

By JOSEPHUS R. COAN

Henry McNeal Turner: A Fearless Prophet of Black Liberation

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the nineteen sixties the public career of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner (1834-1915) has gained spotlight as a subject for research scholars. This writer has received wide correspondence from scholars of various levels expressing the desire to undertake research projects on some aspects of Bishop Turner's life and works, making inquiries about the existence of primary sources. Some of these research projects were to be term papers to meet course requirements; some master's theses; some doctoral dissertations; and others for articles or books to be published.

Current interest in this subject for research can be traced back to 1961, when this writer completed and submitted his doctoral dissertation on *The Expansion of Missions of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Africa, 1896-1908*.¹ The study delineated Bishop Turner as the key figure in the expansion. At the same time it uncovered a wealth of primary sources on the life of Turner hitherto unknown.² Since that time Edwin S. Redkey has projected two publications centering on Bishop Turner. *Black Exodus* (1969) is a very detailed and well-documented account of Bishop Turner as a Black Nationalist and Emigrationist.³ In it he disclosed additional documentary sources. *Black Respect* (1971) is a compilation of "The Writings and Speeches of Henry McNeal Turner."⁴ In this volume, Redkey has done a great service by bringing together under a single cover thirty-seven different documents of Bishop Turner's major pronouncements, stretching over four decades, and which were published originally in various church and secular periodicals, as well as in government records. Gayraud S. Wilmore has devoted several chapters to Bishop Turner in his book, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*.⁵

¹ The dissertation was submitted to the Hartford Seminary Foundation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in 1961. A microfilm Xerox copy of the complete manuscript is available from University Microfilms, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan.

² The two basic sources discovered were bound volumes of *The Voice of Missions, 1893-1900* and *The Voice of the People, 1901-1904*. The two periodicals were started and edited by Bishop Turner. They contain a wealth of his letters, editorials and other writings. Other valuable sources were found in the *A.M.E. Christian Recorder* and the *A.M.E. Review*.

³ *Black Exodus*. Black Nationalist and Back-to-Africa Movements, 1890-1910. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969.

⁴ *Respect Black: The Writings and Speeches of Henry McNeal Turner* Thirty-seven documents, compiled and edited by Edwin S. Redkey. New York: The Arno Press and The New York Times, 1971.

⁵ *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*. New York: Doubleday and Co. 1972.

The surging interest in the re-discovery of the spirit and message of Bishop Turner is an integral part of the current movement of "Black Awareness."⁶ Behind the movement is a determination to achieve complete liberation of Black Americans from all the forces and movements aimed at degrading and dehumanizing the race. It is a revolutionary thrust for authentic identity, full manhood and human dignity. In one sense the current movement is an innovation. That is to say, it is manifested in a different lingo and has new forms of social actions. On the other hand, it should be understood as a re-birth or revival of the Black man's struggles for freedom, justice and equality. For the whole history of Black Americans has been that of a series of struggles for liberation. The current movement has had powerful antecedents in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

A leading exponent of Black liberation during the period from about 1865 to 1915 was Bishop Henry McNeal Turner. On the whole, historians and journalists have neglected this apostle of liberation. The purpose of this paper is to bring to light his spirit and message with the view of revealing him as a dynamic forerunner of the current thrust of Black liberation and awareness. Part One consists of a chronological sketch of his life. Part Two is a presentation of some of his major theological and social ideas.

I. DELINEATION OF THE LIFE OF BISHOP HENRY McNEAL TURNER

Henry McNeal Turner was born on a farm near Newberry in Abbeville County, South Carolina on February 1, 1834.⁷ He was the eldest son of Henry and Sarah Greer Turner, and, on his father's side, the grandson of an African Prince, captured when a boy and brought to America. Due to the English law which forbade the enslavement of royal blood, Turner's grandfather was declared free. His parents and he himself, therefore, were born free.⁸ Though born of free parents, the conditions he had to live with as a Black boy, made but little difference between his situation and that of the slaves. Young Turner was compelled to work side by side with slaves in the cotton and corn fields. Through this exposure, he tasted some of the bitterness of slavery and had unforgettable experiences.⁹ It was unlawful for him to be taught to read and write. In spite of this proscription, through subterfuge, he was taught some reading and writing during his early boyhood days. At first, through the help of a friendly White lady and White boys with

⁶ The concept has been popularized by Major J. Jones in his book, *Black Awareness, A Theology of Hope*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1971.

