



Joel Cabrita. *The People's Zion: Southern Africa, the United States, and a Transatlantic Faith-Healing Movement.* Cambridge: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2018. 368 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-73778-5.

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Transatlantic Faith Healing

Joel Cabrita's *The People's Zion: Southern Africa, the United States, and a Transatlantic Faith-Healing Movement* is a transnational story about the role new forms of Christianity had in shaping concepts of identity and community among religious believers, as well as the ways racial inequality and segregation transformed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Cabrita's story begins in the 1880s during a moment when societies, ideas, and economies were being transformed by rapid advances in communications and transport technology, against a background of increasing industrialization and an acceleration of colonial annexation and imperialism. Religion was not insulated from these trends but influenced the direction they took—while itself being transformed. In turn, new religious ideas and practices—and sometimes, wholly new religious sects—shaped the processes of self-fashioning by which believers made sense of themselves and their spirituality. One hitherto under-examined sect was the Zion Bible movement, which referred to itself as Zionism, though it had no connection to the movement for a Jewish homeland. Cabrita argues that the movement was a new iteration of Christianity's transnational history from the nineteenth to the twentieth century.

Zion was founded in the late 1800s by the missionary John Alexander Dowie, a transnational evangelical leader whose movement covered the United States and southern Africa. In all of these contexts it found racially and

linguistically diverse communities who approached the faith in different ways. Cabrita is attentive to the significance of these dynamics, and the contrasting social contexts in which the sect was implanted. Christianity was a web of ideology and social and cultural practices that was not exported wholesale from place to place but was transported in the bodies and minds of people. As Christian evangelism shifted from northern European and North American contexts to the southern hemisphere, its new adherents remade the faith in their own image in ways that made sense in their own environments. This allows Cabrita to develop an illuminating comparison between the Zionist movement among Americans in Chicago and black and white believers in southern Africa.

At the core of *The People's Zion* is an interest in how religions attract new followers and why some are more successful than others in this endeavor. In common with other newly developed Christian sects in the late nineteenth century, the Zion church was a social movement most popular among the working class. Cabrita is especially interested in the Zionists' use of the rhetoric of colorblindness as a means to unite black and white workers in Johannesburg, as well as their embrace of reformist politics. Concurrently, the movement developed a critique of medical practices, particularly vaccination, developing its own ideas about bodily perfection and forms of healing tied to religious faith.

The text is not only concerned about the histori-

cal legacy of the Zion church but also how it exists today. For Cabrita, “Zion’s remarkable success in southern Africa demonstrates the saliency of Christian evangelicalism for diverse societies undergoing profound social changes—industrialization, urbanization, widespread migration, nativist and colonial racially inflected legislation” (p. 2). As well as seeking to account for the popularity of the Zion church—today approximately 30 to 40 percent of Swazis and 30 percent of South Africans are Zionists, Cabrita also asks how the faith functions in such seemingly different contexts as the American Midwest and the whole of southern Africa.

Cabrita uses a broad but detailed corpus of archival materials spanning from missionary archives in South Africa to the papers of the Zion Historical Society in Illinois. In addition to textual materials, the author included present-day interviews with people in southern Africa and the United States. The sources are enriched by the integration of poetry and print media that concretely link the early Zion movement of the American Midwest and southern Africa. These expansive sources speak not only to the history of the sect but also to the personal stories of members of the community.

Chapter 1 begins with nineteenth century Australia and makes links between the evangelical healing movement in this settler-colonial context and the rise of urban reform. The founder of the Zion Bible movement, John Alexander Dowie, then living in Melbourne, was part of competing networks of nascent independent churches that claimed apostolic prowess. Cabrita illustrates how Dowie’s career in Australia shaped the subsequent trajectory of the Zion church in America. Anti-establishment tendencies in Australia, and its important temperance movement, are among the themes Cabrita explores here. What we gather from this chapter is that Dowie’s rejection and ultimate failure in Australia led to his missionary efforts in North America. While Cabrita describes the circulation of the Zionist movement in three settler-colonial societies—Australia, the United States, and southern Africa—she does not demonstrate how the religious movement relates to settler colonialism.

Chapter 2 explores the successes and failures of Dowie in the United States. After spending two years in California, he left in 1890 for Illinois, where he established the Divine Healing Association. At the time, 80 percent of people in Chicago were foreign-born, with Germans accounting for approximately 30 percent of the population while other Europeans such as Swedes, Poles, Italians, and Lithuanians were also a significant presence.

