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Schooled and Unschooled Biblical Exegetes in the African American Religious Experience, 1865-1900

The years 1865 to 1900 presented many challenges to African American churches. During that thirty-five year period those churches were confronted by a number of external socio-political issues such as the Civil War, the Reconstruction and its failure, and the beginnings of massive Black migration from the South to the North.¹ In addition to these external problems, Black churches also were troubled by a number of powerful internal problems.

Using the methods of intellectual and social history, this essay holds that the personal writings and collected essays of a number of African American clergy, from the Reconstruction to the turn of the twentieth century, show biblical exegesis as one, if not the most prominent internal problem challenging Black Christendom.² Moreover, the question of proper biblical exegesis provoked heated debate and division between largely unschooled African American "traditionalists" and a significant group of African American "schoolmen."

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1. See for example John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery To Freedom: A History Of Negro Americans*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1969); Lerone Bennett, Jr., *The Shaping of Black America*, (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1975); and, Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion And Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, (Marynoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983).

2. The collected essays are found in D. W. Culp, editor, *Twentieth Century Negro Literature*, (Atlanta: J. L. Nichols Company, 1502) and W. N. Hartshorn, *An Era Of Progress And Promise: The Religious, Moral, And Educational Development Of The American Negro Since His Emancipation. 1863-1910*, (Boston: Priscilla Publishing, 1910).

This essay defines unschooled African American traditionalists as largely untrained clergy who fought to maintain the "old-time" Black religious past and therefore insisted that the Bible was the literal word of God which required only blind faith, prayer and a spirit-based biblicism to comprehend. It defines the African American schoolmen as those educated theologians who, while accepting the Bible as the inspired word of God, fought to keep pace with their new age by claiming that proper and correct exegesis and comprehension of the Scriptures could only be obtained through an academically grounded biblical hermeneutic.

As one would expect, writings from the unschooled traditionalists are sparse. Hence, we will explore the tenor of their unstudied biblicism by studying the few sources that are available, the extant writings and reports of founders of African American Churches such as Richard Allen, whose biblicism informed the arguments of the traditionalists and the comments of the schoolmen about their opponents' opposition to a studied biblical hermeneutic. These writings, sparse though they may be, are sufficient for exhibiting the biblicism of the unschooled traditionalists.

In 1902, the Reverend Walter H. Brooks, a graduate of Lincoln University, Pa., and pastor of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, D. C., reflected on the spiritual condition of African Americans:

The Negro Christian is as a rule as good as he knows how to be. [But] we dare say, there is room for improvement... He often errs, *not knowing the Scriptures*. He sometimes plunges head long into the ditch of shame, because his spiritual adviser and instructor is a blind leader of the blind.³

3. Walter H. Brooks, "The Negro As A Christian" cited in Culp, *Twentieth Century Negro Literature*, p. 316.

That Brooks would place emphasis upon Blacks "not knowing the Scriptures" reflects how deep and intense the conflict between schooled and unschooled African American clergy over biblical exegesis had become by the first decade of the twentieth century. In one sense it could have been predicted that discord and division over biblical exegesis would reach crisis proportions in the early twentieth century African American religious community. Tension between traditionalists and schoolmen had been steadily increasing since the Reconstruction. And, from 1865 to 1900, a small but significant group of educated theologians had been waging battle to commit their Churches to an educated biblical hermeneutic. In addition to Baptists such as Brooks and Miles Mark Fisher, that group of clergy included Bishops Daniel Alexander Payne, Evans Tyree, Edward W. Lampton and the Reverend George T. Watkins of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; the Reverend Joseph C. Price and Bishops Alexander Walters and James W. Smith of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; and Bishops Isaac Lane and Robert S. Williams of the Colored (now Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church.⁴ The group also included Black clergy who served in predominantly White churches such as John W. Whittaker, a Congregationalist, Robert P. Wyche and L. B. Ellerson, Presbyterians, and Owen M. Waller, an Episcopalian.⁵

Even before the Civil War, some of these trained theologians such as Daniel Payne—the sixth bishop of the AME Church and founder of Wilberforce College in 1863—had pondered "how the colored race,

⁴ For biographies of Payne, Price and Lane see my *Black Theology As The Foundation Of Three Methodist Colleges: The Educational Views and Labors of Daniel Payne, Joseph C. Price and Isaac Lane*, (Maryland: University Press of America, 1984). For brief biographies of Tyree, Lampton, Walters, Smith and Williams see Hartshorn, *An Era of Progress and Promise*. No scholar has yet written a biography of Miles Mark Fisher, a graduate of Morehouse College and one of the first Blacks to graduate from the University of Chicago. But see *The Dictionary of American Negro Biography*.

