



**Benjamin Fagan.** *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016. 186 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-4940-4.

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## Using “Black Chosenness” to Advocate Abolition and Equality

From the outset, the black press was “a key weapon in the war against tyranny and oppression,” writes Benjamin Fagan in *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation* (p. 2). Editors used their weekly or monthly publications to agitate for freedom and equality. But Fagan argues that some individuals took this notion even further by linking “black chosenness”—the belief that God had selected black Americans as his chosen people on Earth—to universal emancipation. Editorials, published letters, and illustrations connected the suffering of individuals, both free and enslaved, to the biblical story of the Israelites fleeing from the Egyptians and applied it “to specific sites of struggle,” such as the Civil War and public processions like parades (p. 3). Other content “explored the connections between the current American state and ancient countries [such as Babylon] that had enslaved and oppressed the Israelites” (p. 58).

The philosophy of chosenness operated parallel to the claim of white exceptionalism, which had roots in Puritanism; the American Revolution and the advent of a nation based on concepts such as liberty, egalitarianism, and democracy; and the assumption of superiority to other countries based on national history and aims. At times, Fagan writes, black chosenness “involved a distinctly black exceptionalism that offered an alternative to exceptionalist understandings of the United States or even America more broadly conceived” (p. 6). Some editors and orators also believed “that black people possessed superior gifts and talents that they were destined to share with the world” (p. 6). Black newspapers became one avenue for communicating goals, creating commu-

nity, and countering the notion that blackness was “a barrier to freedom” (p. 8).

The book, based on Fagan’s 2011 dissertation, is divided into five chapters that span the years from 1827 to 1865. Chapter 1 introduces readers to the Reverend Samuel Cornish and John B. Russwurm, founders of *Freedom’s Journal*, the nation’s first newspaper for black Americans. Fagan focuses on the editors’ belief that knowledge was critical to self-improvement. If audiences could not attend school, they could still derive an education from the paper’s curated content.[1] Lessons in deportment were featured in *Freedom’s Journal*, too. As Fagan and others have written, Russwurm and Cornish believed that “proper black behavior was the key to achieving black freedom in the United States, as it would convince white Americans to support emancipation and end discrimination” (p. 28).

Fagan uses the newspaper’s coverage of the July 4, 1827, celebration of the emancipation of most of New York’s enslaved people to illustrate the periodical’s role in race relations. “By teaching black readers how to act properly and displaying that behavior to white America,” he writes, “*Freedom’s Journal* could act as a midwife of emancipation and thus help God fulfill the promise of black chosenness” (p. 34). At issue was whether to hold a parade. The public event could serve to bring black New Yorkers together for a joyful affair. And if the marchers behaved well, white onlookers would be convinced “that black Americans deserved and could handle freedom” (p. 29). Inappropriate behavior, on the other hand, would be

judged harshly by white spectators and “could gravely damage the cause of black liberation, reinforcing existing prejudices and discouraging future acts of emancipation” (p. 29). In the end, parades were held on July 4 and July 5. Both were viewed favorably by white editors, but popular support for the second event, which Russwurm and Cornish opposed, “undercut the paper’s goal of cultivating and enforcing a particular version of black chosenness rooted in the class aspirations of a small group of black elites” (p. 38). Perhaps to offset the seeming failure of chosenness in the book’s first chapter, Fagan discusses briefly how he believes *Freedom’s Journal* affected others. He argues that an 1832 convention for the improvement of free people of color “echoed the newspaper’s emphasis on acting chosen,” and suggests that the newspaper’s “very existence may have inspired” the abolitionist David Walker “to put his idea of black chosenness” into his pamphlet, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (p. 40). While this is possible—Walker was a subscription agent for the newspaper—other writings and individuals also may have influenced him. There is some debate, for example, about whether Walker had access to an 1829 manifesto by the preacher Robert Alexander Young that stressed chosenness.[2]

In chapter 2, Fagan explores how the *Colored American*—founded by Philip Bell in January 1837 as the *Weekly Advocate*—used American millennialism “as a way to help define who belonged to God’s chosen nation and to instruct the members of that nation how to act” (p. 46). Protestants generally had a more optimistic interpretation of the 1,000-year period before the Last Judgment and “increasingly debated how and when Christ would return to Earth” (p. 44). Some believed they might hasten his reign if they could eliminate sins such as slavery. Others, however, saw “a world riddled with sin and debauchery” such that only a cataclysmic intervention by God would heal (p. 47). Samuel Cornish, who joined the New York paper as its editor after his own folded, “swung toward the optimistic end of the millennial spectrum” (p. 47). Fagan writes that Cornish, an ordained Presbyterian minister, penned an ongoing column to detail instances of discrimination in places of worship with the goal of shaming “the paper’s white Christian readers into rooting out such practices in their own churches” (p. 48). Although Fagan does not describe this pressure as “moral suasion,” it was a persuasion tactic used by abolitionists such as the white editor William Lloyd Garrison to influence or change behavior. Cornish also paraphrased the prophet Isaiah. He and his successor, Jeremiah, worked “from the margins of the Israelite nation to bring God’s

chosen people back into alignment with his will” (p. 49). Fagan writes that Cornish argued several key points during his tenure at the *Colored American*: white people could avoid a violent end if they “eradicated racial prejudice from their churches,” and black readers, as “children of the soil,” were decidedly more American than their “white brethren” (pp. 50 and 51). Cornish and his successor, the Congregationalist minister Charles B. Ray, “imagined black Americans as one part of a larger, chosen American nation,” and urged readers of the *Colored American* “to participate in and help perfect their country’s institutions” (p. 57).

