WATCH TOWER FAITH IN LIBERIA: A CONFLICT OF FAITH AND AUTHORITY

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Abstract

This research focuses on the introduction of Millennial Dawn faith into Liberia in the 1880s and its place in the societal tension between immigrant Liberians and a Grebo born clergyman. The Millennial Dawn faith drew interest from prominent Liberians. This created tension between religious and political authority and the few Watch Tower adherents found in Liberia. I trace events through a letter written by Samuel W. Seton to C. T. Russell and other correspondence. I examine a Warning sent out by Maryland County clergy, and I touch on the political and religious careers of those involved.

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A letter from Harper, Cape Palmas, Liberia, appeared in the June 1884, issue of Zion's Watch Tower. Dated April 29th, it was from a one-time Episcopal clergyman who had received a copy of the editor's small book, Food for Thinking Christians:

DEAR BROTHER: – Having accidentally met with the little pamphlet published by you, entitled "Food for Thinking Christians," and having carefully read it more than once, I am deeply interested in it, believing I get through it a clearer and more correct knowledge of the teaching of God's holy word than I ever had before. I am constrained to avail myself of your very liberal offer, and ask you to send to my address some copies for distribution among some of my friends and neighbors, who I think will make a judicious and profitable use of them. I should be also very thankful for a few of the tracts, entitled "The Tabernacle and Its Teachings."

Wishing you abundant success in your efforts for the good of mankind, I beg to remain, with assurance of high esteem, yours very respectfully,

Later comments reveal this to be from Samuel Wiah Seton. Seton was a Grebo born in Maryland County, Liberia. His exact birth date is unknown though it was sometime in the 1830s. His original name was Samuel Tobe Kade. He was educated at Protestant Episcopal mission schools and given the surname Seton at his baptism. Early in life he was "a seaman and a warrior," but he turned to religion in the 1860s, serving first as a catechist. He and Samuel D. Ferguson were ordained Episcopal deacons in 1865.1 Their relationship is part of this story, and we meet Ferguson again. Seton was ordained a priest in 1868. In the early 1870s he journeyed inland, preaching to unconverted natives.[2]

As a native-born Liberian, Seton was despised by the Americo-Liberians, American-born or the descendants of American-born blacks who ruled the country. Jane Martin's excellent biographical treatment of Seton notes that no Americo-Liberian ever asked an educated Grebo to dinner, "not even Rev. Seton." Seton sought a return to tribal sovereignty, co-founding in 1873 the Grebo Confederacy, an attempt to unite the Grebo and reassert tribal sovereignty. He opposed central government authority, and some claimed he "was on the battlefield during armed conflict with the government" in 1875. Seton denied participating in the fighting, but he was a Grebo peace negotiator in 1876.[3]

He was accused of "moral turpitude" in 1878 and expelled from the Episcopal ministry.[4] The evidence is mixed, and we think that there was more of ethnic hatred behind the accusation and subsequent expulsion than fact. He had been accused of adultery three times previously. None of these charges were substantiated "because of questionable testimony by the witnesses."[5] Put more bluntly, the accusers lied. In 1878 the accusation wasn't made against Seton but against his new wife.

Seton's first wife died in February 1877, but by September Seton had found a new wife, Laura Potter, a sixteen-year-old from Cape Palmas. She was about thirty years is junior, but for economic and isolation reasons

neither in America nor Liberia was this an issue. Ferguson preferred the marriage. One of the missionaries vocally protested the marriage, declaring that Laura was guilty of adultery. "Bishop Penich interviewed Seton, learned the tale was accurate, and, in an unprecedented action, dismissed Seton from the mission, pending a decision from the Church in America."[6] Seton saw the decision as arbitrary and claimed his new wife had repented. The American bishops vacillated, but suggested that Penich had acted rightly. They were plainly influenced by pervious, unsubstantiated claims against Seton.

The real issue seems to be found in the Immigrant-Black's disdain for the native born, and Seton's political and religious independence. Also, his first wife, Louise, was the first woman of settler descent to marry a Grebo. Many Americo-Liberians would have resented this. Secondary sources conflict. One suggests that Seton married an adulterous woman. Another suggests that Seton committed adultery with the young woman. We were unable to consult Seton's letter of explanations because the Episcopal archive that owns it resisted sharing it. The version we believe correct is that found in an article by Mary Antoinette Brown Sherman: "He was deposed on the accusation of having committed adultery with Laura Potter, age sixteen, whom he married a little more than six months after his former wife's death. He refuted this charge and indicated that he did not feel he had violated his ordination vows. Laura had repented and became a member of the Church prior to their marriage and the villagers had drawn up a testimony to her character."[7]

Seton sought reinstatement in 1882, but this was denied. He reactivated his appeal in 1885, and this appeal was still pending when he resigned from the Episcopal Church. Russell sent Seton regular literature shipments, including back issues of Zion's Watch Tower. One of these was the September 1884 issue. It persuaded Seton and his closest associates to withdraw from the Protestant Episcopal Church. Late in 1887, he wrote to Russell, describing the event: "I am glad to inform you that we, viz: Hon. J. T. G. [Joseph T. Gibson], the superintendent of our county, C. T. B.

