

BRITISH BAPTIST MISSIONARIES AND BAPTIST WORK IN THE BAHAMAS

The revival movements in the southern United States in the late eighteenth century swept many negroes into the various churches, not least the Baptist churches. Negro preachers, or migrants, from these churches in America were behind the foundation of Baptist communities in Jamaica, in Trinidad, in Haiti and in the Bahamas.(1) The revivalist style of religion was naturally introduced into these territories by the incomers, who may also have retained a residual African outlook, especially in respect of worship.(2) When the Baptist Missionary Society eventually began work in these islands, the missionaries met existing churches having a revivalist tradition superimposed on African background. This caused them problems in varying degrees, most acutely in Trinidad but to some extent everywhere in the Caribbean, including the Bahamas, the subject of this paper which briefly explores the partnership between the black churches and the British missionaries there in the nineteenth century.

Baptist work seems to have been first established in New Providence, Bahamas, by a leader known to posterity only as 'Amos', an 'outstanding leader and organizer' from the church at Silver Bluff, South Carolina. This church was the first separate negro Baptist church in the United States, founded between 1773 and 1775, but its importance lies not so much in its priority of foundation but in 'its role as the mother-church of several far-flung Baptist missions'.(3) 'Amos' left America at much the same time as the better-known George Leile, founder of the Baptist churches in Jamaica. He may even have contributed to the work in Jamaica, for Leile's associate, Moses Baker, gathered a group of slaves together into a church, collectively known as the 'New Providence people',(4) doubtless because they had come from there.

But 'Amos' was not mentioned by either of the British Baptist Missionary Society missionaries who wrote on the origins of the Bahamas Baptists. Daniel Wilshere, preparing a Report in 1879 on the northern part of the Bahamas, merely said that the first Baptists on the islands had come from the United States as slaves of Loyalist refugees in 1783.(5) While the Loyalists were building their first (Episcopal) church, 'the coloured freemen and their slave associates had raised the sum of £78, and purchased two lots of land on which to erect a chapel. In the deed they appear 'as the people called "Anabaptists"'.(6) An earlier missionary, Rycroft, who in 1849 offered 'important information' on the origin of the Bahamas Baptists, likewise has nothing to say about 'Amos'. Rycroft reported that before the coming of the BMS, Baptists had come from America as slaves, or had acquired the faith from persons coming from the United States. They had held on with much difficulty. Being accustomed to meet together for divine worship, the slaves continued to do so in the Bahamas, and sought to convert their fellows. At that time, around 1820, 'the only evidence of the existence of a Christian sabbath consisted in the meetings for religious fellowship of these poor afflicted bondsmen', and such meetings brought upon them the ridicule and displeasure of their

employers and neighbours. They were often obliged to meet at night for fear of interference. Stones were often thrown at them, and even those whose duty it was to preserve the peace sought opportunities to break up their meetings.(7)

Conditions were not always as bad as this. The work was clearly established and even favoured by authority in 1815, in which year there is evidence of genuine revival among the Baptists of New Providence. A letter and a messenger were sent in that year to Dr Rippon to inform British Baptists of 'an eminently gracious revival of religion' among the coloured people of New Providence. On 25th December 1814 some 280 persons, who had satisfactorily related their experiences to the church, were baptized, following some nine or ten weeks of examination. Those who were slaves had both to secure testimonials as to their character, and have the permission of their masters. The ordinance was administered by their aged pastor, who remained in the water to do so from eight in the morning until two in the afternoon. The governor provided a guard of soldiers to see that the service was not interrupted. Another fifty were baptized on New Year's Day, following yet more time spent in examining them. It was a 'high day', and 'ever to be remembered'. The close of 1814 and the beginning of 1815 were considered by the people as forming 'a remarkable period in their history', and the messenger was despatched to England to share their joy and to ask for help in the provision of Bibles, Testaments and Religious Tracts, and in furthering the objects of the Bahamian Baptists.(8)

The 'aged pastor' may well have been 'Amos', but, rather oddly, he is not named. What is noteworthy in the account is the sober and evangelical tone of this 'high day'. The candidates were all carefully examined for their fitness; there is no hint of exaggerated excitement or hysteria; and the letter indicates a concern for further teaching of the church and a desire for help from outside. There is no evidence that this was anything less than a real and genuine revival of religion.

