

REVIEW

Evans-Jones, Gareth. 2022. *“Mae’r Beibl o’n tu”*: *Ymatebion crefyddol y Cymry yn America i gaethwasiaeth (1838-1868)*. Cardiff: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru. [“The Bible’s on our side”: religious responses of Welsh people in America to slavery (1838-1868)]

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It is only recently that the involvement of the people of Wales in slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade has come to the fore. In what has become a standard history of Wales, John Davies has no entry for slavery in the index and makes only passing mention of the dependence of the Penrhyn slate industry on Jamaican slave plantations and of the export of Welsh woollen flannel for the clothing of enslaved people in America (Davies 2007a: 758, 317, 318, 2007b: 683, 298, 299). Elin Jones, on the other hand, devotes two fully illustrated pages to the Welsh involvement in the trade and ownership of enslaved people in her new and very accessible history of Wales. In one simple but comprehensive map she identifies the routes taken by handloom weavers in the export of flannel to American slave plantations, the ports that were used for the import of cotton and tobacco from those same plantations, and the ship-yards where Welsh copper was used in building copper-bottomed ships for transporting enslaved people. The map also identifies the homes of 46 families who were compensated as former owners of enslaved people in 1833 (Jones 2021a: 116-117, 2021b: 116-117).

This in part is because the full story of Britain’s slave owners has only recently been told. A full and detailed record was kept of the £20 million the British state borrowed to enable compensation to be paid to each owner of every enslaved person at the abolition of slavery in Britain in 1834. It was, however, kept secret in the state archives until publication began in 2007 in a comprehensive and searchable database now maintained by the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery (Legacies of British Slavery 2023). The total value in today’s money is usually put at £16-17 billion; however, as a government loan a more accurate sum would be £97 billion, calculated as a proportion of Britain’s gross domestic product (Measuring Worth – Relative Worth Comparators and Data Sets 2023). The enormity of the loan explains why it was not fully paid off by the

British Government until 2015 (Olusoga 2018). Increasing awareness has led to the acknowledgment of complicity by individuals (Lashmar and Smith 2023; France-Presse 2023) and institutions from the Guardian (Olusoga 2023) to the Bank of England (Slavery & the Bank 2023). Following the murder of George Floyd, controversy ensued concerning the inappropriate commemoration of slave owners such and the Welsh Senedd undertook an audit of people and places associated with slavery in Wales (Wakelin 2021).

In this context Gareth Evans-Jones' study of religious responses to slavery among Welsh people in America in the mid nineteenth century is timely (Evans-Jones 2022). Its strength lies in the detail of its narrow focus. Given that more than 600 Welsh chapels were built in America in the nineteenth century, Evans-Jones focuses on the Welsh speakers who took with them from Wales their nonconformist beliefs and practices. The proliferation of Welsh language newspapers, periodicals and pamphlets in what he describes as the golden age of Welsh language publishing in America, 1838 to 1868, provides a rich resource as the basis of this study. While taking into account the full range of publications, Evans-Jones pays particular attention to three denominational publications: the Calvinistic Methodist *Y Cyfaill o'r Hen Wlad*, the Friend from the Old Country, first published in 1838; the Congregationalists' *Y Cenhadwr Americanaidd*, The American Messenger, 1840; the Baptists' *Y Seren Orllewinol*, The Western Star, 1844. He also draws on three more broadly-based publications: *Y Dyngarwr*, the Philanthropist, 1844-1845; what was to become the main weekly Welsh language newspaper, *Y Drych*, the Mirror, 1850; and the more academic publication with contributions from Wales and America, *Y Traethodydd yn America*, 1857.

