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The Eulogy

24 By Benjamin E. Mays
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The Greeks were right in saying that we funeralize and eulogize for two reasons: To console the bereaved and to exhort the living to an emulation of the virtues of the deceased. It is for these two purposes that we have gathered: To bring condolence to the Johnson and King families and to exhort the living to an emulation of the virtues of Mordecai Wyatt Johnson. To state the purpose another way, we are not here to grieve, to weep, to mourn but rather to thank Almighty God for giving us and the American people Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, to dwell among us for 86 years, to prick our consciences, and to tell America what the American dream is all about.

If God called Abraham from Chaldea to found a new nation, if he called Hosea to tell us what love is, if he called Amos to tell us what justice is, and if he called Michael to tell us what God requires, surely he called Mordecai Wyatt Johnson to expound the social gospel to America and to make Howard University a truly great university. To assume the presidency of Howard University in 1926, a puny thing, and leave it a great university, Mordecai had to be called of God for the expressed purpose of building a Black university, integrated in faculty and staff, community and students under the leadership of a Black president.

I have known Mordecai for a half century dating back to 1923 when John Hope gave me my first job after graduating from Bates College. In that year, Mordecai came to Morehouse to speak — then pastor of the First Baptist Church in Charleston, West Virginia. I shall never forget that address. He spoke to us and challenged us so eloquently that we were led to believe that this man was called of God to do his work. I can see Mordecai years later, walking across the Howard campus, walking with a sense of dignity and freedom. Strangers on the campus had to know he was the president.

In 1926, fifteen short years after graduating from Morehouse College with an A.B. degree in 1911, from

Rochester Theological Seminary with a B.D. degree, and from earning degrees from the University of Chicago and Harvard University, he had impressed the nation so profoundly and the Trustees of Howard University so deeply that he was called by them to become the first Black man to be president of a potentially great university.

It is my considered judgment that no white man in 1926, when virtually everything in this nation, including God's church, was so segregated — every avenue closed to the Negro with locks of steel — no white man could have made Howard a truly great university. I assert this because few white Americans in 1926 believed that Black people were the potential equal of white people — that given a fair deal to develop their minds, to sensitize their hearts and free to seek freedom, could have done what Mordecai did for Howard from 1926 to 1960. Only a man who believed with all his heart, soul and mind, and who had the ability to articulate to Congress and the people what 350 years of slavery, segregation and denigration had done to Black people, and who had courage to expound it, could have built Howard into a great university. 1926-1960 was the time, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson was the man, and America, the greatest experiment in democracy God has given to man, was the place on which this battle was to be waged. Surely God was in this deal, and surely Mordecai was called of God to this job.

In 1926, Howard University was a puny thing, hardly known in the nation, except through a few eminent professors like Kelly Miller who drew promising students to Howard. When I saw Howard University for the first time as an undergraduate student, I was a disappointed man. Its fame had been spread abroad by distinguished scholars such as Kelly Miller, but I saw nothing to inspire me and nothing to make my soul glad. The buildings were rather old and the campus was unimpressive.

Furthermore, Howard University was a political football, kicked around by Southern congressmen who believed that the Negro's place was to be defined forever by the white man — any white man — and that his education was to be inferior to that provided

for whites. There was no congressional legislation to make Howard a legal institution, a child of the Federal Government. In 1926, after Mordecai became president, he took on the Federal Government, arguing before federal officials that the Federal Government was obligated to make Howard a federal institution in order to make amends for what the white man had done to Negroes for three hundred and fifty years of slavery, segregation, and denigration. Mordecai won that battle in Congress and Howard University was made a federal institution supported by the United States Government. This was a major triumph; and if Mordecai had done nothing else, his name should be written among the immortal ones like the founding fathers who helped to make our nation great. But this is not all.

It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who said that “an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man.” These words are a beautiful description of what Mordecai did for Howard from 1926 through 1960. Nothing much in 1926, only a fledgling. But in 1960 Mordecai left it a healthy, thriving university, standing on a solid foundation, which Nabrit and Cheek could build upon and carry Howard forward as one of the stellar universities of the nation. Mordecai found a budget of \$700,000 in 1926. He left it with a budget of \$8,000,000, an increase of more than 1100 percent in 1960. In addition to that, he built 17 new buildings, strong, solid and firm. Besides, the student body increased — and the faculty increased — I make bold to assert that Howard is the best integrated university in the United States. Students are here from five of the six continents. The faculty is made up of white, red, Black, yellow and brown, Jews, Catholics, Orientals, Episcopalians, Baptists, Methodists, and Congregationalists are all here. Howard University is supra class, supra ethnicity, supra religion, supra sex, supra race, and supra caste. Thus, Howard University is the lengthened shadow of Mordecai Wyatt Johnson.