⁷ M. M. Ponton, *Life and Times of Henry M. Turner*. Atlanta: A. B. Caldwell Publishing Co., 1917. p. 25.

⁸ M. M. Ponton, *Ibid.*; John T. Jenifer, *Centennial Retrospect History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, Nashville: A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1916, p. 390; R. R. Wright, Jr. *The Bishops of the A.M.E. Church*. Nashville: A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1963, p. 329.

⁹ Jenifer, *Ibid.*, p. 391; Wright, *Ibid.*

whom he played, he learned the alphabets and to spell a few common words. His father must have died before he became a teenager, for it seems that he was left to the care of his mother.¹⁰ At the age of fifteen, seeing that the rural area was unsuitable for the growing ambition of her son to learn, his mother moved to Abbeville. Here she employed a White lady to give young Turner lessons every Sunday. This attempt was soon suppressed, and the kind lady was threatened with imprisonment.¹¹ Says Bishop R. R. Wright: "This disappointment embittered young Turner against the haters of his race, and had much to do with the contempt which he showed in after years for those who opposed the progress of his people."¹²

In Abbeville, young Turner became employed in a law firm. Seeing the keenness of his mind and his eager ambition to learn, the attorneys took pleasure in giving him instruction in spite of the law. He had the opportunity to hear the great speeches of the lawyers. Also he had free access to the books of the firm and the current literature of that day. There he studied arithmetic, history, geography, astronomy and the Bible.

On reaching manhood, Abbeville became too small for young Turner's aspirations. Through a friend he was employed in a hospital in Baltimore. During his spare time he continued his private study of books on science, law and theology. He was also tutored by Bishop Cummins of the Protestant Episcopal Church.¹³

About his conversion, little is known. According to John T. Jenifer this event took place during the time he lived at Abbeville.¹⁴ In 1851, at the age of seventeen, he became a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church South. Two years later he was licensed as a local preacher by the Reverend Boyd. With the status of a local preacher, he traveled widely and was unmolested in the states of South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, and Missouri as far as St. Louis.¹⁵

Then came a great turning point in his life. That event was his entrance upon the ministry of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church. Up to 1857, Brother Turner had never even heard of the A.M.E. Church.¹⁶ The reason for his lack of knowledge of this Black Church is the fact that, until about the eighteen fifties, this Church's operation was confined largely to the non-slaveholding states. Occasionally, this Black Church penetrated into strategic centers of slaveholding states. Under the leadership of Reverend John M. Brown (later a Bishop), the A.M.E. Church expanded to New Orleans during the late eighteen forties or early eighteen fifties. In New Orleans at that time, it was unlawful for slaves and free Blacks to worship together. This proscription, of course, was contrary to the spirit and policy of the A.M.E. Church. Reverend

¹⁰ Ponton, *Op. Cit.*, p. 34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Wright, *Op. Cit.*, p. 330.

¹³ Ponton, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 35, 36; Jenifer, *Op. Cit.*, p. 392

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

¹⁵ Ponton, p. 35; Wright, pp. 330-331.

¹⁶ See "Emancipation Day" (1863) in Redkey, *Op. Cit.*, p. 1.

John M. Brown defied the law, and was arrested on five different occasions for permitting slaves and free Blacks to worship together in the same congregation. By 1857, it seems that Reverend John M. Brown had been succeeded as pastor of the A.M.E. Church in New Orleans, known as St. James, by Doctor Willis R. Revels. Brother Turner's visit to New Orleans near the end of the year 1857 brought him in touch with Dr. Revels, who explained to Brother Turner the principles and mission of the A.M.E. Church. The result of this explanation was Brother Turner's immediate joining the A.M.E. Church. Exhibiting his credentials as a local preacher in the M.E. Church South, he was recommended by the Quarterly Conference of St. James to the Annual Conference which was held in St. Louis, Missouri in 1858. Brother Turner attended the Annual Conference, which was presided over by Bishop Daniel A. Payne. After a trial sermon and a rigid examination, Brother Turner was admitted to the itinerant work of the A.M.E. Ministry.¹⁷ This event marked the beginning of his ministry of fifty-seven years in the A.M.E. Church.

