ.”<sup>70</sup> An organizer of the 1885 Emancipation Day celebration in Charlotte rejoiced that all the black ministers in town were on one stage together, representing a unity that spoke louder than the rifts between the churches.<sup>71</sup> The same year, Wilmington, North Carolina, established a ministers’ organization that convened all of the city’s black clergy monthly.<sup>72</sup> Annually, at denominational conferences and conventions, Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian ministers visited each other as fraternal delegates, offering their blessings on the others’ church proceedings. It even became common practice for the

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<sup>69</sup>“A Letter from Rev. H. M. Turner,” *Christian Recorder*, December 30, 1865.

<sup>70</sup>*Fayetteville Educator*, May 22, 1875.

<sup>71</sup>*Star of Zion*, January 5, 1885.

<sup>72</sup>“Preachers’ Meeting,” *Christian Recorder*, March 19, 1885.

host city to ask the ministers gathered at the state Baptist or Methodist convention to fill the various pulpits across town if the conference coincided with a Sunday morning.

Throughout the year, most black congregations would hear sermons from ministers of several different denominations. In 1873 when Rev. S. B. Williams, the AME pastor in Kinston, North Carolina, accepted a transfer to a pastorate in Pennsylvania, the local AME Zion and Missionary Baptist churches took up collections to help fund his train fare.

Williams remarked on this interdenominational generosity to the *Christian Recorder*:

While we differed with the above named churches in church policy, and with the last named church in doctrine, yet during the past year we lived in peace, exchanging pulpits, and thereby manifesting in our members that, while we differed, yet we agreed on the grand and glorious principle of the salvation wrought out through Jesus Christ.<sup>73</sup>

Williams viewed their generosity as demonstrations of unity and cooperation, not as desire to get him out of town.

Likewise, the major black denominational schools in the state — Shaw University (Baptist) in Raleigh, St. Augustine's College (Episcopal) in Raleigh, Livingstone College (AME Zion) in Salisbury, Scotia Seminary (Presbyterian) in Concord, Kittrell College (AME) in Vance County, and Biddle or Johnson C. Smith University (Presbyterian) in Charlotte—came together to form a common league. They met to exchange ideas about funding and curricula and to ensure that a student expelled from one school for misbehavior would not be allowed to attend another school in the league. Black churches and their schools worked together.<sup>74</sup>

African-American Protestants lauded their interdenominational efforts, none so much as the Colored Orphan Asylum in Oxford, North Carolina. The orphanage was the

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<sup>73</sup>“From North Carolina to Pennsylvania,” *Christian Recorder*, December 25, 1873.

<sup>74</sup>Untitled article, *The Augustinian*, (February 1905): 8.

brainchild of Augustus Shepard, a black Baptist minister born in Raleigh. Traveling the state as representative for the American Baptist Publication Society, he observed North Carolina's dire need for an orphanage for African-American children. The state had three such asylums for white orphans. In 1883, Shepard and fellow Baptists formed the Colored Baptist Orphan Association of North Carolina. A few months later, Shepard recalled, "the word 'Baptist' by unanimous consent of the Association . . . was stricken from the name of the Association." When the orphanage opened its doors a few years later, "the most needy colored orphan children were invited to come, regardless of denomination." What began as a Baptist association became an ecumenical endeavor.<sup>75</sup>

Other black denominations quickly joined the effort. The Association sent out representatives to all the denominational meetings across the state to solicit donations. In the summers, female teachers traveled the state with a few orphans to give concerts in black churches and to ask their support for the orphanage. The fundraising efforts secured a broad base of donors. Beginning in 1885, the North Carolina Conference of the AME Zion Church made annual contributions to the orphanage. Others also contributed. When raising funds for a building addition in 1890, the directors asked "that *every* church, Sunday-school and individual will pray the blessings of God upon the work, and take a collection, or make an offering" (emphasis original). The campaign worked. "Besides the Baptists," read a 1900 report, "the Methodists and the Presbyterians are the most liberal contributors to the work." Even private benefactors and the Prince Hall Freemasons became regular contributors. The orphanage appeared to benefit from the competition between black churches and institutions, as each worked to prove their

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<sup>75</sup>*Colored Orphan Asylum of North Carolina, Oxford, NC, Report* (Oxford, NC: Public Ledger Print, 1900), 3-4.

commitment to the work in Oxford. Even the religious and moral instruction of the orphan children was ecumenical. As the 1900 report explained, “Pastors of different churches are invited to preach to the children.” And the asylum’s Board of Directors, composed mostly of clergy, represented the full spectrum of black Protestant denominations.<sup>76</sup>

It was not long, however, before some North Carolina Baptists regretted sharing the project with other churches. As early as 1889 the North Carolina Baptist Educational and Missionary Convention (NCBEMC) passed a resolution calling for the orphanage to be rechristened “a Baptist institution” because, the delegates claimed, it “is supported chiefly by the Baptists of the State.” They forwarded their resolution to the orphan asylum’s Board of Trustees, an interdenominational group which, not surprisingly, ignored the resolution.<sup>77</sup> At the 1901 NCBEMC meeting, Shepard recommended “the establishment of a Baptist Orphanage, controlled exclusively by the colored Baptists.” Whether he was proposing a second institution or a reorganization of the original orphanage he founded is unclear.<sup>78</sup> What is clear, however, is that there were major limits on interdenominational cooperation.

Black Protestants’ denominational loyalties strained their interdenominational efforts. Baptist leaders, in particular, fostered denominational loyalty among their members. The 1882 NCBEMC published a circular letter to be read before and distributed to all the black Baptist churches in the State. “We have great advantages over

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<sup>76</sup>“An Appeal for Help to the People of the State in Behalf of the Colored Orphan Children of North Carolina,” Leaflet (Oxford, NC; Colored Orphan Asylum, 1890); *Colored Orphan Asylum of North Carolina, Oxford, NC, Report*, 4-5.

<sup>77</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1889, 41.

<sup>78</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, November 1901, 8.

all the sects and denominations,” the letter read. The circular was intended to convince Baptists in the pew not only of the correctness of Baptist doctrine but also of the unjustifiable errors of other denominations. “Even those who oppose us and preach ‘another gospel’ know in their hearts that the Baptists are right,” the circular asserted. If such assertions were difficult to prove, as no doubt they were, the letter came complete with biblical proof that the rite of baptism should be for believers only and that it had to be by complete immersion. “There is no hint of infant Baptism in the whole Bible. . . . Immersion is the baptism of the New Testament Scriptures.” Their message was clear: Baptist practice alone had the backing of the Bible.<sup>79</sup>

Baptists boasted two distinct advantages over other denominations. First, they claimed that their decentralized church government and their rejection of infant baptism made them true heirs of the church in the New Testament. The development of elaborate hierarchies in other churches, Baptists believed, was a corruption of the simplicity of the early church.<sup>80</sup> Likewise they considered the practice of pedobaptism (baptizing infants) to be an extra-biblical innovation. In their view, an affiliation with any other denomination was necessarily a step away from biblical truth. “Don’t you know that the Methodists won’t last long if you give them the Bible?” Rev. Charles Meserve asked his fellow black Baptists at the 1895 convention in Oxford, North Carolina. Baptists’ confident belief that their denomination had biblical backing that others lacked helped to erode the interdenominational cooperation among black churches.

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<sup>79</sup>“Circular Letter,” *Proceedings of the North Carolina State Baptist Convention* (colored), October 1882.

<sup>80</sup>For example, Calvin Brown told his colleagues, “We represent the New Testament church, founded by Christ.” NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1894, 24-25.



Second, Baptists boasted that their decentralized church government deserved credit for inspiring American republicanism. Calvin Brown told the 1894 NCBEMC delegates in Wilson, North Carolina that the “Baptist Church is the cradle of religious and civil liberty; and these grand principles have been imperishably stamped by her heroes upon the life and constitution of almost every civilized nation on earth. It is not arrogance to assert that the American government owes much of its magnificent greatness to the principles first fostered by Baptist pioneers.”<sup>81</sup> Vass echoed those sentiments when he spoke at the 1901 Convention: “The Baptist denomination furnished Mr. Jefferson the idea of a Republican form of government.”<sup>82</sup> At stake in this claim was not just a badge of importance. By aligning Baptist doctrine with the principles of liberty and republicanism, Vass and Brown indirectly (and with little warrant) credited Baptist teaching with the revolutionary ideals that many believed secured African Americans their freedom and citizenship rights.

Black Baptists harbored high opinions of their denomination’s teaching, and they held even grander views of its future. While AME Zion leaders among others focused their eschatology upon the future of the race or “the Negro Church,” black Baptists at times seemed to speak of a separate Baptist destiny. “The word of God will not be glorified until we all get the nation into the Baptist Church,” Meserve charged. After all, he reasoned, “Jesus Christ was a Baptist because he was baptized by a Baptist preacher.”<sup>83</sup> Brown challenged his colleagues to “name another church, denomination, or sect that has a grander mission.” Brown, like Meserve, was making an argument for

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 24-5.

<sup>82</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, November 1903, 19.

<sup>83</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1895, 16.

exclusivity, not just superiority. He argued that the ultimate goal of Baptist missions would not be fulfilled until all Christians joined a Baptist church. “The world must be brought to Christ under the Baptist flag, supported by Baptist patriots,” Brown said, “regardless of the multitude of other churches.”<sup>84</sup> The push for an all-Baptist world sounded millennial; the Baptist Church was not just the church of the New Testament, they argued, but the church of the future.

Leaders of the NCBEMC worked toward realizing an all-Baptist world by strengthening the denomination for competition with other black churches. Meserve, president of Shaw University, worried that a lack of denominational allegiance would have negative consequences for Baptist schools. He sounded the alarm: “I have heard of boys and girls of Baptist parents going to other schools than Baptist.” Meserve challenged his colleagues, asking, “How many of you ministers are agents for Shaw, Waters Institute and the other Baptist schools?” Back in 1882, the Educational Board of the NCBEMC had raised the same concern: “The masses of our young people are being educated in the common schools. Efforts are being made to undermine the Baptist faith and lead our young people into error.” J. J. Worlds became even more alarmed than did Meserve or the Education Board. He reported to the 1890 NCBEMC about “very great efforts being made by Pedobaptists [practitioners of infant baptism] to enter our homes and take our girls and boys with which to build their churches.” The inflammatory language conjured up images of attack and kidnapping—unlikely scenarios—but the effect was to strengthen Baptists’ denominational identity. By defining themselves against pedobaptists, Baptists raised the stakes of denominational loyalty and drummed

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<sup>84</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1894, 24-25.

up more support for Baptist institutions. North Carolina black Baptists understood themselves to be competing in a religious free market.<sup>85</sup>

Baptists may have felt particularly vulnerable, due to their decentralized church government. Unlike Methodists, whose bishops held authority over a large territory, or Presbyterians, whose binding decisions could be made regionally at presbytery or nationally at synod, Baptist authority lay with individual congregations. “We are now considered merely as Baptists, a divided, selfish, independent, wrangling, church-splitting, ungovernable horde, with no central power to control and no influence to arrest our audacity,” Calvin Brown complained. Brown hoped to overcome that negative reputation and the logistical limitations imposed by Baptist church polity with a healthy dose of “denominational pride.” Baptists could move as a unit, Brown argued, not by adopting a more centralized government, but by reaffirming Baptist principles and Baptist institutions. Thereby, he assured his colleagues, North Carolina Baptists could “enjoy the prestige which we should have by reason of our numerical strength, education, and resources.”<sup>86</sup> This kind of denominational allegiance placed strains on interdenominational cooperation, as seen in the attempts to rename or reorganize the orphanage in Oxford.

The Baptists were not alone; other black Protestant denominations formed identities that created tension with others. As noted earlier, Hood and Price looked askance at Baptists and Methodist Episcopal churches’ close affiliation with whites. North Carolina Presbyterians and Episcopalians tended to condescendingly dismiss the ministry of Baptists and Methodists as uneducated. A Presbyterian elder from

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<sup>85</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, November 1901, 17; NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1890, 8-9

<sup>86</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1908, 25.

Wadesboro, North Carolina, made a petition before the Central North Carolina Conference of the AME Zion Church to be ordained a Methodist preacher. He came with a note from a Charlotte-area Presbyterian minister and professor saying the man was too poorly educated to be a Presbyterian minister but that he would make a fine Methodist. The Methodists were not amused.<sup>87</sup>

The rivalry between the AME (Bethel, by shorthand) and the AME Zion (Zion, by shorthand), demonstrated the strength of sectarianism within black religious communities. The two denominations, formed under similar circumstances, with nearly identical doctrine and church government, came close to union several times throughout the nineteenth century. After repeated failed attempts at uniting, Bishop Hood lamented, “It has fallen to the lot of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church to have the African Methodist Episcopal (Bethel) Church as its great antagonist.” When Hood arrived as a fraternal delegate to an AME conference meeting in Raleigh, the AME Bishop insulted him by not introducing him with the title of Bishop. “We have seldom visited any of their Conferences since that time,” Hood reported.<sup>88</sup> He told his clergy at the Central North Carolina Conference in 1881, “but then you know that some of our Bethel brethren don’t mind doing a mean thing when they can injure Zion by it.”<sup>89</sup> The AME minister in Asheville leveled the same complaint against Zion Methodists: “Sectarianism is strong here; it boils at times.”<sup>90</sup> The antagonism went both ways.

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<sup>87</sup>*Minutes of the Second Session of the Central North Carolina Conference*, 7.

<sup>88</sup>Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 131, 143.

<sup>89</sup>*Minutes of the Second Session of the Central North Carolina Conference*, 31-32.

<sup>90</sup>“An Appeal for Aid,” *Christian Recorder*, March 26, 1885.

Both Zion and Bethel ministers regretted the degree of sectarian contention that existed between them; their repeated attempts at union demonstrated a common desire to put the “spirit of contention” to rest. Hood believed the rivalry to be a part of the prophecies of Revelation: “This spirit [of contention], in our opinion, is that beast which is to be destroyed before the millennium.”<sup>91</sup> However, strong denominational loyalties and investments in denominational institutions made interdenominational cooperation difficult, even between the most similar of sects. We can even attribute the intensity of their sectarian rivalry to their similarity. Being so similar, the AME and the AME Zion competed for the same share of the religious free market. That competition may have been for both denominations a source of angst and regret, but it ratcheted up their drive to plant more churches, build more institutions, and meet more needs of the communities they served.

Black Protestants spoke about their unity and cooperation as they strategized ways to win out in the religious free market. One AME minister’s letter to the *Christian Recorder* bore out this paradox. In 1878, Rev. J. G. Fry wrote to his denominational newspaper about the progress he had experienced in Wilmington, perhaps in response to a piece published four months earlier that negatively portrayed the work in that port city. Fry described the successful revival on the campgrounds along the Cape Fear River, where two thousand attendees gathered under the large shed, and many more spilled out in adjacent tents. “Souls were converted, and the Slain of the Lord was many,” Fry wrote. Best of all, he reported, prominent ministers from other denominations were in attendance. Fry was happy to share the “grand success” with Baptists and Zion Methodists. But even as Fry celebrated the interdenominational cooperation, he boasted,

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<sup>91</sup>Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 130.

“We [the AME] have three churches in this city . . . Our position in that particular gives us the advantage over the other denominations put together.”<sup>92</sup> So comfortable were ministers like Fry with both competition and cooperation that they failed to comment on the juxtaposition.

## **Conclusion**

Black North Carolinians, of various denominations, left majority-white churches almost simultaneously. Their desire for racial autonomy in places of worship was remarkably widespread. And in their own estimation, the separation from white churches was an eschatological event. But their theological understanding of religious independence varied, as their relationships with white Protestants and with other black churches clearly demonstrated. Black Protestants declared their racial independence, but even as they did so, they resisted being seen as a homogenous group.

They understood their racial independence, which they asserted during emancipation, as something quite distinct from racial segregation, which became the defining feature of the Jim Crow era. An AME Zion bishop in North Carolina captured in a newspaper article the desire for racial independence, which allowed for heterogeneity in black communities, and against racial segregation, which did not. Bishop C. R. Harris lauded his denomination’s move in 1898 to ordain women, and criticized other black Protestants for lagging behind in the work of gender equality. He heralded women’s ordination as the result of his church’s racial independence. Then, in the same article, he complained about the new Jim Crow waiting rooms in North Carolina train stations.<sup>93</sup> It

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<sup>92</sup>“Word from North Carolina,” *Christian Recorder*, July 4, 1878.

may seem odd that Harris would name the virtue of racial independence in the same article in which he protested the vice of racial segregation. Did he want whites and blacks separated or not? Racial segregation, of course, meant different things in churches than it did in train station waiting rooms. Black North Carolinians separated from white churches on their own initiative whereas Jim Crow segregation was imposed by a hostile state.

But the difference between Jim Crow segregation and the independent black church movement went beyond coercion. Unlike the independent black church movement, the logic of Jim Crow segregation was homogenizing. For white railway passengers, there were first-class cars, coach cars, smoking cars, etc. But for African-American passengers, there was only one Jim Crow car. The white supremacists who designed the system refused to recognize distinctions among African Americans. Under the logic of Jim Crow, an black southerner's race said everything about his or her place in society. A heterogeneous black religious community whose members held a common racial identity but differed widely over doctrine and practice simply did not conform to the logic of Jim Crow. Differences of denomination and theology eluded whites' homogenizing gaze. Therefore, by treating theology and denominational identity seriously, we as historians not only see the eschatological impulse to form independent black churches but also can resist the logic of Jim Crow that no doubt informs more monolithic descriptions of African-American Protestantism.

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<sup>93</sup>Harris, "Episcopal Dots."

## Chapter Three

### Exodus and Jubilee: The Politics of Land and Migration

As he traveled around North Carolina in 1865, Freedmen's Bureau agent James Sinclair encountered a curious idea among the state's freedpeople. They eagerly expected to receive title to confiscated lands of ex-Confederates. They believed that the property distribution would take place around Christmas Day 1865 or New Year's Day 1866. At a meeting in Lumberton, North Carolina, Sinclair tried to dissuade black farmers from their "extravagant ideas in relation to confiscated lands," with little success. He told them there would be no scheme to redistribute plantation owners' land among former slaves, but his audience remained convinced that "something very important [was] going to happen" around Christmas Day.<sup>1</sup> Black southerners' "extravagant ideas" about property redistribution were widespread. Republican politician and former Army officer Carl Schurz reported to Congress, "In many localities I found an impression prevailing among the Negroes that some great change was going to take place about Christmas." Schurz continued, "They ardently desire to become freeholders . . . . In the independent

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<sup>1</sup>John J. Robertson et al., to Maj.-Gen. James B. Steedman, September 27, 1865, National Archives, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, RG 105, Georgia Assistant Commissioner, Affidavits and Petitions [A-5166], qtd. in Steven Hahn, "'Extravagant Expectations' of Freedom: Rumour, Political Struggle, and the Christmas Insurrection Scare of 1865 in the American South," *Past and Present*. 157 (November 1997): 122.



possession of landed property they see the consummation of their deliverance.”<sup>2</sup> In the minds of former slaves, with freedom came land.

The connection black southerners made between land and freedom had two biblical precedents, Exodus and Jubilee. Black Protestants saw themselves in both of these stories; and in both stories, freed slaves acquire land. The role Exodus played in black American life has been well-documented.<sup>3</sup> Exodus told the dramatic story of God’s deliverance of the ancient Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. The narrative portrayed the power of Israel’s God and the emancipation of God’s people. It inaugurated the national period of Israel and showcased the Hebrews’ long and troubled journey to and possession of Canaan, the land of their ancestors.<sup>4</sup>

Levitical law, which developed later in Israel’s national history, called for Israelites to keep every fiftieth year holy as a Year of Jubilee. For forty-nine years, the people were allowed to buy and sell land and to obtain slaves from among the debtors or through warfare. During this timeframe, some families and tribes amassed large estates and many slaves, while many debtors lost their lands and indentured themselves or their children to pay their debts. But on the first day of the Year of Jubilee, priests sounded trumpets to announce the Day of Atonement when slaves were freed, debts were erased, and property was redistributed back to landless families and tribes. Jubilee leveled the

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<sup>2</sup>“Ex. Doc. No. 2: Message of President on condition of States lately in rebellion,” in *Senate Executive Documents*, 1st Session, 39th Congress, 1865-66: 31. For detailed accounts of the Christmas Scare of 1865, see Hahn, ““Extravagant Expectations”” and Dan T. Carter, “The Anatomy of Fear: The Christmas Day Insurrection Scare of 1865,” *The Journal of Southern History* 42.3 (August 1976): 345-64.

<sup>3</sup>See Albert J. Raboteau, “African-Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel,” in Paul E. Johnson, ed., *African-American Christianity: Essays in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); and Eddie Glaude, *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup>See the Old Testament book of Exodus, especially chapters 3-33, and the book of Joshua.

playing field, in accordance with Levitical law: “The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine, [says the Lord].” The same held true for slave property. In short, the Year of Jubilee entailed freedom for slaves and property redistribution.<sup>5</sup>

Black Americans wrote themselves into both stories, and often conflated Exodus and Jubilee. Indeed, Exodus and Jubilee carried common meanings: freedom from slavery and acquisition of land. In both cases, freedom came dramatically—with Moses’ parting of the Red Sea in Exodus and with the sounding of trumpets in Jubilee. Black southerners’ experience of emancipation as a dramatic and sudden event gave both stories a particular resonance. Both ran so parallel to black southerners’ experience because in both stories, a leader or the government announced the end of slavery, and slaves participated in their own dramatic emancipation because. In both, landless slaves became property owners.<sup>6</sup>

Exodus and Jubilee, however, held important distinctions, especially for black Americans. Exodus described a large migration after emancipation to a land set aside for the newly freed. Jubilee, in contrast, restored to the landless a title to their homeland. These two very similar stories operated in tension for black North Carolinians, one arguing for colonization and migration, the other for black land ownership in the state of their birth. The tension between Exodus and Jubilee became clear whenever black North Carolinians debated the best way to get land: should they leave the state in search of better economic circumstances, or fight for economic justice and opportunities to own land in North Carolina?

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<sup>5</sup>Lev. 25:1-10, KJV. See also Katherine Dvorak, “After Apocalypse, Moses,” in John Boles, *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South, 1740-1870* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1988).

<sup>6</sup>Chapter 1 discusses black North Carolinians’ experience of emancipation as both Exodus and Jubilee.

In the immediate post-emancipation period, black North Carolinians placed their hope in Jubilee, in the acquisition of land in North Carolina. The freedpeople who shared their “extravagant ideas” of property redistribution with Sinclair certainly had Jubilee in mind. As the century progressed, however, more and more black North Carolinians wearied in waiting for Jubilee, and placed their hope in Exodus instead. In the late 1870s, two small groups of landless black farmers left the state in Exodus-inspired migrations: one to Liberia and another to Indiana. Black Protestant leaders opposed the migrations, intensified their calls for economic justice and land reform in North Carolina, and appealed to black farmers to stay home. In 1889-90, in a mass migration out of North Carolina, tens of thousands headed to states farther west and south in search of a Promised Land. Such a large migration spoke to black North Carolinians’ unrest in waiting for Jubilee. Black leaders opposed this later migration as well but had much less success in stemming the tide of emigrants. Black Protestant leaders remained committed to Jubilee; they believed that black land ownership and economic justice were possible in North Carolina. But increasingly, many of their followers placed their hope in Exodus.

Black agricultural workers appropriated Exodus and Jubilee on a literal level. For them, Exodus meant a mass migration; and they expected the Day of Atonement to be a specific day of property redistribution. Ministers and other leaders, in contrast, preferred a more metaphorical reading. They appropriated Exodus to describe the departure from white churches or the movement from slavery to citizenship, but rarely did they use the story to advocate for a mass migration. In leaders’ metaphorical reading, Jubilee meant righting economic wrongs, or black prosperity, not necessarily an sudden act of property redistribution.

In both literal and metaphorical readings, black leaders and migrants referred to the Exodus and Jubilee stories by shorthand: “Day of Atonement,” “Jubilee,” “Promised Land,” “Moses,” “silver trumpets,” “land flowing with milk and honey,” etc. They rarely retold the entire stories, but their shorthand successfully evoked these biblical stories because their audiences were already acquainted with each narrative and its implications for black life in the post-emancipation South. Even when black North Carolinians made no reference to Exodus and Jubilee, the stories’ effect could be seen in the tension between migration/ colonization and economic justice/ land ownership in black thought. Even though black leaders and agricultural workers at times staked opposite sides of the emigration debate, they all kept a keen eye on the land, the agricultural labor market, and black economic interests in the state. Interpreting religious narratives and destinies did not distract black North Carolinians from such practical considerations, which in fact helped them to discern God’s will. Rising political and economic fortunes in North Carolina supported weight to arguments that God wanted his people to stay settled, while political persecution, poor crops, and economic injustice seemed to signal God’s will that they seek out the Promised Land. Religious motivations were not separate from political and economic ones.

This chapter traces black North Carolinians’ expectations of land during the Christmas season of 1865, the small migrations of the late 1870s, and the large migration in 1889-90. For each of these moments, the chapter analyzes the reasoning of black proponents and opponents and the religious narratives that shaped and inspired black action. As African Americans drew on those narratives, they made strong, explicit

connections between land and freedom, and more specifically, between emigrationism (Exodus) and arguments for economic justice and black land ownership (Jubilee).

### **Jubilee Now: Postwar Expectations of Land**

Across the South, newly freed slaves expected land to accompany their freedom. As one observer of Union contraband camps wrote, “The freedmen had got the impression that the abandoned lands of their old owners were to be divided amongst them.” Rumors of General Sherman’s promise of land, of slaves taking ownership of the Georgia Sea Islands, and of bills before Congress to confiscate and redistribute Confederate fueled their expectations. In hindsight, large-scale land distribution would never have garnered enough support to be feasible, but in the moment, it seemed entirely plausible. The hopeful looked to government precedent in the Homestead Act of 1862, which took confiscated Indian lands out west and made it available and affordable to settlers. Could not the federal government take confiscated Confederate land and make it available and affordable to the freedpeople?<sup>7</sup>

In 1865, the answer appeared to be yes. The rumors of property redistribution had their basis in fact. Freedmen did take possession of confiscated Confederate land in isolated places —on the Georgia Sea Islands, for example, and in James City across the river from New Bern, North Carolina. In March 1865, Congress created the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands and authorized it to lease almost 900,000 acres of abandoned Confederate land to former slaves and loyal white refugees. The law made provision for every male freedman to be assigned no more than forty acres; if the

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<sup>7</sup>Elizabeth Hyde Botune, *First Days Amongst the Contrabands* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1893), 170, quoted in Edward Magdol, *A Right to the Land: Essays on the Freedmen’s Community* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 139; see also pp. 140-42.

freedman rented the property for three years, he would be eligible to purchase the land and assume its title. Freedmen thus began to apply for land. When Andrew Johnson's administration later decided that property redistribution was politically unviable, the federal government made it clear that the abandoned and confiscated lands would be returned to their former owners. Nevertheless, black southerners continued to expect large-scale property redistribution as concomitant with freedom.<sup>8</sup>

In North Carolina, as elsewhere, expectations of property redistribution were most intense in the fall and winter of 1865. As Agent Sinclair reported, the freedpeople in North Carolina waited for something dramatic to happen on Christmas Day, 1865. Black North Carolinians prepared themselves for a coming Day of Atonement. In Duplin County, North Carolina, one group of freedmen stated their intention to own tracts of land "even if they had to shed blood to obtain them."<sup>9</sup> Most, however, prepared peacefully. Rumors circulated that the government would redistribute land to only heads of households. So, in the two days before a visit by a Freedmen's Bureau agent in August 1865, 150 black couples in Warrenton, North Carolina tied the knot in order to be eligible for a land allotment. When the Bureau agent arrived, Warrenton blacks thronged to hear his announcement about the "new laws" regarding land ownership. The agent's attempt to dispel the rumors met resistance.<sup>10</sup> One month later, when African Americans gathered in Warrenton to elect a delegate to the State Freedmen's Convention in Raleigh,

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<sup>8</sup>Magdol, *A Right to the Land*, 140-42; William Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 11.

<sup>9</sup>Qtd. in William McKee Evans, *Ballots and Fence Rails: Reconstruction on the Lower Cape Fear* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 69.

<sup>10</sup>Report of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction, House Report No. 30, 39<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, part II, 192; Magdol, *A Right to the Land*, 140.

they reaffirmed their belief in an imminent plan for property redistribution, passing over the candidate dubious about land hand-outs, and electing the candidate who expected a “grand division” of land.<sup>11</sup>

Together with political organizing, black expectations for property redistribution sparked fears of a violent revolt in the minds of white southerners. The fear of insurrection and revolution began in eastern North Carolina in June 1865 and spread throughout the former Confederacy. In a diary entry, planter Samuel Agnew predicted “a negroe Jubilee insurrection.” Others feared that the federal government would confiscate plantations and give the land to former slaves, or that blacks would turn violent when the government failed to do so, killing their former masters to take their land.<sup>12</sup> Donald MacRae, a white North Carolina merchant, wrote to his wife, warning her of the coming revolution, and confiding his fears that blacks would start a race war to take possession of the land; he encouraged her to learn to shoot a pistol. Some concerned white North Carolinians wrote to Governor William W. Holden about the need to protect landholders from the coming Jubilee revolt.<sup>13</sup> One white North Carolina planter feared the worst: “a rehearsal for the South’s Armageddon.”<sup>14</sup> Rev. L. S. Burkhead recalled his fears of Jubilee-inspired violence in Wilmington in 1865: “They [freed slaves] began to threaten us with mobs, and even their preachers advised the colored people that the houses and lands were theirs and that they

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<sup>11</sup>*New York Tribune*, September 8, 1865.

<sup>12</sup>Samuel A. Agnew, diary entry, November 3, 1865, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, qtd. in Hahn, “Extravagant Expectations,” 122-24.

<sup>13</sup>Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: the Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 425-26.

<sup>14</sup>*Wilmington Daily Herald*, November 7, 1865, qtd. in Carter, “The Anatomy of Fear,” 357.

should get possession of them by violence if they could not be obtained by other means!”<sup>15</sup>  
Black expectations and white fears reinforced one another.

As expectations of property redistribution and rumors of insurrection spread throughout the South, black hopes took on an explicit millennialism. Passers-by heard communities of freed slaves singing:

Old master’s gone and the darkies stayed at home;  
Must be now that the kingdom’s come and the year of jubilee.<sup>16</sup>

Even earlier, a black Union soldier camped near the North Carolina–Virginia border linked the coming Jubilee with the Millennium: “so soon as the general jubilee is proclaimed throughout the Southern regions—so soon as this rebellion, originating from the power of slavery, is subdued, then we will have a glorious millennium of peace in this once slave-cursed country.”<sup>17</sup> One group of African Americans in Mississippi put a precise date on the coming Jubilee/Millennium. They heard a story that the Freedmen’s Bureau had a “Great Document” sealed with four seals, which would be broken on New Year’s Day 1866, when the federal government would deliver its “final orders” for land confiscation and redistribution. In this dramatic retelling of St. John’s vision in Revelation the federal government took on a divine authority. The opening of the document reminded black southerners of millennial prophecy, and the contents of the document reminded them of Jubilee.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Rev. L. S. Burkhead, “History of the Difficulties of the Pastorate of the Front Street Methodist Church, Wilmington, NC, For the Year 1865,” *An Annual Publication of Historical Papers Published by the Historical Society of Trinity College* Series VIII (1908-09): 70

<sup>16</sup>Qtd. in Hahn, “Extravagant Expectations,” 136

<sup>17</sup>*Christian Recorder*, October 1, 1864.

