JETS 65.1 (2022): 11–36

SOCIALLY DERIVED OR STUDIOUSLY PROSECUTED? GOD, REVELATION, EDUCATION, AND DANIEL A. PAYNE

CHRISTOPHER SARVER*

Abstract: *In the nineteenth century, Daniel A. Payne devoted himself to black clergy and laity education as head of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, then as president of Wilberforce University, the first institution of higher learning in the country to be owned and governed by African Americans. Born in the year following Payne's death, Benjamin E. Mays served as president of Morehouse College and significantly influenced the modern civil rights movement. Mays, in his analysis of Payne's life and writings in his seminal work,* The Negro's God: As Reflected in His Literature*, contends that a socially derived concept of God explained the nineteenth-century church leader's deep, enduring commitment to education and social activism on behalf of those of African descent. By analyzing Mays's argument, reflecting upon Payne's writings (i.e., autobiography, sermons, books, essays, articles), and interacting with Payne biographers, I argue that it is better to understand his views of God, education, and social activism as the result of a lifelong, diligent study of all facets of divine revelation in general and the Protestant Scriptures in particular.*

Key words: *Daniel Alexander Payne, Benjamin Elijah Mays, concept of God, God-concept, theology proper, socially derived, studiously prosecuted, divine revelation, Scripture, black, African American, education, social activism*

Recently, the topic of social engagement on behalf of the economically disadvantaged or to address societal injustices has provoked substantial discussion among evangelicals within the United States.[1] Considering the works and examples of historical figures—particularly those from traditionally marginalized communities who sought to address societal problems during their own time periods utilizing broadly Christian frameworks—can serve to enrich the current conversation. In fact, reflection upon the ideas and actions of earlier thinkers and activists provides

* Christopher Sarver (Ed.D., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) ministers to emerging adults in Indianapolis. He resides with his wife, Jodi, and their four children in Fishers, Indiana, and may be contacted at chris.sarver2000@gmail.com.

[1] See, e.g., Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor: Social Involvement and the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013); Steven Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor … and Yourself*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2012); Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011); Jason S. Sexton, ed., *Four Views on the Church's Mission*, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017); Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009); Thaddeus J. Williams, *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth: 12 Questions Christians Should Ask about Social Justice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020); Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

opportunities for contemporary scholars to recognize comparable themes or avoid potential pitfalls in the current situation. Two such figures, Daniel Payne and Elijah Mays, as well as the latter's assessment of the former, provide grist for the mill with respect to today's discussions around Christian social involvement.

Daniel Alexander Payne and Benjamin Elijah Mays earned acclaim as influential black ministers, educators, and social activists in their respective generations.[2] During the ante- and post-bellum periods, Payne strove to educate clergy and laity of African descent, initially as presiding bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church and later as president of the first black-owned-and-governed college in the United States, Wilberforce University. Mays, as president of Morehouse College, played a leading role in shaping the civil rights movement of the twentieth century.[3] Both men's educational and social activism sprang from their deeply held theological beliefs, especially their views of the divine. In his treatment of Payne in *The Negro's God: As Reflected in His Literature*, Mays understood the bishop's devotion to black education as emerging from a socially derived concept of God.[4] Through an examination of Payne's life and writings, I will argue that it is far better to appreciate his view of God, education, and social activism as the result of a lifelong,

---

[2] Many over the decades have ascribed to Daniel A. Payne the title "Apostle of Education." See, e.g., George A. Singleton, *The Romance of African Methodism: A Study of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Exposition Press, 1952), 88. For a recent biographical treatment of Payne, see Nelson T. Strobert, *Daniel Alexander Payne: The Venerable Preceptor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: University Press of America, 2012).

Throughout this essay, I use the terms "black," "African American," and "those of African descent" interchangeably. Writing in the nineteenth century, Daniel Payne used terms such as "black," "colored," "African descent," and "Negro," and Benjamin Mays, in *The Negro's God*, utilized both "black" and "Negro," with "Negro" appearing much more frequently.

[3] Prior to serving as head of Morehouse College, Mays held the position of dean of the School of Religion at Howard University and substantially expanded and strengthened that institution. John Herbert Roper Sr., *The Magnificent Mays: A Biography of Benjamin Elijah Mays* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 182–89. Furthermore, Mays became associated with Martin Luther King Jr. when the latter was an undergraduate student at Morehouse. Mays profoundly impacted King's thinking, life, and social activism. The depth of their relationship was most vividly demonstrated by the fact that Mays delivered the eulogy at King's funeral service and said the following at the outset of that address: "To be honored by being requested to give the eulogy at the funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is like asking one to eulogize his deceased son—so close and so precious was he to me." Benjamin Elijah Mays, *Disturbed about Man* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1969), 9 (the full text of the eulogy can be found on pp. 9–15). For recent biographical treatments of Mays, see Randal Maurice Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays, Schoolmaster of the Movement: A Biography* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Roper, *The Magnificent Mays*.

[4] Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God: As Reflected in His Literature* (Boston: Chapman and Grimes, 1938; repr., New York: Russell and Russell, 1968).

By a socially derived God-concept, I mean a view of the divine that, as Mays contends, is largely determined by social, historical, political, and economic factors converging with personal and psychological needs. In the case of those of African descent within colonial America and the United States, the context of slavery and other forms of white oppression created a unique set of factors resulting in particular God-concepts that Mays sought to demonstrate in *The Negro's God*.

studiously prosecuted examination of divine revelation, particularly the Protestant Scriptures.[5]

In this essay, I will overview Mays's argument in *The Negro's God* and then summarize his analysis of Payne, providing pertinent biographical information of each man along the way. Following that, I will demonstrate from the formative moments in his life, his sermons, and his various writings that Payne's God-concept was firmly rooted in and developed from his continuous and rigorous study of the Bible. I will conclude by considering the manner in which divine revelation informed Daniel Payne's educational philosophy and social activism.

I. MAYS, PERSONAL EXPERIENCES, AND GOD CONCEPTS

1. *Mays's background.* Born in 1894, Benjamin Elijah Mays grew up as a congregant in a traditionally orthodox all-black church in the rural South. However, he trod the path of critical biblical scholarship throughout his undergraduate and graduate work.[6] Having studied under Shirley Jackson Case and Henry Wieman at the University of Chicago, he imbibed their critical perspectives on the New Testament and understanding of the socio-historical development of religious thought.[7] Walter Rauschenbusch's writings on the social gospel further solidified

---

[5] I am indebted to Thabiti Anyabwile's work *The Decline of African American Theology: From Biblical Faith to Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007) for catalyzing my interest in exploring the lives, works, and significant contributions of Payne and Mays as well as for comparing and contrasting their theological and resultant educational outlooks and social activism.

[6] Mays studied at Bates College in Maine from 1917 to 1920 and was instructed by Herbert R. Purinton, who introduced his students to the writings of critical scholar Shirley Jackson Case. Roper, *The Magnificent Mays*, 81. According to Randal Jelks, the courses Mays took through Bates's Department of Biblical Literature and Religion reflected the "mainstream of academic Protestant Liberalism" of the day. Randal M. Jelks, "Mays's Academic Formation, 1917–1936," in *Walking Integrity: Benjamin Elijah Mays, Mentor to Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. Lawrence Edward Carter Sr. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 116. Mays attended the University of Chicago at different points from 1921 to 1935.

[7] Of Case's influence on Mays, Roper writes, "So inspired by Case's socio-historical lectures, Mays determined to write a master's thesis discussing the pagan folklore that made its way into Christianity, especially those parts that had shown up in the New Testament." Roper, *The Magnificent Mays*, 83. Concerning Wieman's impact on Mays, Jelks notes that the professor kindled Mays's interest in philosophical theology and the need for a scientific study of how human beings conceived of God. Jelks summarizes the essence of Wieman's approach that was to inform much of Mays's methodology in his PhD dissertation and, later, *The Negro's God*: "Science, Wieman contended, lifted the veil of sentimentality from Christianity and removed the temptation to anthropomorphize or project superstitions onto God. Wieman believed that science not only enabled human beings to gain knowledge about God but also transformed the relationship between God and the human being." Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays*, 93. See Jelks's excellent treatment of the ways in which particular scholars and ideas at the University of Chicago influenced Mays and shaped his own outlook and writings (86–107).

The socio-historical methodology distinctive of the University of Chicago Divinity School in the early twentieth century shifted the traditional focus of theological studies from special revelation, God, and doctrine to religion as a dynamic human phenomenon shaped by social, historical, economic, and cultural forces as well as the ways in which religion met social and psychological needs. S. R. Pointer, "Chicago School of Theology," in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, ed. Martin Davie et al, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 163; William J. Hynes, *Shirley Jackson Case and the Chicago School: The Socio-Historical Method*, BSNA 5 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 79; Larry E. Axel, "Process and Religion: The History of a Tradition at Chicago," *Process Studies* 8.4 (1978): 234–35. For an

his move into Protestant Liberalism.[8] Mays gave expression to his own socio-historical outlook through his PhD dissertation "The Development of the Idea of God in Contemporary Negro Literature" and its subsequent publication under the title *The Negro's God*. Within its pages, Mays considered, among many others, Daniel A. Payne, a prominent black educator and activist of the preceding generation.[9]

2. *Compensatory and constructive views of God.* Published in 1938, *The Negro's God* explores the evolution of black conceptions of God as shaped by their experiences within the U.S. context and expressed in their writings. Mays separated the corpus of black literature from 1760 to 1936 that reflected ideas about God into two categories: "classical" (i.e., "slave narratives, biography, autobiography, addresses, novels, poetry, and the writings of social scientists") and "mass" (i.e., "Sunday School productions, prayers, sermons, and Negro Spirituals").[10] For the purposes of his study, he further grouped the literature into three time periods: slavery through the Civil War (1760–1865); the post-Civil War era, including Reconstruction and ending at the opening of World War I (1865–1914); and recent (1914–1936).

