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The Reverend John Berry Meachum (1789-1854) of St. Louis: Prophet and Entrepreneurial Black Educator in Historiographical Perspective

Dennis L. Durst, Kentucky Christian College

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Introduction

Wilson Jeremiah Moses is a contemporary scholar well known for his analysis of messianic themes in the history of black leadership in America. Noting the religious context in which a mythology of black messianism has been nurtured, Moses concluded that a fresh model for understanding African Americans as agents of social change is needed. "The problem for the future" noted Moses, "is to discover whether or not a social reform movement can function outside the hotbed of Protestant evangelicalism that, for better *and* for worse, has been its environment for over two hundred years."[1] While Moses appears to accent the worse, and my analysis to follow may seem to accent the better, in any event we would concur that the key investigative category for the history of black leadership, namely messianism, stands in need of a significant re-evaluation. This re-evaluation has already begun in a variety of venues, and for this the historian can be thankful. Whereas messianism as a mythic approach to the history of American black leaders has its obvious appeal and its vital exemplars, the two fundamental modes of messianism, namely the polarities of militancy and martyrdom, tend to obscure flesh and blood figures who defy such stark categories.

One such figure, who serves as the subject for this essay, is John Berry Meachum (1789-1854). Meachum held a multiplicity of roles over his lifetime. He was once a slave, then a freedman. He became a Baptist preacher in St. Louis, Missouri, where he also engaged in entrepreneurship and promoted educational reform. He became a national figure by addressing the National Negro Convention in 1846, and a local activist by founding the "Floating Freedom School" on the Mississippi River after 1847. Meachum's multiple roles sometimes stood in tension or even in conflict with one another. I argue that Meachum's complex mingling of numerous leadership roles, none of which were really "messianic," has rendered him a somewhat marginal figure in historiography. Neither a militant nor a martyr, Meachum was a nonetheless a prophetic figure.[2] His educational vision, his entrepreneurship, and his appeals to the biblical trope of "Ethiopia" blend other-worldly and this-worldly values in ways that seem inherently perplexing, even contradictory to the historian. His contextual specificity itself makes his life susceptible to obscurity—the obscurity (to use a biblical phrase) of a prophet without honor in his own country.

Marginality—existence on the margins, borderlines, or interstices of society, can contribute to a person's becoming barely perceptible. Whether it was in his own day, when his status as a freedman made him an "other," neither slave nor citizen in Antebellum America; or in his portrayal in historiography, wherein he receives brief but respectful mention, Meachum seems peripheral. Unlike his contemporary

Henry Highland Garnet, for example, Meachum was not sufficiently radical to attract the ire of the white community. Yet Meachum was not merely acquiescent in the face of unjust laws in his state suppressing the aspirations of slaves and former slaves for uplift and dignity, a fact that renders him unlike the Uncle Tom stereotype. Meachum's ability to gain a stage for his words and actions among his peers within the free black community, as seen in his participation as a speaker at the 1846 National Negro Convention in Philadelphia, makes clear that at least some of his peers accorded him respect. In a sense, Meachum's multiple roles make him a challenging enigma for the historian, but perhaps these very enigmatic qualities in Meachum's life and words contribute to our correcting or nuancing the polarized ways the history black leadership can often be analyzed.

Meachum's Educational Vision

In 1815, having recently purchased his own freedom, John Berry Meachum followed his still-enslaved wife Mary from Kentucky to St. Louis. He had only three dollars in his pocket. The son of a Baptist minister, Meachum eagerly accepted the tutelage of another Baptist preacher, a white missionary named John Mason Peck.[3] Over the next few years, they worked together with other blacks and whites to educate slave children in the basic skills of literacy. "Baptists did not require literacy as a prerequisite for preachers or members," writes Janet Duitsman Cornelius, "but black leaders who seized the opportunities open to them as Baptists showed an interest in learning and teaching fellow slaves to read."[4]

Through a day school instituted by John Mason Peck, the Meachums became involved in Christian education for slave children. During the years of 1818-1822, whites and blacks worshipped together under Peck's leadership. However, as the number of black Baptists grew, the church leaders (whether the decision was mutual between black and white believers is unclear) deemed it expedient that black congregants have their own, separate meetings. John Berry Meachum gradually took over leadership of the newly-formed congregation, and he was formally ordained in 1825. That year Meachum and other members of the black Baptist community established the First African Baptist Church of St. Louis. The congregation, by then numbering about 220 members, including some 200 slaves, built a new house of worship at Third and Almond Streets in 1827.[5]

In the 1820s Meachum's deep commitment to the education of slave children became evident. The Sunday School movement was a growing component of Protestant religious instruction for children throughout the nation, and, in general, the movement was well received in the Protestant community of St. Louis. An editorial on Sunday Schools in the January 16, 1823 issue of *Missouri Republican* commented that: "Instruction in the doctrines of Christianity presupposes a knowledge of the rudiments of education. Children must be taught to both read and think, in order to be initiated effectually into that sublime system."[6] Historian Donnie Bellamy has commented that "Abundance of evidence suggests that blacks and whites waged a holy war against black illiteracy throughout the antebellum era in Missouri."[7] Meachum's endeavor to educate slave children was not a purely religious, catechetical enterprise, but was an effort to equip them for a better future, a hoped-for future of freedom from slavery and grinding poverty.[8]

Over time, with tensions in the region over the future of slavery in Missouri, and with reports of slave revolts in other parts of the country, local St. Louis officials saw the enterprise of teaching slave children to read as a subversive activity. In the early 1820s, the city's Board of Trustees passed an ordinance prohibiting the education of either free or slave blacks. The lumping together of slave and free children made clear the racist roots of their action. Punishments for violations of this ordinance ranged from twenty lashes to imprisonment and fines.[9]

Rules against literacy education for slave children were enforced only sporadically, yet Meachum's efforts encountered active opposition as when the local Sheriff arrested Meachum and a white Englishman whom he had hired as a teacher while

they were instructing their students in the church basement. Following this incident, the school's students were scattered, and local authorities forced the school's closure by means of threats against Meachum and Peck. Meachum's commitment to the education of African American children and the risks he took on their behalf would affect such young students as James Milton Turner, who was present when Meachum was arrested. Turner later became one of St. Louis's most prominent black citizens and, as an adult, would champion black education in Missouri and serve at the national level as a Consul to Liberia under President Grant.[10]

Meachum's biographical experiences had an obvious impact on the advice he would offer to other free blacks in his 1846 *Address to all the Colored Citizens of the United States*. Since "industriousness" had paid off in terms of freedom and economic success for Meachum, he was convinced such a path would contribute to the uplift of his people generally. The specific contours of his ideology of economic and educational empowerment and the centrality of industriousness to his educational philosophy are evident in the *Address*. His rhetoric was sharp, but I believe Meachum used this tone because of his firm belief in the inherent and latent abilities in his hearers and readers, both free blacks and slaves:

> In order that we might do more for our young children, I would recommend *manual labor schools* to be established in the different states, so as the children could have free access to them. And I would recommend in these schools pious teachers, either white or colored, who would take all pains with the children to bring them up in piety, and in industrious habits. We must endeavor to have our children look up a little, for they are too many to lie in idleness and dishonor.[11]

It would not be hard to criticize Meachum's "bootstrap philosophy" of economic empowerment as simplistic and unrealistic. After all, not all slaveholders gave their slaves the option of buying their own freedom, very few southern states held manumission to be a legal option, and the very notion of having to buy one's liberty only cast into bold relief the fundamental injustice of reducing humans to the status of property to begin with. Nonetheless, Meachum's efforts to empower people through those means available to them appears to have been a subtle method of subverting the peculiar institution, even if too slowly or too conventionally in the minds of many of his contemporaries or of later historians. Economic empowerment for blacks was a form of protest, particularly within the context of the severe limitations placed on free blacks in antebellum Missouri. As Gayle T. Tate has noted:

> Although the nationalist components of racial unity and spiritual redemption provided much of the driving force behind Black resistance, pragmatic nationalism's emphasis on material elevation, education, organization, and the acquisition of property was not overshadowed. Thus, collective material progress was seen not only as dispelling the stereotypical notions of African inferiority but as a central force in Black resistance.[12]

Conformity to American capitalistic methods, then, when contextualized against white assumptions about free blacks, can be read as a subversive activity.