The detail of Evans-Jones' research opens a window not only on to the fierce debates on slavery that developed in the 1840s and 1850s and culminated in the American Civil War (1861-1865), but also on to ordinary Welsh speaking people as they made a new home for themselves in America. In the Introduction he explores the factors that pushed them away from Wales: economic hardship; industrialisation; the imposition of the church tithe by the established Church of England; the attempted suppression of the Welsh language in the context of the Blue Books and the Welsh Not (Johnson et al. 1847). And he considers all that pulled them towards America: the freedom to own property, practise their Christian faith, and use their own language, albeit, as Evans-Jones notes in an aside, at the expense of the native American people. An overview of slavery in America in the remainder of the Introduction sets the scene for an exploration of the response of Welsh people as they encountered slavery first-hand. Evans-Jones tells of the acceptance of slavery at the time of the Declaration of Independence and its growth in response to the demand for cotton, sugar and tobacco; he tells of the Missouri Compromise of 1820 banning slavery to the north of the 36th parallel, of Nat Turner's bloody revolt of 1831, and the growth of the abolitionist

movement from the 1830s on. He tells of John C. Calhoun's defence of slavery as 'a positive good' in 1837, of the fugitive slave legislation of 1850 demanding throughout the United States the return of a runaway slave to their master, and of the Supreme Court judgment in 1857 preventing African Americans from becoming citizens. By the time Abraham Lincoln was elected in 1861, the population of African Americans was 4,441,830, of whom 3,953,760 were enslaved people. The ensuing separation of the southern states from the north led to the Civil War, 1861-1865. Abraham Lincoln's Proclamation of Emancipation on 1 January 1863, led eventually to Congress passing the thirteenth amendment in 1865 making slavery illegal. Not only is the period from 1838 to 1868 the golden age of Welsh language publishing in America, but it is also the period which culminates in the abolition of slavery and the re-building of America after the Civil War.

One of the many tragic features of that bitter civil war was, as Abraham Lincoln observed in his second Inaugural Address, the fact that both sides prayed to the same God and read from the same Bible. It is that issue that Evans-Jones addresses in the bulk of his book. Although the quotation he uses as the title of the book, 'The Bible is on our side' is taken from an opponent of slavery (p. 210), it is a claim that was made on both sides of the argument. He turns first to three passages from the Old Testament and then to key passages in the New Testament that figured large in the columns of the Welsh language periodicals as Welsh people grappled with their response to slavery. He finally takes the Fugitive Slave legislation of 1854 and explores the way the passages explored earlier in the book are used in context of debates surrounding that legislation. The book as a whole is a study of the reception of biblical texts and serves as a reminder to people engaged in modern debates over issues such as creation and sexuality that there are moments in history when the way in which biblical texts have been understood changes significantly. Evans-Jones succeeds in plotting how that paradigm shift took place in the context of the response Welsh Christians made when they encountered for themselves the enslavement of fellow human beings and all that implied for the practice of their Christian faith. Throughout, Evans-Jones succeeds in producing an engaging narrative which is supported by detailed end-notes and an argument that is clearly summarised in concluding sections to each chapter.

In chapter 1, Evans-Jones considers the narrative in Genesis 9:18-27, and especially Noah's curse of his youngest son, Ham, the father of Canaan. He first considers a range of modern interpretations of the passage, including those who regard it as an aetiological origin story accounting for the subjugation of Canaan and those who see it as offering an insight into the all-important honour code of the Middle East. He then goes on to track its interpretation by early Christian and Rabbinic Jewish commentators. By the sixteenth century Evans-Jones suggests

three elements of interpretation have become entrenched even though they have no basis in the text itself: that people who are black can be enslaved as black skin is the result of the curse; that Africans embody this accursed characteristic through over-indulgence in sex; that Africans were, therefore, brutish, deserving of enslavement and in need of the Gospel. This understanding of the curse of Ham became widespread among European colonialists, was a significant contributory factor to the development of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and in America came to be regarded as the ideological cornerstone for the justification of black slavery.