In his sweeping diachronic analysis of an extensive array of material, Mays observed two long-term trends in the way writers of African descent conceptualized God. One category of works expressed "compensatory" thinking, while others demonstrated "constructive" understandings of the divine.[11] By compensatory, Mays meant that the literature presented a "traditional" outlook (i.e., "those of orthodox Christianity as set forth in the Bible") and tended to stress "the magical, spectacular, partial, revengeful, and anthropomorphic nature of God as revealed in the Old Testament."[12] Furthermore, to be considered compensatory, traditional conceptualizations of God were then "used or developed to support a shallow pragmatism" in order to "satiate particular longings" as well as to provide a degree of spiritual and psychological encouragement resulting in individual happiness even though "the belief or idea does not fit observed facts."[13]

---

overview of the distinctives of the University of Chicago's approach to biblical studies and theology within the context of the history of North American biblical interpretation, see Thomas H. Olbricht, "Biblical Interpretation in North America in the Twentieth Century," in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 90–91.

[8] Robert W. Gaines II, "The Educational Thought of Benjamin Elijah Mays" (PhD diss., The University of Georgia, 2012), 59.

[9] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 48–53.

[10] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 1. "Mass" literature contained "ideas of God that reach the masses primarily through the church and through the minister in public utterances."

[11] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 15. Mays also noted within the more recent literature a willingness of some to doubt or deny God's existence. He devoted considerable attention to those developments.

[12] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 14. Mays added that such ideas of God "are being rapidly discarded in an age of science."

[13] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 14. Though he clearly favored constructive thinking, Mays did not judge a compensatory view of God in purely negative terms in all instances. Rather, he held that such an outlook enabled African Americans to endure with dignity the most horrible of conditions. A compensatory belief in God, he wrote, "has given the Negro masses emotional poise and balance; it has enabled them to cling on to life though poor, miserable, and dying, looking to God and expecting Him, through miraculous and spectacular means, to deliver them from their plight. The idea has made Negros feel

Whereas a compensatory view of God tended to encourage a patient waiting for divine reward in the afterlife subsequent to suffering in the current one, a "constructive" God-concept, Mays argued, contributed to a "growing consciousness of needed social adjustment."[14] In other words, within his second category of literature, the manner in which the authors conceived of God moved them to advocate for social change. Throughout the constructive material, Mays found a connection between a belief in God's ongoing involvement in human affairs to address injustices pertinent to the black experience in the United States (i.e., slavery, racism, segregation) and a view that understood humans as active agents in his work.[15]

For Mays, the extent to which an author's focus was "other worldly" or "this worldly" played a central role in differentiating compensatory thought from a constructive outlook, respectively.[16] An "other worldly" writer held a traditional view of God and was largely focused upon the divine and the life to come. Such thinking, in Mays's estimation, lacked sufficient catalyzing elements to move a person to address injustice in human affairs. An "other worldly" understanding of God often rendered a person passive in the face of slavery and the subsequent injustices that black women and men faced. In fact, at one point, Mays stated that "other worldly" notions "served as an opiate for the people, leading them to endure whatever condition they faced since a better day awaited them after death."[17] Even worse, a compensatory framework could leave an oppressed person willing to accept social injustice.[18]

For example, Mays considered the poetry of Theodore H. Shackelford and John Wesley Holloway. He reproduced one work from each followed by a series of observations. After his reflections on Shackelford's piece, he provided the following summary: "And despairing of this life, he seeks relief in heaven where God will reward him by giving eternal rest, everlasting security, crowns, robes, and the like."[19] Mays offered a comparable précis of Holloway's poem and made this concluding statement about their works with "other worldly" literature in view: "There is no effort to develop the idea of God in a way that would relate God to the struggle of perfecting social change here on the earth."[20] Though he attempted to engage in dispassionate analysis, Mays clearly preferred the constructive view with its emphasis on social engagement and work toward individual and societal betterment,

---

good; it has made life endurable for them; and it has caused them to go to church on Sunday and shout and sing and pray" (25).

[14] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 15; Sarah Azaransky, "Benjamin Mays's *The Negro's God*: Recovering a Theological Tradition for an American Freedom Movement," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 34.2 (2014): 142.

[15] Thomas I. S. Mikelson, "Mays, King, and *The Negro's God*," in Carter, *Walking Integrity*, 168.

[16] Mays introduced the notions of "other worldly" and "this worldly" thinking in his earlier influential volume *The Negro's Church* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1933), which he co-authored with Joseph Nicholson.

[17] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 55.

[18] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 14–15, 23–24; Roper, *The Magnificent Mays*, 167.

[19] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 156.

[20] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 161.

much akin to the ideas championed by Rauschenbusch.[21] In fact, as Thomas Mikelson notes, "The constructive approach, as Mays described it, was not so different from the values of liberal, social gospel theology of the 1920s and 1930s."[22]

3. *Socially derived God-conceptions as instruments to social activism.* Mays premised *The Negro God* on the notion that a person's conception of God was socially derived. As he stated in the preface, "The Negro's ideas of God grow out of the social situation which he finds himself."[23] In other words, a person's compensatory or constructive notions of God "develop at the point of social crisis."[24] The harsh social environment and unique historical realities experienced by those of African descent in the United States across centuries coupled with their "needs and desires" created the conditions out of which individuals formulated their God-concepts. As Mays noted in his conclusion, "[The Negro's] ideas of God, so to speak, are chiseled out of the very fabric of the social struggle."[25]

Mays's academic journey equipped him to consider the ways in which societal and historical forces formed religious beliefs.[26] Initially at Bates and then especially at the University of Chicago Divinity School, Mays learned the craft of biblical interpretation that emphasized peeling back the layers of social and other environmental factors critical to shaping the outlooks of the biblical writers. In fact, his master's thesis, entitled "Pagan Survival in Christianity," considered the ways certain historical developments and particular pagan ideas molded early Christian beliefs.[27] In time, Mays applied the same methodology as a means to investigate the forces that shaped black theological views and practices over a span of more than a century and a half.[28] *The Negro's God* reflects the fruit of that effort.[29]

Not only did Mays develop the thesis of *The Negro's God* on the notion of socially derived God-concepts, but he also rooted his broader goal of societal betterment for African Americans in a similar idea. He recognized an indelible link between an individual's—as well as a group's—God-concept and behavior: "A man's conception of God may go a long way toward determining his conduct."[30] Within such a framework, Mays understood that in order to promote broader engagement

---

[21] In fact, a cursory reading of Rauschenbusch's works, made possible by a reader compiled by Mays, highlights similarities. See Benjamin E. Mays, ed., *A Gospel for the Social Awakening: Selections from the Writings of Walter Rauschenbusch* (New York: Association Press, 1950). Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays*, 45.

[22] Mikelson, "Mays, King, and *The Negro's God*," 169. See also Azaransky, "Benjamin Mays's *The Negro's God*," 142; Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays*, 87.

[23] Mays, *The Negro's God*, vii.

[24] Mays, *The Negro's God*, vii.

[25] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 255.

[26] Azaransky, "Benjamin Mays's *The Negro's God*," 148.

[27] Benjamin E. Mays, "Pagan Survivals in Christianity" (MA thesis, The University of Chicago, 1925); Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays*, 89.

[28] Roper, *The Magnificent Mays*, 160; Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays*, 90.

[29] Jelks notes, "In *The Negro's God*, Mays attempted to synthesize the Chicago School's emphasis on theological modernism into something relevant for the era of political radicalism and liberalism." Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays*, 98.

[30] Mays and Nicholson, *The Negro's Church*, 86. Mays and Nicholson also acknowledged a collective dimension to shared God-concepts across a group and even a nation that determined their behavior. Such suppositions provide background to and are given fuller voice in *The Negro's God.*

among African Americans toward the goal of justice born out of social reconstruction, he needed to also provide a means to those ends—in this case, reformulated God-concepts that emphasized particular divine qualities commensurate with the goal.[31] *The Negro's God* figured prominently in that effort. As Sarah Azaransky observes, "*The Negro's God* organized and analyzed black God-talk in part to illuminate a method that Mays's contemporaries could use as they devised responses to Jim Crow. He wanted to show how previous generations of African-descended Americans had used ideas about God to challenge whites' anemic views of freedom and democracy."[32]

A careful analysis of *The Negro's God* finds a quasi-pragmatism as it relates to individual and group God-beliefs.[33] In other words, given the primacy placed upon social engagement and reconstruction as outcomes, Mays tended to appreciate and evaluate conceptions of God largely in terms of their functionality within that schema. Frequently, in his summaries and analyses of specific literary material, Mays employed language whereby authors were said to have "used" their understanding of God—whether it be compensatory or constructive—toward certain ends. In other instances, he stressed that writers' divine concepts acted as "instruments" to accomplish some particular goal.[34] For Mays, then, the substance and makeup of a person's divine beliefs appear to be significant only inasmuch as they produce a particular result. His remarks concerning a sermon entitled "Who Shall Roll Us Away the Stone from the Door of the Sepulchre?" illustrate this point:

> Perhaps it is not too much to say that from the ideas of God presented in this sermon, God may be defined as the power or force in man and in the world that impels man to seek to transform life in the interest of a healthier and a more resplendent life for mankind individually and generally. The ideas are not otherworldly. They place one under obligation to adjust himself to a life of peace where all may enjoy the fruits necessary for resplendent living. They go far beyond the limits of race, but the needs of the race are met in the universality of the ideas of God presented. They are far removed from traditional, compensa-

---

[31] See, e.g., Roper, *The Magnificent Mays*, 44–47, 84, 90; Azaransky, "Benjamin Mays's *The Negro's God*," 142; Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays*, 85. In addition, see the following excellent treatments for invaluable background: Illya E. Davis, "Mays's Spiritual Rebellion," in Carter, *Walking Integrity*, 185–96; Verner Randolph Matthews, "Mays and Racial Justice," in Carter, *Walking Integrity*, 263–88.

