SOUTHERN CONFERENCE ON AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES, INC.
VOLUME 39 | NUMBER 01 | SUMMER 2021

THE GRIOT

THE JOURNAL OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES

Tongues of Fire: AME Theological Protection in the Face of Lynching

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Lord, turpentine his imagination,
Put perpetual motion in his arms,
Fill him full of the dynamite of thy power,
Anoint him all over with the oil of thy salvation,
And set his tongue on fire...

James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones*

In 1927, James Weldon Johnson provided the United States a glimpse into the practice of preaching theological protection – or using spirituality to resist terrorism. *God's Trombones* exposes its readership to the complexities of Black radicalism, by depicting resistance without militancy, and portraying Black respectability without Black docility. Johnson's writing even serendipitously exposes the Black Church as an ambiguous but resilient institution that adapts its theology to satisfy contextual experiences of theodicy – questioning why bad things happen to good people. This motif exposes the multifaceted approach towards fighting racism by exposing unique techniques of resistance within the African-American church. Johnson's sermons are esoteric, satisfying, and are delivered in ways that are clandestine to the untrained ear – while ceremoniously protecting the practitioner.[1]

Black resistance theology was once a concealed concept that was practiced without an academic definition. Now, contemporary scholarship describes this theory as Black liberation theology, and its historical relevance is coming to the surface. Black resistance theology's historical beginnings can be found in the seminar work *Slave Religion*, as author Albert J. Rabatou argues that African slaves syncretized or superimposed their African spiritualism into Judeo-Christianity. For the African slave, the Hebrew story of Exodus was as revered as the passion story of Jesus the Christ. This syncretization or religious mixing often utilized a theology and understanding of Judeo-Christianity from the oppressed and impoverished sight view. For the slave practicing this faith, Jesus was more than a spiritual savior, but a provider of a social gospel that fed the hungry, housed the homeless, and healed the sick. When Jesus died it was from a lynching, a public and cursed death that was so reminiscent to those of the slave experience that many defined this messiah as ethnically and racially a Negro.[2] Finally, when Jesus was resurrected and taught his disciples of his coming again, practitioners convinced themselves that they would receive a level of protection over the trails

of bondage (Philippians 4:13). In parallel, those who terrorized the inflicted would face godly retribution, as their evil ways were forever "charged on the scroll."[3]

Johnson's seven sermons highlighted the perils of sin and its penalty. Instead of including messages that preached forgiveness, this playwright describes the wrath of God who punishes wrong doers. This particular methodology is often found within Black sermons of the nadir of American race relations period which began at the end of Reconstruction and lasted well into the early 20th century, as many preachers were forced to respond to the evils of lynching. Many ministers grappled with the question of theodicy and used their religion to seek what many called 'blessed assurance.' The Black Church's response to lynching often described God as disgusted with evildoers, even predicting eternal doom on their soul. These spiritual conversations were often secretive, but sometimes they made it to print and will be presented in this paper. Exegetical and coded responses are also presented in this work, as some pastors publicly toiled with the thought of either praying for the lynchers souls to be forgiven or to be sent "into everlasting darkness, down into the bottomless pit."[4]

From a macro stance, the aforementioned sermons are seeking to be theological agents for change, whereas a micro study will exhibit how multifaceted the historical practice of 'preaching fire' truly was. This protectional theology exhibited a willingness for Black people in America to become mediators against the act of lynching, or lynching sin, while exercising and developing the complexities of their faith. The relationship of violence with Black theology must be examined in order to understand the history of the Black Church.

The field of lynching has received detailed examinations since the "Emory Conference to Explore Lynching in America" in 2002. What is needed within this historiography, are additional examples of how Black religiosity was used to protect persons from physical violence. This article will introduce historical sermons from African Methodist Episcopal (AME) ministers and laypersons in order to highlight the cultivation of a Denominational theology that resists violence and promotes protection. The AME Church is the selected population for this essay due to its history as the first Black connectional Denomination in America, as because of the professionalism attached to its historical organ, *The Christian Recorder* (TCR). As the oldest Black journal still in production (2021), *TCR* holds hundreds of intimate materials that promote a level of authenticity necessary to study theological protectionism. In the midst of a lynching crisis that was impacting thousands of Black Christians in the nadir era, this paper will seek to highlight the bold voices that sought to change the trajectory of racial violence in the United States of America.

Within this work are sermons, conference notes, and autobiographical works from 1877 to 1919 that emphasize how Black Christians preached against lynching. The field of lynching has grown within its historical focus of Black agency, whereas the Black pulpiteer should receive additional recognition and study.[5] As an