Admitted to the A.M.E. Ministry in 1858, Brother Turner was ordained Deacon in 1860 and Elder in 1862 by Bishop Daniel A. Payne. Elder Turner's¹⁸ first pastoral appointment was Waters Chapel Mission in Baltimore. While there he continued his private studies.¹⁹ After four years of pastorate in Baltimore he was appointed to Israel Church in Washington, D. C.²⁰ While in the city of Washington, Elder Turner helped to recruit Black soldiers for the United States Army during the Civil War. His fame and influence reached the ears of President Abraham Lincoln, who, in 1863 appointed him as Chaplain of Black Troops. In 1865 President Andrew Johnson appointed him Chaplain of the regular army, which appointment made him the first Black man to have received such appointment.²¹ After the Civil War, Elder Turner was assigned to detailed duty in the office of the Freedmen's Bureau and stationed in Savannah, Georgia. When he came to Savannah as the agent of the Freedmen's Bureau, Bishop Daniel A. Payne, who was getting African Methodism started in the states of South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia and Florida, appointed Elder Turner as Presiding Elder and Superintendent of A.M.E. Missions in Georgia. Elder Turner resigned from his lucrative position as agent of the Freedmen's Bureau for two reasons: For one thing, he resented disrespect shown him on account of his color. On the other hand, he wanted to devote more of his attention to organizing the A.M.E. Church in Georgia.²²

¹⁷ See *Ibid.*; Also Jenifer, p. 391.

¹⁸ From this point on till the time he was consecrated Bishop, the title "Elder" will be applied to him.

¹⁹ Jenifer, p. 391.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²¹ See "Turner as a Statesman" in *Quarto-Centennial of H. M. Turner as a Bishop in the A.M.E. Church*. Nashville: A.M.E. S.S. Union 1905. pp. 37-44; Jenifer, *Op. Cit.*, p. 392.

²² Jenifer, *Ibid.*, Also the full address of Bishop Turner's resignation appears in Wright, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 332-336; Redkey, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 29-32; and *Quarto-Centennial*, etc. pp. 113-118.

In this capacity, Jenifer says, "No one man did more to gather in and organize the forces and plant the A.M.E. Church in Georgia and in the South than did Henry McNeal Turner."²³ His wide travels throughout the state, plus his organizing genius resulted in the spread of the Church all over the state of Georgia. In one year alone he is said to have traveled 15,000 miles, organizing new congregations, licensing and training preachers for them. His quarterly Conference sessions became institutes for teaching the doctrine and polity of the Church. For months at a time he preached three times on Sundays, and every night in the week. So fruitful were his labors, that in 1872, when he asked to be delivered from the pressing duties of travel, African Methodism in Georgia was stronger numerically than in any other state. Because of this fact, Georgia gained the reputation of being the "Empire State of African Methodism." It was this ministry which was partially responsible for his being given the credit of "the greatest A.M.E. Missionary known to the Church."²⁴

During this period, Elder Turner was not only involved in expanding A.M.E. missions in Georgia. He was also energetically engaged in Georgia politics. The motive for his political involvement stemmed from his deep conviction that political and social issues boiled down finally to theological and ethical issues. With this conviction he felt compelled to champion the rights of the newly emancipated freedmen. He helped to organize Blacks into the Republican Party, and called the first Republican State Convention in 1867. In 1868 he was elected to the Georgia Constitutional Convention. In 1868 and again in 1870 he was elected to the Georgia Legislature from Macon as a member of the House of Representatives.²⁵ Racism blocked his path. The White Representatives refused to permit the seating of Black Representatives. This action called forth Elder Turner's impassioned "Speech on the Eligibility of Colored Members to Seats in the Georgia Legislature."²⁶ The speech, delivered on September 3, 1868, was a protest against the threatened dismissal of Black Legislators and a demand for their rights as free citizens of the United States. He based his case, first, on the doctrines of the Bible and the Will of God; but also on the principles of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights.²⁷ In this struggle, Elder Turner fought a losing battle. Black Representatives were expelled from the Georgia Legislature.²⁸ The outcome was an unmistakable demonstration that the White people of Georgia, even though defeated in the Civil War, were unprepared to accord Black people their rights. The cause for complete

²³ Jenifer, *Op. Cit.*, p. 392.

²⁴ See "The True Status of H. M. Turner in the A.M.E. Church" in *The Voice of the People*, August 1902, p. 4.

²⁵ Ponton, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 49-64; Jenifer, *Op. Cit.* p. 394; Wright, p. 332.