[32] Azaransky, "Benjamin Mays's *The Negro's God*," 142.

[33] By "pragmatism," I mean a philosophical outlook, as described by Donald McKim, that emphasizes an experiential epistemology, an overriding interest in providing practical solutions to real-world challenges, and an understanding that "truth is tested by its utility and consequences." Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 215.

[34] For Mays's employment of the term "use" as it relates to ideas of God utilized to improve society, see *The Negro's God*, vii, 38, 41, 44, 53, 59, 61, 80, 94, 110, 113, 117, 120, 128, 130, 135, 185, 186, 188, 209, 245, 249, 253, 254. For Mays's deployment in *The Negro's God* of the term "instrument" concerning an idea of God as means or "instrument" to bring about some sort of social change, see pp. 15, 41, 117, 218, 220, 236, 245. Mays, at one point, even observed that within the more recent literature (i.e., 1914–1936), "there is a growing tendency or threat on the part of the younger post-War writers to abandon the conception of God 'as a useful instrument' in social rehabilitation" (15). Anyabwile describes Mays's approach as an "instrumental" view of religious belief and of God. See Anyabwile's critique of Mays's outlook in *The Decline of African American Theology*, 84–86.

> tory patterns. They are constructively developed in terms of social reconstruction that is universal.[35]

Thus, Mays's notion of socially derived God-concepts fit into a broader schema that understood said beliefs in largely functional terms in light of the greater goal of social activism on behalf of the historically oppressed.[36]

Several scholars throughout the decades have provided insightful critiques of Benjamin Mays's seminal work, *The Negro's God*.[37] Some, such as Mays's contemporary C. G. Woodson, took issue with his dichotomous taxonomy consisting of only "compensatory" and "constructive" or his confusing labels of "mass" and "classical" literature.[38] James Cone criticized his entire approach as sociological rather than theological in nature.[39] More recently, Thabiti Anyabwile argued that Mays frequently differentiated individuals holding to a traditional God-concept within his compensatory-constructive framework as if they possessed divergent views of God rather than differing in their application of those similar notions in distinct settings.[40] I aim in this article to evaluate Mays's thesis by means of the lens of one of the individuals he marshaled in support of his claims. Therefore, the issue becomes whether Mays's notion of socially derived views of God provides the best explanation for Daniel Payne's commitment to black education and social activism over the course of his life. Before I consider Mays's evaluation of Payne, I will provide a brief biographical sketch of the nineteenth-century clergyman and educator.

---

[35] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 82.

[36] Jelks, commenting on Mays's earlier work *The Negro's Church*, makes an interesting and related point: "For Mays, black Christians needed to discard the conservative theological orthodoxies because those orthodoxies led them down an eschatological path that did not sustain their struggles for justice and their resistance to white supremacy. To him, theological liberalism opened up important vistas that helped illuminate the faith of black believers and strengthened their commitment to build a more just society." Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays*, 85.

[37] In her article, Azaransky provides a helpful overview of the criticisms leveled against Mays and *The Negro's God*. See Azaransky, "Benjamin Mays's *The Negro's God*," 149–50.

[38] C. G. Woodson, review of *The Negro's God*, by Benjamin E. Mays, *Journal of Negro History* 24.1 (1939): 118–19. Barbara Dianne Savage levels a similar charge against Mays and provides the most sustained critical analysis of him that I located. She also expresses concern that *The Negro's God* supports Mays's aim to extend his notions of male-dominated ecclesiastical leadership. Interestingly, she maintains her argument is supported by Mays's inclusion of Bishop Payne's account of an incident in which he (i.e., Payne) entered into heated conflict with a number of female parishioners in a local church under his ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 59–65.

[39] See esp. James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury, 1972), 17–19. Cone refers to Mays as "sociologist Benjamin Mays" and contends that far more resides within slave songs, theologically speaking, than simply "compensatory" and "constructive" thinking. Mickelson notes that Mays's "method was vague and lacked the sophisticated argumentation of later theological writing," whereas Harding found the "mass" and "classical" categorizations problematic and maintained that Mays "sometimes held too rigidly to a mechanistic, socio-psychological mode of analysis." Mickelson, "Mays, King, and *The Negro's God*," 170; Vincent Harding, preface to *The Negro's God: As Reflected in His Literature* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), n.p.

[40] Anyabwile, *The Decline of African American Theology*, 84–85. Anyabwile also charged *The Negro's God* as suffering from "an instrumental view of religion in general and of God particularly" (85–86).

4. *Payne's background.* Daniel Alexander Payne was born to free parents London and Martha on February 24, 1811, in Charleston, South Carolina. In his autobiography, he recounted that education played a prominent role in his life from his earliest days. His father taught him the alphabet and simple reading. From ages eight to ten, he attended a black-owned-and-operated school and then became the private student of Thomas S. Bonneau, a free black educator in Charleston. Starting at age thirteen, he apprenticed as a carpenter under the tutelage of a relative.[41]

During his eighteenth year, Payne sensed a call from God to become a teacher. Reflecting on that definitive moment, he wrote that he heard "a voice speaking within my soul saying: '*I have set thee apart to educate thyself in order that thou mayest be an educator to thy people.*' The impression was *irresistible* and *divine*; it gave a new direction to my thoughts and efforts."[42] For the next year, he spent his modest income on acquiring books and preparing himself to teach.

Within twelve months, he opened his own school. Though it failed, a conversation with a slave owner seeking to hire him to teach his slaves only deepened Payne's conviction to continue as an educator of those of African lineage. The man asked young Daniel if he understood the difference between a master and his slave. Payne did not know how to respond, so the man interjected, "*Nothing but superior knowledge.*"[43] Two thoughts immediately crossed Payne's mind: he must set himself to the task of gaining knowledge like the slave masters and continue to instruct black men and women. Therefore, he reestablished his school. It started modestly, but he was soon teaching people of color, children and adults, slave and free. Even as the head of the school, Payne persisted in educating himself through the purchase and study of books on a wide range of topics. Soon, his school became one of the largest of its kind in South Carolina and perhaps in the entire South.[44]

South Carolina State Law No. 2639, prohibiting the education of slaves, went into effect in the spring of 1835.[45] No longer permitted to legally operate his school,

---

[41] Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (Nashville: Publishing House of the A.M.E. Sunday School, 1888), 11–15. Strobert observes that all of Daniel Payne's educators up to that point had been black men and women. Strobert, *Daniel Alexander Payne*, 4. Though Payne did not mention it, one cannot help but conclude that these early educational models played an important role in his desire to become an educator.

[42] Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 17, italics his.

[43] Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 20, italics his.

[44] Francis J. Grimke, "Addresses Dealing with the Careers of Distinguished Americans: Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne," in *The Works of Francis J. Grimke*, vol. 1, *Addresses Mainly Personal and Racial*, ed. Carter G. Woodson (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1942), 2.

[45] Entitled "An Act to Amend the Laws in Relation to Slaves and Free Persons of Color," the statute was passed in 1834 and went into effect in early 1835. The portion of the statute directly pertaining to Payne and his school states the following:

"Be it enacted, by the honorable the Senate and House of Representatives, now met and sitting in General Assembly, and by the authority of the same, If any person shall hereafter teach any slave to read or write, or shall aid or assist in teaching any slave to read or write, or cause or procure any slave to be taught to read or write, such person, if a free white person, upon conviction thereof, shall, for each and every offense against this Act, be fined not exceeding one hundred dollars, and imprisoned not more than six months; or if a free person of color, shall be whipped, not exceeding fifty lashes, and fined not exceeding fifty dollars, at the discretion of the court of magistrates and freeholders before which such

Payne shuttered his classrooms and released his nearly sixty students. Though deeply grieved, he remained undaunted, so he traveled to the North in hopes of opening a new school without the fear of anti-education legislation aimed at those of African descent. Early in his northern sojourn, Payne decided to attend Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg.

Seminary proved to be a pivotal experience, launching Payne into vocational ministry. For a time, he affiliated with the Lutheran Church, but he joined as a fully recognized minister of the A.M.E. Church in 1843.[46] As a pastor in the A.M.E. Church, Payne simultaneously pursued his love for God, the Bible, ministry, and education. He was elected in 1852 to the office of presiding bishop over the entire denomination and enacted numerous reforms, the most prominent being the requirement of formal theological training for all clergy. Though initially resisted by many, those changes transformed the office of minister and, more broadly, the culture of the A.M.E. Church.[47]

Payne led a successful effort in 1863 to purchase Wilberforce University, a closed and indebted Methodist Episcopal college. As leader of the reconstituted school, he set out to create an institution that would provide a religiously and classically oriented education for black men and women.[48] For thirteen years, he served as president of the first historically black-owned-and-governed college in the United States.[49] In 1891, the Wilberforce board of directors formally established the Payne Theological Seminary adjacent to the grounds of the university and appointed Payne as its first dean.[50] Payne died two years later, having witnessed the convergence of all he held dear: God, the Scriptures, ministry, and education.