The twin themes of piety and industrious habits that Meachum stressed in the *Address* echoed his own core values as a Baptist preacher and as an entrepreneur. Eddie S. Glaude has noted the intense internal focus of the Negro Convention movement on "respectability." His analysis bears quoting at length here:

> The thinking went something like this: if we changed our attitudes and behaviour then we could command the respect of others. In this view, the problems lay with our

> slothfulness and intemperance. We need only correct this "impoverished" way of living and the difficulties facing the community would inevitably disappear. The latter responded to the problem of racism by accenting the agency of black people, insisting that they were capable of responding, through self-critique and improvement, to the problems facing the black community. This immanent conversation constituted a call of sorts for solidaristic efforts to reject white paternalism and to alleviate the condition of black people in general.[13]

Meachum's active participation in the early Temperance movement and his strong warnings to the slaves he emancipated about the negative effects of strong drink should be understood in light of his commitment to respectability.[14]

Meachum's *Address* is also characterized by considerable attention to the biblical basis for his advice and admonishments and his rhetoric is laced with moral imperatives rooted in Biblical quotations and allusions. Meachum employed some thirty biblical passages in the first twelve pages of the *Address*. In arguing for education of the young, he quoted Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it." His determination to educate the young arose from the central interpersonal ethic of Christian theology: self-sacrificial love. Meachum pled: "'Love your neighbor as yourself,' is the command of the New Testament. We are morally bound by the law of God to teach this to our children."[15] He interwove further scriptural justification for his educational vision into his narrative, appealing to a generalized sense of parental duty:

> I ask the reader, if it would not be to the glory of God for us to endeavor to train up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord? Then if you think so, let us feel it a duty enjoined upon every son and daughter of our race, to endeavor to become united, that we may throw our mites together, and have schools in every state and county where the free children are in large numbers.[16]

Even as Meachum provided strong arguments based in biblical precepts in support of the education of black children and emphasized the elements of conformity to the principles of American capitalism and nineteenth-century notions of respectability, the context in which he delivered his *Address* remained tense. Some free blacks and supportive whites in the border states engaged in increased educational activity, in concert with disseminating a growing abolitionist literature. This was evident in St. Louis, which in the 1830s was a city in turmoil over the pamphlets of Alton, Illinois abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy, who eventually became a martyr to the abolitionist cause.[17] This agitation, along with growing fears over the increasing number of free blacks in St. Louis, led Missouri's white power structure to pass draconian measures that by the late 1840s would severely restrict educational opportunities for blacks in the state.

Less than a year after Meachum published the *Address,* Missouri Governor John C. Edwards similarly promoted statewide implementation of manual labor schools for blacks, but his rhetoric rang hollow for African-Americans in the state. The chain of events that followed Edwards' proposal raised the stakes for Meachum's congregation and the children they sought to educate. Meachum's response to the challenges posed by the power structure of his own state of Missouri has firmly assured his place in the local lore of St. Louis, and increasingly in the broader story of African American history. Early in the year 1847, Missouri's legislature passed resolutions challenging Governor Edwards to detail his plan for the education of teachers and for the establishment of common schools for the citizens of Missouri and

Edwards' reply documented the broad outlines of his plan. While some rhetoric in the document could alternately amuse or offend us today, it does provide a glimpse into the stock vocabulary of democratic idealism utilized in this period:

> The young men sent to each [of] the district or township schools, should impart nothing but true knowledge. The farmer or the mechanic—the shoemaker or the miller—the blacksmith or the carpenter—the spinner or the weaver—the engineer or the machine maker, if properly instructed himself, can impart knowledge as correctly as the lawyer or physician, the merchant or divine.[18]

Edwards laid out an apparently progressive, forward-looking design for state education, one purportedly inclusive of all classes and genders, and inculcating industriousness by blending book learning with practical labor. But a mere ten days after Edwards's lofty goals became public record, he signed into law a different piece of legislation directly relevant to education in Missouri giving the lie to his democratic rhetoric. Its words are jarring:

> *Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Missouri, as follows:*
>
> 1. No person shall keep or teach any school for the instruction of negroes or mulattoes, in reading or writing, in this State.
>
> 2. No meeting or assemblage of negroes or mulattoes, for the purpose of religious worship, or preaching, shall be held or permitted where the services are performed or conducted by negroes or mulattoes, unless some sheriff, constable, marshal, police officer, or justice of the peace, shall be present during all the time of such meeting or assemblage, in order to prevent all seditious speeches, and disorderly and unlawful conduct of every kind.[19]

This legislation was an extension of a political history of imposing increasingly repressive laws in Missouri that structured life for both enslaved and free blacks. In 1817, the territory of Missouri had attempted to forestall slave uprisings by prohibiting assembly or travel by free blacks. In 1825 came a law rendering blacks legally incompetent to serve as witnesses in trials involving whites. In 1835 blacks were stripped of the right to bear arms and restrictions were placed on black participation in apprenticeships. That same year, freedom of movement in and out of the state was limited to those free blacks who obtained a license by posting an expensive bond, or by having whites vouch for them.[20] Edwards and the Missouri legislators were reflecting national trends and tensions as well. The 1842 Supreme Court decision *Prigg vs. Pennsylvania* had upheld the fugitive slave law of 1793.[21] Local conditionas as well worsened the situation for Meachum and his sympathizers. St. Louis had a reputation for special harshness in dealing with its slave populace, arguably due to its tense geographical and demographic situation as a border city with a significant black population, both slave and free.[22]

Literacy education, as is widely noted by historians, was something

> of a "holy grail" for slaves and former slaves in the antebellum South and Meachum and other African Americans in Missouri were shaped by this sensibility and responded to the legislation of 1847 in light of this perspective.

Literacy meant African-Americans could read the parts of the Bible whites neglected to teach them, that they could read the promises of the nation's founding documents, and that they could become self-sufficent and break their dependence on a master. According to one study of the subject, literacy also meant the following to black people in slavery: identity formation (identity as freedom), self-worth, self-determination, communal expressions of resistance to oppression, the creation of a liberating religious consciousness, and a breaking of dependency upon whites.[23]

As a pioneering figure in black literacy, Meachum's greatest claim to fame developed not so much from his words in the *Address* of 1846, but in his actions in response to the repressive legislation of 1847. The 1847 statute went beyond prohibiting literacy training for black children. It struck at the very heart of African-American aspirations and identity, for it targeted freedom of worship and assembly along with freedom to receive an education (thus violating numerous provisions of the Bill of Rights). Worship services were the one context in which slaves and former-slaves could express their heartfelt anguish and experience a catharsis otherwise unavailable and the Sunday School was the central educational institution of African-American life. Strictures placed upon such avenues for black agency cried out for an activist response and Meachum, the preacher, educator, and entrepreneur, soon made a bold and subversive move.

By 1847, Meachum's instructional enterprise violated both city ordinance and state law. In response, he developed a plan of action that thwarted the law without actually breaking it. The term civil *dis*obedience is inadequate to describe Meachum's subsequent actions as it is premised on breaking an unjust law and then suffering unjust consequences so as to appeal to the conscience of the oppressor. But Meachum's action flouted the unjust law, without technically breaking it. After the Missouri Legislature passed the 1847 law, Meachum procured a boat and equipped it with a library, and to this he added tables, benches, and the other accoutrements of a classroom. He anchored his vessel in the federally-protected Mississippi river and began to shuttle slave children out to the craft in small skiffs. John Berry Meachum's "Floating Freedom School," as it came to be known, was a bold act of defiance, demonstrating his power and agency as an educator.[24] The boldness of the move is emphasized when we consider the observation in "The Narrative of William Wells Brown" that Francis McIntosh, a free colored man from Pittsburgh, had been taken from a steamboat named The Flora, and had been burned at the stake near the city of St. Louis.[25] Despite such dangers, teachers from the East came to join Meachum's effort, indicating that the fame of his activity had spread beyond his local context.[26]

Again, Meachum's marginality is highlighted by these events, and even given a literal geographical expression by Meachum's activities. Technically, the Floating Freedom School, located in a federal space (the Mississippi River) and a marginal area separating a free from a slave state, did not violate the law. Quiet and largely out of public view, the school was not a boisterous form of protest. Yet it was a sign that free blacks such as Meachum would not simply acquiesce in the removal of the key avenue to their aspirations of self-improvement and economic empowerment. I suggest a neologism, perhaps civil *mis*obedience, to capture the spirit of Meachum's activist educational stratagem.