⁵ Biographies of these clergy may be found in Culp, *Twentieth Century Negro Literature*.

who had been oppressed for centuries through ignorance and superstition, might become intelligent, Christian, and powerful through the enlightening and sanctifying influences of the word of God."⁶ Because they were ministers, the theologians' first impulse, of course, was to turn to their churches as the agency which would best aid in the intellectual, spiritual and social elevation of their race. In turning to the churches, however, they found that "the uneducated ministry" and "crude biblicism" dominating Black churches since their rise in the late eighteenth century were "unequal to the task of teaching and leading the people along the difficult path to true excellence."⁷ Hence, as Price who founded Livingstone College in Salisbury, North Carolina in 1881 to educate Black minds exclaimed, "If the Negroes are to be speedily and permanently elevated and made good men and women, patriotic citizens and pious Christians, an intelligent and progressive ministry must be the mainspring in the effort."⁸

When the schoolmen spoke about "an intelligent and progressive ministry," they envisioned effecting two dramatic changes in the ministry of the African American churches. First, they projected that "the prejudices of illiterate preachers [against a schooled biblical exegesis] must be overcome and their illiteracy reduced" either by "directing large numbers of promising young men to the colleges and theological schools to be trained for the Master's use" or by conducting "special lectures on methods of Bible study" for untrained clergy already serving churches.⁹ Second, the theologians dreamed that once the uneducated clergy had become trained in proper methods of

⁶ Daniel Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, (New York: Amo Press, reprint 1969), p. 253.

⁷ See Isaac Lane, *Autobiography of Bishop Isaac Lane*, (Nashville: Publishing House of the M.E. Church, South, 1916), p. 70; Robert P. Wyche, "To What Extent Is The Negro Pulpit Uplifting The Race" in *Culp*, p. 122.

⁸ Joseph C. Price, "Need of An Educated Ministry," cited in William Jacob Walls, *Joseph Charles Price: Educator and Race Leader*, (Boston: Christopher Publishing House, 1943), p. 414.

⁹ R. S. Williams, "Greatest Needs of the Negro Race," in *An Era of Progress and Promise*, p. 403.

bible analysis those clergy would realize that the Bible, although divinely inspired and containing "God's everlasting and absolute Truth," required a learned exegesis in order "to unlock the mysteries, evolve the transcendent beauties, and appropriate the inexhaustible riches of that wondrous book."¹⁰ According to the schoolmen such a trained biblical exegesis was no mere luxury for "Those who teach immortal souls." It was no luxury because an academically grounded biblical method would enable unschooled exegetes

to discern the resemblance and dissimilarity between one doctrine and another—to discriminate between falsehood and truth—to scrutinize the opinion, conduct and character of men—and also trace the eternal distinctions which a wise, just, and good Creator has established between right and wrong, good and evil, between virtue and vice. It will also teach him how to adapt the different truths of the Gospel to the varying condition and character of the children of men.¹¹

The schoolmen wanted their unlettered colleagues to learn to "divide" the Scriptures critically and intelligently so that they would be better prepared to bring the gospel to bear upon both the spiritual and social conditions of their race. According to them, an academically grounded biblical exegesis was the only way the unschooled clergy could achieve that end.¹²

Convincing the unschooled traditionalists to accept an "intelligent" biblical hermeneutic was no easy task. It was not easy because the

¹⁰ Daniel Payne, *Bishop Daniel Payne's First Annual Address to the Philadelphia Annual Conference of the A.M.E. Church*, (Philadelphia: C. Sherman, Printer, 1858), pp. 21-22.

¹¹ Payne, *The Christian Ministry, Its Moral and Intellectual Character*, (Indianapolis: Repository of Religion and Literature, 1859), pp. 14-15.

¹² George T. Watkins, "An Educated Ministry," in Daniel Payne, *The Semi-Centenary and the Retrospection of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, (Baltimore: Sherwood Company, 1866), p. 141.

schooled exegetes had to prove to those clergy that their "crude and unenlightened" biblicism was the wrong approach for a race which, although recently emancipated from the degradation of slavery, still faced brutal inhumanities, poverty and illiteracy compounded by spiritual and moral disorder.

The fact that the traditionalists insisted upon maintaining the unstudied biblicism that had long dominated the Black religious community in this country made that task even more difficult. Almost from the moment the first twenty Africans were brought here in 1619, the Bible had been central in the African American religious experience. But as Cain Felder recently reminded us, "To affirm this centrality is not to suggest, however, that the Bible attains such stature as the result of efforts by Blacks to conduct a systematic, critical analysis of biblical texts."¹³ On the contrary, the biblicism which the traditionalists insisted upon maintaining was a simple, uncritical "experiential" or heartfelt understanding of the Scriptures that eschewed any critical, academic analysis of biblical texts.