---

free person of color is tried; and if a slave, to be whipped at the discretion of the court, not exceeding fifty lashes; the informer to be entitled to one half of the fine, and to be a competent witness. And if any free person of color or slave shall keep any school, or other place of instruction, for teaching any slave or free person of color to read or write, such free person of color or slave shall be liable to the same fine, imprisonment, and corporal punishment, as are by this Act imposed and inflicted upon free persons of color and slaves for teaching slaves to read or write." David J. McCord, ed., *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, vol. 7 (Columbia, SC: A. S. Johnston, 1840), 468, italics his.

[46] In 1816, Richard Allen (1760–1831) founded the A.M.E. Church. The A.M.E. Church continues today, and it was the first denomination in the U.S. to be led solely by blacks for those of African descent. Scott A. Miltenberger, "Richard Allen," in *Encyclopedia of African American History 1619–1895: From the Colonial Period to the Age of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Paul Finkelman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1:47–48.

[47] Thabiti Anyabwile, *The Faithful Preacher: Recapturing the Vision of Three Pioneering African-American Pastors* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 78. Fellow African-American pastor and Payne contemporary Francis Grimke gave this assessment of Payne's reforms: "Through the untiring effort of this man, the church was now firmly committed to the policy of intelligence as against ignorance in the pulpit. Its aim henceforth would be, not only to see that the Gospel was preached, but that it was done by men who had, at least, some intellectual preparation for it." Grimke, "Addresses Dealing with the Careers of Distinguished Americans," 1:8.

[48] Paul R. Griffin, *Black Theology as the Foundation of Three Methodist Colleges: The Educational Views and Labors of Daniel Payne, Joseph Price, Isaac Lane* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 95.

[49] Wilberforce University, "About Wilberforce," https://wilberforce.edu/about-wilberforce/.

[50] Wilberforce University, "About Wilberforce"; Payne Theological Seminary, "About Payne," https://payneseminary.edu/about/. The Wilberforce theology department was spun off from the

5. *Mays's evaluation of Bishop Daniel A. Payne.* Daniel Payne wrote and delivered numerous sermons, penned several articles, and authored a handful of notable books, including his autobiography.[51] Furthermore, he advocated for the abolition of slavery and devoted himself to ensuring general and religious education for black men and women prior to the Civil War, during Reconstruction, and beyond. Because Payne was both a prolific writer and a prominent social activist on behalf of those of African descent, Mays devoted several pages in *The Negro's God* to consider Payne's concepts of the divine and his employment of those views in his efforts to bring about social change.[52]

In addition to its primary thesis of demonstrating that the God-concepts of black writers arose from their unique social contexts, *The Negro's God*, as suggested above, aimed to establish that socially derived views of God were—and, by implication, could be—used to motivate and promote work for societal change especially as it related to the injustices experienced by black persons.[53] Mays found Payne's life and ministry supportive of both suppositions and provided a mostly positive evaluation of the nineteenth-century educator, pastor, and bishop.[54] Mays considered Payne's socially derived God-concepts to be constructive in nature, though he highlighted one example of compensatory thought.

Drawing from a number of episodes from Payne's life as recounted by the A.M.E. Church bishop in his autobiography, Mays claimed that the nineteenth-century educator "developed his ideas of God along the lines of social reconstruction."[55] For example, Mays noted that as a young teacher, Payne devoted himself to educating black men and women even after his initial attempt failed and his subsequent effort was legally thwarted. Payne's declination of a higher-paying job in the West Indies working for a wealthy slave owner received note in *The Negro's God* as

---

school to create the seminary. Both Wilberforce University and Payne Theological Seminary endure to this day as testaments to the legacy of Daniel Alexander Payne.

[51] Some of Payne's most important volumes are as follows: *Recollections of Seventy Years*, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, *The Semi-Centenary and the Retrospection of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, and *A Treatise on Domestic Education*. Inexplicably, Mays only drew from Payne's autobiography, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, for his source material.

[52] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 48–53.

[53] See Azaransky, "Benjamin Mays's *The Negro's God*," 143.

[54] Mays's positive evaluation of Payne might, at first blush, appear surprising given the A.M.E. bishop's traditional orthodoxy and Mays's discernable lack of enthusiasm for such. Nonetheless, in view of his overarching purposes, Payne's life and ministry appear initially to buttress his overall argument and aims. Henry Mitchell, however, is not especially taken with Payne. Though impressed with Payne's many accomplishments and concern for general education as well as clerical training, he contends that in many respects, Payne was an example of an "unfortunate surrender to white culture." Mitchell goes on to state that Payne had embraced a viewpoint that held white culture as "normative." Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 42. Contrary to Mitchell, however, James Cone, a leading voice in the Black Power and Black Theology movements, interprets Payne in a much more favorable light. Like Mays, Cone cites Payne as an exemplar of a "black consciousness" that needs to pervade a distinctly black theological endeavor. Furthermore, Cone notes that it was Payne's concept of the divine—"God who in Christ promised wholeness"—that undergirded his abolitionist views and activism. James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury, 1969), 102, 131.

[55] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 53.

further illustration of his devotion to what the young educator considered to be a divinely ordained mission. As Mays observed, "Payne was able to go on in his program of racial uplift and social change because he believed God was in it and that he had been commissioned by God to perform a great task."[56]

Mays observed that in addition to his many educational activities, Payne's attitudes and actions, as they related to color-based discrimination, cohered with constructive thinking: "Bishop Payne was consistent in his belief that discrimination on the basis of color was against God."[57] In fact, Payne held those beliefs so strongly that as A.M.E. Church bishop, he challenged black congregants and their pastor when they excluded a white woman from their fellowship because of her skin color, and he interpreted the pastor's later ecclesiastical sanctioning as divine judgment. Mays also recounted how Payne viewed a white cleric's discriminative actions against two young men of African descent seeking theological education and his subsequent expulsion from his supervisory role as another case of God's "retributive justice." Mays concluded that Payne "developed" and "used" his ideas of God "to fight discrimination in the house of worship" and "to defend his position against unchristian and anti-social practices."[58]

6. *Reflections on Payne's theological crisis.* Despite finding several examples from Payne's life that fit squarely within a constructive framework, Mays began his overall analysis by drawing from an episode consistent with his compensatory construct. Payne recounted his reaction to the enactment in South Carolina of the aforementioned anti-slave education law forcing the closure of his successful school and, seemingly at the time, sounding the death knell of his God-given dream to aid black men, women, and children. In vivid, heartfelt terms, the young Payne expressed his sorrow and even doubts concerning God's existence and justice. Using imprecatory language reminiscent of the Psalter, he clamored for the demise of those who passed such a detestable law. Then, in equally psalm-like fashion, he concluded with statements of renewed trust in the Lord and confidence that God's justice would ultimately bring about the demise of slavery. Such thoughts, Payne recounted, were like water on a fire and soothed his wounded heart.[59]

Mays understood Payne's words as supporting his overall thesis, and he described the young educator's reaction in terms consistent with his compensatory category. Following the excerpt from Payne's memoir recounting his anguished and then more hopeful thoughts rooted in God's character and providence, Mays asserted, "It is the social situation which inclines him [Payne] momentarily to doubt God's existence."[60] Furthermore, Mays averred that Payne's "firm faith in God" undergirded his deep confidence that the Lord would one day vanquish slavery as well as sustain and enable him. Mays then concluded, "The idea of God here expressed gives the author emotional peace and calm. It soothes his soul as he strug-

[56] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 49.
[57] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 51.
[58] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 53.
[59] Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 28.
[60] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 49.

gles against the odds that confront him and his race."[61] Thus, Mays found from a handful of important incidents recorded in *Recollections of Seventy Years* that Payne's views of God were both socially derived and largely developed to advance an agenda of social activism. I propose, however, that evidence from Payne's life and writings supports a conclusion other than the one Mays advanced.

II. DANIEL PAYNE, DIVINE REVELATION, AND HIS CONCEPT OF GOD

1. *Payne's understanding of divine revelation.* Daniel Payne's concept of God, educational philosophy, and commitment to social activism originated from and were sustained by his lifelong devotion to and study of divine revelation in all its forms but especially the Bible.[62] A careful review of his writings confirms that Payne held to a historic and orthodox understanding of Christian epistemology, believing that God could only be known by means of his own self-disclosure. Because of innate human limitations as well as sinfulness, God had to take the initiative if people were to accurately comprehend aspects of his divine essence and know him in a personal way. Therefore, in Payne's view, God revealed himself to human beings through nature, acts in history, and sacred writings. The Christian minister, according to Payne, "will do well to study these manifestations of the Deity."[63]

Payne set forth his clearest teaching on the subject in a sermon he delivered in 1874 entitled "The Divinely Approved Workman." The natural world, he declared, displayed the infinity, "wisdom, power, and goodness" of God. Furthermore, he stated, "We cannot open our eyes or ears without seeing forms and hearing voices speaking in behalf of an existing but invisible Deity."[64] Human beings and their mental, moral, physical, and spiritual natures uniquely reflect the character of God within the created realm.[65] The Creator also revealed himself and was continuing to manifest his nature by means of his dealings with nations, races, and even individuals, which Payne referred to as "biographies." God humbled proud

---

[61] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 49.

