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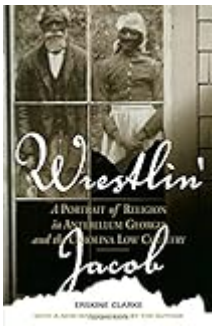

Erskine Clarke. *Wresalin' Jacob: A Portrait of Religion in Antebellum Georgia and the Carolina Low Country.* Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2000. xxvii + 207 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-1040-0.

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Wresalin' Jacob

The republication of Erskine Clarke's 1979 book seeks to generate reflection on the state of scholarly discussions surrounding the relationship between slavery and religion in the South, and to introduce readers to the larger issues in this field. Focusing on the efforts of whites to evangelize slaves in the rural plantations of Liberty County, Georgia and the urban center of Charleston, South Carolina and on the slaves' responses, Clarke concludes that slaves maintained links with their African heritage as they were exposed to Christianity. Furthermore, slaves and white preachers engaged in a complex and ambiguous relationship. White preachers believed they could maintain paternalistic and humane practices within the oppressive environment of slavery. Slaves, however, often used the message and structure of a paternalistic Christianity to resist, rather than submit, to slaveowners.

Clarke traces the early struggles of Charles Colcock Jones as he wrestled with the inhumanity of slavery, but ultimately decided to accept paternalism and work within the boundariess of a slave system. Henceforth, Jones did not question the morality of slavery itself, but instead worked as a missionary to the slaves of Liberty County beginning in 1830. Paternalism influenced Jones' presentation of the gospel by emphasizing the obligation of slaves to obey their masters and of masters to treat their slaves in a just manner. Ironically, while paternalistic Christianity strengthened the control of whites, it also allowed slaves to resist by instilling faith and courage and providing a structure within the church system that gave opportunities for some autonomy. For example, the leadership roles of blacks within the church, while limited, still allowed slaves to exert and develop authority.

Similarly, the church system established in Charleston allowed slaves some of the same experiences as those in Liberty County. White preachers in the city who sought to provide religious instruction to slaves also succumbed to the pressures of southern religious and social influences. Accepting a societal structure that espoused the divinely ordained places of masters and slaves, these ministers emphasized the respective duties inherent in such a system. Rather than challenging slavery itself, they sought to enhance the stability and order of this society through religious instruction. Just

treatment by owners and obedient responses by slaves resulted, at least in theory, in a more productive system. The possibility of gaining more production, therefore, made the slaveowners of Charleston more amenable to religious instruction of slaves. On the other hand, while whites exercised a large degree of control over the religious life of slaves, slaves also used the paternalistic church to enhance their humanity. Weddings, funerals, and sabbath activities allowed slaves to express hope and affirm their humanity.

The strength of Clarke's book lies in its explication of the relationship between slaves and their owners within the context of religion. In detailing this relationship, he highlights the ambiguities created by the contact between slavery and Christianity. White ministers, for example, advocated more humane treatment of slaves, yet did not advocate the abolishment of an inhumane system. Clarke explains this inconsistency in light of the white ministers' emphasis on the eternal state of the slave over the temporal. He also notes that their efforts to reform the system blinded them to its inhumanity. Believing themselves to be moderates between abolitionists and slaveowners who considered slaves only as property, ministers like Jones accomodated themselves to the demands of southern paternalism.

At this point, Clarke could have explored in more detail the theological ramifications. The ministers' actions seem to have been more complex than simple accommodation. Clarke underestimates the strength of theological influences on these ministers. Believing that a sovereign and provident God controlled all that happened, these ministers understood slavery more in light of its existence, than in terms of its inhumanity. Challenging the status quo, therefore, was tantamount to challenging God's rule in the world since slavery's existence suggested its divine approval. The strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God essentially caused the white ministers to interpret scripture in light of the current social order. Clarke also notes that marriage was fundamental to Jones' understanding of the divine order of society (p. 75), but he does not detail how the biblical connection between slavery and the family influenced Jones' understanding of the social order.

Jones and his colleagues did not have to stretch far to find biblical precedent for paternalism. Some of the main passages underlying paternalistic Christianity, such as Colossians 3:18-4:1 and Ephesians 5:21-6:9, actually advocate paternalism when interpreted literally. Due to the biblical linking of slavery with the family as a part of the divine social order, these ministers thought the southern social order did indeed reflect God's order. While unconscionable in modern times, these theological ideas within a slaveowning society proved formidable. Explicating these issues would further enhance Clarke's assertion regarding the reciprocal influence of society and religion.

Overall, *Wresalin' Jacob* introduces the reader to some of the issues arising from the contact between southern religion and societal structures and beliefs. While Clarke asserts in his introduction to the reprint edition that, "Larger issues of slavery and religion in the South can thus be addressed by close attention to these particular communities" (p. xvii), a more detailed analysis and connection with these issues since 1979 would make the book even more helpful. He does overview the main works produced since that time, but only shows briefly how the book touches on the issues raised in these studies. Clarke notes that since the 1980s historians have focused on the negotiated relationships between slaves and masters. He indicates that his study deals with negotiated relationships, but does not explicitly show how it contributes something new to the current discussion. Perhaps the complexity of southern religion unearthed in the last two decades is reflected in the change of the subtitle from its original and broader, *A Portrait of Religion in the Old South* to the more specific, *A Portrait of Religion in Antebellum Georgia and the Carolina Low Country.* Overall, the book serves as a good starting point for studying antebellum southern religion and stimulates thinking regarding the many issues covered in it.

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