Such an unstudied biblical approach appealed to majority of Reconstruction and post Reconstruction era African Americans for at least three reasons. First, the late eighteenth century founders of African American churches had made simplistic biblical exegesis a cornerstone of their ministries. Most of those founders—clergy such as Richard Allen who founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1787; Peter Williams and William Varick who founded the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in 1796; and, Andrew Bryan, George Liele and other anonymous organizers of various independent Black Baptist churches—were all former slaves who had been denied any opportunity for formal learning.

Consistent with their lack of formal learning, these founders taught

¹³ Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 6.

a straightforward and simple exegesis grounded in the conviction that a simple uncritical faith, a sudden and dramatic conversion experience, prayer and the visitation of the Holy Spirit were the only prerequisites for comprehending the Scriptures and being a genuine Christian. Allen suggested such a conviction when he spoke about his own conversion experience and declared:

I was awakened [by the Holy Spirit] and brought to see myself, poor, wretched and undone, and without the mercy of God must be lost. Shortly after, I obtained mercy through the blood of Christ, and was constrained to exhort my old companions to seek the Lord. I went rejoicing for several days and was happy in the Lord.

. . . I [then] was brought under doubts, and was tempted to believe that I was deceived, and was constrained to seek the Lord afresh. . . . I cried unto him who delighteth to hear the prayers of a poor sinner, and all of a sudden my dungeon shook, my chains flew off, and Glory to God, I cried. My soul was filled. I cried, enough for me—the Saviour died. Now my confidence was strengthened that the Lord, for Christ's sake, had heard my prayers and pardoned all my sins.¹⁴

Continuing sometime later, Allen expressed his gratitude to God— that Thou hast not abandoned me to the dim light of my own reason to conduct me to happiness, but that Thou hast revealed in the Holy Scriptures whatever is necessary for me to believe and practice, in order to obtain my eternal salvation.¹⁵

¹⁴ Richard Allen, *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, reprint 1960), pp. 15-16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

In addition to his own lack of education, Allen was acutely aware that the majority of slaves and even free Blacks were also unlettered. Hence he declared that "the plain and simple gospel suits best for any people," especially "the unlearned."¹⁶

The second reason untrained biblical exegesis appealed to the Black masses was that it cohered well with what Miles Mark Fisher, an early twentieth century Black Baptist clergyman and educator, called the "Exciting religion" of the African American majority.¹⁷ Partly because of their African heritage and partly because of the need to release themselves vicariously from the everyday burdens of slavery and oppression by casting their "cares upon the Lord," African Americans had long engaged in protracted and spirited religious demonstrations in which they "lost complete control of themselves and shouted and swooned" as a part of their worship practices.¹⁸

The fervent preaching arising out of the Black preacher's simplistic exegesis—more accurately uninhibited *eisegesis*—of biblical stories, themes and figures well-suited both the African religious heritage and the socio-psychological needs of African Americans. Indeed, unrestricted by exegetical "orthodoxy," unschooled Black preachers were able to massage the Bible and preach "spiritual or extempore" sermons that had two consequences for Black people.

First, those sermons would "move [them] to tears and sweep [them] in its flight" to another world. Second, they would "tickle [them] into laughter" and joy because of the preachers' histrionic and emotionalized depiction of how "God's word" promised to bring their oppression

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁷ Miles Mark Fisher, "Negroes as Christian Ministers," in *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 4, July, 1935, p. 53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* For a broader recent discussion of how African religion influenced early African American Christians see Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983), pp. 1-28.

to an end and their oppressor to "his judgment seat."¹⁹ Because those sermons were not circumscribed by critical biblical analysis, and because they contained "a constant iteration, and reiteration concerning the joys of heaven, and the sorrows of hell," they were a powerful attraction to a people who had little hope of freedom and justice in this world.²⁰ During slavery, those spirit-based sermons had been a dam against despair and hopelessness. They had enabled both slaves and free Blacks to find some confidence that slavery would someday end. And, they helped pre-Civil War African Americans to at least find some measure of peace, dignity and even community in the midst of slavery and racism.

Although the emancipation ended legalized slavery, post civil War African Americans clung tightly to the biblicism that had "brought them safe thus far." Indeed, as W. E. B. DuBois noted in 1902, "it may be safely said that two thirds of the preaching is of the crudest character, emotional, hortatory, imaginative, visionary, abounding in misconceptions of scripture."²¹ Continuing, DuBois cited how "Two members of a minister's class recently made these statements to their colored instructor: one had preached that Joshua never had father or mother, because he was "the son of Nun," (none); the other wrought up his congregation mightily by repeatedly shouting: "Mesopotamia."²²

According to the schooled exegetes, untrained clergy who practiced

¹⁹ Fisher, "Negroes as Christian Ministers, p. 53; L. B. Ellerson, "The Negro As A Christian, in Culp," *Twentieth Century Negro Literature*, p. 314. For an example of how the sermons of unschooled clergy were not restricted by exegetical orthodoxy, see Jupiter Hammon, *A Winter Piece: being a Serious Exhortation, With A Call To The Unconverted: And A Short Contemplation On The Death Of Jesus Christ*, (Hartford, Connecticut: the author, 1782) cited in Stanley Austin Ransom, *America's First Negro Poet: The Complete Works of Jupiter Hammon of Long Island*, (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1983), pp. 67-85. For a more recent discussion of that phenomena see Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 79ff.