Contributors to the Welsh language periodicals tend for the most part to reject this interpretation, argues Evans-Jones. In the writings he surveys, the argument is frequently made that the curse of Ham has nothing to do with slavery, let alone the enslavement of African people. A detailed analysis of a debate between one calling himself 'Tudur' and another, 'Eos Glan Twrch' (the bardic name of John Edwards), however, is a reminder that among Welsh people there were those on both sides of the argument who claimed the support of the Bible. Tudur argued that the Bible's acceptance of slavery and its inclusion of laws governing the right treatment of slaves justified slavery in modern America, as long as slaves were treated well. Eos Glan Twrch, on the other hand, argued that slavery was itself sinful and an affront against other human beings. Tudur, Evans-Jones observes, was a rare exception: most contributions to the Welsh language periodicals were anti-slavery and did not give any credence to the connection between the curse of Noah and American slavery. They had one distinctive contribution to make. Welsh emigrants to America took with them the interest in ancient Welsh traditions that was sweeping Wales itself. Among those traditions was one that could be traced back to the ninth century identifying the Welsh as descendants of Gomer, the son of Ham's brother Japheth. Thomas E. Hughes, writing to *Y Cyfaill o'r Hen Wlad* in March 1869 was not untypical in arguing that the Welsh, as descendants of Gomer, were related to Africans as descendants of Ham. It was as if they were arguing that as members of the one human family, they should treat everyone equally. Some Welsh Americans went further, not least in a poetic drama, *The Treachery of the Blue Books*, to suggest that the freedom they sought in fleeing the tyranny of the commissioners as they endeavoured to suppress Welsh identity, was the freedom enslaved Africans also sought.

In their campaign against slavery, the Jubilee of Leviticus 25 became one of the key texts often cited by Welsh abolitionists in America. How different were the provisions for slavery in ancient biblical times from the treatment of enslaved Africans in America. The freedom envisaged in the Jubilee year, many argued, was a freedom that should be granted to enslaved people in America. In this second chapter, Evans-Jones focuses also on millenarian thinking among many contributors to the Welsh language periodicals: the abolition of slavery and the freedom of the slaves would pave the way for the coming of the millennium.

Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1 January 1863 was published in *Y Cenhadwr Americanaidd* under the headline, *Year of the Jubilee: Proclamation of Freedom for Three Million Slaves*. Evans-Jones traces the way the imagery of The Day of Jubilee when the chains of slavery are broken appears in many a poem and hymn, citing the winning poem in the *Utica Eisteddfod* of 1 January 1868 by T. B. Morris as it uses exactly that imagery in celebrating President Lincoln's Proclamation, Freeing the Slaves.

In the third chapter Evans-Jones examines the way the exile in Babylon was regarded by contributors to the Welsh language periodicals in America as a historical event and also as a concept analogous to the contemporary situation in the United States. Comparing the deportation of the Jews to Babylon with the deportation of Africans to America, Welsh writers tended to see an even greater degree of oppression in the contemporary American situation. In both the biblical exile and the contemporary enslavement of African people individuals were taken from their mother country and transplanted into a new land with a very different language and culture. That led Welsh people to support pioneering candidates politically who sought freedom for Africans in exile. Using the Biblical theme of exile enabled them to combine a number of discourses about slavery in a way that pricked the conscience of the readers.

Turning to the New Testament and the teaching of Jesus in chapter four, Evans-Jones sets out the way contributors to Welsh language periodicals adopted and adapted a strategy used widely among English speaking abolitionists in America. English speaking Americans had developed a new hermeneutic in reading the Bible less literally. Recognising that a slave society is assumed in the Gospel narratives of Jesus and regulated in Paul's letters, abolitionists argued that there was an over-riding principle of brotherhood and equality in the New Testament which exposed the immorality of enslaving people for profit and for cheap labour. Whilst adopting this shift from interpreting the Bible literally to a focus on the 'spirit of the gospel', Welsh abolitionists in America continued to use specific texts and passages from the Bible to support their cause. Hymn-writers spoke of the way enslaved people were the recipients of the grace of the gospel and deserving of bodily and spiritual freedom. Foremost among the texts to which they appealed was the Golden Rule in Matthew 7:12: 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets'. Contributors to *Y Dyngarwr*, the Philanthropist, invited Welsh people to imagine what it would be like if their brother or sister were enslaved, sold on and exposed to sexual abuse at the hands of their masters. That was, argued Owen Jones of Philadelphia, a complete contradiction of the Golden Rule. Coupled with the Golden Rule was the command to love one's neighbour. One of the leading Welsh abolitionists, Robert Everett, argued that 'freedom is the right of every man (sic) of every colour, language and nation, through the divine gift'. His emphasis on

