

## Baptist Work in Jamaica Before the Arrival of the Missionaries.

THE first Baptist missionary was sent from England to Jamaica in 1813, in response to an appeal for help from the leaders of small Baptist communities of slaves and coloured people. For some time men like Dr. Ryland had been concerned that something should be done in the West Indies. "I have waited for several years with great anxiety for someone to send," he wrote, as early as 1807. What manner of men were they who asked for help? How came they to turn towards England? What sort of churches were under their leadership? How had these churches come into existence? The full story of the romantic and unexpected beginnings of Baptist work in Jamaica is now lost, probably beyond recovery, but some information is available, and there has recently come to light in the Library of the Baptist Mission House, London, a copy of "*The Covenant of the Anabaptist Church, begun in America, December 1777, and in Jamaica, December 1783.*" This church had George Liele as its minister, and he and Moses Baker were the best known of the Baptist leaders at the time that the first agent of the Baptist Missionary Society reached Jamaica. What follows has been collected from various sources, chiefly from contemporary magazines and the early records of the B.M.S., and it is intended as an introduction to the study of this interesting and important Church Covenant.

At the time of the American War of Independence there was a considerable emigration from the States to certain of the West Indian islands, and particularly to Jamaica. W. J. Gardner, in his *History of Jamaica* (London, 1873) says: "Early in January 1783, when the struggle for independence in the United States had been decided in favour of the colonists, about four hundred white families, and between four and five thousand of their negro slaves, arrived in Jamaica, preferring a colony still under imperial rule to residing under a new and untried republican government." Among those who journeyed oversea about this time was George Liele. Dr. Rippon was put in touch with him seven years later by a Baptist minister in South Carolina, and elicited from Liele himself certain facts about his strange story, which were published in the first volume of the *Baptist Register*.

Liele was a negro slave, born in Virginia. When young he

worked in several parts of America, settling finally in New Georgia. His father was said to have been a godly man, but it was in Georgia, about 1780, that Liele was converted. He was baptised by a Baptist minister, and at once began Christian work among his fellow-negroes on the plantations. His owner, Henry Sharp, was a deacon of a Baptist Church, and gave him his freedom, encouraging him in the exercise of his preaching gifts. Rippon's correspondent speaks of Liele's planting "the first Baptist Church in Savannah." It appears that he remained there until its evacuation by the British. Sharp was killed in the War of Independence, and Liele, who had remained in the service of his family although free, suffered imprisonment. A certain Colonel Kirkland befriended him, and together they left America for Jamaica. "At the evacuation of the country," wrote Liele to Rippon, in 1791, "I was partly obliged to come to Jamaica as an indented servant for money I owed him, he promising to be my friend in this country."

On his arrival in Kingston in 1783, Liele was employed for a while by the Governor of Jamaica; afterwards he supported himself by cultivating some land, and acting as a carrier. He was at the time in the early thirties. The godlessness of the place filled him with concern, and he began boldly preaching on the Kingston racecourse, forming, with a handful of other American refugees, a little Baptist Church. Almost at once he was imprisoned on a charge of teaching sedition, but when the day of the trial came no accusers appeared, and he was released. There was much opposition to be met. The life of Kingston was in general wild and dissolute. A story has been preserved of three young men riding in upon a little company celebrating the Lord's Supper and giving the bread to their horses; nor was it forgotten that one of them later became insane and another was drowned in the harbour. But so effectively did Liele proclaim his message of faith in Christ that in seven years he had baptised five hundred people, over three hundred of whom had joined his church. "At Kingston I baptise in the sea, at Spanish Town in the river, and at convenient places in the country," he wrote to Rippon. "We have, together with well-wishers and followers, in different parts of the country, about fifteen hundred people." In the same letter he spoke of "the whole island under arms"—"Several of our members and a deacon were obliged to be on duty and I, being trumpeter to the troop of horse in Kingston, am frequently called upon." Already in 1791 the need for a permanent building for the church was acute and an appeal for help was made. A number of white men, including Bryan Edwards, the Jamaica historian, responded generously, and in 1793 the first dissenting chapel in the island was built. There

remained a debt on it, however, and troubles over this led to Liele's second imprisonment. This does not seem to have been for long, and his creditors were ultimately paid in full. Inquiries were made of Rippon as to the cost of a bell which could be heard two miles off.

Of Liele's subsequent history not a great deal is known. For some years he was in correspondence with England, and Rippon sent him some books. It is reported that in 1822, that is, some years after the Baptist missionaries had arrived in Jamaica, he paid a brief visit to this country. It was some time after 1825 that he died, for William Knibb attended his funeral. The impression left by the few records we have is of a powerful and enthusiastic figure. The church covenant is a strange document in many ways, but that also bears the mark of a vigorous and devoted personality. It was Rippon's contact with Liele that drew the attention of the English denominational authorities to what was going on in Jamaica. Before long they came to know of other coloured leaders.

