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George Liele and the Ethiopian Baptist Church: The First Credible Baptist Missionary Witness to the World

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ABSTRACT

Asked to determine the foundations of Jamaican Christianity and Baptist mission, most British Caribbean Baptists in Britain and the Caribbean would talk of the arrival of missionaries William Knibb and Thomas Burchell as the leading pioneers of European missionary movement during the nineteenth century, or tell of such giants of mission as William Carey and Adoniram Judson. Such views are supported by an esteemed number of academics such as Shirley Gordon and Robert Stewart who also locate the emergence of Jamaican Christianity in the nineteenth century missionary movement, describing all that came before them as practitioners of African religion steeped in syncretic practices which they often camouflaged under the Christian label of ‘native Baptists.’ Yet the reality of the evolution of Jamaican Christianity and subsequent religious perspectives, rather than being located in Eurocentric Christianity, can be located in one of, if not the most successful Baptist missionary movement which preceded the BMS and William Cary by 10 years and Adoniram Judson and the American Baptist Missionary Union by 32 years – the Ethiopian Baptists (EB), led by a once enslaved African American, George Liele.

This paper seeks to demonstrate the rise of Liele and the EB and how it was able to become the first Baptist missionary movement, accepted and encouraged by the wider global Baptist family. It documents their origins in the crisis of the American Revolutionary War, and their growth under Liele and his primary mission in Jamaica, but also details its influence around the world, from Nova Scotia to the Bahamas and the UK. It details how ‘bold’ Baptists in America and Britain played their part in giving credibility and support to this most unusual of all ministries, often going against the popular wisdom of the day which believed that Africans transported into enslavement were no more than ‘slaves’ a people without culture, identity and faith and who were therefore undeserving of being treated as human beings, much less ministers and missionaries of equal status and position under God.

Introduction

Baptist faith originated during the Reformation in England in the sixteenth century. It then emerged in the American colonies in the early seventeenth century, with the first church being established in Providence Rhode Island (1636 -1637). Whilst each Baptist church is

autonomous, Baptists like their counterparts in Britain, organized themselves into associations for mutual support and growth. Churches were established along the east coast of America, both within plantations and the wider society, and it was as a consequence of this that both black and white Christians often worshipped together at that time.

It was on one such plantation in Virginia, owned by Henry Sharpe, a British subject and Baptist Deacon, that a slave George Liele (formerly named Sharpe) was born and raised. His mother was Nancy, and his father, Liele from whom he took his name when free. Liele Senior was believed to have been the only African Christian on Sharpe's plantation and Liele in describing his upbringing recalled how members of the both the black and white community in Virginia at that time described his father as "the only black person who knew the Lord in a spiritual way in that country."¹ Liele therefore always had an awareness of Christianity, but it was not until he was an adult that he became a Christian.

Conversion and Early Ministry

1770 saw Henry Sharpe locate to Burke County, Georgia with his slaves, and it was there under the pastoral leadership of a Rev Matthew Moore, of Buckhead Creek Baptist Church that Liele accepted Jesus Christ for himself in 1773. Of his conversion Liele stated:

I saw my condemnation in my own heart, and I found no way wherein I could escape the damnation of hell, only through the merits of my dying Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; which caused me to make intercession with Christ, for the salvation of my poor immortal soul; and I full well recollect, I requested of my Lord and Master to give me a work, I did not care how mean it was, only to try and see how good I would do it.²

Liele's conviction was sure for all to see and Moore recognising his potential for ministry gave him a "call at a quarterly meeting to preach before the congregation"³ thereby allowing him to take his place as a part of the global Baptist 'family.' Such was his success that Moore then encouraged him to preach on the many plantations in the area, as well as to the predominantly white congregations around them. It was as a consequence of this that Liele then became the first African Baptist pastor of the first black church in America, Silver Bluff, on the Gaulphin Plantation in South Carolina, and then shortly afterwards in 1775 was ordained, once again leading the way by becoming not only the first African Baptist minister, but the first African minister in America.

