

*The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation*. By Benjamin Fagan. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016, xi, 186 pp. \$44.95) Reviewed by Amy Helene Forss in *American Historical Review*, Volume 122, Issue 3, June, 2017.

Benjamin Fagan based *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation* on the primary narrative thread of black chosenness. It was a premise he defined and defended as a connecting theme to eighteenth and nineteenth century African American newspapers. Working from this standpoint, Fagan pinpointed black newspaper publishers, several of whom were ministers, as the proponents of his black chosenness argument. The author demonstrated his secondary theme of a black nation existing within the American nation through the auspices of black newspaper articles and editorials. According to Fagan, the black chosen nation alternated as the New Israel, Babylon, or wilderness depending on the timing of the Civil War years (before, during, and after) and the readership of the individual black newspapers.

Fagan's unique text, which included comparative American literature excerpts and biblical illustrations, primarily focused on five African American journals, four printing in New York and one publishing in Canada. The author began his study of black newspapers and black newspaper men with *Freedom's Journal*, America's original African American paper and its co-founders Reverend Samuel Cornish and abolitionist John Brown Russworm. Fagan argued the goal of their newspaper was to bring the Lord's word to black readers by educating them in the social proprieties of white elite society. The author interpreted Cornish's didactic editorials as evidence of coaching readers on "how to act chosen" (p. 22) Expounding on this idea, Fagan used biblical passages to suggest Frederick Douglass' *North Star* newspaper had the same intent: promotion of the black chosen nation. The author cited Douglass' reporting of the 1848 French revolution as an example of the renowned abolitionist disagreeing with American exceptionalism but still supporting black chosenness. Fagan deduced the *North Star* offered proof of the chosen black prophecy of deliverance, similar to the Israelites fighting against their Egyptian oppressors. The author insisted the *North Star's* interest in successful European revolutionary strategies in France and the British West Indies was for its imitation in slave-owning oppressive America. Fagan saw transnational connections throughout the pages of the *North Star*, including the formatting of newspaper columns and the ancestry of Douglass' Scottish printer. The author, clarifying his black nation theme with examples of scripture, determined the *North Star* had "uncoupled the promise of black chosenness from American identity" (p. 94). Fagan could have strengthened this engaging historical position by situating the *North Star's* Rochester newspaper office inside of its western New York Burned-Over District. Free Soil Party newspapers, such as the *Seneca County Courier*, a paper Douglass supported because of its anti-slavery, temperance, and pro-woman's rights stance, could have offered further contemporary interpretations of black chosenness.

The author's well-selected inclusion of minister-editors Cornish and Charles Ray's *Colored American*, Mary Ann Shadd Cary's *Provincial Freedom* Canadian newspaper, and Thomas Hamilton's *Weekly Anglo-African* provided insightful historical scholarship. Fagan arrived at wide conclusions concerning the *Colored American* serving as a millennialist mouthpiece for its editors. First, Fagan contended it was Cornish who turned the newspaper into "a modern-day Jeremiah," a purveyor of America as the New Israel (p. 49). Second, the author deduced Ray deliberately published intermittent millennial articles for regular readers to understand his message while the "premillennialist prophecies would slip past an enemy

glancing at a single issue” (p. 59). Fagan analyzed *Colored American* woodcuts of Nineveh and Babylon to aid this theory. Referring to Mary Ann Shadd Cary as Shadd, Fagan cited her *Provincial Freedom* publication as pivotal. Shadd’s belief in Canada being the shortest path to liberation from America’s wilderness was to instruct her readers to “be British at heart”; Fagan construed this adage was akin to being chosen (p. 112). Unfortunately, uneven chronology and poor copy editing undermined the chapter’s historiography. Quoting Shadd at the beginning of chapter four reinforced Fagan’s black chosenness argument but the influence of her words dissolved when the quote resurfaced in its entirety towards the end of the chapter. The author’s chosenness contention in a similar context existed in black activist Hamilton’s *Weekly Anglo-African* newspaper. Fagan’s review of an 1861 three month letter interchange between New York correspondent Robert H. Vandyne and United States Colored Troop soldier Alfred M. Green elucidated his point. As Fagan noted, “black chosenness had always been, at least in part, a means to the end of freedom from bondage” (p. 146). The author concluded the men’s editorials were biblical typology of chosenness. After all, he surmised, the Civil War divided the United States in the same manner as the Lord parting the Red Sea. Fagan’s historical/religious parallel offered an intriguing area for future research that would have benefited from the text including a bibliography.

It was unclear why Fagan selected and limited his study of black newspapers to five African American journals printing mainly in one area of the country. The latter makes some sense considering most black newspapers during this time frame were printed in the Empire state but it does not explain Fagan’s cursory examination of *The Christian Recorder* (1861-1902) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and his omission of *The National Era* (1847-1860) in Washington, D.C., the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* (1845-1861) in Lisbon, Ohio, and the *Detroit Free Press*, (1831-Present) in Detroit, Michigan. Fagan’s substantive argument of black newspapers promoting the concept of chosenness and the black chosen nation rested on establishing journalistic connections. The author had a Herculean historical task to explain and support His divine design, His chosen army, His choice of black men, and His chosen nation.

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