Mordecai did not cringe and kow-tow though the university is supported by federal money. When L. D. Milton, chairman of the Board during most of the

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Johnson years, sent out letters to a select group of men requesting the names of men qualified to succeed Mordecai, I was among them. I gave Mr. Milton no names, but I described the man who should succeed Mordecai. I said in essence when the president of Howard speaks, the nation would be compelled to listen. Mordecai was such a man. Academic freedom must be maintained. Mordecai was a fine exponent of academic freedom. Competence and character were the plumb lines of acceptability. As you know, the civil rights movement was born in the law school of Howard University. When Black men were arguing against segregation before the Supreme Court, Jim Nabrit says, Mordecai was sitting there giving his moral support to the lawyers.

No man in the 20th Century has spoken any more eloquently against racism, segregation and denigration than Mordecai Johnson. No man in this century spoke more forcefully against German Nazis, Italian Facism, and Russian Communism than Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, demonstrating that when a man speaks the truth supported by ethical and moral living, girded with deep spirituality, nothing can stop him except illness and death. Mordecai believed as Shakespeare, “Thrice is he armed who has his quarrels just,” and that God will sustain that which is right.

As for religion, Mordecai lived his religion. When a distinguished Negro journal wrote a weekly column denouncing Mordecai, he never said a mumbling word. Having known, admired, and loved him, I went to his office one day. I said, “Why don’t you say something? Why don’t you expose the people who are weekly falsifying your work and filching from you your good name? Why don’t you refute the lies?” He listened and said: “Dean Mays, in time the people will know that what the paper is saying is false.” As I look back over the years and have lived longer, I conclude that Mordecai was right.

He must have believed that, “Truth crushed to earth shall rise again, the eternal years of God are hers; but error wounded, writhes with pain and dies amidst her worshippers.” He must have accepted the

26 faith of Robert Browning who said: "One who never turned his back but marched breast forward, never doubted that clouds would break, never dreamed that right though worsted wrong would triumph. Held, we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better, sleep to wake." The words of the psalmist must have been his shield and buckler: "Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are asleep: In the morning they are like grass which groweth up. In the morning it flourishes, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth." How many times he must have uttered another verse from the Psalms: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

Most of those, or all of them, who participated in the slander have gone to their reward, but Mordecai lived to the respectable age of 86. Certainly Mrs. Anna Ethelyn Gardner, the first Mrs. Johnson, sustained him during these rough years; and the second Mrs. Johnson brought fellowship and companionship in Mordecai's declining years.

At the 107th Anniversary of Howard in 1972, I said in substance, the seed sown in 1865 by General Howard and by Johnson in establishing Howard as a government university, has multiplied many thousand times: From one teacher of four girls in 1867, to a staff of 1,599 in 1974—1,286 are United States citizens and 313 foreign born; definitely integrated, 27% white and 73% Black. Ninety countries are represented in the student body. Students are here from North and South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa—five of the six continents; the Near, Middle, and Far East are represented. They come from the Isle of the Sea. In 1974, the enrollment was approximately 10,000 students. On the Board of Trustees you have $\frac{2}{3}$ Black, $\frac{1}{3}$ white.

Beginning with no graduates in 1867, Howard had graduated in 1974, 35,000 men and women who have received diplomas, degrees or certificates; and 14,150 of the 35,000 hold graduate and professional degrees. The campus, land, buildings and equipment are valued at more than \$90 million. The drops of water and grains of sand have become an ocean and a great



fertile land — not barren. Since 1960, Nabrit and Cheek have furthered the development of the university. I assert again, Howard is the most integrated university in the United States.

Had Mordecai not had the prophetic vision in 1926 to make Howard legally owned by the Federal Government, this university would have died a long time ago. To Mordecai, this was his most significant act. Let us thank God for Mordecai Wyatt Johnson!

Mordecai was a man who not only talked his religion, but he walked it. Careful analysis of his sermons and speeches reveals one striking thing: All of them reveal a deep seated concern for the man farthest down. Here he followed in the footsteps of the master. In Matthew 25, where the prerequisite is given for the entrance into the kingdom, we read:

“**W**hen the son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations; and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, come, ye blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee? Or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? Or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them. “Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

If this is the case, Mordecai will have no trouble when catechized by Saint Peter at the pearly gates. I hear Mordecai saying to Peter, “Peter, what have I done to warrant admission to God’s kingdom?” Saint Peter replied, “Mordecai, the love of God and the

love of man is one love. The two loves are interlaced, intertwined, and interwoven so delicately that when you hurt man you hurt God. When you make it hard for man to live, you make it hard for God to live. Come in Mordecai, you have earned for yourself an immortal crown, a city not made with hands but eternal in the heaven.” □