<sup>18</sup>S. D. Barnes to Lieutenant E. Bamberger, December 30, 1865, cited in Magdol, *A Right to the Land*, 141.



Black southerners resisted news that the federal government planned no property redistribution. In mid-1865, when President Andrew Johnson announced that all confiscated lands would be restored to their former owners, General O. O. Howard, the Commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, delivered the bad news to former slaves across the South. An audience in Fayetteville, North Carolina, accused Howard of being a “Reb” dressed up as a Union general in order to deceive them. On one South Carolina plantation, when a black Freedmen’s Bureau official informed the former slaves that the land would be restored to their former master, they lamented: “Christ has been betrayed by one of his own color.” Despite disappointing news from Washington, black southerners still hoped for prosperity and land at home.<sup>19</sup>

Black Protestant leaders shared their followers’ expectation of land and property, but most shied away from the dramatic Christmas Day predictions. Rev. J. C. Gibbs, a black Presbyterian minister Wilmington wrote the *Christian Recorder* from Wilmington urging other church leaders to take advantage of “confiscated rebel property.” The U.S. military had already granted black churchgoers temporary rights over church properties abandoned by pro-Confederate clergy, and Gibbs believed there was “much property to be had for churches and schools.”<sup>20</sup> He cited the recent “act of Congress” providing for the “withdrawing from confiscated rebel property, on the day of sale, such portions as may be needed for public purposes.” Gibbs expected to very soon possess “a rebel’s property, worth \$15,000” on which he could build a church and a school. “Now is the golden moment,” he told other leaders. Gibbs had every reason to expect property

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<sup>19</sup>Magdol, *A Right to the Land*, 142, 161, 165.

<sup>20</sup>“Letter from Rev. J. C. Gibbs,” *Christian Recorder*, May 6, 1865. Chapter 2 treats black possession of church property in further detail.

redistribution on a large scale, and he told others to “seize upon all these chances as quickly as possible.”<sup>21</sup> Jubilee seemed imminent.

Other black Protestant leaders articulated visions for land ownership that looked less like a dramatic revolution and more like a steady rise in economic prosperity. Black leaders argued for the freedpeople’s right to land, even if they distanced themselves from the rumors and fears surrounding Christmas, 1865. They seemed hopeful that black North Carolinians could achieve economic independence from whites and create prosperous free black communities in the state.

Leaders at the Freedmen’s Convention in Raleigh in September 1865 discouraged emigration because they believed that land would be available in North Carolina. In an open letter to the convention, abolitionist Horace Greeley advised the delegates: “Stay where you belong. It may by-and-by be well to emigrate, but not now.” Greeley extolled North Carolina for “her resources” and “sources of unsuspected wealth.” He predicted that black North Carolinians could achieve financial independence from whites. As long as the state held promise for black land ownership and prosperity, Greeley reasoned, emigration made little sense.<sup>22</sup>

The delegates agreed. James Walker Hood told the convention in his presidential address, “Let us keep constantly in our mind that this State is our home.” This was curious advice from a man born in Pennsylvania. He continued, “Some people talk of emigration for the black race, some of expatriation and some of colonization. I regard

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Raleigh *Journal of Freedom*, September 30, 1865. Chapter 1 includes a section on the 1865 Freedmen’s Convention that explains in more detail what happened at the meeting and about the *Journal of Freedom*, the short-lived black newspaper that covered the meeting.

this all as nonsense.”<sup>23</sup> Native North Carolinians concurred. After the convention, one delegate wrote, “It’s not our purpose to emigrate or colonize, and we do not want to be driven away.” African Americans, the delegate continued, wanted to live and die in “the Old North State” as landed and enfranchised men, “not as rogues, not as convicts, not as vagabonds.”<sup>24</sup> The delegate’s opposition to emigration remained wedded to a vision for land ownership and prosperity in North Carolina.

Black Protestant leaders consistently discussed emigration and land ownership in tandem. In an October 1865 editorial in the *Journal of Freedom*, Edward P. Brooks chastised former North Carolina Senator Kenneth Rayner for his “lugubrious sore-headed” plan to remove African Americans from the South. Brooks dismissed the plan on practical and ideological grounds, much as black leaders for decades had opposed white schemes for colonization. He cited “difficulties too numerous to mention” and accused Rayner of “hot-headed haste.” But Brooks also used the editorial to argue for black land rights: “The blacks will remain here in the land to which their unquestionable loyalty gives them a better title than Rayner.” Brooks’s editorial placed him near the beginning of a long procession of black leaders who discussed and dismissed emigration as a segue to arguing for black rights to the land and other forms of economic justice.<sup>25</sup>

In 1865, very few black North Carolinians held title to land. The Christmas season did nothing to change that. The 1865 holiday season passed without incident—no Jubilee riot, no “Great Document,” no property redistribution. Still, African Americans

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<sup>23</sup>Sidney Andrews, *The South Since the War as Shown by Fourteen Weeks of Travel and Observation in Georgia and the Carolinas* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1866), 122.

<sup>24</sup>Raleigh *Journal of Freedom*, October 21, 1865.

<sup>25</sup>Raleigh *Journal of Freedom*, October 28, 1865.

held out hope for land. Rumors of a coming Jubilee-like land scheme circulated again in 1867, 1868, and 1873.<sup>26</sup> Black laborers faced mounting debt and the few who accumulated capital met resistance when they tried to purchase land. A few, remarkably, did become freeholders. Throughout Reconstruction, black leaders advised against emigration in hopes that land and economic justice would become available at home. The African-American editors of the *Fayetteville Educator* in 1874 still expressed enough faith in black opportunities in the state that they encouraged others to immigrate to North Carolina. The editors told readers that in North Carolina black men could become “freeholders.” They enticed “all who wish land” to move to “a most beautiful and quite country,” the Old North State.<sup>27</sup>

### **Still Waiting for Jubilee: Migrations in the Late 1870s**

After Reconstruction, a number of black North Carolinians expressed discontent with their deteriorating political and economic circumstances. In the late 1870s, some disgruntled African Americans organized migrations out of state. One group enlisted help from the American Colonization Society to emigrate to Liberia; another turned to the National Emigrant Aid Society for their move to Indiana. Both groups cited their landlessness and economic troubles as cause for leaving, and both appropriated the Exodus narrative as their own story. Although both migrations were relatively small, they nevertheless made waves in North Carolina politics. Black Protestant leaders, for the most part, opposed the migrations, but used them as opportunities to push for land reform in North Carolina.

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<sup>26</sup>Magdol, *A Right to the Land*, 142, 144; Hahn, “Extravagant Expectations,” 153-54.

<sup>27</sup>*Fayetteville Educator*, November 28, 1874.

In 1877, the American Colonization Society (ACS) in Washington, DC began receiving new petitions for transport to Liberia. “The people here are in a great uproar about going to Liberia,” a white teacher from Cabarrus County, North Carolina, wrote to ACS secretary William Coppinger in August 1877. “The Colored people here are wide awake and are in earnest about going to Liberia,” she informed him. “They say they expect to be ready by fall.”<sup>28</sup> In the same year, Albert Williams described a similar readiness among Raleigh’s African Americans, himself included. They wanted to leave “at the earliest opportunity.” He was happy to report that “Meetings are held weekly in this city on the subject of colonization, and the people appear to be much interested in the matter.” The ACS responded positively to these requests, giving instructions on transport preparations.<sup>29</sup>

In early 1877, a group of African-American men from Burke County sent their request not to the ACS but to Governor Zebulon Vance, who proved less than sympathetic. The men asked for Vance’s assistance in finding the necessary resources “for colonizing themselves.” Vance’s response, a public letter, was infantilizing; he blamed scheming white Republicans for deceiving gullible and ignorant blacks. “We want you to help work our fields,” he told them, ignoring their desire to work their own fields.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>P. P. Erwin, Concord, NC, to William Coppinger, August 15, 1877, Series 1A, Reel 116A, American Colonization Society Papers, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as the ACS Papers). In the post-bellum years, the ACS focused more on missionary and educational efforts in Liberia and less on transporting new colonists there. Often, the ACS asked colonists to fund their own transport and few African Americans could afford it. From 1876 to 1894, only 318 black North Carolinians left for Liberia. See Frenise A. Logan, “The Movement of Negroes from North Carolina, 1876-1894,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 33.1 (January 1956): 49.

<sup>29</sup>Albert B. Williams, Raleigh, NC, to ACS, 1 February 1877, Series 1A, Reel 115, ACS Papers.

<sup>30</sup>*Greensboro Patriot*, March 21, 1877.

Two years later, in Kinston, North Carolina, African Americans from across Lenoir County came together on one Saturday in July 1879 to discuss an exodus to Kansas. “The feeling was much more intense than anyone imagined,” an observer noted. The large crowd greeted the prospect of emigration with the enthusiasm of “campaign times.” The Kinston crowd listened to Sam Perry, a relatively unknown black leader, as he explained the reasons to move. Economic injustice, black poverty, and landlessness topped his list. Perry accused white landholders of “cheating them out of their earnings.” Slave labor was valued at \$150 a year, Perry reasoned, and if black farmworkers had received the true value of the labor since emancipation, each should own \$2250 in savings or real property. Perry’s speech resonated with the crowd, as they proved “by the close attention paid and by repeated applause.” Perry attracted followers because conditions at home failed to meet black expectations for land and economic justice.<sup>31</sup>

Perry, a long-time advocate for colonization, had not served as a delegate to the Colored or Freedmen’s Conventions, and he openly opposed their anti-emigration consensus. “I had not much to do with the big professional negroes, the rich men. I did not associate with them much, but I got among the workingmen,” he later recalled. Perry carried his populist pro-emigration message to the workers in Lenoir County throughout the 1870s but with little success until 1879.<sup>32</sup> What changed the minds of those in attendance at the July 1879 meeting? Why did Lenoir County blacks suddenly favor a Kansas exodus?

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<sup>31</sup>*Kinston Journal*, July 10, 1879.

<sup>32</sup>Cohen, *At Freedom’s Edge*, 187-88; *Report and Testimony of the Select Committee of the United States Senate to Investigate the Causes of the Removal of the Negroes from the Southern States to the Northern States*, 3 parts, 46<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, Senate Report No. 693, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com> (hereafter cited as the Senate Report on the Exodus), part III, 381.

The answer, at least in part, was the Landlord and Tenant Act of 1877. The North Carolina General Assembly revised previous laws on farm tenancy to privilege landlords over tenants. The new law declared that all crops and possessions held on leased land remained the property of the landlord until he decided all conditions of the lease agreement had been met. Perry later claimed that the infamous law “g[ave] the landlord the right to be the court, sheriff, and jury.” One section of the law made it a misdemeanor for sharecroppers or tenant farmers to move off rented land without the consent of the landlord, thus further empowering landlords, and limiting black tenants’ freedom and financial growth. Nearly all of the black North Carolinians who eventually followed Perry out-of-state cited the Landlord and Tenant Act as the reason why.<sup>33</sup>

The political climate in post-Reconstruction North Carolina fostered pessimism in certain sectors of the black community. In a private letter to white Republican leader George W. Stanton, Ransom Howell, a black farmer from Wilson repeated a rumor circulating in his community: “The colored people are invited to go west, and to do so at once before the XVth amendment is repealed, for the purpose of returning us to a condition of slavery, if you are found South of the Ohio River.” In his public reply, printed in the *Raleigh Signal*, Stanton quoted from that private letter and responded, stressing that the rumor had no basis in fact. But the rumor’s existence signaled black North Carolinians’ sense of disfranchisement.<sup>34</sup> In such a climate, “false emigration agents” preyed on black farmers’ fears. In Kinston, two men sold worthless “little scripts

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<sup>33</sup>Joseph Taylor, “The Great Migration from North Carolina in 1879,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 31:1 (January 1954): 26-27, especially n.22.

<sup>34</sup>*Raleigh Signal*, January 14, 1880.

of paper” for one dollar each, saying they were railway tickets to Kansas.<sup>35</sup> People were desperate to move. It was in this environment that sincere emigrationists like Sam Perry found followers.

In September, Perry arrived in Washington, DC, at the offices of the National Emigrant Aid Society, bearing petitions from would-be emigrants in Lenoir County. The Society discouraged Perry from organizing a mass migration to Kansas, for two reasons. Black migrants from Mississippi, Louisiana, and Tennessee were already pouring into Kansas, and there were not enough jobs or land for additional migrants. Secondly, the Society could subsidize transportation to the former Northwestern states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, but not the more expensive passage to the Great Plains. Perry heeded the Society’s advice to organize a movement of black workers from North Carolina to Indiana.<sup>36</sup>

In November 1879, Perry returned to ready his followers for a journey to Indiana. A flyer posted around Lenoir County read:

#### EMIGRATION MEETING

A meeting of the colored citizens of Lenoir County will be held at the

Freedman’s School House at La Grange, N. C.  
on Saturday the 8th Day of Nov. 1879,

for the purpose of expressing our grievance to the Country and of  
perfecting our plans of escape from the House of Bondage.<sup>37</sup>

Perry’s group self-consciously appropriated the language of the Hebrew Exodus to make comparison between peonage or sharecropping in North Carolina and slavery in ancient

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<sup>35</sup>*Kinston Journal*, December 18, 1879.

<sup>36</sup>Cohen, *At Freedom’s Edge*, 188-91.

<sup>37</sup>Qtd. in a letter to the editor, *Kinston Journal*, November 13, 1879.



Egypt, “the House of Bondage.” They relived the Exodus story, as did their Deep South counterparts. The large numbers of exodusters fleeing Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas for Kansas christened the southern Great Plains “a new Canaan.” Historian Nell Painter has argued that their exodus to Kansas not only appropriated the language of the Hebrew exodus but also invested it with clear millenarian overtones.<sup>38</sup>

If Kansas was a dubious candidate for the land flowing with milk and honey, Indiana was even less promising. But, as the flyer indicated, conditions in North Carolina, not in their destination, drove Lenoir County blacks to flee.<sup>39</sup> One Baptist farmer seemed ambivalent about where he wanted to go. “Some of my friends has [*sic*] gone to Indiana,” Cary Bellamy wrote, “But a great many are yet still getting ready for Liberia.” Bellamy, like those at the Lenoir County emigration meeting, was concerned with the lack of economic justice at home. “It has been so dreadful hard for a colored man to get any money here in the south that . . . I shall do every thing that I can to leave here.” It mattered less to Bellamy where he was going.<sup>40</sup>

But to the success of the exodus, the place of destination mattered a great deal, and Indiana came far short of the Promised Land. Train cars delivered black North Carolinians to Indianapolis, beginning in mid-November 1879, but they were not warmly welcomed. As early as January 1880, some of the migrants tried to return home. Maria Bryant, who had emigrated to Indiana from Lenoir County, stopped in Washington, DC, on her way back home. According to a Washington newspaper account reprinted in North

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<sup>38</sup>Nell Painter, *Exodusters: The Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York: Norton, 1977), 195-96.

<sup>39</sup>*Kinston Journal*, November 13, 1879.

<sup>40</sup>Cary S. Bellamy, Battleboro, NC, to William Coppinger, January 11, 1880, Series 1A, Reel 120, ACS Papers.

Carolina papers, “she was stationed [in Indianapolis] in a church, packed with emigrants of her own color, from her own section, where she was compelled to remain two or three weeks, receiving only one meal a day, and that a very poor one.”<sup>41</sup> An AME Church in Indianapolis had stepped up to care for the displaced North Carolinians, but the church quickly depleted its resources. The disaster prompted Indiana’s Democratic Senator Daniel Voorhees to call a Congressional hearing. At that hearing, Perry, who had been called as a witness, confessed that “if [he] owned a lot in Indiana and one in hell, [he] would rent out the one in Indiana and live in hell.”<sup>42</sup> Perry’s followers would probably have made the same choice. Reports from Indiana agreed, “The emigrants cannot procure work, and are suffering and dying from cold and starvation.”<sup>43</sup>

The Senate Report on the Exodus tried to make sense of the emigration, but party politics got in the way. The majority report (Democratic) purported that the National Emigrant Aid Society was a Republican Party operation trying to ship black Republicans from solidly Democratic states like North Carolina to swing states like Indiana. The Democrats denied that the move had anything to do with conditions in North Carolina. Things were going well for blacks in North Carolina, they argued, as many wealthy white North Carolinians had testified. Senate Republicans, in the minority report, pointed to the economic and political injustices black southerners faced at home and disavowed any party connections to the failed migration to Indiana.

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<sup>41</sup>*Wilmington Morning Star*, January 15, 1880.

<sup>42</sup>Senate Report on the Exodus, 314.

<sup>43</sup>*Chatham Record*, January 29, 1880. This North Carolina newspaper compiled reports from Indiana newspapers without citing them.

Both reports were true. Perry and his followers had been co-opted by the members of the National Emigrant Aid Society, which was concerned more with the 1880 election than with the migrants' welfare. But the migration was not solely the work of Republican Party operatives. Unfair land practices and policies, as black witnesses testified at the hearing, prompted black North Carolinians to leave the state long before they ever met the National Emigrant Aid Society workers in DC. Before 1879 Perry and his followers had certain expectations of freedom—namely, land and economic prosperity. When they did not find those in North Carolina, they appropriated the exodus story as their own and left.

Those who followed Perry to Indiana numbered fewer than 1500, and only 318 black North Carolinians left for Liberia during the post-emancipation period. Even though the migrations to Liberia and Indiana were small, they received considerable attention, especially from black leaders in North Carolina. In the late 1870s, black Protestant leaders debated, and by and large refuted, arguments for emigration and colonization for several reasons. Black emigration ran counter to black leaders' own interests. In the nineteenth century, black leadership was intensely local; the loss of local constituencies or congregations eroded a leader's influence and power. Emigration threatened the survival of institutions in which black ministers and politicians were so heavily invested. But leaders also sincerely believed North Carolina had more to offer than did other places. Migrants faced harsh conditions in Indiana and Liberia, and black leaders felt a duty to rebut the rosy portrayals painted by those who did not have their congregants' best interests at heart. The central theme of their opposition to emigration was a belief in better prospects for black land ownership in North Carolina and a

commitment to advocating for economic justice in the state. They wanted Jubilee, not Exodus.

When pro-colonization ideas began circulating in North Carolina in February 1877, Hood, by this time a bishop in the AME Zion Church, gave public speeches around the state denouncing the colonization schemes. At a courthouse gathering in Concord, North Carolina, Hood recounted listed the disadvantages of Liberia: its bad climate, poor produce, and dangerous diseases. He told the crowd that he had “never interviewed one man who [had] been to Liberia [who] advises us to go there.” But Hood’s central argument focused not on conditions abroad but on conditions at home. He turned his attention to the land. “He urged better cultivation—better cultivation of the soil.” There was promise for African Americans in the land, the land of North Carolina. Hood “felt sure a brighter and better day was breaking upon the colored man,” and he did not want black North Carolinians to miss it by relocating elsewhere.<sup>44</sup>

Edward Hill, an African-American legislator, made similar arguments when the North Carolina House of Representatives debated colonization in 1877. John H. Williamson, a black representative from Franklin County, had put forth a resolution in the state General Assembly, calling upon the state’s U.S. Congressmen to work toward designating some land west of the Missouri River for the “sole occupation and colonization of the colored race.” Williamson was not the only one interested in such a law, and the day his resolution came up for debate, “the galleries and a portion of the lobbies were packed by a dense crowd of colored people of both sexes.”<sup>45</sup> The debate quickly devolved into mockery, however, as one leading white legislator proposed an

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<sup>44</sup>Qtd. in *Tarboro Southerner*, February 23, 1877.

<sup>45</sup>*Greensboro Patriot*, February 14, 1877.

amendment to the proposal that asked Congress to provide for the removal of Williamson alone.

Black legislators also opposed Williamson's proposal. Hill questioned "what was to be gained by it, especially when it was proposed to carry them among uncivilized Indians and grizzly bears . . . and where for ten months in the year there is ice eight to ten inches in thickness." Hill critiqued the plan from all sides. Colonization, he argued, meant "giving up their church organizations and school houses," and, he worried, "beneath it slept the extermination of their race." He said to the House that there was "no better field than North Carolina for the colored man to develop himself." Hill had not yet given up on economic prosperity in North Carolina.<sup>46</sup> Hill's arguments even convinced Williamson, who later joined other black leaders in their anti-emigration consensus.

Those leaders met in two State Colored Conventions in Raleigh, one in September 1877 and the other in January 1880, to issue statements against organized emigrations. Their opposition to the Exodus movements to Liberia and Indiana hinged upon the eschatological belief in a better day coming for African Americans in North Carolina. And they used the attention gained from emigrationism to argue for land reform and economic justice at home.

On September 15, 1877, African Americans in Edgecombe County filed into the Tarboro courthouse to elect delegates to the upcoming State Colored Convention. "Crowds from every direction poured in town," a Republican newspaper reported. "By 10 o'clock the streets were crowded to such an extent that persons could scarcely make their passage through the dense throngs." The meeting organizers abandoned their plans to hold the proceedings indoors, "the Court House being literally packed." When they

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<sup>46</sup>*Tarboro Southerner*, February 16, 1877.

moved outdoors, “the yard was completely covered.” The reporter estimated that more than 2,000 were in attendance, roughly the size of the entire Tarboro black population from the previous census. At eleven o’clock the courthouse bell rang, and “everybody as if drawn by a magnet,” made their way to hear the speakers, the first being the well-known and well-respected politician James H. Harris.<sup>47</sup>

Harris opened his speech by admitting that his party, the Republicans, had suffered defeat, or, in his words, a “lull in politics.” For Harris, however, political defeat did not mean a surrender of claims to the land: “I said then [in the face of Democratic victory] what I repeat today, that we were born here, we were raised here, [and] our forefathers . . . by their sweat and toil [developed] the great resources of the South.” The land the audience gathered upon, Harris argued, belonged to them. He cited cotton and tobacco production figures, claiming that black labor provided the wealth of white institutions. “I declare here today,” Harris said, “that the black man is entitled to a home in this country, and so help him God here he’s going to remain.” The audience replied with applause and “cries of yes! yes!”<sup>48</sup>

Harris turned from land claims to anti-emigration remarks with seamless transition. Recounting his “foolish” journeys to Canada, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, he warned of “African fever and a hundred other plagues,” and of the “large numbers of emigrants [who] died daily in that strange land, without an eye to pity or a friend to speak a soothing word in their last moments on earth.” His point was clear: “This is my home. Here I propose to stay, and I advise my people to do the same thing.” But, to Harris,

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<sup>47</sup>*Raleigh Register*, October 4, 1877. The 1870 Census recorded the “colored population” of Tarboro at 2,094.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

colonization, beyond being “foolish,” conceded that the political actions of southern whites could interfere with black destiny. Some said that “there will be no chance for the colored people” now that Democrats have control, but Harris countered that Democrats could do nothing to prevent the elevation of his race “in the great drama of life.” By not emigrating, black North Carolinians could still stake claim to the land they worked. “Let us hear no more talk about this being a white man’s country,” Harris concluded, “for it must be admitted that the black man has a share in it, purchased by his blood and toil.” Harris’s anti-emigration stance countered white claims of supremacy and white titles to land.<sup>49</sup>

Harris and his allies pointed to emancipation to support their belief that God was actively working in human history for their interests. They had little doubt as to the outcome of black struggles in North Carolina, believing, as Harris did, “that right must ultimately triumph.” His colleague James E. O’Hara shared the hope when he spoke later at the same meeting. “At no distant future the negro will be the balance of power in North Carolina,” he predicted, based in part on the progress made since emancipation. “A brighter day is dawning upon us,” O’Hara proclaimed, “North Carolina regenerated and redeemed.”<sup>50</sup> In his speech, he applied language of individual born-again conversion to the whole state. In the familiar nineteenth-century narrative of conversion, the sinner reached his or her darkest hours before experiencing the joy of rebirth. O’Hara followed this narrative when he connected the language of rebirth (“regenerated and redeemed”) to the dawn, as nineteenth-century evangelicals often did to explain individual conversion: “it is always darkest just before dawn.” O’Hara, however, went beyond the individual,

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

applying the metaphor to African Americans' economic and political circumstances in North Carolina. The dire straits where many rural blacks found themselves did not argue for the need for Exodus, O'Hara hinted, but foreshadowed North Carolina's coming conversion.<sup>51</sup>

Harris was as hopeful as O'Hara. He told the enraptured crowd on the Tarboro courthouse lawn that the upcoming State Colored Convention in Raleigh had to address "the most important crisis in our history": whether to emigrate. But he, for one, was not worrying. Over loud and continuous applause, he concluded, "Let us put our trust in God, and press forward in the good work, and all will be well." Harris was no doubt pleased with how things turned out at the convention. The delegates elected him president and passed a resolution opposing all emigration schemes. Moreover, the convention's public statements spoke of black autonomy and black destiny. Despite their political losses and the landlessness of their people, black leaders affirmed that African Americans were, as convention leaders wrote in their public statement, "moulding their own destiny."<sup>52</sup> By opposing emigration, black Protestants reiterated their eschatological beliefs in a better day coming.

Harris and his colleagues restated that belief at a similar gathering in January 1880, where they turned their attention to land reform in the state. They gathered as the Conference of Representative Colored Men because, as their later statements explained, they were alarmed that "large numbers of our laboring population are leaving our state." The conference featured the usual slate of prominent black leaders. They selected James

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>*Raleigh Register*, October 4, 1877 and November 1, 1877.



H. Harris as their chairman and deliberated for two days in the Senate Chamber on how to stop the emigration to Indiana: “to arrest this gigantic evil.”<sup>53</sup>

At the end of those two days, the conference leaders issued a public document that reaffirmed their resolutions at the State Colored Convention two years earlier. But the new document went one step further. The authors walked a fine line, trying simultaneously to convince whites of the legitimacy of black migrants’ complaints and to convince rural blacks to stay in North Carolina. Even though black leaders unequivocally disapproved of the movement, not once did they castigate the emigrants. Instead, they placed responsibility for the migration on the shoulders of leading whites, identifying repressive Democratic policies as the “prime causes of the unrest.” Their list of grievances focused on abusive land practices and black disfranchisement. Topping the list was the charge that “land owners exact exorbitant rents for their lands and necessary supplies, thereby sucking the life’s blood from the colored sons of soil.” This was strong language from men who valued tact and restraint. The document also cited the Landlord and Tenant Act which, they claimed, “open[ed] a broad channel for unscrupulous landlords to defraud their colored tenants out of their hard earnings.” The migration to Indiana captured white attention, and those at the January 1880 conference used that attention to attack unfair land policies in the state.<sup>54</sup>

Those leaders also criticized recent small-scale disfranchisement moves by white Democrats. Constitutional changes took the power of electing justices of the peace away from local constituencies—many of which were majority black—and gave it the state legislature, which, as the document explained, had “no sympathy with the colored

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<sup>53</sup>*Raleigh Signal*, January 21, 1880.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*

laborer.” Black men, the document complained, were denied a whole host of citizenship rights: the right to serve as jurors, to select “their own school committeemen,” and the right to a fair trial. “The evidence that convicts a colored person fails to convict a white person charged with similar offenses,” the document charged. The conference leaders depicted a state of serious inequality, exposing the “unjust, unrepugnant and oppressive measures” that drove black workers “to the North-west, seeking homes among strangers and in an uncongenial clime.”<sup>55</sup>

The document put black leaders on the same page with the disgruntled migrants of Lenoir County escaping the “House of Bondage.” In fact, the self-styled “representative colored men” from the January 1880 conference intended to install themselves as liaisons between disgruntled African Americans and leading whites. James Harris and his colleagues saw themselves as mediators, conveying black workers’ grievances to leading whites and leading whites’ anti-emigration advice to black workers. But even though they agreed with black workers as to the facts of oppression and economic injustice, the conference participants foresaw a better day ahead. The spirit of oppression among whites, they believed, was “now happily disappearing.” Secondly, they trusted that the Constitution and justice system would protect black interests. They could not envision a world or time when the “rights vouchsafed to us by the Constitution and laws of our country” would be rescinded. For the conference participants, many of whom had been active in Reconstruction politics, activism addressed the new challenges better than did emigration.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

Most importantly, the January 1880 conference showed that black leaders, unlike the migrants, still believed that black economic prosperity was possible in North Carolina. They advocated specific land reform, such as the repeal of the Landlord and Tenant Act and limits on the fees and interest landlords and merchants could charge farmers. These reforms, they hoped, would provide black workers with decent wages, and eventually, a degree of economic independence from whites. And in the preamble to the document, the conference delegates resurrected the moral claim that black North Carolinians had to the land. They reminded whites that black “labor, toil, suffering and affliction have changed North Carolina from a wilderness into a prosperous state.” Black workers had endured a “long dark dismal night of bondage and oppression” and deserved a share of the prosperity their labor had produced. Black leaders assembled in Raleigh, then, advocated not emigration but black land ownership and economic justice.<sup>57</sup>

One black Presbyterian minister sharply contrasted emigration and economic uplift. He wrote in the *New York Evangelist* of two “Southern sensations” coming out of North Carolina. The first, the North Carolina Colored Exhibition, was the first full-scale black-run fair in the South, designed to exhibit the freedpeople’s industry and arts. The Exhibition told a narrative of advancement, of “material and mental improvement,” and foretold brighter days for black southerners. The second sensation, the exodus to Indiana, told a narrative contrary to black triumph or advancement. “The North Carolina exodus is a most miserable mystery,” the minister wrote. “Running from place to place . . . would be more likely to hinder and hurt the peace and progress of the colored people,” he argued. He interpreted the exodus as a concession, a defeat. The Presbyterian minister concluded that he had “no faith in any exodus but that led by Moses.” Although he did

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

not say it directly, by placing his faith in the economic advancement of the 1879 North Carolina Colored Exhibition, the writer believed in Jubilee.<sup>58</sup>

Despite their opposition to exodus, black Protestant leaders benefited from the attention that mass migrations attracted. Migrations could publicize black concerns in ways that black institutions could not. Additionally, the threat of emigration gave black leaders negotiating power with leading whites. With black political voices increasingly marginalized, African Americans' ability to vote with their feet lent power to black leaders' demands, even if those leaders had very little control over migrants' decisions to move. The January 1880 document proved that leading black North Carolinians were willing to use this power. The document warned whites "to remove the cause of dissatisfaction" among black North Carolinians or face "the depopulation of the laboring element of our State." Emigration, though vehemently opposed by black politicians and ministers, became one of their favorite topics of discussion. It installed them as liaisons between powerful whites and would-be emigrants. It also reminded whites and blacks that African Americans were living out a certain religious destiny in the wake of emancipation: the pursuit of land. White North Carolinians needed to remove obstacles in the way of black economic prosperity, black leaders argued, in order to prevent their labor force from seeking out a distant Promised Land.