It was whilst as the pastor of Silver Bluff Church that Liele came to understand the work which he was to do. He developed a concern for his African brothers and sisters, determining that he would seek to enhance their lives by introducing a relevant contextual church able to speak holistically to their needs, whether they were enslaved or free. To this end he and his followers co-opted the notion of 'Ethiopianism' and began to refer to themselves as Ethiopian Baptists, Ethiopia being understood by the wider Church at that time as the Hebrew translation of the Greek word Ethiopia, meaning Black or African. It was therefore used by

Liele and his colleagues as a term which allowed them to embrace their full identity, both politically and spiritually without having to visibly challenge their enslaved condition, whilst never failing to remind themselves of their never ending historical link to Africa.

Such were Liele's skill and abilities that the church grew quickly as did his reputation as a preacher and evangelist amongst Baptist in the region. Hughes Oliphant, himself a noted scholar of preaching said of Liele, "His preaching was received by black and white alike...George Liele was a gifted evangelistic preacher who knew how to present the gospel in the language of his people."⁴ However following the outset of the American Revolutionary War in 1775, between Britain and America, Sharpe joining up with the British forces in Savannah, moved his slaves with him. He did however appreciate the ministry of Liele, and so gave him his freedom so that he could preach freely in Georgia and South Carolina, without restriction. Liele forever grateful, in gratitude nevertheless committed himself to remain in the 'free' service of Sharpe as long as he needed him. This he did for four years until Sharpe was killed in battle.

Liele nevertheless took advantage of his new found freedom, using the opportunity to widen his appeal so that despite the war and its restrictions, he soon founded the first African Baptist Church in North America, named First African Baptist Church of Savannah, which he and his successors had once called the Ethiopian Baptist Church of Jesus Christ, the first church within the developing Ethiopian Baptist Church movement.

The American Revolutionary War: A Catalyst for a Global Missionary Movement

1782 saw the war coming to an end, with the British on the losing side, but having promised freedom to those Africans who had fought with them. They therefore sought to honour their agreement, by releasing them to freedom however events happened so quickly that many of the victorious Americans in the South tried to re-enslave these Africans before freedom papers could be granted, relenting in many instances only if compensation was then paid for the loss of their 'property.'

Liele himself was considered to be such 'property' by the children of Sharpe who had him imprisoned in an attempt to re-enslave him. Liele fearing a life of slavery produced his freedom papers, but also sought help from the British and received support from one Colonel Kirkland, a member of the British armed forces. Kirkland was based at Port Tybee, Savannah and agreed to protect Liele whilst he and all British citizens and sympathisers awaited their evacuation in 1783 to enclaves of their choosing within the Empire. Liele and his family chose to relocate to Jamaica, but before we discuss the work of Liele in Jamaica, it is necessary to discuss how the trustworthiness of he and the EB came to be established within the Baptist world, which then gave credence to its missionary endeavours around the globe.

Dr John Rippon and the Global Credentialing of George Liele and the Ethiopian Baptists

Whilst Liele was the head of the EB, his own integrity was given credibility by one Dr John Rippon, Baptist minister and historian based in London, England. Rippon was the first editor of the Baptist Annual Register from 1790 -1802, a periodical established to chronicle the activities of the Particular Baptists in England and America. He gained a reputation as the pre-eminent Baptist historian of his day, even though he was based in England for such was his enthusiasm to document Baptist history that he was known to communicate with Baptists as they established themselves all over the world. Throughout his life he was known to have communicated with Baptists in Philadelphia, Savannah, South Carolina, Virginia, Dublin in Ireland, and later missionaries in Indian and other BMS regions, and it was through this communication that he learnt of the ministry of George Liele and the Ethiopian Baptist Church.

It is believed that Rippon heard about Liele initially through a mutual acquaintance of Liele, Rev Joseph Cook of South Carolina, previously of Bath, England, who wrote to Rippon in September 1790, to tell him that:

A poor negro, commonly called among his friends, Brother George, has been so highly favoured of God, as to plant the first Baptist Church in Savannah and another in Jamaica.⁵

Also a prominent merchant, and member of the Jamaican Assembly in Kingston, Jamaica, Stephen Cooke contacted Rippon in 1791 saying of Liele:

He has been for a considerable time past, very zealous in the ministry; but his congregation being chiefly of slaves, they had it not in their power to support him; therefore, he has been obliged to do it from his own industry...however, I am led to believe that it has been of essential service to the ministry; however, I am led to believe that it has been of essential service to the cause of God, for his industry has set a good example to his flock, and has put it out of the power of enemies to religion to say, that he has been eating the bread of idleness or lived upon the poor slaves.⁶

