
The African Methodist Episcopal Church Media and Racial Discourse, 1880-1900

Lawrence S. Little, Villanova University

©1998 Lawrence S. Little. Any archiving, redistribution, or republication of this text in any medium requires the consent of the author.

During the age of "new" imperialism at the turn of the century, several African American religious leaders like those in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church asserted that the major obstacle to liberty and equality in the United States and across the globe was racism. In the United States, the age marked an increase in racism that resulted in racial violence, discrimination, and disfranchisement and provoked a measured discourse on race and racial differences and attitudes. In a global sense, racism played an intrinsic role in the history of imperialism as American and European imperialists used prevalent racist attitudes and theories to justify the use of their military and technological advantage to subjugate people of color throughout the world. Imperialists relied on scientific and biblical "evidence" to produce an array of distortions and falsehoods that attempted to verify the inferiority of darker people. Foremost among the scientific distortions was the application of Darwin's theories of evolution and natural selection to the social development of people, whom scientists and scholars ordered into racial, gender, and class categories. Scholars formulated hierarchial evolutionary scales that placed white people or subcategories of white people at the top and black people at the bottom or below the bottom. They manipulated the burgeoning social sciences of history, geography, anthropology, and psychology to confirm their biological biases. Those like British sociologist Herbert Spencer and his disciple, William Graham Sumner, a founder of American sociology, maintained that conflict between people was good because "natural law" would select those with superior institutions and culture to survive and dominate. Such attitudes permeated the psyche of

American society, and newspapers such as the *Baltimore American* often declared that "It is the same old law of the survival of the fittest. The weak must bend to the strong and today the American race is the sturdiest, the noblest on earth." American and European imperialism fed upon such logic of white supremacy.¹

Still, many imperialists, especially among social gospelers, concluded that evolution should not be used to exploit people, but instead, "Anglo-Saxons" and "Aryans," as the most advanced and civilized people in the world, had the duty and the burden to Christianize and civilize the world's inferior people of color. Social gospelers, unlike social Darwinists, acknowledged the role of environment in shaping the human condition yet still relied on prevalent racial theories when they attempted to change oppressive conditions. Thus, "the white man's burden," a rallying cry for imperialists, combined evangelical Protestantism with white supremacy and a paternal mission of uplift. Because people of color were inferior, however, they could never be uplifted to the same stage as white people; nevertheless, the fate of the "white man" was to try, if only for self-attainment. In 1899, Alfred T. Mahan, an architect of the modern United States navy and expansion, maintained that "the inhabitants may not return love for their benefits [of American civilization], comprehension or gratitude may fail them; but the sense of duty achieved and the security of the tenure, are the rewards of the ruler." This supremacist and paternal attitude was not new in the United States. Many Americans had internalized such racial arguments in defensive of slavery. Indeed, social scientists in the

1903 *American Sociological Review* determined that "slavery was the most humane and the most practical method ever devised for 'bearing the white man's burden.'" During the age of imperialism, American and European imperialists easily transferred such racial attitudes to people of color across the globe, making the subjugation of entire populations part of the national duty.²

Perhaps more important to AME leaders and religious scholars who appeared in AME publications was the use of religion to verify the inferiority of people of color, especially African Americans. From the Hamitic myth to polygenesis to the Scriptures by Paul, American religious leaders relied on an abundance of various interpretations of biblical history and genealogy to justify the servile and degraded character of black people that produced slavery and oppression. African Americans were "hewers of wood and drawers of water" by God's decree. Meanwhile, white people were the true and only chosen people, whom God favored with superior culture and civilization. God was white, and God's earthly image was destined to thrive and rule. As the final authority for many in American society, the Bible presented irrefutable "evidence" of racial hierarchy. Thus, both science and religion constructed racial hierarchies that placed the nature and character of black people in the lowest rungs of humanity or lower and that of white people in the highest rungs or higher. Scholars, scientists, and theologians informed the nation and the rest of the world that people of color were childlike and animal like, docile and savage, to be cared for and controlled. Northern capitalists encouraged and exploited the prevailing racial images and attitudes to maintain and exploit cheap labor in the South and in overseas territories. Such racial sentiment became ingrained in popular culture as the media of the times often published blatantly racist material that advanced negative racial images of inferiority for people of color. Consequently, racists and imperialists used racial assumptions based on pseudo racial theories to justify racial violence and genocide and to deny self-determination to people of color in Africa, Asia, the

South Pacific, Middle East, the Caribbean, and Latin America because they were considered incapable of self-government.³

In response to the global epidemic of racism, AME leaders and other African American leaders became global spokespersons for people of color, speaking out against racism from a context of global oppression. Many within AME circles linked international issues to domestic issues and concluded that racial violence and the denial of rights against African Americans were manifestations of a worldwide movement against darker people, an attempt to subjugate and dominate darker people because of perceived white superiority. To combat this, AME members organized a communication network, buoyed by the weekly newspaper *Christian Recorder* and the quarterly journal *Church Review*, that disseminated information and alternative perspectives on race and racism. The AME media helped to develop a rhetoric of liberty and equality that espoused self-determination for people of color and projected positive racial images that emphasized the past and present accomplishments and contributions of people of color especially those of African descent. Armed with the personal knowledge of the consequences of racism, church leaders ardently attacked and attempted to overturn or redefine many of the prevalent racial theories of the times. Not only did they attempt to deconstruct concepts of color superiority and inferiority, they often constructed racial theories of their own with results that were often as complex, ambiguous, and absurd as racist scholarship.