²⁶ See "Turner as a Leader" in *Quarto-Centennial*, pp. 56-57; Redkey, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 14-28.

²⁷ Wright, *Op. Cit.*, p. 332; Redkey, *Black Exodus*, p. 26.

²⁸ Redkey, *Black Exodus*, p. 27.

liberation, equality and justice for the Black man suffered a severe setback. The shocking experience was a factor that led Elder Turner to advocate Black Nationalism. Disappointed over the fact of the expulsion of himself and the members of his race from the Georgia State Legislature, Elder Turner applied for and was appointed Postmaster in Macon. However, mounting pressure on the Federal Government caused him to lose this position after only two weeks in office.

After these disheartening experiences, Turner continued his work as Presiding Elder and Superintendent of A.M.E. Missions in Georgia until January 5, 1872. On this date he delivered his masterful address at St. Phillip A.M.E. Church in Savannah. The content of the speech consisted of a summary of his seven years work and a request to be relieved from the pressing duties. These are the closing words of the speech:

I would say also to the brethren of the Conference: You are now Deacons, Elders, Presiding Elders, and many of you are pulpit orators, as now you must bear your own responsibilities, and look, in addition to your Bible, Discipline and Bishop, to our Father who art in Heaven, for direction and counsel; you are welcome to the benefits of my experience at any time that you may wish them; but I trust it will not be in my province to exercise any further control over a single member of the Conference. With these remarks, Bishop and Conference, I again pray to be relieved of my heavy, taxing responsibilities. May the God of grace keep you, is my prayer.²⁹

The Conference granted Elder Turner's request of relief from the duties of Presiding Elder and Superintendent of Missions. He became a pastor in the Savannah area. Sources are not clear as to the pastoral charge that he held. In this capacity he served from 1872 to 1876. This means that during his total ministry of fifty-seven years, he held pastoral charges in Baltimore, Washington and Savannah.

From 1876 to 1880 Elder Turner served as the Business Manager of the A.M.E. Book Concern. During this period he was able to bring about a recovery of the almost bankrupted enterprise. Moreover, the position gave him the opportunity of becoming an author and publisher. His literary publications became outstanding contributions to the literature of the A.M.E. Church. For one thing, he compiled and published the first musical edition of the A.M.E. Hymnal, and so filled a long felt need. This Hymn Book was used for decades before a revision was made. His second literary work was what has been termed, *Turner's Catechism*, which is still in use today in the Church's program of Christian education for children. His major literary contribution was the *Methodist Polity*. Concerning this publication, A. L. Ridgel wrote: "That wonderful book, *Methodist Polity*, alone would immortalize Bishop Turner. It is the most valuable production given to the Church."³⁰ The book is the result of extensive research on Elder Turner's part, in

²⁹ Ponton, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 72, 73; Redkey, *Respect Black*, p. 32.

³⁰ See "Turner as a Publisher" in *Quarto-Centennial*, pp. 66-71; also A. L. Ridgel, *Africa and African Methodism*. Atlanta: The Franklin Printing and Publishing Co., 1896, p. 108.

theology, church history and doctrine. The study equipped him with superior knowledge of church law and practices of all ages, and put him in a distinctly advantageous position over his colleagues. The book has been in use as a textbook for candidates entering the A.M.E. ministry. The use has been continued for eighty-six years, being replaced by Bishop Joseph Gomez's *Polity of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*.³¹

In 1880, Elder Turner was elected and consecrated a Bishop. In this capacity he was active until his death in 1915, a total of thirty-five years, the last twenty years of which he served as the Senior Bishop.³² During the period of his episcopacy, Bishop Turner's ministerial activities became more widely extended and involved in church, state, national and international affairs. He supervised the work of the A.M.E. Church in six different Episcopal Districts, covering fifteen states, a portion of Canada, Bermuda, West and South Africa. He served as President of the Missionary Board from 1896 to 1900. Through his leadership, the A.M.E. Church witnessed its greatest era of missionary expansion. Between 1891 and 1897 he made three trips to West Africa for the purpose of organizing and promoting the Sierra Leone and Liberia Annual Conferences of the A.M.E. Church.³³ In 1896 he accepted the Ethiopian Church from South Africa into the A.M.E. Church, thus, extending African Methodism into South Africa. He made a historic trip to South Africa in 1898 and organized the Transvaal and the South African Annual Conferences. Since the initial planting of African Methodism on the continent of Africa, the work has grown to the extent that the A.M.E. Church now operates among the following African nations: Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, Republic of South Africa, Rhodesia, Zambia, Swazi, Lesotho, Botswana, and Malawi.