### **Mass Exodus: the 1889-90 Migration**

One decade later, rural black North Carolinians faced the same obstacles to prosperity. In a *Christian Recorder* article, one AME minister tried to explain the frustrations of black sharecroppers in the state: "They have been striving for [over]

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<sup>58</sup>*Wilmington Morning Star*, January 13, 1880.

twenty years to get ahead and to secure homes of their own, and the result is highly unsatisfactory.” It was not surprising, he argued, that they were tempted to move elsewhere. “The marvel is that they have been content to pursue so long an experiment that has been without real encouragement.”<sup>59</sup> They had waited for Jubilee long enough. Another AME minister, Rev. M. B. Sheppard of Burlington, North Carolina, reported that “many of our people are suffering . . . an ‘emigration Grippe.’” Sheppard used the metaphor of disease in part to show that emigrationism was “injurious” and in part to describe his own passiveness in the movement. This new migration was happening to his people; he had no hand in it.<sup>60</sup>

Other preachers, however, particularly rural ministers less connected to their denominational institutions, did have their hands in the migration of 1889-90. “When the exodus first began [in January 1889],” a *New York Herald* journalist reported, “it was given a religious color.” The religious movement started in Wayne and Wilson counties, where congregations began planning an exodus to Kansas, Texas, or Arkansas. “It was preached from the pulpit,” the reporter wrote. Rural preachers declared that “God’s hand was in it, and that He was leading His people as the children of Israel were led aforetime.”<sup>61</sup> We do not know much about these pro-emigration ministers; they were not well-connected or well-known. But they certainly held some sway. The movement grew rapidly.

Beginning in February 1889, the movement ballooned into a mass exodus. “Since our last issue several hundred more negroes have left Wayne and the surrounding

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<sup>59</sup>*Christian Recorder*, February 11, 1884.

<sup>60</sup>*Christian Recorder*, March 13, 1890.

<sup>61</sup>*New York Herald*, January 11, 1890, qtd. in the *Lenoir Topic*, January 22, 1890.

counties,” the *Raleigh Signal* reported on February 28. “There are three hundred now in Goldsboro awaiting transportation . . . [;] about three hundred have left Wake county, and several hundred more are preparing to leave in a few days.” Some emigrants soon regretted the move. As AME minister I. F. Aldridge of Smithfield, North Carolina, reported in a *Christian Recorder* article, “Many of those who went away during the exodus are dissatisfied, and they would return to the ‘old North State’ if they had the means. I am sorry for them.”<sup>62</sup> But other emigrants sent letters home encouraging more to follow them. Ms. Lincoln Holt, a “well known colored teacher” who moved to Arkansas, wrote to Rev. Hill Wilson of Trenton, North Carolina, “and advised all her friends to come out as soon as they possible could.” *The New Berne Weekly Journal* reported that “a colored minister by the name of Hayes, who is now in Kansas, is writing urgent letters to all his church folk here to sell everything and come to that State.”<sup>63</sup> The movement built momentum.

Observers, like the emigrants themselves, referenced the biblical Exodus story at every turn. The North Carolina Baptist Educational and Missionary Convention (NCBEMC) described the sudden loss of many of their members as “the great emigration fever . . . like the exodus of Egypt.”<sup>64</sup> Whites, too, described the movement with biblical references. The *Raleigh News and Observer* criticized the movement: “We have shown them on the best authorities that these lands are not flowing with milk and honey.”<sup>65</sup> Another white Democratic newspaper reported, in a mocking tone, that

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<sup>62</sup>*Christian Recorder*, April 18, 1889.

<sup>63</sup>*New Berne Weekly Journal*, November 14, 1889.

<sup>64</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1889, 14.

<sup>65</sup>*Raleigh News and Observer*, April 27, 1889.

“Several colored families made a start for their promised land today.” The same paper mocked another man who “had made up his mind to move to the promised land.”<sup>66</sup> Even as they critiqued the movement, white newspapers drew upon the same biblical language the “exodusters” themselves appropriated.

By the fall, the exodus reached unprecedented proportions. “The fever rise[s] higher and higher,” a white man from Jones County reported in November 1889. “My impression is, two-thirds of Jones County will leave this winter.”<sup>67</sup> Similar filled newspapers across the eastern part of the state: “200 more negroes scheduled to leave Wilson Friday for Arkansas,”<sup>68</sup> “1,500 enthusiastic exodusters in town,”<sup>69</sup> “8,000 exodusters passed through Raleigh.”<sup>70</sup> Readers wrote into newspapers with vivid depictions of the exodus. For example, in Kinston, on November 15, 1889, crowds gathered around the train depot to bid farewell to 1,500 “negroes anxious to shake the North Carolina dust off their shoes and try their fortunes in some other State.” The “exodusters” were heading west for Kansas and Arkansas. They piled the platform “ten feet high” with their luggage: “Old meat boxes, various other boxes, barrels, trunks of all shapes and sizes.”<sup>71</sup> Such a large emigration frightened white North Carolinians. “In some sections of Pitt [county], the reporter is informed, every colored person has left,” a writer for the *Tarboro Southerner* wrote with astonishment. “Some people may not

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<sup>66</sup>*New Berne Weekly Journal*, November 14, 1889.

<sup>67</sup>*Tarboro Southerner*, December 19, 1889.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup>*New Berne Weekly Journal*, November 21, 1889.

<sup>70</sup>*New York Herald*, January 11, 1890, qtd. in the *Lenoir Topic*, January 22, 1890.

<sup>71</sup>*New Berne Weekly Journal*, November 21, 1889.

believe it, but land without labor to cultivate it is of little value.”<sup>72</sup> By January 1890, journalists tried to compile actual emigration numbers. One reported that “35,000 have left [North Carolina] since January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1889,” and another concurred that “some estimate the total exodus at 25-35,000 negroes.”<sup>73</sup> Another estimate topped out at 50,000.<sup>74</sup> If these estimates were too high, they nevertheless hinted at the enormity of the movement.

Why did the exodus grow so large in such a short amount of time? The answer, once again, lay with land policy. Sharecroppers continued to complain of abuse from landlords, who exploited them using the Landlord and Tenant Act. Crop yields in 1888 were particularly bad, people across the state complained. Black farmers, many already trapped in a cycle of debt and peonage, hit rock bottom with a series of bad harvests. What finally spurred some migrants were the stock laws (or fence laws) that took effect in a number of counties throughout the 1880s. These laws required farmers to fence-in their livestock and not their crops, a reversal of long-standing agricultural practices. Small farmers, accustomed to letting their animals roam in common areas—the “root, hog, or die” method—now had to shoulder the expense of feeding enclosed livestock. Subsistence farmers soon had to grow more cash crops to afford the purchase of meat and other foodstuffs. Poorer white farmers, unable to make ends meet, moved off the land and worked instead for the state’s growing industries. Their black counterparts, excluded

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<sup>72</sup>*Tarboro Southerner*, December 19, 1889.

<sup>73</sup>*Tarboro Southerner*, January 23, 1890; *New York Herald*, January 11, 1890, qtd. in the *Lenoir Topic*, January 22, 1890.

<sup>74</sup>Qtd. in Logan, “Movement of Negroes,” 56, n.47.



from North Carolina's burgeoning industry economy, looked out-of-state to improve their lot.<sup>75</sup>

One black legislator blamed both black poverty and emigration on the stock laws. When he asked a crowd of black farmers at the Tarboro courthouse, "Whose fault is it that people have to leave?" he answered his own question: "I claim that the white folks are the cause of it, when I look around and see the fences taken away and don't allow us to raise a pig." The listening farmers urged him on, shouting, "talk on." The legislator continued, "Ever since the fences have been taken away, we've been making short crops." Because of this, he had been fighting to repeal the stock law in the state legislature. In the meantime, he could sympathize with the black farmers who, faced with short crop yields, oppressive landlords, and no livestock, felt they had to leave the state.<sup>76</sup>

A few observers of the 1889-90 migration believed that black migrants' move made good economic sense. William Mitchell, a black businessman in Raleigh, told a reporter why black farmers left the state: because they were broke and could not break even as sharecroppers in eastern North Carolina. Norfleet Jeffries, whom a reporter described as "an old and well-informed Negro," sympathized with the exodusters because wages were higher in the Deep South and Southwest than they were in North Carolina. Isaac Hayes, a black lawyer, did not advise his fellow citizens to leave the state, but he understood that they did so "to make more money."<sup>77</sup> When black Baptist missionary

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<sup>75</sup>Logan, "The Movement of Negroes"; see also K. Todd Johnson, "Fences," in William S. Powell, ed., *Encyclopedia of North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 424-25.

<sup>76</sup>*Tarboro Southerner*, December 19, 1889.

<sup>77</sup>*New York Herald*, January 11, 1890, qtd. in the *Lenoir Topic*, January 22, 1890.

Rev. F. R. Howell traveled across the state in 1889, he found “poverty-stricken congregations” and observed how “the acts of the last Legislature . . . made it impossible for a farmer to live in some portions of the State.” To those acquainted with the economic circumstances of black sharecroppers, the mass migration came as no surprise.<sup>78</sup>

In April 1889, a group of pro-emigrationists met in Raleigh to form the State Colored Emigration Association. The Association claimed a number of leading black North Carolinians as its members, but most stayed away from the meeting. As a report at the meeting noted, “there was but one sentiment expressed and that was in favor of organizing and going to the southwest.” Members of the Association justified their position by listing grievances against North Carolina, almost all of which involved land policies: low wages offered by landholders, “the stock law which interfered with the right of common,” and restrictions which prevented African Americans from hunting on whites’ land. The situation in North Carolina, the Association decided, “was more precarious now than ever before.” The president of the Association, George W. Price, admitted he “did not know how much better they could do” in the Southwest, but concluded that “it could not be worse than here unless they went to hell.” As Price’s statement demonstrated, black workers left emigrated primarily because of their dissatisfaction in North Carolina and not necessarily because they found their destinations enticing.<sup>79</sup>

Poverty and unfavorable land policies prompted the mass migration, but labor agents made it happen. These agents, hired by southwestern and Gulf Coast cotton

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<sup>78</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1889, 14.

<sup>79</sup>*Raleigh State Chronicle*, May 3, 1889.

planters to recruit labor from the Atlantic South, organized and orchestrated the movement. As one reporter observed, “The religious side of the movement was aided by agents, into whose hand it played.”<sup>80</sup> By the fall of 1889, wherever would-be migrants gathered, labor agents followed, attracting the disdain of many black and white observers. Some whites blamed the entire movement on unscrupulous men like “Peg-Leg” Williams and W. P. Mabson.<sup>81</sup> “Doubtless many of the colored people who have been duped by Mabson and others and persuaded to emigrate West will regret it before they have been away long,” the *Tarboro Southerner* editor opined. The editor accused Mabson (an African American) of hypocrisy: “he does not seem to be anxious to leave himself, but remains here and reaps remuneration for persuading them to leave.”<sup>82</sup> Men like Mabson were busy throughout the fall and winter of 1889-90, organizing parties of migrants, and arranging and funding their transportation.

The role of agents further intensified black debates over emigration. A number of black North Carolinians, like Mabson, worked as labor agents or on their behalf. Some of the pro-emigration leaders recognized that agents, by providing transportation, made possible the exodus on a scale previously unimaginable. Anti-emigrationist leaders, still at the helm of black institutions, vilified the agents as modern-day slave traders. To take advantage of the fare-free travel that agents offered, emigrants had to sign labor contracts, indenturing themselves to a particular plantation. Rev. I. F. Aldridge, pastor of the AME Church in Smithfield, compared the agents to cattle traders: “They talk about free transportation. Nonsense! It must all be paid for by work, hard labor in Arkansas. Those

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<sup>80</sup>*New York Herald*, January 11, 1890, qtd. in the *Lenoir Topic*, January 22, 1890.

<sup>81</sup>*New Berne Weekly Journal*, November 21, 1889.

<sup>82</sup>*Tarboro Southerner*, December 26, 1889.

who go are locked up in the cars like cattle and carried by freight trains.” As he reported in his denominational newspaper, he sympathized with migrants’ motivations were though he doubted they would find a better financial and political climate in Arkansas or Texas. He could hardly hide his disgust: “It is a speculation in human beings, carried on by the cattle planters, railroads and agents of Arkansas.”<sup>83</sup> Even black North Carolinians sympathetic to emigrationism worried that labor agents traded transportation in exchange for freedom. The debates within African-American communities during the 1889-90 migration demonstrated how important emigration was to questions of freedom, land ownership, and the race’s future.

One particular meeting offers a good illustration of the importance of those debates. African Americans around Tarboro, North Carolina, called for a mass meeting at the courthouse in December 1889 to discuss the “emigration fever” sweeping through their part of the state. As the *Tarboro Southerner* reported, the local Republican Party chairman George Lloyd opened the meeting with nervousness and trepidation. He feared not only the hostility local whites might feel about the meeting but also the tensions within the black community that had resulted in the spread of slanderous rumors about him. “The great trouble,” he told the crowd, “is that the colored people don’t unite.”<sup>84</sup> He knew how inflammatory the issue of emigration had become.

Lloyd placed emigration in the context of emancipation: “Many of you under the sound of my voice, whose heads are getting gray, prayed twenty-five years ago that the burden would be taken from you.” Emigration, Lloyd explained, marked the opening of another act in the drama that emancipation kicked off. Like emancipation, the moment

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<sup>83</sup>*Christian Recorder*, April 21, 1889.

<sup>84</sup>*Tarboro Southerner*, December 19, 1889.

called for divine action and guidance: “Get all the preachers to pray for us all, we’ll get all we want.” Lloyd told the audience that he favored emigration, but only on black people’s own terms. He opposed the work of emigration agents. “We don’t want to be taken off and sold like we were in slavery time,” Lloyd told them, and the audience replied, “That’s right.” Lloyd advocated selecting a home-grown leader to organize the emigration, not someone paid to represent planters’ interests. He and the audience seemed to be of one mind: “If you are going to have a leader, have one (cries, that’s right,) you have agents to come here and pick you out like mules; we don’t want to go that way (that’s right).” Lloyd worried about black North Carolinians headed to the Deep South. He argued they were jumping from the pot to the frying pan. “The Mississippi bottoms are next to hell itself,” he told the audience. The audience seemed to agree. When he asked, “Where should we go?” the crowd yelled back: “Kansas.” Like most black leaders, Lloyd placed contemporary setbacks in the context of emancipation and argued that critical contemporary situations were momentous turning points in the race’s God-ordained history. Unlike most leaders, however, Lloyd entertained emigration as a way for black southerners to assert their autonomy.<sup>85</sup>

Not everyone shared Lloyd’s outlook. The opponents he mentioned at the beginning of his speech stormed the stage. These men seemed to support the work of labor agents, and Lloyd’s attack angered them. One of the men, Nathan Boyd, attempted to strong-arm Lloyd away from the podium. When Boyd tried to introduce a new speaker, presumably a labor agent, the struggle became violent. The audience laughed as the

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<sup>85</sup>Ibid.

leaders brawled on stage, but the violence revealed the intensity of the debates over emigration.<sup>86</sup>

Black leaders rarely resorted to fist fighting, as they did at the Tarboro courthouse, but they took the 1889-90 migration very seriously. When black Baptists gathered at their state convention (NCBEMC) that year at Roanoke-Salem Baptist Church, they broached the topic with sobriety and gravity. State missionary F. R. Howell assessed the situation grimly, naming “a great many embarrassments in the past year.” Baptists predominated in poor, rural areas of the state. Poverty and emigration hit those churches hard. “And brethren,” Howell explained, “as every pastor knows, the spiritual condition of a church is soon impeded by its financial depression.” Howell and his colleagues had not foreseen the downturn in the agricultural market or the migration of 1889. As one minister recalled, “The emigration movement had such an effect that no one seemed to know what best to do.” The Baptist ministers gathered in the 1889 convention to decide what best to do.<sup>87</sup>

The convention denounced emigration and then re-narrated recent setbacks in light of gains since emancipation and in line with eschatological expectations. In one resolution, the Baptist ministers commended Governor Daniel Fowle for his attempts to bring two lynch mobs to justice but reproved his support of black emigration. The resolution read, “We do not agree with him in recommending the emigration of our race in great numbers from one part of the South to another, or to any other land, since we feel that we should share the privileges and benefits of this our native land.” Their resolution reasserted black claims to the land. Later at the convention, delegate Henry P. Cheatham

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<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

<sup>87</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1889, 14.

used the same kind of language, opposing emigration by staking claim to North Carolina land. Cheatham, the U.S. Congressman from North Carolina's Second Congressional District, was easily the most prominent Baptist leader at the convention. He addressed the church leaders, saying "The emigration of our people to the far South is a serious mistake, and ought to be discouraged." The reasons were all too apparent to black ministers. North Carolina boasted more and better black institutions. "Look at our schools and colleges. Look at our educated ministers and learned men," he continued. Cheatham, as the only African American in Congress, himself served as proof of greater political opportunities in North Carolina. In Cheatham's opinion, staying in North Carolina made good political and cultural sense, and it also allowed African Americans to continue fighting for specific rights. North Carolina, he said, "is our birth-place; our home; our native land, and we have a right to the undisturbed enjoyment of its rich blessings." Cheatham presented a choice to black North Carolinians: either fight for civil rights and land rights in North Carolina or move to where African American had fewer political rights and cultural resources.<sup>88</sup>

Cheatham's message went beyond the four walls of Roanoke-Salem Baptist Church. The next day, the NCBEMC appointed a committee to convey their anti-emigration message in a pamphlet targeted at "colored people, farmers, and landlords." The next day, the committee sent the pamphlet to the printer and ordered 10,000 copies. None of those pamphlets survive in full, but we can come close to replicating the message from the minutes of the committee meeting. The pamphlet laid out the relative advantages of black life in North Carolina and warned would-be migrants of the racial climate they would face in Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, etc. The pamphlet

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<sup>88</sup>NCBEMC *Proceeding*, October 1889, 7-8.

asserted black farmers' right to land in North Carolina, or at the very least, to a just share of the state's prosperity.<sup>89</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, the convention's pamphlet placed the troubles of 1889 in a broader political and theological context. As gathered from the convention proceedings, the tone of the pamphlet was decidedly optimistic: "we can see the hand of God at work for us." Black Baptists in North Carolina could mark significant progress since the days of emancipation, the committee argued. "We started out with nothing; we had no education as a race, nor any experience as a people; we had never felt any responsibility, nor never knew anything about leadership. But to-day we represent 120,000 communicants." The pamphlet worked to situate the problems of the day within a larger, happier story. By tracking progress since emancipation, Baptist ministers reassured their people that God was on their side, and that their future in North Carolina remained hopeful. Cheatham hoped in a better day coming—"I never felt happier over the condition than now"—and wanted other Baptists to feel the same way.<sup>90</sup>

A number of Methodist clergy agreed with Cheatham's assessment. The AME Zion pastor in Asheville, North Carolina, wrote a letter to his denominational newspaper to discourage any emigration. He denounced the "Negro Exodus" as "misleading, false and destructive to the race." The pastor worried most about the labor agents' motives: "I protest against agents entering into contracts with railroad monopolies to dissettle, take away, carry off and ruin the Negro." He had harsh words for the agents: "I know people who are leaving their homes without a cent. Advocates of the Negro exodus, 'Their

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<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid.



blood will be required at your hands.’”<sup>91</sup> The New Berne District Conference of the AME Zion Church held similar sentiments. The ministers present at their January 1890 meeting complained that unscrupulous men were organizing some of their parishioners into fraudulent emigration societies. These “bogus organizers” either planned exoduses contrary to the migrants’ best interests or never planned trips, pocketing the societies’ monetary collections “for their own personal benefit.” So, the district conference “resolved that the ministers and influential brethren of the New Berne District use every effort to repel the present unwise, unprofitable, and speculative emigration fever.”<sup>92</sup> Methodist clergy, no less than Baptists, wanted the exodus to stop.

The AME Zion Church probably fared better during the 1889-90 migration than did black Baptist churches. Their congregations were slightly more affluent, less rural, and less likely to leave the state. But AME Zion churches still felt the impact of the exodus. A layman wrote into the *Star of Zion* with “good news” from his church in Kinston, but the title “Kinston Yet Alive” belied his upbeat message. “We thank God that amidst the hard times and exodus fever, connected with other unfavorable circumstances that He has placed his arm of protection around St. Augustine [AME Zion Church],” J. L. Borden wrote. Borden downplayed the setbacks, putting them in the context of continued support and divine protection, but he could hardly hide the disastrous effects the migration had had on his local church. “We have lost many members by the exodus,” he reported, so many that they struggled “to keep Zion’s banner aloft.” The good news, as Borden offered up, was that during “the time of our greatest

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<sup>91</sup>“Notes from Asheville, NC,” *Star of Zion*, March 28, 1889.

<sup>92</sup>“New Berne District Conference,” *Star of Zion*, February 6, 1890.

distress,” the church never closed its doors. To Borden and others, the work of God continued despite—not because of—the exodus.<sup>93</sup>

John C. Dancy, the influential editor of the *Star of Zion*, however, found some good news in the exodus. Like most black institutional leaders, Dancy advised against the exodus of 1889-90. He had been present at the Tarboro courthouse meeting, and after Lloyd’s brawl with Boyd, he took to the podium and advised those considering emigration to “remain here.”<sup>94</sup> But unlike his colleagues, Dancy appreciated the message that the exodus sent to whites: it broadcasted black autonomy and pride. The trainloads of emigrants leaving the state demonstrated that black North Carolinians were unwilling to tolerate “the deep humiliation and oppression to which they have been subjected by their masters.” When landowners or the state militia stood in the way of black migration, Dancy became incensed. Mobility, Dancy believed, was a fundamental right of citizenship.<sup>95</sup>

Dancy hoped that the large-scale migration would force the state legislature to reconsider their repressive policies toward black residents. At the very beginning of the 1889-90 migration, Dancy laid out what he believed to be its cause: “If the abusive politicians and newspapers could be suppressed and a more liberal policy be inaugurated toward the Negro, there would be no emigration, but until the farmers [the planter class] have the wisdom to see this, they [black workers] will continue to leave until the State is depleted.” As the numbers of exodusters swelled, Dancy celebrated. He valued the

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<sup>93</sup>“Kinston Yet Alive,” *Star of Zion*, February 20, 1890.

<sup>94</sup>*Tarboro Southerner*, December 19, 1889.

<sup>95</sup>“Cause of the Unrest and Discontent,” *Star of Zion*, March 28, 1889; “Exodus Movement,” *Star of Zion*, April 25, 1889; *Star of Zion*, February 6, 1890.

movement for the way it taught white planters and legislators a lesson. In August 1889, he wrote in the *Star of Zion*:

They say 78,000 of our colored population intend leaving the State this Fall. We hardly think half that number will go, but enough will go, no doubt, to teach those silly lawmakers that they will not endure political oppression in a State they have made what it is, forever. The farmers whose legislature is driving them away need to thank themselves for the going. They may learn something from experience yet.<sup>96</sup>

Dancy warned his readers against taking “a leap in the dark” and objected strongly to going to “murderous Mississippi” and “wicked” Louisiana. Yet he could hardly contain his enthusiasm when he recounted how racist landlords, by enacting “iniquitous measures,” were shooting themselves in the foot.<sup>97</sup>

In January 1890, after tens of thousands had left the state, Dancy made specific demands of lawmakers. In a lengthy editorial, he reminded them of his earlier statements: “We predicted that with the passage of such laws the State would soon become depopulated of some of its best colored citizens, and that quite fifty thousand would leave the state.” His estimates were not far off. “The results,” Dancy boasted, “have more than justified our prophecy . . . ten thousand leaving last week alone.” He argued that the exodus mostly affected the class of planters who “sought hardest to humiliate and crush the remaining sparks of manhood out of the Negro.” By disfranchising and cheating black laborers, wealthy whites found themselves without a workforce. Dancy reminded his imaginary audience of planters—they weren’t among his subscribers—that their land was “almost worthless without Negro labor.” The only way out of the ensuing bankruptcy landowners would soon encounter was substantial legal reform. Darcy called

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<sup>96</sup>*Star of Zion*, August 22, 1889.

<sup>97</sup>*Star of Zion*, September 26, 1889; “The Facts Undisguised,” *Star of Zion*, January 16, 1890.

for a number of specific changes. “Let the Landlord and Tenant Act be so changed as to encourage and protect the tenant as well as the landlord, and guarantee to the tenant some rights which the landlord is bound to respect,” he demanded. Better yet, he offered, “Sell the Negro some land at a fair, reasonable price,” so that black North Carolinians will be invested in the state’s prosperity. “Make him feel and realize his complete manhood, his full citizenship,” Dancy pleaded. Without such reforms, he argued, nothing would stop the hemorrhaging of black labor from the state.<sup>98</sup>

Dancy stood out among black institutional leaders because he never unequivocally opposed the exodus. The 1889-90 migration played well into the political argument he was trying to make. But Dancy’s rhetoric did conform to the association black Protestants commonly made between emigration and land reform. His vision for the future involved the remaking of North Carolina’s land and economy. If several thousand black workers had to leave for these changes to take place, Dancy was not going to stand in their way.

Dancy’s rhetoric may have contributed to the notion that black leaders in North Carolina did little to stop the exodus to the Deep South. J. W. Rankin, an AME pastor in Louisiana, wrote a frantic word of warning to his colleagues in the North Carolina Conference: “Stay Away from Louisiana!” The Bayou State had little to recommend it to black North Carolinians, Rev. Rankin explained, and he was alarmed that so many were heading his way. Late in 1889, Rankin wrote other preachers, begging them to “instruct them from your pulpits not to come to Louisiana for their own good.” He warned of brutal overseers, lynch mobs, and malnutrition. “Please sound the alarm as watchman on the walls.” The warning implicated North Carolina clergy for falling asleep on the watch.

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<sup>98</sup>“The Facts Undisguised,” *Star of Zion*, January 16, 1890.

As for those ministers who were in league with labor agents, Rankin expressed his pity and shame.<sup>99</sup>

The mass migration posed a serious challenge to prominent black Protestant leaders and betrayed the limits of their power. Despite their continued appeals against it, the migration went unabated. One scathing editorial in the *Christian Recorder*—entitled “The North Carolina Negro Leaders, Where Are They?”—chalked the exodus up to North Carolina ministers’ lack of manhood. Rev. J. H. Iford, AME pastor in Shreveport, Louisiana, described the exodus from North Carolina to Louisiana with despair. “For the last six or seven months our people have been under the control, advice and influence of what I pronounce Negro traders, huddled up like cattle and brought from North Carolina to North Louisiana, the hades of the South, where they have no more liberty than any other swamp hog.” The situation, he argued, could hardly be bleaker. Iford expressed his disbelief that black leaders in North Carolina could have allowed the exodus to occur.<sup>100</sup>

Iford put a gendered edge to his critique. Black women, in particular, he reported, suffered from abuse in Louisiana: “They are whipped, the women are driven to work right along with the men. . . . These poor women are getting up at the ringing of the bell at 4 o'clock in the morning, getting ready for the new ground, to contend with the briers and thorns all day; half clothed, bare headed, bare handed, bare footed.” By highlighting the women’s suffering, Iford accused black leaders in North Carolina of failing to protect black womanhood. It was a serious charge. “A race that will not protect its women,” Iford wrote, “is not worthy to be a race.” The critique assumed that black leaders, “the preachers and the teachers,” had more control over black populations than they actually

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<sup>99</sup>*Tarboro Southerner*, January 2, 1890, quoted from the *Christian Recorder*, December 12, 1889.

<sup>100</sup>*Christian Recorder*, February 6, 1890.

did. But the questioning of those leaders' manhood—"Is there no more manhood in brave old North Carolina?"—likely worked well on readers. Black Protestant leaders worked hard to demonstrate their manhood by exhibiting the qualities of good citizens—respectability, sobriety, intelligence, and honesty—and by performing masculine duties such as providing for and protecting women and children. Iford's harangue, therefore, struck below the belt.<sup>101</sup>

Iford exhorted North Carolina clergy to use all their power to stop the migration: "For God's sake, keep your people in North Carolina and give the Louisianans a chance to breathe." The Louisiana pastor told his colleagues what to do: "Let the leaders of North Carolina rise up in the power of Israel's God and say out in the voice of manhood: 'We will protect and defend the virtues and sanctity of our women and put down this exodus and Negro trading which are doing more to damn the Negro than all other evils.'"<sup>102</sup> The solution was not that easy. Black Protestant leaders in North Carolina, with a few exceptions, had opposed the exodus from the beginning. They had used conventions, pamphlets, sermons, editorials, and in one case, their knuckles, to stop the labor agents. It was not until white landowners pushed through the legislature a prohibitive tax on labor agents that the exodus came to a halt.<sup>103</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The migration of 1889-90 and emigration in general presented a crisis for black Protestant leadership in North Carolina. The railway cars full of black North Carolinians

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<sup>101</sup>Ibid.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid.

<sup>103</sup>Logan, "Movement of Negroes," 63-65.

heading out of state carried the message that not everyone shared black Protestant leaders' visions for the future. In the 1879 exodus, emigrationist leader Sam Perry exploited the class differences between the working populations of eastern North Carolina and the prominent ministers and politicians. But the charge that black Protestant leaders did not have sharecroppers' best interests at heart rang hollow; they had lobbied for land reform and had correctly assessed of the migrants' destinations as unfavorable. Moreover, the vast majority of black North Carolinians stayed put. So, perhaps, "crisis" is too strong of a word. But leaders were alarmed nonetheless.

Emigration did, though, offer black Protestant leaders an opportunity to rearticulate their religious visions for the future. They seized that opportunity. In 1892, Baptist pastor C. C. Somerville preached that anti-emigrationists like himself were also on a journey, a "journey to Beulah." In Isaiah's prophecy, Jehovah renamed the Promised Land, christening it Beulah, meaning "the married one." It was a commitment by God to claim Israel as his bride and to heal or remake the land. When Jehovah renamed Zion Beulah, he posted watchmen on the city walls to protect her from invaders.<sup>104</sup> J. W. Rankin, the Louisiana pastor who warned North Carolinians to stay away, alluded to this prophecy when he commanded his colleagues to be "watchmen on the walls." As the watchmen, or as those journeying to Beulah, black Protestant leaders offered an interpretation of Exodus to counter that of migrants.<sup>105</sup>

In this counter-interpretation, black North Carolinians had been metaphorically en route to the Promised Land since emancipation. To leave now in search of another Promised Land, to ministers like Rankin and Somerville, would not be to reenact the

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<sup>104</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1892, 19; Isa. 62 and 63, KJV.

<sup>105</sup>*Christian Recorder*, December 12, 1889, qtd. in the *Tarboro Southerner*, January 2, 1890.