African American religious scholars who engaged in racial construction at the turn of the century, like their white counterparts, often based their theories in unproven natural sciences, especially their biological assumptions. They similarly manipulated the emerging social sciences of anthropology, psychology, geography, and history. Perhaps more important, as religious leaders, they combined scientific historical evidence with their own interpretations of Biblical history and genealogy to

create and recreate an African past of myth, legend, and fact. Thus, racial construction and theories by black and white scholars used the same or similar sources, constructs, and methodology. In many instances, racial theorists writing in AME publications were less interested in overturning the "Great Chain of Being," the gradation of humans, and more concerned with redefining the African and especially the African American place in the chain. As ideas of evolution slowly spread, religious scholars within AME circles countered claims that people of color had not advanced far on the evolutionary scale. At the same time in a paradoxical manner, many scholars accepted the concept of categorizing people according to racial hierarchies. For instance, many often asserted that Anglo-Saxons were superior to Slavs. They accepted such racial labels, but often refashioned the characteristics assigned to particular racial categories. With a deeply held set of western beliefs and values, they also supported a religious and cultural overseas mission that was paternal, chauvinist, intolerant, and often degrading to other religions and cultures.⁴

Although many religious scholars readily acknowledged an advanced civilization among Europeans and Americans and a need to uplift less advanced people, they, nevertheless, refuted assertions that Anglo-Saxon or Aryan racial superiority accounted for that advance. The advent of western civilization could be traced to God, Christianity, chance, accident, or other factors, but not to race. As editor of the *Recorder*, H.T. Johnson was in the forefront of refuting claims of white superiority. In 1898, the *Recorder* condemned the World's Congress of Anglo-Saxons held in Philadelphia. Editors questioned the validity of the all-encompassing term "Anglo-Saxon" and determined that the Congress was nothing more than an effort "to insure and perpetuate their supremacy over the aspiring and competing race-forces of the world." The editors insisted that it was "as foolish to suppose all white people are Anglo-Saxon as to suppose all Americans [are] white folks, or all Africans [are] Negroes." For them, racists constructed

and used the nebulous "Anglo-Saxon" to consolidate white supremacy. The editors of the *Recorder* also used sarcasm and humor to counter notions of white superiority. In 1895, they reprinted a satirical poem, "The Original Aryan," from *Punch Magazine*:

I am the ancient Aryan
And you have done me wrong.
I did not come from Hindustan--
I've been here all along.

I never traveled from the east
In huge successive waves.
You'll find your ancestors deceased
Inside your own old caves.

There my remains may now be sought
Mixed up with mastodons,
Which very long with flint I fought
Before I fought with bronze.

In simple skins I wrapped me round
Ere mats I learned to make.
I dug my dwelling in the ground
Or reared them on a lake.

I had no pen, I'm sure of this,
Although you say I penned
All manner of theologies
In Sanskrit and in Zend.

My nature you've misunderstood.
When first I sojourned here,
I worshiped chunks of stone or wood;
My rites were rather queer.

The more my little ways you scan
The less you'll care to praise
And bless the dear old Aryan
Of neolithic days.

They've mixed me up till, I declare,
I hardly can report
Whether I first was tall and fair,
Or I was dark or short.

But of two things I take my stand
Through all their noise and strife--
I didn't come from Asia, and
I had no higher life.

The anonymous author ridiculed the notion of an "Aryan race," whom many scholars inaccurately considered the progenitors of all civilizations, past and present. Although the poem first appeared in the popular British journal, the choice by AME editors to reprint it in an AME publication demonstrated that they were willing to question prevalent racial classifications.⁵

The subject of race was featured in two 1902 *Review* articles. Contributor J. W. Sanders considered race "an accident of birth" and argued that the "unity of the human race is a question of the unity of species," which he defined as a collection of individuals connected by resemblance and the "deeper idea" of genetics. Sanders described physical variations within groups and similarities among various groups and determined that physical distinctions were superficial and that there was a "oneness of races." Sanders further concluded that all people had the same sensibilities and religious and moral nature and that anyone could achieve "noble results" through "earnest personal efforts." In the other article, United States chaplain and AME minister Theophilus Steward asserted that a better way to define the "generic distinction" between people would be class them as "pigmented, and non-pigmented." Steward rejected the racial divisions taught in American high schools and condemned textbooks that taught that the "only historic race is the Caucasian, the others having done little worth recording." He especially took exception to theories that maintained that Noah's son Ham was white and accused American historians of using the Bible when it aided their theories and discarding it when it did not:

It is remarkable that just as we poor "niggers" have got clearly delivered from Noah's curse and from all those Biblical embarrassments, and were sitting down to

enjoy a little of the green pastures of revelation, here comes a Biblical, historical and theological reconstruction, wiping out all revelation, history and theology, in which we could count our blessings.