[unknown], George H. C. [Perhaps George H. Coleman], and myself – met at Brother G.'s residence on the first inst., and duly recognized ourselves as part of the Church of Christ, after reading the article 'The Ecclesia,' published in Z.W.T. of Sept. 1884."[8] Though only these four are mentioned, there were ten adherents in total all derived from Seton's former congregation and all of them Watch Tower subscribers. They called their new congregation the African Evangelical Church of Christ.[9]

The Watch Tower article they found persuasive condemned creed-bound churches: "We see the early church organized, governed, and in perfect unity and harmony under the rulership or headship of Jesus. Contrast this church organization with what now affects to be a continuance of the same – viz.: the various denominational organizations, each of which binds its members to a mental union on the basis of some creed or dogma of its own (many of them anything but lovely [ie: unloving]) and each having its own laws." In it Russell wrote: "remember that Jesus is your pattern and teacher, and neither in his words nor acts will you find any authority for binding yourselves with creeds and traditions of the elders, which all tend to make the word of God of none effect, and bring you under a bondage." Russell advocated a return to New Testament church polity.

This reads well until closely examined. By 1884 Watch Tower adherents had a clearly expressed doctrine summarized in the small book Food for Thinking Christians and in Bible Students Tracts. The Watch Tower printed in several formats creedal statements of its own. Their doctrines were expressed in short statements that are as much creedal statements as those of the ancient and medieval church. So what did Russell really mean? He meant that Watch Tower doctrine was true and not bound by other church's creeds. He meant that those who read Watch Tower material should look beyond their religion's creed to the Bible and see it as he saw it. It was an untruth to suggest that Watch Tower adherents had no creed and a manipulation of word meaning.

As did Seton, Joseph Thomas Gibson, one of the organizers of the first Watch Tower congregation in Liberia, started his career as a Protestant Episcopal clergyman but transitioned into business. He continued to be listed as an Episcopal clergyman for some months after the fledgling Watch Tower congregation was formed.[10] He was politically and socially prominent, filling various political offices and owning Gibson & Harmon, a shipping company and warehouse. In March 1867, the most prominent citizens of Maryland County, Liberia, passed a resolution praising him for his work as county superintendent. One of the three signers was S. D. Ferguson.[11] He was one of the peace commissioners, sitting opposite Seton at the end of the Grebo war. When J. T. Gibson died in 1901, Liberia's president called him "the father" of Maryland County.[12] The Lagos, Nigeria, Weekly Record 13 noted that he served a term as Liberian Vice-President and that he "often had the Chief Magistracy of the State within his reach if he had been inclined to aspire to the responsible post."

International Bible Students Association.
IS "MILLENNIAL DAWN" TEACHING SCRIPTURAL?
WE BELIEVE THE BIBLE
[Text in image is too small to transcribe fully]
Watch Tower Creedal Statement from 1902.

The three Gibson brothers – including one who seems never to have been interested in Watch Tower belief – were Americo-Liberians, immigrants from the United States. An obituary noted: "His honor R. H. Gibson came to Liberia from the United States in 1835, and was one of a large family, including an elder and a younger brother. On his arrival at Cape Palmas, the deceased judge, with his two other brothers, were under the tutelage of Mr. Thomas Jackson, one of the pioneer settlers at Cape Palmas . . . and it is characteristic of the sound bent imparted to their minds under this tutelage and the abilities of the Gibson brothers that all of them rose to positions of eminence and responsibility in the country." Another source says that the

Gibsons arrived via Barbados in 1865, which seems a more reasonable date, but which we cannot verify, and gives his birth date as about 1837.[14]

None of the original documents we've seen tell us when his brother, Robert Henry Gibson, joined him in expressing Watch Tower belief.[15] R. H. Gibson was also an Episcopal clergyman and worked closely with Ferguson.[16] He eventually entered the law. President Coleman called Judge Gibson a distinguished and incorruptible statesman. According to the 1977 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses, he and his brother Joseph were the mainstays of the Watch Tower adherent group in the late 1890s.[17]

Seton wrote to Bishop Ferguson, resigning from the P. E. Church. His letter is preserved in Zion's Watch Tower and elsewhere. It is permeated with Watch Tower doctrine:

DEAR BROTHER:

I am compelled to discharge the painful duty of acquainting you with the fact that I have this afternoon severed my connection with the Prot. Episcopal Church, of which you are the representative in Liberia. My reason for so doing, in the first place, is that I believe the Protestant churches have departed from the pure word of God, as taught by Jesus Christ and His Apostles, and have adopted human dogmas and traditions of the elders which make void the word of God (Mark 7:13); on account of which Jesus denounced woe upon the Pharisees and others who were guilty of the same thing in His day – Matt. 23:1-33; 15:2, 3, 9; Mark 7:2, 3, 5. Not only was Jesus displeased with the observance of the traditions of men, but the Apostle to the Gentiles strongly warned his converts to beware of the same, among other injurious things. – Col. 2:8, Gal. 1:14. – The nominal church – Papal mother and Protestant daughters – I believe is called Babylon (confusion) by reason of opposing and jarring creeds; and discord prevails among them. I firmly believe God calls you and me, as well as all His people, to come out of her; for her punishment for her sin is due. – Revelation 18:2, 4, 5, 6.