Bishop Turner was President of the Sunday School Union from 1900 to 1908, and Historiographer from 1908 to 1912.³⁴ As a journalist he started the publication of three A.M.E. Church periodicals: *The Southern Christian Recorder* was started in 1886, *The Voice of Missions* in 1893 and the *Voice of the People* in 1901.³⁵

Bishop Turner was a constant and fearless critic of the national government, and particularly the Supreme Court for failing to protect the rights of Black Americans. Distrustful of the possibility of achieving justice, civil rights and equality, he passionately advocated emigration to Africa. It was his stand on this issue more than that of any other which led him to battle with his colleagues and other Black leaders of his day.

³¹ Published by The Division of Christian Education, A.M.E. Church, 1971.

³² Wright, *Op. Cit.*, p. 339.

³³ A.M.E. Mission in Liberia began in 1878, and in Sierra Leone in 1887. See Jenifer, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 127-130; D. A. Payne, *History of the A.M.E. Church*, Nashville; A.M.E. S.S. Union, 1891, pp. 475-492. Turner was known as Bishop of Africa. His visits were for the purpose of organizing the mission into Annual Conferences.

³⁴ Jenifer, *Op. Cit.*, p. 395.

³⁵ *Quarto-Centennial*, pp. 86, 94-99.

II. BISHOP TURNER'S THEOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL VIEWS

From the brief sketch of Bishop Turner's life presented in Part I, it can be seen that his whole public ministry was devoted to bridging the gap between theology and sociology. He saw the task of Christian ministry as a matter of bringing the message and spirit of the Christian gospel to bear upon the whole field of human relationships, which modern Christian educators declare, embraces the entire "gamut of man's experiences and needs and their expressions in specific situations."³⁶ This meant translating the principles of the gospel into every area of individual and social life — political, social and economic.

Bishop Turner spared neither time nor effort in developing a definitive statement of his theology. His views were expressed on different occasions in his sermons, addresses, letters, articles and editorials. They were preached and taught from the pulpit as well as the legislative halls; through church and secular press.

What were the sources of his theological and sociological views? What were some of the major factors that influenced his far-reaching theological outlook and his application of what he discovered as the truth about God to the problems and needs of Black Americans? Answers to these questions can be summed up in two points: His private study of the Bible and traditional theologies, and the Black experience in America. To a brief examination of these points we now turn.

One responsible factor was the insight he gained from private study of the Bible and traditional theologies. His theology was grounded in the Bible, especially the essential teachings of the eighth century prophets of the Old Testament and of the teachings of Jesus. His sociology emerged out of his reflection upon God's purpose for mankind as revealed in the Bible combined with the Black experience in America. Without the privilege of formal education, his study of the Bible goes back to his boyhood days and continued through adulthood. On becoming a minister of the A.M.E. Church, he accepted the "Articles of Religion" and the "Catechism of Faith."³⁷ Both of these doctrinal statements were inherited from the Methodist Episcopal (M.E.) Church. In adopting these affirmations, the Fathers of African Methodism had no problem with the conceptual dimensions of Methodist theology. They did have problems with the behavioral dimensions, which permitted slavery. Even some of the clergy of the M.E. Church defended the institution of slavery. To the Fathers of African Methodism, this practice was inconsistent with the ideals and principles of the Christian faith. The following "Report on Slavery," adopted by the General Conference of 1860 reveals the position of the A.M.E. Church:

³⁶ Cooperative Curriculum Project, *The Church's Educational Ministry: A Curriculum Plan*. St. Louis, Mo.: The Bethany Press, 1965. p. 14.

³⁷ These two doctrinal affirmations have appeared in every edition of the A.M.E. *Book of Discipline*. In the first edition, printed in 1817, they appear on pages 15-37. In the 1968 edition, they appear on pages 15-24 and 29-53.

We, your Committee, appointed on Slavery, beg most respectfully to submit the following as our Report: Having had the subject under careful consideration, we find in our Book of Discipline, on page 114, the following, "The buying and selling of men, women, and children, except with the intention to free them immediately; if he, she, or they, do not immediately emancipate them, he, she, or they, shall be immediately expelled."