Steward sarcastically suggested that the only way to return black people to their place in history and the Bible was to make them "Caucasian on Ham's account." The chaplain then declared that the "Negro is out of Ham, out of Adam, out of Christ, and consequently, out of Heaven." Thus, several religious scholars writing in the AME media rejected hierarchical racial categories that denied that the capabilities of people of African descent and removed them from the accomplishments of the past.⁶

During the war with Spain in 1898, *Review* editors offered a stinging satire in response to a reportedly hour long debate at the International Surgical Association in Washington on the subject, "'Do Negroes Sneeze?'" The editors declared that "In no age has such a momentous inquiry been propounded," and that no less than the relationships between black people and God and slave owners and slaves rested on the answers. Asserting that the shape of the nose rather than function accounted for the inability of black people to sneeze, the editors maintained the Germanic was "the best nose for sneezing, and may therefore be fixed upon as the ideal human nose for sounding the Adamic shibboleth." Consequently, black people must have a pre-Adamic origin. For further evidence, the editors noted that nowhere in history had there ever been a recorded "Negro sneeze" and that black people often would fake or imitate sneezing to gain entry into the human family. The editors also found a practical use for the information because a test using cayenne pepper could be devised to insure that biracial people could not use Jim Crow facilities. Through satirical criticism, the religious editors managed to call the members of the Association asses twice without direct references to the members and to expose the absurdity of the effluvium racial argument.⁷

Perhaps no piece of literature had as much influence on the world of imperialism as Rudyard Kipling's poem, "The White Man's Burden," published in the United States in 1899. In the poem, Kipling emphasized the superiority of the white man who consequently was charged to "Take up" the near impossible "burden" of uplifting the "Half-devil and half-child" darker people of the world. The poem quickly became a rallying point for imperialists around the world and a focus of scorn for the AME media. The same month the poem was published, *Recorder* editors maintained that "the back of the black man is quite inured to the duty of burden-bearing" and referred to the poem as a "beautiful and interesting something in the light of poetic license, especially when colored by arrogant reflections of the Kipling kind." They concluded that arrogance rather than superiority was the basis for the supposed burden. The following month, they declared that Kipling had "outlived his usefulness, having reached the acme of inefficiency in the poem." The editors asserted that the poem was "unquestionably a verse license to injustice and tribute to Caucasian avarice and cruelty such as has no parallel in any mad flight of the poetic muse." In this analysis greed rather than superiority undergirded white paternalism.⁸

In response to Kipling's poem, a few contributors to the publications devised their own poems on the subject. For instance, elder Edward Clarke, who taught at the church's flagship Wilberforce University in Ohio, wrote "The White Man's Chance" in which he maintained that white ego not superiority had created the alleged burden. Clarke insisted that instead of considering Christian mission as a burden, the "white man" should speak in terms of the opportunity to advance civilization. Perhaps, the best reply was Johnson's "Black Man's Burden," which denounced American imperialism:

Pile on the Black Man's Burden.
'Tis nearest at your door;
Why heed long bleeding Cuba,
or dark Hawaii's shore?

Hail ye your fearless armies,
Which menace feeble folks
Who fight with clubs and arrows
and brook your rifle's smoke.

Pile on the Black Man's Burden
His wail with laughter drown
You've sealed the Red Man's problem,
And will take up the Brown,
In vain ye seek to end it,
With bullet, blood or death
Better far defend it
With honor's holy breath.

Sarcasm at times denotes a degree of frustration, and nothing frustrated the men and women of the AME more than racism. Johnson's poem demonstrated a defiance, insisting that it would be better to "pile on" more "burden" for African Americans than to "take up" more on foreign shores. He reminded people of color in the American empire of the plight of American slaves and the fate of Native Americans and warned them that it was better to die defending their "problem." Johnson saw the application of American racism on a global level and responded with a rhetoric liberty and equality that scorned and rejected two of the premises of subjugation, white paternalism and white superiority.⁹

The AME media also presented theories that scorned and rejected the concepts of evolution, natural selection, and social Darwinism that imperialists used as evidence of white superiority. As religious scholars, several AME members formed theological arguments that relied on the Bible as the ultimate authority for creation. In a two-part *Review* article in 1898, elder A. J. Kershaw compared Darwin's theories on evolution with those posed by David Star Jordan, president of Stanford University, and rejected them both. Kershaw accused Jordan of merely redressing Darwin "in a new outfit" and maintained that evolution was nothing more than "speculative philosophy" based on faulty reasoning. Worse, evolution was the "son of atheism." Kershaw asserted that there was no conflict between religion and

science and used his own interpretations of geology and the Bible to construct the various stages in the development of the world. He acknowledged the existence of natural laws but noted in Newtonian fashion that God was the lawgiver. The next year, elder Edward Clarke referred to evolutionists as "the Unhappy" because they had so many unanswered questions and too much doubt. The Bible answered all of the questions for Clarke who cited the *Edinburgh Encyclopedia* for the exact dates of creation in "4004 B.C." For Clarke, evolution was God's method of shaping the world in a continuous upward movement of progress from "the 'primal-fire mist' to the advent of the Lord Jesus Christ." One contributor to the *Recorder* that year disdainfully used social Darwinist notions to illustrate that African Americans were not inferior. In the article "The Fittest Must Survive," elder J. G. Monroe maintained that by surviving slavery and contributing to American society, African Americans demonstrated that they were among the fittest people in the world. Still, Monroe like others in the AME rejected evolution as an explanation for creation or white superiority, and throughout the age of imperialism, writers in AME publications asserted that evolution meant that anyone anywhere could progress to a higher level.¹⁰

Although they accepted many of the prevalent racial and cultural classifications and hierarchies and constructed a few of their own, several religious scholars within the AME maintained that such hierarchies, especially cultural, were fluid and not rigid and permanent as racist theories suggested. As the preeminent black journal of the era, the *Review* consistently published scholarly works that rebuked and redefined racial theories and characteristics that postulated permanent racial inferiority. In many ways, the editors of the *Review*, such as future bishop Levi Coppin, whose own religious views bordered on acknowledging a black God, led the way. In 1890 under Coppin's tenure, *Review* editors analyzed the racial theories of Johns Hopkins professor Maurice Bloomfield, who classified people according to hair texture--bushy; fleecy; stiff/straight, and wavy.