My second reason for leaving the Prot. Episcopal Church is, I desire to preach the pure word of God under the sole authority and commission of none but Jesus, whom I recognize as the only Head of His church. Having my eyes once anointed with the eye salve (Rev. 3:18) of the pure word of God, I dare not remain longer to dabble in the human teachings, which are the prolific sources of discord and wrangling in the Protestant churches.

You may ask, Where are you going, my brother? I answer, I am not going back to heathenism, where I once was; but I have already united myself with the Church of Christ – the church which Christ and His apostles organized, and which is characterized by the preaching of the pure word of God, and by primitive simplicity in all things appertaining to the same church. You are hereby assured that I will ever stretch out the right-hand of fellowship to welcome you, and all my friends and brethren of fellowship to behind in the bondage of Babylon. I shall ever endeavor to win you all to Christ and into His church. May our brotherly love continue! – Farewell!

With fraternal regards, your friend and brother in Christ.[18]

As can be imagined, Ferguson did not react well. Jane Martin, drawing on original correspondence, said:

Ferguson was convinced that this move was "an attempt on the part of Satan to pull down and destroy all that has been reared up for the cause of Christ in this land." The Bishop declared that Seton had withdrawn from the Church because he had not been restored to his position of authority and because the sect ... which he had helped to establish in Cape Palmas did not condemn polygamy. Ferguson issued a warning against the new church and its false prophet, Seton.[19]

There is nothing in the original records that suggests polygamy was an issue for anyone except in Bishop Ferguson's mind. Seton may have been influenced by Edward Blyden, once a Presbyterian clergyman. Blyden and Seton were friends and Seton admired him. In 1887, Blyden published

a book entitled Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race, advocating a syncretistic religion fusing elements of Islam and native practice with Christianity. Holis Lynch suggests that Seton's resignation from the Episcopal Church may have been influenced by Blyden's resignation from the Presbyterian Church in September 1886, "to become an itinerant 'minister of the truth.'"[20] But none of Seton's letters suggests anything but a desire to find and adhere to Christianity. Watch Tower publications from the late nineteenth century almost never mention polygamy simply because there were few Watch Tower adherents in lands where it was common. No Watch Tower congregation advocated or allowed polygamy.

There were other issues between Seton and Ferguson. Seton was native-born, looked down on by the American-settler Liberians. The class differences were distinct. Seton was fully Grebo tribesman. Ferguson's slaver-owner ancestry showed on his face, giving him status in Liberia it would not have given him in the United States. Based solely on origin, Ferguson had been educated and promoted where Seton was not. Their politics differed too. We do not suggest that Seton was jealous of Ferguson. There is nothing in the records we've seen that suggests that. Ferguson felt threatened by Seton. The records suggest that. He had been made Bishop-Elect in 1884, not just on the grounds of his education, but because he was an American-Liberian. There was a struggle for power and voice beyond the religious issues. Seton was elected to the Liberian legislature in 1887, the first native-born Liberian to serve in that body, giving him significant influence. Before the 19th Century ended, Seton was expelled from the legislature for introducing a bill that if passed would have conferred unrestricted citizenship on the native-born.

REV. SAMUEL D. FERGUSON, MISSIONARY BISHOP-ELECT OF CAPE PALMAS AND PARTS ADJACENT.

Ferguson convened a meeting of the principal Maryland County clergy, and they issued a warning to "all the Christian churches of Liberia." Appended to it was a long list of prominent Baptist, Methodist and Protestant Episcopal clergy. We intend Separate Identity to be an exhaustive

examination of the available documentation. We occasionally present documents in full or nearly complete that others will abbreviate once they become a familiar resource. Omitting very little from it, we do that here with A Letter to All the Churches:

Urgent necessity compels us to address you this letter of fraternal warning. Whatever may be the shades of difference between us, we rejoice to know that in the essentials we are really one in Christ Jesus – One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism; and we hope and pray that even the shades of difference will disappear, and that we shall be united in a closer and indissoluble union, that we may the better strive against our common foe, and the more successfully advance the cause of Christ in this land.