If 'Amos' is a rather mysterious figure, there is another black ex-slave from America who played a key role in the establishment of the churches. The negro minister, Sharper Morris, having lived for some time in Nassau, was invited to visit Turk's Island by the church there. Soon after his arrival the church was given a house by some 'aged females'. This house was re-erected on a plot of land bought by the church, the work being done at midnight. Morris baptized some fifty persons, and 'after his departure the church had rest from its persecutions'.(9) Sharper Morris was among those Native Baptists who looked upon the arrival of the first BMS missionary 'as the answer to fervent prayers'.(10)

That first missionary was Joseph Burton. He had been commissioned at St George's Place Baptist Church, Canterbury, in June 1826,(11) for service in Jamaica, and served there, under conditions of great difficulty, until obliged to leave in 1833. He was due to be tried at the Kingston assizes for preaching, although he had the proper licence, but escaped that dilemma, and at the same time 'recruited the shattered health of his wife', by being sent on a visit of inspection to the Bahamas, where he landed in January 1833. In

Nassau, New Providence, Burton found a substantial Baptist community, and was welcomed by Sharper Morris, by the clergyman, by Wesleyan missionaries, and by the Governor, Sir J. C. Smith.(12) He discovered that the churches had fallen upon bad times between 1815 and 1833:

Among the population of between nine and ten thousand there was a considerable number of persons calling themselves Baptists, who traced their religious belief to the exertions of black men brought from the United States at the close of the war of 1813[sic]... The people were in bondage, and addicted to all the vices of slavery, while little had been done for their religious benefit, and the leaders of the so-called Baptist churches were illiterate - only one could read. The people who followed them indulged in many superstitious practices, and paid scant regard to the moral precepts of the Gospel.(13)

Burton himself reported that he had never met any of the Baptists of the Bahamas able to read a chapter correctly, and 'the first prayer which I heard offered by one of the members was partly offered to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob'.(14) The missionary seems to have begun with an uprooting of prevailing superstition and with teaching sober living.(15) He examined the church membership and his opinion of suitability was acted upon all through the island. He built Zion Mission Church, and established preaching stations at other places in New Providence; and 'his labours were truly apostolic during his stay, and the name of Joseph Burton is written in many hearts even now', so Wilshe recorded.(16) Burton and his associates appear to have been accepted, despite their re-organization of church life; the twenty Baptist churches he found had 'a fervent desire to receive religious instruction'.(17) The basic trouble was lack of Christian teaching. 'Amos' and his successors, like Sharper Morris, had done a very creditable job in establishing the churches, but the limitations imposed by slavery and illiteracy made their task very difficult.

Though Burton and his successors throughout the century did much good in building up the church,(18) not all the 'old Baptists' joined the mission. The missionary Capern, visiting Long Island in 1843, met 'a worthy man who was laying himself out for usefulness', whose eyes had 'lately been opened to the truth as it is in Jesus'. This man had belonged to a small congregation calling themselves Baptists, but led by one who a few years previously had (so he said) a 'vision from heaven ... in which he was shown that he might pour and not plunge'. Capern's acquaintance had accordingly only been 'poured upon'. He was now, along with nine others, baptized in the sea, and Capern proceeded to Great Harbour, there to form a church from these ten plus others from a mixed congregation already there, who were willing to accept the missionary as teacher, leaving others, who 'refused to submit to discipline' behind.(19)

This small incident gives a glimpse of the 'old Baptist' churches of the Bahamas. Such congregations were likely to be ill-taught and affected by African concepts of religion. The Afro-Caribbean emphasis on visions appears here, and also the unwillingness of some to depart from that viewpoint to join the missionary. Equally, however, it is

interesting that until the visit of Capern the differences between evangelical and revivalist Christianity and Afro-Caribbean religion do not seem to have been very clear to the people themselves. The line between them must have been rather hazy. But Capern was hardly breaking up an existing congregation at Great Harbour merely for the sake of asserting his own authority; there must have been some more significant reason. Presumably Capern judged that sub-Christian elements had entered some of these 'old Baptist' communities. If we could probe his motives for disturbing such congregations, he would very likely have replied that he wanted to establish churches which were evangelically Bible-based in place of those which gave authority to leaders who had visions.

Some tension between the mission churches and the 'old Baptists' continued throughout the century, though the differences were not sharp, or not well understood by the BMS committee at home. When plans were being made for the West Indies deputation of 1892, the move which preceded the BMS withdrawal from the area, the Western Committee urged that, wherever a mission church and a native Baptist church existed in places too small to support both, the churches should unite.(20) Had there been fundamental differences, understood by London, this could scarcely have been suggested. But, on the other hand, it must be admitted that in 1904 the Bahamas Baptists were found to be divided into four sections, two of which were designated 'African', thus:(21)

<u>Date</u>	<u>Section</u>	<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Remark</u>
1801	Bethel	Rev. C. A. Portier	African
1812	St John's	Rev. J. W. Roberts	African
1833	Baptist Mission	Rev. C. A. Dann	
1892	Baptist Union	Rev. D. Wilshere	

