

### Christian Citizens: Reading the Bible in Black and White in the Postemancipation South

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## Review

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**Jemison, Elizabeth J.** *Christian Citizens: Reading the Bible in Black and White in the Postemancipation South*. University of North Carolina Press, 2020. PAPERBACK. \$29.95 ISBN 9781469659695 pp. 242

Elizabeth Jemison's *Christian Citizens: Reading the Bible in Black and White in the Postemancipation South* argues that the religious and the political were inseparable bedfellows before, during, and after Reconstruction in the South. Jemison examines the beliefs and ideas of Black and white Southern Christians and their responses to a changing society. The transitions of millions of enslaved Black people from property to rights-bearing citizens affected how Black and white Christian southerners viewed themselves and their placement in society. The advent of Reconstruction and the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments left Black and white people debating over God's plan for the future of the nation. Jemison argues that both groups were cognizant of the impact religion had on shaping the political outlooks for the opposing groups.

Jemison limits her area of study to the Mississippi River Valley region. Relying on sermons, denominational publications, and religious speeches, Jemison documents the ways in which Black and white religious communities responded to the political climate from the end of slavery to Reconstruction, its end, and the rise of Jim Crow. After emancipation, Black Christians believed God was on their side. Slavery had come to an end and the federal government was aiding God's work. Black Christians used their religious momentum to argue for rights-based religious and political freedoms in a society that could translate into a new type of citizenship. White Christians also felt that God was supporting their cause. The crises of emancipation and Reconstruction were tests from God that would challenge their faith and trust in the Lord.

White Christians viewed the increased civic and religious rights of Black people with disgust and dismay. While Black southern Christians were inspired by rights-based concepts of

faith and citizenship, white southern Christians asserted *duty*-based concepts of belonging and citizenship for Black people. The institution of slavery was a God-ordained testament to the proper established order for society and the church. Jemison makes the implicit argument that slavery was the apex of Black-white Christian relations in the South. Before slavery's end, Black Christians were largely under the watchful eyes of their white Christian counterparts. The end of slavery brought the end of this Christian surveillance as Black denominations blossomed and separated from whites. Jemison argues that white Christians were fully aware of the authority Black modes of Christianity had on communal perceptions of citizenship and rights. They, therefore, took great pains in launching "ongoing efforts to denigrate the authenticity of black Christianity" (11).

The end of slavery left white Christians attacking Black Christianity while simultaneously rebranding white Christianity. They would rely on the faith of their predecessors to make sense of Black political and spiritual advancements. White Christians elevated the spiritual values of the previous generation making it synonymous with a golden era of white Christian rule. Spiritual leaders aided in reconstructing a glorified past where slavery was benign and subjugated Black people were in an Edenic state. The dissolution of slavery was the new Fall of mankind as white Christians understood it. Black freedom was antithetical to the God white, proslavery Christians served. How would society return to its previous state? Jemison suggests that white southern Christians placed faith in extralegal violence to return the region back to God and white supremacy. This violence buttressed a postemancipation Christian paternalism that was inspired by what white Christians considered to be the golden age of white Christianity—slavery. However, Jemison notes, in returning to the paternalism of old, white Christians would not come close to matching the financial support they gave black Christians prior to slavery's end.

Lastly, gender is integral to Jemison's understanding of postemancipation southern religious history. The fall of Reconstruction and the proliferation of white Redemption were inspired by "antebellum proslavery theological commitments" that mandated the need for "a racial and gendered hierarchy in which white men governed dependent members of society" (109). White fears of libidinous, vengeful Black men legitimated the need for extralegal violence on Black Christians. Moreover, white Christian women took on the task of being memory cultivators through their efforts in Confederate memorial organizations. Black Christian men

challenged white gender hierarchies through respectability politics. Getting an education, leading a family, and being morally blameless were goals. Black women sought to incorporate modes of Victorian womanhood and sexual norms to justify their need for protection commensurate to their white counterparts.

Jemison's concise monograph adds to the field of post-Reconstruction religious history by clearly articulating the impact faith had on the spiritual and civic lives of black and white southerners, and how both recognized the importance of faith in adjusting to changing times. *Christian Citizens* speaks to the malleability of faith and its ability to define who deserves to rule and be ruled in society.

*Shakeel Harris is a doctoral candidate at Louisiana State University in the History Department. His research interests are grounded in the intersections of religion, race, and gender in the nineteenth century. Harris' dissertation project is entitled, "Tests of Faith: Race, Religion & Gender During the Civil War." He holds a Master of Divinity degree from Duke University.*