The Church of Christ in Liberia has been hitherto blessed in not having to contend against dangerous heresies, such as God's people had to encounter in the early period of Christianity. But recent events warn us that, like the primitive Christians, our faith is henceforth to be sorely tested. Certain publications – "Millennial Dawn," "Zion's Watch Tower," and "Bill Arp's Slips" – by one Mr. Russell, a citizen of the United States of America, are being scattered throughout our land, which openly declare all Christian churches to be in error, and proclaim a false and most pernicious system of religion which is none other than an agent of Satan to abolish and destroy all that has been accomplished here in the name of Jesus.

Now, be it understood that we would deny no persons the right of believing what they choose, or of worshiping God according to the dictates of their own consciences; and there would have been no cause for this letter were it not that the party aforesaid and his followers do not content themselves with their own choice in the matter, but have made it their business to seek to overthrow our faith and to interfere with rights that we hold as sacred as those which we accord to them. This they do by strenuously [sic] endeavoring to propagate their false doctrines among us, and to persuade all – "saints and sinners" – to believe them. Here is what Mr. Russell says to his followers: "We were out of Arp's Slips [containing

words from one who was caught in his trap by reading "Millennial Dawn"] for free distribution for a while, but have plenty now. Order all you can use. Put one in every letter you write; wrap one in every bundle you send away, and if possible arrange to engage help and distribute them to every church in your town. Seeing the good results from the slips already distributed, . . . it is proposed to deluge the country with them." Thus his false doctrines have reached Liberia, and, according to the above command, his followers here are endeavoring to spread them broadcast over the land. It is a bold attack on the Church of Christ that must be repelled.

Among other errors taught are these: "that trial is yet to come – that all are to rise from the dead when Christ comes, that He will offer His salvation to all people; not only to the living, but to those who rise from the dead;" that there is no such thing as everlasting punishment for the wicked; that at death the soul goes down to the grave with the body, and there is no more of it until the resurrection; that the money and valuable lives spent in carrying the gospel to the heathen are a needless waste; that monogamy is nowhere enjoined in Scripture, and therefore polygamy is no barrier to Christian Baptism; etc. etc.

We pause here to analyze the claims and message sent out by Liberian clergy. Their first complaint is that while they give everyone the right to believe as they wish, Watch Tower adherents should keep it to themselves. This was, of course, hypocritical. American churches in Liberia maintained an aggressive evangelism among tribals, seeking to convert them from native religions or from Islam. But, they feared the effects of an aggressive Watch Tower evangelism because it questioned the scriptural validity of church teaching and the worth of missionary endeavor.

As did most American clergy who opposed Watch Tower theology before 1890, they offered no refutation but a list of Watch Tower teachings meant to shock. The last paragraph quoted above is a series of fabrications. The quotation is supposed to come from Russell. It does not, nor does it

represent Watch Tower teaching. The Watch Tower suggested that a full test of faith and character came from hearing the gospel. This was a kind of second-probationism. But Zion's Watch Tower did not teach universal salvation. Watch Tower teaching was very different from this contrived quotation. Writing in the December 1, 1902, Watch Tower , Russell said: "The angels did not declare that our Lord came to bring universal and everlasting salvation to all people; but they do declare that the good message of joy, of privilege, love, hope, shall extend to all people."

Ferguson's claim that Watch Tower adherents approved polygamy is also contrived. As noted above, the Watch Tower seldom commented on the practice because most adherents lived in lands where it was not an issue. When it did comment, it was with obvious disapproval.[21] Clergy in the United States and United Kingdom similarly misrepresented Watch Tower teaching and practice when it suited them. Liberian clergy were not uniquely duplicitous, but were no less blameworthy for being part of a disreputable and inadequate crowd.

That the tract was a panicked response to what they saw as a threat to their authority and influence is demonstrated by the next paragraph:

Christian ministers and others in America see the danger of such false doctrines which are calculated to deceive the ungodly, to make Christians indifferent to the salvation of their souls, and render the civilized worse than savages, and savages worse than devils, and are, therefore, warning their people against them. Says the "Watch Tower," "The influence of many is exerted to hinder and oppose the book ["Millennial Dawn"] and is sufficient to keep it out of book stores generally." Shall we in this land give ourselves no concern while the enemy is digging at the very foundation of our holy religion? Can we calmly allow weaker brethren, our children, and, above all, the heathen for whose evangelization God holds us responsible, to be "led away with the error of the wicked"? We should thereby prove recreant to our solemn trust. No, as we love the religion of

Jesus Christ that has been handed down to us through the apostles, as we love the institutions of our country resting on this holy religion, yea, as we love our children and would hand down to them intact the Truth as we have received it, we are compelled to defend the Church against this assault of the enemy. No Christian who is true to his profession can refrain from solemnly protesting against evil. To be silent or take a neutral position is giving license to it. Says the blessed Savior, "He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad."

