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978-1-108-01184-6 - Gospel on the Banks of the Niger: Journals and Notices of the Native Missionaries Accompanying the Niger Expedition of 1857-1859

Samuel Crowther and John Christopher Taylor

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Gospel on the Banks of the Niger

This 1859 publication contains the journals kept by Samuel Crowther (who in 1864 became the first African bishop of the Anglican church) and John Christopher Taylor during their respective missions to the banks of the Niger in 1857 and 1858. Crowther, a rescued slave educated at the Anglican mission in Sierra Leone, and Taylor, another Sierra Leonean, travelled on a trade expedition endorsed by the British government. Taylor disembarked at Onitsha and founded the first mission among the Ibo people, while Crowther landed further up the river, at Rabba. Revealing great Christian zeal and enthusiasm, both journals offer compelling insights into the daily life of a missionary in Africa and also serve as a valuable source of local history. The book includes the account of a canoe expedition undertaken by Crowther, along with a table of expenses for the trip, and a fascinating collection of Ibo proverbs compiled by Taylor.

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Gospel on the Banks of the Niger

*Journals and Notices of the Native
Missionaries Accompanying the Niger
Expedition of 1857-1859*

SAMUEL CROWTHER
JOHN CHRISTOPHER TAYLOR



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THE GOSPEL
ON THE BANKS OF THE NIGER.

JOURNALS AND NOTICES

OF THE

NATIVE MISSIONARIES

ACCOMPANYING THE

NIGER EXPEDITION OF 1857—1859.

BY THE

REV. SAMUEL CROWTHER

AND THE

REV. JOHN CHRISTOPHER TAYLOR,

NATIVE MISSIONARIES OF THE CHURCH MISSIONARY SOCIETY.

With Appendices and Map.

LONDON:

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PREFACE.

THE following pages contain records of the last Niger Expedition, being the third undertaken either directly by the British Government, or by private enterprise aided by its sanction and pecuniary support.

The first, in 1841, under the conduct of Captain H. D. Trotter, R.N., succeeded only in penetrating as far as Egga, and the disastrous mortality amongst those engaged in it is familiar to all interested in the annals of African discovery. It was accompanied by the *Church Missionary Society's* Missionary, the Rev. J. F. Schön, who then laid the foundation of that knowledge of West-African languages, which has of late years proved so invaluable an auxiliary to the translation of the Holy Scriptures into Hausa, Ibo, and Yoruba; and also by Mr. Samuel Crowther, a re-captured slave of the Yoruba tribe, at that time about thirty-three years of age, who then displayed so many excellent qualities, that he was in consequence invited to England, and, after a course of study at the Society's Institution at Islington, received ordination from the late Bishop of London. This Expedition, calamitous as it appeared, was one of the proximate causes of the establishment of the Yoruba Mission, now, at its two chief towns, Lagos and Abbeokuta, a flourishing

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centre of that legitimate commerce which has accompanied the introduction of Christianity.

Many years, however, elapsed before any further attempts were made to explore the Niger, and the remarkable fact was presented of a navigable stream flowing for thousands of miles through fertile and populous countries shut out from intercourse with the civilized world, for years after it had been explored, owing to the dread of the malaria which infected its banks.

Meanwhile, however, the discovery of the preventive qualities of quinine, and other improvements in the treatment of African fever, encouraged further attempts in this direction, and the well-known African merchant, Macgregor Laird, Esq., of Mincing Lane, who had himself ascended the Tshadda in 1833, and to whose enterprise and perseverance the negro race will ever be deeply indebted, pressed on Her Majesty's Government the importance of another effort to open the Niger. The result was the Expedition of 1854, in the screw steamer "Pleiad," under the command of Dr. Baikie, R.N., which, after staying in the river 118 days, returned without the loss of a man. This Expedition also was accompanied by the Rev. Samuel Crowther, who has given a narrative of it in his interesting and valuable journal,* published by the Society in the fol-

* Journal of an Expedition up the Niger and Tshadda Rivers, undertaken by Macgregor Laird, Esq., in connection with the British Government, in 1854. By the Rev. Samuel Crowther. With Map and Appendix. London, Church Missionary House, 1855.

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lowing year. The Natives everywhere exhibited a friendly spirit. Several points were designated as suitable sites for Mission Stations or for Factories hereafter; the town of *Onitsha*, in the Ibo country, with a population of 13,000 inhabitants, about 150 miles from the Nun mouth of the Niger,—the Confluence of the Niger and Tshadda, called by the natives Gbegbe or Igbegbe, and about as much further up the River, commanding the Nufi and Kakanda districts,—and *Rabba* itself, about 200 miles further west, abutting on the widely-extended Mahommedan Hausa tribes,—were definitely indicated; and, in fact, a strong conviction was left on Mr. Crowther's mind by all that he saw and heard, that the whole country was open to Christian enterprise. This fact cannot be better described than in his own words: "Having proved," says he, "the good will of the chiefs and people, the respect they have for their countrymen who have enjoyed greater advantages than themselves, their willingness to be taught, and their anxious expectation to see us fulfil the promise long made to the late King of Ibo; in this respect, I cannot but conclude my report by saying, I assuredly gather that the Lord had called the Church to preach the Gospel to them."