Exodus story, but rather to reenact the grumbling of the Israelites in the wilderness who wanted to return to Egypt. It demonstrated not a prophetic vision but a loss of hope. In his sermon, Somerville claimed the Exodus story: “If God delight in us, then will He bring us into this land and give it to us; a land which floweth with milk and honey.” But he also claimed to already be en route to the land, right there in Fayetteville, North Carolina. By invoking Isaiah’s prophecy of Beulah in conjunction with the Exodus narrative, Somerville made the Exodus look more like Jubilee. He spoke of remaking the land and of God’s commitment to a special people—a Jubilee, albeit less literal than that of the Christmas Scare of 1865.<sup>106</sup>

Anti-emigrationist ministers expected God to change their people’s status and condition in the South, to remake the South into a land for his special people. Bishop C. R. Harris, when he traveled to the Agricultural and Industrial Fair in Alexandria, Virginia, said, “We dismiss as contrary to the teachings of Providence, the idea that the Negro is to remain in a state of serfdom which seems to be the condition in which many of the Southern whites desire to keep our people.” He then sang a couple lines from the often-quoted English hymn that expressed his eschatological confidence: “For Right is Right / Since God is God, / And Right the day must win, / To doubt would be disloyalty, / To falter would be sin.” Harris then gave a concrete example of what it meant to doubt and falter: emigration and colonization. “Deportation schemes,” he argued, had symbolic power. They represented Plan B for African Americans, should the fight for full civil and political rights be abandoned. Whites, he reasoned, knew the symbolic power of the idea, which explained why “certain southern political leaders” hailed the merits of colonization or emigration even though they tried to prevent actual migrations. “To prove this,”

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<sup>106</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1892, 19.



Harris told his audience, “call attention to the fact that in nearly every state where there has been a considerable emigration, or exodus, the legislature has enacted laws to forbid or discourage emigrant agents from persuading the Negro away.” He clearly remembered the exodus from his own state a few years back: “If the South is so anxious to get rid of the Negro, why hinder agents from carrying them away, free of expense to the state or the nation?” The answer: talk of emigration distracted black southerners from the journey they were already on, the journey to full citizenship and economic justice.<sup>107</sup>

In the 1890s, Harris surely found it difficult to assure fellow blacks that they were indeed on the road to full citizenship. But their fate, he argued, compared favorably to that of American Indians. “Where would the Negro be to-day had he not clung to the God of the oppressed? Let the fate of the American Indian answer.” Harris did not argue that God had caused American Indians’ suffering but rather that the Christian God, if followed, could have defended them against whites:

Unable to cope with his cruel, crafty, and powerful foe, he [the Indian] yet refused to bow to that God who would vindicate his cause. To-day that people is a mere fragment, driven from their homes, though guaranteed them by the most solemn treaty obligation! If he be not completely blotted off the face of the earth, it will be because a purer Christianity shall effectually intercede for him and win him her protecting embrace!

Harris’ comparison of Indians and African Americans illustrated two of his key tenets: first, that black progress since emancipation was attributable to God’s protection of the race; second, that American Indians represented exactly what black Protestant leaders feared about emigration and colonization. Moving away in response to white supremacy would result in less land and fewer rights.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup>C. R. Harris, “The Negro’s Mission in America,” *African Methodist Episcopal Zion Quarterly* 3:1 (Oct 1892): 49.

Land, then, remained central to black Protestant leaders' objections to colonization and emigration. They still waited, albeit in less dramatic ways than those who anticipated the Christmas Scare of 1865, for God to give them the land they worked. J. C. Price told an audience just across the state line in Chester, South Carolina, "This sunny Southland, where lie the bleaching bones of my fathers, is dear to me, and I, too, feel to the manor born. This soil is consecrated by the labor, the tears and the prayers of my ancestors." Price not only claimed the land as his by birth but also expected God to give him the proceeds of the land. "I believe that God intends the negro race to work here in the South the highest stature he has ever attained," he preached. The South "will one day produce the richest harvest of prosperity the world ever saw, and I want to help reap it and enjoy it," Price told a cheering audience.<sup>109</sup>

Surely Price's prediction of black prosperity to be reaped from the land of the South seemed discordant with the realities of life as a sharecropper. Price spoke in January 1890, as the large-scale migration from North Carolina to the West and Deep South continued. We can imagine someone in Price's audience responding with incredulity, "We have never seen the rich harvest that the South offers." To the would-be migrants in his audience, Price not only catalogued the practical reasons why black farmers were worse off in the American West and in West Africa, but also asked them to view the world with an impractical hope, seeing the divine forces operating around them. "He who would try to crush us deserves the pity—not the crushed!" Price concluded. "Though a hundred men fall around me, I will stand on the rock of my faith with an

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<sup>108</sup>Ibid., 52.

<sup>109</sup>*Lenoir Topic*, January 22, 1890.

unshaken hope.”<sup>110</sup> He bid his audience to resist the desire to leave, and to maintain the fight for land and economic prosperity. Black Protestant leaders argued, even when the evidence suggested otherwise, that in God’s plan for the race, land would come just as surely as did freedom.

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<sup>110</sup>Ibid.

## **Chapter Four**

### **A Jeremiad: Temperance and Prohibition Politics**

In January 1887, Rev. Joseph C. Price, the president of Livingstone College in Salisbury, North Carolina, delivered a speech for the National Temperance Society. As he assured the crowd, “I am sanguine. I believe there is a future, and a great future, ahead of the colored men.” That great future, Price explained, had to do with the many gifts and abilities, and the intelligence that African Americans could use to further their progress. But the future Price described was one greater than that of black Americans’ own making: it was a divine mission. Price continued, “The negro has a great mission to perform, which, with the will of God, he will perform.”<sup>1</sup> Two years later, in another temperance speech, Price sounded less sanguine. He told the African-American audience that though “God set the Negro free,” their immoral appetites still threatened to enslave them.<sup>2</sup> Taken together, the two different speeches, one of happy predictions and the other of doomsday warnings, represented well Price’s temperance message. According to him, African Americans held an important place within God’s plan for human history, and to that end, God had decreed the progress of the race. Precisely because they had a “great

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<sup>1</sup>“Prof. Price’s Lecture,” *Christian Recorder*, February 3, 1887.

<sup>2</sup>*Star of Zion*, January 31, 1889.

mission to perform,” African Americans needed to hold themselves to a high moral standard and guard against whatever stood in the way of racial progress.

Late nineteenth-century black ministers in North Carolina concluded, almost unanimously, that intemperance was a serious obstacle for black communities. For them, the manufacture, sale, and consumption of alcohol threatened to arrest the God-ordained progress of the race. Black Protestants across the state enlisted in what they saw as a fight between good and evil, a fight upon which depended, as one minister said, “the hope of our race.”<sup>3</sup> So, it was with a particular zeal that black temperance activists—ministers and their many male and female lay allies—campaigns for individual abstinence from alcohol and statewide prohibition, from Reconstruction well into the twentieth century.

Historians have paid little attention to black temperance activism, but when they have, they have placed it within the context of the black pursuit of respectability. By living a temperate lifestyle, black reformers believed they could rise above negative racial stereotypes and gain the respect of their white neighbors. A number of scholars have explained the importance, complexities, and problems of this bid for respectability. In contrast, this chapter shifts focus away from the white gaze and places black temperance activism within the religious narratives that African Americans told about themselves and for themselves. To be sure, African-American reformers coveted the respect of leading whites, and temperance served those ends. But focusing on their bid for respectability mistakes a small part of the temperance movement for the whole.

North Carolina’s black temperance activists were motivated more by a desire to assume the special role God had assigned African Americans than by their desire to

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<sup>3</sup> *Star of Zion*, January 1, 1886.

secure the respect of whites. When advocating temperance, they spoke principally of the moral and material development of the race, usually as an issue internal to black communities. Thus, the racially internal message of temperance activism functioned as a jeremiad. It warned African-American communities of impending judgment—that intemperance could derail the race from its God-ordained progress. At the same time, by calling attention to the threat that alcohol made on race advancement, temperance activists reaffirmed beliefs that African Americans played a special role within God’s design for human history.

To argue that black temperance was a jeremiad is to subordinate, not supplant, arguments about black respectability. Temperance activism was at the heart of late nineteenth-century bids for respectability and racial uplift. Black women’s temperance activism played a large role in what historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham called “the politics of respectability.” Higginbotham noted that black Baptist women’s reform efforts showed both their “assimilationist leanings” and their opposition to “racist images and structures.” Black female reformers, Higginbotham continued, “reflected and reinforced the hegemonic values of white America,” even as they “simultaneously subverted and transformed the logic of race and gender subordination.” Even though Higginbotham acknowledged that black Baptist women “emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes . . . as a goal in itself,” in her analysis, black reformers primarily operated for a white audience: to demonstrate black superiority in “manners and morals” and to “refute the logic behind their social subordination.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 187-88, 191, 193. The only lengthy work on post-emancipation southern black temperance activism is H. Paul Thompson, “Race, Temperance, and Prohibition in the Postbellum South: Black Atlanta, 1865-1890” (PhD diss., Emory

Historian Kevin Gaines offered a decidedly less sympathetic reading of black reform movements, though he, too, placed black temperance activism in the context of respectability. Gaines argued that black ministers and other “bourgeois agents of civilization” called for temperance as a means to establish their moral authority and distinguish themselves from lower-class blacks. As they distanced themselves from poor blacks, black ministers and reformers sought respectability in the eyes of leading whites. To Gaines, these reformers suffered from “unconscious internalized racism”; that is, they blamed the black community for falling short of white middle class moral standards instead of pointing to the white oppression that prevented the black community from attaining those standards. Moreover, he argued, they sacrificed their common cause with lower-class blacks on the altar of white approval.<sup>5</sup> Higginbotham had a greater appreciation for the difficulties that black leaders faced. She could see the sincere, if sometimes non-self-critical, motives behind temperance activism, where Gaines could

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University, 2005). Few scholars have addressed the role of race in southern prohibition elections. The best work has been on the Texas Prohibition Movement of the 1880s. See James D. Ivy, *No Saloon in the Valley: The Southern Strategy of Texas Prohibitionists in the 1880s* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003); and Gregg Cantrell, “‘Dark Tactics’: Black Politics in the 1887 Texas Prohibition Campaign,” *Journal of American Studies* 25 (1991): 85-93. Janette Greenwood covers the biracial coalition for the North Carolina 1881 Prohibition Referendum, a topic I return to later in this chapter. *Bittersweet Legacy: The Black and White “Better Classes” in Charlotte, 1850-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 80-105. For other works on prohibition elections, see Hanes Walton Jr., and James E. Taylor, “Another Force for Disfranchisement: Blacks and the Southern Prohibition Movement,” *Phylon* 32 (3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 1971): 247-59 and “Blacks, the Prohibitionists, and Disfranchisement,” *Quarterly Review of Higher Education among Negroes* (April 1969): 66-69. See also Denise Herd, “Prohibition, Racism and Class Politics in the Post-Reconstruction South,” *Journal of Drug Issues* 13 (1983): 77-94. There have been a few studies of antebellum black temperance activism, including Donald Yacovone, “The Transformation of the Black Temperance Movement, 1827-1854: An Interpretation,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 8 (Fall 1988): 288-91, and Shelley Block, “A Revolutionary Aim: The Rhetoric of Temperance in the Anglo-African Magazine,” *American Periodicals* 12 (2002): 9-24. Like Higginbotham, a number of women’s historians address temperance activism within larger discussions of black reform and black religion. For North Carolina-specific studies, see Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), and Anastatia Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women’s Organizations and Politics in North Carolina, 1880-1930* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup>Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 2, 6.

see only “bourgeois agents of civilization.” But both scholars wrote as if black temperance activism existed principally for on-looking whites.

In contrast, this chapter places black temperance activism in North Carolina within its eschatological context. It asks not, what message did black temperance activists want to broadcast to whites, but rather, what did their message say about African Americans’ role in divine plans for human history? To do that, the chapter first situates the temperance movement as a key part of black religious life before and after emancipation. Then, the chapter characterizes the temperance messages from North Carolina’s black Protestant leaders as a kind of jeremiad, a sermon intended to warn, chastise, and rebuke a people even as it affirms them as God’s chosen people. Lastly, I examine the implications of temperance activists’ foray into the state’s prohibition politics.

### **Initial Impulse**

Early on, independent black churches embraced the temperance cause both because it resonated with their own theological beliefs and because it placed them in a movement peopled with their allies. Northern black churches adopted the cause nearly forty years before southern emancipation. Beginning in the 1830s, AME and AME Zion conventions annually declared themselves opposed to the use of intoxicating liquors. In the antebellum North, temperance activism seemed wedded to abolitionism as part of a comprehensive national reform agenda. Leading black abolitionists also stumped for the temperance cause. As Frederick Douglass told an audience in 1846, “I am a temperance man because I am an anti-slavery man.” The rhetoric of the two movements—temperance and abolition—bled into each other. Abolitionists accused slaveholders of



being “drunk” with power. Temperance activists lobbied for a nation “freed from the chains” of intemperate drinking.<sup>6</sup> The early connection between these two reform movements helps explain why the white South, despite its evangelical population, was less fertile ground for nineteenth-century prohibition campaigns.

Black Protestants quickly gravitated toward the temperance movement, perhaps because it was part of a larger radical reform agenda. The temperance movement did not carry connotations of religious conservatism, as twentieth-century Americans would later attribute to it. Rather, temperance was allied with radical movements like abolitionism and feminism. Antebellum temperance activists, white and black, also joined any number of other northern evangelical reform societies, the same societies that were so quick to send missionaries to the freedpeople in the South.<sup>7</sup>

When northern white missionaries, like those from the American Missionary Association (AMA) and the American Baptist Home Missionary Society (ABHMS), arrived to work among southern black communities, they laid the temperance message on thick. Primers designed to teach freedpeople how to read and write also taught abstinence from alcohol. The *Freedman’s Spelling-Book* had students learn three-letter words by copying or reading aloud the following sentences:

It is a sin to sip rum.  
A sot is a bad man  
God is ho-ly; he can see if men sin.  
If a man sin, he is bad.  
A sot has rum or gin in his jug.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Thompson, “Race, Temperance, and Prohibition,” 76-82; Frederick Douglass, “Temperance and Anti-Slavery: An Address Delivered in Paisley, Scotland, on 30 March 1846,” in John W. Blassingame, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, 1:1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 209.

<sup>7</sup>Thompson, “Race, Temperance, and Prohibition,” 76-82.

<sup>8</sup>American Tract Society, *The Freedman’s Spelling-Book*, quoted in Robert C. Morris, ed., *The Freedmen’s Schools and Textbooks*, 6 vols. (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1980), vol.2, 13.

Obviously, spelling was not the only lesson to be learned. As the students advanced, they moved on to four-letter and five-letter lessons about alcohol. In Atlanta, the northern missionaries flooded black communities with temperance tracts from the American Tract Society. They organized African-American youth into temperance clubs and encouraged them all to sign abstinence pledges. Similarly, African-American missionaries from the AME and AME Zion denominations incorporated temperance activism into their post-emancipation educational and church-building efforts. These tactics did not end in the immediate post-war period. Throughout the late nineteenth century, northern missionary organizations sent free and unsolicited temperance newspaper subscriptions to black ministers and schoolteachers. The largest missionary organizations, the AMA and the ABHMS, maintained their focus upon freedpeople, American Indians, and immigrants, and central to their message was temperance.<sup>9</sup>

Their theology predisposed black churchgoers in North Carolina to welcome the message of temperance. In the mid- to late nineteenth century, most attended Methodist and Baptist churches. Methodists espoused John Wesley's doctrine of perfectionism, a belief that Christians, in a moment after their conversion, could attain a state of sinless perfection. The grace of God, many Methodists argued, enabled believers to purge sin from their lives. Theologians and lay people developed different interpretations of this doctrine, but however interpreted, Wesleyan perfectionism supported the belief that a life or a society without alcohol was possible and desirable. In antebellum North Carolina, one of the most important popularizers of this doctrine was Henry Evans, a free black Methodist minister in Fayetteville. Evans led a large, influential, and biracial

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<sup>9</sup>Thompson, "Race, Temperance, and Prohibition," 82-120.

congregation, and was considered by his bishop to be “the father of the Methodist Church, white and black,” in the area. So, African-American Methodists could claim perfectionism and temperance as authentically theirs by virtue of their race and denomination.<sup>10</sup>

African-American Baptists, too, thought of temperance as consistent with their theology. Most black Baptists, like their Methodist counterparts, were heirs to the legacy of the Second Great Awakening and favored a free-will theology over the Calvinism of older Baptists. The added emphasis on human free will brought more attention to law-keeping; therefore, free-will Baptists spoke a great deal about the individual’s responsibility to obey the dictates of God. At an early black Baptist State Convention in North Carolina, ministers stated for the record their belief “that temperance is a part of the Christian religion.”<sup>11</sup> Temperance, then, for black Methodists and Baptists was of a piece with their religious life.

Black Protestants in North Carolina also organized non-denominational temperance societies soon after emancipation. When the Independent Order of Good Templars, one of the largest international temperance organizations, first arrived in the state in 1872, African Americans immediately petitioned for membership. The society admitted white and black members, but in the South, the Templars organized separate white and black lodges. Wary white Templars in North Carolina balked at even restricted interracialism and withheld the necessary password from black Templars. Undaunted,

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<sup>10</sup>Thompson, “Race, Temperance, and Prohibition,” 68-70; Timothy Smith, “Righteousness and Hope: Christian Holiness and the Millennial Vision in America, 1800-1900” *American Quarterly* 31:1 (Spring 1979): 21-45; Monte Hampton, “‘The Greatest Curiosity’: Race, Religion, and Politics in Henry Evans’ Methodist Church, 1758–1858,” (paper presented at the Southern Historical Association Annual Meeting, Richmond Virginia, November 1, 2007).

<sup>11</sup>*Proceedings of the State Baptist Convention (colored)* (Raleigh, NC: W. J. Edwards, 1872), 11.

black temperance advocates lodged a complaint with the national headquarters, the Right Worthy Grand Lodge, and soon black Good Templars lodges were established across the state.<sup>12</sup>

The Good Templars lodges quickly became interwoven with black religious life in the state. The lodges sometimes met concurrently with Sabbath schools or church meetings. The lodge meetings at times resembled revivals. An AME Zion bishop described one such lodge meeting. On a Monday night in early 1875, the Ark of Safety Lodge, Independent Order of Good Templars, met in Beaufort, North Carolina. Many from the community—members and non-members alike—turned out to witness the public installation of officers. The bishop was happy to observe that “this society is in a most flourishing condition” and that “the people here [seem settled] to drive the monster Intemperance from their midst.” As the bishop’s account shows, the meeting consisted of more than installing officers or planning temperance work. With preaching and singing, the gathering could have been a worship service: “During some part of the exercises, someone became so deeply impressed as to cry aloud, and before the Lodge closed, was happily converted.”<sup>13</sup> The boundary between temperance organizations and black churches seemed blurry, to say the least.

Male-led temperance societies arrived first in North Carolina, but black women soon took the initiative in temperance organizing. Until 1883, North Carolina was one of only two states without a chapter of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). But after a visit from WCTU national president Frances Willard and strong backing from

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<sup>12</sup>Daniel Jay Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina, 1715-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1945), 55-56.

<sup>13</sup>“Episcopal Correspondence,” *Fayetteville Educator*, February 20, 1875.

North Carolina's Quaker communities, the WCTU grew quickly. Black women across the state organized their own separate local chapters, often without the aid of local whites. In the late 1880s, black women attended the state WCTU conventions, but the poor treatment they received from white women led them in 1891 to establish North Carolina's WCTU No. 2. The separate state convention provided for both black autonomy and interracial cooperation, and, like the Good Templars, became enmeshed with black religious life. Mary Lynch, union president for its first twenty-five years, served on the faculty of the AME Zion Church's flagship school, Livingstone College. And across the state, black women's temperance activism linked up well with the work of black women's home missions societies and Sunday School conventions.<sup>14</sup>

The temperance movement's abstinence message was one black Protestants had received from others, but one that they considered complementary and consistent with the rest of their religious beliefs and practices. Whatever else we say about black temperance activism, we must acknowledge that black Protestants embraced the cause not simply as a means to an end—respectability, for example—but rather as a natural extension of their deeply held convictions.

### **The Temperance Message: A Jeremiad**

The temperance messages that black Protestants preached said a great deal more than the simple anti-alcohol lessons of the *Freedman's Spelling Book*. Temperance sermons, editorials, meetings, poems, and speeches spoke of the material and moral progress of the race, gendered expectations, supernatural battles, and black Christians'

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<sup>14</sup>Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South*, 21.

rocky but favored relationship with God. The messages functioned like a jeremiad; it rebuked black Christians even as it affirmed them as God's special people. As a literary and cultural genre, the American jeremiad has had a long and distinguished history, but it is best known as the favorite sermon topic of New England Puritan ministers. The Puritan jeremiads were political sermons delivered at almost every public event; they were "state-of-the-covenant" addresses. They weren't happy speeches. Puritan jeremiads modeled themselves after their namesake, the rather grim Old Testament prophet Jeremiah whose task was to pronounce God's judgments on Israel for its wickedness. Jeremiah's prophecies included long lamentations over Israel's many sins and concluded with a rehearsal of the nation's military defeat and exile from its homeland, interpreted as a punishment from God. Likewise, the political sermons in New England recorded a litany of the community's sins and corruption and described or anticipated God's fierce judgment for its iniquity. For some observers and historians, the jeremiad signified the Puritans' predilection for self-castigation.<sup>15</sup>

But the Puritan jeremiad was not completely hopeless. Literary scholar Sacvan Bercovitch identified the affirming and optimistic side of these doomsday wailings: "For all their catalogues of iniquities, the jeremiads attest to an unswerving faith in their errand." Puritans believed they were a peculiar people, on a special mission from God. Precisely because they served such a special role in the "sacred historical design," their allegiance to God came under close scrutiny, and they suffered God's corrective discipline. Puritans used jeremiads, Bercovitch continued, "to direct an imperiled people

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<sup>15</sup>Historians have followed the lead of Perry Miller, who described Puritan jeremiads as "literature of self-condemnation." *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956), 8-15. See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 3-6.

of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God.” The jeremiads reaffirmed the Puritans’ status as a “chosen people” and spoke of God’s watchful eye over them. Amid all the threats, hope remained.<sup>16</sup>

The American jeremiad outlived the Puritans, and, in Bercovitch’s analysis, played a central role in the United States’ national character through the twentieth century. As a Canadian, Bercovitch wondered how “a country that, despite its arbitrary territorial limits, could read its destiny in its landscapes, and a population that, despite its bewildering mixture of race and creed, could believe in something called an American mission.” In all the contestations and rearticulations of the American mission—from the Puritan “city on a hill” to Jeffersonian agrarianism, from Manifest Destiny to the land of equal opportunity—American Jeremiahs chastised the nation for failing to live up to its grand purpose. As Bercovitch observed, “The question in these latter-day jeremiads, as in their seventeenth-century precursors was never ‘Who are we?’ but, almost in deliberate evasion of that question, the old prophetic refrain, ‘When is our errand to be fulfilled? How long, O Lord, how long?’”<sup>17</sup>

If that particular refrain seems reminiscent of African-American calls for the nation to live up to its democratic ideals, that is no coincidence. African-American critiques of and hopes for the nation constituted the best examples of the enduring American jeremiad. Black abolitionists warned white Americans of God’s impending wrath for the national sin of slavery. The black jeremiad drew upon common American commitments to Christianity and republicanism to offer, as David Howard-Pitney has

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<sup>16</sup>Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 6-9.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 11.

argued, “sharp social criticism within normative cultural bounds.” Like Puritan jeremiads, black abolitionist rhetoric rebuked the nation and simultaneously affirmed its favored status as a chosen people. Wilson Moses has described the ways that black abolitionists and the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century black leaders after them displayed “a clever ability to play on the belief that America as a whole was a chosen nation with a covenantal duty to deal justly with the blacks.”<sup>18</sup>

In the African-American jeremiad tradition, the nation was not the only or even the most important chosen people. As Howard-Pitney explained, black jeremiads conceived of “blacks as a chosen people within a chosen people.” African-American jeremiads were two different kinds of messages—one principally concerned with the failings of the American mission, chastising the nation for the sins of slavery, racism, or lynching, and the other concerned with black destiny, rebuking the race for failing to live up to its mission. When scholars speak of black jeremiads, they usually have in mind the former, but African-American history teems with examples of the latter. Howard-Pitney identified Booker T. Washington as this second type of black Jeremiah. Washington affirmed his belief “in the promise of the black chosen people” with “stern remonstrations against their current failings” and by demanding “their socioeconomic repentance.” Howard-Pitney argued that Washington’s “critical reform rhetoric” toward African Americans closely conformed to the conventions of the jeremiad, perhaps more so than did black jeremiads against white Americans.<sup>19</sup> Traditionally, a jeremiad was

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<sup>18</sup>David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 10-13; Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 29-32.

<sup>19</sup>Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad*, 53-55.



delivered by an insider who fully identified with the people under rebuke and felt complicit in their wrongdoings.

By selecting Washington as his sole example of the black jeremiad for a black audience, however, Howard-Pitney belittled a large part of the black jeremiad tradition. He contrasted Washington's internal critiques and blind eye toward white racism with the outright denunciations of white supremacy by Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Frederick Douglass. For Howard-Pitney, Washington represented a deviation from the African-American jeremiad tradition, one that stood in contrast to Wells's and Douglass's appeals for justice. In Howard-Pitney's analysis, internal critiques stood in isolation from and were even incompatible with critiques of the nation. But most nineteenth-century black Protestants had no problem naming national sins and opposing white supremacy even as they leveled internal critiques against black communities. Black Protestant leaders embraced both kinds of jeremiads. They could warn the nation of God's impending judgment for its unjust treatment of African Americans in one speech, and in the next warn African Americans that alcohol threatened the race's freedom and progress.

For example, Rev. J. A. Tyler, a Methodist minister, remembered as "full of grit and grace," whose weighty sermons reportedly fell "like the blows of Cyclopes' hammer"<sup>20</sup>, delivered both types of jeremiads in one 1875 editorial. According to Tyler, black churches found themselves at the confluence of two dangerous eras: "an age of oppression" and "an age of intemperance." The first alluded to the voter fraud, corruption, and racial discrimination that characterized the end of Reconstruction. Tyler described the injustice meted out by the state legislature: "the wicked . . . rule and the people mourn, the needy are neglected and the poor cast out." The solution to the "age of

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<sup>20</sup>S. F. Hamilton, "Present Times," *Star of Zion*, March 29, 1894.

oppression” was to be found in divine redemption and retribution. “This the Lord does not love. He will defend [the poor and the needy] and break in pieces the oppressor.” Tyler used the language of Old Testament prophets to assure his readers that their political persecution would be short-lived: “[Your] cry will not go unheeded for He is ever near beholding all this is done.” Tyler argued that God would intervene in North Carolina political history on the side of the oppressed, an argument many black Protestants made. So, the “age of oppression”—the first of the eras Tyler identified—would not prove “detrimental” to black churches.<sup>21</sup>

The “age of intemperance,” however, posed a greater threat. Like oppression, intemperance created hardships for the poor and needy. Drinking, Tyler argued, led to the proliferation of crime, violence, and poverty, and wreaked havoc on struggling black communities. Intemperance could create as much misery for black North Carolinians as could a hostile legislature, but its effects were harder to remedy. Racial oppression would drive God to their defense, Tyler argued, whereas licentious living would only alienate them from God.

Some black Protestant leaders agreed with Tyler that the problems with alcohol were supernatural. The North Carolina Baptist Educational and Missionary Convention characterized the temperance movement as spiritual warfare. Temperance societies, Baptist ministers believed, would “help tear down the cause of Satan and in its stead establish the cause of Christ.”<sup>22</sup> Baptists were not the only ones to equate the liquor trade or alcohol consumption with satanic or demonic forces. AME Zion Bishop James Walker Hood described the threat in one of his published sermons. God had plans for the

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<sup>21</sup>“The Age in Which We Live,” *Fayetteville Educator*, March 20, 1875.

<sup>22</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1890, 41.

race, Hood believed, and the liquor industry served as evidence that Satan had “summoned all the hosts of hell” to thwart those plans.<sup>23</sup> The rhetoric of Satan, hell, and demons not only dramatized the conflict between temperance activists and their opponents, but it also viewed intemperance as an active external force that attacked black communities in order to thwart their progress. Presumably, black communities were vulnerable to these satanic attacks precisely because they were favored by God and because their progress brought about God’s purposes on earth.

The forces of intemperance, many black ministers warned, held the power to delay or undercut the promises of God. Hood invoked the Exodus narrative: “If we are to wander forty years in this wilderness, I can see no cause for it but intemperance.” Hood cautioned his congregation that drinking might push the entrance to the Promised Land further into the distant future.<sup>24</sup> God promised freedom for African Americans, as evidenced by emancipation, and intemperance threatened that plan. “This monster,” Hood preached, “seems to have been waiting the results of the emancipation proclamation, that it might seize upon the freed people and enslave them again, before they were strong enough to resist its power.” Indeed, Hood continued, “[Intemperance] has, in many cases, wholly nullified the intended effect of the freedom proclamation.” In a subsequent sermon, Hood clarified that God’s intentions constituted “the intended effect” of black emancipation. Alcohol threatened to temporarily reverse or delay God’s

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<sup>23</sup>James Walker Hood, *Negro in the Christian Pulpit, or the Two Characters and Two Destinies* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards & Broughton, 1884), 120; *Minutes of the Eighteenth Session of the North Carolina Annual Conference of the A. M. E. Zion Church in America, Held in Beaufort, N. C., November 30th to December 6th, 1881*, comp., A. B. Smyer (Salisbury, NC: Star of Zion Job Print, 1882), 43-44.

<sup>24</sup>Hood, *Negro in the Christian Pulpit*, 121.

plan for black freedom. In fact, Hood drew a close parallel between the evils of slavery and intemperance, arguing that the latter was more dangerous than the former:

We, as a race, have lately escaped from a bondage most oppressive, degrading, and evil in its consequences—a system denounced by a great and good man as the ‘sum of all villainies.’ Whatever were the evils of that system, (and they were never half told), and whatever were the horrors to the enslaved class, or the curses upon the slaveholder, yet the victims of that system were in no such evil case as are the victims of intemperance!<sup>25</sup>

The *Star of Zion* published a speech from former Louisiana governor P. B. S. Pinchback in which he warned his fellow African Americans that licentious living would re-enslave them.<sup>26</sup> Speaking of temperance, one AME Zion minister argued that “the hope of our race is as much dependent upon this virtue, as any other, and possibly more.”<sup>27</sup> The future of the race, according to black ministers, was contingent on the race’s temperance.

In some jeremiads, black ministers spoke of God’s favor upon the race as contingent upon their virtue and faithfulness to God. As AME Zion Bishop C. R. Harris, a native of Charlotte, told an audience at the 1892 Agricultural and Industrial Fair, “it is the duty of every lover of his race to exert his influence towards quickening the moral sense and enlightening the religious views of the people wherever such a condition exists. Only by so doing may we count upon continued favor of Almighty-God and fulfill the mission He has given us to perform.”<sup>28</sup> Like Tyler’s editorial in the *Fayetteville Educator* twenty years earlier, Harris’s speech placed temperance in the context of African Americans’ special relationship with God. That relationship, according to Harris,

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 119.

<sup>26</sup>*Star of Zion*, January 15, 1886.

<sup>27</sup>*Star of Zion*, January 1, 1886.

<sup>28</sup>C. R. Harris, “The Negro’s Mission in America,” *African Methodist Episcopal Zion Quarterly* 3:1 (October 1892): 53.

was covenantal or contractual. The people offered God loyalty, obedience, and moral rectitude; and God offered the people divine protection and a promising future.