The gap between Meachum's idealistic rhetoric on the national stage, and the conditions he soon faced at the local level, manifested a bitter and harsh reality. In the year 1849 St. Louis suffered a devastating cholera epidemic, eventually claiming some 6,000 lives. On May 19, a fire spread from a levee to river vessels and buildings along the riverfront. Twenty-

three steamboats were destroyed; fifteen city blocks of buildings were gutted, and estimates of damage range from three to six million dollars. Yet despite these hardships, the citizens of St. Louis turned out the following month to vote in favor of a school tax by a margin of two to one.[27] By contrasting the enthusiasm of St. Louisans for educating white children with the state law barring literacy to "negroes and mulattoes," such rank hypocrisy cried out for an activist response. Thus Meachum's Floating Freedom School's education of black children into the 1850s not only improved the lot of those children, but stood as a prophetic rebuke to the unjust social conditions that made such measures necessary.

Meachum's Entrepreneurship

Meachum was not only a preacher and an educator, but an entrepreneur and emancipator. The growing number of blacks moving from slavery to freedom gave Meachum practical opportunities to train his fellow blacks in marketable skills, which in turn led to their increased self-empowerment. In the state of Missouri, one of only two southern states that did not criminalize manumission, the free black population experienced a dramatic increase. Between 1820 and 1850, the ranks of liberated African-Americans rose from 347 free blacks in 1820 to 2,618 free blacks in 1850. Ira Berlin's classic study of freedmen notes that ". . . while rural Missourians rarely freed their slaves, a growing number of St. Louis masters liberated their bondsmen or allowed them to buy their freedom."[28]

Free blacks in the antebellum South were marginal figures who often had to keep their activities at a low level of visibility. As living proof of the falsity of much racist rhetoric about the abilities of blacks, they were often treated with deep suspicion and fear by white slaveholders and legislators. As Berlin's analysis shows, their numbers relative to the population fluctuated from decade to decade, but by 1810 were showing signs of decline. After 1820 most southern states passed laws in an attempt to restrict manumission. Such laws were flouted in a variety of ways. Perhaps more inhibitory was the ire any manumitting master would incur from his slaveholding contemporaries. Whatever the reason, the rate of legal manumission generally slowed down in the years before the Civil War. The proportion of African-Americans who were legally classified as free in the South declined from 8.1% in 1820 to 6.2% by 1860. Yet in sheer numbers during that period (given the numerical increase among African-Americans generally), the (legally) free black populace grew from 134,223 to 261,918.[29]

Masters desirous of manumitting their slaves and slaves eager for their freedom devised numerous ways of circumventing the laws. Straightforwardly illegal manumission, nominal manumission (i.e., individuals who were slaves "on paper" but not in practice), manumission procured by subterfuge, and deathbed or testamentary manumission describe just a few of the ways slaves could achieve a greater measure of freedom.[30] For some (at least prior to the passage of restrictive laws), legal means seemed the most expedient way of leaving enslavement behind. John Berry Meachum started his life in slavery in the state of Virginia, was moved to North Carolina and later to Kentucky by his master, Paul Meachum. His 1846 *Address* contains a brief autobiographical account of his life that bears review here in the context of examining his development as a religious leader, educator, entrepreneur, and abolitionist. Having been granted by his master some time to earn his own money, Meachum worked in a saltpeter cave in Kentucky in order to earn enough money to purchase his own freedom. Once free, he moved from Kentucky back to his home state of Virginia in order to emancipate his father. According to an extant sermon preached by a protégé of John Berry Meachum's shortly after his death, his former master (Paul Meachum), himself near death, granted John Berry Meachum charge of some seventy-five slaves and instructed him to move them north into Ohio to free them. In Ohio the group was greeted by an angry mob, but the mob was dispersed through circumstances John Berry Meachum later would

attribute to prayer and providence. These slaves eventually were liberated and settled in the state of Indiana.[31] John Berry Meachum's wife Mary, still enslaved, had been moved to Missouri during his emancipatory task in Indiana, so he had learned of her move by heart-rending discovery. Now destitute of funds, he had to work for a time to earn travel money. After earning enough money to travel west, he followed Mary and worked for her emancipation. By the time of the 1846 address, he boasted that he had freed some twenty additional slaves by purchasing them and teaching them skills of economic self-reliance.

Using the slave system against itself was perhaps a triumph of pragmatism over principle. Yet this was a far cry from the stereotypical "Uncle Tom" motif in Meachum's case, because while he expressed affection for his former master, he did not remain with that master's family but sought a life of greater independence. His own family took precedence over the household in which he was raised, even if he at times expressed affection for Paul Meachum. John Berry Meachum's experience of self-emancipation, articulated in his sermons and in his 1846 *Address* doubtless resonated with many free blacks who had likewise exerted initiative in their own liberation. The historian—separated by time and social comforts from the existential realities of antebellum black experience-- does best to refrain from passing value judgments on the actions of those under oppression doing what they can. Given the practical exigencies of their situation and status, one can admire the efforts of antebellum blacks to secure the greatest measure of freedom available to them by the means most readily at their disposal. For some slaves, such as Moses Roper, the sheer cruelty of the master dictated that escape was the only viable approach.[32] For others, such as Denmark Vesey and Henry Highland Garnet, outright violent revolt appeared to be both opportune and principled. For Meachum, a less radical path presented itself and he seized upon it. Meachum used the peculiar institution to subvert that same institution, at least in the case of that limited number of apprentices he was able to set free. Meachum's entrepreneurial capitalism illustrates the impulse toward democracy and voluntarism nurtured by the independent black church movement, particularly in its Baptist and Methodist iterations. As Nathan O. Hatch has noted, "By its democratization in black hands, the church served as the major rallying point for human dignity, freedom, and equality among those who bore slavery's cruel yoke."[33] Meachum's own appropriation of a democratic ethos recast the matter of self-determination in terms both biblical and African by employing in the *Address* an obscure passage in the book of Psalms. He pointed to a reference to Ethiopia (drawn from Psalm 68:31, KJV) a text that proved particularly evocative for antebellum African Americans, with its bracing words: "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands to God."

Meachum, the Ethiopia Motif, and Black National Identity

"Ethiopianism" is a term that has gained a specific meaning in scholarly literature on the history of black nationalism. As an ideology with a specialized following in African American culture (or, perhaps more accurately, as a subculture thereof), Wilson Jeremiah Moses has described Ethiopianism as "the millennial Christianity of various sects and cults arising at the end of the nineteenth century." Moses has pointed out, however, that the theme has roots in the earlier rhetoric of black missionaries with a history stretching back into the eighteenth century. Often in the antebellum era, the Ethiopia theme served as a call to liberate the continent of Africa from European colonialism, yet with the concurrent call for Christianizing it by means of African-American missionaries.[34] Patrick Rael has noted that Episcopalian minister Alexander Crummell utilized the Ethiopia passage so as to buttress the case for colonization as a solution to the problem of slavery. Rael's analysis of the problematic quality of the "fortunate fall" thesis for later black nationalism(s), and the countervalent "unfortunate fall" thesis casts the ambiguity of the Ethiopia theme into even bolder relief.[35] For the majority of free blacks in America, colonization was *not* a live option, and so the dream

of an Ethiopia-like civilization came to be transplanted, so to speak, by black preachers such as Meachum, into American soil. Meachum's emphasis on Ethiopianism stressed the efforts of former slaves, particularly free blacks in the North, to accomplish that end. Furthermore, as Joanne Pope Melish has noted, many black leaders in the 1830s and beyond refrained from forcing a choice between self-referential terms "colored" or "African" so as to maximize *both goals* of claiming their rights as Americans and invoking their solidarity with the oppressed peoples of Africa. But it was clearly the former concern that was predominant in Meachum's era—it would take several generations before the needs and concerns of African nations became clearly articulated and advocated by African American leaders. "They chose the language of physical difference as their primary form of identification as a present, living group in order to avoid weakening their claim to American citizenship;" Melish argues, continuing, "at the same time, they renewed their historical identification with the Africa of antiquity—emphasizing the glories of ancient Egypt and Ethiopia, whose achievements stood as a powerful rebuttal to accusations of innate inferiority associated with that physical identity."[36] African terminology thus served more immediate and pressing goals for leaders like Meachum, who yearned for a place in advancing civilization, perhaps too uncritical of how that term was often deployed by whites to buttress a supremacist mentality.