Ferguson's argument (We think it obvious that he wrote this tract), is an example of argumentum ad populum . What others believe and do does not give validity to an argument. But Liberian society was based on an authoritarian structure where clergy and politicians were often the same people, and were status came from filling one or the other office. To question authority was a kind of lèse-majesté. Nineteenth Century Liberian immigrant society was heavily religious, combining state actions with religious authority structure. We see this in the tract's wording: "No, as we love the religion of Jesus Christ that has been handed down to us through the apostles, as we love the institutions of our country resting on this holy religion, yea, as we love our children and would hand down to them intact the Truth as we have received it."

The tract quotes from the March 1888, Zion's Watch Tower , but truncates Russell's words. In more complete form, Russell wrote of Millennial Dawn: The Plan of the Ages :

You will be pleased to learn that the seventieth thousand is now in the binder's hands. The sixty thousand already in circulation are nearly all out as the result of personal efforts on the part of those who love the truth and delight to serve it. The influence of many is exerted to hinder and oppose the book, and is sufficient to keep it out of book stores generally. As always, such are "grieved that we teach the people." Thus, and in every conceivable way, professed servants of truth oppose and hinder its spread

and endeavor to keep the truth hungry of the flock from the green pastures, from the "meat in due season." But praise God, it is shining more and more; and every consecrated one who sees the light lets it shine as the Chief-Shepherd instructed. Each seems to realize himself a minister (servant) of the truth, and each looks up his Christian friends, writes to them, and sends them DAWN and TOWERS. And thus God is having the truth, the "good tidings," preached to every "Israelite indeed in whom is no guile," notwithstanding the opposition of the clergy, who, from their office and profession, should be the very ones to sound the Jubilee trump to our dear brethren and sisters.

It is easy to see why Ferguson did not quote Russell more fully. Following well-trod paths, Liberian clergy tried to redefine Watch Tower belief in the same way that they redefined native beliefs in the earliest days of the Liberian Republic. "Knowing that the indigenous religions are . . . an obstacle to the propagation of their own faith ..., clergymen established a campaign of degradation. This was done by demeaning African religious worship as paganism and animism."[22] Indigenous worship was pagan and animistic. And Watch Tower belief did eviscerate orthodox doctrine. Clergy response was to turn everything into a 'bad name' without rational refutation; this was certainly the case with the Liberian clergy in Maryland County.

Ferguson and whoever else contributed to this tract compared the Watch Tower message to Satan's corruption of Eve:

Be therefore on your guard, brethren, especially those whom God has set as watchmen upon the walls. Be not deceived by specious arguments, nor be tempted to believer false doctrines because they are said to be supported by Scripture. Remember the devil also quoted Scripture. This author's telling us that there is no everlasting punishment involved in the second death, and promising "light – more light" if we will follow him reminds us of the temptation which led to the fall of our first parents. "Ye

shall not surely die," said Satan, and "In the day ye eat thereof then your eyes shall be opened ["Light – more light;"] and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." It is the same temptation, then, and should Christians allow themselves to be deceived as Adam and Eve were, their fall will lead to worse consequences.

We wonder if any of the clergy saw the irony of refuting Watch Tower Conditional Immortality doctrine with Satan's claims made to Eve. The one who promises immortality in the Genesis story is Satan, not God. If one adopts Ferguson's reasoning, the Protestant Episcopal Church was teaching Satanic doctrine. Ferguson's purpose was to create fear of divine retribution on any who listened to Seton and his associates. He presented his readers with another contrived quotation and a false claim. The "light – more light" quotation is false. Russell's view as printed in Watch Tower articles in this era was that 'light,' divinely given understanding and moral guidance, came from following Jesus, not from following any man, including himself.[23]

Ferguson quoted a number of scriptures about false doctrine and false prophets, but the tract contained no refutation of Watch Tower teachings. Instead, it called upon church members to reject "Millennial Dawn" because the clergy did, because it would upset the social structure. It seems strange that fewer than 150 Watch Tower adherents should produce this kind of fright:

Let us ... put all our people on their guard. Pastors and preachers of the gospel, consider what a solemn responsibility we are under . ... Shall we, as hirelings, by our carelessness, allow the wolf to catch and scatter the sheep? How lightly some regard it, this greatest danger that has ever threatened Liberia. War and pestilence and famine bear no comparison to it: they kill the body, while this ruins immortal souls; not only of the present generation, but the evil will descend to generations yet unborn.

Why Ferguson elected to call Liberian clergy "hirelings" is a puzzle. The hirelings of Jesus' parable were disreputable, false shepherds (John 10:1-18) It appears to us that Ferguson, as was true of many 19th Century clergy, was able to quote scripture at will, but his quotations were divorced from context.