Bloomfield maintained that there was an undeniable and permanent connection between the physical and mental character of people. The editors sarcastically thanked the professor for the "rather charitable conclusions" that placed African Americans in the next to bottom "fleecy" category rather than the bottom "bushy" and then noted the number of differences in hair textures among individuals within the racial categories. Citing the existence of data that proved that any people could progress, the editors asserted that the "characteristics of the Negro that are discounted by the present civilization" might be needed in the future for a "higher and better" civilization. Foremost, among those characteristics was the "religious tendency" of African Americans, an attribute necessary for progress. Fifteen years later, the staff of lay editor H. T. Kealing compared "shallow thinkers" and "color-line philosophers" who maintained that white people had a higher civilization because they were white to the housewife who believed her friend dropped by because the rooster crowed. The editors attributed higher civilization to the "liberalizing and progressive tendencies" of Christianity and concluded that skin was nothing more than "a wrap." For both sets of editors, Christianity had the ability and promise to uplift and eventually liberate all people regardless of race.¹¹

A critical first step toward constructing a racial identity was to recapture a history that was lost or stolen and, if necessary, create a history where none existed. Thus, in response to theories that insisted that black people had no history and contributed nothing to society, black historians of the age highlighted the several African empires and kingdoms in the ancient world, both historical and biblical. Using credible sources from Herodotus to Volney, many AME scholars focused on Ethiopia and Egypt and maintained that the ancient Ethiopians and Egyptians were black. Moreover, these ancient Africans initiated all the arts, sciences, and religion and handed down their knowledge to the Greeks and Romans. As historian Dickson Bruce points out, the focus on ancient Africa as the progenitor of civilization allowed scholars to display a double consciousness.

As distinctly black people who had contributed uniquely to the birth of western civilization, Ethiopians and Egyptians provided a source of collective racial pride and a means to identify with western culture. As early as 1879, black nationalist and close AME associate Martin Delany combined biological assumptions, Egyptian and Greek mythology, and biblical history and genealogy in his classic *The Origins of Races and Color* to construct racial identity and to recreate an African past that was uniquely black and that contributed to the birth of knowledge and civilization. Delany used this African past as a foundation for an African future in which black people would be singularly endowed to redeem the world for Christianity. Throughout the age, his work stood as a model and a source for AME members interested in exploring their racial identity and African past to counter arguments of racial inferiority.¹²

Scholars and theologians within AME circles responded to biblical-based racial theories such as polygenesis and predestined or cursed servility by referring to the several ancient African kingdoms of biblical history and the black personalities of biblical genealogy. Biblical genealogy maintained that the sons of Noah peopled the Earth--Japheth in Europe, Shem in Asia, and Ham in Africa and much of southwest Asia. Thus, Ham and his sons Cush, Mizraim, Put, and Canaan became pivotal figures in black scholarship. For instance in 1898, taking the Methodist Episcopal Church to task for suggesting a pre-Adamic origin for black people, bishop Benjamin Tanner traced "The Descent of the Negro." The editor of the *Recorder* from 1868 to 1884 and founder and editor of the *Review* from 1884-1888, Tanner was the consummate theologian whose religious interpretations challenged many contemporary views on the role of people of color in biblical history and genealogy. During the period, the Tanner family was among the most influential in Philadelphia. Tanner argued that "Ham is of Africa, and because this is so, the Negro being of Africa, is necessarily of Ham." If Ham were black, then the ancient kingdoms and cities of Kush, Meroe, Phut, Kem, Babel, Babylon,

Nineveh, and Rehoboth were black. A black Ham meant that the Ethiopians, Egyptians, Babylonians, west Chaldeans, Canaanites, Phoenicians and Carthaginians were black. Personalities from Nimrod to Ramses to Candace including Moses and Solomon frequently were depicted as black. Moreover, AME theologians noted that Africa had served Christ in times of need. They often reminded detractors that Egypt provided a refuge and a place of learning for Christ and his parents when Herod's decree would have ended his life, and that Simon the Cyrene, an African, lightened Christ's burden on the road to Mount Calvary. Thus, biblical history and genealogy furnished valuable and "irrefutable" evidence of the greatness of Africa.¹³

According to biblical history and genealogy as interpreted by several AME religious scholars, Ham and Mizraim settled in Egypt and Libya, Cush and Put settled in Ethiopia, and Canaan, who remained in southwest Asia, settled in Phoenicia and founded most of the nations of Judea. Ironically, the cursed Canaan never went to Africa. In Africa, Ethiopia was settled first, and as the waters of the Nile receded, Ham established Egypt as a colony. Thus, several black religious scholars asserted it was impossible to separate Ethiopia from Egypt. For instance, Martin Delany maintained that the dual kingdom stretched from the Nile to the Niger. In 1892, Tanner also noted the ties between the two kingdoms:

All know that Egypt and Ethiopia went hand in hand; and while the tendency of modern or white scholarship is to break the bands, and dissolve what God as Providence hath joined and what as Revelation He hath confirmed, the mighty union will no more be dissolved or broken in twain than will the waters of their one unbroken Nile.

