

The African and Jewish Questions between Religious Prophecy and Freedom Seeking: A Study in Edward Wilmot Blyden's Philosophy

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Abstract:

Exile, slavery and persecution were tense and often challenging themes in African and Jewish history. For the Jews, the desire of return to Jerusalem was a response to the desperate plight encountered worldwide as well as a need to fulfill a religious prophecy. For Africans, repatriation to Africa meant an escape from the high amount of institutional racism and white abuses in the Churches of the United States. Through a close reading of Blyden's thoughts, the article reveals that Blyden saw that the Jewish situation resembled that of Africa as both were harassed and stigmatized. Yet, he confirmed that the Jewish case is different in the sense that Jews' long for repatriation was completely religious

Keywords: Blyden; the Jewish question; the African question; Zionism; religion; freedom

Résumé:

L'exil, l'esclavage et la persécution étaient des thèmes tendus et souvent difficiles dans l'histoire africaine et juive. Pour les Juifs, le désir de retourner à Jérusalem était une réponse à la situation désespérée rencontrée dans le monde entier ainsi qu'un besoin d'accomplir une prophétie religieuse. Pour les Africains, le rapatriement en Afrique signifiait une échappatoire au racisme institutionnel et aux abus des blancs dans les Églises des États-Unis. À travers une lecture attentive des pensées de Blyden, l'article révèle que Blyden a vu que la situation juive ressemblait à celle de l'Afrique car les deux étaient harcelés et stigmatisés. Pourtant, il a confirmé que le cas juif est différent dans le sens où le désir de rapatriement des Juifs était complètement religieux bien plus que racial ou politique.

Mots-clés: Blyden; la question juive; la question africaine; sionisme; religion ;liberté

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1. INTRODUCTION

Human history is replete with incidents of complete departure from an old life into a new one. This applies to all people of the world and in particular the African and Jewish peoples. Throughout history, the African people was subject to countless influences from the outside world spanning from the eleventh century up to the nineteenth century. Within this period, people experienced the melancholic experience of slavery which did not only subjugated their liberties but also enforced ideas of inferiority and barbarity. For Afro-Americans, the situation was one of chaos as they could not bear to be a second-class citizen nor being excluded from the participation in all aspects of life. As a different socio-racial category, the Afro-American lived in strict psychological conflicts as racial relations hardened to the amount of mental and physical violence. The situation of the Jews was much more difficult. Much scattered, unable to form a collective voice regarding their situation and to crown it all suffering violence in all corners of the world especially during the beginning of the twentieth century, the situation of Jews triggered massive responses as little were sympathetic with the Jewish case while the majority ignored their demands. What emerged to the scene was a Jewish question that showed insecurity and a dream to find a permanent place for centuries of scattered people. The rise of Zionism as a national revival movement presented an embodiment to the demands of the Jewish people and a force to advance the Jewish cause worldwide.

It was under the realm of giving voice to the distorted manhood of the African that Edward Wilmot Blyden staunchly gave accurate expression to the Jewish case as to reveal resemblance and differences in the pursuit of freedom for the African as well as the Jewish people. Blyden was born on 03 August 1832 in the Island of St. Thomas, the Danish West Indies. Much has been written about his early life, education and tours between the United States, Africa and the Middle East. Yet, what is of interest here is his early contact with Jews which is of vital importance in formulating his response to the Jewish question. Blyden grown up in Charlotte Amalie, the capital of St. Thomas where the dominant group was Jews. Blyden (1898) narrated that for years he had been in contact with Jews. In his childhood years, he played with their children and attended many of their annual

festivals and Church celebrations. Blyden (1898) continued that he instantly and secretly attended the Day of Atonement where he witnesses “the proceedings of the worshippers, hear the prayers and the reading, the singing and the sermon”(p.05). For Blyden, the reverence of assembly of Jews fascinated him the most and remained throughout his life. What attracted Blyden (Joseph,1989) to the Jewish community was also their vital participation in the intellectual, political and social life of the island. Unlike the disabled black community, the Jews could obtain many notable positions. Judah R Benjamin, Camille Pissarro, Jacob Mendes da Costa and Pissarro da Costa were Jews who succeeded in occupying many institutional as well as political positions during the time. Blyden’s interest in the Jews community triggered much interest in learning Hebrew. For Blyden, Hebrew would help him read the Old Testament, as he believed that the book contained many parts that mentioned the African race. His acquaintance with David Cardoze, a Jewish intellectual, was very influential and provided, as stated by Blyden (1898), “a wonderful storehouse of philological, historical and even theological information” (p.07).

