



Matthew Harper. *The End of Days: African American Religion and Politics in the Age of Emancipation.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. 224 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-2936-0.

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Commissioned by David M. Prior (University of New Mexico)

Matthew Harper's *End of Days* offers an insightful account of how African American Protestants' religious beliefs and narratives shaped their political action in postemancipation North Carolina. Organized into five thematic and chronological chapters and covering the changing political landscape of North Carolina from emancipation to the advent of Jim Crow segregation and disfranchisement, the book describes how black theology allowed black Protestants to remain hopeful in the face of political disappointments and violence. Central to their theology was an eschatology of hope that was not based on a systematic theology "of carefully arranged, internally consistent propositional statements," but rather a narrative theology of "seeking knowledge of God through a community's familiarity and identification with biblical stories" (p. 100). These biblical stories helped black Protestants to orient their understanding of the ultimate things—their eschatology—around two themes: an end to race prejudice and a sense of purpose for the race. With this idea of eschatology organizing his inquiry, Harper examines various political moments and issues, among them: the meaning of emancipation, the formation of independent black churches, the demise of Reconstruction, as well as land, emigration, temperance, and disfranchisement. Using religious newspapers, government records, and

church convention minutes and reports, Harper's text provides a useful examination of what he argues is an overlooked aspect of black religious politics—the religious ideas. He asserts, "as they struggled through a violent political environment, they returned to a hopeful, prophetic eschatology to direct their own political strategies" (p. 16).

Black eschatological hope was rooted in a theology of emancipation that emerged at the end of the Civil War. This theology of emancipation centered God's intervention in the lives of enslaved people and manifested itself in their mass liberation. Rather than get bogged down in the debates about black church membership after emancipation touched off by Daniel Fountain's claims of a postemancipation increase in Christian church membership of former slaves, Harper focuses on emancipation as the fulfillment of prophecy that touched off a great revival, and became a touchstone for framing black theology. This exceptional moment reframed black people's interpretation of their experience, leading some to interpret black church independence and "[anticipate] their departure [from white churches] as an important eschatological event," signifying "a new divinely appointed era, one foretold in the scriptures and inaugurated by emancipation" (pp. 28, 31). Black narrative theology, using biblical stories to frame and interpret current events, shaped black poli-

tics. Emancipation was the central moment for black people to analyze their lives in relation to and marked the beginning of an age, one in which separate black churches were formed and debates about demanding immediate rights or exercising patience emerged. These debates drew on narrative theology of emancipation as evidence that God was on their side. These views of emancipation also led black politicians in the 1865 North Carolina Freedmen's Convention to debate strategies. For some delegates, "the certainty of victory released them from a sense of urgency and commended a slower more deferential path of reforms. For others, the dramatic intervention of God in emancipation had begun a new era where moderation and gradualism were no longer necessary" (p. 40). Whatever position black Protestants took, they were sure that God was on their side.

Harper advances from this point to expand the methodology of interpreting black theology to include the use of narrative. In this narrative theology, black people read themselves into the bible and used a variety of stories to interpret the past and predict the future. Harper builds upon Eddie Glaude's *Exodus!* (2000), which shows how the Exodus narrative anchored black political strategies, by suggesting that the corpus of biblical narratives black Protestants drew upon was much more diverse (p. 94). He demonstrates this through a close reading of a well-known circular titled "An Address to Colored People of North Carolina." Harper emphasizes the use of biblical narratives in black political thought and action by calling it "the Esther circular" and argues that stories like Esther's "offered real political strategies" (p. 40). The circular makes brief mention of Esther but the story "frame[s] the political crisis" and the political strategies that the black North Carolina legislators who issued it sought to deploy (p. 45). The legislators issued the circular in 1870, in the midst of the demise of Reconstruction brought on by North Carolina's Democratic-controlled legislature's effort to impeach Republican governor

William Woods Holden. Like Esther, who hoped to save her uncle Mordecai from being murdered by the Persian king, Haman, the legislators hoped to stave off the impeachment of Holden and the political violence that black and white Republicans were suffering. Esther was able to save her uncle by calling for the Jews to fast and likewise, the legislators called for a day of fasting and prayer, an act that was "a different kind of political act than readers might have anticipated" (p. 56). Mordecai's life was spared and, according to practice, the Jews were entitled to defend themselves against any subsequent violence directed at them. In invoking this narrative, the legislators also laid claim to this practice of self-defense, and contemporaries understood this, reading the circular as a threat. Through this very carefully developed analysis, Harper argues that we should look at the influence of religion on politics differently: "as offering narratives that shaped political means and ends" (p. 62).