Tanner contended that neither the kinship bonds between Cush and Mizraim nor the blackness of both could be overturned by scholars who had bias against African Americans, Hamites, descendants of Ham.¹⁴

The focus on Ethiopia and Egypt also produced theories and rhetoric that espoused notions of "sun people versus ice people," suggesting that while Africa basked in the light of knowledge and civilization, Europe wallowed in the darkness of ignorance and barbarism. In 1892, *Review* contributor William Walrond Moe stressed such notions in an article aptly titled "The Boasted Inherent Superiority of the Anglo-Saxon on Trial, With the Universally Authoritative Acknowledgment of the Unique Ethiopian Race." Moe asserted that "the posterity of Japhet . . . had sunk by degrees into the lowest state of barbarism. And may I inform you that the boasted inherent superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race proceeds from this son of Noah." After maintaining that Egyptian colonists gave Europe laws, religion, science, and the arts and that the Phoenicians taught them an alphabet, navigation, and commerce, Moe questioned, "Wherefore, then, do the Anglo-Saxon that proceed from the Gothic stock boast themselves? Is it in barbarity and unevenness, and this to the present day?" Barbaric Goths had burned Rome. In answer to his questions, Moe decried, "O ye Anglo-Saxons! Your boastings are as the most obnoxious rags in the air of a very violent tempest, which blows into oblivion that which cannot withstand its rushing velocity." Such virulent attacks were motivated by efforts of racist scholarship to remove Africans and blackness from the historical and biblical texts. Yet like much of the racist scholarship of the times, Moe's interpretations simplified history to modern perceptions of race and created a dichotomy of good versus evil that was based on color.

Moe continued his light versus dark comparison with Carthage and Rome. Carthage played an important role in shaping racial identity at the turn of the century. Scholars within AME circles combined evidence from the Bible and mythology to demonstrate that Carthage, the rival of Rome, was a black empire. Biblical history traced Carthage back to Ham through the Canaanites and Phoenicians, and according to mythology, Carthage was founded by Dido, queen of the Phoenician city of Tyre and daughter of Belus, king of Tyre and Egypt. According

to Moe, Carthage not only civilized Rome with the knowledge and wisdom of the ancient world but also conducted "the greatest naval and military exploits of antiquity":

But here we have before us the great Ethiopian sons again--polished Carthage, but rude Rome; the elegant Carthaginians, the uncouth Romans. For historical information gives the evidence that "The Romans were almost totally ignorant of the fine arts, until the time of Scipio Africanus."

Thus, not until the defeat of Carthage did Rome advance as the center of empire. Nevertheless, the military prowess and courage of the Carthaginians became a source of collective racial pride, and for many like Moe, heroes such as Hasdrubal, Hannibal, and the "unconquerable" Hannibal proved the true mantle of the black race.¹⁵

Although most religious scholars who wrote in the AME media focused on deconstructing and constructing black identity, a few also considered the origins and nature of white identity. In 1893, frequent *Review* contributor George Wilson Brent used "Biblical testimony" to create a racial origin and identity for white people and, in the process, revealed God's purpose in imperialism. After rejecting evolution, permanent black servility, and "oft-repeated declarations" of white superiority, which necessitated his study, Brent postulated three theses. First, he maintained that races rose to power but eventually declined into oblivion, leaving only a perishable history of past achievements. Still, throughout their existence, members of each race retained certain distinguishing characteristics. Second, he declared that there were no white people prior to the great flood that destroyed the world save Noah or for about seventeen hundred years after the flood. Finally, he proclaimed that Elisha's curse in 2 Kings 5: 20-27 effectively and historically explained the entrance of white people as a race. As Delany had in his work, Brent maintained that everyone from

Adam to Noah had a yellowish complexion. In Brent's scenario, however, Ham was black, Japheth was yellow, and Shem was brown. Thus, the original races were black, yellow, and brown. God created the red race later in Genesis 25: 25-27. After pausing to note that "the red and white races are minor offshoots designed by God to act as a balance-wheel and pivot to His designs for the well-being of the original three races," Brent began to recount the origin of the white race.¹⁶

Brent asserted that originally people were white because of an incurable and contagious sickness, similar to small pox, that in its final stages, marked its victims for life with whiteness. For evidence, he referred to the description of leprosy in Leviticus 13, which described lepers as having white skin and yellow, white, or black hair. Because of contaminated blood, however, these white people could have no children. The author then asserted that in biblical days, "white skin was not a badge of honor" or a desirable condition and contended that positive references to whiteness or "ruddy" in the Bible meant either an emotional condition or a cream-colored, healthy fairness. In a footnote, he explained that "the white man's standard of beauty is a dead, colorless white . . . hence the Indians called them 'pale faces,' and the original color of the unmixed white race is today true to the standard, being colorless, white as snow, a deathly paleness." The "white as snow" allusion came directly from the biblical tale of Elisha's curse which, according to Brent, related the origin of the white race.