Indeed, Blyden’s desire to know about Jews triggered much interest in visiting the Middle East where Jerusalem, the Holy Land as conceived by the Jews, was located. The journey gave birth to a very reputable publication of Blyden “From west Africa to Palestine” (1872). The book, as described by Blyden, was “a source of grateful relief and intense enjoyment” as he could gather unforgettable positive impressions about the Holy Land and the immortal history of Arabs, Jews and most importantly Negro’s contribution to this vast and deep rooted peoples and nationalities. It was within the realm of these visits coupled with a notable increase in the impact of Zionism as a movement that Blyden published a pamphlet “the Jewish Question’ (1898) in response to the much debated issue of the time and its relation to Negro sufferings. A reading on the pamphlet reveals that Blyden focused on the prevalence of the spiritual over the political in discussing the Jewish question. There was an attempt to highlight the spiritual contribution of Jews to humanity as a path for African emancipation since the two underwent exile, subjugation and persecution.

The writing of this article emerged as a need to see how Blyden conceived the Jewish question in parallel with the African question. This kind of comparison will reveal many facets of Blyden's view that is rarely discussed in scholarly works. The article will further expose the opinion of Blyden regarding Zionism as a national political movement and accurately describes his view regarding the establishment of homeland for Jews in Palestine or elsewhere.

2. Blyden, Afro-Americans and the African Question

No doubt that Blyden's early formulations of the African question arose out of discrimination he encountered in the United States. During the early 1850's, Blyden, with the help of his teacher John Knox, decided to pursue higher education in the United States. Unfortunately, he was refused admission in two colleges because of his color. As a colorblind society, Blyden (as cited in Holden, 1966) melancholy expressed that he "found a deep-seated prejudice" against all things African which made access to educational institutional a remote impossibility. Blyden further noted that the Afro-American is still "unapproachable mystery". The strangeness of his look remained a barrier to integration into society. Wherever he goes, he was "spotted" as "a peculiar being- sui generis" and this peculiarity of appearance helped differentiate the African from peoples of other races. Blyden added that this state of mind is more common with untraveled people and children than with people who had been abroad. He (1905) narrated an incident where he personally experience the fact of being different not because of intellectual strength but because of mere racial prejudice:

During a visit to Blackpool many years ago, I went with some hospitable friends to the Winter Garden where there were several wild animals on exhibition. I noticed that a nurse having two children with her, could not keep her eyes from the spot where I stood, looking at first with a sort of suspicious, if not terrified curiosity. After a while, she heard me speak to one of the gentlemen who were with me. Apparently surprised and reassured by this evidence of a genuine humanity, she called to the children who were

interested in examining a leopard, “Look, look there is a black man and he speaks English.” (p.135)

For Blyden, the incident apparently proved how color inflicted on “unsophisticated” peoples of a foreign race. This along with appearance “the look of the African” that made the African totally strange and mysterious. Blyden’s friend Macaulay also wrote many letters to Blyden describing similar situations.

For Blyden, feelings of racial superiority because of color differences heralded differences in the mental building-up of the African. For European scientists, African’s physical peculiarities was a result of deficiencies in the intellectual and mental development of the African which needed much attention and study. For Blyden (1905), this mindset was a result of superficial investigations of facts and systems of the African as well as entrenched feelings of superiority of Europeans. Blyden continued that feelings of this kind made the European conclude that the African has “inferior mental and psychological constitution” that abruptly interrupted his own development. For the European, a remedy to the African situation rested on giving the African “an assiduous culture” which could bring the African in close conformity with western modernity and modes of life. To this point, Blyden exemplified by Marie Kingsley, one of the notable English explorers and Anthropologists. In contrast to Anthropologists of the time, Marie went to Africa with zealous attempts to unveil facts about Africans. She never stood aloof to unreasonable opinions and theories and tried its best to make facts stood upon. She selected to work on the spot as to know the African in his own home unspoiled by “the veneer European manipulation” and far from the discomforts and inconveniences of the European enterprise.

Far from western influences, the African was intelligent, adoptive and productive. Surprisingly enough, Marie found the African owing good traits and habits compared to his European counterpart. In the words of Blyden(1905), contact with Africans at home made Kingsley “entertain feelings of respect” and “with whom she could be on terms of friendships”. Blyden also made mention of Booker. T Washington who, though an ex-slave, showed an unsurmountable energy and intellect. According to Blyden

(1905), “Mr. Booker T. Washington, the Founder, himself coming “up from slavery,”has by his own talents, energy and thrift, reached a position unparalleled in the history of his race in the Western Hemisphere”(p153). In a similar manner, Mrs. Green (as cited in Blyden, 1905) shared both Blyden’s and Kingley’s view and confirmed that a real image of the African was distorted by centuries of false- unreasonable depictions. As a counter narrative to these abuses, Mrs. Green wrote very notable words:

“A true knowledge of the native proves that the Negro has a mind-form of his own, which it is worse than useless to try and drag into what at best must be a bad imitation of a wholly different thing—the European mind-form, The one thing necessary is, therefore, to study the Native mind without prejudice, and to help its development along its own lines of thought” (p.139)

Considering the African mind as a *tabula rasa*, the European neglected the presence of African institutions which, for Blyden, are “worthy of study, of respect and of preservation”. Instead, they believed in an inferiority complex and a degrading position just because the African drink from the waters of Niger, Congo and Nigeria. As an attempt to counteract these views, Blyden reminded the African of his past as to make people proud of themselves. In ancient times, the African people occupied an important position as a leading religious people. For Blyden, Africa was the “center of religious impulse” as mentioned in the Bible and the scripts of Almighty God. This was also apparent in Greek and Roman poetry as it made many descriptions of Negroes and their sacred, unaccomplished contributions to God and humanity.

Unlike European assumptions of the African continent as dark and devil, Blyden falsified these claims and told his readers that God chose Africa as a divine place. For Blyden, peoples of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome looked for God through the eyes of Africans. According to Blyden (1905), God “buried His great truths in Africa's sands”. It was believed that Gods made visits to Africa as to meet, according to Greek poets, the “blameless Ethiopians”. The Ethiopians, according to Blyden, were of and associated with divine nature and mortality. Europe, on the other hand, was never

associated with neither religious nor leadership. Its history is a history of slaughter, betrayal. Blyden narrated that while Africa was linked with the “Divine Sufferer”, Asia and Europe deceived the God-Man and “slew Him and plundered His clothes after His death”.

Blyden’s attacks on forms persecutions and attempts to distort African identity coincided with tenacious attempt to criticize Afro-Americans who followed the tide of western influences. Blyden lamented that all nations of the world succeeded in creating nationality. Yet, for Africans they were still bamboozled by western influences due to in part a defective education that instilled inferiority and distanced the African of his own institutions. The situation of the African became very difficult as he became unable to stand as an African. Blyden (as cited in Joseph,1989) sadly described present situation of Afro-Americans:

“Now, if the African educated on European lines, is unable or unwilling to teach the outside world something of the Institutions and inner feelings of his people; if for some reason or other, he can show nothing of his real self to those anxious to learn and to assist him ; if he cannot make his friends feel the force of his racial character and sympathize with his racial aspiration, then it is evident that his education has been sadly defective, that his training by aliens has done but little for him—that his teachers have surely missed their aim and wasted their time” (p.44)

In a stronger tone, he leveled severe criticism at those Africans in the diaspora who were still speaking about Africa “disparagingly”, and attempted to cut connection with ancestral land and peoples whenever occasion allowed them to do. The problem of those individuals, according to Blyden, is stemming from the fact that they could not recognize the existence of an African nationality as much as they recognized American or English nationality. To this point, Blyden admonished that what Africans needed today is to carve an African nationality. Blyden (Joseph,1989) stated that the respect of other races could not come from things alien to our environment nor by despising our own institutions. Rather, respect is a result of a strong, very rooted nationality.

This atmosphere of great antagonism toward all things western made Blyden aware of the need to escape these influences by returning to the African continent. For Blyden, it's high time to build a Negro State. Blyden saw Liberia as the first destination of every African longing for creating a real nationality and identity. As a commissioner to the United States, Blyden (as cited in Conyers,1998) targeted a special mission to convince peoples of African descent for a repatriation movement. His mission was intended to show "the cause of Liberia to the descendants of Africa in that country... and the paramount advantage that would accrue to them, their children and their race by their return to the fatherland" (p.47). In an address entitled "The Call of Province to the Descendants of Africa in America", Blyden made an influential speech in front of peoples of African descent in America on the need of return to Africa and in particular the new established republic of Liberia. For Blyden (1862), Africa was in need of her sons for an intellectual, educational, religious and social revival:

"And if the intelligent and enterprising colored people of this country would emigrate in large numbers, an important work would be done in a short time. And we know exactly the kind of work that would be done. We know that where now stand unbroken forests would spring up towns and villages, with their schools and churches—that the natives would be taught the arts of civilization—that their energies would be properly directed—that their prejudices would disappear—that there would be a rapid and important revulsion from the practices of heathenism, and a radical change in their social condition" (p.89)

Africans' return to the African continent would guarantee a revolution on all spheres of life and a mechanism to build new Africa devoid of western influences and give the world the real intellectual and mental capabilities of Africans. Though Blyden's appeals did not have much impact on the time, the idea of return remained one of the most appealing demands in his philosophy. Yet, by the close of the nineteenth century, the rise of Zionism as cultural revival movement brought the question of African return to the spot as Blyden saw resemblance in the African and Jewish case. Blyden's next task was to expose the nature of the Jewish question as to reveal

similarities and differences in the nature of the African and Jewish questions.

