

A Review of *The African American Jeremiad : Appeals for Justice in America* by David Howard-Pitney. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005 viii, 277p.

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David Howard Pitney's revised and expanded 2005 edition of *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* is as timely now as it was when it was first published 15 years ago at the height of George Bush the elder's reign as President. Now when America finds itself mired in what many deem another unjust war abroad called for by Bush the younger and the wrenching and wretched aftermath of Hurricane Katrina has unstitched our neat little fabrics of democracy and social justice at home, Howard-Pitney re-examines our nation's history, hopes, and the confluence of the jeremiad and black intellectual tradition.

The jeremiad tradition in the United States, one passed down from New England Puritans, helped set the tenor for the nation's founding. Possessing on the one hand, an enduring optimism about America's covenant with democracy, humanism, equality, freedom, and the unfettered pursuit of happiness, the jeremiad was equally a keen social critique, messianic and damning when the linear path towards the covenant was marred by craven missteps and deliberate faltering. The African American Jeremiad is a pivotal figure if ever there was one in the history of America and its aspirations. At the moment the nation was founded with its inimitable documents of freedom, *The United States Constitution* and *The Declaration of Independence*, America had instantaneously strayed from its principles as it championed freedom along side of the bondage of Africans in America, a contradiction of such great proportions that it gave birth to the African American Jeremiad. It was the abolition of that peculiar institution of slavery that ignited the passions of free African Americans like Maria Stewart and David Walker and the fiery rhetoric of his *David Walker's Appeal*, and the enslaved who aspired to freedom like Frederick Douglass and his literary masterpiece *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* and Harriet Jacobs's melodramatic *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

Broadly inclusive this time around with chapters on important Black Nationalist figures like Malcolm X and introductory remarks on Marcus Garvey, a sustained engagement with the self-fashioned and wholly out of step conservative iconoclast Alan Keyes, and a revised analysis of the waning figure of Jessie Jackson, perhaps the most laudable study of the Jeremiah can be found in Howard-Pitney's comparative chapter on nineteenth-century black feminist and anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells and Tuskegee Wizard Booker T. Washington. Contrasting Wells's radicalism with Washington's accommodationism, reflected most deftly in his Atlanta Compromise speech, Howard-Pitney astutely scrutinizes Wells's legacy as a Jeremiah.

With the exception of Paula Giddings's supremely researched *When and Where I Enter* with its section devoted to Wells's and Wells's own literary legacy—her journalism and autobiography—nineteenth-century black radicalism and calls for social justice are generally studied as male endeavors: the ascendancy of W.E.B. Du Bois, the declining leadership of the elder statesman Frederick Douglass, among others. Therefore, Howard-Pitney's recuperative history is much appreciated for its gender-inclusiveness. Howard-Pitney also recognizes that it is the gender constrictions and constraints of the

time, namely the Victorian ideals of womanhood as well as motherhood that hamper Wells's ability to flower in the ways possible for, say, W.E. B. Du Bois, her contemporary and one of the co-founders with her of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. It was also the combination of Wells's gender and radicalism that led to Du Bois's excision of her name from his political writings—citing Wells's sharp insights to make a point but referring to her vaguely as “a woman of our race.”

Where Howard-Pitney comes up short too with respect to Wells is in his underestimation of her jeremiad radicalism and disruption of gender norms; it is perhaps his only gaffe in an otherwise fine book. He ropes too much of his analysis on gender when he suggests that her relationship to the jeremiad tradition is “somewhat ambiguous, because [she] relied on less aggressive modes of persuasion.” Part of the jeremiad tradition is tied to religious rhetoric even if the tradition evolved into a secular one in the U.S. It is true that Wells heavily articulated her points in that “just the facts” journalistic mode. But this was of course an important strategy to preclude any attempts to discredit her research as both a woman and black at the time. If one defines aggressiveness purely in the contexts of “fire and brimstone” rhetorical modes of persuasion and cajoling, then Wells too comes up short. But there was quite frankly *no* black leader in the nineteenth-century that called for black people to arm themselves, let alone a women—and publicly. At the height of extralegal violence directed at blacks by white mobs and lynching on all and sundry trumped up charges, the most frequent being that of rape of white women, Wells suggested that “a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give.” Such rhetoric transcends any and all polite notions about nineteenth-century gender ideals. And the articulation of that kind of aggressive persuasion would not be heard again until the 1960's in the voice and writings of Malcolm X.