[62] As will be seen, Payne recognized that God "manifested" himself to human beings by means of the natural world, his supernatural and providential activity in human affairs, and—foremost—the sixty-six books of the Protestant Scriptures. Contemporary theologians often refer to God's self-disclosure by these means as "the doctrine of revelation," with the subcategories of "special" and "general" being applied to distinguish between the Bible (i.e., special revelation) and other forms (i.e., general revelation). See Gregg R. Allison with Michael J. Anthony, "Revelation, Scripture, and Christian Education," in James R. Estep Jr., Michael J. Anthony, and Gregg R. Allison, *A Theology for Christian Education* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 75–79. In this essay, I utilize the term "divine revelation" to refer to the entirety of Payne's categories of God's self-manifestations, and I use "the Bible" or "Scripture" or "revelation"—Payne's particular term for the Bible—when special revelation is in view. For a helpful treatment of Payne's understanding of the doctrine of revelation, see Anyabwile, *The Decline of African American Theology*, 29–32. See also Griffin, *Black Theology as Foundation*, 81–84.

[63] Daniel Alexander Payne, "The Divinely Approved Workman," in *The Faithful Preacher*: *Recapturing the Vision of Three Pioneering African-American Pastors*, ed. Thabiti Anyabwile (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 105.

[64] Payne, "The Divinely Approved Workman," 105.

[65] Payne, "The Divinely Approved Workman," 106–7.

nations and their rulers (e.g., Egypt's Pharaoh, Babylon's Nebuchadnezzar). Payne contended that one cannot read about Joseph or Job, or even Martin Luther or John Wesley, "without discovering an invisible, supernatural power behind and above these men, inspiring, guiding, and protecting them, planning their plans and executing their victories."[66]

The Bible, what Payne referred to as "revelation," was the most authoritative of God's means of self-disclosure: "But above all these there is revelation, in which the infinite has manifested Himself as He has done nowhere else."[67] Payne understood that within the pages of Scripture, the "ineffable character" of the Lord was on display. Workmen—that is, clergy—who studied revelation would clearly observe the "dignity and kindness" of the Lord and would see his very character impressed upon their own.[68]

According to Payne, divinely approved workmen took seriously all aspects of divine revelation. As servants constructing the Master's house (i.e., the church), clergy must know the Master and his character. Therefore, the A.M.E. Church bishop called clergy before all else to prosecute a serious and ongoing study of God as primarily revealed in Scripture and, to a lesser extent, nature and history.[69] He elaborated further,

> So varied and so deep are the truths with which the Christian minister has to deal that unless he is a careful, prayerful, and diligent student of that one book, the Bible, he will often be compelled to blush at his ignorance. And let this workman know that to understand that as it ought to be understood and to apply its varied important teachings as they ought to be applied, it is necessary that he make himself master of many other books.[70]

In other words, ministers ought to attend to continuous research into the Bible, "that one book." Becoming a master of "many other books" benefited the workman in his study and application of "the one." Payne charged clergy with the very task that had defined his own life—a studiously prosecuted, unending examination of divine revelation.[71] The linkage in Payne's mind between general and theological education clearly emerges in this sermon.

2. *Beginnings of a lifetime of Scripture study.* As young Daniel Payne was born to free black parents in the antebellum South, his family fully participated in the life of

---

[66] Payne, "The Divinely Approved Workman," 105.

[67] Payne, "The Divinely Approved Workman," 105.

[68] Payne, "The Divinely Approved Workman," 106.

[69] In fact, "study" (or its derivatives) appears fourteen times throughout the text of this sermon.

[70] Payne, "The Divinely Approved Workman," 106.

[71] "Studious" and "prosecuted" are Payne's words as they relate to this topic: "Now when the studious workman has prosecuted such studies and made such researches as we have indicated, he will feel the necessity of unceasing efforts to secure the approbation of God, from whom he professes to have received a commission to preach the gospel, and consequently of so conducting himself in the presence of his omniscient Master that he may never have cause to be ashamed." Payne, "The Divinely Approved Workman," 106.

a local Methodist congregation.[72] His father and mother were particularly devout Christians, and Payne's earliest recollections were of their personal piety and the family's regular church attendance. He recounted in his autobiography that his father dedicated him at an early age to the Lord's service and named him after the Old Testament prophet Daniel.[73] At age nine, his mother died, and his "grandaunt" took charge of his care as Payne's father had passed a few years prior. She, like his parents, modeled a devoted religious life and took him regularly to worship services and instructional meetings. The Methodist tradition of Payne's youth, being influenced as it was by pietism, greatly emphasized the Bible in corporate meetings and personal devotions.[74] Thus, the examples of his family members and ecclesiastical community highlighted the priority of Scripture in order to know God and develop personal holiness.

At age thirteen, Payne acquired a copy of *The Self-Interpreting Bible* by Rev. John Brown—who recounted in the volume's opening pages how he taught himself Latin, Greek, and Hebrew—and studied it "with great interest," according to Payne's earliest biographer, Charles Smith.[75] About *The Self-Interpreting Bible* and its author, Payne himself wrote the following:

> The reading of this became the turning-point of my life; for, after reading it, I came to the conclusion to try and be what he was. I said to myself: "If Brown learned Latin, Greek, and Hebrew without a living teacher, why can't I?" This question was answered by: "I'll try." Up to that hour I had never seen a book in Latin, Greek, or Hebrew; but I resolved as soon as I could get them to study them.[76]

---

[72] While even free black men and women experienced racial discrimination and injustices in the South during this period, they enjoyed relative freedom to worship and gather for religious instruction in comparison to slaves. The enslaved, generally speaking, faced greater restrictions with respect to congregating for worship and religious instruction, particularly over the passage of time. For an excellent treatment of freed black life in antebellum Charleston, South Carolina, see Bernard E. Powers Jr., *Black Charlestonians: A Social History, 1822–1885* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1994). Payne's family attended the multi-racial Cumberland Street Church of the Methodist Episcopal Church—though the congregation was white-led and conducted segregated worship services. The denomination emerged from the ministry and efforts of John Wesley and was formally constituted following the American Revolution. Arthur Stokes points out that the Methodist church during the antebellum period had the greatest number of black members of any American denomination. Arthur Paul Stokes, "Daniel Alexander Payne: Churchman and Educator" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1973), 8–10.

[73] Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 16.

[74] Arthur Wilford Nagler, *Pietism and Methodism: Or the Significance of German Pietism in the Origin and Early Development of Methodism* (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1918). See also Griffin, *Black Theology as Foundation*, 49–52; Strobert, *Daniel Alexander Payne*, 17–19.

[75] Charles Spencer Smith, *The Life of Daniel Alexander Payne, D.D., LL.D.* (Nashville: Publishing House of the A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1894), 16. John Brown, a Scottish Presbyterian, published *The Self–Interpreting Bible* in 1778. It contained various annotations of Old and New Testament texts as well as a concordance and Bible dictionary. *The Self-Interpreting Bible* was available in both the United States and Great Britain.

[76] Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 15. As the OT was mostly composed in ancient Hebrew and the NT in Koine Greek, serious students of biblical texts have routinely acquired knowledge of those languages. Furthermore, as the entire Bible was translated into Latin in the fourth century and many

The Self-Interpreting Bible set Daniel Payne down a lifelong path of biblical primacy and study.

3. *Seminary and the Scriptures.* Following the closure of his school in Charleston in 1835, Payne traveled north with the intention of educating black students without government interference. In New York City, he encountered Rev. Daniel Strobel, who informed him of a scholarship available for men like himself to obtain a theological education. Payne objected, to which Strobel replied, "Now, if you will go to [Lutheran Theological Seminary at] Gettysburg, and study theology there, you will be better fitted than you now are for usefulness among your people.… And if you should not enter the ministry, your training in theology will make you more useful in the school-room."[77] The reverend's words addressed his protestations, so Payne moved to Pennsylvania to begin his formal theological training.

Payne appears to have thrived in seminary, and his coursework heightened his commitment to the study of Scripture. Payne biographer Nelson Strobert notes that the seminary's president at the time, Dr. Samuel S. Schmucker, dramatically shaped the school's culture. His particular brand of Lutheran pietism emphasized a rigorous exegesis of biblical texts in their original languages, a strong devotional life, personal piety, and an interest in ethical and societal engagement—all of which found fertile soil in Payne's life.[78] A review of Payne's journals from the period indicate that most mornings, he rose early, sometimes well before dawn, in order to read and reflect upon the Bible, only to do so again later in the evening.[79]

Two years into Payne's course of study, health problems forced him to terminate his education early. Nonetheless, seminary confirmed his nascent inclinations toward education, the ministry, and the study of Scripture. The parting words of his biblical languages professor C. P. Krauth captured best the convictions Payne would hold even after his premature departure from seminary:

> The minister of Jesus should be well versed in the Bible, and he has a most desirable acquisition who can take the very words of inspiration and sit in judgment on their import and determine what it is. Study this holy book, then, by day and night. Read it in the original. Enlarge your knowledge of Hebrew and Greek philology. Spend a portion of every day in this employment. In this way you can make it appear what education and study can effect in your brethren, and refute the slanders of their enemies. You will thus enlarge your power of being useful to men by preaching the everlasting gospel, and become "a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." You will place your own mind and heart in contact with the treasures of wisdom and grace, and advance in the knowledge of Jesus and grow in holiness. You are to

---

early and medieval Christian writings were completed in that language, students of the Scriptures for centuries have seen fit to learn Latin as well.