In temperance jeremiads like Harris's, divine displeasure and satanic attack were not separate from the other ill effects of drinking, such as poverty, unemployment, and violence, which also threatened to derail the race from its eschatological destiny. As ministers recounted the damage drinking caused black communities, their rhetoric seemed hyperbolic, though certainly they thought it was no exaggeration. One resolution read:

We, the ministers and delegates of the Baptist Educational and Missionary Convention of North Carolina believe that intemperance, as applied to the use of alcoholic liquors in any form is the most gigantic and terrible of all the evils of the present age; that it has ruined more souls; blighted greater hopes; crushed out noble ambitions; tarnished more characters; broken more hearts; shattered more homes; squandered more property, than all the evils combined.<sup>29</sup>

Other leaders, too, placed the blame for any number of social ills on drinking. At the 1877 State Colored Convention, John Williamson, a black legislator from Franklin County, pushed hard for a strongly worded temperance resolution. As he told the other black leaders there, "Day by day, this prolific source of vice and crime, was contributing large numbers of our people to the penitentiary, already overflowing." Alcohol consumption in the state's African-American communities, he concluded, "entail[ed] misery, want, degradation and death, upon thousands of innocent victims. . . . To this source might be traced four fifths, if not five sixths of all the crimes of our land."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1894, 18.

<sup>30</sup>*Raleigh Register*, November 1, 1877.; Williamson appears in Chapter 3 because in 1877 he proposed black colonization to an independent territory in the West. At the 1877 State Colored Convention, where he delivered this speech on temperance, he recanted his advocacy of colonization.

Temperance advocates routinely issued dire warnings and grim assessments of alcohol's effect on crime, poverty, and violence.

Williamson leveled his jeremiad against black churches. At the convention, he accused "the church" of failing to meet the "requirements of this important issue." Black churches, he complained, had not said and done enough to address the crisis of intemperance. But the jeremiad cut deeper: "So far from throwing their powerful influence in the way of its onward and ruinous course, many professing Christians in the city of Raleigh, had favored and voted to continue the whiskey business." Several leaders present objected to his accusation. When one said that it was not the convention's job to critique the church, Williamson countered, "Many members of the church and ministers of the Gospel had not the backbone to meet this question." Some ministers defended Williamson. Rev. Ransom and Rev. Crosby told the convention "the delegate from Franklin had drawn the picture none too strong." Upon the ministers' recommendation, the convention passed a temperance resolution that included a critique of black churches.<sup>31</sup> Why would black Protestant leaders, many of them ministers, assemble together to pass resolutions condemning themselves and the institutions they led? In their self-castigation, ministers conformed to the logic of the jeremiad. They mourned over their own failings, as an attempt to renew and reinvigorate their divine mission.

It was not an isolated incident. Black church leaders since emancipation had routinely complained that intemperance infested the ranks of the clergy. The 1872 State Baptist Convention was "sorry to learn that in some sections of our State the standard of morality among Baptist Ministers of our race is so low and unscriptural." "Tippling," or

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

drinking, topped the list of ministerial transgressions, accompanied by “fornication, adultery and their concomitant evils.”<sup>32</sup> Worse than the occasional bad apple was the willingness of congregations to tolerate them. The church convention seemed even more concerned that some Baptists failed to understand that drinking was a sin. The delegates regretted to admit “that so few of our brethren seem to appreciate the idea of an entire abstinence from the use of ardent spirits.”<sup>33</sup> Baptist and Methodist church bodies routinely called upon ministers to forsake the use of alcohol; their repeated calls probably spoke to a lack of ministerial compliance. Churches passed regulation preventing drinkers or smokers from joining the ranks of the clergy. Nevertheless, as one AME Zion bishop reported, “the section of the general rules which forbids the use of intoxicating drinks is not strictly obeyed.” As the bishop warned the annual convention, “Unless ministers in this conference cease to use intoxicating drinks as a beverage, you can not hope for success; drunken ministers cannot preach the gospel of Jesus.”<sup>34</sup> The temperance jeremiad was a message not only internal to black communities but also internal to black clergy and churches.

The message of temperance advocates intertwined fears of moral degradation with those of financial decline. Black Protestant leaders marked progress since emancipation in terms of moral and material progress. They tracked statistics—the number of legal marriages, property accumulated, percentages of black landownership—and recounted anecdotes of moral and financial success. The statistics and stories described the moral and the material as twin developments, both key to the race’s future. They reasoned that

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<sup>32</sup>*Proceedings of the State Baptist Convention* (colored), October 1872, 11.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup>*Star of Zion*, November 21, 1884.

intemperance, as an enemy of God and the race, stood ready to inflict damage on black morality and property. As Harris warned, “If a bargain is made while under [alcohol’s] influence, the drinker is liable to be grossly cheated,” and black North Carolinians were already at great risk of being cheated. “Besides,” Harris continued, “it involves a worse than useless waste of money, and the Negro cannot afford to be extravagant. The Negro is at the bottom of the ladder. Other forces of society are arrayed against him and he must deny himself of useless encumbrances, or he will be forever a hewer of wood and drawer of water.” Harris envisioned a future when black communities were financially prosperous, and he argued that the way to “acquire wealth is by STRICT TEMPERANCE.”<sup>35</sup>

Ministers and others often spoke of the spiritual and financial problems of alcohol as two sides of the same coin. A committee of the North Carolina Baptist Education and Missionary Conference (NCBEMC) began one resolution, saying “the use of strong drink is detrimental to the moral and spiritual life of the Church, and has proven destructive to the intellectual and financial success of men who follow the drink habit.”<sup>36</sup> At the same convention, Dr. A. W. Peques made the connection between spiritual and financial welfare more directly: “We need men in our Churches who will interest themselves in the moral and material welfare of our people. A people who are poor, ignorant, and oppressed on every side are in no condition to render acceptable service to God. Ignorance and Poverty are not religion.”<sup>37</sup> Peques identified racial oppression and alcohol among the causes for black Baptists’ ignorance and poverty. Fourteen years

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<sup>35</sup>Harris, “The Negro’s Mission in America,” 55-56.

<sup>36</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, November 1903, 42.

<sup>37</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, November 1903, 21.



earlier, the same church body had committed itself to attacking “everything . . . which tends to obstruct [black North Carolinians’] intellectual, moral, and spiritual progress . . . [and their] present condition of poverty and ignorance.”<sup>38</sup> Baptist ministers saw their temperance message as complementary to their campaigns for racial justice. Both alcohol and injustice were roadblocks on the race’s march of progress. Part of the church’s job, they believed, was to oppose whatever stood in the way of God’s plan for the moral and material progress of the race.

As black reformers described what that progress looked like, they often turned to gendered ideals. Temperance activists were concerned about alcohol’s impact on women and on relationships between men and women, but they were particularly worried that drinking crippled black manhood. The *Fayetteville Educator*, North Carolina’s second black-authored newspaper and the first to run for a year—a thirteen-month run in 1874-1875—devoted more than a few columns to intemperance and gender.<sup>39</sup> The *Educator* illustrated the ways and the frequency with which black temperance activists connected gender and drinking. The temperance message of the young editors often sounded like jeremiads. Even the masthead motto gave a sense of the paper’s claim to moral authority: “Fearlessly the right defend— / Impartially the wrong condemn.” In almost every issue, the editors included temperance lessons and news, yet they fostered the mystique that they and others said regrettably little. In one letter to the editor, the writer asked the paper to address temperance more: “It seems that there is one great mistake practiced

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<sup>38</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1889, 16.

<sup>39</sup>The newspaper warned their audience of danger lurking around every corner because of the community’s waywardness. The editors held out high hopes for black North Carolinians if they remained faithful to their mission yet warned of the dire consequences that would follow if they turned astray. The jeremiads made assumptions that the editors believed their readers would share, namely that the race had a golden day ahead and that drinking alcohol was antithetical both to teachings of the Bible and to the progress of the race.

among the masses which has not attracted the attention of our better thinking men. . . . It is the bad habit of drinking intoxicating liquors.”<sup>40</sup> The letter writer worried that the issue had not attracted black leaders’ attention, even though temperance remained one of the most-discussed topics in the state’s only black newspaper, the annual state colored conventions, annual church conventions, countless public speeches, and dozens of temperance society meetings across the state. Perhaps one of the editors penned the letter; the notion that no one heard the watchman’s alarm only confirmed the urgency of the jeremiad.

The editors of the *Educator* seemed particularly worried about boys in the black community. “Your boys are in great danger,” they told the parents of the “colored boys of Fayetteville.” Young black boys, they observed, were spending their time idly on the streets, and it was only a matter of time, they predicted, before they would become unemployed or incarcerated men. The editors traced most of the dangers haunting the community’s male youth to alcohol. “Idleness leads to vice,” one editorial explained. “We see that most of young men on Sundays, so soon as they become idle, take a cigar, that is not sufficient and they want a drink.” The triple sins of idleness, truancy, and drinking concerned the young editors. As the editors challenged black parents, “Will you make them men, such as will honor the race?” Idleness and alcohol, they told the boys, “does not only injure you, but our whole race as a people.” The lament over black boys in Fayetteville was a jeremiad for the whole race.<sup>41</sup>

In one issue, the students from Fayetteville’s Howard School presented their award-winning declamations. The top winners were two brothers—John and Henry

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<sup>40</sup>“For the Editors,” *Fayetteville Educator*, May 8, 1875.

<sup>41</sup>“Our Own Boys,” *Fayetteville Educator*, January 9, 1875.

Tyson—and their twin topics of education and temperance reflected the paper’s own emphases. Henry’s speech, titled “Whiskey,” painted a grim picture: “If I understand what the Bible says about the whiskey drinker, thousands and thousands more are now on their way to ruin on account of drinking whiskey.” Henry despaired over the loss of “many of our young men . . . who might have been noble men” to the bottle. J. A. Tyler wrote in the *Educator* that he feared the “great, influential, and growing evil” of intemperance most acutely when it came to African-American boys. Liquor and business interests, Tyler lamented, rivaled the church for rank in the community and were “leading our brightest sons astray from the cradle.” Black boys became the focal point of the *Educator*’s temperance jeremiads.

Temperance activists’ concern with black manhood was widespread and long-lasting. They defined manhood as a specific set of gendered ideals, among them the exercise of upright character, self-restraint, independent self-reliance, and the ability to financially support and protect women and children. Beyond these particular attributes, black Protestant leaders exalted the terms *manhood* and *manliness* to mean everything laudable in a man. Historian Gail Bederman found a definition in the 1890 Century Dictionary helpful: “Manly . . . is the word into which has been gathered the highest conceptions of what is noble in man or worthy of his manhood.”<sup>42</sup> Such an expansive definition could mean anything or nothing, and black writers continually redefined what it was to be manly or to have manhood. One editorialist equated manhood with religion: “Religion is as much as the total of manhood”; another equated it with “truth, honor, and

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<sup>42</sup>Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 18-19.

bravery.” Others described manhood as the self-respect that was denied black men under slavery.<sup>43</sup>

Whatever the attributes of manliness, black temperance activists emphasized that alcohol undermined them. As one black minister put it simply, “The real man is the sober man.”<sup>44</sup> When AME Zion minister W. S. Meadows warned fellow preachers of the dangers of alcohol in an open letter to *Star of Zion*, he wrote, “intemperance cuts down manhood in its strength.”<sup>45</sup> According to temperance advocates, by undermining black manhood (particularly qualities such as independent self-reliance and the provision for and protection of women and children), intemperance returned black men to the childlike dependence they experienced under slavery. As an anonymous poet explained in verse:

So the dread curse of slavery forever is gone,  
But alcohol’s curse doth remain,  
And I would much rather be black and in bonds,  
Than bound by this soul-cutting chain.  
Arouse, men and women, and open your eyes,  
O! Look on the misery around,  
Mark the works of this enemy so deadly and mean,  
Brilliant manhood he drags to the ground.<sup>46</sup>

The poet not only connected alcohol with slavery, a common rhetorical strategy in the black temperance movement, but also described the loss of freedom as the loss of black manhood.

Temperance activists also frequently wrote of the effect men’s drinking had on women and children. At the 1884 North Carolina AME Zion Conference, Bishop T. H. Lomax called intemperance “the wife’s dreadful woe” and the “children’s tormentor.”

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<sup>43</sup>*Fayetteville Educator*, January 23, 1875; “Manliness,” *Star of Zion*, January 17, 1889.

<sup>44</sup>“A Temperance Lesson,” *Star of Zion*, January 28, 1887.

<sup>45</sup>W. S. Meadows, “A Warning to Preachers,” *Star of Zion*, December 20, 1894.

<sup>46</sup>“A Sad Blight,” *Star of Zion*, 20 February 1885.

The victims of alcohol abuse, Lomax continued, were more often than not the innocent and helpless. Intemperance produced widows, orphans, and destitution.<sup>47</sup> At the same conference, Rev. C. H. Meade of the National Temperance Society portrayed “the scenes in a drunkard’s family,” of inebriated men and hungry children, of fathers bringing home whiskey instead of ham. His sermon “brought solemnity and tears in many eyes” and “concluded . . . in a touching and feeling manner that there was a glorious shouting all over the church.”<sup>48</sup> Meade’s message echoed the one Meadows delivered to his fellow ministers. “Think,” Meadows wrote, “of the poverty, of the destruction, of the little children tugging at the breast, of a weeping and despairing wife asking for bread, of the man struggling with imaginary serpents, produced by the devilish thing.”<sup>49</sup> These speeches and articles were designed to appeal to a man’s self-image as protector and provider. Another *Star of Zion* editorial spoke pointedly to black men as husbands and fathers: “Cease the dread habit that keeps you in poverty, renders your children destitute and thus makes them criminals, and causes you to dishonor yourself, your family, and your God. Stand up for the right and be a man.”<sup>50</sup> The temperance jeremiad was intended to alert black men to their failures to meet gender norms.

Black women were just as likely as men to issue temperance jeremiads about manhood. Cecilia B. Gwyn, president of the WCTU chapter that met at St. Augustine’s College in Raleigh, considered it the job of black women to raise the alarm about drinking and black manhood. She described the ill effects of alcohol on husbands and

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<sup>47</sup> H. T. Lomax, “N.C. Conference,” *Star of Zion*, December 26, 1884.

<sup>48</sup> C. H. Meade, “N.C. Conference,” *Star of Zion*, December 12, 1884.

<sup>49</sup> W. S. Meadows, “A Warning to Preachers.”

<sup>50</sup> “A Temperance Lesson,” *Star of Zion*, January 28, 1887.

fathers in familiar ways. Gwyn cited higher crime rates and financial downfall, but she focused her attention on the destruction of the home. She told her audience of well-educated women, “We, who are in our homes or other places of safety, can have but a vague idea of the dreary surroundings of a drunkard’s children. They not only suffer physically; it is not [evidence from] their little bodies which are scantily provided for and, yes, we must say brutalized, that show the effects of intemperance.” She told her WCTU chapter that the root of problem was in “the character of man.” But it was not solely a man’s problem. “It is for us, who are receiving temperance instructions to exert our influence,” she said, so that the race might boast of its progress.<sup>51</sup>

The fears over black manhood that temperance advocates expressed remained consistent with their jeremiads over the race’s progress as a whole. Black Protestant leaders frequently described the destiny of the race in terms of its achievement of gendered ideals. Joseph C. Price, five years after his speaking tour for the National Temperance Society, told a New York audience about the race’s destiny “to gather up a Christian civilization that is unparalleled in [its] history.” In the same speech, Price phrased his eschatological expectations differently: “The Negro is to build up a manhood and womanhood, [the likes of which] the world has never seen.”<sup>52</sup> Other black ministers in North Carolina also marked the race’s progress in terms of manhood (and womanhood.) At a 1908 church convention, Baptist preacher Dr. J. A. Whitthed boasted of progress since emancipation. He recounted the dire straits from which black churches emerged in

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<sup>51</sup>*The Augustinian*, December 1905: 1-3. *The Augustinian*, edited by James K. Satterwhite, was a short-lived and irregularly issued publication written by and for students and alumni of St. Augustine’s College in Raleigh, NC, a four-year African-American college affiliated with the Episcopal Church.

<sup>52</sup>J. C. Price, “The Race Question in the South,” *African Methodist Episcopal Zion Quarterly* 2:3 (April 1892): 322-23.

the 1860s, and as proof that God was doing a mighty work among them, Whitted pointed to the black men in his audience “representing intelligence and Christian manhood, planting the old flag in every nook and corner of the Old North State.”<sup>53</sup> If achieving manhood marked African-American progress and destiny, then threats to manhood, temperance activists could claim, questioned whether the race would meet its mission. Temperance workers’ discourse on manliness simply added temperance to the list of things that threatened black manhood, a list that already included slavery, white supremacy, and irreligion, things that conspired against the race’s progress, and thus, against the plans of God.

There was, of course, a positive side to all the wailings over poverty, crime, re-enslavement, and loss of manhood. Temperance activists reaffirmed the belief that a glorious day stood in the not-too-distant future for black North Carolinians. And in the case of alcohol, black communities had it fully within their power to remove the obstacle from their path, unlike other obstacles, such as oppressive landlords or voter fraud and intimidation. At the AME Zion District Conference in Fayetteville in 1884, Richard Williams reminded his fellow temperance activists what lay ahead of them if their reform efforts met success: “Nothing, I think, is nobler than reform. Fearfully it is needed among our own race, especially in the way of temperance.” While his jeremiad began with a grim portrait, as did others, it ended on quite an optimistic note: “Should economy, uprightness, honesty, sobriety, each in their turn take the place of the many vices that we are addicted to or should the raging flood of intemperance which now sweeps through

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<sup>53</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1908, 10-11.

our land cease, this world of ours would be a happy one.” What awaited black North Carolinians, Williams said hopefully, was “a Paradise on earth.”<sup>54</sup>

### **Prohibition Politics**

The reform that Williams promised would bring Paradise on earth was one of moral suasion. The Good Templars and churches, and later the WCTU, recruited members who then signed pledges not to drink alcohol. Activists gave speeches, preachers delivered sermons, and Sunday School teachers taught lessons—all designed to stop individuals from drinking and to gain more activists for the temperance cause. But even though black temperance activism was largely focused on the demand-side of the liquor trade, activists also touted supply-side solutions. J. A. Tyler, who described intemperance as a problem of the human heart, nevertheless placed blame on the state’s refusal to make the liquor trade illegal. “The highest sanction of the land,” he wrote, “enables [men] to stab conscience with a death blow.”<sup>55</sup> Howard Tyson, the student who won the Fayetteville school declamation contest, asked, “Is there no way to stop the making of it?” and answered, “Yes, if we will vote down the selling of it, the demand for it will come to an end.”<sup>56</sup> Temperance advocates like Tyler and Tyson championed local-option prohibition referenda and encouraged black voters to throw their support behind any and all prohibition measures. Black Protestants, in effect, assumed that the personal was political.

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<sup>54</sup>*Star of Zion*, November 14, 1884.

<sup>55</sup>J. A. Tyler, “The Age in Which We Live,” *Fayetteville Educator*, March 20, 1875.

<sup>56</sup>Howard Tyson, “Whiskey,” *Fayetteville Educator*, February 6, 1875.



In the 1870s, black temperance activists campaigned for local option laws to prohibit the sale of alcohol in townships throughout North Carolina. The occasional black school or church petitioned the state legislature to outlaw the sale or consumption of alcohol within a certain radius of the school grounds or churchyard. In 1881, the black temperance movement in North Carolina had its first major debut in the contentious politics of prohibition. After a decade of temperance organizing, black leaders felt ready for the statewide debut. The campaign began when a number of temperance organizations, leading citizens, and representatives from white and black churches converged on a State Prohibition Convention in Raleigh in January 1881. The Convention drafted a proposal to the state legislature arguing for a statewide ban on the sale of intoxicating liquors, and North Carolina's most prominent ministers and laymen signed it, including black Baptist minister Augustus Shepard, founder of the Oxford Colored Orphan's Asylum, and prominent layman Charles Hunter.<sup>57</sup> "In the early part of the campaign," one white minister remembered, "all the ministers, white and colored, with but few exceptions, in the State, were for prohibition."<sup>58</sup> It was a biracial movement.

In the proposal sent to the state legislature, the Convention organizers boasted of unqualified black support for a new prohibition law. Not only were some of the leading prohibitionists African-American but also black churches and organizations passed resolutions favoring prohibition. In Raleigh, while the Prohibition Convention met, the North Carolina Prince Hall Masons, a black fraternal lodge, went into session and passed a unanimous resolution in favor of the proposed prohibition law. The Lodge's support,

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<sup>57</sup>Daniel Jay Whitener, "History of the Temperance Movement in North Carolina, 1715 to 1908" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1932), 130-35.

<sup>58</sup>R. H. Whitaker, *Whitaker's Reminiscences, Incidents, and Anecdotes* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards and Broughton, 1905), 196-98.

white prohibitionists argued, was “an incident highly creditable to our colored citizens.” In fact, leading white activists saw the Masonic resolution as the first fruits of full black support for prohibition. As the Convention told the legislature, “This endorsement from such an intelligent and influential portion of the race, indicates they will support it. Since then we have received the names of a large number of their ministers, and of thousands of petitioners.”<sup>59</sup> Rev. R. H. Whitaker, a leading white temperance activist and editor of a temperance newspaper, recalled, “The colored people, if anything, were more favorable to it than were the whites.”<sup>60</sup> Black temperance organizers presented a unified front.

State legislators refused to pass a statewide ban on the sale of alcohol. Instead, they put the issue before the voters in a popular referendum set for August 1881. Prohibitionists quickly mobilized a campaign targeted at the state’s electorate. This, too, was a biracial effort. Price—“the greatest orator I have ever heard utter a sentence,” according to one colleague—stumped the state for the prohibition measure.<sup>61</sup> His speeches attracted interracial audiences. One speech in High Point, North Carolina, attracted “the largest audience ever assembled in this part of the State (supposed to be ten thousand).” Observers marveled at Price, “a Negro as big and black as he was eloquent and learned,” and delighted in his “grace and eloquence” and his “logical reasoning and solid arguments.”<sup>62</sup> Numerous colleagues joined Price in the campaign. Newspapers and observers commented on the organizing work of black women, who worked tirelessly in

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<sup>59</sup>“Document No. 23,” in *North Carolina Executive and Legal Documents, Session 1881* (Raleigh, NC: News & Observer, State Printers and Binders, 1881), 2-3, 4-5.

<sup>60</sup>Whitaker, *Whitaker’s Reminiscences*, 196.

<sup>61</sup>Morgan London Latta, *The History of My Life and Work* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards and Broughton, 1903), 158-59.

<sup>62</sup>“Prohibition in North Carolina,” *Christian Recorder*, July 28, 1881; “Breaking Down the Color Line,” *Christian Recorder*, December 8, 1887.

favor of the prohibition referendum. About the movement in Raleigh, Rev. Morgan Latta said, “Of course [the women] were in favor of prohibition,” as if women’s involvement was so widely known as to need no comment.<sup>63</sup> And in Charlotte, black churchwomen organized the Ladies’ Prohibition Association, which caught the attention of the white press.<sup>64</sup> Male and female prohibitionists’ interracial campaign appeared to be working well, and by the early summer of 1881, nearly everyone expected the prohibition measure to pass.<sup>65</sup>

But anti-prohibitionists were ready for a fight. On June 1, North Carolina’s liquor dealers organized a convention to oppose the referendum. Nearly three hundred delegates arrived in Raleigh to chart their course. According to local newspapers, about one-fourth of the delegates were African-American. When prominent black leader James E. O’Hara, who would later represent North Carolina’s Second Congressional District in the U.S. House, joined the anti-prohibitionists, many of his friends and colleagues felt betrayed. O’Hara came onboard the State Anti-Prohibition Association’s executive committee and helped craft the strategy to defeat the 1881 referendum.<sup>66</sup>

The liquor dealers and anti-prohibitionists demonstrated political savvy by creating a new political party, the Liberal Anti-Prohibition Party. This party poised itself to challenge the Democratic Party leadership, many of whom had come out in favor of the 1881 referendum. The state’s Republican Party leadership, including O’Hara, smiled

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<sup>63</sup>Latta, *The History of My Life and Work*, 159.

<sup>64</sup>“Colored Prohibition,” *Charlotte Observer*, July 15, 1881, quoted in Anastatia Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South*, 21.

<sup>65</sup>Daniel Jay Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina, 1715-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1946), 70-78.

<sup>66</sup>Whitener, “History of the Temperance Movement in North Carolina, 1715 to 1908,” 130ff.

upon the Liberal Anti-Prohibition Party's defection from the Democrat Party, and welcomed the arrival of a third party. The Republican Party State Executive Committee, in a controversial 3-to-2 vote, issued a statement opposing the prohibition referendum, and hoping to absorb the Liberal Anti-Prohibition Party (which it would do three years later) and to challenge the decade-long dominance of the Democratic Party. Black North Carolinians watched as two institutions that normally made good bedfellows, black churches and the Republican Party, turned against each other.<sup>67</sup>

Leading prohibition activists responded with confusion and terror to the movement's politicization. Hood insisted, "It was not the intention of the movers in the prohibition measure to connect it with politics." Hood told members of his church that organizers had introduced the measure in 1881, precisely because it was a time of little political divisiveness. Hood accused liquor dealers and politicians of "forc[ing] politics into it," when the measure had nothing to do with the Democratic or Republican parties.<sup>68</sup> But despite the design of the original prohibitionist organizers, party politics dominated the 1881 campaign. When Baptist minister Morgan Latta gave speeches in Raleigh in favor of the referendum, he met resistance from black audiences who dismissed the measure as "nothing but a Democratic ticket." Frustrated, Latta told those assembled that "there were no politics involved in this measure." The people responded by accusing Latta of "selling their interests to the Democratic Party."<sup>69</sup> Black ministers encountered loyalty to the Republican Party as a substantial obstacle in their prohibitionist campaign.

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid.; Whitaker, *Whitaker's Reminiscences*, 196-98.

<sup>68</sup>*Minutes of the Eighteenth Session of the North Carolina Annual Conference of the A. M. E. Zion Church* (1881), 43-44.

<sup>69</sup>Latta, *The History of My Life and Work*, 158-59.

According to Whitaker, a leading white prohibitionist, the Republican Party leadership tried to convince black voters that prohibition was just one of the many ways Democrats planned to restrict their rights or “to put them all back into slavery.”<sup>70</sup> Given small-scale disfranchisement measures and unfair landlord-tenant laws unleashed by the Democratic-controlled legislature, the association between the Democratic party and curtailment of rights had to be strong in black voters’ minds. A number of black North Carolinians found the description of prohibition as a curtailment of liberties a convincing one. Latta encountered black voters who believed that “to take whiskey out of the State was infringing upon their material rights that were granted to them in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments of the Constitution of the United States.”<sup>71</sup> Whitaker and Latta were unsympathetic, even mocking, of this perspective on prohibition, but some black North Carolinians were reluctant to give the state more power to limit their personal choices.

In August, voters defeated the prohibition referendum by a margin of three to one. Some white North Carolinians blamed the defeat on black voters. The *Charlotte Observer* and the *Carolina Watchman* concluded, with little evidence, that the black vote went almost entirely against the referendum and that the white vote was split. But because black voters made up less than one-third of the state’s electorate, it was not entirely believable to blame the election results on them. Rev. Whitaker, however, found a way: “as soon as it was seen the negro vote would be cast almost solidly against prohibition, hundreds of white men who had intended to vote for it, began to ease off.” As dubious as Whitaker’s reasoning was—that white voters took their cue from black

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<sup>70</sup>Whitaker, *Whitaker’s Reminiscences*, 196-98.

<sup>71</sup>Latta, *The History of My Life and Work*, 155-56.

voters—the idea caught on. A consensus among white temperance leaders emerged that, despite initial black support for prohibition, the 1881 referendum failed in large part because of African-American voters.<sup>72</sup>

Black temperance leaders, in contrast, argued that both the white and the black vote split on the issue, but they were equally disappointed with the outcome. Bishop Hood told the North Carolina Annual Conference of the AME Zion Church in Beaufort, North Carolina, in December of that year, “the members of our church contributed a full proportionate share of [the prohibition] vote, yet it is painful to know that some were active opponents of the measure. . . . Nothing since emancipation has reflected so badly upon our people as their action in this matter.”<sup>73</sup> Black leaders’ contention that the African-American electorate cast a split vote seemed easier to substantiate than did white leaders’ accusation of a solidly wet vote. Black churches and temperance organizations maintained an active campaign throughout the summer of 1881, and in subsequent local-option prohibition campaigns, newspapers reported a mixture of black support and opposition. After several 1886 elections, the *North Carolina Presbyterian* reported, “Some of our successes in the late elections were due to freedmen. They refused to be hood-winked by the clap-trap about liberty and freedom.”<sup>74</sup> Whatever the racial makeup of the 1881 vote, the anti-prohibitionists won a landslide. It was a deafening defeat for both black and white temperance activists.

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<sup>72</sup>*Charlotte Observer*, August 5, 1881, and *Carolina Watchman*, August 11, 1881, quoted in Daniel Jay Whitener, “History of the Temperance Movement in North Carolina, 1715 to 1908,” 153-55.

<sup>73</sup>*Minutes of the Eighteenth Session of the North Carolina Annual Conference of the A. M. E. Zion Church* (1881), 43-44.

<sup>74</sup>*North Carolina Presbyterian*, June 16, 1886, quoted in Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 91.

The prohibitionist camp searched for answers, trying to make sense of defeat. Hood told his church that “Satan must have looked upon the anti-prohibition movement as his last great effort . . . in defense of his tottering kingdom.” Hood often described earthly events as the work of both human and supernatural agents. So, even though he blamed the defeat on “the hosts of hell,” which he meant literally, he also pointed fingers at certain groups of people. Hood attributed the election results to the “slanders of politicians or rum-sellers” and to white leaders who claimed to be “friends of the temperance cause” yet “found fault with the bill’s [wording].” He challenged those leaders, who “are most likely to control the next Legislature,” to produce a better prohibition measure, and if they did so, black churches would stand ready to help. Hood also considered the 1881 prohibition referendum a test that his church and his race had failed, and so, he issued a stern warning to his colleagues. Anyone who rejected “total abstinence from all intoxicants as a beverage,” Hood warned, “has denied the faith . . . and forfeits his right to a place among us.” The faithful would continue to “make war” on intemperance, to “follow the path of duty” that God had laid out before them, Hood preached. It was a jeremiad of the first order.<sup>75</sup>

The success of the anti-prohibition message in black communities—and its extent was not entirely clear—depended upon its ability to produce a jeremiad of comparable credibility to that of the prohibitionists. We know very little about why black Protestant leaders like James O’Hara opposed the 1881 measure. But we know from others’ accounts that O’Hara was hardly alone. Part of their opposition came from their vested interests in the success of the Republican Party and their willingness to try maneuvers

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<sup>75</sup>*Minutes of the Eighteenth Session of the North Carolina Annual Conference of the A. M. E. Zion Church* (1881), 43-44

aimed at regaining a Republican majority in the state. Some of the bill's black opponents may simply have wanted a place to drink. But it also seems probable that leaders like O'Hara might not have considered their support for temperance and their opposition to prohibition to be inconsistent. The concept of manliness, which, again, black temperance activists often invoked, emphasized a man's ability to control himself. Seen in this way, imposed state control took away a black man's ability to exercise that key virtues of manhood: self-control. Moreover, when black leaders used the concept manhood, it was almost always in contrast to white paternalism. As manly men, black men wanted to regulate themselves and to prove they could do so without white supervision. Opposition to prohibition, then, for leaders like O'Hara, may have stemmed from longstanding black Protestant support for the virtues of manhood and for black political liberty.

