

Review 9

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Title: The Spirituality of Black Hebrew Pentecostals

Subtitle: A Study of Two Religious Communities

Author: Fred.G. Sherron. 2012

Publisher: Bloemfontein: SUN Press

This is a book that promised much with its glossy cover and interesting theme. Black Hebrew Pentecostals who synthesise elements of Judaism and Pentecostal Christianity while perhaps also drawing on diverse elements of African and African American spirituality seem to present something unique for scholars of new or marginal religious movements. Indeed, Sherron makes the point in his book that he covers what is more or less virgin territory. Due to the fact that he never really gives the reader a proper introduction to the history and demography of the movement in general this book regrettably does not clarify why the movement of 'Black Hebrew Pentecostals' has remained unstudied thus far.

Instead, Sherron begins his book by launching into a generalised discussion on the subject of spirituality, a rather rambling discussion at that with very little extrapolation of why the various sources he quotes from should be considered of relevance for understanding 'Black Hebrew Pentecostals' in particular. The very first paragraph of the book is enough to cause the reader some concern regarding the wisdom of committing oneself to its reading. It contains a bizarre and off key reference to the "spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer" (v). Yet, although one may forgive a first-time academic author many things including perhaps a certain lack of focus, what cannot really be tolerated are imprecise linguistic terms and poorly constructed sentences. Unfortunately, this book abounds with these. The very first sentence sets the tone for the kind of literary 'value' the reader can expect in what is to follow: "The spirituality of two Black Hebrew communities in America is considered the culmination of my interest in spirituality" (v).

Thus having immersed the reader into his subject of research in the passive voice the author never ventures far from awkward sentence constructions and seems to abide by the dictum that real relevant data should take a back seat to a plethora of self-evident statements and irrelevant claims. For example: "Christian spirituality researches a Christian's faith" (3). There is also a worrying element of gross insensitivity to some of the people and movements discussed. For example, in reference to the 1921 Bulhoek massacre in the Eastern Cape where an uprising was brutally suppressed by the colonial authorities, Sherron writes: "Tragedies such as the massacre happen when Black people take power into their own hands and misuse it in the name of religion" (40).

Most problematic of all is the fact that the reader discovers halfway through the book that the author is actually the presiding bishop of one of the two churches under study. Sherron's disclaimer that "the author must remain impartial and take

note of his feelings and anxieties over how this work would be viewed by the larger church community” is not reassuring to the reader. Although I would not go so far as to suggest that Sherron’s leadership role in the church invalidates any value the study might otherwise have, I suggest that this is information the reader is entitled to know up front, or even better on the back cover. The fact that it is hidden away in the introduction of chapter 4 (page 107) does not serve to soften a growing impression of academic sloppiness and borderline obscurantism.

In effect the two churches under study are covered in only two chapters (three and four respectively). Rather than focusing on ‘spirituality’ as intended, much here deals with issues of doctrine and perceived orthopraxis, or the lack thereof. What may however be of interest to scholars are the appendixes to the two chapters, containing verbatim reports of interviews with members. While some relevant information may perhaps be deduced from these field notes, the author’s own interpretations of these do not delve very deeply beneath the surface.

Although the author is mainly responsible for the patchy data and weak presentation of findings in this work, the publisher should take much of the blame for carrying a title that is basically an unrevised dissertation. Whatever value it may or may not have had as a dissertation, as a book it is unconvincing. The most glaring example of the lack of revision is found at the bottom of page 170, where after mentioning the name of James Cone among others in connection with black theology, one finds after a full stop the following: “(give examples. . . quote Cone. You can say how he does this using the Exodus)”. Should one deduce then that this is an undeleted, and evidently ignored, comment by a dissertation advisor, or someone else? If so, how did it pass into publication without the notice of author, proof reader, or editor?

Some elements of comic relief, but editorial shame, include a reference to the famous missiologist David Bosch as “South African Reformed musicologist Bosch” (180)! However, perhaps the most entertaining sentence in the entire work, perfectly capturing the inanity of much of the insights presented is the following: “Pre-marital sex is an immoral act for which justification is found in Scripture” (187-188).

It will suffice to conclude that I really cannot with a good conscience recommend this work, either to the general reader or scholarly community at large. Specialists with a particular interest in ‘Black Hebrew Pentecostals’ should of course consult it with the most useful information likely to come from the two above-mentioned appendixes, following chapters three and four in the book.

DR RETIEF MÜLLER
POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCH FELLOW, FACULTY OF THEOLOGY,
STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

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