The Maryland County clergy passed a series of resolutions, including the text in the Warning tract. A series of 'resolves' called for the appointment of a committee "to devise plans to check the damnable heresies ... being circulated in our land by one Mr. Russell." Prayer meetings were called for "to be held in all the churches" in Maryland County every Wednesday, "to implore God's deliverance from the threatened dangers of war, famine and false doctrine." The committee's response was to reject Watch Tower belief on the basis of their own opinion: "We ... declare that, in our opinion, the book called 'Millennial Dawn,' the periodical known as 'Zion's Watch Tower,' and 'Bill Arp's Slips,' ... contain false doctrines that are most pernicious to the cause of Christ." It was the duty of all preachers of the gospel "to warn people of the great danger of following such false doctrines." They said that Watch Tower teaching was "the hand of Satan."

In the January-February 1889 double issue of Zion's Watch Tower , Russell quoted from a missionary magazine showing cooperation between Catholic and Protestant missions. He suggested that it proved that the Catholic Church and Protestant religions were the Babylon the Great of the Apocalypse. He observed that, "Protestants and Roman Catholics are recognizing each other in a practical manner; each thus recognizes the other as a good and proper teacher of religion; and each leaves the other in quiet possession of whatever part of the field it may enter upon first. ..." This contrasted strongly with their attitude toward the Watch Tower faith. He used the Liberian denominational reaction to Seton and Zion's Watch Tower as an example:

It is now about two years since Brother Seaton, [sic] under the Lord's providence, by some means unknown to us, receiving some of the Watch Tower publications, was led out of sectarian darkness into the Bible light. Too noble to attempt to preach covertly the Bible doctrines, while under pay to preach for an "ism," the doctrines of men, and anxious for the spread of the "good tidings of great joy," as well as for the great reward in heaven for those who suffer in its service, Bro. Seaton boldly renounced his pulpit, salary, etc., and explaining his reasons to his flock began to teach and preach the Bible only. As a result of his labors quite a number – natives and foreigners – received the truth and are rejoicing in it.

Russell's words present us with an historical puzzle. Seton was defrocked in 1878, and unauthorized to preach anywhere. If he had a pulpit and salary, we do not know where. We presume – with no documentary evidence – that he filled the pulpit of St. James Church, where he preached previously. But we do not know. The alternative is that Russell simply got it wrong. Whatever the truth is, Russell continued:

The interest may be judged from the fact that upwards of two hundred copies of DAWN VOL. I. and thousands of copies of the Arp Tract have gone to two of these mission stations, and we now have over fifty regular subscribers to the Watch Tower there.

As might be expected the Episcopal bishop there, Bp. Ferguson, was highly incensed against the Bible teacher and teachings which led men more directly to the fountain of truth – the Bible – and consequently exposed some of the absurdities, pretensions and false doctrines of sectarians. Forthwith the bishop formed a union of all the denominations represented there – Episcopalian, Methodists and Baptists, – to withstand the unsectarian Bible Teachings of Bro. Seaton and the TOWER.

A meeting was held in the Baptist church, in which ministers and officers of five churches (three Episcopalian, one Baptist and one

Methodist) were present to the number of forty-four. Here resolutions were passed unanimously, by men who probably had never read Millennial Dawn, denouncing it and the Watch Tower and the Arp Tracts, as the doctrines of Satan; and requesting the prayers of all Christians that the Lord would deliver them from their false teachings. A four paged tract embodying these resolutions and warnings, and bearing the signatures of the aforesaid forty-four ministers and officers was printed and scattered; a copy of which is before us.

Truly, it is wonderful, how Satan does blindfold some of the Lord's children; for we have no doubt, that some of these are the Lord's, and that if prejudice could be removed long enough for them to get a glimpse of the questions really involved, some would gladly receive the truth. This union of all the sects against the truth reminds one of the union of the Pharisees, Sadducees, etc., against the truth in the early church. It reminds us too of the prophet's words, "Why do the heathen rage and the people imagine a vain thing. The mighty ones of the earth and the rulers set themselves in opposition to the Lord and his anointed."

The time will come when those who now despitefully use and persecute the truth, and its advocates, will be brought to a knowledge of the truth, and be ashamed. Thank God there is forgiveness for such ignorant opposition to his Word. Ere long the morninglight of the grand new day will enable all to discern truth from error. Bro. Seaton's last letter tells that already prejudice is giving way to some extent. The church there requests your prayers and sympathy.[24]

Seton, a native tribesman, and the Gibsons, Americo-Liberians preached to everyone, but seem to have mostly reached the most prominent citizens of both groups. The records as we have them do not tell us much of their mission work, but in 1889 Seton wrote to Russell telling of the baptism of a native chief:

I am glad to advise you of our compliance with the request of the heathen chief at Gramay, [Probably Gamai] referred to in my letter to you, as the one who had sent for us to baptize him. On Sunday Brothers Brunot, Brown, Clark and myself went down to the appointed place on the beach.

Instead of one candidate, we found two ready to outwardly symbolize their union with the Lord by immersion. These we examined as to their faith in Christ's death as their redemption price, and found fit subjects for baptism into his name, and immersed them into the name of Christ, in the presence of the whole town's people who came out to witness the ceremony. ... We had a divine service in the open air, and I preached to the congregation ... after which Brother Bruno[t] spoke – indorsing and confirming the sermon, which we hoped had made a lasting impression upon the people.