Meachum was not the first African-American to build on the Ethiopia theme as a call for social change in America. In 1829, for example, Robert Alexander Young, a New York City preacher, had published the "Ethiopian Manifesto." An apocalyptic jeremiad, this text offered both comfort to blacks in America and a blistering rebuke to white slaveholders, promising divine retribution for their crimes against African slaves. Thus Young mingled external and internal foci in a "pamphlet of protest." The sense of peoplehood for the black community, reinforced by social injustice, was often mediated in black preaching through biblical language such as the Exodus trope. For Young, the primary biblical metaphor of peoplehood was the Ethiopia trope that offered a stark contrast between their position in American society and their potential as a community:

> Ethiopians! The power of Divinity having within us, as man, implanted a sense of the due and prerogatives belonging to you, a people, of whom we were of your race, in part born, as a mirror we trust, to reflect to you from a review of ourselves, the dread condition in which you do at this day stand. We do, therefore, to the accomplishment of our purpose, issue this but a brief of our grand manifesto, herefrom requiring the attention towards us of every native, or those proceeding in descent from the Ethiopian or African people; a regard to your welfare being the great and inspiring motive which leads us to this our undertaking.[37]

Some 17 years later, John Berry Meachum evoked the Ethiopia theme in his *Address.* Meachum's *Address* has failed to garner the degree of attention from historians that protest literature or other Negro Convention speeches have -- most notably Henry Highland Garnet's famous 1843 call for insurrection – likely because of the mainstream position that he stakes out with regard to a range of issues in African American life at the time.[38] Perhaps its lack of an incendiary quality and its use of arguments well-established in the convention speeches by 1846, when compared with the content of other public addresses of the day, rendered it simply too mundane to gain widespread attention.

Although Meachum's subtle approach might lead scholars to view the *Address* as unremarkable, his particular application of the biblical metaphor of Ethiopia is noteworthy, particularly when examined in contrast to the Exodus motif even more dominant and widespread in black preaching. This elusive topic comes into even better focus when refracted through the prism of Meachum's life experiences.

As Glaude and others have rightly pointed out, the Exodus theme was extremely important in communal identity-formation for slaves and former slaves alike. Glaude argues that "Nation language emerged in African American political discourse as a synonym for peoplehood, a way of grounding solidaristic efforts in an understanding of America's racial, hegemonic order."[39] Whereas the Puritans of an earlier era had held an ideal of America as a promised land, slaves recognized in the predominant system of slavery a society run by a new set of greedy Pharaohs. The power of this inverted theme as prophetic social critique can hardly be overstated. Yet for Meachum, who had by this time lived as a free person for more than thirty years, the theme of Ethiopia was his rallying cry of the day. Several points of contrast between the two tropes deserve elucidation.

The Exodus theme was a theme of journey and pilgrimage. The middle passage had been an uprooting experience that can scarcely be imagined for the terror and anguish it evoked—a storied experience kept alive in the collective memory of slaves.[40] Add to that memory the unsettled life of slavery in which taking root in a community was impossible for many reasons. Slaves were often, at the capricious whim of their masters, being sold and thus torn from their kinfolk and friends, perhaps to be sent several states distant, often never to see their loved ones again. Even with relatively kind masters, as in Meachum's case, the slave still had no choice but to move when the master moved, wreaking havoc on natural familial ties. Family destruction and the demeaning of labor reinforced the rootless, pilgrim-like ethos that found its resonance in black preaching of the Exodus and wilderness wandering narratives of the Bible. Slave songs contained dual messages, with Canaan land standing as a ubiquitous metaphor of heaven, but also symbolizing a prophetic cry for emancipation or escape to the "free" northern states.[41] The Ethiopia theme stood in tension with the Exodus motif. The repetition of references to Ethiopia in Meachum's *Address* evinced his impatience with a transitory existence. Meachum envisioned the black community as a renewed civilization, and its members as paragons of success in their own right, and by their own efforts. They could practice capitalism in ways equal to or better than any competitors, if only they could and would seize the opportunity. Ethiopia had a mythic quality resonant of the continent of Africa and of both past and future greatness for a people uprooted yet planted anew in the soil of America. Albert J. Raboteau comments that:

> All interpreters of the verse agreed that Egypt and Ethiopia referred to 'the African race.' In a kind of mythic geography, nineteenth-century black Americans identified Ethiopia and Egypt with their own African origins and looked to those ancient civilizations as exemplars of a glorious African past, surely as legitimate a fictive pedigree as white American claims of descent from Greco-Roman civilization."[42]

The Ethiopia theme held a scope and a dignity that fit well with Meachum's aspirations for black solidarity. Through speaking at the 1846 National Negro Convention in Philadelphia, and through publication of his *Address*, Meachum sought a national audience for his views on the education of black children, his entrepreneurial vision, and his call to unity under the idealistic banner of "Ethiopia." Meachum also served in that same period on a committee for the promotion of the National Convention of the Colored Citizens of America, projected for 1847. Meachum outlined the purposes of that event as including, ". . .to take into consideration the general education of our youth, and also the general union of those free people of color that are now scattered in different directions in the United States of America."[43] According to Jane and William Pease, by the 1840s the emphasis of these conventions was shifting away from an assimilationist stance dominant in the 1830s and toward an emphasis on black nationalism with its themes of self-sufficiency and political pressure on the white power structure.[44] Elements of both impulses are detectable in Meachum's *Address*, and the document shows him to be a figure who defies easy categorization, and this, in my view, has contributed to his marginality.

His multiple roles—preacher, educator, entrepreneur, national spokesman placed him in a situation of great tension and frustration. In 1846 he offered a sweeping agenda for a national reform of black education, the cutting edge of a reclaimed national civilization encapsulated in the vision of Ethiopia. Yet in 1847, his own state legislature virtually forced him to move his classroom to a boat anchored amid the swelter and stench of the Mississippi river. Then tensions between a utopian vision and disappointing reality doubtless inflicted a severe psychological toll.

As has been noted, Meachum followed a pattern for bringing slaves into freedom that was subtle, discreet, and largely non-confrontational. Though from one vantage point this might appear to make him complicit in slavery, from another vantage point this activity shows resourcefulness and ingenuity. This pattern of laboring to purchase the freedom of not only his family, but also numerous other slaves instilled in Meachum a deep belief in the power of "industriousness." This became a watchword he was not reticent to proclaim to others. His emphasis on industriousness gave an entrepreneurial cast to his educational philosophy.

In order to become a great nation like Ethiopia, much had to be done. Meachum's themes of moral reform, manual labor schools, entrepreneurial drive, and black national unity illustrate the emphasis of the conventions on moral reform, exemplary living, and education as means to the goal of social "uplift." His sense of the corporate nature of this enterprise appears to be derived both from scripture and from his hardscrabble life. The twin forces of the authoritative biblical text and his own experience of success convinced him of the exemplary power of his personal values for the benefit of his community as a whole. Meachum utilized often the first-person plural pronoun "we" in building solidarity with his audience, primarily free blacks like himself. He also emphasized scriptures that focus upon unity, such as Ps. 133:1 "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!"[45] Furthermore, he used the term "nation" to refer not to the United States, but to the African American community. The opening words of the *Address* evince a biblicist and providential view of human history in which African Americans played a vital role:

> PROVIDENCE has placed us all on the shores of America—and God has said 'Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands To God' Psalm 68, 31. This being true, is it not necessary that some exertion should be made? Ought we not to use our influence and the means placed in our power for the consummation of this end. All will admit that we are capable of elevating ourselves, for we have once been distinguished as one of the greatest nations, and it is reasonable to suppose that what has once been can be again. Sin has degraded us, but righteousness will exalt us.[46]

