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Response to “Exodus and Ethiopia”

Why would African Americans choose to evangelize Africa? This inquiry may appear at first blush rather axiomatic: evangelization, after all, recognizes no borders. But then one must take up the historical, sociological, and theological specificities of the proper noun: why would *African Americans* choose to travel to Africa and compel conversion to the Christianities of the New World?

To be sure, Christianity was in Africa and among Africans prior to the slave trade. And as scholarship in African American religion has admirably demonstrated, the conversion of enslaved and free blacks to Christianity in the colonies was far more complicated than a strategic opiate foisted by whites. Yet even with the proper provisos and acknowledgments, the missionary passion of nineteenth-century African Americans has remained a surprisingly unexplored terrain. This is, I would argue, in part due to the discomfort of the image itself. Black missionaries travel to faraway lands (that they themselves posited as ancestral) in order to convert subjects (that they themselves posited as primitive) to a new religious system (that they themselves posited as superior). Why did they do this? To spread the gospel, yes. But *how* did they do this? How did they explain to themselves, and to their racial and denominational communities, why this was such an exigent project of reverse colonization, civilization, and evangelization?

Laurie Maffly-Kipp wades into these complicated psychological and spiritual waters, offering a haunting study of these efforts to incorporate a Christian Africa into African American social ambition. Time and again, she answers the *why* and the *how* question with the same answer: history. She demonstrates that American blacks bound their fate to that of African peoples through historical narration. “One could both

appreciate and lament the state of the natives, and in turn understand that the differences between Africans and African Americans were chronological rather than moral,” she explains, “One people, separated by time and space, had proceeded along two separate spiritual paths. But in the narratives of missionaries they could once again be reunited” (192). Maffly-Kipp offers historical narration as a requisite missionary practice *and* a touted missionary dividend. Through their published historical retellings and anthropological renderings, missionaries explained why they did what they did and why they saw what they saw. They never just did, they historicized; they never just observed, they situated. And, through their resultant conversions, they righted history: blacks torn from their home continent would find again unity with their genealogical forbears. And those forbears would be improved by the civilizing improvements of their cousins’ converting etiquette, faith, and millennial futurism.

Using the writings of the famous (such as Martin Delany, William Sheppard, and Henry McNeal Turner) and the obscure (like Thomas L. Johnson), Maffly-Kipp writes an intellectual history that is also a survey of print culture; a cultural history that is also an account of organizational shifts and changes. Centering this wide-ranging venture is the repeated invocation of history as the tie that binds. These varied expositors “endeavored to link their understandings of sacred history to the endurance of an oppressed people” (174). Why does *history* unburden the oppressed? As with all relieving and liberating practices, the answer is in its inscribing faith. Maffly-Kipp reminds her readers that during the long nineteenth century of her survey, history was still, for many, a *sacred* matter. What African Americans (and white Americans) knew about Africa (indeed, what they knew about most non-provincial subjects) derived from classical literature and

Biblical prophecy more than any ethnographic description. African Americans knew more about Ethiopia and Exodus than they did about colonial politics or tribal differences. With few exceptions, historical awareness in the early national and Reconstruction periods was Biblical awareness. Tracking the tales of the Bible, then, meant that a colonizing approach to Africa by African Americans wasn't oppressive, it was prophesy.

Because the Bible made no specific reference to the United States or American slavery, and because the African lands to which missionaries traveled were (by their own descriptions) heathen, "history had to be rewritten in the minds of African Americans, as well as Christianity etched in the hearts of Africans, before Canaan could be reborn" (200). This was no easy task, as demonstrated in the texts examined by Maffly-Kipp. Missionaries labored through elaborate processes of selective remembering and strategic forgetting to make Africa a usable space for black missionary work. For example, they had to explain how the primitivism they decidedly observed among African peoples was, simultaneously, a virtue and a problem: a virtue insofar as it signified the primal dignity of a race ravaged by the indignities of slavery, and a problem inasmuch as it needed to be solved through religious reformation. This involves inviting but tauntingly unexplored connections between back-to-Africa efforts and the history of Zionism. In a letter advocating emigration to Liberia in 1873, Beverly Page Yates writes, "You will not come as the prodigal son, wasted, weary, and wretched; but like the Jews, hastening from the land of Egypt, laden with precious and valuable spoils. You are one in origin with us, and with the benighted tribes in whose behalf we plead—one in interest and one in worldly destiny" (177). The African and the African American must be made equal for

projects at home and abroad. Or, as Edward Blyden would remark, “We must merge ourselves in the indigenous forces of the land and become one with them in a vast body social, political, and religious. They are ours and we are theirs” (168).

Maffly-Kipp’s examination invites a slew of comparative questions, begging that the patterns of historical narration observed by her would be connected and contrasted to the missionary accounts of whites. Here, the comparisons would be interesting not only if made in the nineteenth-century, but also into the twentieth and twenty-first, in which missionary ventures seem unstoppable, if now cast in even more explicit economic ambition. Maffly-Kipp shows how gendered was this project for African Americans, as indicated by Martin Delany when he explained, “I am more and more convinced that Africa is the country to which all colored men who wish to attain the full stature of manhood, and bring up their children to be men and not creeping things, should turn their steps” (162). As we circle a globe currently mapped by evangelical, governmental, missionary, and non-governmental agencies bent upon the transformation of the world in the American image, Maffly-Kipp’s observations about the psychic necessity and sacred historicity of such ventures may temper and incite our post-colonial critiques.