And again, on page 124, it reads, "We shall not receive any person in our society, as a member, who is a slaveholder; and any that are now members, that have slaves, and refuse to emancipate them shall be excluded."

Your Committee, not desiring to enter into the discussion of the broad question of slavery, we would therefore recommend for adoption the following: *Resolved, 1st.* That the A.M.E. Church, composed as it is of colored persons, identified with the slaves in chains, who never can be dis severed from them in their sufferings, do deeply sympathize with them in their tears and blood, and they shall have our constant prayers and good wishes. *Resolved, 2d.* That we deprecate the spirit of any professing Christian denomination, that would attempt to excuse its members from the sin of slave holding, by offering as an apology the example of the Apostolic Church. J. A. Shorter, Chairman³⁸

Bishop Turner was influenced by this statement. The A.M.E. doctrinal affirmations were crystallized by Bishop Daniel A. Payne into what has become the A.M.E. Church's motto: "God our Father, Christ our Redeemer, Man our Brother."³⁹ Bishop Turner accepted the Wesleyan theology with an important difference — the lack of emphasis in Wesleyan theology on human brotherhood. His theology, therefore, was a reaction against the distorted view which put accent on the Fatherhood of God and Redemption through Jesus Christ and neglected or overlooked the universal brotherhood of man. For him, Black people should be treated by White people as Brothers under the Fatherhood of God.⁴⁰ The Christian faith for him called for a declaration of war on all efforts to deny Black Americans freedom, equality and justice.

Another basic source for Bishop Turner's theological and sociological views was his experience as a Black man and member of an enslaved and oppressed racial group. Witnessing the afflictions of his people was, for him, a lifelong experience. He appropriated what he had learned about the Christian faith to the situations through which he and the members of his race had passed and were still experiencing. The result was a theology from the Black perspective.

In today's terminology, Bishop Turner would be classified as a prophet of liberation. He was definitely a forerunner of the current movement of "Black Theology of Liberation." The themes of liberation (freedom) justice, equality and human dignity for the Black man run

³⁸ *Minutes of the Twelfth General Conference of the African M.E.* held in Pittsburgh, Pa., May 7, 1960, p. 14.

³⁹ The belief is common that this motto was formulated by Bishop Richard Allen. On the other hand, the "Episcopal Address" for 1896 attributes its formulation to Bishop Daniel A. Payne. See *Minutes of the General Conference of the A.M.E. Church, 1896*, p. 98.

⁴⁰ See "Emancipation Address," 1866 in Redkey, *Respect Black*, p. 12. See "The Barbarous Decision of the Supreme Court," *Ibid.*, p. 69.

throughout all of his existing speeches and writings, extending across forty-seven years, from 1866 to 1913.⁴¹ To an examination of some of his existing written works we now turn.

On January 1, 1866, he delivered an address on "The Anniversary of Emancipation." The following is an epitome of the address:

European colonists and settlers came to America in search for freedom. They fought the Revolutionary War in order to gain liberation from British domination. Yet they enslaved Africans whom they brought over. God did not endorse slavery. Human bondage was antagonistic to His Will. Yet God permitted the institution of slavery as a test to the White man's obedience. Africans were committed to the care of the White man "as a trust from God." It was not God's will that the White man should bar all avenues of improvement and hold the Black man as he would a horse or a cow." Such treatment "defaced the image of God and was a crime which offended Heaven." In return for the Black man's labors, Whites should have educated them and equipped them as missionaries to the Fatherland.⁴² White "Doctors of Divinity" should have taught Black people "that we have rights that should be respected." Hence the enslavement of Africans was the abuse of a Divine trust. Its defense was "an insult to God." He closed the address with this admonition to the Freedmen: "Let us show them we can be a people, respectable, virtuous, honest and industrious; and soon their prejudice will melt away, and with God for our Father, we will all be brothers."⁴³

But "their prejudice" did not "melt away." Two years later White Legislators refused to permit the seating of Black Representatives in the Georgia Legislature. On this occasion Bishop Turner made his impassioned speech "On the Eligibility of Colored Members to Seats in the Georgia Legislature," in which he bitterly denounced the ousting as can be seen in the following excerpts:

I hold that I am a member of this body. Therefore, Sir, I shall neither fawn nor cringe before any party, nor stoop to *beg* them for my rights . . . I am here to demand my rights, and to hurl thunderbolts at the men who would dare to cross the threshold of my manhood.