Meachum called for unification of black folk as a means of promoting education eventually leading to exaltation.[47] Meachum tapped into a rhetorical tradition stressing uplift—but was more concerned with black self-improvement than with any alleged effect their exemplary character might have upon recalcitrant whites. His tripartite program of religion, education, and financial resourcing was aimed squarely at his own extended community:[48]

> All will admit that we are capable of elevating ourselves, for we have once been distinguished as one of the greatest nations, and it is reasonable to suppose that what has once been can be again. Sin has degraded us, but righteousness will exalt us. We are under positive moral obligation to effect this object, by our religious influence, by mental culture, and by appropriating a portion of our worldly goods to the

> accomplishment of this end.[49]

During the mid-1840s the Negro conventions were growing increasingly polarized between factions emphasizing moral suasion and those emphasizing a form of political action that embraced violence if necessary.[50] Meachum appears, on the whole, to have aligned more closely with the "moral suasion" side of the debate. Nowhere in the document did he advocate any course of action approaching insurrection. Instead, Meachum focused almost entirely on the hortatory mode of discourse in internal or "immanent" conversation with his fellow-blacks. His harshest criticisms were of those within the fold, his own people, in phrases that today would usually be perceived as "blaming the victim:"

> It is a common thing for people to suppose that our oppression is occasioned by severe restrictions and disabilities laid upon us by others, but the truth is you keep yourselves down, for as long as you continue to speak evil one of the other and use abusive epithets and backbite, ridicule and reproach one another with opprobrious names, just so long will you be oppressed, for it is an old and true maxim, "if you do not respect yourself others will not respect you."[51]

These words, harsh though they may seem, place Meachum in the long tradition of the prophet whose uncompromising ethical stance leads him to rebuke an already suffering people. In contrast with Young's 1829 pamphlet centered on the Ethiopia trope, criticism of the slaveholder is muted at best within Meachum's rhetoric.[52] In a sense, Meachum's rebuke of white oppression took the form of a studied silence. Doubtless we might also surmise that Meachum held certain white co-workers, such as the white educators who had assisted him over the years, in high esteem. Meachum's words, as well as his unconcern with speaking directly to whites in the *Address*, bespoke his sense of the inherent abilities of those whom he did address—his fellow-blacks in general, and free blacks in particular.[53] His was a program of positive action, of self-emancipation, not a patient waiting for the conscience of white America to awaken.

Meachum's references to fratricidal infighting in the community make even more sense in light of the bitter disputes within the conventions, and within the pages of the various anti-slavery newspapers that were proliferating by this time.[54] As a centrist figure perhaps Meachum strove to be a mediating figure between factions in the free black community. As far as the *Address* goes, Meachum placed the responsibility for fostering unity and for effectuating positive societal benefits by unified action on the shoulders of his immediate audience. The cacophony of internal factionalism may be perceived as the subtext of Meachum's repeated insistence on unity as the only means to improving conditions for blacks in America. He was a Baptist and an evangelical, but he tempered the individualism typical of revivalist preaching with a strong sense of community identity and co-operation.

Within the *Address*, Meachum held forth for several pages on the themes of death and the final judgment, the threat of damnation and the call to repentance.[55] But unlike the pious personal moralism of much of the preaching of his contemporaries, by revisiting the Ethiopia theme with which the *Address* had opened, Meachum emphasized the corporate identity of African Americans, as well as corporate salvation. This motif drew Meachum back to a communal focus found in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Scriptures in the writers' call for national repentance, a theme often lost in the individualistic conversionism of antebellum evangelicalism. He cried out: "O, Ethiopia, have you obeyed the voice of God Almighty, that spoke by the voice of thunder, to the Israelites on the Mount Sinai?"[56] Thus Meachum made explicit a familiar linkage in African-American preaching, namely, the continuity of the black community with ancient Israel, with an attendant sense of covenantal peoplehood and a yearning for

freedom from slavery.[57] Meachum recontextualized this peoplehood for his audience within the identity of Ethiopia, a great African civilization.

For Meachum, concern for the afterlife and diligent provisioning for this life were all of one piece. His narrative interwove attention to eternity and attention to the mundane:

> Then why sit ye here and look at one another? Why not get enough to last as long as you and all your family live. Don't sit there any longer. Rise and go to work like men, and buy property and live like men and women in this world. If you have not got religion, God sends rain on the just and the unjust. But while you are receiving all these good things remember, O man, that thou hast an immortal soul that has to be saved or lost to all eternity. Then let us wake up, not only in regard to earthly concerns, but also in regard to eternity, which is just before us.[58]

Here Meachum constructed the American dream in general, and property ownership in particular, not as a mere wistful aspiration, but as a positive duty to be carried out in tandem with (and ostensibly in an unproblematic harmony with) a concern for one's salvation. An education that focused on developing the character traits as well as the manual skills of industry would empower his people to realize the dream. Thus, Meachum urged unity and a renewal of commitment to the manual labor school effort on a national scale in order to bring to reality his sweeping vision of African Americans as a people of destiny.

Prophet, Yes; Messiah, No

So where does Meachum "fit" with regard to messianic figures such as the insurrectionists on one end of the spectrum, and the suffering servant-like "Uncle Toms" at the opposite end? I contend here that Meachum does not qualify as a messiah figure in these polarized modes of expression, but *does* qualify in important ways as a figure situated between these poles, namely as *prophet*, understood in the sociological terms defined by Max Weber, with attention to the aforementioned work of Wilson Jeremiah Moses.

In his epochal work, *The Sociology of Religion*, Weber set forth the characteristics of the religious figure of the "prophet" in a profile derived from a comparative examination of the diverse traditions of the world's religions. At the outset of his analysis, Weber bracketed consideration of the prophet as "bringer of salvation," as, in his view, this identity was not a universal characteristic of prophets, though it is an important element of many prophets in religious history. Weber defined a prophet as ". . . a purely individual bearer of charisma, who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine commandment."[59]

It is important to note that, despite this individualistic emphasis in Weber, the prophetic motif, at least in Judaism and Christianity, has a significant communal importance as well. We need only think of Jeremiah's laments in the Hebrew Scriptures over the anguish of the people with whom he so passionately identified, and his resistance to the proclamations of doom God called him to announce. Or we could note Isaiah's suffering servant passages, some of which have a clearly "corporate" or national thrust.[60] Though the doctrine of prophetic speech is clearly religious, it is at the same time often aimed at social reform as a concomitant of individual repentance.[61]

Wilson Jeremiah Moses' analysis of black religious leadership with its communal emphasis becomes a valuable corrective to the individualistic ethos of Weber's articulation of the qualities of religious prophets. For example, among four major patterns Moses discovered in his broad and impressive investigation of "messianic" themes in black literature and in American culture more generally, is "the concept of the redemptive mission of the black

race."[62] Here I see Meachum's emphasis on Ethiopia as a marvelous case in point. Where I would differ from Moses is that the fourth of his categories, namely "prophetism" and "prophetic movement" elides the role of the prophet and the role of the messiah too readily. I am not convinced that prophetism is necessarily messianic in nature. I could concede that all messiahs are prophets, but would insist that not all prophets are messiahs or even meaningfully messianic. One might be a prophet without being, or even aspiring to be, a messiah figure, like, for example, John the Baptist in the New Testament.

For the mission of a messiah to have its potency, messiahs must by nature be rare individuals. Moses analyzes many figures, both real and imagined, who have been seen as messianic in opposite ways -- either as militants or as martyrs. The American literary imagination thus sorts into such categories figures like Henry Highland Garnet, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom,* Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, Du Bois's *Dark Princess*, Joe Louis, Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Malcolm X. Moses's analysis of such tropes is nuanced and he is himself critical of ways that uncritical acceptance of such motifs has obscured, for example, a concern for democracy beyond the borders of the U. S. He concludes that "The paradox of African American history is that much of our social progress has been driven by the same zealous, narrow-minded, self-righteous Protestantism that has so often worked against us."[63] All these adjectives could apply to John Berry Meachum, and the question is, has the distaste of contemporary academia for such character traits itself pushed all-too-human figures like John Berry Meachum to the margin? Could it be we are drawn more readily to messiahs, whose vivid contours make them easier to categorize for analysis than a figure with multiple, even conflicting, roles, such as we find in a John Berry Meachum?