Whitaker's memoir, which intended to demonstrate the "nonsense" of anti-prohibitionists, unintentionally revealed their rationality. Anti-prohibitionists marshaled numerous biblical stories to argue that prohibition ran counter to God's will. Passing such an anti-biblical measure, they insisted, would imperil the race's freedom. This counter-jeremiad, as it were, seemed to resonate well with black audiences who held biblical stories in high regard and who worried that their newly won liberties were in danger.<sup>76</sup>

Whitaker reported seeing a number of open-air camp meetings, akin to revivals, in the summer of 1881, where anti-prohibitionists convince black worshippers that prohibition ran contrary to their own interests and to the word of God. In his memoirs, Whitaker offered a composite sample of the speeches he heard, and he provided a sketch (See Figure 4.1). In the sketch, a white man preaches from a makeshift pulpit of two

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<sup>76</sup>Whitaker, *Whitaker's Reminiscences*, 198-201.



whiskey barrels and a plank of wood. He stands on a soap box, with a liquor bottle in his back pocket and his fist in the air. An audience of black men and women, some barefoot and wearing farmers' hats and headscarves, gathers in an outdoor meeting place. At first glance, the scene could be one of a camp meeting revival: indeed, the text in Whitaker's account of the anti-prohibition speech sounded very much like a sermon. The preacher appealed to audience as "fellow citizens" and acknowledged that "These are mighty ticklish times!" In doing so, he recognized and legitimated black fears that their citizenship rights were in jeopardy while assuring them that he considered them to be full citizens. According to Whitaker, the "whiskey power" preacher played on black North Carolinians' sense of endangerment by calling attention to the "danger of losing our most sacred right—the right to eat and drink as we please." The language of rights and freedom, Whitaker worried, was an underhanded way to gain the support of a people "who were ignorant and very much afraid they might be put back into slavery again." The anti-prohibition preacher raised additional fears when he claimed, rather vaguely, that "there's something behind" the bill, something "concocted by the enemies of a free and independent people." The fact that many Democrats supported prohibition and that the Republican Party State Executive Committee opposed it, no doubt, lent weight to the whiskey preacher's arguments.<sup>77</sup>

The preacher in Whitaker's account went further, claiming that prohibition contradicted the teachings of the Bible. He drew upon the familiar passages of Jesus' miracle at Cana, where he turned water into wine, and Paul's advice to Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach infirmities; and he quoted the proverb, "Give strong drink to him that is ready to perish." These passages, the preacher argued, proved "that the Bible

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

is teetotally against prohibition.” The speech reached its climax when the preacher asked the congregation, “And didn’t the blessed Savior say, ‘Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man, but which proceedeth out of the mouth?’” People in the crowd cried out, “Bless de Lawd, de Bible’s on our side!” These biblical arguments combined with political arguments made an effective case for anti-prohibition, and Whitaker lamented that it was “no wonder” that black North Carolinians believed it.<sup>78</sup>

There is reason to question the accuracy of Whitaker’s account. First, it was an imagined composite; his story named no specific people or places. Secondly, the tone of his memoir was so openly derisive of African Americans as to lose any semblance of objectivity. And lastly, the failure of the 1881 prohibition campaign left Whitaker bitter, and he, like many white North Carolinians, displayed a facility to scapegoat black neighbors for his own frustrations. Other sources, however, including white and black religious newspapers, corroborated some aspects of Whitaker’s story. African Americans in North Carolina were apprehensive about any further curtailment of their rights; and they found biblical stories that seemed to condone drinking more persuasive than general moral arguments against the practice. There were striking parallels between the anti-prohibitionist sermon in Whitaker’s memoir and the typical jeremiad of black temperance activists. Both argued that black North Carolinians were on a path to full citizenship and that certain barriers threatened to stop or reverse their progress. Both gave warnings and both appealed to the authority of the Bible. For folks on both sides of the issue, prohibition raised questions about the freedom and progress of the race and the directives of God.

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

After the 1881 campaign, prohibition politics in North Carolina remained racially charged. The national Prohibition Party held its first convention in North Carolina in December 1885. The convention frightened Republican and Democratic Party officials, who feared defection from their ranks, but the Democratic Party, in particular, was uneasy. Democrats held too precarious a majority to back a statewide prohibition measure, an unpopular move if the 1881 election proved anything. But by not backing prohibition, the Democratic Party risked losing one wing of the party to the new Prohibition Party. Party officials, therefore, sent a clear message to their own members: any third party risked splitting white votes and electing black officers. Instead, prohibitionist Democrats threw their weight behind local-option prohibition campaigns, hoping to defuse the issue at the state level.<sup>79</sup>

But even local prohibition elections became racially charged, although wet and dry never fell neatly along racial lines. The *Winston Sentinel* claimed that Winston's black residents voted "almost solidly for the dry ticket" while newspapers in Charlotte reported that only "two Negroes voted for prohibition, notwithstanding nine tenths of them are members of the church."<sup>80</sup> The traveling editor of the AME Church's *Christian Recorder*, Benjamin F. Lee, observed a strong prohibition sentiment among Raleigh's black population. In 1886, that city voted dry in a local-option prohibition referendum, and one year later, the issue again came before the voters. As a result, Lee noticed, "the prohibition question was in hot discussion in the town." Lee described prohibition meetings convened "under a large canvas tent" where "colored and white assembled

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<sup>79</sup>Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 81-100.

<sup>80</sup>Both newspaper reports quoted in the *North Carolina Presbyterian*, June 16, 1886; see also Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 91.

together night after night, speaking, singing, yelling and rolling on the prohibition subject.” The meetings were interracial, but as Lee recounted, the African-American community was the “most pronounced in favor of reform.” Black women showed the most commitment, as they “declared themselves ready to die martyrs to the glorious cause.” African-American prohibition activism in Raleigh fed into the city’s race-baiting politics. Lee reported, “The white ‘anti’s’ [anti-prohibitionists] use this as a means of intimidating white ‘probi’s,’ [prohibitionists]: ‘You certainly don’t want to be on the nigger side, do you!’” It is hard to say how effective that intimidation was, but at the next election, Raleigh voters opted for a wet city.<sup>81</sup>

Prohibition politics in North Carolina became increasingly racialized. Black temperance leaders, who spearheaded parts of the earlier campaigns, found the movement snowballing out of their control. When black churches gave their full support to the 1881 referendum, the movement failed and white prohibitionists blamed the black community. When black churches renewed their commitment to prohibition, as they did in the 1886-1887 Raleigh local-option campaigns, some whites used black prohibitionist sentiment to drum up white support for the opposing side. After the 1881 campaign, Bishop Hood declared, “We care not who leads in the suppression of intemperance; what we desire is that the evil be banished form the land, and we will follow any man’s lead to that end.”<sup>82</sup> Black ministers and women organizers had championed the interracialism of the temperance movement, not principally to gain respectability or white approval. Rather, working with whites served as a means to another end: to stop threats to African

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<sup>81</sup>“A Visit to Raleigh, N.C.” *Christian Recorder*, June 9, 1887.

<sup>82</sup>*Minutes of the Eighteenth Session of the North Carolina Annual Conference of the A. M. E. Zion Church*, 43-44.

Americans' progress. But interracial cooperation became trickier and more volatile as the century came to a close. The movement for prohibition in North Carolina became a story largely about whites, not because black temperance activists retreated or lost interest, but because they found themselves unwelcome among their former allies.

In fact, a number of leading white temperance advocates reasoned that black suffrage stood in the way of statewide prohibition. They cited allegations that African Americans would always vote wet. Frances Willard, the national president of the WCTU, said in an 1890 interview in Atlanta, "The problem on their [white southerners'] hands is immeasurable. The colored race multiplies like the locusts of Egypt. The grog-shop is its center of power."<sup>83</sup> At the 1896 North Carolina state WCTU convention, Belle Kearney, the keynote speaker, listed black suffrage among the primary hindrances to temperance legislation.<sup>84</sup> But the other part of their reasoning had little to do with speculation as to whether black men would vote dry or wet. White prohibitionists argued that Democrats were reluctant to split white votes over a controversial measure like prohibition as long as black politicians stood ready to capitalize on their discord. Race-baiting sounded the death knell for prohibition legislation in North Carolina. By disfranchising black voters, southern white prohibitionists argued they could take the race card from their opponents' deck.<sup>85</sup>

In an August 1900 referendum, North Carolina passed a constitutional amendment to disfranchise the African-American electorate. The *Biblical Recorder*, the

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<sup>83</sup>Interview quoted in Ida B. Wells-Barnett, "A Red Record," in *On Lynchings* (1895; repr., Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2002), 133.

<sup>84</sup>Belle Kearney, "The Late State Convention of the W. C. T. U.," *The North Carolina White Ribbon*, July 1, 1896.

<sup>85</sup>Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 133-35.

weekly journal of the white State Baptist Convention of North Carolina, hailed disfranchisement as a boon to prohibition: “As was long hoped, the first fruits of disfranchisement of the negroes bids fair to be progress in legislations prohibiting saloons.”<sup>86</sup> Other white prohibitionists anticipated more success now that state elections were nearly all-white. As historian Daniel Whitener explained, “Since the Negro was eliminated, they said, prohibitionists were now at liberty to leave any party that persisted in licensing and upholding ‘a business that demoralizes and debauches society.’”<sup>87</sup> There was some truth to the predictions that Democratic politicians would be more supportive of prohibition after black disfranchisement. In 1903, Charles Aycock and Furnifold Simmons, two of the masterminds behind the white supremacy campaigns of 1898 and 1900, pushed through the legislature a bill that prohibited the sale and manufacture of alcohol in the state except in incorporated towns that had the police power to oversee it. Five years later, in a popular referendum, North Carolina became the first southern state to ban completely the manufacture and sale of all alcoholic beverages.<sup>88</sup>

## **Conclusion**

When black temperance activists entered state prohibition politics, they did not abandon their role as Jeremiahs. In fact, black ministers looked back upon their foray into prohibition politics as a crucial moment in the race’s peculiar relationship with God. They interpreted their failures in the 1881 campaign as the sin for which black North Carolinians suffered God’s chastisement in the late 1890s. The 1898 white supremacy

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<sup>86</sup>*Biblical Recorder*, December 24, 1902, qtd. in Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 134.

<sup>87</sup>Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 135.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*

campaign in North Carolina used race baiting, fraud, and lawlessness to render black Republicans powerless and to send black residents of Wilmington scurrying out of town in a bloody coup d'état. As black Protestant leaders tried to make sense of the radically changed political landscape—from the triumphs of emancipation to the violent defeat in 1898—they recounted black North Carolinians' sins to place their political history within larger religious narratives.<sup>89</sup> Topping the list of sins was intemperance and the failure to support prohibition legislation.

Bishop C. R. Harris wrote in an editorial for the *Star of Zion* that to understand the “great political defeat” of 1898, black North Carolinians need to reflect on their relationship with God since the days of emancipation. “Thirty years ago or more,” he wrote, “God was for the Negro and the Republican Party.” Harris argued that black Republicans had been so hungry for power, with such blind loyalty to the Party, that they made alliances with unscrupulous and immoral men. Harris explained God's reaction:

But, as with Israel in the days of old, God did not suffer us to desert Him without a Prophet to warn and persuade us. He saw the Negro had just emerged from the black night of slavery; he can not easily discriminate between right and wrong in party politics. ‘I will try him with a moral issue.’ So in 1881 He sends upon the political arena a prophet like Isaiah and Jeremiah . . . God even here ‘tempered the wind to the shorn lamb.’ He separated it from the word ‘Party’ and named it ‘Bill’—Prohibition Bill. In the contest that ensued, God, with His preachers, white and black, were found upon one side, allied with the best people of the State, Republicans as well as Democrats.

According to Harris, black North Carolinians did not pass the test that God sent. When they failed to ride the tide of the prohibition campaign to victory, “its ebb drug back the Negro into well nigh irretrievable defeat.” What was its result? Harris answered,

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<sup>89</sup>Chapter 5 examines how black Protestant leaders reconciled their political defeats in 1898 with their hopeful eschatology.

“Righteousness was defeated without regard to color or party, and corruption has ruled politics since.”<sup>90</sup>

Harris’s account of the 1881 prohibition referendum election laid out some practical consequences. Because black voters listened more to the Republican Party than to their own consciences, white prohibitionists abandoned the idea of biracial politics and instead threw their weight behind white supremacist politics. But Harris’s story was also supernatural. “God has deserted the party,” Harris explained. The subtitle of his editorial explained even more: “The Negro Leaves God—God Leaves the Negro.” Harris drew the parallel with ancient Israel very closely. African Americans, being God’s chosen people, entered into a special reciprocal relationship or covenant with God. Their faithfulness ensured God’s protection and blessing, but their unfaithfulness—amid the warnings of prophets—led God to withdrawal blessing and to issue divine chastisement. In light of the recent chastisement, Harris said, “So may the Negro now cry ‘O preacher, preacher! Had I but served my God as I have served my party, He would not now have left me prostrate and bleeding.’”<sup>91</sup>

Harris’s good friend and colleague, Bishop Hood, agreed with Harris’ interpretation. He, too, after the 1898 white supremacy campaigns, mourned the lost opportunity of the 1881 prohibition referendum. Before the Central North Carolina Conference of the AME Zion Church, Hood recounted the story of the 1881 election. He reminded his audience of the Republican Party’s decision to support “the rum interest,” and the “sorts of lies” opponents spread about a loss of freedom, or a return to slavery,

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<sup>90</sup>C. R. Harris, “Bishop’s Address: The Negro Leaves God—God Leaves the Negro,” *Star of Zion*, December 22, 1898.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*



that would result from the prohibition measure. “We were read out of the party and our preachers generally who favored Prohibition were denounced as enemies of the race.”

Hood spoke just three weeks after the Wilmington Race Riot, and he related the recent events to the 1881 election:

In 1881 we had the opportunity to divide the white vote so widely that it could never have been consolidated again—not on a political issue, however, but on a great moral issue . . . If the mass of our people could have been induced to vote for Prohibition and thus secured its adoption, the white people would have seen that we could be depended upon to support such measures . . . and what we have now passed through could never have occurred.

Like Harris, Hood lamented the results of the 1881 prohibition campaign, and blamed on it the failure to forge long-lasting biracial alliances.<sup>92</sup>

Like Harris, Hood recast the history as a supernatural story: “The drunken side of the Republican Party with the anti-Prohibitionists generally succeeded in defeating the measure, and the curse of God has rested upon the party in this State from that date to the present.” Hood’s and Harris’s pronouncements of God’s judgment sounded as grim as the original jeremiads. But, for all their talk of God’s chastisement, their messages were not self-loathing but rather self-affirming. By rebuking black North Carolinians, Hood in no way meant to exonerate the race’s political enemies. White supremacists, Hood felt certain, would suffer God’s wrath for their “lawlessness.”<sup>93</sup> That is, black reformers like Hood were not suffering from “unconscious, internalized racism.”<sup>94</sup> We know this because the story that Hood and Harris and other temperance activists wanted to tell was not about white North Carolinians—though obviously they desired biracial alliances and

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<sup>92</sup>J. W. Hood, “Race Disturbances,” *Star of Zion*, December 15, 1898.

<sup>93</sup>Hood, “Race Disturbances.”

<sup>94</sup>Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 6.

the friendship of white men “worth standing with” to accomplish their purposes. Instead, the story they told was of black Americans’ relationship with God and the special mission God had granted them in human history.

The story black temperance activists told, despite the setbacks of 1881 and 1898, was a triumphant one. Their chest-beating, like that in Puritan jeremiads, gave way to predictions of a glorious day and affirmations of their role as God’s special people. Hood ended his editorial on an upbeat: “Notwithstanding the bitterness of the recent campaign and its results, I cannot allow myself to believe that the future of my people in this State can be as dark and discouraging as some are now prophesying.” In the column next to Harris’ editorial in the *Star of Zion*, Bishop Alexander Walters explained why ministers like Hood might still hold out hope: “Truly the outlook is gloomy. But we have seen gloomier times than the present (a short while before the war, when the fugitive slave law was passed) and were brought triumphantly through the God of battles.”<sup>95</sup> Walters expected divine intervention on behalf of his people. In all the doomsday warnings and admonitions to stop drinking, black temperance activists were sending another message: that African Americans occupied a high place in the sacred historical design, and that as God’s special people, their eschatological destiny was progress and triumph.

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<sup>95</sup>Alexander Walters, “The Outlook Gloomy,” *Star of Zion*, December 22, 1898.

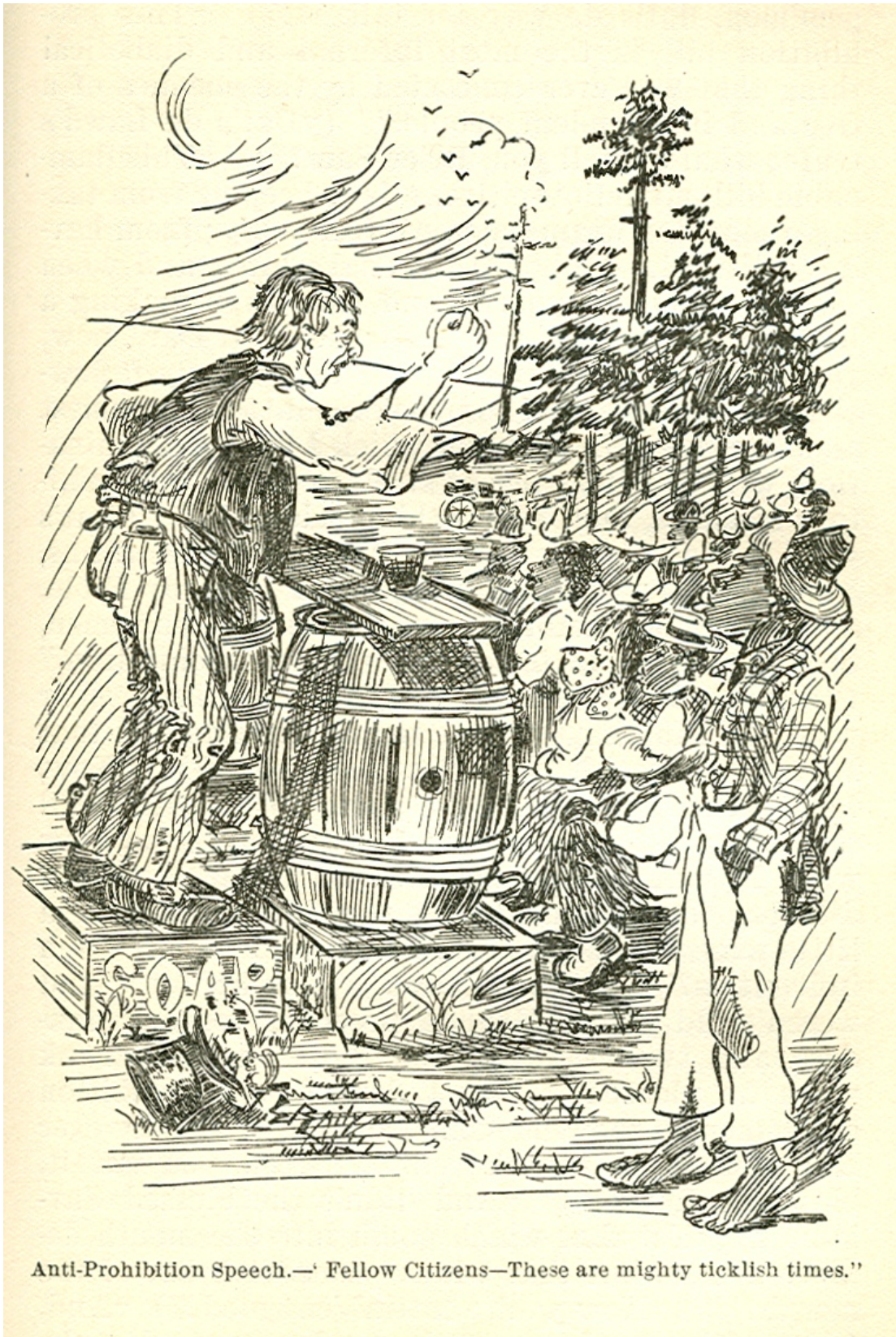


Figure 4-1. "Anti-Prohibition Speech," *Whitaker's Reminiscences, Incidents, and Anecdotes* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards and Broughton, 1905), 199.

## Chapter Five

### A Persistent Theology of Hope and the Politics of Jim Crow

In 1894, Rev. S. F. Hamilton, a black Methodist minister in Monroe, North Carolina, was both troubled and comforted about his race's future in the state. He viewed recent political events as portentous signs. Across the South, state legislatures and popular referenda imposed racial segregation on rail travel and considered ways to disfranchise black men. And Hamilton wrote during the height of lynching. He conveyed his fears to fellow church members in a *Star of Zion* column. "The times are stringent, it cannot be denied . . . We have reached the danger line," he reported. In the history of the race since emancipation, Hamilton wrote, the 1890s were a critical turning point. "What God has done for us in these twenty-nine years is a wonder of wonders!" He described racial progress as a reenactment of the biblical story of the conquest of Canaan. "We as a nation are in arms' reach of the goal," he narrated. But, he continued, "There seems to be a great Jordan between us and the 'Promised Land.' Many difficulties to remove before we eat of the corn of the land." As the race worked to reach the "Promised Land," Hamilton predicted the 1890s would be a decade full of difficulties. He wrote, "We must achieve victory in the next decade, or to some extent a great defeat will send a shock of cowardice on the Negro race . . . which will be felt for succeeding

generations.” Hamilton foresaw the new assaults on black rights, the beginnings of the Jim Crow era, and warned his colleagues to fight hard against it.<sup>1</sup>

Though Hamilton saw omens of defeat for black North Carolinians—lynching, low wages for black farmers, and disfranchisement measures in other states—he nevertheless spoke confidently about the race’s coming triumph. “I believe a brighter day is coming; that we are on the eve of a millennial age, in which the pure gleam of heaven will be inhaled by the nations,” he wrote. With such an eschatology of hope, Hamilton explained, black North Carolinians could weather and defeat the forces of Jim Crow. “If we are God’s people, ‘no weapon that is formed against us shall prosper,’” he wrote, softening his alarmism. He used apocalyptic language:

Let God but unstable His fiery horses and they will paw the mountain into cinders and beat the world into ashes in a moment; but even then hitched to the car of our redemption, shaking their fiery manes among the stars, and flashing through the constellations will roll us up to God—the fires of hell tossing below with the damned.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the very real warnings that Hamilton gave in the beginning of his column, he concluded with a much more upbeat message. The column ended, “The ‘living wheels’ of the Almighty cannot be hindered by man. Be courageous for the trembling gates of hell shall not prevail against her [Zion, the church, or God’s people]. No never.”

Hamilton had two seemingly contradictory aims. First, he wanted to alert “every leader” to the political dangers facing the race and to motivate them to seek practical and human ways to avert those dangers. Second, he insisted that the future of black Americans lay in

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<sup>1</sup>S. F. Hamilton, “Present Times,” *Star of Zion*, March 29, 1894. I use the term “Jim Crow segregation” to mean *de jure* racial segregation, but I employ the term “Jim Crow” more broadly to refer to the policies of segregation, disfranchisement, intimidation, and economic subjugation that circumscribed black southerners’ lives from the 1890s to the 1960s.

<sup>2</sup>S. F. Hamilton, “Present Times.”

God's hands, and thus, despite the machinations of white supremacists, the race would enter the twentieth century triumphantly.<sup>3</sup>

Hamilton's predictions of a contentious and difficult decade proved true. Just months after his column appeared in the *Star of Zion*, the People's Party (composed of reform-minded white farmers) and the Republican Party (composed largely of African Americans) formed a coalition in North Carolina that produced a Fusion slate of candidates in the 1894 election. The success of the Fusion ticket in 1894 and 1896 ignited fierce race-baiting campaigns by white Democrats in an attempt to regain control of the legislature and the Governor's Palace. In 1898, black North Carolinians fielded a company of volunteers for the Spanish-American War, which they hoped would erase the color line but which instead served the ends of domestic and international white supremacy. The white supremacy campaigns in North Carolina peaked in the corrupt and bloody November 1898 election, an election that delivered the state to the Democratic Party. Two days after the election, a violent *coup d'état* in Wilmington deposed and exiled the city's elected biracial leadership and left at least a dozen African Americans dead. Within three years' time, the state instituted *de jure* segregation and passed a constitutional amendment designed to disfranchise African Americans. The late 1890s, as Hamilton predicted, proved disastrous for black interests in the state.

Contemporary white southerners who engineered this shift in racial politics thought of it as a permanent solution to the race problem. Among historians, the 1890s and the turn of the twentieth century have earned the reputation as the nadir of American race relations. The rather dramatic and drastic political changes—disfranchisement and

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

segregation—along with a peak in lynching marked the descent into the long night of the Jim Crow era.

Given the devastating events of the late 1890s, one might have expected black Protestants to revise the thoroughly optimistic eschatology that they had preached since emancipation. But instead, their theology weathered the storms of Jim Crow, and guided their interpretation of the period. Black Protestant leaders' descriptions of the time period seem incongruent with those of historians and contemporary whites. First, black political victories in 1894 and 1896 only strengthened their faith in a better day coming. Until 1898, black leaders in North Carolina could describe the years following emancipation as ones of steady progress. What, though, could sustain their hope given the events of the turn of the century? Previously, black Protestant leaders had celebrated non-political markers of progress, things like church membership, church property, schools, and black land ownership. After 1898, they turned to these markers almost exclusively.

Many black ministers and laypeople were deeply troubled by the 1898 election, disfranchisement, and Jim Crow legislation. Those events, as they understood them, constituted an undeniable setback but not an insurmountable one. For most black Protestant leaders in North Carolina, the turn of the twentieth century was no nadir, only a bump—albeit a sizable one—on the road to a great preordained destiny. Because black eschatology took the shape of biblical narratives, ministers and other leaders had at their disposal many stories, which helped to contextualize their current defeat within a larger story of triumph. Some leaders regarded the setbacks as God's chastisement of his beloved people—further proof that God favored African Americans and reserved for them a special role in history. Others couched the political conflict as supernatural

warfare between the forces of hell and heaven. Still others drew parallels between Christ's crucifixion and black suffering and eagerly awaited their own resurrection. This chapter traces African-American religious responses to North Carolina politics from 1894 into the first decade of the twentieth century and argues that, in the millennial worldview of black Protestant leaders, the reality of emancipation always overshadowed and outweighed the reality of Jim Crow.

### **Fusion**

In the early 1890s, black North Carolinians closely watched the political developments in the Deep South. When neighbors to the south experienced a wave of defeats—beginning with black disfranchisement in Mississippi in 1890 and the separate railcar law in Louisiana the same year—black leaders in North Carolina boasted that their state followed a different path. In 1892, J. C. Price told an audience in New York, “While North Carolina does not profess perfection in this matter [race relations], it is far in advance of many of her sister states in the South.”<sup>4</sup> Throughout most of the 1890s, Price and his colleagues celebrated the absence of Jim Crow laws in North Carolina. At the 1893 annual meeting of the North Carolina Baptist Educational and Missionary Convention (NCBEMC), Dr. J. O Crosby, the president of Greensboro’s A&M College decried the introduction of Jim Crow cars on railroads in states farther south, and he urged those assembled to make use of the opportunities that their brothers in “the southland” did not have.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>J. C. Price, “The Race Question in the South,” *African Methodist Episcopal Zion Quarterly* 2:3 (April 1892): 328-29.



Later in the decade, black Protestant leaders in North Carolina continued to compare their state favorably to others. In 1898, Bishop C. R. Harris of Charlotte, put forth “the absences of jim-crow cars” and the prosperity of black-businesses as evidence of the “good feeling which exists between the races in this State.” The economic and political climate, Harris argued, “justifies the North Carolina Negro in deeming this the best of all the Southern States, and he sings with gusto, ‘Hurrah, Hurrah, for the good old North State forever, / Hurrah, hurrah, for the old North State.’”<sup>6</sup> A year later, Rev. S. N. Nass, the District Secretary for the American Baptist Publication Society, too, burst with state pride: “Our people are a superior people to those you meet in other states—both white and colored.”<sup>7</sup> Even as black ministers routinely criticized state leaders for the curtailment of black rights, they continued to extol North Carolina as the most racially progressive state in the South.

The elections of 1894 and 1896 underscored North Carolina’s exceptionalism. Across the South and Midwest, the People’s Party formed temporary coalitions with the Republican Party to pursue a number of economic and electoral reforms. Nowhere was this two-party coalition more successful than in North Carolina. If the Populists and Republicans ran a joint slate of candidates, the party leaders reasoned, they would have the numerical strength to defeat the incumbent Democrats and to pass legislation favorable to both. It was a strategy, as the *New York Times* labeled it, of “Anything to Get Votes,” but it also revealed the similar class interests held by white and black farmers

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<sup>5</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1893, 9.

<sup>6</sup>C. R. Harris, “Episcopal Dots,” *Star of Zion*, August 4, 1898.

<sup>7</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1899, 16.

and laborers. Fusion, as the two-party coalition became known, was an assault by the working classes and politically marginalized upon the Democratic oligarchy.<sup>8</sup>

Some black clergymen, like Walter Pattillo, embraced the strategy wholeheartedly. Pattillo, a prominent Baptist who helped organize the Colored Orphanage in Oxford, celebrated Fusion not only because it offered black North Carolinians a return to political power but also because Populist reforms would benefit black farmers and sharecroppers. In 1890, Pattillo served as the elected state organizer and lecturer for the Colored Farmers' Alliance, and by the early 1890s, the organization claimed over 55,000 members in North Carolina. In 1891, Pattillo represented the organization at a Confederation of Industrial Organizations (CIO) convention in Washington, DC, and a year later, he attended the St. Louis meeting that organized the People's Party.<sup>9</sup>

Pattillo exemplified the close connections between Populists and rural Baptists in the state. The People's Party and Baptist churches drew support from the same populations: rural farmers, black and white. And, as recent scholars have noted, they also shared similar methods. Populist meetings mirrored evangelical revivals.<sup>10</sup> The parallels between Baptists and Populists in North Carolina went deeper still. Both engaged in rather extraordinary biracial cooperation in the 1890s. White and black Baptists linked arms in a biracial Christian education project known as the Plan of Cooperation. And at

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<sup>8</sup>“Anything to Get Votes,” *New York Times*, 24 July 1896; Gerald H. Gaither, *Blacks and the Populist Movement: Ballots and Bigotry in the New South* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005, c1977); Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890*, rev. ed. (1983; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Joe Creech, *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup>Omar H. Ali, “The Making of a Black Populist: A Tribute to the Rev. Walter A. Pattillo,” *Oxford Public Ledger* 121:25 (March 28, 2002).