²⁰ Watkins, "An Educated Ministry," p. 141.

²¹ W. E. B. DuBois, *The Negro Church*, (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1902), p. 122.

²² *Ibid.*

such an emotionalistic biblicism were a blasphemy against God. Moreover, they were certain that those unschooled clerics were "an incubus upon the proper development of our people, and a disgrace to the profession to which they have called themselves."²³

The third reason unschooled biblical exegesis appealed to the majority of African American Christians was that founders of African American churches had appropriated much of that biblicism from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century White churches. Although they had separated from White churches because of segregation and other racial hostilities, founders of independent Black churches refused to abandon the theology and biblicism of the White churches.²⁴ Studies have well-documented that those churches, especially the early nineteenth century White Methodist and Baptist churches, were active leaders of the Second Great Awakening that swept across America during that era and advocated an unschooled, revivalistic, "soul saving gospel."²⁵ Speaking about the importance of a "soul saving gospel" that did not require learning, Bishop Francis Asbury, the "father" of American Methodism, once declared "Every candid inquirer after truth will acknowledge upon examining Church history, that it was a great and serious evil introduced when philosophy and human learning were taught as preparation for a gospel ministry. A simple man can speak and write for simple, plain people, upon simple, plain truths" of Scripture.²⁶ Continuing, Asbury asserted that "collegecraft and priest-craft" were unnecessary for "spreading Scriptural holi-

²⁴ For discussion of segregation and racism in White Methodist churches, see Allen, *Life Experience*, pp. 25-26, and James W. Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*, (New York: AMEZ Book Concern, 1895) pp. 1-10.

²⁵ Two of the best studies of antebellum White revivalism are Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957); William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham*, (New York: Ronald Press, 1965). Also see Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1963).

²⁶ *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, Vol. II, Elmer T. Clark, editor, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), p. 488; also see William L. Duren, *Francis Asbury: Founder of American Methodism and Unofficial Minister of State*, (New York: Macmillian Company, 1928), p. 7.

ness all over the land."²⁷

Because they had been nurtured in such uncritical biblicism, founders of independent African American churches such as Allen, Williams, and Varick continued to preach that biblicism, even after they had separated from the White churches. Indeed, Allen was straightforward in proclaiming his appreciation for the unschooled biblicism of the White Methodists:

I feel thankful that ever I heard a Methodist preach. We are beholden to the Methodists, under God, for the light of the Gospel we enjoy; for all other denominations preached so high flown. . . . Sure am I that reading sermons will never prove so beneficial to the colored people as spiritual or extempore preaching.²⁸

A report about the founders of the AME Zion Church shows that Varick and Williams also were not hesitant in declaring their appreciation of the simplistic biblicism they had appropriated from the White Methodists. We "had no fault to find with . . . the evangelistic and soul-saving gospel of [White] Methodism."²⁹

The "plain and simple gospel" accepted from European American Churches was an important asset in the development and expansion of African American churches during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Although historians have largely neglected study of African American church expansion during those years, Black churches—like their White counterparts—were caught up in the religious fervor associated with the Second Great Awakening. And founders and leaders of African American churches quickly found that the simplistic biblicism espoused by revivalists was a mighty weapon in awakening Black souls and thereby expanding their denominations.

²⁸ Allen, *Life Experience*, p. 30.

²⁹ Hood, *One Hundred Years*, p. 10.

Allen explained that fact quite well when he said that “the plain and simple gospel” was “the reason the Methodist is so successful in the awakening and conversion of the colored people.”³⁰

Because African American churches had long followed the unsophisticated, spirit-based biblicism of their founders, some within the Reconstruction and early twentieth century Black churches found it easy to move that hermeneutic to an entirely emotionalized and spirit-based biblicism—reminiscent of the sixteenth century spiritual Anabaptists—in which the visitation of the Holy Spirit became the sole norm for understanding the Bible.³¹ Still others found it easy to ridicule an educated biblicism as alien to the true “old-time” African American religious experience.

An example of those who relied solely on an unlearned, spirit-based biblicism is found in the comments of an unidentified 93 year old ex-slave who testified in 1945 about the way in which “The Power” of the spirit enabled those possessed by it to discern the Bible:

There ams lots of folks, and educated ones too, what says we-uns believes in superstition. Well, its cause they don't understand. 'Member the Lord, in some of his ways, can be mysterious. The Bible says so. . . . Now, just 'cause you don't know 'bout some of the Lord's laws, t'aint superstition if some other person understands and believes in such. . . . How I larnt such? Well, I's done larn it. It comes to me. When the Lord gives such power to a person, it just comes to 'em. . . . The old folks in them days [slavery] knows more about the signs the Lord uses to reveal his laws than folks of today.³²

³⁰ Allen, *Life Experience*, p. 29.