Prophets are more common than messiahs. Prophets can also be much more marginal and little-noticed. Messiahs tend to become focal points for followers and opponents alike—they are impossible to ignore. Prophets can be, and often are, ignored. Thus with regard to John Berry Meachum, I believe he is a prophet (in terms of Weber's description below), but not a messiah. Thus he loses any heroic allure a messiah might claim, but he gains authenticity as one more complex, nuanced, and conflicted figure of history—one of flesh and blood, not the idealized focus of an active literary imagination (while I hasten to add that such an imagination is valuable and necessary at times!).

So how, precisely, was John Berry Meachum a prophetic figure? Weber identifies of the traits that characterize the prophets of various religious communities. These traits include the prophet either as preacher of ethics or as exemplar, the prophet as laborer, and the prophet as preacher of a divine revelation. The life and writings of John Berry Meachum manifest all of these characteristics. Meachum personifies an ambiguous *via media* between the dominant mythic roles (militant, martyr) identified by Wilson Moses. While Moses' emphasis on the communal and symbolic power of messianic motifs in African American history shows greater nuance and applicability to the black religious context than Weber's individualism and historic literalism, Weber's articulation of the prophetic ethos shows promise for explicating a particular black figure like John Berry Meachum.

Weber identified two kinds of prophets in his analysis of various world religions: the ethical prophet, and the exemplary prophet. The former speaks for a god, and his preaching demands obedience to specific commands or general norms as an ethical duty. The latter shows the way to salvation by personal example, commending his own life's path to others.[64] Weber's distinction turns out to be one of emphasis rather than of a hard-and-fast demarcation. Both the ethical prophet and the exemplar are attempting to bring their followers to develop a harmonious *Weltanschauung:*

> Regardless of whether a particular religious prophet is predominantly of the ethical or predominantly of

> the exemplary type, prophetic revelation involves for both the prophet himself and for his followers—and this is the common element to both varieties—a unified view of the world derived from a consciously integrated and meaningful attitude toward life. To the prophet, both the life of man and the world, both social and cosmic events, have a certain systematic and coherent meaning. To this meaning the conduct of mankind must be oriented if it is to bring salvation, for only in relation to this meaning does life obtain a unified and significant pattern.[65]

John Berry Meachum fulfilled the prophetic motif in just such an integrating manner, thus I would apply to him the moniker of "ethical exemplar." In other words, his *Address* incorporates elements of biography with a subtext that in effect says, "I have worked to empower myself and others, now I am teaching you, my fellow African-Americans as a national community to imitate me, so we may accomplish self-empowerment by working together." His twin emphasis on piety and industriousness exemplifies this merging of the "cosmic" and the "social," characteristic of an integrated worldview.

Weber further stressed the distinction between prophetic and priestly forms of leadership within religious communities. One method of distinguishing them is what he labeled the "criterion of gratuitous service." Whereas the priest receives his living from performing religious services, through a system of fees or other means of remuneration, the prophet "propagates ideas for their own sake and not for fees, at least in any obvious or regulated form." Thus, in order to be, or at least to appear, free from the corruption of greed, prophets were willing to engage in labor.[66] Meachum, like many free blacks, had labored for his own emancipation. But what rendered his labor over the course of his lifetime prophetic was his labor on behalf of others in the quest for emancipation, then education and entrepreneurship, then "Ethiopia," or communal civilization-building for the black nation within a nation.

Weber identified prophecy in a strict sense with the offer of "a substantively new revelation" or the prophet as one "speaking in the name of a special divine injunction."[67] Given Meachum's biblicist Baptist denominational affiliation, and the saturation of his *Address* with quotations and allusions to existing scripture, he is clearly not a prophet in the sense of bringing a new *revelation*. But in terms of "speaking in the name of a special divine injunction," and appropriating scriptures in ways uniquely meaningful for African-American experiences and aspirations, the quality of newness and freshness is to some degree evident in Meachum. A certain revelatory quality may be seen in the *Address* and its elaboration of the themes of emancipation, education, and the Ethiopia motif, when combined with Meachum's subtle and creative activism in founding the Floating Freedom School.

Conclusion

John Berry Meachum's Floating Freedom School continued its work into the 1850s until he died in his pulpit in February 1854. The anonymous author of his obituary underscored the race norms of the St. Louis community reminding readers and later scholars of the context in which Meachum worked, writing: "The deceased was one of our oldest colored citizens, and enjoyed the confidence of his white brethren, among whom he was extensively acquainted."[68] Meachum's value to St. Louis, even in his death, this author construed in terms commensurate with a hegemonic white paternalism.

"Powerless" in conventional terms, John Berry Meachum, while technically a freedman, labored and achieved much even while under the shadow of the complexional policies of Missouri. By means of a vision saturated with biblical allusion and imagery, and through multi-vocational toil as preacher, entrepreneur, educator, and public speaker, he promoted a broader educational vision than had the

racially and regionally stunted vision of leaders like Governor John C. Edwards.

Lineaments of Meachum's influence can be traced in other elements of the history of black education in St. Louis. At least five other schools dedicated to the education of black children were established and then quickly suppressed in the 1840s -- all of them church affiliated (Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal, and Catholic). After St. Louis had been taken by Union forces during the Civil War, William Greenleaf Eliot, a white Unitarian minister, worked with a businessman named James Yeatman to establish the "American Freedom School." This educational venture was established to give a basic education to recently-freed and fugitive slaves. The school was begun at a church site in 1863, but the building was burned two days later, presumably (though not provably) by opponents of integrated education, yet the school continued on in another location. At the end of the Civil War, Missouri's new constitution of 1865 mandated education for black children. That year, five schools with a combined enrollment of 1,600 were opened and administered by the "Board of Education for Colored Schools."[69] The spectre of "separate but equal," however, was not lifted in legal terms until 1954, and the remaining challenges facing *de facto* efforts at integration are well-known in St. Louis as in most of America's urban centers.
In an era of the broken promises of reconstruction, another figure remarkably like Meachum arose, namely, Booker T. Washington. Washington was and is criticized for being an assimilationist, and for too-readily embracing values some have perceived to be the cultural baggage of whites.[70] Yet his Tuskegee Institute may be seen, in light of Meachum's *Address*, as in many ways a fulfillment of Meachum's vision for manual labor schools.[71]

In 1997, an integrated, private elementary school begun by a group of St. Louis Presbyterians consciously invoked the memory of Meachum's educational vision in the choice of both the name and the emphasis of their educational venture. The "Freedom School," located in suburban University City, has set forth in its promotional literature the following mission statement: "The Freedom School will provide a Christ-centered, challenging elementary education in a safe and nurturing environment to multi-ethnic students from Christian and non-Christian families. We strive to fully develop the God-given potential of each child to be a life long learner and to positively serve the community."[72] Both the title of "Freedom School," and the cooperation of various ethnic groups in the enterprise indicate its debt to the Meachum legacy. Thus Meachum's vision continues to inspire church-based Missouri educators.

The tensions between moral suasionism and insurrectionism in the antebellum period, or between integrationism and black nationalism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, exemplify a perennial struggle between two means to a shared end of a better life for Americans of African descent. While John Berry Meachum urged black and white co-operation in the education of African-American youth, he also embraced the notion of nationhood or peoplehood for the black community, and employed the Biblical metaphor of Ethiopia to evoke a sense of rootedness, dignity, respectability, and destiny. This tension within Meachum's vision could perhaps illuminate other "centrist" figures in antebellum black leadership roles who have drifted to the margins of history. The arguments of the 1840s over the direction of the convention movement have important elements of continuing relevance today, as Eddie S. Glaude has eloquently argued.[73] Meachum passionately proclaimed:

> UNION should be our constant watchword—it should be the standard to which all of us should rally. As in family relations, so in national affairs, --for example, a man and his wife are at variance, they disagree among themselves, but let any thing arise pertaining to the interest of the whole family, all minor differences and opinions are forthwith forgotten and they become united as one. Let us then,

> at this important crisis when a matter is pending which is bearing upon our present and eternal destiny, lose sight of all party spirit and sectarian feelings, and unite in one bond of love, for, as says the Psalmist, "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity."[74]

Lest this essay be perceived as hagiography, let me hasten to emphasize that Meachum's vision was in key respects overly idealistic. As subsequent developments have shown, the barriers posed by systemic and individualized racism have been formidable, and piety and hard work by themselves have been hardly sufficient to overcome them. Any simple solution to the struggle has been elusive. The "American dream" is not the panacea Meachum's words might lead us to believe, but African-American leaders today also continue to lament the liabilities inherent in the dissolution of a sense of community, as did Meachum. No single proposal has yet proven to be a "north star" to which all African Americans can give unqualified assent, leading many to question whether a uniform prescription is a feasible goal. Yet internal debate in a community is not necessarily negative or destructive, and often results in progress. As scholars continue to articulate what they perceive as the best impulses found in integrationism and black nationalism, we still find Meachum's vision in the oft-cited maxim "think globally, act locally."[75] The values he enunciated with regard to ethically-disciplined living, community participation, educational empowerment, and the solidarity evoked by a transcendent sense of destiny, remain worthy of critical reflection today.