<sup>10</sup>See Creech, *Righteous Indignation*.

the same time, the state's white and black farmers considered a political alliance to address the common economic concerns. There is not enough evidence to argue that one of these rural biracial alliances led to the other. Did the biracial relationships forged in the Plan of Cooperation pave the way for black and white farmers' political cooperation? Figures like Pattillo, who advocated for both black involvement in the Populist party and black Baptist involvement in the Plan of Cooperation, suggest a strong correlation. In any case, the similarity and concurrence of the two biracial alliances are noteworthy. Certainly, for leaders like Pattillo, they went hand-in-hand.<sup>11</sup>

Responses from other black clergy, however, were mixed, and many black ministers at first eyed Fusion with suspicion. Rev. George Clinton, editor of the *Star of Zion*, raised a number of concerns. In April 1894 when party officials began discussing the possible coalition, Clinton wrote an editorial arguing against it. He believed that Populists were "as much if not more opposed to giving fair play to the Negro" than were Democrats. According to Clinton, the People's Party attracted "the element of white people which has always been opposed to the progress and best interests of the Negro." He cited the attempts at Fusion in Alabama as evidence that white Republicans and Populists seemed unready to extend a friendly hand to black voters. There was nothing in Fusion, Clinton wrote, "that will prove of benefit to the Negro." He also had concerns about the viability of a third party. Only the Republican and Democratic parties had any chance at a working majority, Clinton argued. Third parties in American politics were short-lived, he maintained, and therefore he discouraged African Americans from building a long-term political strategy dependent upon the survival of the Populists.

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<sup>11</sup>Chapter 2 discusses and analyzes the Baptist Plan of Cooperation.

Black Americans, he argued, should not hitch their train to an engine that was running low on steam.<sup>12</sup>

Clinton's opposition to Populism also stemmed from his loyalty to the Republican Party. He was forever devoted to the party of "Lincoln, Sumner, and Grant." Ultimately, he believed that true principles—not coalitions of convenience—would ensure the long-term success of the Republican Party; so he called for a return to the party's "pristine principles" and opposed the patronage of "special classes and unfit leaders." His belief in the effectiveness of "pristine" politics rested upon his belief in an active God that worked in human affairs: "We believe God raised up the men who founded and manned the Republican party for a purpose. If that purpose is carried out, He will see that the party succeeds." With God ready to defend the Republican Party, Clinton felt free to let Fusion pass on by.<sup>13</sup>

Ignoring Clinton's advice, North Carolina Republicans embraced Fusion as a promising venture. Republicans and Populists held concurrent conventions in Raleigh during the summer of 1894. Party leaders found a number of shared interests: wresting power away from Democrats, democratizing local and county governments, and enacting electoral reforms, such as color-coded balloting, to assist illiterate voters. The parties put forward a single slate of candidates for state offices, mostly white Populists and white Republicans but a number of black Republicans as well. In September, when the parties published the slate, the Fusion ticket met with widespread black support. The editors of

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<sup>12</sup>"Nothing in It for the Negro," *Star of Zion*, April 5, 1894.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

the *Star of Zion*, who had opposed the coalition just a few months before, now endorsed the Fusion ticket.<sup>14</sup>

Black North Carolinians heeded the editors' new advice. Republicans and Populists won a landslide two-thirds majority in the state legislature, with ten black lawmakers winning seats. The *Star of Zion* rejoiced over the results, despite the editors' previous objections to Fusion. Among the spoils of the 1894 victory was the power to replace North Carolina's Democratic senators in Washington. "Every Negro in North Carolina," editor Clinton wrote, "ought to rejoice that fouled-mouth, Negro-hating, and foxy Senator Ransom will be among the slain after March." In the 1896 election, the Fusionists increased their majority in the legislature to three-fourths and elected a white Republican as governor. Black North Carolinians struck a triumphant chord. Their union with Populists had succeeded, in numbers greater than anyone expected, in "wrest[ing] the State from the hands of hidebound and one-sided Democracy."<sup>15</sup> It was reminiscent of the biracial politics of Reconstruction, and black North Carolinians seemed as hopeful as they had been a generation earlier. Their political victories and the Fusionist reforms fueled and confirmed black Protestants' expectations of a better day coming. As the *Star of Zion* editor beamed, "The long oppressed and discouraged Negro will now take courage again."<sup>16</sup> Things were looking up.

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<sup>14</sup>*Star of Zion*, September 6, 1894.

<sup>15</sup>"Election Opinions," *Star of Zion*, November 15, 1894.

<sup>16</sup>*Star of Zion*, November 15, 1894; Eric Anderson, *Race and Politics in North Carolina, 1872-1901: the Black Second* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

## Spanish-American-Cuban War

Feelings among black Protestant leaders remained high in the state, even as North Carolinians prepared for war in the spring of 1898. With sympathy for the Cubans' bid for independence, African Americans, like most other Americans, greeted President William McKinley's declaration of war against Spain as justified and a cause for celebration. John C. Dancy, a leading state Republican and the editor of the *AME Zion Quarterly Review*, seemed particularly sanguine. "There is a growing opinion that the war with Spain is wiping out race, sectional, and class prejudice all at one time," he wrote in the summer of 1898. Black soldiers' participation in the fight against Spain inspired Dancy: "What wonderful changes. Who would have thought thirty years ago that Negro troops with colored officers would be commanded in a war with a foreign power?" Former Confederate generals served alongside free black regiments, Dancy boasted. "God, indeed, makes the wrath of men to praise Him." The positions of honor that black men held in the war fit well into the narrative of progress and destiny that black Protestants told and retold. Dancy added it to a long list of proofs that a better day indeed lay ahead, that progress was sure: "Publication Houses, successful beneficial associations, cotton factories, building and loan associations, great Church organizations, and regiments of soldiers commanded by our own people—these are some of the beginnings of the future of a recently emancipated race." Dancy and others invested the War of 1898 with manifold meaning. "Everything is beginning to come our way after thirty years of freedom—even the isles of the sea with their large contingent of colored population."<sup>17</sup> Dancy hoped that good race relations forged in wartime would snuff out the race hatred igniting the Deep South and elsewhere. And the respect, manhood, and citizenship that

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<sup>17</sup>"Editorials," *AME Zion Quarterly Review* 8:3 (July 1898): 76-79.

black soldiers won on the battlefield gave new life to the belief that emancipation had initiated a new and better era.

If black military service—and the accolades, respect, and citizenship that came with it—tasted sweet, black autonomy in North Carolina’s Third Regiment of Volunteers was sweeter. “North Carolina again leads,” Dancy declared.<sup>18</sup> The Third Regiment, unlike all other black volunteer regiments in 1898, marched with a full slate of black officers. North Carolina black volunteers, perhaps emboldened by recent political events, refused to field a regiment with white officers. Their mantra—“No officers, no fight!”—along with the newly elected Republican governor’s support ensured “a full quota of officers—all Negroes.”<sup>19</sup> For black Protestant leaders like Dancy, the regiment communicated a message: that black men took a complete and equal share in the body politic. Dancy wrote, “The State has three regiments and our race has one of these. This gives up our precise quota according to our population. No other State in the Union can say as much. North Carolina really leads—the other States simply follow.” A precise quota meant full representation in the state, further evidence that in North Carolina black men had the power their numbers afforded them.<sup>20</sup> Democrats, in contrast, pointed to the regiment as proof that Republicans—despite substantial evidence to the contrary—were hell-bent on “Negro domination,” an allegation they would wield often upcoming elections. Ultimately, the regiment, which never saw conflict, held more importance for state politics than for the war effort.

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 78.

<sup>19</sup>Willard Gatewood, “North Carolina’s Negro Regiment in the Spanish-American War,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 48:4 (October 1971); Peiro Gleijeses, “African Americans and the War Against Spain,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 74:2 (April 1996): 184-209.

<sup>20</sup>Editorials,” *AME Zion Quarterly Review* 8:3 (July 1898): 78.

The regiment also held eschatological importance. N. N. Bruce, a Baptist leader, soldier, and instructor at Shaw University, wrote a letter to the *Raleigh News and Observer* shortly before the Third Regiment had been formed, explaining the significance of the regiment, and expressing hope that black military service would translate into equal citizenship rights. “Nobody seriously suggests any want of patriotism, courage, intelligence or boldness on the part of the black soldier boys,” he wrote. “It seems to be a settled truth that these can fight and fight well and long and hard.” Bruce drew upon racial tropes whites used to denigrate and caricature slaves—black subservience and musicality, for example—and inverted them to argue for black superiority in military service. “It is freely admitted that, for instance, [for] an implicit obedience to orders, for imitativeness and aptness to time and tune, and for holding together in the midst of danger, the Negro is a superior man for making the true soldier.” For Bruce, though, the war with Spain was about more than proving the worth of black men as soldiers and citizens. It was an instrument to usher in a new era of peace, justice, and egalitarianism. Bruce continued, “The war was begun for Justice to Humanity—Justice at home as well as abroad, and if this is true, it will not end until any and every color of American man will be gladly welcomed into the trenches alongside of the other boys to fight for Christ’s peace and justice on earth.”<sup>21</sup> For Bruce, the War of 1898 fit into a larger narrative about the coming of “Christ’s peace and justice” and racial harmony.

AME Zion minister Rev. L. S. Slaughter, too, invested the Spanish-American War with theological meaning. He discerned parallels between the war with Spain and the

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<sup>21</sup>N. N. Bruce to the *Raleigh News and Observer*, May 22, 1898, in Willard B. Gatewood Jr., ed., “*Smoked Yankees*” and the *Struggle for Empire: Letters From Negro Soldiers, 1898-1902* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 106-10. Thanks to Elsa Barkeley Brown, who in her comments at a 2005 Southern Historical Association Annual Meeting panel, helped me better interpret Bruce’s letter.



Civil War, instilling both with providential meaning. His retelling of the Civil War followed literary conventions of Old Testament histories. It read like a page from Genesis or the First Book of Kings: “The South said, ‘We will secede and set up a kingdom of our own and have for our king Jeff. Davis.’” The point of his retelling was to show how God used human actors, like Lincoln and Davis, who unwittingly accomplished God’s purpose in emancipation. Slaughter allegorized, “Here we have in those two men a Moses and a Pharaoh—one to lead and the other to drive, and God the great General to command.” He hoped that the War of 1898 would likewise accomplish divine purposes even as the nations involved pursued their own interests. If good were to come from the war of 1898, he believed, it would have to come from “the Lord who will see that justice is done.”<sup>22</sup>

But Slaughter worried that the current war would parallel the Civil War in less desirable ways. “After the [Civil] war,” he recalled, “the Negro,” despite his exemplary military service, “was treated by the Government as a poor man treats his horse after a hard day’s work—turned out to graze on a dry pasture.” He worried that the same mistreatment might follow the present war and noted that “nearly as many Negroes . . . have died by lynching since the close of the war as died in the war.” He remained mystified why the United States would go to war to protect and liberate Cubans, while refusing to offer the same protections to its own citizens. “Our patriotism is being chilled because our willingness to help to defend the flag is not appreciated.” The war, according to Slaughter, had not accomplished what Dancy and Bruce had hoped. In fact, the war heightened racial tensions and intensified calls for white supremacy.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>L. S. Slaughter, “This Present War: Should Charity Begin at Home?” *Star of Zion*, July 14, 1898.

As the war came to an end, many black Americans agreed with Slaughter's assessment. As historian Willard Gatewood has argued, African Americans reevaluated their enthusiasm for the war when the expected blessings failed to materialize. The accolades black soldiers received for the service in Cuba and elsewhere "proved both brief and illusory." As Gatewood explained, the sectional unity that black leaders like Dancy expected, "actually meant northern acquiescence in the 'southern solution' to the Negro Problem." The boasted black volunteer regiments, stationed in the South, "aroused fear and resentment among whites," and Gatewood argued, "the reward for the Negro's demonstration of patriotism and valor was a tightening of racial lines." Perhaps the most frightening development of all to the black leaders who heralded the war was the nation's new imperialist ideology—the white man's burden—that taught white men to exercise control and care over dependent and inferior colored populations. The employment of white supremacy abroad only strengthened campaigns for white supremacy at home.<sup>24</sup> This foreign and domestic nexus of white supremacy certainly played out in North Carolina. While members of the North Carolina Third Regiment of Volunteers wrote letters to the Army lamenting their poor treatment in the garrison, their family members wrote them complaining of racial violence at home.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Willard Gatewood Jr., *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden, 1898-1903* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 322-23.

<sup>25</sup>The Third Regiment never left the States. Stationed in garrisons in Fort Macon, NC, and Knoxville, TN, the soldier faced increasing restlessness and declining sanitation. The soldiers wrote complaints and signed petitions, asking for leave of garrison duty. After the war ended, they received daily letters from family, describing, as one letter did, "their suffering condition, and oh my-God, the way we are treated." Qtd. in Gatewood, "North Carolina's Negro Regiment in the Spanish-American War."

## The 1898 Campaign and the Wilmington Massacre

Frustrated by their defeats in 1894 and 1896, leading Democrats launched a fierce race-baiting campaign in the summer and fall of 1898. With the major newspapers and printing presses in their control, Democratic leaders like Josephus Daniels, editor and owner of the *Raleigh News & Observer*, were well positioned to spread their message. The message was three-pronged. First, Democrats tried to convince Populists that Republicans were exploiting them for their votes without showing due concern for their interests. At times, they argued the opposite, that Populists exploited white Republicans. Second, Democratic leaders trumpeted evidence of corruption and ineptitude within the Fusionist government. The third prong, the threat of “Negro domination” was their sharpest. By focusing on race, Democrats aimed for Fusion’s Achilles’ heel. In rallies, stump speeches, editorials, and vivid political cartoons, Democrats alleged that a vote for Fusion was a vote for “Negro domination.” The cartoons portrayed the relatively small number of black officeholders as ubiquitous and powerful. Often, Democratic newspapers argued, black men served as supervisors for white men, thus inverting the racial order. And most alarmingly, the papers warned shrilly, “Negro domination” put white women under the power of black men. The leaders of the race-baiting campaign self-consciously exaggerated the prevalence and power of black officeholders to stir up fear among white voters. Their alarmist messages about “Negro domination” were carefully coded to raise the fear of black male sexual access to white women.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>See issues of the *Raleigh News and Observer*, July – November, 1898; Robert H. Wooley, “Race and Politics: the Evolution of the White Supremacy Campaign of 1898 in North Carolina” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1977). See also Timothy Tyson and David S. Celeski, eds., *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Eric Anderson, *Race and Politics*.

The campaign put black church leaders on edge. The NCBEMC met in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, in October 1898. At the meeting, ministers expressed concern that the intense race-baiting campaign would lead to violence against blacks. “The people of North Carolina are going through a heated and most bitter political campaign, and the prejudice between the races is being greatly excited,” one committee explained. The ministers blamed the “politicians and partisan newspapers” for “daily aggravating the passions of the people by inflammatory remarks and utterances, menacing the peace and welfare of our commonwealth.” The Baptist leaders’ acute concern was the prospect of violence, and they asked for prayers “that the God of peace will control the passions of the people for the general good of our citizenship.” Considering the racial tensions in the state, they believed that any perceived transgression by African Americans would provoke a disproportionate backlash from whites. They therefore urged members of their own denomination to “restrain themselves from excessive anger, and avoid provoking race conflict.” In a short period of time, the political climate had turned hostile.

According to the editor of the *Star of Zion*, the level of racial tension in the state was unprecedented. “There have been many hot and bitter campaigns in old North Carolina, but the one now raging is the bitterest known in the history of the State,” J. W. Smith wrote in October. The race-baiting and intimidation used to fracture a biracial alliance, unsurprisingly, reminded Smith of Reconstruction. “The blaze of hatred and persecution of reconstruction days has been re-lighted and is now burning with deeply intense fury against the Negro.” Analyzing the campaign strategy, Smith identified “the cry of ‘nigger domination,’” as a “scare-crow, a false alarm,” shouted only for political gain. Black political hegemony was no threat, Smith explained, “while there are three

white men in North Carolina to one black man. Those who believe to the contrary should instantly have their family physicians examine their mental condition.” Ninety percent of Fusionist officeholders were white, Smith continued, and the only political power black men enjoyed was that of “little county offices like magistrates, constables, policemen, etc.,” and few of them at that. Smith underestimated black officeholding, but not as much as Democratic propaganda overstated it. So, why all the fury over “Negro domination?” he asked. The answer, according to Smith, was simple: “the Democrats want offices.”<sup>27</sup>

The answer may have been simple, but the consequences were dark. Smith feared that a cheap political trick—the “cry of ‘nigger domination,’ the last and only trump card”—would continue to haunt the state’s black communities for some time.

Democratic leaders, Smith believed, were short-sighted, focused only on winning the elections in November, but their tactics threatened to permanently increase racial hostilities in the state. Like his Baptist colleagues, Smith feared violence. He tried to impress upon his out-of-state readers the danger that black North Carolinians faced. “North Carolina to-day is such a field of strife and turmoil that Governor Russell this week has felt it to be his duty to issue a proclamation enjoining upon all citizens to obey the laws and keep the peace.” The state’s Democratic leaders, Smith reported, were listening to Benjamin Tillman, South Carolina’s strident white supremacist senator, who advised them to “carry the State . . . with shot guns.” Smith urged caution: “Let the white and black voters keep cool now and say and do nothing rash. Let the Negro go quietly to the polls and vote against every man that coughs up the race issue.” Even beyond the risk of immediate violence, Smith saw disastrous consequences: “The day is coming when the Democrats in all the Southern States will attempt to disfranchise the Negro.” Smith

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<sup>27</sup>“A Race Issue Campaign,” *Star of Zion*, October 27, 1898.

still believed that God had good things in store for African Americans. Nevertheless, because black North Carolinians were contending with a “diabolical campaign” led by “fallen angels [trying] to regain the Paradise which their folly excluded them,” they needed to prepare for a supernatural conflict.<sup>28</sup>

Aided by voter intimidation and ballot box stuffing, the Democrats won at the polls on November 8. In the run-up to the election, black and white Republicans experienced violence designed to keep them from voting. The night before the election, Alfred Waddell, a leading white supremacist in Wilmington, instructed his supporters, “If you find the Negro out voting, tell him to leave the polls, and if he refuses, kill him, shoot him down in his tracks. We shall win tomorrow if we have to do it with guns.”<sup>29</sup> The violence and intimidation worked to keep many black voters at home. An organization of African-American women in Wilmington encouraged black men to brave the streets in order to cast ballots. The “Organization of Colored Ladies” wanted to remind black men that the fight was supernatural, between God and “the demons who are now seeking to take away the most sacred rights vouchsafed to any people.” For them, “trusting in God to restore order” involved marching down to the precinct poll and casting a vote for the Republican Party.<sup>30</sup> Despite the women’s impassioned plea, many black voters stayed

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>*Outlook*, November 19, 1898, qtd. in John Hope Franklin, “Foreword,” in Tyson and Cecelski, eds., *Democracy Betrayed*, xi; see also H. Leon Prather Sr., “We Have Taken a City,” in Tyson and Cecelski, eds., *Democracy Betrayed*, 26.

<sup>30</sup>*Wilmington Messenger*, October 21, 1898, qtd., in LeRae Umfleet and the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission, *1898 Wilmington Race Riot*, Office of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, (2006), Ch.4, p.104 (<http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/1898-wrrc/report/report.htm>).

home on Election Day. The Democratic party regained a majority in the state legislature and recaptured most local and county governments.<sup>31</sup>

Two days after the election, racial violence escalated in Wilmington, the state's most populous city. The most divisive issue involved an Alexander Manly's editorial in the Wilmington *Daily Record*, the only black daily in the South. In the article, Manly criticized Rebecca Latimer Felton, a white Georgia woman who advocated the lynching of black men—"a thousand times a week if necessary"—to protect white women from rape. Manly argued that if the accusations of rape were accurate, "her plea would be worthy of consideration," but Manly countered that interracial sex was not always violent. When white newspapers reprinted the editorial, white residents of Wilmington clamored for the destruction of the *Record*'s printing press and for Manly's exile.<sup>32</sup>

Rev. J. Allen Kirk, the pastor of Wilmington's Central Baptist Church, first entered the Manly editorial fray when businesses pulled advertisements from the *Daily Record*. He and the other black ministers in town, afraid that the *Record* might fold, called upon their congregants to subscribe. They wanted to back the only black daily newspaper in the South without endorsing Manly's inflammatory editorial.<sup>33</sup> The distinction was lost on Wilmington's white residents, who soon identified black churches with Manly's "Infamous Attack on White Women."<sup>34</sup> Some local whites threatened to

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<sup>31</sup>Anderson, *Race and Politics*, 252-77.

<sup>32</sup>*Wilmington Daily Record*, August 18, 1898, qtd. in the *1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report*, Ch. 4, p. 98. See Prather, "We Have Taken a City," 16-23, and Glenda Gilmore, *Gender & Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1902* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 105-6.

<sup>33</sup>J. Allen Kirk, "A Statement of Facts Concerning the Bloody Riot in Wilmington, N.C. Of Interest to Every Citizen of the United States," (Wilmington, N. C.: The Author?, 1898?), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/kirk/menu.html> (accessed July 29, 2008), 1-3.

exile the members of the Interdenominational Ministerial Union. In fact, rumors spread through the city that black churches were organizing the black community for a violent backlash. Some white newspapers reported that black leaders were using churches “to deliver incendiary speeches and impassioned appeals to blacks to use the bullet” and encouraging church members to torch whites’ crops and property.<sup>35</sup> Black ministers, despite attempts to distance themselves from Manly, found themselves in the middle of a tense and dangerous situation.<sup>36</sup>

On Thursday, November 10, an armed white mob burned the Record office and then descended upon black neighborhoods, searching out specific men. Believing churches to be the black community’s ammunition warehouses, the mobs ransacked the buildings in a fruitless search for weapons. Rev. Kirk and his family, along with many others, fled into the swamps outside of town. Armed men forced the white Republican mayor and the city aldermen onboard trains out of town. At the end of the day, at least a dozen African Americans lay dead, hundreds more were in exile, and martial law replaced the elected government. It was the first and only military *coup d’etat* in the United States.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>*Wilmington Messenger*, August 27, 1898, qtd. in Prather, “We Have Taken a City,” 23.

<sup>35</sup>*Raleigh News and Observer*, November 1, 1898, qtd. in Prather, “We Have Taken a City,” 28.

<sup>36</sup>The day following the election, an extralegal white citizens’ group summoned black leaders—ministers and businessmen—to an evening meeting at the courthouse., where the group delivered an ultimatum to the city’s African-American community: immediately expel Manly from the city and cease the publication of the *Record*, or armed white men would do so. By that time, Manly had already fled Wilmington and ceased publication. Furthermore, none of the black leaders summoned, however willing to comply, had any direct connection with or control over the newspaper. The meeting, it seemed, was but a cover for the planned *coup* the next day, when the citizens’ group planned to take control of the city and replace its elected biracial leadership. See Kirk, “A Statement of Facts,” 5-12; Prather, “We Have Taken a City,” 29-31; and the *1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report*, Chapter 4, 116ff.

<sup>37</sup>Prather, “We Have Taken a City,” 31-37; *1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report*, Chapter 5.



Events in Wilmington produced shock and grief in black religious communities across the country. Editors at the *Christian Recorder* called the “bloody massacre” a “hell-born conspiracy,” and mourned the death of “a score or so of sable-hued human victims.”<sup>38</sup> The paper displayed a picture of white mobs in front of Manly’s burnt office and asked readers to “let your hearts go out in sympathy to the people affected.”<sup>39</sup> Many in the black community hoped that President McKinley would condemn the lawlessness when he addressed Congress in December of 1898. His failure to mention the massacre dismayed black religious leaders. AME Bishop Wesley Gaines told *Atlanta Constitution* readers that, because of the Wilmington massacre and the subsequent inaction by the federal government, he was “beginning to despair of race harmony in this country.”<sup>40</sup> AME Zion Bishop Alexander Walters considered “the outlook . . . gloomy” because no governmental body stood ready to protect African Americans from the strong-arming of white supremacists. “The city officials of Wilmington, N.C., were the leaders of the mob that ruthlessly murdered more than a dozen Afro-Americans on the 10th of last November,” he explained, and the state officials and federal government answered black appeals for justice and protection with silence. All levels of government, Walter lamented, “abandoned us to our fate.”<sup>41</sup> It was a time for mourning.

Indeed, a spirit of mourning prevailed at the North Carolina Conference of the AME Zion Church, when it met in Washington, North Carolina, one month after the 1898

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<sup>38</sup>*Christian Recorder*, December 29, 1898.

<sup>39</sup>*Christian Recorder*, November 24, 1898.

<sup>40</sup>“Bishop Gaines on the Situation in the South,” *Christian Recorder*, December 1, 1898, reprinted from the *Atlanta Constitution*.

<sup>41</sup>Alexander Walters, “Outlook Gloomy,” *Star of Zion*, December 22, 1898, and Alexander Walters, “What Must We Do to Be Saved?” *Christian Recorder*, December 29, 1898.

election and the Wilmington massacre. The ministers and lay delegates sang the hymn “And Are We Yet Alive?” with gusto, because it captured their mixture of pain and hope. An observer noted that “the members of the Wilmington District seemed to lay especial emphasis upon it in their singing”:

And are we yet alive,  
And see each other’s face?  
Glory and thanks to Jesus give  
For His almighty grace!

What troubles have we seen,  
What mighty conflicts past,  
Fightings without, and fears within,  
Since we assembled last!

John C. Dancy, a mainstay at the conference, was in temporary exile, as were other delegates who had escaped Wilmington. One church reported the loss of two hundred members. The delegates dispensed with a committee on the State of the Country, presumably because no one had enough distance to objectively evaluate their circumstances. When they adjourned, the conference delegates scheduled the next annual meeting for Kinston and prayed that “no occasion will call forth the singing of the song, ‘And are we yet alive?’”<sup>42</sup> The same month, Bishop James Walker Hood opened the denomination’s Central North Carolina Conference in Carthage, North Carolina, with similar solemnity. Recent events, he said, “have brought sadness, sorrow, and gloom to many hearts.”<sup>43</sup> The church sustained substantial personal and financial losses.

At the 1899 NCBEMC in Newbern, black Baptist leaders, too, tallied their losses. Rev. Charles Meserve, Shaw University president, made a sober assessment. “We live

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<sup>42</sup>W. F. Fonvielle, “Majors and Minors: Echoes from the N. C. Conference,” *Star of Zion*, January 5, 1899.

<sup>43</sup>James Walker Hood, “Race Disturbances, Bad Leadership the Cause of It in North Carolina: Political Extract from Bishop J. W. Hood’s annual address delivered before the Central North Carolina Conference in Carthage, N. C., two weeks ago,” *Star of Zion*, December 15, 1898.

under different conditions than we did a year ago.” Missionary J. A. Whitthred said, “I need hardly call your attention to the fall elections of ‘98, and the bitterness resulting therefrom.” He told those present at the meeting in Newbern, “You are yourselves aware that business enterprises and work of all kinds were obstructed and necessarily hindered.” Those in gospel ministry, Whitthred explained, had suffered just the same. Churches struggled to rebuild and reorganize in the wake of 1898. Whitthred confessed, “At one time the obstructions were so great, and the discouragements so numerous we feared lest we would have to give up in hopeless despair.” Somehow, the work of planting and building black churches continued, but the losses were great.

As Bishop Hood expected, the political changes brought by the white supremacy campaign did not end in 1898. Hood told the annual Central North Carolina Conference, “I do not know to what extent we shall enjoy the right of the elective franchise hereafter.”<sup>44</sup> Democrats had promised that if they won the election in 1898, they would not seek the disfranchisement of black voters. Rev. George Clinton stood ready to “give them the credit of sincerity,”<sup>45</sup> but Hood and others put little faith in the Democrats’ promise. As early as January 1899, black North Carolinians braced themselves for a wave of anti-black legislation. J. W. Smith expected the following: “Jim Crow cars, disfranchis[ement], the withdrawal of taxes paid by the whites to help support the colored public schools, etc.”<sup>46</sup> The legislature mandated racial segregation on railways in 1899; and as Hood and Smith predicted, the new legislature put before the people a constitutional amendment in August 1900 designed to take the ballot away from black

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<sup>44</sup>Hood, “Race Disturbances.”

<sup>45</sup>“Bishop’s Address,” *Star of Zion*, December 22, 1898.

<sup>46</sup>“Hung on Their Own Gallows,” *Star of Zion*, January 12, 1899.

men. Those who would have opposed such an amendment were so badly bruised by the 1898 election that they hardly made a showing in the 1900 election. The party of white supremacy easily won reelection, including the governorship, George White's Congressional seat, and the disfranchisement amendment needed to cement their hold on power.<sup>47</sup>

Black ministers received this news with horror but not shock. They had seen it coming. What did shock them, however, was the lack of support they received from the state's white Republicans. Dancy wrote that the entire "colored race in North Carolina" waited for white Republican leaders, for whom black voters had risked life and limb at the polls, to oppose the measure. When they failed to do so, Dancy complained: "our supposed friends have deserted us, wronged us and forsaken us."<sup>48</sup> The theme of abandonment recurred throughout black religious responses to the white supremacy campaigns. Bishop J. B. Small, an Afro-Caribbean minister in the AME Zion Church who spent much of his ministry in North Carolina, wrote, "God has left us in the hands of our enemies, and they maltreat us without mercy, while all seem to look on approvingly—none even advise to the contrary. A terrible plight!"<sup>49</sup> Within two years' time, black Protestants watched North Carolina transform from a relatively racially progressive state, without *de jure* segregation and with significant black political influence, to a white supremacist state willing to enforce segregation and black disfranchisement with violence. It was a terrible plight indeed.

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<sup>47</sup>Anderson, *Race and Politics*, 296-312.

<sup>48</sup>"Senator Pritchard on Guard," *AME Zion Quarterly Review* 9:1-2 (January-April 1899): 89-90.

<sup>49</sup>"Our Race Troubles: A Repeated Lesson Taught the Children of Israel," *Star of Zion*, January 12, 1899.

## Interpreting Jim Crow Politics

Black Protestants in North Carolina saw the events of 1898-1900 as significant and tragic. But it is possible to overstate the impact of these events on their outlook. Glenda Gilmore poetically described black North Carolinians after 1898 as “searching . . . for a place to stand after the earth and sky fell away.”<sup>50</sup> In one way, Gilmore’s picture captures the grief and bewilderment that many felt in the wake of the white supremacy campaigns. But in another way, the image conjures up something much more dismal and cataclysmic than appears in contemporary black religious writings. Black Protestant leaders’ myriad responses to the grim new political climate revealed profound disagreement within black communities and a desire to search out new political strategies. However, black ministers and other leaders felt no similar need to revisit their theological beliefs. Their eschatology survived the events of 1898-1900 intact. They wrote their experiences of Jim Crow politics into biblical narratives, and reiterated their unwavering belief in their status as God’s favored people and their hope in a better day coming. The persistence of this eschatological hope shaped the way black North Carolinians viewed the events of 1898-1900 and the way they responded to the new political climate. For them, the devastating events of 1898-1900 comprised a short episode in a God-ordained drama in which emancipation—not Jim Crow—remained at center stage.

African-American church leaders interpreted the arrival of Jim Crow politics in several different ways. After initial expressions of lament and despair, many quickly looked for God’s hand in the events. Bishops Hood, Clinton, and Small, among others, reckoned the events of 1898-1900 as God’s chastisement of a beloved and favorite people. Hood told the Central North Carolina Conference in early December 1898 that African

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<sup>50</sup>Gilmore, *Gender & Jim Crow*, 120.