Rippon as a consequence sought to find out about Liele, his supporters and the EB for himself and so communicated with him directly from 1791. Rippon in seeking to establish Liele's believability sent him more than 50 questions about himself and his ministry. Liele appears to have responded openly in the same year, sharing his history, faith perspective and pastoral ambition, along with information as to the ministers, ministries and individuals who had supported his ministry both in the USA and Jamaica, stating in part that:

My occupation is a farmer, but as the seasons in the part of the country are uncertain, I also keep a team of horses and wagons for the carrying of goods from one place to another, which I attend myself, with the assistance of my sons, and by this way of life I have gained the good will of the public, who

recommend me to business and to some very principal work of the Government...There is no Baptist church in this country but ours. We have purchased a piece of land at the east end of Kingston, containing three acres, for the sum of £155, and on it have begun a meeting house, 57 feet in length and 37 in breadth. We have raised the brick wall eight feet high from the foundation, and intend to have a gallery. Several gentlemen, members of the House of Assembly, and other gentlemen, have subscribed to the building about £40. The chief part of our congregation are slaves, and their owners allow them, in common, but three or four bits per week (equivalent to 5-7 pennies then and 3p today) for allowance to feed themselves, and out of so small a sum we cannot expect anything that can be of service from them; if we did, it would soon bring a scandal upon religion: and the free people in our society are poor, but they are willing...And Rev. Sir, we think the Lord has put it in the power of the Baptist societies in England to help and assist us in completing this building...we place all our confidence in you to make our circumstances known to the several Baptist churches in England, and we look upon you as our father, friend, and brother...Your letter was read to the church two or three times and did create a great deal of love and warmness...I remain with the utmost love, Rev. Sir, your unworthy fellow labourer, servant and brother in Christ. George Liele.⁷

So began Rippons relationship with Liele and this letter was followed up by a visit to Jamaica by a Mr Green in 1792, who travelled on behalf of Rippon, and returned with Liele's Church Covenant⁸ in hand, approved and witnessed by 12 members, 6 male and six female. This covenant was the foundational document of the EB and was read monthly in each of their congregations. It served Rippon as a testimony of their intent, and being impressed he passed it on to the Baptist leadership in Britain.

Rippon at the same time then embarked on direct correspondence with EB missionaries around the world, confirming and documenting the extent of this missionary movement as the first global Baptist missionary organisation, which just so happened to be African-led. By the turn of the century Liele, and his followers had so convinced Rippon that he was able to declare in his writings to the world that Liele and the EB were a credible Baptist witness which were impacting the world in a very significant way. Having 'joined the dots' as it were, Rippon then passed on this information and his understanding of the EB directly to his colleagues across the Baptist world and more specifically the BMS led by John Ryland, who were soon to become the primary supporters of the mission of the EB in Jamaica.

The Establishing of a Baptist presence in Jamaica

So to the person George Liele, his ministry, and that of the Ethiopian Baptist Church of Jamaica (EB). Having been evacuated from Savannah, Liele arrived in Jamaica in 1783, determined to continue his ministry. However in order to repay Colonel Kirkland the \$700 which he had borrowed in order to transport his family to Jamaica. He was forced to take up employment with General Campbell, the then Governor of Jamaica, who often called upon

him when the island was ‘under arms’ to “be on duty;...being a trumpeter to the troop of horse...and employed in carrying all cannon that could be found lying about this part of the country.”⁹ Liele admitted that this was a distraction to his mission for it took him two years to repay the debt in full, so that he could then receive his papers stating that he was indeed a free man.

Liele was then able to concentrate on building up the church in Jamaica, supported in his work by Moses Baker, himself a mulatto (coloured) barber from New York, America, Thomas Swigle (Swiegle) a coloured creole African from Jamaica, and George Gibb an African American who had also travelled from Savannah at the close of the war.