I do not regard this movement as a thrust at me. It is a thrust at the Bible — a thrust at the God of the universe for making a man and not finishing him; it is simply calling the Great Jehovah a fool.

Justice is the great doctrine taught in the Bible. God's Eternal Justice is founded upon Truth and the man who steps from justice steps from truth, and cannot make his principles prevail.

You may expel us, Gentlemen, by your votes today; but while you do it, remember there is a just God in Heaven, whose All-Seeing eye beholds alike the acts of the oppressor and the oppressed, and who, despite the machinations of the wicked, never fails to vindicate the cause of Justice, and the sanctity of His own handiwork.⁴⁴

⁴¹ See Note number 4.

⁴² Bishop Turner was a leading spirit of the vital impulse known as "Redemption of Africa." See J. R. Coan, *The Expansion of Missions Episcopal Church in South Africa, 1896-1908*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation) 1961, pp. 43-60.

⁴³ Redkey, *Respect Black*, pp. 5-12.

⁴⁴ Redkey, *Ibid.*, pp. 14-28.

These excerpts are merely a few samplings of utterances in Bishop Turner's courageous fight for liberation and human dignity. They are clear indications that he was an undaunted forerunner of the current movement of "Black Theology of Liberation."

The writings of Bishop Turner reveal him as a precursor of the idea of an "Africanized God." In this country Albert B. Cleage, who is Pastor of the Shrine of the Black Madonna in Detroit, has advanced the thesis that Jesus is the Black Messiah; a descendant of the nation of Israel, which became Black during its sojourn in Babylon and Egypt. He claims further that Jesus was a member of the Zealots, an underground movement with a revolutionary message of separation and liberation from Rome.⁴⁵ Bishop Turner went a step further and declared "God is a Negro." in support of his view he said:

We have as much right biblically and otherwise to believe that God is a Negro, as you buckra, or White people have to believe that God is a fine looking, symmetrical and ornamented White man. For the bulk of you, and all the fool Negroes of the country, believe that God is White-skinned, blue-eyed, straight-haired, projecting nosed, compressed-lipped and finely-robed *White* gentleman, sitting upon a throne somewhere in the heavens. Every race of people since time began who have attempted to describe their God by words, or by paintings, or carvings, or by any other form or figure, have conveyed the idea that the God who made them and shaped their destinies was symbolized in themselves, and why should not the Negro believe that he resembles God as much as other people? We do not believe that there is any hope for a race of people who do not believe that they look like God.⁴⁶

Bishop Turner's concept of God was a kind of anthropomorphism that was not uncommon in his day. He took that notion over and attempted to apply it as a symbol to satisfy the needs of Black people.

The Black Power Movement, which came into being during the mid-sixties has had a tremendous effect on the development of a Black Nationalist emphasis. It aimed at the achievement of power for Black Americans through the consolidation of their political and economic resources. Bishop Turner did not use the term "Black Power" as such. Yet he was definitely concerned with the basic idea behind the current movement of Black Power. For him it was the one thing needed for the liberation of Black Americans. It was the compelling motive that led to his involvement in many different religious, political and social activities. With prophetic vision he saw the necessity of Black Americans' participation in all levels of the life of the nation. Thus, after the Emancipation he induced Black Freedmen to join the Republican Party; helped to organize the Georgia Constitutional Convention, and got himself elected twice to the Georgia Legislature. Nor did he give up when Black Representatives were expelled from the Legislature.

⁴⁵ Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Op. Cit.*, p. 289.

⁴⁶See Redkey, *Respect Black*, p. 176; A. L. Ridgel, *Op. Cit.*, p. 10. See "My Trip to South Africa" in Redkey, pp. 178-181, *Voice of Missions*, April 5, 1898; *Christian Recorder*, May 26, 1898.

Seeing the deterioration of the situation of Blacks as a result of post-Reconstruction, he never gave up his aim. Doubtful of a viable future for Black Americans in the United States, he became a militant emigrationist, with the slogan: "Emigration or Extermination is the Ultimatum."⁴⁷ For him, Africa, and especially Liberia, was the land of promise. It promised freedom, wealth, honor and prosperity for Black Americans. There was no manhood future for the Negro (Black man) in the United States.⁴⁸

These views aroused sharp and bitter criticism, particularly from Black leaders living in the North. Bishop Turner was described as a "crack-brain," "cranky" and "fanatical" for his insistence on African emigration. He was unmoved, however, by the opposition, and was hard on people who disagreed with him. In other words, Bishop Turner was a most powerful forerunner of the current Black Power Movement. The real difference between his movement and that of today's Black Power movement is to be seen in the method of implementation. For Bishop Turner, it was back-to-Africa. Today it is the achievement of Black Power within this country.