[77] Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 45.

[78] Strobert, *Daniel Alexander Payne*, 15–19.

[79] Josephus Roosevelt Coan, *Daniel Alexander Payne: Christian Educator* (Philadelphia: A.M.E. Book Concern, 1935), 48. Having studied the diary Payne kept during his seminary years, Coan concludes, "What light does this journal shed upon the experiences of Payne during his two years at Gettysburg Siminary [sic]? The most obvious aspect is his habit of private worship."

> be set on a hill, and to attract the observation of men. Much depends on fidelity on your part. If you pursue this course I confidently believe that honor, usefulness, and happiness await you in this world; and in that to come, where there is one fold under one Shepherd, a glory measured by your work, and not by your physical structure.[80]

Payne included this letter in its entirety in his memoir, and a study of his extant writings quickly reveals the presence of its themes and very vocabulary throughout much of what he penned. In fact, Charles Killian's analysis of Payne's journals and diaries from different points in his life demonstrates a lifetime of personal and careful study of Holy Writ. Killian concludes that in keeping with his Methodist heritage, Payne's "methodical Bible study indicated that he, like [John] Wesley, 'was a man of one Book.'"[81] Payne biographer Josephus Coan makes a similar assertion: "The chief source of Payne's ethical thought and practice was the authority of the Bible."[82]

4. *The A.M.E. Church and revelation.* Following his departure from seminary in Gettysburg and a period of convalescence, Payne entered the ministry as a Lutheran pastor. Initially, he considered serving as part of the A.M.E. Church, a denomination started in 1816 by those of African descent. However, he worried that many in the church opposed formal theological education for the clergy. Thus, he identified with a new synod of Lutherans that valued, among other things, theological training for its ministers.[83] Soon, however, Payne joined ranks with the A.M.E. Church first as an affiliate in 1841. Though still concerned about what he considered to be strong anti-intellectual and anti-educational undercurrents within the denomination, he ultimately put those qualms aside. In 1843, he ascended into full "connection" with the church, a relationship that endured till his death in 1893.

Payne seized upon his position as an A.M.E. clergyman to spread his passion for a thorough study of revelation as a means of knowing God and living in accordance with his will. While serving as pastor of Israel A.M.E. Church in Washington, D.C., he penned his five "Epistles on the Education of the Ministry" for the denomination's monthly magazine throughout 1843 and into 1844. In his first essay, Payne asked his fellow clergy, "Are you resolved to qualify yourself for the work of God, in the sphere of the ministry, by making use of every literary as well as moral means?"[84] Such a minister, in Payne's view, made a habit of rigorous study

---

[80] Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 63–64.

[81] Charles Killian, "Bishop Daniel A. Payne: An Apostle of Wesley," *Methodist History* 24.2 (1986): 109–10. See also Charles Denmore Killian, "Bishop Daniel A. Payne: Black Spokesman for Reform" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1971), 54–55.

[82] Coan, *Daniel Alexander Payne*, 127.

[83] Payne joined the newly formed Franckean Synod of the Lutheran church. This particular synod was decidedly opposed to slavery. Given the group's commitment to both pietism and the abolitionist cause, Strobert observes, "It isn't difficult to imagine Payne embracing his brothers in this newly established synod with its abolitionist stance." Strobert, *Daniel Alexander Payne*, 29.

[84] Strobert, *Daniel Alexander Payne*, 45. I was unable to locate extant copies of four of the five of Payne's "Epistles on the Education of the Ministry" and the one only as it was reproduced in another

of revelation. In fact, Payne's second essay pressed for a commitment to Scripture rather than reliance upon personal inspiration, especially in preaching.

Payne also contended that the Bible was poorly handled and that false interpretations of Scripture were plentiful across the denomination. He proposed to remedy the situation by means of a multi-year ministerial course of theological study requirement for A.M.E. clergy. In addition, he also commended a reading list for ministers and prospective clergy that contained several seminary-level texts. In subsequent essays, Payne argued for a thorough examination process for all pastoral candidates, and in his last piece, he made the case for learning Hebrew and Greek. He was moved by a concern for his fellow ministers, for he longed for them to study the Bible on their own without recourse to what he considered to be flawed English translations. Following his installation as chairman of the Committee of Education for the entire denomination, Payne acted on much of what he recommended in the "Epistles on the Education of the Ministry." The committee implemented, among other things, a multi-year course of study for pastoral candidates with an emphasis on theology and biblical exegesis.[85]

5. *The Bishop and the Bible.* At the A.M.E. Church General Conference in 1852, Payne delivered the opening address titled "Who Is Sufficient for These Things?"[86] Preaching from 2 Corinthians 2:16, he argued that gospel ministry and church governance were the primary pastoral responsibilities. Gospel ministry involved introducing people to the grace found in Jesus Christ even as the minister made them aware of their sin. Local church leadership centered upon helping congregants learn Bible doctrine, teaching from the Scriptures, correcting the wayward, and even excommunicating the unrepentant in accord with biblical guidelines.[87] Again, revelation figured prominently in Payne's instruction.

A few days later, the assembly elected Payne to the highest denominational office—bishop. From that position, he advanced his vision for a biblically grounded clergy committed to the study and exposition of Scripture. Throughout his long tenure, he confronted the lack of appeal to Scripture to guide one's convictions as well as the poor use of the Bible from the pulpit or in the discharge of one's pastoral duties.[88] Proper training of the clergy remained Payne's great passion from the beginning of his bishopric to the end.

Payne's writings and sermons from that period highlight his devotion to divine revelation.[89] For example, in 1859, he wrote and circulated an important mes-

---

work. Therefore, I relied, in large part, upon Strobert's review and discussion of this material. His is the most thorough reflection on their content, and it informs this entire section (45–48).

[85] Strobert, *Daniel Alexander Payne*, 48–49.

[86] Daniel Alexander Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville: Publishing House of the A.M.E. Sunday School, 1891), 268–71. Payne included the manuscript of his entire sermon in his seminal work on the history of the A.M.E. Church.

[87] Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, 269–70.

[88] See, e.g., Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 233–34, 253–57.

[89] Killian's rhetorical analysis of Payne's sermons leads him to conclude, "Payne used the Bible as his principal source of authority. Biblical quotations and Biblical words dominated most of his sermons." He goes on to say, "Argument by exposition was central to Payne's proof. He used exegesis as

sage called "The Christian Ministry: Its Moral and Intellectual Character." In this piece, his foundational text was 2 Timothy 2:2, which reads, "And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also" (ESV). Early in the discourse, Payne stated that "the teachers of religion and of its highest form, Christianity, are heaven-called, heaven-appointed, heaven-ordained. They are called *ministers* and are responsible first to God, secondarily to man."[90] Arguing from Scripture, Payne exhorted clergymen to deeper levels of personal piety and an intellectually rooted faith. Above all else, clergy were to pursue moral purity and mental keenness characterized by teachability, a hunger for knowledge, a commitment to applying God's Word, sound judgment, an ability to teach others, and humility. He concluded, "To sum up all our ideas in a single sentence, he must be holy, studious, instructive, and wise, ever keeping his heart in contact with the Spirit of God, ever drinking from the pure fountains of truth. He teaches himself, that he may be able to teach others also."[91] Payne understood "pure fountains of truth" to be all forms of divine revelation with special emphasis on the Bible.[92]

6. *Payne's crisis of faith, Scripture, and God.* As noted above, Benjamin Mays interpreted Payne's reaction to the closing of his Charleston school in 1835 as affirmation of his overall thesis. In that moment, Payne experienced a significant crisis of faith. Mays's work reproduced Payne's own words expressing his brief but anguished doubt of God's existence and justice and provided the following commentary: "The author [Payne] of this quotation clamors for the emancipation of his race and for the liberty to teach and uplift them. It is the social situation which inclines him momentarily to doubt God's existence."[93] The twentieth-century scholar seemed to suggest that the mere fact Payne briefly doubted God's existence and justice as a response to external events supported his (i.e., Mays's) supposition that God-concepts are socially derived.

Dramatic political and legal events certainly provoked the young teacher to seriously ponder altering his understanding of God, yet Payne did not adapt his view of the divine in the face of "social crisis." Rather, his response to the requirement to shutter his school indicates that his conceptualization of God was much

---

an instrument for explicating his theme. The discussion of the sermon was 'leading out' from the Scriptures some divine truth. His exegesis followed a verse-by-verse, phrase-by-phrase analysis." Killian, "Bishop Daniel A. Payne," 132. Stokes reaches the same conclusion regarding the Scripture's authority in Payne's life and ministry. Stokes, "Daniel Alexander Payne," 72.

[90] Daniel Alexander Payne, "The Christian Ministry: Its Moral and Intellectual Character," in *Sermons and Addresses 1853–1891*, ed. Charles Killian (New York: Arno, 1972), "Repository of Religion and Literature," 7, italics his.

[91] Payne, "The Christian Ministry," 16, italics his.

[92] Another example is a sermon Payne preached in 1888 at the A.M.E. General Conference called "The Quadrennial Sermon." Rooted in Malachi 2:4–7, Payne argued for the moral and intellectual integrity of A.M.E. clergy grounded in divine revelation, especially God's law and commandments. Charles Spencer Smith, ed., *Sermons Delivered by Bishop Daniel A. Payne: Before the General Conference of the A.M.E. Church, Indianapolis, Ind., May, 1888* (Nashville: Publishing House of the A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1888), 5–41.

