

A Response to Laurie Maffly-Kipp, “Exodus and Ethiopia”
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W. E. B. DuBois met Alexander Crummell, in the 1890s, during a commencement at Wilberforce University, and he included a biographic reflection, “Of Alexander Crummel,” toward the end of *The Souls of Black Folk*. At the time of their meeting Crummell was in his seventies. “Tall, frail, and black he stood, with simple dignity,” DuBois recalled, and he drew Crummell apart from the crowd to speak with him, at first “politely, then curiously, then eagerly.” As they talked, Crummell seemed to take on the aura of a prophet: “Some seer he seemed, that came not from the crimson Past or the gray To-come but from the pulsing Now,—that mocking world which seemed to me at once so light and dark, so splendid and sordid.”

Crummell was one of several hundred African Americans who journeyed to Africa, in gathering numbers from the early 1850s to the opening decades of the twentieth century, as missionaries and reporters. In a chapter entitled “Exodus and Ethiopia,” from her new book *Setting Down the Sacred Past: African-American Race Histories*, Laurie Maffly-Kipp effectively incorporates Crummell into the collective biography of these adventurous missionaries, men and women representing the African Methodist Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches. Like DuBois’s image of Crummell, they were prophets neither of past nor future but of the “now” in which they lived, a mocking world “at once so light and dark, so splendid and sordid.” Consequently, they did not agree among themselves either about their purposes in going or the consequences of their journeys for Africa, for the United States, and for their personal and social identities as African Americans. Indeed, as Maffly-Kipp recounts it, they struggled intellectually and practically to compose a new history that, by

establishing a usable past, would invest the present with meaning and dignity and open out toward the future.

Initially, the missionaries and their American supporters interpreted the journey to Africa by applying biblical templates: the Exodus from Egypt or the ambiguous forecast of Psalm 68: 31, that Ethiopia will “stretch out her hands to God.” Was the yet-to-be-written history a history of departure from a racist United States, redemptive evangelism in Africa, or some wider mission of the African people in world history? Maffly-Kipp deftly describes the alternative visions articulated, from Martin Delaney in the 1850s to AME Bishop Henry McNeal Turner in the 1890s.

DuBois briefly employed the template of Exodus with respect to Crummell: “a seer to lead the uncalled out of the house of bondage.” But DuBois was more interested in the fact that, after graduating from Cambridge University and spending more than twenty years in Liberia, Crummell chose to return to the United States. For DuBois, as, it seems, for Maffly-Kipp, the task of African-American historians required a decision about the moral geography in which the narrative would take place. It was no accident that, in his meditations on Alexander Crummell, DuBois regularly alluded to John Bunyan’s great allegory of life as journey, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Maffly-Kipp concludes her chapter by citing Alfred Lee Ridgel, who wrote in 1898 that ““for nearly three hundred years the American negro has been away from home.”” Ridgel organized his moral geography around Africa and concluded that ““the negro in foreign lands must return home [to Africa] and become renegroized, if you please, before he can fully appreciate himself and his people”” (cited in Maffly-Kipp, p. 199). DuBois, by contrast, admired Crummell because Crummell’s education in England and Liberia eventually

returned him to the United States, where Crummell “never faltered, he seldom complained; he simply worked, inspiring the young, rebuking the old, helping the weak, guiding the strong.” Crummell’s moral compass, in DuBois’s interpretation, organized history around “the tragedy of the age: not that men are poor,—all men know something of poverty; not that men are wicked,—who is good? not that men are ignorant,—what is Truth? Nay, but that men know so little of men.”