On Sunday, May 4, 1969, during the morning worship service at the Riverside Church in New York City, James Forman read to the congregation a Manifesto which had been approved by the Black Economic Development Conference (BEDC).⁴⁹ The Manifesto called for Reparations to Black people of \$500,000,000. It was to be paid through BEDC by White Protestant and Catholic Churches and Jewish Synagogues of America. The money was to be used as a "new adventure" for seven different programs of economic development for Black people in the United States. It should be noted that Bishop Turner repeatedly advocated reparations in his struggle for manhood and dignity of the Black people. In an "Open Letter to Blanche K. Bruce," written in 1890, Bishop Turner declared, "This nation must pay us \$40,000,000,000 for our 200 years of service."⁵⁰ On another occasion he declared that the United States Government should pay the cost of transportation of 7,000,000 Black emigrants to Africa.⁵¹ Still on another occasion, he urged the Chattanooga Convention to petition the United States Congress to pay \$500,000,000 for African emigration.⁵²

The sources show that the idea of reparations to Black people was claimed by Bishop Turner. There were several differences between the claims of Bishop Turner and of James Forman. One difference is seen in the amount claimed. The Manifesto called for an "exceedingly modest sum" of \$500,000,000. Bishop Turner claimed \$40,000,000,000. The Manifesto looked forward to the "building of a socialist society inside of the United States — led by Black people — concerned about the

⁴⁷, ⁴⁸ *Voice of Missions*, November 1896; *Voice of the People*, October 1903.

⁴⁹ The Conference met in Detroit, April 25-27, See Wilmore, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 277-280.

⁵⁰ See Redkey, *Respect Black*, p. 79.

⁵¹ Redkey, *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁵² Redkey, *Black Exodus*, p. 245.

total humanity of the world.”⁵³ Bishop Turner saw no manhood future for the Black people in the United States. Reparation money was to be used for the purpose of emigration to Liberia and the building up of a Black nation in that country where “unconditioned manhood” would be enjoyed by all Black people.⁵⁴ Another difference to be noted is the question of who should pay the reparations. The Manifesto called for payment by White Protestant and Catholic Churches and by Jewish Synagogues in America. Bishop Turner demanded that payment be made through Congressional appropriations. Another difference is the fact that the Black Manifesto had the backing of BEDC, composed of 600 persons from all segments of the Black community. Bishop Turner, on the other hand, was like a voice crying in the wilderness, mainly because the idea of reparations was linked up with emigration, and his overall scheme was opposed strongly by the intellectuals of his day.

It seems fitting to close our discussion of this fearless prophet of liberation with a few estimates of his character and disposition. About him, A. L. Ridgel wrote: “His soul went out for his God, his Church and his race.”⁵⁵ Bishop R. R. Wright said: “His career was stormy, as he was one of those who wanted equal rights for all people; and would settle for nothing less.”⁵⁶ Bishop B. T. Tanner, who opposed Bishop Turner on the issue of emigration, declared: “He is a remarkable man . . . More earnest than polite, a man who thinks for himself; speaks as he feels, and who fears only God. . . .”⁵⁷ According to W. E. B. DuBois, “Turner was the last of his clan; mighty men, physically and mentally; who started at the bottom and hammered their way to the top by sheer brute strength; they were the spiritual progeny of the ancient African Chieftains and they built the African Church in America.”⁵⁸ His significance can be expressed in the words of Phillips rendition of Hebrews 11:4: “By his faith he still speaks to us today.”

⁵³ Wilmore, *Op. Cit.*, p. 278.

⁵⁴ *Voice of the People*, October 1903; Redkey, *Respect Black*, p. 79.

⁵⁵ Ridgel, *Op. Cit.*, p. 21.

⁵⁶ Wright, *Op. Cit.*, p. 332.

⁵⁷ Wright, *Ibid.*, p. 339.

⁵⁸ Redkey, *Respect Black*, p. IX.