³¹ Wilmore points out that such a phenomenon existed among the slaves and that some were certain that “The Spirit Within” was “superior to the Bible as a guide for religious knowledge,” *Black Religion*, p. 9.

³² Cited in B. A. Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945, pp. 36-37.

An example of those who deplored an educated biblicism as foreign to the genuine Black religious tradition is found in Payne's complaint that many of the unschooled clergy would . . . introduce their sermons by declaring that they had not rubbed their heads against college walls, at which the people would cry, Amen! they had never studied Latin or Greek, at which the people would exclaim, Glory to God! they had never studied Hebrew, at which all would shout.³³

Although the Reconstruction era and early twentieth century unschooled biblical exegetes clearly had the historic African American religious tradition on their side, the schoolmen believed they could overcome that history by showing that their opponents' biblicism failed to improve the recently emancipated African Americans either spiritually, morally, intellectually or socially. Thus some of those theologians, such as Price, began with the argument that "Of the multitudes of our people among the mountains, in the valleys, and in the plains of Southland, . . . many are lost for want of teaching, or through incorrect teaching as to Bible truth."³⁴ Others such as Payne argued that while the fiery sermons of unschooled biblical exegetes "heated up" Black emotions and aroused Black men and women to "heavenly flights", African Americans also needed some biblical "light," some intelligence, in order to understand the divine laws which God commanded them to practice in this life.

"To be Christian," he exclaimed, "is to be filled with light as well as heat; to be filled with love as well as knowledge; *to be impelled by wisdom and not by excitement.*"³⁵

A few such as the Reverend George T. Watkins of the AME Church asserted that, "A minister of the Gospel should be as well qualified for his position in the community as a physician is for his. . . This idea is

³³ Payne, *Recollections*, p. 64.

³⁴ Joseph C. Price, "The Negro In America" in *Christian Educators In Council*, (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1888) p. 75.

³⁵ Daniel Payne, "Thoughts About the Past, The Present and the Future of the African M. E. Church," in the *AME Church Review*, Vol. I, January 1884, p. 2.

plainly opposed to the lazy theory that a minister should go into the pulpit without preparation; that he should open his mouth, expecting God to fill it. He might as well go to market, and expect an angel to fill his basket."³⁶ And still others such as Owen M. Waller—who succeeded the well-known Alexander Crummell as rector of the historic Black St. Luke Episcopal Church in Washington D. C.—proposed that the unstudied, spirit based biblicism had placed far too many African Americans “under a spell of religiosity; a conception of religion” in which “The Negro’s religion is a poem, a sentiment—indeed, a velvet-lined yoke” that prohibits both spiritual and social elevation.³⁷

Having set forth such arguments, schoolmen such as Waller proceeded to argue that “The Negro stands sadly in need of an influence that will regulate his super-emotional nature, and not one that adds fuel to an existing conflagration that threatens to forever consume the only power in the human being that can ultimately work out his salvation, viz., the human will.”³⁸

The schoolmen insisted that a studied biblical method alone was that “influence.” According to them, a critical biblical exegesis would enable African Americans to learn that the Bible contained divine, practical precepts that were crucial for a people needing to improve both their personal lives and combat the racism that marked the age. Post Civil War and early twentieth century African Americans were not only faced with the failure of Reconstruction, the rise of Jim Crow and the brutal lynchings and atrocities of racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, they also were hounded and restricted by racist arguments—grounded in both the Bible and Darwinism—that African

³⁶ Watkins, “An Educated Ministry,” p. 139.

³⁷ Owen M. Waller, “Are Other Than Baptist and Methodist Churches Adapted to the Present Negro?” in Culp, *Twentieth Century Negro Literature*, p. 363.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Americans had been created an inferior and immoral species.³⁹

Although the trained biblical exegetes vehemently protested the inhumane acts and arguments of racist Whites about innate Black inferiority, they affirmed that the unstudied biblicism of Black clergy had not effected much improvement in the morality and ethical conduct of many African Americans. John Whittaker—the Congregationalist clergyman who graduated from Atlanta University (1884) and Hartford Seminary (1887)—was very straightforward in his assertions about how the unschooled exegetes, especially Black Methodists and Baptists, had helped hinder the moral and spiritual advancement of late nineteenth and early twentieth century African Americans. According to him, those exegetes had impeded that advancement because they “were for the most part ignorant and superstitious” clergy who “taught the people to be satisfied with what their fathers before them did and had; not to believe in this Bible religion which has sprung up since the [Civil] war; to prefer the “old-time” preacher who, without any learning, gets up and opens his mouth and lets God fill it with words to utter.”⁴⁰