Having made the two converts, we, after the manner of the apostles, resolved to hold weekly service here, in order to feed our "new born babes" in Christ who desire the sincere milk of the Word that they may grow thereby. Before leaving the town, we had a strong assurance from the people that ere long we will be called upon to baptize more people therein. May the good Lord give us grace to be faithful in the harvest work for his own glory, and crown our feeble efforts with such success as will most honor him.[25]

We cannot identify "brothers" Brown and Clark. "Brother" Brunot was Felix R. Brunot, a native-born teacher at the Hoffman Station mission school. We lack a solid biography for him, and, at this point in our research, do not believe he maintained his interest.

Seton remained active in Liberian and tribal politics. He was elected to the National Legislature in 1887, serving "with credit" to himself and giving great satisfaction "to the whole tribe."[26] He was the first native Grebo to hold a seat in the Legislature. James Jenkins Dossen, Vice

President of Liberia and certainly not Seton's friend, outlined Seton's career, writing that he graduated from "our State College ... the son of a heathen Grebo rescued from Heathenism, educated, Christianized and fitted for civilization and citizenship, and who held several prominent positions in the State such as a member of the National Legislature, Public School Commissioner ... and lastly judge of the Probate Court, which office he filled up to the time of his death."[27]

Though few letters from Seton appear in Zion's Watch Tower , one of them suggests that he and Russell maintained a regular correspondence. A letter from Seton arrived late in 1890 after a prolonged silence due to illness. The "harvest work" was progressing despite opposition, he said: "The books, papers, tracts, etc., you sent me came to hand and are doing their intended work. Enclosed please find another order for more books." He was "gratified" by the publication of Poems and Hymns of Dawn . "You may recollect that I called your attention, some two years ago, to the necessity of having such hymns, so we might 'sing with the spirit and with the understanding,'" he wrote. "I am greatly rejoiced to know that you have felt the same need." We're seldom introduced to other Liberian interest. Seton's letter takes us to the name of another reading and circulating Watch Tower material: "A recent letter from Bro. C. J. George to me, in reference to the Church of Christ, ... says: 'When you communicate to America you will not fail to remind Bro. Russell of the interest that is being awakened at L___, and also to send me a few more of his tracts (assorted), missionary envelopes, and a copy of the Emphatic Diaglott.'" [The Emphatic Diaglott is a Greek-English interlinear translation of the New Testament.]

C. J. George's identity is uncertain. There are two possibilities. Christopher J. George was a mission school teacher at Cape Palmas about 1885, and thus someone Seton would have known. He was educated in mission schools in Sierra Leone, but served in various ways in the Protestant Episcopal Church in Liberia. However, Seton's letter suggests that C. J. George was resident outside of Liberia. Charles Joseph George

was a native trader in Lagos, Nigeria and a member of the Legislative Counsel. He connects to Seton through Blythe. The "L___" of Seton's letter may be Lagos, Nigeria. When Seton wrote in 1890, George was a member of the legislative council and in contact with Blythe. We lack sufficient documentation to make a positive identification.

Despite his declining health, Seton was encouraged by the spread of the message:

I am also glad to advise you that the harvest work here is still going on with unabated zeal and perseverance amidst opposition and persecution from the nominal church and the world. We feel assured that the presence of the Lord is with us, which in great measure stimulates and cheers our otherwise drooping hearts. ...

Thus you see how the truth is gaining ground, and must eventually prevail over errors and sophistries of the devil, and traditions of long standing. May the good Lord still bless your labor for his own glory![29]

We lose track of Seton's interest after this. We know he wrote articles for American and Liberian publications, but with the exception of two, we haven't seen them. The destruction caused by the most recent Liberian civil war has taken most of that material out of our reach. Seton died in February 1908, still active in politics. At least one Watch Tower congregation remained up to 1901. The 1977 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses mentions it:

Just how and when the two elderly brothers, Henry and Joseph Gibson, came into possession of Zion's Watch Tower is not known. But home Bible study classes were held regularly, as a number of old-timers, including the late president of the Republic, William V. S. Tubman, have testified. He remembered that the meetings were held when he was just a young boy. ... The Memorial of our Lord's death was observed by the group

yearly on the anniversary night corresponding to the Jewish calendar date of Nisan 14. The Gibson brothers died around the turn of the century and evidently the classes then ended.