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Notes

[1] Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*, Revised Ed. (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 238, cf. 1-16.

[2] For references to Meachum in the secondary literature, see Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 201-204; Michael Patrick Williams, "The Black Evangelical Ministry in the Antebellum Border States: Profiles of Elders John Berry Meachum and Noah Davis," Foundations 21 (1978), 225-41; George E. Stevens, *History of Central Baptist Church* (St. Louis: King Publishing, 1927), 7; Edward A. Freeman, *The Epoch of Negro Baptists and the Foreign Mission Board* (Kansas City: The Central Seminary Press, 1953), 60-61; N. Webster Moore, "John Berry Meachum (1789-1854): St. Louis Pioneer, Black Abolitionist, Educator, and Preacher," *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society* 29 (1973), 96-103; Donnie D. Bellamy, "The Education of Blacks in Missouri Prior to 1861," *Journal of Negro History* 59 (1974), 149-50; Alberta D. and David O. Shipley, *The History of Black Baptists in Missouri* (National Baptist Convention USA: n. p., 1976), 22; Jean E. Meeh Gosebrink and Candace O'Connor, eds., *Discovering African-American St. Louis: A Guide to Historic Sites* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1994), 2.

[3] For details on Peck see John Mason Peck, *Forty Years of Pioneer Life: Memoir of John Mason Peck, D.D.*, edited by Rufus Babcock (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), passim.

[4] Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *"When I Can Read My Title Clear": Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 21.

[5] Moore, 98-99.

[6] Cited in Ralph E. Glauert, "Education and Society in Ante-Bellum Missouri" (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri, 1973), 92.

[7] Bellamy, 144.

[8] Ibid., 150.

[9] Moore, 98-100.

[10] Ibid., 100; Lawrence O. Christensen, "Schools for Blacks: J. Milton Turner in Reconstruction Missouri," *Missouri Historical Review* 76 (1982): 121-35; Gary R. Kremer, *James Milton Turner and the Promise of America: The Public Life of a Post-Civil War Black Leader* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1991), 53-57.

[11] John Berry Meachum, *An Address to all the Colored Citizens of the United States* (Philadelphia: King and Baird, 1846), 19. Some African American leaders had begun advocating the utility of manual labor schools at least as early as the 1833 Negro Convention. See Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Exodus! Religion, Race & Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 126. See also Howard H. Bell, "National Negro Conventions of the Middle 1840's: Moral Suasion vs. Political Action," *Journal of Negro History* 42 (1957), 247.

[12] Gayle T. Tate, "Free Black Resistance in the Antebellum Era, 1830 to 1860," *Journal of Black Studies* 28 (1998), 770.

[13] Glaude, 118-119.

[14] Williams, 233.

[15] Meachum, 12-14.

[16] Meachum, 17.

[17] Lovejoy ran an abolitionist newspaper. Anti-abolitionist opponents threw his printing apparatus into the river on more than one occasion. On the final occasion, they killed Lovejoy in the process. In the historiography of press freedom, Lovejoy is often presented as a heroic figure. See Merton L. Dillon, *Elijah P. Lovejoy, Abolitionist Editor* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961) *passim*; and Edwin Scott Gaustad, *A Religious History of America*, New Revised Ed., (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 165-66.

[18] John C. Edwards, "Communication from the Governor of the State of Missouri," in *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Missouri of the First Session of the Fourteenth General Assembly* (Jefferson City, MO: James Lusk, Printer to the State, 1847), 194.

[19] *Laws of the State of Missouri Passed at the First Session of the Fourteenth General Assembly* (City of Jefferson: James Lusk Public Printer, 1847), 103-104. The statute continues: "3. All meetings of negroes or mulattoes, for the purposes mentioned in the two preceding sections, shall be considered unlawful assemblages, and shall be suppressed by sheriffs, constables, and other public officers." On the complex history of the term "mulatto," which denotes a group that comprised more than half the black populace in Illinois, and made up roughly one sixth of the slave populace of Missouri by this time, see Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 24-33, 57-59.

[20] Lorenzo J. Greene, et. al., eds., *Missouri's Black Heritage*, rev. ed. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 62-64.

[21] Glaude, 147.

[22] In "The Narrative of William Wells Brown," specific instances of cruelty to slaves are described in some detail. In this 1847 narrative, Brown observed, "Though slavery is thought, by some, to be mild in Missouri, when compared with the cotton, sugar and rice growing States, yet no part of our slave-holding country, is more noted for the barbarity of its inhabitants, than St. Louis. It was here that Col. Harney, a United States officer, whipped a slave woman to death. It was here that Francis McIntosh, a free colored man from Pittsburgh, was taken from the steamboat Flora, and burned at the stake. During a residence of eight years in this city, numerous cases of extreme cruelty came under my own observation;--to record them all, would occupy more space than could possibly be allowed in this little volume." William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. *Slave Narratives*, Library of America (New York: Library Classics, 2000), 383.

[23] Cornelius, 2-3. The words of slaves and former slaves could be cited in abundance to buttress this point. I offer here just two illustrative examples: Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. When Douglass as a child overheard his master rebuke his mistress for teaching him the alphabet, it dawned on him that this forced ignorance was at the core of the thralldom of slavery. As an adult he reflected back upon the impact of this revelation on his determination as a youth to teach himself to read: “I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man . . . . From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.” Published just two years before the Missouri legislation, Douglass’s treatise offers a window into the fear of slave-state whites, and conversely the aspirations of slaves, regarding literacy. A generation later, Booker T. Washington, as a small child during the final years of slavery, had envied children who received a formal education, and expressed as much in the following poignant terms: “The picture of several dozen boys and girls in a schoolroom engaged in study made a deep impression upon me, and I had the feeling that to get into a schoolhouse and study in this way would be about the same as getting into paradise.” A generation later, Booker T. Washington, as a small child during the final years of slavery, had envied children who received a formal education, and expressed as much in the following poignant terms: “The picture of several dozen boys and girls in a schoolroom engaged in study made a deep impression upon me, and I had the feeling that to get into a schoolhouse and study in this way would be about the same as getting into paradise.” Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, ed. David W. Blight, Bedford Series in History and Culture (Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press: Boston, 1993 [1845]), 58; Booker T. Washington, Up from Slavery, Signet Classic Edition (New York: Penguin, 2000 [1901]), 5.

[24] Moore, 101.

[25] Andrews & Gates, eds., *Slave Narratives*, 383.

[26] Gosebrink and O’Connor, 2.

[27] Edwin J. Benton, “A History of Public Education in Missouri, 1760-1964” (Ph.D. diss., St. Louis University, 1965), 51.

[28] Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), 143, 136.

[29] Berlin, 136-37.

[30] Berlin, 137-57.

[31] Williams, 227.

[32] Moses Roper, *Narrative of My Escape from Slavery* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003 [republication of the 1837 edition]), 5-19.

[33] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 113.

[34] Moses, 8.

[35] Patrick Rael, "Black Theodicy: African-Americans and Nationalism in the Antebellum North," *The North Star: A Journal of African American Religious History* 3:2 (Spring, 2000), 7. Http://northstar.vassar.edu/volume3/rael.html.

[36] Joanne Pope Melish, "The 'Condition' Debate and Racial Discourse in the Antebellum North," *Journal of the Early Republic* 19 (Winter 1999), 669.

[37] Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Phillip Lapansky, eds., *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African American Protest Literature, 1790-1860* (New York: Routlege, 2001), 85. This recent work is the best anthology, to my knowledge, of antebellum protest literature written by African Americans.

