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Horace Russell.
The Missionary
Outreach of the West
Indian Church:
Jamaican Baptist
Missions to West Africa
in the Nineteenth
century.

New York: Peter Lang Publishers,
2000.

Reviewed by Las Newman

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This long awaited book has finally arrived. The result of Russell's pioneering doctoral thesis at Oxford in 1972¹, the study of the Jamaican Baptist Missions to West Africa in the Nineteenth century has come to public knowledge at the right time. Africa is the focus of global attention today as it was in the 19th century. Then in the 19th century, it was the lucrative and persistent trading in African slaves, despite Parliamentary Acts of Abolition and Trans-oceanic policing, which attracted global attention to the continent. Now in the 20th-21st century, it is the persistence of Africa's post-colonial poverty, internal warfare, and the pandemic of HIV/AIDS, which have attracted global attention to Africa, as the forced agenda of the recent G8

summit in Genoa in July 2001 suggests. The African continent, from which much of the new world has derived its own development, has therefore been at the receiving end of colonial and post-colonial attention over the last century.

Professor Russell's book draws attention to the contribution made to the continent, in particular to West Africa, by the African Diaspora in the West Indies. The historical and theological interest which the post-emancipation initiative from the West Indies and the United States stirred, -- that Black Africans captured and transported to the West Indies and America as slaves could, upon Emancipation, return to the continent to

¹ Dr. Russell is now Professor of Historical Theology, Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

make a contribution to its development -- is yet to be fully explored and explained. What accounts for that desire and what explains the lengths to which some pursued that development of their "father-land"? Russell's work attempts to answer these questions from the West Indian perspective.

As he states in the introduction of the book, the purpose of his study was to "see what were the contributions made by the churches in the West Indies to and for the conversion of Africa". His interest in investigating this subject was sparked not only by his own Baptist affiliation. In a very useful bibliographic introduction to the problem, he showed the extent of colonial neglect of the subject and the post-colonial context both in the West Indies and in Africa, which gave rise to renewed interest in it.

As such his study concentrates primarily on "the ecclesiastical aspects of the relationship between the West Indies and West Africa up to the middle of the nineteenth century", examining three aspects of that relationship.

The contribution of this study lies in three areas. First, it highlights the process of formation of the union of Baptist work in Jamaica in the nineteenth century, and argues for the fact that despite the benefits of the union, the Baptist movement in Jamaica remained "two ecclesial communities", one led by the missionaries and one led by the "deacon/leader system". Second, it was this problem of one church with bifurcated leadership which led to the failure of what could have been a very productive enterprise in the Baptist Mission from Jamaica to the Cameroon. This mission, the subject of Russell's impressive study, was in his view a failure because it did not originate among the "deacon/leader system", and therefore, lacked support among the post-emancipation African-Jamaican Baptist population. Third, Russell concludes that though the mission was a failure in terms of its expectation and design, yet it had positive historical value both for the Baptist Union of Jamaica, "helping to define its final shape and structure" (262) as well as for the resultant Baptist churches of the Cameroon. In his judgment, this was "one of the finest stories of missionary endeavor (250).

It is hard to contest Russell's reading of this important aspect of the socio-religious dynamic of Baptist work in post-emancipation Jamaica. He writes as an insider. But beyond that, he marshals a good argument, and explains, justifies and cogently defends his arguments. For example, he argues strongly that the use of the biblical text, Psalm 68:31, was not a

motivating factor for the Jamaican Baptist who never referred to themselves as "Ethiopians" (252). Motivation for involvement in the mission to Africa came from other sources. Though Russell makes a strong case, the arguments are largely circumstantial and might be susceptible to challenge.

In this important pioneering work Russell has blazed a trail for examination of this aspect of the post-emancipation history of the West Indies. He made reference to the other West Indian outreaches to the Gambia, Rio Pongas, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Calabar, Nigeria also in the 19th century and hoped that those stories and others from the West Indies will also be told.