All were literate and so were not only pioneers in establishing churches and schools, but they were able to also share their experiences directly with the wider Baptist family around the world. Liele himself stated:

I have a few books, some good old authors and sermons, and one large Bible that was given me by a gentleman. A good many of our members can read and all are desirous to learn.¹⁰

Much of his support came from Britain and it seems that his previous contact and faithfulness to the British cause in America had endeared him to Baptist sympathisers within the Jamaican Assembly who sought to encourage his ministry by allowing him to preach in various homes, as well as the then Kingston Race Course. Impressed, they in turn sought support from their Baptist colleagues in Britain who responded with funds to support the building of the first Baptist church on the island, the Winward Road Chapel, located at the corner of Victoria Avenue and Elletson Road.

The church was completed in 1793, and shortly thereafter George Gibb Bailey was sent by the BMS to confirm the person and work of Liele and the EB. Bailey on meeting Liele and seeing the work which he had planted, with a thriving congregation of over 500 people, reported back that:

I have inquired of those, who, I thought, could give me an account of Mr Liele’s conduct, and I can say, with pleasure, what Pilate said, “I can find no fault in this man.” The Baptist church thrives abundantly among the Negroes, more than any denomination in Jamaica; but I am sorry to say, the Methodist church is declining rapidly.¹¹

We know from Stephen Cooke’s testimony to John Rippon that Liele was as a result supported in the paying for the church in Kingston from the wider Baptist family, both inside and outside of Jamaica, and so they too became aware of how difficult a task this group of Baptists were facing. Stephen Cooke confirmed this in a further letter of support for Liele to Dr Rippon in which he stated that:

The idea that too much prevails here amongst the masters of slaves is, that if their minds are considerably enlightened by religion, or otherwise, that it would be attended with the most dangerous consequences, and this has been

the only cause why the Methodist ministers and Mr Liele have not made a greater progress in the ministry among the slaves.¹²

The success of the EB and Liele, meant that he was negatively ‘targeted’ by the Jamaican Assembly, supported by the plantation owners, who saw any gathering of groups of Africans as the recipe for a revolution. They therefore utilised every opportunity to prevent him from preaching, banning him in 1794. He was:

Charged with preaching sedition, for which he was thrown in prison, loaded with irons, and his feet fastened in the stocks. Not even his wife or children were permitted to see him. At length he was tried for his life; but no evil could be proved against him, and he was honourably acquitted. (However, he was thereupon) thrown into gaol (jail) for the balance due to the builder of his chapel. He refused to take benefit of the insolvent Debtor’s Act, and remained in prison until he had fully paid all that was due.¹³

Perhaps the hope had been that if they were able to remove the leadership of the EB, then the work would eventually come to an end. By the time Liele had resolved these issues and gained his release from prison, the church had fragmented, but not disbanded, under the leadership of others who remained committed to the authority of his Covenant.

Liele himself became an itinerant preacher, which positively enabled him to take the gospel throughout the island until he was able to resume his pastoral duties in 1797. He then relocated to Spanish Town, the then capital of Jamaica, establishing the second Baptist church on the island supported by funds from the UK and the USA, which were encouraged once again by Stephen Cooke who had clearly taken on the role of advisor to him and who perhaps should be credited with the introduction though not the content of the Church Covenant. Cooke being a politician created a means whereby Liele was allowed him to continue preaching. He informed Rippon that:

I very early saw into the impropriety of admitting slaves into their societies (Methodists), ‘without permission of their owners’ and told them the consequences that would attend it: but they rejected my advice; and it has not only prevented the increase of their church, but has raised them many enemies. Mr Liele has very wisely acted a different part. He has I believe, admitted no slaves into society but those who had obtained permission from their owners, by which he has made many friends; and I think the Almighty is now opening a way for another church in the capital.¹⁴

Of this new church, the Covenant and his position, Liele ever the pragmatist stated that:

The reading of this covenant once-a-month, when all are met together from the different parts of the island, keeps them in mind of the commandments of God. And by showing the same to the gentlemen of the legislature, the justices, and magistrates, when I applied for a sanction, it gave them general satisfaction;

and whenever a negro servant is to be admitted, their owners, after the perusal of it, are better satisfied.¹⁵