About 1787 Liele had baptised a certain Moses Baker, a mulatto barber, also from the States. At the evacuation of New York in 1783 he had come to Jamaica with his wife and child. Although he had had some contact with Anglicans in America, he was a worldly and intemperate man. For some time he had a small shop in Kingston, and then secured some land to cultivate about fifteen miles from the town. Under the influence of an old black man named Cupid Wilkin, Baker's wife began to read the Bible, and just about the same time her husband became seriously ill, his sight being badly affected. The estate on which Baker worked belonged to a Quaker, Isaac Lascelles Winn. There were thus various influences brought to bear upon him, leading in the end to his change of heart and baptism by George Liele. Winn, almost at once, suggested that Baker be employed to instruct the negroes on the estate "in religious and moral principles." Such an action reflects credit both on the Quaker and the ex-barber. Moses Baker commenced a vigorous attack on superstition and idolatry, and formed a "small society" on the lines laid down by Liele. He met with considerable success, on one occasion baptising in one day more than a hundred persons. When Winn died, Baker passed into the employ of Samuel Vaughan, for whose slaves he did the same kind of service. There was opposition to be met with, not only from some of the slaves, but also from unfriendly planters. Baker was often charged with sedition and was in personal danger on many occasions. His reputation grew, however, and his influence, until in 1806 the Jamaican Assembly passed a law preventing all teaching and preaching on the plantations. It remained in force

for eight years, and was a sad blow to men like Liele and Baker, and the latter seems to have appealed direct to England for help. John Rowe, the first Baptist missionary, went at once to Baker on his arrival in Jamaica in 1814, and though from the first the B.M.S. work was carried on independently, very friendly relations existed between the missionaries and the coloured leader. Rowe was instrumental in influencing Baker's son, and when the missionary died in 1816, it was Baker who sent home an account of his last days. Two descriptions of Baker are worth quoting. The first comes from 1813 from a Mr. Hill, one of a family much respected in Jamaica: "He appeared a plain, home-spun man, rugged as a honeycomb rock; his eyes were then failing; his head was bound with a handkerchief, for he had suffered torture in America, which had injured both his ears and eyes. His appearance was that of no common man. His language was direct, and his demeanour was marked with simplicity." In 1821 the missionary, James Coultart, visited Baker, who was then quite without his sight. He found a crowded chapel, and examined the negro children who were able to repeat a number of Watts's hymns and other verses. "Baker was neither superstitious nor enthusiastic," he wrote. "He possessed good, plain common-sense; he spoke like a spiritual-minded person, and with much feeling. He was decisive and firm in religious discipline; always consistent and influential."

One other of these coloured men deserves mention—Thomas Nicholas Swigle—for a number of his letters to England were printed by Rippon. Swigle was baptised by Liele and wrote in April, 1793: "Our beloved minister by consent of the church, appointed me deacon, schoolmaster, and his principal helper." Soon after he seems to have separated from Liele and to have become the leader of a second church in Kingston, which had its own meeting-house. In 1802 he reported that since becoming pastor he had baptised one hundred and eleven persons, and had about five hundred people in all. "Our church consists of people of colour and black people; some of free condition, but the greater part of them are slaves and natives from the different countries of Africa. . . . We have five trustees to our chapel and burying-ground, eight deacons and six exhorters." Later that same year he wrote to Rippon describing his new chapel and recounting a visit he had had from Moses Baker, who was in search of a helper. "I gave him Brother George Vineyard, one of our Exhorters, an old experienced professor (who has been called by grace upwards of eighteen years) to assist him. . . . Myself and brethren were at Mr. Liele's chapel a few weeks ago, at the funeral of one of his elders; he is well, and we were friendly together."

In Swigle's letters there are references to other coloured leaders—John Gilbert, George Gibbs, and James Pascall. The first was a free black man who worked in the north of Jamaica. The second, who had come from one of the Southern States of America, laboured around Spanish Town and formed a church which practised "triune immersion"; he died in 1826, and our missionary Phillippo visited the places in which he had worked, and linked some of his converts on to the Spanish Town Baptist Church. There were other less known independent evangelists, men of few gifts, but of real consecration, whose work prepared the way for that of the Baptist missionaries. "Some of our best people," so runs an early record, "came from the churches first formed by Liele, Gibbs, and Moses Baker."