The story began with the mighty Syrian general, Naaman, who had won many battles for God. Rich, powerful, and the commander of the Syrian army, Naaman was a leper. A servant girl (slave in some translations) from Israel informed him that there was a holy man in her country who could cure him of his sickness. Naaman acquired permission to go to Israel and a letter of reference from the king of Syria. He traveled to Israel with about sixty thousand dollars in silver and gold and ten suits of clothing to give as

gifts if indeed he could be cured. Eventually, he met the holy man Elisha who gave a worthy Naaman instructions on how to cure his leprosy. After his sickness was cured, Naaman offered Elisha the gifts, but Elisha steadfastly refused, and the general began the trip back to Syria. Elisha's servant Gehazi overheard what transpired and decided that "As the Lord liveth, **I will run after him** [Naaman] and **take somewhat** of him," which he did (note Brent's emphasis). After lying to Naaman, Gehazi received about four thousand dollars in silver and two suits of clothing from the grateful general. When Gehazi returned home, Elisha confronted him. Gehazi lied again, but the holy man knew better and cursed Gehazi and his descendants with Naaman's leprosy and, according to the Bible passage, "he went out a leper, white as snow." Thus, Brent asserted that "Gehazi was the progenitor of the Caucasian or white race" and that unlike the disease, this leprosy was permanent and inheritable.

Brent then argued that Gehazi passed several distinguishing characteristics that were recognizable in present-day white people. First, there were racial characteristics--the curse of skin color, hair, and so forth. Second, Gehazi transmitted social instincts demonstrated in the statement, "I will run after him." Brent contended that as the greatest travelers on earth, "All of their [white men] modern inventions tend to one end, and that is to **make haste**," and they used those inventions to "run after" the rest of the nations of the world. Third, the moral characteristics of white people were evident in Gehazi's statement, "**I will take somewhat** of him." Brent maintained that white people had taken most of their civilization from other people:

In fact, it is the boast of the white race that contact with it means to all other races extinction, either by absorption or extermination; as Gehazi did to Naaman's talents of silver and changes of raiment--he used the one and spent the other. So does it to all other races.

In Asia and Africa, noted Brent, white people were currently "working on the same plan--**to get something**." Fourth and extremely important were the religious characteristics evident in the lies that Gehazi told while invoking God's name, "As the Lord liveth." Brent reasoned that the hypocrisy and deceit that European and American imperialists employed when they justified their actions in the name of evangelizing the world for Christ illustrated a part of white nature passed down from Gehazi. He maintained that religion for white people was intellectual rather than emotional or spiritual and that white people believed in destiny and evolution. He declared that they were the only race to produce atheists. The final characteristic was racial antipathy toward other races since Gehazi was originally either black or yellow. This antipathy led to "an almost unconquerable aversion . . . because the white race willingly mingles its blood with the others, but stubbornly refuses to allow intermarriage with its own." For Brent, the unwillingness to intermarry not only addressed current issues of miscegenation, but also was an obstacle to God's ultimate plan.

According to Brent, God had promised Noah that the original races would one day live together in harmony. Still, God had not finished with his wrath, yet the flood was a bit excessive. Instead, God created the white race to be used as instruments of his wrath. Brent attempted to explain imperialism in such terms. Although motivated by imperial designs that were characteristic of the descendants of Gehazi, the white race, through divine purpose, was punishing those nations that had forgotten God. Once this was accomplished, America, which was now home for members from all the races, would be the fulfillment of God's promise. The brown race, called the "**colored people**" and also produced through intermarriage, was key because "in their veins are to be found the uniting strand of one blood; and America has but one religion and one civilization for all." Through miscegenation the white race would eventually vanish and America would become the true promised land for all the descendants of Noah. Thus, Brent constructed a white racial identity that

explained global imperialism as God's plan and that offered hope for the future of people of color.¹⁷

Brent's analysis seized upon the one of the greatest fears of racists and white supremacists, the fear of miscegenation, and made it part of God's plan. Used to justify lynching, the notion of race mixing elicited strong emotions and opinions on racial identity in American society. Some maintained that miscegenation weakened and polluted both races and called for the maintenance of racial purity while others asserted that race assimilation or absorption was the inevitable solution to the nation's racial problems and supported an end to miscegenation laws. Within AME circles, opinions varied between the two extremes. In 1891, *Review* contributor William Lynch from New Jersey refuted the concept of racial assimilation, declaring that the "Negro character has its own marked and distinctive peculiarities. It has a peculiar power of resistance and permanence, a strong tendency to remain apart." Lynch maintained that black Americans had no desire to mingle with white Americans and that "the Negro" had a certain pride that led him "to exult in the purity in his blood, and to regard a foreign element in it as not only not desirable, but even objectionable." "If there be any assimilation," Lynch contended, "it will be of the white race," which likely would lead to race war in American society. No matter, Lynch predicted a progressive future for African Americans that was based on a history of the "noblest and most aggressive character." Although he sought to create a black identity with characteristics usually only assigned to white people, Lynch and others who expressed notions of black racial purity spurned a whole group of Americans, indeed African Americans, as "not desirable" and "objectionable."¹⁸