Americans had committed “two very great blunders” that incurred the “curse of God.” The first, he explained, was the failure to support the statewide prohibition measure in 1881. The second occurred when black Republicans allied with white Republicans and Populists in Fusion. The alliance, Hood admitted, brought political advantages, but it also compromised black Republicans’ integrity. “To my mind, there is not a plank in the Populist national platform to which an honest Republican can subscribe,” he told the conference. Fusion cast further shadows upon the black community, Hood continued, because the sudden success enticed self-seeking, unscrupulous, and unqualified men into office. The follies of Fusion, which Hood named by category and not by incident, returned to haunt African Americans in the most recent election. According to Hood, God meant for black North Carolinians to learn a lesson from the election of 1898: “to have more religion in our politics.” His phrase—“more religion in our politics”—meant higher moral standards for office-seekers and a return to the principles of the Republican Party during the days of emancipation and Reconstruction.<sup>51</sup>

When Hood’s address hit the press, it provoked a chilly response from Christopher J. Perry, the editor of the Philadelphia *Tribune*, a fifteen-year-old African-American weekly. Perry chided Hood for his failure to condemn the white supremacist attack. In the editor’s opinion, Hood had mild words for the murderous mob but harsh words for the black victims. In his response, Hood assured the editor he strictly condemned the lawlessness that accompanied the 1898 election. If his words of condemnation were mild, well, Hood argued, it was because he was a mild man: “If any expect me to rant and rage and curse and rip, they are mistaken in the man.” But Hood went further in his defense. The *Tribune* editor, comfortably situated in his office north

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<sup>51</sup>Hood, “Race Disturbances.”

of the Mason-Dixon Line, had little perspective from which to criticize Hood, who had “been down here for many years.” In general, black leaders in the South, in contrast to their northern counterparts, responded to the politics of white supremacy with more caution than outrage. Hood boasted of his success in and knowledge of the South. After thirty-five years in North Carolina, Hood felt confident in his own judgment. “I have faith in ultimate success on the line on which I believe I am directed by the Holy Spirit. For me to turn back while thus convinced would be a sin as great as that of Lot’s wife.” His experience and his religious convictions told him to stay the course.<sup>52</sup>

Ultimately, however, Hood gauged his differences with Perry to be more theological than regional. Hood considered Perry one of “many of our leaders” who “trust too much in the arm of the flesh.” In Hood’s assessment, Perry saw only the material and temporal realities of the situation. Hood, in contrast, paid attention to the supernatural realities behind worldly events. His commentary on the Wilmington massacre went deeper than condemning the bloodshed and lawlessness, censures he thought went without saying. In the address before the Central North Carolina Conference, Hood did what he thought ministers were supposed to do: explain the supernatural significance of earthly affairs.<sup>53</sup>

Likewise, Bishop Harris, Hood’s colleague, saw divine lessons in the defeat of 1898. “The Negro has been departing from God,” he wrote, “now God has departed from the Negro.” Harris listed numerous biblical precedents—the lamenting, God-forsaken Psalmist; the wayward, idolatrous people of Israel; the prophet Jeremiah—to demonstrate that God chastises those who stray from the right path. Like Hood, Harris lamented that

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<sup>52</sup>J. W. Hood, “My Critic,” *Star of Zion*, January 5, 1899.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

the Republican Party had lost its way and hoped that it would become a “Moral Reform Party.” He too made reference to the failed prohibition referendum of 1881. Harris denounced the corruption that ruled politics, and took the fact that “the preacher as a potent factor in politics is unknown” as evidence that indeed the Republican Party was in moral decline. But by Harris’s reckoning, God’s lesson was not “more religion in our politics,” as Hood believed, but rather that loyalty to the Republican Party had outstripped the race’s loyalty to God. And God, in his jealousy, destroyed the race’s idol.<sup>54</sup>

Bishop J. B. Small argued that while national newspapers and race leaders furiously debated the meaning of Jim Crow politics, a consensus was emerging in the pews and pulpits of churches across the country. For most black Protestants, Small maintained, it was not hard to see “the pointings of the finger of Providence.” In the “severe suffering of the colored people of . . . North and South Carolina,” he wrote in an 1899 editorial, there was a clear rebuke from God. He reminded readers of the reciprocal relationship between God and the Old Testament Israelites. While the Israelites remained in God’s service, God prospered their work, but when they strayed from God’s commands, they fell into the hands of their enemies. God sent suffering to the Israelites to chastise them, so they might return to faithfulness and righteousness. African Americans’ defeat in 1898, Small reasoned, had the same divine purpose.<sup>55</sup>

God had abandoned black Americans, Small argued, precisely because he cared about their future. “The colored people of this country have a special mission to fulfill,

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<sup>54</sup>C. R. Harris, “Bishop’s Address,” *Star of Zion*, December 22, 1898.

<sup>55</sup>J. B. Small, “Our Race Troubles: A Repeated Lesson Taught the Children of Israel,” *Star of Zion*, January 12, 1899.



and God will have them perform the intention of His Providence, if it must be done through suffering.” According to Small, African Americans shared several similarities with Old Testament Israelites—a deep devotion and piety, a proclivity for sin, and a divine mission that conferred with it the moniker of “God’s own people.” To reign in their proclivity for sin and to prepare them for their mission, God rebuked black Americans just as he did ancient Israelites. In Small’s view, God willed President McKinley to remain silent about the Wilmington massacre “to teach us . . . there is no true friend save God.” He continued, “What we really need is to serve God with an honest heart and true intent, work to our own interest and let parties go to the bats.” He did not advocate an absence from politics. Rather, like Harris, Small interpreted the crushing defeat of 1898, along with betrayals from white Republicans, as God’s way of directing African Americans away from partisanship.<sup>56</sup>

In 1900, John Dancy, too, interpreted North Carolina’s disfranchisement measure as God’s chastisement. In his view, evidence of chastisement was cause for rejoicing. Dancy passionately defended black voting rights, but if disfranchisement were chastisement from God, then it conferred God’s favor. “Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth,” he quoted from the New Testament Book of Hebrews. “How do we know that the very fact of our recent chastenings is not proof conclusive that the Lord loveth us far beyond our knowledge or even belief,” Dancy opined.<sup>57</sup> To interpret disfranchisement as God’s chastisement was not to condone the work of white supremacists, nor was it an expression of self-loathing. Rather, the interpretation reaffirmed African Americans’ identity as God’s beloved people. By seeing God as the

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>*AME Zion Quarterly Review* 10:3 (October-December 1900): 46.

principal actor, black Protestants could belittle the power of white supremacists, who could only do as much damage as God would permit. Perhaps most importantly, the interpretation placed black North Carolinians at the center of the action, precisely when whites had been, at first glance, so successful at marginalizing them.

Even those who shied away from naming specific sins of the black community that occasioned God's rebuke nevertheless saw divine purpose in the community's suffering. Suffering, in their view, was redemptive. So, even among black Protestants' frank assessments of the new circumstances, there remained a chorus of optimistic voices. Meserve told his fellow Baptist ministers in 1897, "The colored race is getting more out of adversity than any other race ever did."<sup>58</sup> Two years later, Meserve reiterated his message: "I am not in favor of persecution, but let us remember that God has some purpose even in persecution. I believe in the purposes of God. He can and will, sooner or later, make the wrath of man praise him." Meserve also opposed disfranchisement, but said, "Some fear that they can never vote again; some good may come out of this."<sup>59</sup> The final 1900 issue of the *AME Zion Quarterly* opened with a string of similarly upbeat messages: "No blow struck the Negro race is of sufficient force to incapacitate him for further effort. Indeed the race that strikes us suffers more from the effect of the reaction than we do from the blow itself. Continue the upward stride."<sup>60</sup> The *Quarterly* offered the same insight four years later, "It is remarkable that every move against the Negro helps him. He is used to overcoming great obstacles."<sup>61</sup> Having weathered the events of 1898-

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<sup>58</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1897, 17.

<sup>59</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, 14-15.

<sup>60</sup>*AME Zion Quarterly Review* 10:3 (October-December 1900): 46.

<sup>61</sup>"Editorial Section" *African Methodist Episcopal Zion Quarterly* 13:1 (Jan-Mar 1904): 87.

1900, black North Carolinians stood stronger and tougher, waiting for God to work good out of their ill.

African Americans in North Carolina concentrated on other markers of progress—the growth of black institutions or church membership—as evidence that God indeed was doing good things among them. The month after the 1898 election, Warren C. Coleman, a wealthy black Methodist layman, opened the Coleman Cotton Mill outside Concord, North Carolina. The black-owned and black-run mill made headlines. The editor of the *Christian Recorder* thought it difficult to overestimate the mill’s significance: “Now that the factory has actually started, the race has more in its turning spindles, its flying shuttles, its marketable fabrics, to enlist its interest and furnish far-reaching object lesson than all the industrial education theories proposed by friends, or all the political troubles precipitated by foes.” The textile factory stood as brick-and-mortar proof of “Negro possibilities and prospects in the Southland.” Coming as it did on the heels of the Wilmington massacre, the Concord mill offered a reassuring contrast. The *Christian Recorder* cited the mill as evidence of the “folly of looking to politics.” Entrepreneurial success was the real benchmark of black progress.<sup>62</sup>

So, too, was church growth. In the first decade of the twentieth century, revivals and church planting continued to grow black Baptist and Methodist churches. Even during the heat of the white supremacy campaign in North Carolina, Rev. W. M. Anderson was more concerned with the revival in his small mountain town. “The Lord has blessed us with a glorious revival throughout our work this year,” he reported, “and many souls have been happily converted and Zion’s borders enlarged.”<sup>63</sup> J. A. Whitted

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<sup>62</sup>*Christian Recorder*, December 29, 1898.

took time to reflect at the 1908 NCBEMC. He marveled at how quickly the conference had grown to represent 180,000 church members. And he noted, “It is a proud day when [the Baptist] women alone in a single Annual Convention can report eleven hundred and forty dollars in cold cash.” The maturity and wealth of black church institutions—such as 22 schools, and the oldest, Shaw University approaching forty-four years—gave Whitted cause to proclaim a steady progress since emancipation.<sup>64</sup>

In 1899, Baptist delegates to the annual convention in Newbern heard some unusual advice: “Get homes; get farms; put one or two rooms to your house; get a bigger mule for your farm.” Rev. Meserve turned to the subject of farms and mules to move his listeners beyond the political defeats of 1898.<sup>65</sup> Meserve was not the only black leader to shift his attention in this way. African Americans in North Carolina, since emancipation, had focused their energy on land ownership; it remained the unfulfilled promise of Jubilee. But as black political fortunes plummeted, African Americans increasingly looked to black land ownership for a rosier picture of black life in North Carolina. In 1910, black-owned land in the United States topped 15 million acres, a high-water mark from which black land ownership rates subsequently declined. North Carolina figures tell a similar story. The number of black-owned farms in the state steadily increased from emancipation to 1910.<sup>66</sup> So, in the first decade of the twentieth century, black

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<sup>63</sup>W. M. Anderson, “Marching On,” *Star of Zion*, July 14, 1898.

<sup>64</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1908, 10-11.

<sup>65</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1899, 14-15.

<sup>66</sup>The 1910 *U.S. Census of Agriculture* records the number of black-owned farms in North Carolina at 21,443 (14.75% of all farms), up from 17,520 (13.4%) in the 1900 Census. Earlier censuses do not categorize North Carolina farms by the color of their owners, making it difficult to chart black land ownership rates. It is generally accepted that 1910 or 1920 was the national high point for black land ownership, and there is little reason to believe that North Carolina diverged from the national trend. For a survey of this research,

southerners had cause to be optimistic, if their eyes fixed upon economics instead of politics. George Clinton told as much to northern audiences: “All over the South, wealth, education, and general progress can be noted. The South is the battleground where the Negro is destined to reach the highest plane of progress.”<sup>67</sup>

Black Protestant leaders seemed rather self-conscious in their search to find only evidence of progress in black life at the turn of the century. One minister wrote in 1904, “We must not be discouraged. To do that is [to] half surrender the fight. Let us see nothing but victory despite all the clouds and difficulties.”<sup>68</sup> Black Protestant leaders evaluated their circumstances as part of both human history and divine history. For them, the greater reality was divine history. So, many were unashamed to seek out only evidence from human history that aligned with their understanding of divine history. If God had ordained victory for the race, then they need only look for affirmations of that fact. Accordingly, they saw victory in black land ownership, church growth, and the development of black institutions.

African-American church leaders’ most hopeful interpretations of Jim Crow politics, however, focused on the past, not the present or the future. Black eschatology had always been as much a reading of history as a prediction of days to come. Black ministers reminded their followers of a sacred history and urged them to place the events of 1898-1900 within that context. In order to cast segregation or disfranchisement as

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see Jess Gilbert, Gwen Sharp, and M. Sindy Felin, “The Decline (and Revival?) of Black Farmers and Rural Landowners: A Review of Research Literature,” Working Paper No. 44, North America Series, Land Tenure Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison (May 2001), [http://minds.wisconsin.edu/bitstream/1793/21927/1/31\\_wp44.pdf](http://minds.wisconsin.edu/bitstream/1793/21927/1/31_wp44.pdf); and Jay R. Mandle, *Not Slave, Not Free: The African-American Economic Experience Since the Civil War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992).

<sup>67</sup>George W. Clinton, “The Southern Negro: Some Evidences of His Progress Since the War,” *Star of Zion*, October 6, 1898.

<sup>68</sup>“Editorial Section,” *African Methodist Episcopal Zion Quarterly* 13:1 (January-March 1904): 87.

temporary setbacks, black ministers weighed them against the black experience before emancipation. After the Wilmington massacre, Bishop Alexander Walters had to overcome his melancholy: “we have seen gloomier times than the present.” He recalled the fugitive slave law that passed Congress shortly before emancipation, a measure surely more devastating to African Americans than the disfranchisement measures before them at present. “And we were brought triumphantly through by the God of battles.”<sup>69</sup> Devastating setbacks sometimes preceded monumental victories. If any found the news of the day depressing, they could turn to the lessons of history for reassurances that God was on their side.

Meserve made those lessons explicit. “Count your blessings,” he said, “review your history.” To encourage fellow Baptist ministers, he offered an impromptu catechism: “What were your darkest days? The days of the African slave stealer.”<sup>70</sup> Their darkest days had passed. Emancipation had inaugurated a new era. In light of the larger historical narrative of slavery to freedom, a narrative presided over by “the God of battles,” surely the election of 1898 and the curtailment of black freedoms thereafter seemed a rather small setback. The bigger story was freedom—not white supremacy.

To situate Jim Crow politics into that broader story of freedom, black Protestants turned to another biblical narrative, the crucifixion. African-American leaders in North Carolina revisited the central Christian story—that of Jesus’ death and resurrection—as evidence that God redeems suffering for a greater good and frustrates the plans of evildoers. According to R. A. Williams, a missionary from the Woman’s Baptist State Convention, black North Carolinians were living through the sufferings of Christ.

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<sup>69</sup>Alexander Walters, “The Outlook Gloomy,” *Star of Zion*, December 22, 1898.

<sup>70</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1899, 14-15

African-American men and women lived “through the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm,” she said. Christians understood the psalm, written several hundred years prior to Jesus’ birth, as a foreshadowing of his crucifixion. In the gospel accounts, Jesus himself quoted the psalm from the cross: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Williams’s use of the psalm would have prompted her audience to think of the crucifixion and to see themselves in that story. Black religious commentary on the election and violence of 1898 echoed the psalm’s theme of abandonment by God.<sup>71</sup>

Williams, like the Psalmist, found hope amid the suffering. The Psalmist after initially accusing God of abandoning him in his suffering turns near the end of the song to praising God, who “has listened to [his] cry for help.” Williams told the NCBEMC delegates that “we need to learn the lesson of Christian progress.” Before redemption comes suffering. Before the resurrection comes the crucifixion. In their suffering, Williams argued, black North Carolinians saw glimpses of redemption. She explained, “We are moving into the 23rd Psalm,” a psalm that describes God as a shepherd taking excellent care of his flock. “In fact,” she concluded, “we are being invited to sit down at the table prepared by our enemies. God be praised.” The lesson of the crucifixion—and that of the psalms that prefigured it—was to wait for the resurrection.<sup>72</sup>

Bishop George Clinton made this point explicitly at the 1904 Emancipation Day celebration in Charlotte. Before addressing black suffering under Jim Crow, Clinton placed emancipation in a broader context. He ranked emancipation among the four greatest milestones in human history and compared it to the Jewish Year of Jubilee. Clinton contrasted the historical significance of emancipation with the passing “anti-

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 24; Ps. 22:1, KJV; Matt. 27: 45-46, KJV.

<sup>72</sup>NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1899, 24.

Negro spirit of the times.” Even though Jim Crow deserved less attention than did emancipation, the current persecution of African Americans warranted an explanation or interpretation. Clinton thought it fitting to parallel whites’ attempt to “keep the Negro . . . in ‘his place’” with the crucifixion of Christ. In Clinton’s retelling, Jesus’ enemies doubted his ability to rise from the dead, in much the same way that white supremacists spoke of “Negro inferiority and incapacity.” The enemies not only doubted but also attacked, as if they did not trust their own rejection of Jesus’ claim. Again, it paralleled black experience in Jim Crow. All the effort whites expended to keep African Americans “in their place” only showed that African Americans did not fit very well in that place. And white supremacists’ attempt to suppress black Americans, Clinton argued, would work as well as Jesus’ enemies’ effort “to keep the Nazarene from rising.”<sup>73</sup>

As Clinton told it, Jesus’ triumph over the grave gave hope to black North Carolinians that they too would experience a resurrection. The resurrection in Clinton’s retelling frustrated God’s enemies and all the plans they had concocted. Clinton told the crowd assembled before him at Grace AME Zion Church in Charlotte to wait for their own political resurrection. Those “who made all sorts of declarations against the Negro, especially against his success,” Clinton prayed, like those who sought Jesus’ death “may have a like disappointment.” According to Clinton, the enemies of God and of the race may win the battle, but they will lose the war.<sup>74</sup>

The battle waged against black North Carolinians in 1898-1900 and thereafter, black ministers attested, had been devastating to African-American communities. But by

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<sup>73</sup> “Thoughts for the Occasion: A Powerful Emancipation Address Delivered by Bishop G. W. Clinton, A. M., D. D., at Charlotte, N. C.” *African Methodist Episcopal Zion Quarterly* 13:1 (January-March 1904): 3-6.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



placing the battle in a larger historical context, one where emancipation loomed large, black Protestant leaders downplayed the long term significance of their political defeat. And by writing their suffering and defeat into biblical narratives—ones where, in the words of Dancy, “the density of this darkness only foreshadows the brightness of the approaching dawn,”<sup>75</sup>—black North Carolinians found hope in their eschatological destiny.

## Conclusion

Two scenes from the streets of Wilmington stand in stark contrast. The first, from February 1865, features black soldiers marching triumphantly through the city. As they took control of Wilmington, they set slaves free and sent remaining white Confederates fleeing. Thirty-three years later, in November 1898, white soldiers marched Wilmington’s streets. As they took control of the city, black residents fled for safety out of town. In the first scene, the marching troops symbolized for black North Carolinians the triumph of emancipation. In the latter scene, the troops represented the forces of white supremacy and the limits of black freedom. Taken together, these two scenes illustrate a narrative of decline for black interests in the state. But black Protestant leaders nearly uniformly resisted that kind of narrative. Their theology allowed them to wedge these two scenes into a very different narrative, one of hope and purpose, orchestrated by a God active in human affairs. One *Star of Zion* editorialist confided in 1898, “I have unalterable and abiding faith in my race—the Negro race—and I am not yet prepared to denounce it or renounce it. In all human history it is families, nations, races,

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<sup>75</sup>John C. Dancy, “Disfranchisement,” *AME Zion Quarterly Review* 14:4 (December 1905): 85.

to whom Almighty God has given mission, and as a race we have a mission.”<sup>76</sup> The events of 1898-1900 did little to mitigate the sense of purpose and the eschatological hope that black Protestants had expressed since emancipation.

Contrast the staying power of black North Carolinians’ theological beliefs with those of early twentieth-century white Protestants. Many held postmillennial views that God’s kingdom on earth was steadily advancing. All around them they saw progress—in science and medicine, in government and diplomacy, in religion and good will. A good number of these postmillennialists predicted the end of war. When subsequently confronted with two bloody world wars, and the Great Depression, their faith in progress, however, faltered. Postmillennialism faded from white Protestant circles, replaced with more sober assessments of human nature and the future of humanity. They looked around at the world, at the disasters of the twentieth century, and reasoned that the march of progress had either been abruptly arrested or had only been an illusion.<sup>77</sup>

During the “nadir of race relations,”<sup>78</sup> black Protestant leaders in North Carolina experienced no similar disillusionment. As a way to make sense of their social circumstances, their eschatology proved amazingly elastic and powerful. They were not naïve about the realities of segregation and disfranchisement. But they saw in the turn of the twentieth century what they expected to see—a God active in human affairs working

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<sup>76</sup>Bruce Grit, “Don’t Like the Name,” *Star of Zion*, October 6, 1898.

<sup>77</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, “Confessions of a Tired Radical” *Christian Century* (August 30, 1928), 1046-47; Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

<sup>78</sup>Historians, perhaps beginning with Rayford Logan’s *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954) commonly use this phrase to designate the period from the end of Reconstruction to the beginning of the twentieth century.

on their behalf, a continuation of the advancements made since emancipation, and a better day coming.

Of late, historians have been chipping away at the Jim Crow era from both ends. Jim Crow, as a solid system of segregation and oppression, was slow in coming and took many years to construct. Historians have argued for earlier and earlier dates for the start of the Civil Rights movement, as they unearth evidence of black political activity, protest, and progress in the first half of the twentieth century. The move to consider much of the twentieth century as one long civil rights movement has come out of a recognition that black Americans never acquiesced to Jim Crow policies. This new periodization in American historiography—one that sees continuity in African-American history since emancipation—approaches black Protestants' own view of history. Their eschatological expectations forced them to see their own struggle for freedom as uninterrupted by the politics of Jim Crow, a position that historians have now belatedly adopted.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>Jacquelyn Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91:4 (2005): 1233-63, among others.

## Conclusion

Biblical narratives set the terms of political debates within southern black communities. The story of Queen Esther recommended fasting in a time of political persecution. The promise of Jubilee argued for property redistribution. And the resurrection of Jesus Christ assured black North Carolinians that disfranchisement would not last long. Immediately after emancipation, black religious thinkers sought out narratives that helped make sense of their freedom (Exodus and Jubilee), but by the end of the nineteenth century, they turned to narratives that made sense of defeat and suffering (the life of Jesus). The stories appeared in lots of places—complaints about sharecropping, prohibition campaigns, women’s rights, black voting rights. They were hardly peripheral to black politics. On first reading, these stories had little to say about African-American experience. Yet black religious and political leaders routinely appropriated the narratives as if they were principally about black southerners; and, as far as we can tell, their audiences found nothing unusual about this kind of interpretation. Debates centered not on whether biblical stories spoke directly to black experience but rather on which story best made sense of the issue at present.

This way to read the Bible represented a kind of narrative theology, a term used by some late twentieth-century theologians—liberationist, feminist, and post-liberal theologians, among the best examples.<sup>1</sup> Their method, seeking knowledge of God

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<sup>1</sup>See Gary Comstock, “Two Types of Narrative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55:4 (1987): 687-717; Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative?: Readings in*

through a community's familiarity and identification with biblical stories, was hardly new. Narrative theology had long been a black Christian tradition, and it stood in contrast to systematic theology. Much of the western Christian tradition sought to construct a systematic theology from the pages of scripture. Systematic theologians extracted concepts and precepts from biblical narratives and arranged them into an internally consistent, rational whole. When systematic theologians could not easily reduce some narratives— Esther or Jubilee, for example—down to doctrine, they largely ignored them. In such a project, stories took a back seat to propositional statements. Nineteenth-century black Protestants, fully a part of Protestant Christianity, at times took part in this project. But more often, and more important for this story, they offered an alternate way to read the Bible. For them, the Bible was not principally a cache of propositions and commandments, but first and foremost a set of stories.

African-American narrative theology had origins in black Christians' attempts to make sense of the pain of slavery and racism and came from their intimate familiarity with the stories of scripture. Old Testament narratives described a people without a home who experienced slavery and persecution but who, nevertheless, were the favored people of God. New Testament stories claimed that Jesus, even as he suffered a humiliating and excruciating death, subdued nations under his feet. Black Americans heard these stories and recognized them as their own. Black narrative theology, then, centered both human history and divine history on African-American experience.

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*Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1989); Colleen Carpenter Cullinan, *Redeeming the Story: Women, Suffering, and Christ* (New York: Continuum, 2004); Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church, and Narrative Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Gerhard Sauter and John Barton, eds, *Revelation and Story: Narrative Theology and the Centrality of Story* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2000).

Black Christianity, at its birth, was an act of narrative reinterpretation. In slavery, black believers reinterpreted the Christianity they heard from white Protestants. As they embraced the religion of their oppressors, they transformed it, recognizing in it an argument for their liberation. The creativity of African-American Protestantism lay in its ability to give new meanings to old stories. In the post-emancipation period, black Protestant leaders formed a black political tradition that drew directly on this creativity, reinterpreting North Carolina politics just as they did biblical narratives. They recognized themselves in Exodus, Jubilee, and the siege of Jericho, stories which, on the face of them, say nothing about African-American experience but which profoundly shaped black political debates. And in the decades between emancipation and Jim Crow, which seemed to outline the limitations of black freedom, black Protestant leaders used those biblical stories and political debates to discern instead divine favor and the signs of a better day coming.

Because narratives and not systematics were at the heart of black Christianity, African Americans' eschatology of hope had a resiliency unparalleled by nineteenth-century whites' millennial beliefs. Many premillennialists tied their predictions to very narrow readings of scripture and named specific dates. After Jesus failed to appear in the clouds in 1844, for example, Millerites had little else to say. Premillennialists were notorious for revising their predictions after the fact, pushing back the date after each disappointment, as Millerite leaders did. But movements like Millerism fizzled out.<sup>2</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, another form of premillennialism taught much of the

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<sup>2</sup>Other forms of premillennialism had more staying power. Premillennialism, for example, enjoyed popularity among many white Protestants for much of the mid and late twentieth century. In contrast to Millerism, this form of premillennialism shared characteristics with nineteenth-century black eschatology: a clear view of the future that nevertheless avoided naming specific dates and did not depend upon the precise outcome of any particular event.

white South a theological pessimism that favored withdrawal, retrenchment, and disinterest in social and political issues.

White postmillennialists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries never had to recant or withdraw in the same way that premillennialists did because they relied on expansive, not narrow, readings of scripture. Still, because postmillennialists' view of progress was tied to an onward and upward understanding of history, not the ups and downs of biblical stories, they were ill-equipped to make sense of the scale of tragedy and mayhem of the twentieth century. Postmillennialist views of uninterrupted progress could not account for two world wars or the Holocaust. In contrast, black eschatology's reliance upon many biblical narratives gave it the flexibility to account for suffering, disappointment, periods of waiting, triumph, and progress. In that way, black eschatological hopes were in better touch with human realities than were the more rigid eschatological beliefs, pessimistic or optimistic, of contemporary white Protestants.

Black Protestants' use of biblical narratives made their theology directly applicable to African-American life and politics. Unlike systematic theology, narrative theology could be quite concrete because biblical stories involved real, tangible things: tyrants and armies, harvests and famines, floods and flogging. Black Protestants found concrete parallels between their own experience and these biblical stories. For almost every moment from slavery to Jim Crow, there was a relevant narrative. African Americans' theology, and particularly their eschatology, was hardly esoteric; it was, as this study has labored to prove, integral to black North Carolinians' understanding of their political, economic, and social circumstances.

The narrative nature of black theology accounts for the diversity of black eschatological thought. The appropriation of many different stories might have produced a fragmented and incoherent theological worldview. Instead, black Protestant leaders wove the stories together. For them, all biblical narratives broadcast a similar message, which could be summarized as follows: God was active in human history, working on the race's behalf, as emancipation so clearly evidenced. In the divine plan for human history, African Americans were not only to wait but also to work for the realization of the better day coming. And hard times were not to distract them; there would be many valleys and ravines on the way to the mountaintop.

When circumstances on the ground seemed incongruent with black Protestant beliefs in a better day coming—be it an end to white racism, broadened citizenship rights, land ownership, or economic prosperity—a myriad of biblical narratives offered ways to make sense of the disconnect. Indeed, the stories fit black southerners' experience with some specificity. For example, Jubilee explained how emancipated slaves could receive land, much in the same way that Congress considered redistribution of confiscated Confederate property. The biblical account of Exodus, for another example, seemed an apt way to understand a people's mass migration. Black Protestant leaders, arguably, were not mangling or twisting biblical passages to support their eschatological conclusions. They were, however, adept at employing different narratives at different times, which afforded them flexibility in interpreting their circumstances.

The elasticity of their theology gave it staying power. It would have difficult for any contemporary to disprove the eschatology of hope; there were far too many narratives to help explain how an event might fit into black Protestant leaders'



eschatology. Black Protestant leaders could, for example, emerge from the political crisis of 1898 with the same predictions of the future that they held thirty years earlier. Some will ask, is this elasticity not the strength of black eschatology, proof of its success in making sense of the world for black southerners? Others will ask, did not black eschatology allow black leaders to fit all events and circumstances to their existing beliefs about the sacred historical design, and thus, did it not blind African Americans to the realities they faced?

Both of these questions deserve a qualified affirmative answer. As we discussed above, black eschatology did seem to make sense of a wide range of black experiences in convincing ways. But, one can argue, that same flexibility blinded nineteenth-century black Protestants from certain realities. For example, North Carolina black legislators believed that Governor Holden would not be impeached in 1871, despite strong evidence to indicate that he would be; and indeed he was. And black Protestant leaders refused to believe that Jim Crow segregation would come to North Carolina; that is, they sometimes saw what they wanted to see. When the Jim Crow era did come to the state, bringing with it major changes, black leaders saw instead a continuity with the age of emancipation. They characterized the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as eras of racial progress, and, as a result, their theology and political strategies remained intact.

For some, this continuity may represent a loss of prophetic voice; black Protestant leaders failed to understand their own circumstances and to properly condemn the policies of the Jim Crow South. For others, however, the continuity of black eschatology carried its own condemnation of white supremacist politics. By refusing to abandon their

eschatological expectations, black Protestant leaders remained undeterred and uncowed in the face of Jim Crow. Whereas southern whites proclaimed disfranchisement and segregation as permanent solutions to the so-called race problem, black eschatological thinkers balked at such pronouncements, confining the policies of Jim Crow to the footnotes of a story that was principally about emancipation and black progress. But my purpose is not to vindicate black Protestant leaders' outlook or decisions. Rather, I want to locate those decisions within their theology.<sup>3</sup>

Taking black theology seriously, something this study has worked to do, is a call to revisit the intersections of religion and politics. Historians readily acknowledge that religion was important to black politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My work asks us to go one step further: to not leave black religion as institutional or inspirational but to look at the content of black religious beliefs as important to black politics. Religious ideas, more than fueling black politics, shaped and transformed black political ideas and actions.

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<sup>3</sup>This is in contrast to other historians attempt to locate the same decisions primarily in black leaders' class aspirations or their embrace of white values. See, for example, Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 1-17; and Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 163-170.

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