The 'sections' here indicate the 'mother-church' of each group. The significance of the description 'African' is not spelled out. The differences between the 'Mission' (i.e. BMS) and the Union were due to the action of Wilshere, once the BMS missionary, who apparently became rather eccentric in his later years; almost certainly the differences were purely personal. But even here, though the 'African' churches had remained, or become, separate from the Mission and Union churches, the Rev. Charles Williams, author of this Report, had felt free to preach not only in the BMS church for Dann, but for Wilshere and the 'African' Baptists. We may, therefore, be fairly sure that the latter were not, at least by the end of the century, too far from orthodox evangelicalism. The problems which the same Report identified in Trinidad(22) were not known in the Bahamas, or at least not to the same degree. These various branches of the Baptist denomination in the Bahamas amounted, according to Williams, to one in five of the population:(23) Thus the denomination had become proportionately stronger in the Bahamas than in Britain; a corresponding British Baptist body would, said Williams, amount to 8,000,000 members.(24)

<u>Section</u>	<u>Places of Worship</u>	<u>Accommodation</u>	<u>Members</u>
Bethel	2	702	360
St John's	58	4,130	4,022
Baptist Mission	73	8,835	3,842
Baptist Union	<u>28</u>	<u>4,670</u>	<u>2,402</u>
Total	161	18,337	10,626

The growth of the Bahamas churches was, however, very hard won. The full story cannot be told here; but perhaps the secret of success can be hinted at. In September 1842 Mrs Kilner Pearson, widow of one of the early missionaries, who had returned to assist the mission, wrote to her pastor, Dr Steane, appealing for his help in recruiting a missionary for the 'out-islands'. Such a missionary must be motivated only by the constraining love of Christ, and must 'work for souls irrespective of respectable associations etc. The Baptists, by identifying the interests of the black people with their own, are low enough in the world's esteem...'.(25) White colonial society despised the black population; but the missionaries identified with them and reaped the harvest. This is precisely the same point as was made by D. J. East of Jamaica in 1872: 'Very simple are the methods by which the results have been attained [sc. in the West Indies]: Faith in the manhood, the mental capacities, and the religious aptitudes of the African race...'.(26) John Bailey, who had been to the West Indies in 1892 with J. G. Greenhough as a BMS 'deputation', also emphasised that 'our mission in the West Indies has always been ... a mission to the blacks, and it has been carried on very largely by native agency'. It was indeed the glory of the mission that it had been directed to those in the sorest need, absolutely neglected and downtrodden; 'there was nothing for us to gain but the heavenly reward of doing Christ's work in Christ's own way...'.(27)

But Bailey had once thought the Bahamas Mission a failure. In a letter to the Western Committee of the BMS he had expressed the view that after fifty or sixty years work the condition of things there was lamentably disappointing, and went on:

... with such appeals as that from China presented by Dr Glover yesterday... is it not our duty to relinquish as soon as we can such responsibilities as that in the Bahamas and through [sic] all our strength into other and richer fields?(28)

His visit the following year made him more sympathetic. In the remote little islands he found the effect of the mission deeply felt; the chapel was the local centre of interest; indeed, 'our work among these natives has been marvellously successful'.(29) His colleague on the deputation, Greenhough, substantially agreed.(30)

Nevertheless, in its centenary year the BMS withdrew from the whole West Indies (except for support of Calabar College). The object was to transfer the entire West Indian Mission to the care and support of the Jamaican BMS, thus 'forming something like a West Indian Baptist Missionary Confederation' and allowing the BMS in Britain to devote efforts 'to other fields as yet unvisited by the Christian

Missionary'.(31) This decision was made even before Bailey and Greenhough had visited the islands on behalf of the Society. The final decision as it affected the Bahamas was made in October 1892. The Western Committee thought it 'high time', after sixty years, for the churches to become independent, to release missionaries 'for the millions of heathen who had not heard'; otherwise they would continue to be dependent indefinitely. The Bahamas Baptists, having about eighty-six churches on the twenty large islands of the group, ought to be self-supporting. If the Native Baptist churches could manage, so could the Mission churches. It was in the churches' own interests to be 'more vigorous and self-reliant', and the missionary, Dann, was to convince them of this. Worthy natives would be trained for the ministry at Calabar, with BMS support, up to four students being supported at any one time.(32)

So ended the era of BMS work in the Bahamas. It had never been an easy field. Division between Baptist groups, many scattered islands sundered by stormy seas, dire economic stress, and educational disadvantage, were just some of the difficulties. The wisdom of withdrawing support in 1892 is at least open to question, and certainly the plan to shift all financial responsibility for the West Indies to the Jamaicans was hopelessly unrealistic. These policy issues cannot be argued here. What can be said, however, is that it is remarkable that the churches flourished as much as they did. It is a tribute to the commitment of their members and the devotion of a succession of missionaries, and (we may well believe) to the grace of God, that so much was achieved by so few.

