

Frederick Douglass – America’s Prophet

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Review

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Dilbeck, D. H. *Frederick Douglass – America’s Prophet*. University of North Carolina Press, \$28.00 ISBN 9781469636184

This concise and powerful spiritual biography of such a key figure in the American abolitionist movement adds significantly to our understanding of the man and his work due to the author’s well-executed study of the foundational, pervasive role that Douglass’s Christian faith played in who he was, what he believed, and how he lived. D.H. Dilbeck’s designation of Frederick Douglass as “America’s Prophet” is indeed an accurate assessment of this runaway slave who rose to leadership in the American struggle to end human slavery and advocate for full equality for all Americans. Embracing the Christian Gospel as a teenager, Douglass formulated his thoughts, words, vision, and deeds around his understanding of the teachings of Christ, which he found strikingly at odds with the Christianity practiced in America’s churches. He also gained inspiration for his hard-hitting methods from the prophets of Old Testament Israel. This work is not a traditional biography in the sense of covering all major aspects of Douglass’s life, yet sufficient attention is paid to key events to make it a compelling and chronologically easy to follow account.

Frederick Douglass grew in his outrage over the discrepancy between American civic ideals and practices when it came to human slavery, racial inequality, and gender inequality. He also became disenchanted with America’s churches for their passive acceptance and often active advocacy of these injustices. Dilbeck carefully traces Douglass’s evolutionary thinking from using only moral persuasion (the philosophy of his early mentor and hero William Lloyd Garrison) in the battle against slavery and inequality to employing political action, to finally giving approbation to physical resistance and even violence for the cause of righteousness. The volume could be enhanced by including a bit more detail of the rift that developed between Douglass and Garrison. Using Douglass’s own words, Dilbeck informs us that Douglass initially “had worshipped

Garrison as a hero worthy of ‘love and reverence.’” The causes and extent of the parting of the ways between these two abolitionist giants deserves further elaboration.

While acknowledging that Douglass in his later years gave less credit to God for emancipation and any progress made in the struggle for equality, and more credit to human effort, Dilbeck is confident that this is less a theological change in Douglass than his attempt to deal with the new social and political realities facing African Americans in the Reconstruction era and beyond. Dilbeck asserts that rather than modifying his earlier biblical understanding of the character and actions of God in human events, Douglass repackaged his speeches and writings to counter his concern that former slaves might passively rely too much on the sovereignty of God and not enough on their own efforts to bring about justice and righteousness in American society. The author’s portrayal of Douglass is thus as a theologically principled pragmatist, holding firm to his essential Christian beliefs while presenting his message in a manner most relevant for the times.

While the author provides evidence that Douglass in no way cast off his Christian faith, it is less evident that his theological perspective was not reshaped in some significant ways. If there is criticism to be made of this account of the life and prophetic ministry of Frederick Douglass, it is that any inconsistencies and other flaws in him are either absent or minimized. Given the incremental slowness of progress toward racial equality, if not outright regression, following Reconstruction, Douglass must have had serious times of doubt and immense frustration. Yet Dilbeck asserts with assurance (p. 127) that “Douglass never gave himself over to despair or resignation.” If this were the case, Frederick Douglass would be a saint among even the Old Testament prophets, including Elijah, who in the biblical account were at times depressed by circumstances to the point of wishing for death.

That said, this is a fine book, well researched and written and appropriately filled with Douglass’s own words from his speeches and writings. The volume is true to its stated purpose, expertly crafted, coherent, engaging, and inspiring in its portrayal. While his imperfections are hard to find in this volume, Frederick Douglass looms largely as a potent force for righteousness, his passions were fundamentally hopeful, and he yearned for America’s redemption rather than judgment. At Frederick Douglass’s funeral in 1895, the main eulogy was delivered by John Thomas Jenifer, a former slave and then pastor of Metropolitan AME Church in Washington. The eulogy contained a succinct summation of the religious, prophetic heart of Douglass: “Christ to

him was larger than Creed, and his Christianity transcended his Churchianity.”(page 161) Douglass’s own words, penned in 1886, perhaps best explain the ultimate reason for his patient optimism, despite so many struggles and setbacks: “I am consoled with the thought that God reigns in eternity – and that deliverance will finally come.” (page 155).

Author D.H. Dilbeck resides in New Haven, Connecticut and has also authored *A More Civil War*.

Allen Carden, professor of history at Fresno Pacific University, is the author of Puritan Christianity in America; Freedom’s Delay – America’s Struggle for Emancipation, 1776-1865; and co-author with Thomas J. Ebert of soon to be published John George Nicolay – The Man in Lincoln’s Shadow.