While one could argue that Whittaker’s attack upon unschooled African American biblical exegetes reflected his personal prejudice as a Congregationalist clergyman against the two leading African American churches, the African Methodists and African Baptists, that argument pales because a number of Baptist and Methodist clergy also condemned the unlearned biblicism of their churches. For example, although he was not as brutal as Whittaker in his critique of his Black Baptist colleagues, Fisher expressed serious dismay that of “a thousand Negro [Baptist] preachers” in North Carolina, “not more than 15 have

³⁹ An excellent discussion of the racist arguments against Reconstruction era Black people is found in C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), pp. 350-356.

⁴⁰ John Whittaker, “Are Other Than Baptist and Methodist Churches Adapted To The Present Negro?” in Culp, pp. 359-360.

full college or seminary training." Fisher was especially appalled that "preachers of a meagre preparation [could] be located in the pastorate" because "The Baptists indeed seem to have no standards at all that preachers are asked to meet."⁴¹

As the sixth bishop of the AME Church and founder of Wilberforce College, Payne was even more straightforward than Whittaker in his condemnation of the unlearned and spirit-based biblicism of his Black Methodist clerical and lay colleagues. Starting with the clergy he declared that they

Preach what is in no Bible under heaven. Not even in the Alcoran of Mahomet. Rant, obscene language, rude and vulgar expressions. Irreverent exclamations, empty sound, nonsense, and the essence of superstition constitute the gospel they preach.⁴²

Continuing, Payne angrily denounced the "superstitious gospel" preaching of the untrained clerical masses as the blasphemous source that too frequently led laity to be antagonistic towards Bible study and, somewhat amazingly, towards choral singing. Because of the "empty nonsense" associated with the uncritical biblicism of the clergy, Payne claims that the people not only resented his efforts to "make responsive readings of the Holy Scriptures a part of the public worship," but also violently opposed his efforts to introduce choral singing into the churches by claiming, "You have brought the devil into the Church, and therefore we will go out."⁴³

Payne was convinced that those lay people were simply "acting according to their conviction—according to the light which they had

⁴¹ Fisher, "Negroes As Christian Ministers," p. 37.

⁴² Daniel Payne, *The Christian Ministry: Its Moral and Intellectual Character*, (Indianapolis: Respository of Religion, 1859), p. 12.

⁴³ Payne, *Recollections*, pp. 233, 253.

taken into their intellects" by hearing and imbibing the unschooled biblicism of clergy who refused to analyze the Scriptures and learn "that an individual man or woman must never follow conviction in regard to moral, religious, civil or political questions until they are first tested by the unerring word of God."⁴⁴ Continuing his attack upon the unschooled exegetes and their followers, Payne declared that "Had these self-called sanctified ones been Bible-readers—Bereans instead of mere African Methodists—they never would have called choral singing [and responsive reading of the Scriptures] the devil."⁴⁵

Because they had been trained in colleges and seminaries—even Black-owned schools such as Wilberforce College, Lane College and Livingstone College, the schooled exegetes wanted their clerical colleagues to advocate a biblicism that was congruent with the intellectual and socio-political ethos of their age.⁴⁶ "All honor to the pioneers who did their best in their circumstances and who served well their day and generation. But this is another age," proclaimed Ellerson.⁴⁷ That "new age" was one in which a significant number of Black laypersons were obtaining college degrees and entering professions such as education, medicine, science, law and business.⁴⁸ Moreover, it was an era in which a more "scientific" method of biblical study was beginning to gain acceptance throughout the land. Thus the schoolmen were convinced that if untrained clergy were to be on the same intellectual level with the Black laity and also keep pace with the intellectual ethos of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, they must learn to interpret the Bible in an intelligent fashion.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

⁴⁶ See my *Black Theology As the Foundation of Three Methodist Colleges*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984).

⁴⁷ Ellerson, "The Negro As A Christian," p. 314.

⁴⁸ See M. C. B. Mason, "Did The American Negro Make, In The Nineteenth Century, Achievements Along Lines of Wealth, Morality, Education, Etc., Commensurate With His Opportunities? If So, What Achievements Did He Make?" in Culp, pp. 34-37, *passim*.