equality related to another text popular among those opposed to slavery, Acts 17:26 speaks of God creating the whole world and all creatures. Writing in *Y Cenhadwr Americanaidd* in January 1843 Everett asked what Welsh people could do. His answer was clear: they should publicise the anti-slavery standpoint and campaign to reject prejudice against Africans on the grounds of race and colour. He made a special appeal to ministers to support the cause and establish anti-slavery societies as part of a mass movement in which unity is strength. His challenge was to compose hymns on freedom just as there were hymns on temperance.

Chapter five considers the response made by contributors to the Welsh language periodicals to one specific piece of legislation, the Fugitive Slave Law passed on 18 September 1850. This decreed that throughout the United States, in the North as well as in the South, runaway slaves when found must be returned to their master. This led to the development of the ‘underground railway’ as runaway slaves were helped to find a way to freedom in Canada. Harriett Beecher Stowe’s campaigning novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Stowe 1981), highlights the way those defending and those opposing slavery both appealed to the Bible. It played a key part in the resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law and the success of the abolitionists. Evans-Jones details seven Welsh translations that appeared within a couple of years, including one by Robert Everett with a personal endorsement by Harriet Beecher Stowe (Everett 1854). Drawing on Biblical texts, contributors to the Welsh periodicals likened Canada to Canaan and the promised land of liberty sought by the erstwhile Hebrew slaves in Egypt. The express prohibition of the return of the runaway slave in Deuteronomy 23:15-16 became a cornerstone of the abolitionist reading of the Bible. In a sermon reported in *Seren Cymru* on 18 September 1860, Edward Matthews declared forcibly that the religion of Moses was an anti-slavery religion and spoke scathingly of the Fugitive Slave Law, describing it as unreasonable, cruel, unscriptural, contrary to the constitution of the United States, and a law that could not be obeyed as a higher power forbade it. This last point had been made at a meeting in Carmel Chapel, Pittsburgh only months after the legislation had been passed. Appealing to Acts 5:29, those present agreed that wherever a law contradicts the word of God or one’s conscience, one is obliged to go to prison or even to death rather than to obey it. Evans-Jones argues that the frequent use of this text in this way suggests that Welsh people were among the most radical in the anti-slavery movement.

In his carefully argued and thoroughly referenced book Gareth Evans-Jones has opened up the little-explored world of Welsh-language periodicals in Wales and shone a light on the involvement of Welsh-speaking people in the most pressing issue of mid nineteenth century America. He challenges those in any context today who maintain that the Bible has always meant one thing, by

demonstrating how differently texts to do with slavery have been interpreted in the last 2000 years. In a final concluding chapter he invites his readers to reflect on the response made by Welsh people to modern slavery. Evans-Jones takes issue with the likes of Hector Avalos who argues that ‘Biblical and Christian ethics were not a major factor in explaining the triumph of abolitionism between 1775 and 1863 or in any other period’. (Avalos 2011: 285) In spite of the fact that the Bible was used to justify both sides of the argument, Evans-Jones is clear: ‘there can be no doubt that the Bible, Christian ethics and, indeed, the Nonconformist culture were significant for the Welsh people of America as they responded to contemporary slavery’. With a few exceptions, the majority were opposed to slavery and convinced that the Bible truly was ‘on their side’.

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