[38]Glaude, 146-59.

[39] Ibid., 54.

[40] For the religious dimensions of this uprooting, see Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 129-63; for an analysis giving greater weight to the agency of slaves in their own religious formation in their creative blending of Christian and African elements, see Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3-97.

[41] See Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 243-66.

[42] Albert J. Raboteau, "'Ethiopia Shall Soon Stretch Forth Her Hands': Black Destiny in Nineteenth-Century America" in his *Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 42-43.

[43] John Berry Meachum, *An Address to all the Colored Citizens of the United States* (Philadelphia: King and Baird, 1846), 60.

[44] Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, "Negro Conventions and the Problem of Black Leadership," *Journal of Black Studies* 2 (1971), 30. On the nuanced cluster of meanings attached to the rhetoric of "nationhood," see Glaude, 63-81. For an alternative, though in many ways overlapping, analysis of black leadership, see Vincent Bakpetu Thompson, "Leadership in the African Diaspora in the Americas Prior to 1860," *Journal of Black Studies* 24 (1993), 42-76.

[45] Meachum, 9.

[46] Ibid., 7.

[47] This was a common theme of the Negro conventions. For example, in his address at the convention in Buffalo, New York in 1843, Samuel H. Davis stated: "We also wish to secure, for our children *especially*, the benefits of education, which, in several States are entirely denied us, and in others are enjoyed only in name." *Minutes of the National Convention of Colored Citizens: Held at Buffalo, on the 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th of August, 1843, for the Purpose of Considering their Moral and Political Condition as American Citizens* (New York: Piercy & Reed,

1843) 5; reprinted in Howard H. Bell, ed., *Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions 1830-1864*, The American Negro: His History and Literature (New York: Arno Press, 1969).

[48] Cleophus J. LaRue points out the role of black preaching in addressing social concerns from a position within the black community, both today and in the past: "Many African Americans believe that matters of vital importance in black life are best dealt with by other blacks, for example, issues such as teen-aged pregnancy, exhortations to blacks to lift themselves from the welfare rolls, black on black crime, and calls for educational excellence. They are convinced that some things can best be said to blacks by other blacks. More pointedly, there are some things that should only be said to blacks by other blacks. Issues and concerns that fall within this realm have historically been addressed from black pulpits." Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 24.

[49] Meachum, 7.

[50] Bell, "National Negro Conventions," 247-60.

[51] Meachum, 11-12.

[52] On this point Meachum's position may be both compared and contrasted with that of William Lloyd Garrison, a white Quaker and the chief proponent of non-violent moral suasionism within the ranks of the abolitionist movement. Garrison was an especially powerful and uncompromising figure in his demands for abolition, but seemed somewhat naïve about how threatening his views would be to white slaveholders, or how violence and warfare would come into play in defense of an inherently violent institution. In Garrison's "Address to the Slaves of the United States" on June 2, 1845, he had urged, in a rather paternalistic manner, that: "The weapons with which the abolitionists seek to effect your deliverance are not bowie knives, pistols, swords, guns, or any other deadly implements. They consist of appeals, warnings, rebukes, arguments and facts, addressed to the understandings, consciences and hearts of the people. Many of your friends believe that not even those who are oppressed, whether their skins are white or black, can shed the blood of their oppressors in accordance with the will of God; while many others believe that it is right for the oppressed to rise and take their liberty by violence, if they can secure it in no other manner; but they, in common with all your friends, believe that every attempt at insurrection would be attended with disaster and defeat, on your part, because you are not strong enough to contend with the military power of the nation; consequently, their advice to you is, to be patient, long-suffering, and submissive, yet awhile longer—trusting that, by the blessing of the Most High on their labors, you will yet be emancipated without shedding a drop of your masters' blood, or losing a drop of your own." William Lloyd Garrison, "Address to the Slaves of the United States," in *William Lloyd Garrison and the Fight against Slavery: Selections from* The Liberator, ed. William E. Cain (New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1995), 111; see also William Lloyd Garrison, *Selections from the Writings and Speeches of William Lloyd* Garrison (1852; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968) 59, 65, 163-73.

[53] On the importance of *agency* as a category in the study of antebellum African American experience, see also Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), x-xi.

[54] See Pease and Pease, 29-44; see also Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker, eds., *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions*, vol. 1, *New York, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), 1:xiv-xv.

[55] Meachum., 37-41.

[56] Ibid., 41.

[57] See the excellent essay by Albert Raboteau, "African-Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel," in *African-American Christianity: Essays in History*, ed. Paul E. Johnson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 1-17.

[58] Meachum, 46.

[59] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, translated by Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 46.

[60] Lamentations 1:1-22; Jeremiah 20:7-18; Isaiah 44:1-5, 21-28; cf. 54:1-8.

[61] Weber, 51.

[62] Moses, 1.

[63] Moses, 238.

[64] Weber, 55. Weber identifies Muhammed and Zoroaster as instances of the former, and Buddha as an instance of the latter type of prophet.

[65] Ibid., 58-59.

[66] Weber, 48. Weber remarked that: "The Christian prophet was enjoined to live by the labor of his own hands or, as among the Buddhists, only from alms which he had not specifically solicited. These injunctions were repeatedly emphasized in the Pauline epistles, and in another form, in the Buddhist monastic regulations. The dictum 'whosoever will not work, shall not eat' applied to missionaries, and it constitutes one of the chief mysteries of the success of prophetic propaganda itself."

[67] Ibid.

[68] "SUDDEN DEATH OF A COLORED PREACHER," Obituary of John Berry Meachum, *Daily Missouri Democrat*, vol. 3, no. 47, February 21, 1854, n.p.

[69] "St. Louis Historic Context: The African American Experience" website, http://stlouis.missouri.org/government/heritage/history/afriamer.htm.

[70] An excellent starting point for examining the controversies is Jan Miller, "Annotated Bibliography of the Washington-Du Bois Controversy," *Journal of Black Studies* 25 (1994), 250-72; but see the highly critical rhetoric directed at Washington by Donald Spivey, *Schooling for the New Slavery: Black Industrial Education, 1868-1915*, Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, 38 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1978), 45-108.

[71] In arguing for industrial education to undergird more abstract forms of higher learning, Washington's rhetoric clearly echoes themes found in Meachum: "Patiently, quietly, doggedly, persistently, through summer and winter, sunshine and shadow, by self-sacrifice, by foresight, by honesty and industry, we must re-enforce arguments with results. One farm bought, one house built, one home sweetly and intelligently kept, one man who is the largest tax payer or has the largest bank account, one school or church maintained, one factory running successfully, one truck garden profitably cultivated, one patient cured by a Negro doctor, one sermon well-preached, one office well-filled, one life cleanly lived—these will tell more in our favor than all the abstract eloquence that can be summoned to plead our cause. Our pathway must be up through the soil, up through swamps, up through forests, up through the streams, the rocks, up through commerce, education and religion!" Booker T. Washington, "Industrial Education for the Negro," in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of To-day* (New York: AMS Press, 1903), 28-29. Reprint ed., 1970. To trace the history of the struggle to improve black education, north and south, pre-and post-Civil War, see: Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961), 113-52; W. A. Low, "The Education of Negroes Viewed Historically," in *Negro Education in America: its Adequacy, Problems and Needs*, edited by Virgil A. Clift, et. al. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 27-59; Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1980), 59-66; C. Stuart McGehee, "E.O. Tade, Freedmen's Education, and the Failure of Reconstruction in Tennessee," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 43 (1984), 376-89; Patrick J. Huber and Gary R. Kremer, "Nathaniel C. Bruce, Black Education, and the 'Tuskegee of the Midwest'" *Missouri Historical Review* 86 (1991), 37-54; and Kenrick Ian Grandison, "Negotiated Space: The Black College Campus as a Cultural Record of Postbellum America," *American Quarterly* 51 (1999), 529-79.

[72] My thanks to Karen Jameson and Chris Crain for providing a helpful brochure on the "Freedom School" of University City, Missouri.

[73] See Glaude, 160-67.

[74] Meachum, 10.

[75] Theologian James H. Cone has argued that these two streams in African American intellectual history are not as polarized as they are often made to appear. See James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: Dream or Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 1-19; 244-71.