We don't think it is at all evident that the Bible classes ended with the Gibson's death. There is a blank in the record up until 1926. A report of annual communion attendance for all of West Africa counted about 50, but reports in that era are notoriously incomplete. It is possible that the number of believers in Liberia was very small and out of touch with the Watch Tower Society. We simply do not know. Though it was certainly an exaggeration, by 1895 Russell believed the message had reached every nation:

This pastoral work extends all over the world; for the "harvest" work extends now to every land. The same mail which brings many queries on many subjects, and requests for remembrance in prayer, and kind expressions, or occasional fault-findings, from all parts of our land and Great Britain, sometimes brings also an inquiry from individuals or groups of the interested in Africa, or India, or Australia, or South America, or the West Indies, asking for advice from God's Word concerning the ways of life. Some of these require no reply; or only a reference to a back number of the TOWER or to the DAWN, while others require replies at considerable length. But all that we can do is gladly done, for the Lord and his people. It will, perhaps, surprise some to learn that we received about 20,000 letters during the past year, 12,939 of which were answered.[30]

Liberian clergy confused zeal with numbers. The movement was very small, and remained so into the 20th Century. Increased numbers came after 1902. When Russell reported the attendance at the annual communion in 1900, numbers for the United States – the most numerous – were insignificant: "We are not foolish enough to think that these figures give any occasion for boasting, for the total amounts to only a few over 2,600, and we have every reason to suppose that we have heard from two-thirds of

those who celebrated."[31] Figures for attendance outside the U.S. hadn't been compiled when he wrote, but they were equally small. Why, then, did Liberian clergy panic in 1887? The best answer is they were unprepared to refute Watch Tower doctrine. They knew what they believed, and they knew their status depended on others believing them to be religious and social authorities. Their beliefs had neither a rational nor scriptural basis. Even if totally and scripturally true, they were unable to defend them, so the small number of Watch Tower adherents appeared larger and more threatening than they were.

Liberian Watch Tower meetings drew the politically and socially prominent. Social and ethnic pressure affected those who might otherwise have been interested. Watch Tower belief would tend to move one to the fringes of Liberian society. Overcoming this was a very slow process and did not begin until after the mid-20th Century.

Readers will have noticed that we did not, as some have done, identify Seton's faith as Jehovah's Witnesses. After the death of C. T. Russell, founder and editor of Zion's Watch Tower , the movement fractured. Jehovah's Witnesses are one strand derived from the original movement. Their doctrine significantly differs from Russell's in some key ways. Seton and his associates cannot be described as Witnesses, but we can describe them as Watch Tower adherents.

NOTES

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3. Historical Dictionary of Liberia , Scarecrow Press, Maryland, Second Edition, 2001, 296.

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6. Ibid., 105.
7. M. A. Sherman: Liberian Intellectuals in the Nineteenth Century, Liberian Studies Journal , Volume 6, Number 2, (1975), 167.
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9. M. A. Noll and C. Nystrom: Clouds of Witnesses: Christian Voices from Africa and Asia , IVP Books, Illinois, 2011, 71. View from the Tower, Zion's Watch Tower , December 1887, 1.
10. The Domestic and Foreign Mission Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America: Triennial Report of the Board of Managers, Annual Report of the Board of Managers, Reports of Standing Committees, Recognized Auxiliaries, Missionary Bishops, etc., For the year ending August 31st, 1889 , New York, 1889, 110.
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12. President Coleman's Annual Message, Liberia – Bulletin No. 19, November 1901, 36.
13. The Lagos, Nigeria, Weekly Record as quoted in Liberia – Bulletin No. 17, November 1900, 73.
14. Address by Kenneth Y. Best, Publisher and Managing Director of the Daily Observer Newspaper, on the Occasion of the 188th Anniversary of the Founding of the Township of Caldwell, All Purpose Hall, Caldwell Boulevard, Saturday, May 25, 2013, retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/notes/liberian-observer-online/updated-occasion-of-the-188th-anniversary-of-founding-of-the-township-of-caldwell/10151500950048215/?_fb_noscript=1 on August 8, 2016.
15. The 1977 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses [page 139] names him as Henry, but this is his full name.

16. Letter from the Rev. S. D. Ferguson, The Spirit of Missions , October 1876, 500.
17. 1977 Yearbook , 139-40.
18. Extracts from Interesting Letters, Zion's Watch Tower , February 1888, page 8. We have changed Seton's Roman numeral scripture citations to a modern format.
19. J. J. Martin: Samuel W. Seton: Liberian Citizen, Liberian Studies Journal , Volume XII, Number 2, 1987, 108.
20. H. Lynch: Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro Patriot, 1832-1912 , (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 166.
21. See ZWT November 1-15, 1893, double issue, page 343; January 1, 1894, 8; July 15, 1909, 211.
22. S. L. Somah: Settlement of Liberia and its Environmental Impact , (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1995), 33.
23. See for example Zion's Watch Tower of March 1886, 5.
24. View from the Tower, Zion's Watch Tower , February 1889, 1-2.
25. Extracts from Interesting Letters, Zion's Watch Tower , November 1889, 7. [Not in Reprints.]
26. Letter from J. H. Dennis, dated May 16, 1896, as reproduced in Liberia, Bulletin No. 9, November 1896, 83.
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Watch Tower Faith in Liberia

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