Chapter 3 focuses on Frederick Douglass, the famous orator who launched the *North Star* in Rochester, New York, in 1847. Fagan writes that he quickly “took up and revised some of the central tenets of black chosenness” (p. 73). Douglass emphasized a vision of “black exceptionalism that cast black Americans as uniquely able to blend and transform sometimes-competing tactics into an ideal strategy for transforming society” (p. 74). That vision was informed by the transatlantic nature of his subscriber list—about half of the newspaper’s subscribers lived in the British Isles—and the February 1848 revolution in France that led to formation of the Second French Republic and universal suffrage for men. Douglass printed stories about that event and commented in an editorial on the impossibility of suppressing “the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity” (p. 79). The unfolding story in France, combined with details from other revolts against European monarchies in 1848, prompted a version of chosenness that “cast black Americans as one part of a global army of liberation whose members fought against tyranny in all its forms” (p. 90). Fagan writes that those uprisings, along with others in the Caribbean, were seen as impetus for legal challenges of slavery in the United States. This chapter focuses primarily on events that transpired during the first half of 1848. It would have been interesting to know whether Douglass’s interpretation of chosenness continued or evolved during the newspaper’s four-year run.

It has been almost two decades since the publication of Jane Rhodes’s biography of Mary Ann Shadd Cary, a teacher, activist, abolitionist, and journalist. That book explored in part her career publishing *The (Toronto, Canada) Provincial Freeman* and the “complex political dynamics that permeated the black abolitionist community over such issues as emigration, black nationalism, and strategies and tactics for combating slavery in the United States.”[3] Fagan covers some familiar ground in chapter 4, then discusses the newspaper that Cary

founded in 1854. She “relentlessly urged” her black American readers to settle in Canada, a place she promoted using the same sort of unabashed boosterism that Western editors practiced during the nineteenth century.[4] Once in their new country, black Canadians were described “as the builders of an improving Canada,” rather than as “poor refugees, dependent upon the charity of their white neighbors” (p. 106). Fagan writes that Frederick Douglass opposed this pro-emigration stance, because that editor saw “international solidarity ... as a way to improve conditions in the United States” (p. 107). In fact, much of the chapter is devoted to comparing the three publications already discussed to Cary’s *Provincial Freeman*, which outright “rejected racial solidarity as a pathway to liberation” and did not associate black chosenness with black freedom (p. 116). Rather, freedom was associated with Canada’s position vis-à-vis Great Britain; Cary counseled newly arrived black Canadians to become “British at heart” and eschew all segregated organizations (p. 112). Fagan observes that the *Provincial Freeman* thus “revealed the limits of black chosenness”—and perhaps consequently makes this newspaper an outlier in a book about the black newspaper and the chosen nation (p. 17).

The fifth and final chapter addresses the *Weekly Anglo-African*, a New York City newspaper that resumed publication in July 1861 following a brief hiatus. As with other chapters, this one addresses a specific issue to illustrate chosenness. Fagan highlights “competing visions of acting chosen in wartime” by discussing “the issue of military preparation through the lens of black propriety and decorum” (p. 127). One writer believed that drilling would enhance black soldiers’ “carriage and demeanor,” while another argued that time was better spent on “drilling our young men into habits of sobriety, frugality, chastity and economy” (pp. 127 and 129). Another pair of letter-writers, Alfred Green and Robert Vandyne, disagreed in 1861 over how—or if—black Northerners should respond to the war that was by then into its seventh month. Green used an analogy rooted in the book of Exodus, wherein Moses leads the Israelites through the parted Red Sea and to safety. Fagan believes that Green’s use of that biblical typology to interpret unfolding events fits squarely with the theory of black chosenness. Vandyne, however, situated the war as a “God-given conflict that would destroy the United States and leave black Americans free to establish a new American civilization” (p. 133). Fagan does not relate that to the cataclysmic idea of millennialism that was addressed in chapter 2, but Vandyne’s advice to “sit back and marvel

at the power of God” while the US “destroyed itself” certainly fits with that philosophy (p. 133).

The balance of chapter 5 explores the newspaper’s serialized publication of *Blake: Or the Huts of America*, a book by Martin R. Delany that tells the story of the protagonist’s escape from a Southern plantation and subsequent travels to unite free and enslaved people in the struggle for freedom. Scholars now describe it as “at once the most important and the least consequential work of fiction published by a black writer in the nineteenth century” due to the “intellectual scope of its representations” and the fact that the book fell into obscurity for nearly a century.[5] Fagan argues that the action in Delany’s chapters, which were reprinted between November 1861 and April 1862, and his use of language “invited the *Weekly Anglo-African*’s regular readers to connect *Blake* to the paper’s ongoing Civil War coverage and commentary” (p. 135). While that may have been the case, Fagan notes also that the book “echoes” themes that Green and Vandyne explored in their letters to the newspaper. Some may take issue with this analogy, since the book was written in 1859, two years earlier than the men’s published debate over the war and chosenness.