The variety of political acts that narrative theology afforded was on full display in how black Protestant North Carolinians addressed their desires for land immediately after emancipation and in later emigration movements. Initially, freedpeople appealed to the idea of Jubilee—a Hebrew practice of returning all owned property to a common pool for redistribution every fifty years—when they anticipated some great land redistribution to occur on Christmas in 1865. Another group of Mississippians believed that a "Great Document" with four seals would be opened on New Year's Day 1866, and it would have the "final orders" for land redistributions (p. 72). Later, when land reform did not materialize, and in its place came land policies that made black sharecroppers' and farmers' lives more challenging, black emigrants appealed to the story of Exodus, to see themselves as being liberated from the "House of Bondage" by moving, as one emigration meeting flier extolled (p. 78). Even as some black people appealed to Jubilee and Exodus narratives to interpret their political options around land,

some church leaders opposed emigration based on the theology of emancipation that God had not left them.

Harper further expands what comes into view when black religious thought is read carefully by finding within the temperance movement a black jeremiad that “subordinates” but does not “supplant” the politics of respectability that other scholars have argued motivated black participation in the movement (p. 100). Harper suggests that those black people who supported temperance did so because they wanted to “assume the special role God had assigned African Americans” (p. 99). When prohibition legislation failed to pass, ministers saw in it the hand of the devil. With this framework of rereading black religious politics in place, the diversity of black responses and the hopefulness of their approaches to fusion politics and the advent of Jim Crow come into view. Black Protestants’ belief in the powerful significance of emancipation made disfranchisement appear as “only a bump on the road to a great pre-ordained destiny” rather than a defining moment of decline. Harper’s interpretation is underscored in his depiction of early twentieth-century decisions to discontinue emancipation celebrations because the narrative of progress that came with them seemed incongruous for a generation that only knew life under Jim Crow. While an older generation continued to appreciate the powerful moment of emancipation, the emphasis on progress was eclipsed when the younger generation born into Jim Crow could not appreciate how transformative an event emancipation was.

Harper carefully demonstrates how attentive reading of biblical narrative allusions in postemancipation black political life can inform understanding of the universe of political actions. Tracking the diversity of the stories and their use helps explain how black hope persisted despite political decline. Though the advance of Jim Crow initially could have produced disappointment, it seemingly did not. Some black people saw it as

chastisement; others, just a momentary setback in a story that was still advancing. These examples, coupled with the others Harper presents, illustrate compellingly that “from the beginning black Protestants’ theology of emancipation had been changing” and that this “calls for us to investigate the particular implications of different narratives” (p. 161). Still, the notion that black people arrived at different political positions using the same book or even texts is one of the more useful ideas in Harper’s work. If there is any challenge to consider in the postemancipation period leading up to the turn of the twentieth century, it is the diversification of black political strategies and approaches. This work demonstrates how black Protestants interpreted the Bible in myriad ways, leading them to different political positions. Harper succeeds in representing how these diverse approaches emerged but he does not explain why they emerged. The biblical narratives allowed flexibility, but this alone does not explain, for example, why some church leaders clung to a theology of emancipation and opposed emigration while others church leaders and members favored exodus and chose emigration. Nor does it explain why some preachers used a jeremiad to chastise black folks about alcohol consumption while other preachers and church members found biblical support for moderate consumption and independent manhood. In addition, by reframing the way historians study black religion and politics, Harper also provides a view of black religious politics that moves away from a vision of a unified “black church” with singular political goals and aims, toward a much more nuanced understanding. This book contributes to scholarship about postemancipation politics, provides a clearer picture of the religious mechanisms for political thought and action, and invites a re-reading of how economic, social, and even denominational differences may have influenced biblical reading practices of black Protestants.

This book offers a focused look at nineteenth-century black theology and succeeds in enhancing

the study of black religious politics. Where studies of the social and political effects of black Protestant religious organizations have dominated the study of African American religious history, nineteenth-century black theology has received less attention. Harper joins Eddie Glaude, Vincent Wim-bush, and other theologians in the study of black religion's politics and demonstrates how failing to fully recognize and interpret black theology occludes a significant aspect of nineteenth-century politics. The theological ideas underpinning the history of black resilience, resistance, hope, and sorrow has been underexamined to this point and for this reason, Harper's contribution will be of interest to scholars of African American history, Reconstruction history, and religious studies.

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