[93] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 49.

more the result of a conscious, deliberate effort to ground his God-understanding in the Scriptures instead of largely the result of social forces pressing upon him. After inquiring again as to God's existence, Payne wrote that he recalled a particular verse from the Bible: "But then there came into my mind those solemn words: 'With God one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day' [2 Pet 3:8]."[94] That Scripture—coupled with words he considered spiritual in origin and admonishing him to trust God to bring about slavery's ultimate demise—put to rest any consideration of reformulating the ways he conceived of God.

In that moment, Payne granted Scripture epistemological priority above other considerations in the formation of his God-concept. His orthodox view of God, rooted in revelation, acted as an anchor and created a foundation he continued to build upon by means of lifelong study.[95] Mays's thesis excludes the possibility of factors outside the sociological and psychological as playing a role—let alone being the paramount matter—in a person's formation of his or her view of God. In Payne's case, he invested great effort in ensuring that his God-concept adhered as much as possible to the Bible's own presentation thereof. In fact, the incident Mays includes within the pages of *The Negro's God* is but one of many in which significant injustice, deep sorrow, racial animus, and personal indignities pressed upon Payne's life and could be said to collide with his God-concept.[96] Yet, far from being socially *derived*, Payne's view of God was socially *resistant* because he cultivated it with deep roots in divine revelation and consistently held to it irrespective of the potent social forces exerted upon him or his psychological needs of the moment.[97] Furthermore, Payne's life and writings clearly indicate that not only did his studiously prosecuted examination of the Bible cement his traditional view of God over the years of his long life and ministry, but his same commitment to the sacred writings of Scripture also informed and drove his devotion to education and social engagement.[98]

---

[94] Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 28. Payne immediately continued, "'Trust in him, and he will bring slavery and all its outrages to an end.' These words from the spirit world acted on my troubled soul like water on a burning fire, and my aching heart was soothed and relieved from its burden of woes."

[95] Following the closure of his school, Payne, in a heartbroken state, penned a poem titled "The Mournful Lute, or The Preceptor's Farewell." This lengthy verse evidences an orthodox Trinitarian theology and a deep devotion to God. It should also be noted that Payne expressed significant concern for his students' spiritual well-being, character development, and continued education. Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 29–34.

[96] For a handful of illustrative incidents, see Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 92–94, 286–89.

[97] In contrast to Mays's contention that a person or group's God-concept is formed from the convergence of social forces and psychological factors, a socially resistant God-concept is one that—despite significant external influences and internal needs—decidedly remains informed and shaped by other considerations since those matters are given greater emphasis. In Payne's case, he granted Scripture primacy to inform his understanding of God such that even dramatic circumstances and his own longings and emotional distress were not permitted to alter it.

[98] Whereas Mays generally intimated negative assessments of similar traditional views of God, he failed to do so in Payne's case. In fact, he evaluated Payne in largely positive terms. One cannot help but speculate that Mays was so impressed with Payne's commitment to social activism that his (i.e., Payne's) actual concept of God—traditional and even compensatory at moments—was not most important to the author of *The Negro's God*.

III. PAYNE, DIVINE REVELATION, EDUCATION, AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

Payne's view of revelation and its central role in knowing God formed the basis of his educational philosophy and approach to social activism. In his understanding, the Bible would "enlighten" and make wise the members of his race who had been long kept underfoot through ignorance.[99] Revelation acquainted one with God, produced personal holiness, and was the starting point of all educational endeavors. Therefore, clergy in particular needed appropriate instruction and training in order to properly teach others its content.

1. *An educated clergy.* As divine revelation included God's self-disclosure by means of nature, history, and biographies, Payne argued for a general education curriculum as part of any ministerial training in addition to theological courses. In fact, in his sermon "Who Is Sufficient for These Things?" before the A.M.E. General Conference in 1852, he argued that ministers must train their minds through the study of subjects such as science, philosophy, and literature. Equally, he exhorted clergy to lay claim to the power of the Holy Spirit by means of prayer and faith and as demonstrated by personal holiness. Payne then underscored the conjoining of one's mental and moral faculties by referring to Christ himself: "For such was our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ the Righteous—His head was all knowledge, and His heart all holiness. He was as free from ignorance as He was free from sin. God grant that we may all seek to be like Him as much in the one case as in the other."[100] No better summary of the nexus of Payne's understanding of divine revelation, education, and personal piety exists. To possess knowledge was to mirror Christ, and knowing about the world acquainted the minister with him. Such knowledge would be evidenced by personal piety and holiness. In another sermon, Payne made a similar point: "The end of all his [the minister's] studies and research into religion, science, and philosophy is to teach immortal souls and lead them to the knowledge of the truth as it is in Christ Jesus."[101] While Payne held that a general education was critical for clergy to carry out their responsibilities, he maintained a similar position vis-à-vis the laity.

2. *An educated laity.* Beginning in his late teens, Payne gave himself wholeheartedly to the cause of educating black men and women, boys and girls, free and slave. While a seminary student, he created and ran the Society for Moral and Mental Improvement, a general and religious education study group. Payne also secured meeting space off campus in order to educate children in general curricula as well as the Scriptures. As bishop, he advocated for local churches to found schools, worked to improve the education level of all church members, pushed for the establishment of a denomination-wide literary magazine, set up Sunday schools, and

---

[99] Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 253.

[100] Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, 270–71.

[101] Payne, "The Christian Ministry," 15.

even put in place joint laity-clergy study groups.[102] Fundamentally, Payne recognized that an educated congregation valued an educated clergy and was more likely to support its ministers. He stated, "They act and react upon each other."[103]

3. *Divine revelation and educational philosophy*. Given his understanding of divine revelation, Payne appreciated that a synergistic relationship existed between general and religious education. General education supplemented the study of revelation; it aided one in knowing and following God as a holy disciple. For example, upon the occasion of the emancipation of slaves in the District of Columbia, Payne exhorted newly freed men and women to "*rest not till you have learned to read the Bible*" and for parents to give themselves fully to the education of their children.[104] Of course, education held many benefits—economic as well as eternal—but Payne mostly viewed those through the lens of intellectual-theological and moral-character improvement. Paul Griffin summarized Payne's general education outlook as follows: "Payne tended to view [the purpose of education] as a means of creating black saints, men and women who could understand the Bible and practice its commandments."[105]

Under Payne's leadership, the A.M.E. Church in 1863 acquired the closed Wilberforce University. As its newly ensconced president, he set himself to the task of building a school out of the same framework that had informed his ministry up to that point: one must study divine revelation to know God, which, in turn, produced divine holiness in one's character. According to Griffin, Payne "thought that theology could suggest both a rationale and a structure for higher education …, that theological notions could form patterns of education that would eventually convince even their opponents that holiness and higher learning were mutually complementary."[106] In fact, he resisted calls to incorporate vocational training at Wilberforce, arguing instead that a curriculum centered mainly on theology and the classics would provide blacks with what they ultimately needed for holiness and social advancement.[107]

---

[102] In 1856, Payne also became a founding member of the board of directors of Wilberforce University, which at the time was owned and operated by the Methodist Episcopal Church and attracted a number of black students from the North and South. As the A.M.E. Church did not have a university or seminary of its own to train clergy and laity, Payne sought to forge closer ties between the school and the A.M.E. In fact, he eventually moved his family to the campus.

[103] Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 137.

[104] Daniel Alexander Payne, "Welcome to the Ransomed," in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett, 2nd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 234–36, italics his.

[105] Griffin, *Black Theology as the Foundation*, 15. For example, Payne recalled in his autobiography an occasion when he entered the homes of destitute black families to discover that the parents, and the mothers in particular, were illiterate and, as a result, unable to read the Bible. He urged them to seek out education to remedy the situation. Reflecting on that experience, he wrote, "These mothers all had children. What must become of such, if their mothers are unable to train them right? And what mother can train a child in the way it should go, if she is not a daily, prayerful reader of the Bible?" Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 291.

[106] Griffin, *Black Theology as the Foundation*, 18.

[107] Griffin, *Black Theology as the Foundation*, 95.

4. *A truly Christian education and social activism.* Benjamin Mays lauded Payne for a deeply self-sacrificial commitment to black uplift primarily expressed through his lifelong educational efforts and advocacy for abolition.[108] While Mays rightly concluded that Payne's theological concepts did not fall strictly into the category of "other worldly," he failed to appreciate the degree to and manner in which Payne related those views to his activism. Mays stated that Daniel Payne "*developed* his ideas of God *to perfect* social changes" and then "*used*" those conceptions of the Divine to fight for societal alterations.[109] *The Negro's God* contended that Payne's theological and philosophical construct began and ended with social reconstruction. Mays failed to grasp the nineteenth-century educator's full rationale.