Ten years later in a *Review* article, political activist and lay journalist T. Thomas Fortune postulated that through the "theory of ultimate absorption," all distinctive racial types including African would be absorbed "into the bone and sinew of the Republic" and become extinct. Fortune asserted that unlike

Native Americans whose savagery prevented them from being absorbed into a republic, African Americans had mental aptitudes similar to white people and could be absorbed because they were "eloquent, musical, poetic and philosophical." Maintaining that ideas of the unity of humanity already were confirmed "in the ready amalgamation of dissimilar race types in the United States," Fortune proposed a federal marriage and law to hasten the process. For Fortune, habitat, language, and religion rather than blood formed the bonds of humanity. Many within the AME agreed with the need to eliminate miscegenation laws and others agreed that culture was more important than blood, yet Fortune's argument of the "bleaching" of black America had a less receptive audience especially within the autonomous minded AME. Although they differed on notions of racial purity, Brent, Lynch, and Fortune all condemned the racial concubinage system that was started during slavery and perpetuated through racism as destroying the moral fiber of the African American community and the nation.

Religious scholars within AME circles like Brent, Tanner, and Coppin, no doubt, spent hours upon hours studying and investigating biblical, literary, and historic texts. Their intricate interpretations of the Bible, their knowledge of the sciences and the classics, their use of Greek and Latin, their attempts to decipher the secrets of the hieroglyphics unmistakably demonstrated their quest for knowledge and accuracy. By reexamining and reinterpreting both ancient and modern evidence, they attempted to reintroduce Africans and people of color whom modern racist scholarship had written out of myth, legend, and history. Their effort at racial construction was as much an effort at racial deconstruction. Thus, they agreed that Hannibal was a great military leader, but in their analysis of the texts, Hannibal was African and thus black. Still, their interpretations were colored by the prevalent deluge of racial theories of black inferiority that justified racist attitudes and actions. It was not difficult for them to deconstruct the boasted inherent superiority of the white race and, at the same time, to construct an

inherent superiority of the black race.¹⁹

The racial discourse in the pages of the AME media revealed the extent and appeal of racial thought at the turn of the century. African American religious scholars asserted that they were compelled to respond to each and every theory produced by racist scholarship no matter how credible or absurd. Very often, they argued that they would not be broaching the subject of race were it not to correct false and inaccurate racial theories. Employing poetry, satire, literary and analytical criticism, metaphor, allegory, and a host of rhetorical devices, religious scholars assumed active and creative stances against theories of white supremacy. Yet they were not able to overcome most of the racist theories of the period. Racism had too much value in American society, and much of the appeal of racial thought in the nation was geared to proving white superiority and black inferiority. Indeed, in many ways, the racial discourse developed by writers in the AME publications was counterproductive. The acceptance of cultural hierarchies and measuring people by their contributions to western culture helped to further paternal and chauvinist attitudes that aided imperialist notions of white superiority and destroyed indigenous cultural values and institutions across the globe. Moreover, the racial discourse easily degenerated into the absurd, adding layers of racial confusion and ambiguity to an already confused and ambiguous racial debate.

Yet, how scholars within AME circles constructed and deconstructed racial identity revealed some of the meanings of race to a people whose oppression was based on race. Some writers rejected the notion of racial differences and categories and stressed the similarities among various peoples. Race was an accident of birth, merely an outer skin that did not determine the worth of an individual. Others maintained that black people had unique and positive characteristics such as religious tendencies that benefitted and contributed to western civilization. Race had value; it was part of God's plan. Indeed, God's plan was even present in the negative and

destructive characteristics that some assigned to white people. Several scholars also argued that racial and cultural hierarchies were fluid not rigid or permanent; thus all people, no matter the race, had the ability to advance. They rejected evolutionary explanations of creation and, more important, white supremacy. Race was not the source of the advent of western society. By highlighting ancient Africans and African kingdoms, they created black heroes, touted black ability to self-govern, and made racial links to western civilization. Finally, their interpretations of biblical history and genealogy vehemently opposed religious arguments of polygenesis and placed people of African descent within the family of God and humanity. Yet, the complexities and ambiguities of their racial discourse demonstrate that the construction of racial identity was difficult at best and, perhaps more important, that the construction of racial superiority was impossible and absurd.

©1998 Lawrence S. Little. Any archiving, redistribution, or republication of this text in any medium requires the consent of the author.

Notes:

1. Herbert Aptheker, *Racism, Imperialism, and Peace*, (Minneapolis: MEP Publications, 1987), 132-142; Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea In America*, (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1970), 144-175; Rubin F. Weston, *Racism in U.S. Imperialism: Influence of Racial Assumptions on American Foreign Policy, 1895-1946*, (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), xii-xiv; also see Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) and Robert Dallek, *The American Style of Foreign Policy: Cultural Politics and Foreign Affairs*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983); George Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 229-230, 234; quoted in Stuart Creighton Miller, *Benevolent Assimilation: The American Conquest of the Philippine Islands, 1899-1903*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 15.

2. Gossett, *Race*, 176-197; Frederickson, *Black Image*, 228-55; Alfred T. Mahan, *Lessons of the War with Spain*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1899), 247; quoted in Aptheker, *Racism, Imperialism, and Peace*, 141, 140.