Fagan devotes about seven pages to exploring “the ends of black chosenness” following the Civil War. Passages from an editorial by Robert Hamilton, owner of the *Weekly Anglo-African*, illustrate this: “If we feel less disposed to join in the shouts of victory which fill the skies, it is because with the cessation of the war our anxieties begin” (p. 147). Fagan does not contextualize the quote, but Hamilton likely was writing about the surrender of General Robert E. Lee to General Ulysses S. Grant on April 9. The slow printing cycle may account for the six-day gap between the news event and publication of the editorial on April 15, 1865, and explain the dissonance between the tone of the column and the death of President Abraham Lincoln that same day. Hamilton worried that the end of the conflict would give rise to “oppression [in the South] akin to slavery” if, in Fagan’s words, “the federal government did not actively protect the rights (and especially the franchise) of its new citizens” (p. 147). While it is problematic to link citizenship and voting to Hamilton’s concerns (the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were not ratified until 1868 and 1870, respectively), the editor’s fears soon were realized: first when Midwestern states adopted codes that regulated black migration, then when the Ku Klux Klan was organized, and finally when federal troops were withdrawn in 1877 and the Reconstruction era ended. Conclusions can be difficult to craft, in part because authors

sometimes feel as if they have already shared everything useful and interesting with their readers. But additional details such as these would illustrate for audiences unfamiliar with the postwar timeline the import of Hamilton's editorial and underscore Fagan's observation that unfair treatment of formerly enslaved people "unsettled [by December 1865] any faith in the United States as a protector of God's chosen people" (p. 147).

Fagan returns to the story of the Israelites, as told in the book of Exodus, to illustrate the long struggle for civil rights. "And just as the Israelites wandered for decades before they arrived at the land of milk and honey, the journey of black Americans to freedom would be neither quick nor easy. But as God's chosen nation," he writes, "they could rest assured that they would eventually reach the end of the wilderness, and cross into the Promised Land" (p. 148). Some may dislike that pat ending, given that the struggle for civil rights took another full century. In fact, it is a shame that Fagan declares black chosenness over in 1865 and does not link the idea to other editors and orators; the sociologist and writer W. E. B. DuBois comes immediately to mind. He popularized the concept of the "Talented Tenth" and wrote in a 1903 essay, "The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races." [6] By reflecting on the ongoing relevance of the idea of chosenness to other black editors, orators, and intellectuals, Fagan might have more powerfully demonstrated its evolution across space, time, and mediums.

Overall, *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation* is relatively short at 148 pages (plus notes). There is no bibliography, so some readers may find it bothersome to review the book's notes for listings of primary and secondary sources, and citations are occasionally missing. Even so, this exploration of select examples of black chosenness as represented in five newspapers could be a good addition to undergraduate or graduate classes on topics such as religion or African American history or literature.

#### Notes

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

[1]. After reading a newspaper such as *Freedom's Journal*, subscribers often would share their copy with others. This pass-along readership was important to editors who aimed to educate and inform large numbers. There was an oral tradition, too, whereby individuals read black papers aloud to their family or groups of people. I use "audiences" to signify readers and listeners.

[2]. Robert Alexander Young, *The Ethiopian Manifesto, Issued in Defense of the Black Man's Rights in the Scale of Universal Human Freedom* (New York: For the Author, 1829), in *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), ed. Sterling Stuckey, 37-38. Regarding differing opinions, see, for example, Boyd Childress, "David Walker (1784-1830)," in *Slavery in the United States: A Social, Political, and Historical Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, ed. Junius P. Rodriguez (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2007), 501-502; and Bernhard Thuer-sam, "David Walker: Black Wilmington Abolitionist," Cape Fear Historical Institute, <http://www.cfhi.net/DavidWalkerBlackWilmingtonAbolitionist.php>.

[3]. Shirley J. Yee, review of Jane Rhodes, *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century*, H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews, July 1999, <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3243>.

[4]. William E. Huntzicker, "Boosterism: Newspapers helping to build their communities," in *History of the Mass Media in the United States*, ed. Margaret A. Blanchard (New York: Routledge, 2013), 75.

[5]. Jerome McGann, "Rethinking Delany's *Blake*," *Callaloo* 39, no. 1 (2016): 80.

[6]. Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Who Really Invented the 'Talented Tenth,'" *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross*, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/who-really-invented-the-talented-tenth/>; W. E. Burghardt DuBois, "The Talented Tenth," in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of To-Day. Contributions by Booker T. Washington, Principal of Tuskegee Institute, W. E. Burghardt DuBois, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Charles W. Chesnutt, and others* (New York: James Pott & Co., 1903), <http://www.webdubois.org/dbTalentedTenth.html>.

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