All this work owed much to the Church Covenant drawn up by George Liele. We have record that a copy was sent to Rippon in 1792, but that recently found in the Mission House Library is dated 1796. "It is read," wrote Liele, "once a month here on sacrament meetings, that our members may examine if they live according to all those laws which they professed, covenanted and agreed to." In an earlier letter he had stated that all his four children were members of the church, the youngest being but eleven years old. Before the text of the Covenant a list of twenty-four elders is given, twelve men and twelve women, and underneath it is stated: "We bind ourselves, under an affirmation, to do duty to our King, Country, and Laws, and to see that the affixed Rules are duly observed." Each article is followed by a series of Biblical references printed in full, but here only noted. There was evidently no fear of the name "Anabaptist," and in this connection it is worth recalling that the parish register of St. James' describes John Rowe as an "Anabaptist Missionary."

#### THE COVENANT OF THE ANABAPTIST CHURCH.

1. We are of the Anabaptist persuasion because we believe it agreeable to the Scriptures.  
Proof:—(Matt. iii. 1-3; 2 Cor. vi. 14-18.)
2. We hold to keep the Lord's Day throughout the year, in a place appointed for Public Worship, in singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, and preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.  
(Mark xvi. 2, 5, 6; Col. iii. 16.)
3. We hold to be Baptised in a river, or in a place where there is much water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.  
(Matt. iii. 13, 16, 17; Mark xvi. 15, 16; Matt. xxviii. 19.)

4. We hold to receiving the Lord's Supper in obedience according to His commands.  
(Mark xiv. 22-24; John vi. 53-57.)
5. We hold to the ordinance of washing one another's feet.  
(John xiii. 2-17.)
6. We hold to receive and admit young children into the Church according to the Word of God.  
(Luke ii. 27-28; Mark x. 13-16.)
7. We hold to pray over the sick, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.  
(James v. 14, 15.)
8. We hold to labouring one with another according to the Word of God.  
(Matt. xviii. 15-18.)
9. We hold to appoint Judges and such other Officers among us, to settle any matter according to the Word of God.  
(Acts vi. 1-3.)
10. We hold not to the shedding of blood.  
(Genesis ix. 6; Matt. xxvi. 51-52.)
11. We are forbidden to go to law one with another before the unjust, but to settle any matter we have before the Saints.  
(1 Cor. vi. 1-3.)
12. We are forbidden to swear not at all (*sic*).  
(Matt. v. 33-37; Jas. v. 12.)
13. We are forbidden to eat blood, for it is the life of a creature, and from things strangled, and from meat offered to idols.  
(Acts xv. 29.)
14. We are forbidden to wear any costly raiment, such as superfluity.  
(1 Peter iii. 3, 4; 1 Timothy ii. 9-10.)
15. We permit no slaves to join the Church without first having a few lines from their owners of their good behaviour.  
(1 Peter ii. 13-16; 1 Thess. iii. 13.)
16. To avoid Fornication, we permit none to keep each other, except they be married according to the Word of God.  
(1 Cor. vii. 2; Heb. xiii. 4.)
17. If a slave or servant misbehave to their owners they are to be dealt with according to the Word of God.  
(1 Tim. i. 6; Eph. vi. 5; 1 Peter ii. 18-22; Titus ii. 9-11.)

18. If any one of this Religion should transgress and walk disorderly, and not according to the Commands which we have received in this Covenant, he will be censured according to the Word of God.  
(Luke xii. 47-48.)
19. We hold, if a brother or sister should transgress any of these articles written in this Covenant so as to become a swearer, a fornicator, or adulterer; a covetous person, an idolater, a railer, a drunkard, an extortioner or whoremonger; or should commit any abominable sin, and do not give satisfaction to the Church, according to the Word of God, he or she, shall be put away from among us, not to keep company, nor to eat with him.  
(1 Cor. v. 11-13.)
20. We hold if a Brother or Sister should transgress, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, and he, or she, after being justly dealt with agreeable to the 8th article, and be put out of the Church, that they shall have no right or claim whatsoever to be interred into the Burying-ground during the time they are put out, should they depart life; but should they return in peace, and make a concession so as to give satisfaction, according to the word of God, they shall be received into the Church again and have all privileges as before granted.  
(2 John i. 9-10; Gal. vi. 1, 2; Luke xvii. 3, 4.)
21. We hold to all the other Commandments, Articles, Covenants, and Ordinances, recorded in the Holy Scriptures as are set forth by our Lord and Master Jesus Christ and His Apostles, which are not written in this Covenant, and to live to them as nigh as we possibly can, agreeable to the Word of God.  
(John xv. 7-14.)

## FINIS.

In view of the sincerity and simplicity here revealed, the danger of fanaticism and heresy, the difficulties and the opportunities of work among people who had covenanted in this fashion, and the special responsibility of Englishmen for the West Indies, it is not surprising that Dr. Ryland and his friends did not rest till they were able to send missionaries to Jamaica.

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