2. Jews Search for a Homeland: Persecution, spirituality and a Nation State

Though Jews suffered persecution, slavery and exile from the time of ancient Egypt, it was only by the close of the nineteenth century that people began to recognize the Jewish question and their search for a homeland. It was under the influence of Theodore Herzl, a Jewish Lawyer, journalist based on France, that Zionism attracted the attention of people all over the world and Blyden himself during the 1890's. Herzl (as cited in Joseph, 1989) spoke about atrocities the Jews encountered in Eastern and Western Europe alike and openly stated that the Jews "are a people living perpetually in enemy territory"(p.48). As a response to anti-Semitism and in particular Dreyfus affair in France, Herzl published "Judenstaat" in 1896. The book made a direct appeal to all Jews around the world to rally together and form a Zionist state. Unlike previous attempts by Jews which failed to give concrete expression to their needs, Herzl, however, convened in Basle, Switzerland the Zionist Congress by the close of August of the same year. It was stated that two hundred delegates representing the scattered Jews all around the world and some others who were sympathetic with the Jewish situation attended the meeting. There had been many similar meetings the coming years. These meetings, along with Herzl's propaganda of the Zionist demands as a journalist and diplomat, made strong advancement to the cause of Jews and gave more pressure to people to recognize Zionism as a movement. It was within this atmosphere that Blyden, willingly or unwillingly, responded to the Jewish case. Blyden's response centered on three main tenets. He saw that the Jewish case is similar to the African case as the two suffered the humiliations of slavery, exile and persecution. Second, he hinted to the spiritual side of Jewish case as it resembles that of Africa. Lastly, Blyden, based on a religious point of view, spoke about the right of Jews for a homeland based on Jerusalem.

Partly as the two peoples shared the same hostilities, and less motivated to argue about the right of Jews for a homeland that Blyden decided to write about the Jewish question. For Blyden (1898), "the history

of the African race—their enslavement, persecution, proscription, and sufferings—closely resembles that of the Jews”(p.09). While Africans held the burden of exile and slavery in America and perpetual degradation in Africa their homeland, the Jews are an old suffering people. Throughout history, the Jews were harassed and stigmatized. Stretching from ancient Egyptian kings to the overruling Roman emperors and ending with Spanish and Russian dictatorships, Blyden affirmed, the Jews were ostensibly destructed and led to violent death. The humiliations that Africans encountered as slaves was similar to that of Jews in Egypt. Blyden (1898) narrated that in ancient Egypt the Jews were considered “servants of all” while for the Romans Jews were “born to servitude”.

As African emancipation rested on recognizing the spiritual contribution of Africans to humanity, Blyden believed that the Jews must do the same. Blyden (1898) seemed to not support the view that Jews should find a homeland. Rather, he made the point that the Jews should focus on “a nobler” and “a higher” task which was spiritual better then searching for a “political power in one corner of the world”. For Blyden, as people whose history was of endurance and oppression, there should be a focus on religion rather than politics. He instantly described Jews as “God’s chosen people” who could guide humanity and give “light to the peoples” who were still under the ravages of colonialism and persecution. For Blyden, the Jews could form a “sacred nation”, not a political one, because their religion was the root of both Islam and Christianity. Furthermore, Leadership of Africans alike with Jews in religion was the root of other peoples’s histories. According to Blyden (1898), “the very civilization of which we are so proud was passed on to the west by the Greeks and the Romans who for their part were strongly influenced by the Jews”. This made these peoples “entrusted the spiritual hegemony” of Africans and Jews alike. Their task, thus; was on giving the world their “international religion” as the one which could impart “practical brotherhood of humanity” and establish a firm ground for the propagation of one Lord under One Name. Furthermore, Blyden (1898) advised Jews that “persecution of ages” should be a positive start to overdue their “timidity” and carve new destiny as “the saviors of the world”.