In the following pages we are now able to report the opening realization of these encouraging prospects. The success of the "Pleiad" determined the Admiralty to enter into a contract with Mr. Macgregor Laird for five years, commencing from January 1, 1857, to explore the Niger and its tributaries. Under this agree-

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ment was despatched the steamer “Dayspring,” which entered the Niger in the July of that year. The Rev. Samuel Crowther, and the Rev. J. C. Taylor, a native clergyman, born in Sierra Leone, but whose parents had been sold as slaves from the Ibo country, together with Simon Jonas, and other Catechists, accompanied the Expedition as Missionary Agents. Mr. Taylor was left by Mr. Crowther at Onitsha, to commence a Mission there, and the extracts from his journal relate to his sojourn of twenty months in that important town. The journals of these two native Missionaries are now presented to the reader. These documents have received a few grammatical corrections in passing through the press. They are chiefly confined to Mr. Taylor’s MS., whose knowledge of English is not equal to that of Mr. Crowther.

The importance of this great enterprise, in a mercantile point of view, is fully described in an admirable summary of the results already attained, and the preparations for further commerce, in the following Memorial to the Lords of the Treasury from the Manchester Cotton Supply Association:—

“The Memorial of the Cotton Supply Association,
to the Lords Commissioners of Her Majesty’s
Treasury.

“Humbly sheweth,

“That from the accounts of recent travellers in Central Africa, sent out at the expense of Her Majesty’s Government, it appears that cotton, of quality equal to that from New Orleans, is extensively culti-

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vated in the countries traversed by the navigable streams Niger and Tshadda.

“That your Memorialists consider it of the greatest importance that measures should be taken to ensure a regular communication by the Niger, with these cotton-producing countries, and they consider that the provision for visiting the principal mouths of this celebrated river, in the new contract entered into with the African Steam-ship Company for the conveyance of the mails, will prove of the greatest value in the development of the trade.

“Your Memorialists, however, consider, that in order to encourage the settlement of Europeans and liberated African traders on the banks of the Niger and its tributaries, this postal communication should be carried monthly up the Niger as far as the confluence of the Tshadda with that river, in steam vessels of light draught of water ; by which means the piratical tribes in the Delta would be kept in order, and cotton and other bulky articles of trade would have a safe and free passage to the sea.

“That your Memorialists are informed that between Rabba (which may be considered the centre of the cotton-producing countries, situated about 450 miles from the mouth of the river), and the sea, there are five changes of conveyance, owing to the jealousy of the native chiefs, and that consequently the transit of such a bulky article as cotton is practically made impossible.

“That your Memorialists are aware that English capital and skill are waiting to be employed in the

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establishment of cotton-presses and gins on the banks of the Niger, more particularly at Rabba, provided there be a certainty of the passage through the Delta being kept open by the regular and frequent passing of steam vessels, which your Memorialists consider to be essential to the security of the transit.

“That the medical experience acquired during the late ascents of the Niger, prove that the Delta can be safely passed by Europeans, and that the long residence of Dr. Barth, Dr. Baikie, and English and American Missionaries in the interior, lead to the conclusion that Central Africa is much healthier than the coast, and not more injurious to life than other tropical climates where cotton for the English market is largely cultivated.

“Your Memorialists, therefore, pray that Her Majesty’s Government will take advantage of the present favourable opportunity to encourage the return of liberated Africans to their native lands, the settlement of free blacks from all countries, and the establishment of European Agencies in Central Africa for the collection of produce, and the pursuit of legitimate trade, by extending the monthly mail communication from the sea to such parts of the Niger as may appear most advisable.

“Signed on behalf of the Executive Committee of the Cotton Supply Association, at a Meeting held at the Offices of the said Association, 19th October 1858.

“EDMUND ASHWORTH, *Vice-President*.

“G. R. HAYWOOD, *Secretary*.”

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The prayer of this Memorial has not yet been complied with; and the Government has given notice to Mr. Laird of their intention to terminate their contract with him at the close of three instead of five years. But, at the present apparent rate of commercial progress on the West Coast of Africa, such regular postal communication up the Niger must ere long be conceded.

The influx of European commerce, and its concomitant temptations, cannot fail to be a severe test to the rising Christianity of Western Africa. Mr. Crowther is fully aware of them, as his latest words (p. 445), in the subsequent pages, abundantly show. There is reason, however, to hope, that under the wise and parental counsel of the European Missionaries in the Yoruba country, this difficulty, like others that meet the introduction of the Gospel into a semi-civilized country, will be successfully overcome. A grave responsibility rests, also, on our British merchants for the selection of those only as their agents and representatives in Africa who will exhibit there the deportment, and practice the self-control of Christian gentlemen. One of the most serious drawbacks to the success of Missions all over the world has been, alas! the recklessness and profligacy of our own countrymen in heathen lands.

It is impossible to close these few remarks without one reflection. The journals and papers now submitted to the reader record the first lodgment of the Gospel on the banks of the Niger. Sir T. Fowell Buxton,

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who planned the first Niger Expedition, and his son, Sir Edward N. Buxton, who never wavered in his interest in the cause of Africa, have both passed away to their rest. Still, more recently, the leader of that expedition, Rear-Admiral H. D. Trotter, has been suddenly removed from us, and his death is traced to disease contracted during that trying time. He ever cherished a lively concern in the opening prospects of the Niger. He has been taken away, like so many others, just at the moment when the enterprise which he initiated seemed about to be crowned with success. With mere earthly undertakings, the poor shadow of posthumous fame is all that would remain. Africa does, indeed, owe to these tried friends such a posthumous Memorial; but their reward is far higher than this. The love of Christ was their great motive, and their record is on high. "They rest from their labours, and their works follow them."

W. K.

Church Missionary House, Sept. 1859.

NOTE.—In the spelling of native names, Lepsius's Standard Alphabet, adopted by the Church Missionary Society, has been employed, with the omission of diacritical marks which might embarrass the English reader. It is sufficient to state that the vowels have the Italian sounds, and that no syllable is ever mute, *e.g.* Nupe (or Nufi) is a dissyllable—Nu-pe.

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