Payne grounded his commitment to the abolitionist cause in his theology proper as well as anthropology that he in turn derived from his study of revelation.[110] On the occasion of his ordination by the Franckean Synod of the Lutheran Church in 1839, Payne delivered a speech that related his theological and educational views to the matter of slavery. He argued that American slavery "brutalizes" humankind, binds the "mind," and violates the "moral government" of God.[111] Slavery in the United States, according to Payne, was antithetical to God, humans, and the divinely created order as disclosed in revelation. Many slaveholders withheld general and religious education, making slavery an especially wicked institution. It kept men and women and children from knowing, let alone obeying, God and his laws. Payne held that the restrictions on education within the practice of slavery were responsible for blacks having limited and even incorrect understandings of God. Because it severely narrowed educational opportunities, slavery barred black men, women, and children from all types of moral and spiritual development.[112]

Payne certainly appreciated the value of general education as a means of black empowerment, particularly given the context of slavery and later post-emancipation life for black people. Nonetheless, it is impossible to separate that position from what he understood to be the priority function of education. A biblically informed devotion to God was the underpinning of his educational philosophy: educated men and women became better disciples of Christ, and better disciples—by virtue of being devoted to Christ—wrought societal change. Payne did not see societal restructuring as foundational to his belief system, nor did he see it as the ultimate goal. Rather, social change came as a necessary entailment of his beliefs.

Payne expressed the relationship between God, education, and social transformation best in a sermon he delivered in 1874. Speaking of the local church's responsibility to educate its people and, in this case, its young women, he said the following:

---

[108] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 53.

[109] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 53, italics mine.

[110] In fact, Stokes observes that Payne's approach to the matter of slavery and its abolition was nuanced by a number of different biblical commands and theological points—his theology proper and anthropology in particular. Stokes, "Daniel Alexander Payne," 95–99.

[111] Daniel A. Payne, "American Slavery Brutalizes Man," Blackpast, http://www.blackpast.org/1839-daniel-payne-slavery-brutalizes-man.

[112] Griffin, *Black Theology as the Foundation*, 18.

> I do not mean a smattering, or even excellence in music, instrumental and vocal, in drawing and painting; nor do I mean a mere classical or scientific and mathematical training. But I do mean a Christian education, that which draws our head and heart toward the Cross, and after consecrating them to the Cross sends the individuals from beneath the Cross with the spirit of Him who died upon it, sending them abroad well fitted for Christian usefulness, a moral, a spiritual power, molding and coloring the community, and preparing it for a nobler and higher state of existence in that world where change never comes, unless it be a change from the good to the better and from the better to the best.[113]

Daniel Payne maintained that the ultimate goal of education was to draw one's "head and heart to the Cross," that is, to know the Christ who died upon it. In Payne's view, revelation provided the only means for a person to truly know Christ and his cross. Education, then, starts with God's self-disclosure, fills one with true knowledge, shapes the moral character, and overflows into the surrounding world, "molding and coloring the community."

Mays interpreted Payne's emphasis to be social activism when, in point of fact, it was on instructing women and men in all facets of divine revelation, especially the Scriptures. Whereas Mays started with the goal of social activism and then pragmatically moved toward a socially formed notion of God as his basis and motivation, Payne began with a view of God informed above all else by a careful, lifelong study of Scripture.[114] Education, both general and religious, were means to a much greater end—knowing God and living a life consistent with that knowledge—with efforts to engage in societal betterment as a normal expression of that telos.

IV. CONCLUSION

Daniel Alexander Payne died on November 2, 1893, having served the A.M.E. Church for nearly fifty years and invested in Wilberforce for over thirty. In his eulogy of the "Apostle of Education," Fredrick Douglass remarked, "It may be said of Daniel A. Payne, that he has gone to heaven as the wise counselor and uplifter of eight millions of the colored race in their transition from slavery, sin and ignorance. No lips ever uttered purer words to fallen man than his, and no man has ever gone down to the grave deserving more honor for his service to mankind."[115] As an educator, church bishop, and university president, Payne possessed a multitude of accomplishments to his credit. Benjamin Elijah Mays correctly recognized Payne's contributions to society and that his God-concept was foundational to his commitment to education and social engagement on behalf of black men and

---

[113] Payne, "The Divinely Approved Workman," 109.

[114] In other words, rather than developing "his ideas of God along the lines of social reconstruction," as Mays argued, Payne formed his notions of social engagement around his scripturally derived God-concept.

[115] Fredrick A. Douglass, "Remarks of Fredrick Douglass on Bishop Daniel A. Payne," The Original Manuscript of Fredrick Douglass's Eulogy for Daniel A. Payne, https://www.loc.gov/resource/mfd.25025/?sp=7.

women. However, Mays, a towering figure in his own right, failed to appreciate that Payne derived his understanding of God, educational philosophy, and commitment to social activism from a lifetime of devoted study of all facets of divine revelation, especially the Bible.[116] I have endeavored to show that Daniel Payne's concept of God and resultant commitment to black betterment, far from being socially derived, is best recognized as being—first and foremost—scripturally originated.

V. EPILOGUE: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

As important historical figures, Benjamin Mays and Daniel Payne present contemporary Christians with contrasting visions of how people come to understand and know God and the ways that knowledge informs their response to and engagement with the world around them. Mays argued that one's God-concept is essentially a socially informed construct that one shapes and employs to lesser (e.g., personal emotional comfort and soothing) or greater (e.g., external engagement to address broad social injustice) ends. Payne, in contrast, contended that knowing God was actually possible by means of a careful, ongoing study of and reflection upon God's own self-disclosure, particularly the Scriptures. For him, a proper knowledge of God would enliven the soul to strive for personal holiness as well as social engagement. Therefore, he viewed biblically grounded educational ministry as the linchpin to knowing God, living correctly, and doing good for others.

Christians today, just as they did in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, must decide between two paths: grant external social and internal psychological factors greater authority to shape and remake one's understanding of God or strive to ground how one thinks of him in Scripture. The church's educational ministries can and must play an instrumental role in assisting Christians as they tread the latter path and recognize the serious pitfalls of the former.

Bruce Waltke, in *The Dance between God and Humanity*, outlines a philosophy of Christian education suited for the challenge and illustrated by Daniel Payne's life and ministry in the nineteenth century.[117] Waltke approaches the subject from the perspective of biblical studies and recognizes that Christian education is first and foremost a theological endeavor. He understands theology, then, as "propositional truth," "spiritual formation," and "a 'Way' of life."[118] The Bible makes, as Waltke suggests, "many linguistic assertions about ultimate realities, about God, about human behavior, and about humanity's situation," and "good theology" renders those

---

[116] Though I am critical of Mays's analysis of Payne and take issue with, among other things, his view of Scripture and socio-historical approach, I nonetheless acknowledge his tremendous set of accomplishments and long list of contributions over the many years of his life. See, e.g., Young's excellent synopsis of said achievements. Henry J. Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders Since 1940* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 43–45.

[117] Bruce K. Waltke, *The Dance between God and Humanity: Reading the Bible Today as the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 1–19.

[118] While Waltke outlines his views on Christian education specifically with respect to theological education and seminary training, his framework and ideas are nonetheless applicable for the educational ministries within a local church context.

realities as propositions.[119] Christian education, then, first seeks to "educate each generation of the church in the Holy Scripture's propositional truths, derived from an accredited exegetical method."[120]

By an "accredited exegesis" (among other important elements), Waltke means that the method strives to "open the exegete to an encounter with God."[121] Waltke expresses concern that swaths of theologically conservative exegetes have neglected the role of the Holy Spirit in exegesis, for many have lost sight of the fact that we seek to know the Scriptures in order to know God himself. As John Frame states, "Listening to Scripture is not merely a transaction between ourselves and a book, even a very extraordinary book; rather, in Scripture we meet God *himself*."[122] Daniel Payne's emphasis on a studiously prosecuted study of the Word of God reflects the very same conviction. He understood not only that in the pages of the Bible a person finds data about the divine but also that the Scriptures make relating to God intimately and personally a possibility. Having studied Payne's journals and acknowledging his commitment to regular and careful personal Bible study and worship, Josephus Coan avers, "First, they [his journals] reveal him to be a 'God intoxicated man.'"[123] Payne certainly seems to have engaged in the very type of "accredited exegesis" that Waltke advocates.

Finally, Waltke argues that theology must link the ultimate reality presented in the text of Scripture with how Christians act. He states, "That's good theology. To be sure, we need sound propositions but these ultimately function to ensure sound behavior."[124] Thus, the role of teachers in the church is to educate the laity in the ultimate realities found in Scripture so the people may relate to the God revealed by the Bible and obey his commands. Waltke calls for a decidedly theological orientation to Christian education—one that is biblically grounded and integrates a correct knowledge of and relationship with God along with right living in all of its expressions. Waltke's entreaty echoes Daniel Payne, who—as the "Apostle of Education" well over a century earlier—exemplified and tirelessly advocated for the same: a personal and social ethic derived from a scrupulous study of Scripture and rooted in God's character. May we heed both men's words and follow their lead.

---

[119] Waltke, *The Dance between God and Humanity*, 1.

[120] Waltke, *The Dance between God and Humanity*, 5.

[121] Waltke, *The Dance between God and Humanity*, 9. Of course, Waltke contends, exegesis seeks to discover the "text's intention." However, the biblical text is not the end; a knowledge of God is. In addition, Waltke argues that an "accredited exegesis" also "empathizes with the human author," loves truth, acknowledges the exegete's depravity and need for the Holy Spirit, and understands that a sovereign God "has hidden the revelation of himself in Jesus Christ both in the physical presence at his advent and in his textual presence in Scripture" (11–18).

[122] John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 651, italics his. Waltke actually includes this same quotation, citing Frame's earlier work *Spiritual Formation* from 1981. Frame reproduced the quotation in *The Doctrine of the Word of God*.

[123] Coan, *Daniel Alexander Payne*, 72.

[124] Waltke, *The Dance between God and Humanity*, 18.