3. Edith R. Sanders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis; Its Origin and Functions in Time Perspective," *Journal of African History*, 10 (1969), 521-23; William M. Evans, "From the Land of Canaan to the Land of Guinea: The Strange Odyssey of the 'Sons of Ham,'" *American Historical Review*, 85 (February 1980), 15-43; Michael D. Biddis, "Gobineau and the Origins of European Racism," *Race*, 7 (January 1966), 255-70; Frederickson, *Black Image*, 71-96.
4. "A Worldwide Movement Among Darker Races Has Begun," *AME Church Review*, 16 (October 1899); also see W. E. B. DuBois, "The Present Outlook for the Darker Races of Mankind," *AME Church Review*, 17 (October 1900), 95-110. The required mobility of the clergy and lay officials allowed them to view and experience the stigmatizing effects and indignities of racism and inequality in various sections of the nation and world. For instance, the 1884 General Conference condemned the assault of three bishops traveling on a train through the South as a "disgrace to national civilization, and Christianity." Twenty years later, conditions compelled bishop Arnett to pay \$81.50 for an entire sleeping car from Ohio to Alabama because he could not buy a berth on the segregated train; "The General Conference," *Christian Recorder*, 15 May 1884, 2; "Et Tu, Pullman," *AME Church Review*, 20 (April 1904), 415.
5. "Want the Earth," *Christian Recorder*, 13 January 1898, 2; "The Original Aryan," *Christian Recorder*, 2 May 1895, 6.
6. J. W. Sanders, "Unity of the Human Race," *AME Church Review*, 19 (July 1902), 427-31; T. G. Steward, "History and the Races--Pernicious School of History," 19 (July 1902), 423-26.
7. "A Weighty Questions Unsettled," *AME Church Review*, 15 (July 1898), 565-68; "A Rete Mucosum Civilization," *AME Church Review*, 21 (April 1905) 397-98.
8. Gossett, *Race*, 310-338; Rudyard Kipling, *The Five Nations*, (London: 1903); "The Black Man's Burden," *Christian Recorder*, 23 February 1899, 2; "Editorial," *Christian Recorder*, 2 March 1899, 2.
9. "The White Man's Chance," *Christian Recorder*, 28 March 1899; H. T. Johnson, "The Black Man's Burden," *Voice of Missions*, 1 April 1899.
10. A.J. Kershaw, "Evolution: Its Darwinian and Jordanic Theories Compared," *AME Church Review*, 14 (April 1898), 429-35 and 15 (July 1898), 495-502; Edward O. Clarke, "Evolution. God's Method of Work in His World," 15 (January 1899), 729-33; J. G. Monroe, "The Fittest Must Survive," *Christian Recorder*, 16 March 1899, 1, 3.
11. "Study of Human Types," *AME Church Review*, 7 (July 1890), 101-03; "A Rete Mucosum Civilization," *AME Church Review*, 21 (April 1905) 397-98; Several racial theorists, white and black, advanced notions of positive characteristics for African Americans including greater religious tendencies. Referred to as "romantic racialism" by historian George Frederickson, such theories were often used by racists who acknowledged them to justify white supremacy.

12. Dickson D. Bruce, "Ancient Africa and the Early Black American Historians, 1883-1915," *American Quarterly*, 36 (Winter 1984), 684-99; For example see, George Washington Williams, *History of the Negro Race in America, from 1619 to 1880*, (New York: George Putnam's Sons, 1885), Caesar A.A. Taylor, *The Negro Race Retrospective or the Negro's Past and Present, and His Future Prospect*, (Johnstown, PA: Benshoff, 1890) or Joseph E. Haynes, *The Black; or the Natural History of the Hamitic Race*, (Raleigh, NC: Edwards and Broughton, 1894), all of which appeared in the libraries of AME leaders like Arnett and Coppin; Martin R. Delany, *The Origins of Races and Color* (Philadelphia: Harper Bros., 1879; repr., Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1991).

13. Benjamin Tucker Tanner, "The Descent of the Negro," 15 (July 1898), 513-28; also see idem, *Theological Lectures*, 3-20; George Wilson Brent, "The Ancient Glory of the Hamitic Race," *AME Church Review*, 12 (October 1895), 272-75.

14. Benjamin T. Tanner, "The Negro and the Flood," *AME Church Review*, 8 (April 1892), 439-45; also see idem, *The Color of Solomon--What?*, (Philadelphia: AME Book Concern).

15. William Wilroud Moe, "The Boasted Inherent Superiority of the Anglo-Saxon Race on Trial: With the Universal Authoritative Acknowledgment of the Unique Ethiopian Race," *AME Church Review*, 9 (October 1892), 170-78.

16. George Wilson Brent, "Origins of the Race," *AME Church Review*, 9 (January 1893), 278-88.

17. Ibid.

18. William A Lynch, "Race Assimilation," *AME Church Review*, 8 (October 1891), 211-13.

19. Thomas Fortune, "Race Absorption," *AME Church Review*, 18 (July 1901), 54-66; also see idem, "Prof. James Bryce's Prejudice Against African and Polynesian Races," *AME Church Review*, 15 (May 1898), 503-12 and idem, "The Nationalization of Africa" in J. W. H. Bowen, ed., *Addresses and Proceedings of the Congress on Africa, December 13-15, 1895*, Reprint, (Miami: Mnemosyne Publishing Inc, 1969), 199-204.