Chicago, which had been home to the Haymarket martyrs, was also a hub of working-class political organizing and Marxist ideology: the population was heavily politicized and unionized. Cabrita’s key intervention in this chapter is to argue that “secular labor movements were not the only forces propagating notions of human fraternity” (p. 61). The reader comes to understand the plurality and contested notions of egalitarianism that were overlapping during this time. Mostly European immigrant workers from various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds attended Dowie’s Zion Tabernacle, and during his sermons, he also catered to African Americans in Chicago by arguing that there was one human race. People of all backgrounds were allowed to attend services and he constructed a church by the name of Zion City and several establishments that he called “healing homes.” He was later fined for maintaining an unlicensed hospital. Integration and healing were key features of the church during its missionary period and are emblematic of other themes to which Cabrita returns repeatedly in this book.

In chapters 3 and 4 Cabrita explores the significance of Zionist egalitarianism in sections that deal with cosmopolitanism and racial exclusivism. The Zion church in South Africa was a contested terrain for English- and Dutch-speaking settlers who were trying to envision themselves as part of a transnational white community. Johannesburg was home to many evangelical Protestant churches that became sites for the promotion of “racial health” and imperial “white South Africanism” (p. 109). In the first part of the twentieth century, the Zion congregation in Johannesburg eschewed racial integration and maintained apartheid. Zionism began to integrate in South Africa once rural black elites began to be drawn to the cosmopolitan project, but such integration did not lead to material equality. While some white South African Zionists were able to visit Chicago in the early twentieth century, black South Africans did not.

After engaging in a thorough history of the social experience of apartheid in South Africa, chapters 5 and 6 articulate the ways that Zion churches emerged within a growing literate black population in other southern African contexts, especially as they increasingly expressed anti-establishment views. The explosion of churches among the urban middle class and unskilled men happened mostly during the interwar period. At the same time, popular healing practices were also linked to religion, and the Zion movement was “a seamless continuation of indigenous healing therapies” (p. 192). While much is written about Zion’s connection to healing, Cabrita misses an opportunity to further explore

the dynamism of indigenous medical practices. Chapter 6 also outlines how the reconfiguration of evangelical churches was driven by inter-Southern African migration as a result of labor demands, particularly in mining. The cosmopolitanism of the Zion church, for black South Africans who came from a variety of ethnic and linguistic groups, elided those differences. This was especially true for black migrants to South Africa. However, perceptions about ethnic differences were not completely erased by participation in the church, where ethnic patriots would sometimes make claims to leadership of their compatriots within the church.

Chapter 7 returns to themes explored at the beginning of the book, outlining the links between the North American and southern African Zion churches. In both contexts, the Bible School and prophecies were central means of galvanizing the congregations. This was mostly achieved by healing prayers. The chapter goes on to explore how Protestants developed a transnational movement that made claims to human equality. At the same time, transnational connections in evangelical Protestantism emerged and were crystalized during a broader imperial project in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Churches functioned as a site for southern Africans to make sense of sickness, health, and healing. Divine healing, too, was an international phenomenon that did not develop in isolation. As Cabrita argues, the development of ideas of divine healing in the Zionist church was part of a global shift in Christian healing therapies. For southern Africans, medical and religious knowledge were co-constituted, mutually reinforcing each other.

Divine healing practices existed in awkward tension with other forms of Christian religiosity such as Victorian piety, which tended to call for a passive response to sickness. Divine healing, in contrast, allowed believers to find earnest and direct methods for remedy. These in turn could be connected in the believer's mind with religious faith, such that personal holiness and disease management were closely interlinked.

Zionist advocacy of egalitarianism sometimes fell short of what it might have been. Southern African Zionists did not explicitly challenge apartheid. Leaders went so far as to say that apartheid officials were "God's servants for your [own] good" (p. 12). Their interventions in, or quiescence in the face of, the political apparatus were paradoxical. In addition to the significance of divine healing and the meaning of egalitarianism, a further unifying theme in this book is the idea of reform, at the level of the church's organization. In southern Africa, congregations were decentralized and factional in their approach, which allowed space for new members to join and be incorporated into a congregation. This meant that in the South African case, black South Africans who were finding the limits of living under apartheid could find an accessible and seemingly multicultural and intercontinental religious movement. That is to say, they were able to make connections with white people from outside of South Africa on the basis of religious affinity.

The book mostly focuses on southern African perspectives and the latter half of the twentieth century, with the cosmopolitan and transnational claims in the endless present. It is not always clear that the Zion church of the late nineteenth century is comparable to that of today. Cabrita's text explains that when the Zion movement started, it sought to be multiracial; however, by the end of the twentieth century, the congregations in Chicago were mostly white and those in South Africa were mostly black. While the mostly monoracial congregation in South Africa is explained, the same is not true for the case in Chicago.

What one gathers from this work is that egalitarianism had its limits insofar as it was incendiary and conventional. It was not the case that leadership within the Zionist movement reflected the diversity of the communities it had reached. This is an interesting work of an understudied religious movement that makes new connections between southern Africa and the United States and illuminates the relationship between social history and the history of religion.

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