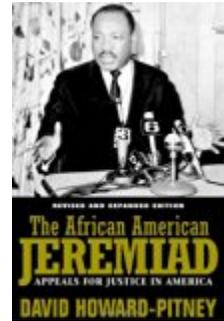


David Howard-Pitney. *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005. 288 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-59213-415-1.

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A Racial Analysis of the Jeremiad

David Howard-Pitney contributes finely to understanding the cultural history of African American protest and accommodation in his *African American Jeremiad*. The role of propaganda in strategies of moral suasion is plainly visible in this study of the jeremiad as performed by African Americans. The term “jeremiad,” of course, derives from the laments of Jeremiah in early Judaism, urging Judeans to view their God as one who punishes sin and rewards righteousness. Sacvan Bercovitch firmly established the jeremiad as a key category in interpretations of Euro-American religious history in *The American Jeremiad* (1978). Wilson Moses Jeremiah, in *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms* (1982), also developed a rich assessment of this phenomenon among African Americans. Both works inform Howard-Pitney’s volume. Howard-Pitney includes in his study the works of Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Ida Barnett-Wells, W. E. B. Du Bois, Mary McLeod Bethune, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. This second edition of Howard-Pitney’s text expands upon the first by featuring a concluding chapter that examines the rhetorical styles and representational strategies of Jesse Jackson and Alan Keyes. Keyes, particularly, has garnered considerable acclaim for his renowned conservatism on social and public policy issues, which is viewed as atypical for African Americans.

After defining his project in relation to the work of Sacvan Bercovitch and Wilson Jeremiah Moses, Pitney launches into an astutely developed discussion of this tradition by employing brief narratives of each black or-

ator’s biography that segue into insightful analyses of their speeches and arguments. He organizes the study chronologically, grouping individuals by era. He repeatedly identifies the germane issues of each historical period that inspired the specific content of propagandists’ speeches.

Howard-Pitney is critical and thorough in his handling of each historical figure. His chapter on Booker T. Washington, for example, notes the social cost of Washington’s typical refusal to speak out against acts of white terrorism. He exposes Washington’s willingness, at one point, to justify anti-black lynchings rather than to protest these acts of violent hatred. Washington’s capitulation to white terrorism, on this score, is irredeemable. But Howard-Pitney is sophisticated enough also to engage the compelling aspects of Washington’s philosophy of racial advancement. And he is equally astute when recognizing that W. E. B. Du Bois, who is often flattened into the alter-ego of Washington, at times agreed with and mirrored Washington’s strategies of economic empowerment and pragmatism.

Especially helpful is the author’s attention to gender as an analytical category, examining the impact of social ideas of masculinity and femininity on efforts to represent racial justice. Public masculinity, the author explains, was performed as undaunted dissent, so that protest itself was a form of “manliness.” This sexist encoding of speech and power complicated the work of African American activists—men and women alike—who

were always performing gender and thus risked transgressing the boundaries of authentic identity. He contrasts, for instance, Ida B. Wells-Barnett against Booker T. Washington. Wells-Barnett was scathingly critical of whites who supported the thousands of acts of lynching that became the most enduring form of terrorism in the Progressive Era at the same time that Washington suggested black victims of lynching had perhaps deserved their fate. Wells-Barnett developed a searing indictment against whites that was forceful and truthful; she was thus perceived as being too masculine (pp. 86-88). Washington's refusal to critique whites directly, on the other hand, caused many African Americans to feel that he was betraying "manhood" a racial and personal level (p. 87).

Howard-Pitney's treatment of Martin Luther King summarizes the familiar influences of King's upbringing and education. Clearly distinct is his assessment of King's fit with the model of the jeremiad. Howard-Pitney indicates that King conformed to the essentials of the jeremiad model insofar as King appealed to whites with a hopeful belief in their potential goodness. Malcolm X, on the other hand, never achieved the "transracial" positioning that evidently serves as a normative feature of the African American jeremiad. Pitney is careful to recognize that Malcolm's denunciations of whites as evil was tied to an actual history of whites enslaving, murdering, politically dominating, and terrorizing blacks in America. This is why so many blacks were willing to embrace the Nation of Islam's theology of racial demonology. Yet it is clear that Malcolm's refusal to base his oratory on appeals to white American sympathy—Malcolm gloated when publicly performing disdain for white approval—is a glaring aberration from an otherwise consistent pattern of black appeals to whites for justice in Howard-Pitney's study.

This is the one place where the model of the jeremiad seems artificial or imposed. It is abundantly clear that the author's historiography hinges on the attitudes of blacks toward whites. This is even more important than the attitude of black spokespersons toward other blacks. Early on, Howard-Pitney identifies his reliance upon Wilson Jeremiah Moses for this conceptual formulation of the African American jeremiad (pp. 10-11); in other words, Howard-Pitney clearly conceives of the African American jeremiad—"appeals for justice" as he subtitles it—as African Americans appealing to whites for social justice. This conception overwhelmingly shapes the author's discussion of each black orator. For the most part, whites have behaved and articulated American nationalism as if black Americans did not exist. And this is due to the

nature of race and power in the United States—whites do not have to ask blacks for social justice; African Americans have not held political and social power over whites. The result is that, whereas Sacvan Bercovitch viewed the jeremiad essentially as urging a non-racial audience—racial analysis unfortunately rarely moved beyond the subterranean abode of Bercovitch's footnotes—through scolding to amend their ways in order to restore divine favor, Howard-Pitney (along with Moses) analyzes the African American jeremiad as a rhetorical form whereby blacks appeal to a white audience for white favor. In Howard-Pitney's study, white subjectivity (whites will deliver justice) is substituted in place of divine subjectivity (God will deliver justice).

There is at least one unfortunate drawback to this approach. When he uncritically accepts Wilson Moses's approach to defining the African American jeremiad as blacks appealing to whites for justice, Howard-Pitney replicates the effect of rendering invisible the dynamism and diversity of this jeremiad phenomenon among blacks. For instance, numerous religious figures such as Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, Noble Drew Ali, and Louis Farrakhan have performed the jeremiad before African American audiences in an effort to inspire hope and to intimate that divine justice or divine favor is contingent upon human obedience to divine will. Because these religious leaders did not envision jeremiad appeals to whites as central to their view of divine deliverance, in some sense theirs is more comparable to the performances of historical actors central to Bercovitch's narrative history. Centering analysis around appeals to whites actually introduces a new and significantly differentiating variable into the jeremiad formula.

Furthermore, there simply is no historical basis for defining the category of "African American jeremiad" as solely or even predominantly contingent upon manifesting *qua* blacks appealing to whites. The actual history is more complicated. And while Garvey, Muhammad, and other figures named above are regularly absent from substantive discussion in established canons of American history, this absence bespeaks a politics of historiography that is indefensible on empirical-historical terms. American history has been deeply shaped by these religious innovators, and ignoring them fails to promote the best of historical scholarship, inducing instead troubling misapprehensions.

Despite this historiographical difficulty, however, Pitney's work as a cultural historian is supremely evident in this volume. Among the overarching arguments

he persuasively demonstrates (in departure from Wilson Moses) is that the African American jeremiad has not undergone a declension toward extinction but has, rather, periodically experienced a waning and resurgence, the latter of which characterizes its present course. Jesse Jackson and Alan Keyes, he explains, are key indicators of such. His discussion is detailed and analytically astute. In addition, he adds tremendous knowledge to the intellectual mapping of how the jeremiad has intersected with the social reality of race in American religious history. Readers from undergraduate students to advanced scholars will learn immensely from this work.

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