NOTES

- 1 For Jamaica, see E. A. Payne, *Freedom in Jamaica: Some Chapters in the Story of the Baptist Foreign Mission Society*, Carey Press, 1933; G. A. Catherall, *British Baptist Involvement in Jamaica, 1783-1865*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Keele, 1971; *ibid.*, 'The Native Baptist Church', BQ 24, No.2, April 1971, pp.65-73. For Trinidad, see the writer's pending M.Th. thesis. For Haiti, see *Missionary Herald*, April 1843, pp.224-5, letter from Littlewood, BMS missionary in the Bahamas, who had visited Haiti.
- 2 For the problems connected with the revival and possible residual Africanism among the converts, see A. J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Ante-Bellum South*, 1978; for Afro-Caribbean cults in the Caribbean, A. R. Salthouse, *Indigenous Worship: A Cultural Approach to Liturgy, Applied to the Commonwealth Caribbean*, Ph.D. thesis, Birmingham, 1972-3.
- 3 John Stewart, *Mission and Leadership Among the 'Merikin' Baptists of Trinidad*, paper to American Anthropological Association, Dec.1975, p.2; Raboteau, *op.cit.*, p.139.
- 4 Catherall, *British Baptist Involvement*, p.65.
- 5 Daniel Wilshere, *The Northern District of the Bahama Islands. A Review of the Work of the Baptist Missionary Society, 1833-1879*, report for BMS Western Sub-Committee, BMS Archives, 1879, p.2 (hereafter Wilshere).
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Baptist Magazine and Missionary Herald* (hereafter BM/MH) September

- 1849, p.588, letter from Rycroft.
- 8 *Baptist Magazine*, VII, May 1815, pp.212-3.
- 9 BM/MH, September 1849, p.588, letter from Rycroft.
- 10 Wilshere, p.3.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.2. 12 *Ibid.*, p.3.
- 13 D. J. East, 'The West Indies', in J. B. Myers (ed.) *The Centenary Volume of the Baptist Missionary Society*, 1892, pp.208-9 (hereafter *Cent.Vol.*).
- 14 W. Henderson, 'Holding the Ropes', *Cent.Vol.*, p.10.
- 15 East, *op.cit.*, pp.208-9.
- 16 Wilshere, p.3.
- 17 BM/MH, XL, September 1849, p.589, letter of Rycroft.
- 18 East, *op.cit.*, pp.208-9.
- 19 BM/MH, XXXV, September 1843, p.497, letter from Capern, 22 June 1843.
- 20 Minute Book (9) Western Committee, pp.62-7; Minutes of 7 October 1892.
- 21 Report by the Rev. Charles Williams on a Visit to Jamaica, Trinidad and the Bahamas (BMS Archives, 1904), p.6 (hereafter Williams).
- 22 Williams, p.5. 23 *Ibid.*, p.6.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p.6; see also J. H. Poole, *The Baptist Church in Trinidad: A Historical Sketch*, p.9 (typescript, c.1944, BMS Archives).
- 25 BM/MH, XXXV, February 1843, pp.116-7, letter of Mrs Kilner Pearson to Dr Steane, 30 September 1842.
- 26 East, *op.cit.*, p.216.
- 27 John Bailey, 'Address at Northampton', 21 March 1893, in *Cent. Vol.*, p.473.
- 28 Minute Book (8) Western Committee, pp.162-4, Minutes of 20 July 1891, recording Bailey's letter to Committee, 16 July 1891.
- 29 Bailey, *op.cit.*, pp.475-6; see also J. G. Greenhough and J. Bailey, *Report on the West Indian Missions 1892* (BMS Archives), the official report of the deputation.
- 30 J. G. Greenhough, Address at Leicester, 1 June 1893, in *Cent.Cel.*, pp.125-6.
- 31 Minute Book (7) Western Committee, p.95, Minutes of 19 June 1888.
- 32 Minute Book (9) Western Committee, pp.62-7, Minutes of 7 October 1892.

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ANNUAL MEETING 1988

The Annual General Meeting of the Baptist Historical Society will take place on Monday, 25th April at 4.30 p.m. in the Lloyd Jones Hall at Westminster Chapel. The Lecturer will be the Revd Roger Hayden, M.A., B.D.