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Matthew Harper

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Matthew Harper : The End of Days: African American Religion and Politics in the Age of Emancipation before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The End of Days: African American Religion and Politics in the Age of Emancipation:

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...By JSHarper argues that historians have not given enough attention to the religious motives that informed African American political and economic strategies in the postbellum era. He posits that African Americans “understood political events to be part of a larger spiritual drama,” meaning that nearly every concern was refracted through this millenarian worldview. (61-62). In particular, he reveals that African Americans had a rich millennialist tradition of interpreting events through trying to discern its role in the Second Coming of Christ. However, that did not lead to monolithic views in the African American community. Instead, different interpretations of events led to discord in matters of politics and economics after the Civil War. Harper proves his argument in several case studies of political events that African American communities faced after Appomattox. African Americans viewed topics as varied as voting rights, land reform, temperance, Populism, migration, and segregation through an eschatological lens and employed a variety of biblical stories to buttress their interpretations. This fostered a variety of religious views in African American communities, which in turn spawned different political strategies according to particular religious readings. Harper’s most salient point, though, comes in the final pages of his book. He rightly argues that historians have been cutting at the history of Jim Crow “from both ends,” discovering black political organization for civil rights at progressively earlier dates from the Civil Rights Movement and later dates than Reconstruction. Harper’s historical figures demonstrate that African Americans have consistently fought for civil rights in part because of their eschatological expectations (155-156).

For 4 million slaves, emancipation was a liberation and resurrection story of biblical proportion, both the clearest example of God's intervention in human history and a sign of the end of days. In this book, Matthew Harper demonstrates how black southerners' theology, in particular their understanding of the end times, influenced nearly every major economic and political decision they made in the aftermath of emancipation. From considering what demands to make in early Reconstruction to deciding whether or not to migrate west, African American Protestants consistently inserted themselves into biblical narratives as a way of seeing the importance of their own struggle in God's greater plan for humanity. Phrases like "jubilee," "Zion," "valley of dry bones," and the "New Jerusalem" in black-authored political documents invoked different stories from the Bible to argue for different political strategies. This study offers new ways of understanding the intersections between black political and religious thought of this era. Until now, scholarship on black religion has not highlighted how pervasive or contested these beliefs were. This narrative, however, tracks how these ideas governed particular political moments as African Americans sought to define and defend their freedom in the forty years following emancipation.