In their pursuit of the lofty spiritual nature of their race, the Jews should look for brethren Africa, as it still needed their help. For Blyden, Africans and Jews should build more strong relations of sympathy and cooperation. The Jews would find in African centuries of oppression and degradation a highly source of religious divinity and spiritual aspirations while Africans would find a good example of people who resisted all types of humiliations and proved their intellectual, political and organizational skills. Blyden (1898) lamented that the Jews did not recognize “the great body of the “Dark Continent” (p, 16). He appealed on them to come to Africa to heal the distorted manhood of Africans and join the many scattered Jewish tribes:

“I would earnestly plead for Africa, especially at this crisis in her history, and entreat Israel to remember that land of their sojourn and early training, to assist Ethiopia to stretch forth her hands unto God, and gather from that country the remnants of the tribes of Israel” (p, 21)

He further alluded to a spiritual and much divine mission of Jews in Africa:

“Now Africa appeals to the Jew – the other son of Abraham, preserved during so many years, and through so many vicissitudes – to come with his scientific and other culture, gathered by his exile in many lands, and with his special spiritual endowments, to the assistance of Ishmael. (p, 23)

As an indispensable element in the progress of not only Africans but also humanity, Blyden affirmed that the Jews would be a source of emancipation for Africans as many of the “broad and pregnant principles” which any suffering race needed was part of their evolution and nature. Blyden (1898) further noted that the Jews would provide a good example for Africans to people who showed “pride in race” and “unquenchable vitality”. This would made their mission in Africa took a different path from the falsifying Christian missions and instead of using the sword the Jew would “bear the stripes and carry the cross”.

As tension intensified about Zionism and its demands for a homeland for Jews, Blyden was very careful in dealing with matter, as he knew very well that supporting Jews would anger Arabs, who also had a

very deep, sacred attachment to Jerusalem, while standing with Arabs would anger Jews especially intimate friends and surroundings. During the 1890's Blyden seemed more interested in giving accurate expression to what Echeruo termed "a spiritual virtual state" for the Jews. He propounded that the idea of return in African and Jewish seemed to be alike. Yet, they had different scopes. For the Jews, Blyden (1898) continued, "[their return] to the land of Israel was in its way an act towards the fulfilment of prophecy", i.e. a call from God, as believed by Jews, to repatriate to their "Promised Land". On the other hand, African return "was an act of utmost piety, independent of divine prescription" and stemming from the high amount of white abuses and discrimination. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, Blyden, partly in a response to the wide spread of Zionism and the increasing support to its demands worldwide especially by the British government, supported Zionism. In one address, he referred, in his words, to "that marvelous movement called Zionism". For Blyden, the Jewish question was similar to the African question as thousands of Africans as well as Jews were still longing for a day of a return to their homeland. For Blyden, the Jews had never talked of the land. Yet, their independence, or as he called it "wonderful prosperity" was linked to a return to Canaan, an old name for Jerusalem. He for the first time used the term "Land of Israel" and saw in Zionism a movement for "a fulfillment of biblical prophecies and promises". He (1898) clearly stated that Jerusalem was the land of Jews:

"there is one subject however upon which there seems to be remarkable unanimity among the principal sects- Jews, Christians and Muslims- with regard to the final destiny of Jerusalem: that it is to be the scene of latter days glories, that the Jews are to be restored to the land of their Fathers and the Messiah to be enthroned"

He continued:

"there is hardly a man in the civilized world – Christian, Mohamadan or Jew- who does not recognize the claim and the right of the Jew to the Holy Land and there are very few who, if the conditions were favorable, would not be glad to

see them return in a body and take their place in the Land of their Fathers as a great, leading secular power”

Though Blyden hinted to an acceptance of a political nation state for Jews, he until he died was occupied by the view that Jews contribution was spiritual and would remain spiritual. The departure in his view was in part a response to uprising pressure surrounding the destiny of Jews that amounted the time when Zionism uprooted its influence worldwide especially in United Kingdom and America.

3. CONCLUSION

The present study tries to expose the nature of the African and Jewish questions from the standpoint of Edward Wilmot Blyden. As a nineteenth century advocate of African racial and physical emancipation, Blyden thoroughly studied the Jewish question from an African standpoint. His response to the Jewish case was generally an attempt to deliver a clear understanding among readers of the atrocities both Jewish and Africans encountered in matters of exile, slavery and persecution. Based on personal narratives and other stories, Blyden raised a necessity to consider the African question, as there was unbearable, very terrifying racism destined blacks in America. This made Blyden aware of the need of return to Africa as to escape persecution and discrimination. Yet, for Blyden, return of Jews to Jerusalem was based on biblical prophecies much more than bad treatment and curtailment of liberties. Though he seemed influenced by Zionism as cultural revival movement and its appeals for the establishment of a political nation state for Jews, Blyden re-affirmed that the creation of a sacred, spiritual nation state for Jews should be the aim of every conscious individual considered to the would be spiritual contribution of Jews to Africans and humanity at large.

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