Moreover, such an academic biblicism was especially crucial if African American Christians were to keep abreast of the biblical methods of their White counterparts. Indeed, a number of White American churches were beginning to accept the validity of the largely German historical-critical method of biblical study that swept across America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁴⁹

Although some recent interpretations have argued that the German historical-critical method did not impact African American clergy during those decades,⁵⁰ there is evidence that the schooled exegetes did, in fact, attempt to commit their unschooled colleagues to that hermeneutic. Indeed, sources such as General Conference and Annual Conference Minutes, Church Disciplines, Church Histories and other official records show that some trained African-American exegetes—especially those who could shape the ministerial studies of their denominations such as Payne, Watkins, Price and Lane—argued for a rigorous course of biblical study for the unschooled exegetes. For example, the 1856 *Discipline of The AME Church* reveals a course of study for the clergy that included the writings of popular late eighteenth and nineteenth century White theologians and biblical scholars such as William Paley's *Evidences of Christian Revelation* (1784); Thomas Hartwell Horne's *Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, Five Vols.* (1818); Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (1872); Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Three Vols.* (1872); Johann Augustus Neander's *The Life Of Christ* (1848); Adam Clarke's *Christian Theology* (1856); and Mark Hopkins' *Evidence of Christianity* (1893)⁵¹

⁴⁹ See Vincent L. Wimbush, "Biblical Historical Study as Liberation: Toward an Afro-Christian Hermeneutic," *Journal of Religious Thought*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Fall-Winter, 1985), p. 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*; Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters*, pp. 6, 79.

⁵¹ See Payne, *A History of the A. M. E. Church*, pp. 169-170; Payne, *Semi-Centenary*, pp. 46, 51, 61; Lane, *Autobiography*, pp. 101-102; Walls, Price: *The Educator*, p. 201.

While all of these writings were in many ways apologies for the orthodox understanding of the Bible as the "divine revelation of God," each represented a serious effort at critical analysis of the Scriptures as writings of a particular historical moment, written by "flesh and blood" men and women and therefore subject to human inventions, interpolations and idiosyncracies. In this sense they closely resembled some of the assumptions of the German historical-critical biblical school. For example, Hodge whom Payne proclaimed "as the greatest theologian America has yet produced,"⁵² had insisted that while "the Bible contains the truths [of God] . . . the theologian has to collect, authenticate, arrange, and exhibit [those truths] in their internal relation to each other."⁵³ Neander was straightforward in asserting that his writing was an attempt to engage a critical study of the Bible. Setting his study within the context of the emerging German historical-critical method, he stated in the introduction of his book that although he was aware "some readers unacquainted with the progress of the human mind, which has developed new intellectual necessities, even for those who seek the truth believingly, may take offence at some of the sentiments of this book," he was "certain that the fall of the old form of the Doctrine of Inspiration and indeed, of many other doctrinal prejudices, will not only not involve the fall of the essence of the Gospel, but will cause it no detriment whatever."⁵⁴ Continuing, Neander demonstrated his acceptance of a new "scientific" biblical method by declaring that he was convinced that the Bible:

will be more clearly and accurately understood; that men will be better prepared to fight with and conquer that in rushing

⁵² Payne, *Recollections*, p. 248.

⁵³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1872), p.

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⁵⁴ Johann August Wilhelm Neander, *The Life of Jesus Christ*, (New York: John M'Clintock and Charles Blumenthal, translators, 1873), p. x-xi.

infidelity against which the weapons of the old dogmatism must be powerless in any land; and that from such a struggle a new theology, purified and renovated in the spirit of the Gospel, must arise. Everywhere we see the signs of a new creation; the Lord will build himself, in science as well as in life, a new tabernacle in which to dwell; and neither a stubborn adherence to antiquity, nor a profane appetite for novelty, can hinder this work of the Lord which is now preparing.⁵⁵

By insisting upon the study of the writings of theologians and biblical exegetes such as these, the schooled exegetes showed their determination to commit their unschooled colleagues to the intellectualized critical method of biblical analysis that marked their age. They were certain such a method would not merely aid the clergy in improving Black spirituality. That method, at least in their view, also would enable clergy to develop a more effective biblical witness against the racist structures that continued to torment their race. "Christianity," declared Price, "in the essentials of its nature, is naturally reformatory. We notice its introduction into the world by Christ in its effects upon the existing manners and customs of nations."⁵⁶

For the schooled exegetes, Black clergy could not begin to comprehend or utilize the "reformatory nature" of the gospel until they studied writings which, in turn, would teach them to approach the Scriptures in a critical, impassionate fashion. The elitist assumption of the schoolmen's insistence upon the study of such writings is clear and cannot fail to be somewhat disturbing, especially as those writings relied on a distinct European rootage.

Although the schooled biblical exegetes were able to present con-

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. x.

⁵⁶ Joseph C. Price, "Methodism, A Power Purifying and Elevating Society," cited in Walls, *Price*, p. 333.

crete theological and social reasons why African Americans needed an educated, and "systematic" biblical method, those reasons failed to convince the majority of their Reconstruction and early twentieth century clerical colleagues to modify their unschooled, spirit-based biblicism. One can cite three prominent reasons for that failure. On the one hand, there was the feeling on the part of some Blacks that the critical study of the Bible represented yet another intrusion of an European American hermeneutic in the African American religious community. The powerful early twentieth century AME bishop and race leader—Reverdy C. Ransom—strongly suggested that feeling when he declared that "Throughout the more than three hundred years of his sojourn in America, the Negro has made no distinctive contribution to religious thought in the realm of doctrine and dogma. He has [merely] sampled all of the denominational and theological labels the white people have handed him."⁵⁷ On the other hand, unlettered preachers were not restricted by any academic rules about biblical analysis. Hence they were free to manipulate texts and make them appeal to what Ellerson called "the natural emotional element in our makeup" as African Americans.⁵⁸ Because African Americans had long been dehumanized in the society, the unschooled preacher's "sensationalized" portrayal of how God would deliver them from the New World pharaohs and establish them as a people naturally appealed to those oppressed and maligned men and women. In this sense, it could be posited that the unschooled biblicism served as a mighty spiritual opiate for the Black masses.

Still, on another hand, there were some African American clergy who, despite the fact that they were educated, eschewed academic methods of biblical analysis as inappropriate for genuine Christianity.

⁵⁷ Reverdy C. Ransom, *The Negro: The Hope or Despair of Christainity*, (Boston: Ruth Hill Publisher, 1935), p. 22.

⁵⁸ Ellerson, "The Negro As A Christian," p. 314.

The Reverend E. A. P. Albert, a minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church, was an example of those clergy. In 1901, Albert wrote an article entitled "Biblical Criticism And The Christian Faith" in which he announced that genuine Christians "would need no longer to fear any harm that could come from any form of biblical criticism, that the world, the flesh, the devil, or even some of our theological professors, too often entertain and suggest" so long as they continued to "accept in sincerity the facts of experimental religion as expressed by St. John, the Beloved Apostle, and St. Peter, the heroic missionary" and "continued to contend for the faith once delivered to the Saints, regardless of all [higher] criticism."⁵⁹ For educated clergy such as Albert, heartfelt piety was all-sufficient for biblical analysis.

Despite their failure to reach the masses, the schooled exegetes did have at least two identifiable consequences on the religious and social life of some Reconstruction era and early twentieth century African Americans. First, their studied biblical exegesis encouraged some African Americans to realize that a learned approach to the Scriptures was not a threat to Black spirituality, but an important aid to all who are "called" to preach the gospel to an ever advancing civilized world. During the Reconstruction an increasing number of Black men and women seized the opportunity for education. As Fisher stated, some of those "laymen in the professions have better training and a world view different from that of the average preacher."⁶⁰

In order to "preach" the gospel to a learned congregation, some clergy accepted the challenge of the schooled biblical exegetes and immersed themselves in the academic study of the Bible and Christian theology at seminaries and colleges. Some of those clergy even studied at the colleges the schoolmen such as Payne (Wilberforce), Price (Livingstone), and Lane (Lane College) had built: Benjamin F. Lee, an eminent Black linguist who mastered six different languages and

⁵⁹ Cited in the *AME Church Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2, October 1901, pp 146-147.

⁶⁰ Fisher, "Negroes As Christian Ministers," p. 55.

who subsequently became a bishop in the AME Church studied under Payne at Wilberforce; George C. Clement who served as the first Black chairman of the Race Relations Commission of the Federal Council of Churches studied under Price at Livingstone; and, J. Arthur Hamlett who became one of the leading early twentieth century bishops of the CME Church studied at Lane College.⁶¹

Second, the academic biblical exegesis of the schoolmen provided Black men and women with an opportunity to study the Scriptures and learn that Christianity did in fact carry practical consequences for life in this world. Indeed, by insisting that a studied approach to the Bible would show that "Christianity, in the essentials of its nature, is naturally reformatory," the trained exegetes were able to convince some of their race that "if [they] would be free, [they] must strike the blow."⁶² While beyond the parameters of this essay, further research might find a relationship between this argument of the educated biblical exegetes and the thought of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Although the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction decades have long passed, the conflict between schooled and unschooled biblical exegetes within the African American religious community continues. To listen, critically yet sympathetically, to the ways in which this conflict developed during the years 1865 to 1900 may provide present day schooled and unschooled African American clergy an agenda for a continuing dialogue about proper biblical exegesis in the African

⁶¹ See my *Black Theology As The Foundation of Three Methodist Colleges*, pp. 103-104.

⁶² J. C. Price, "Methodism, A Power Purifying and Elevating Society," cited in Walls, *Joseph Charles Price: Educator and Race Leader*, (Boston: Christopher Publishing Co., 1943), p. 333; Daniel Webster Davis, "Did The American Negro Make, In the Nineteenth Century, Achievements Along The Lines of Wealth, Morality, Education, Etc., Commensurate With His Opportunities? If So What Achievements Did He Make?" cited in Culp, p. 41.