Yet the pressure continued to be applied by the State, for example, following an influx of free Africans at the turn of the century from the Bahamas, Santo Domingo and the newly freed nation of Haiti, who on their arrival also began churches, the government of Jamaica feared revolt, when in 1802 the Jamaican House of Assembly began an increased assault on all 'native' or African preachers by amending the 1792 Consolidated Slave Act. The Kingston Council ordered that they be prevented from preaching claiming that what had been taking place under the leadership of all African preachers was, "pretended preaching, teaching and expounding the word of God...by uneducated, illiterate and ignorant persons and false enthusiasts."¹⁶

Whilst there remained testimonies as to the goodness of the work of Liele and the EB they too were included in the ban, which when enacted in 1805 by the Jamaican Assembly and 'enforced uniformly' in 1810 punished offenders with imprisonment and death for those who chose to disregard this rule by holding anything from a prayer meeting to a full service, without permission. The consequences could be quite severe as was shown in the case of one such person, David, reported in the Baptist Quarterly of 1790. David organised a prayer meeting in the stead of the then leader, Moses Hall, only to have it attacked by slave owners who not only brutally killed him, but cut off his head and paraded it through the village as a warning to others.

The situation was volatile, with no reason for celebrating after the passing of the 1807 Abolition of the Transatlantic Slavery Act which was so highly praised in Europe at that time. Of the members of the EB Swigle was determined to be an 'unlicensed' preacher and so was prohibited from preaching, Baker champion of the work in the West was severely restricted to the estate of Vaughan, whilst others less well known were prevented from preaching altogether and so faced severe financial difficulties.

However amongst those white people who knew their work directly there was only praise, with their support for Liele and the EB never diminishing, and if anything it increased. For example, one plantation owner declared of Baker that they knew "of no inconvenience he has been to our property to counterbalance the substantial benefits we have received"¹⁷ and such was the support for them from abroad that funds were given to them and their congregations from all quarters of society. For example, Lady Gray of Portsmouth, gave instructions for Stephen Cooke to give Moses Baker £5 (approximately equivalent to £425 today) to support his family though those hard times.

It was in this climate of fear, hatred, violence, impending poverty and the clear restrictions on the ministry for black or African preachers, leaving the needs of the majority African population untended, that caused the leadership of the EB to contact the BMS in Britain for people to assist them. But let us first take a brief look at that cadre of leaders who despite the many voices of opposition from the legislature and other religious groups, convinced the BMS that they were indeed not only a credible Baptist witness, but more importantly a

Christian witness, and not as was insinuated a ‘rag tag’ group of ignorant Africans steeped in unacceptable African centred religious practices.

Pioneering leaders of the Ethiopian Baptists

Though Liele was the leader of the EB and more specifically the church in Jamaica, his work and credibility there could not have been progressed without the partnership he developed and the leadership provided by Moses Baker, Thomas Swigle and George Gibb and others who history has perhaps failed to document as being a part of the leadership of the EB. We are therefore fortunate to have testimonies in regards to these three leading characters, primarily thanks once again to the earlier work of John Rippon, his contact with them, and subsequent correspondence and articles which they wrote themselves.

The banning and imprisonment of Liele in 1794, caused the EB to fragment into many independent but united churches, and as a consequence Moses Baker came to the fore and became the most well-known of all their missionaries in Jamaica. Yet Baker was the most unlikely of candidates, a mulatto from New York, married in the Church of England and on arriving in Jamaica worked as a barber for three years in Leguine, 15 miles outside Kingston. He also had a benefactor in the person of Mr Isaac Lascelles Winn, a Quaker who owned the Stretch and Sett sugar estate (later named Adelphi) in Falmouth, within the parish of St James.

Winn had sought his assistance, “to instruct my negroes in religious and moral principles.”¹⁸ However before Baker could take on this role, he began to lose his sight. Desperate he was advised to go to Kingston and see George Liele and his congregation. Of that meeting he said that he went so that, “they might see the works which God had done for me.” Baker was nevertheless impressed by Liele, stating that, “Though but little acquainted with him, I thought he was a good man: and was baptized by him at this time.”¹⁹ Baker found his sight miraculously restored after a year, before he took the medicine recommended to him.

Baker nevertheless accepted Winn’s invitation and travelled to Winn’s estate, where he ministered from across the west of the island for the entire 40 years of his ministry until his death in about 1826. Whilst he appears to have had little real contact with Liele and the EB in Kingston, it is clear that he was a follower of Liele for when asked by his contacts in Britain to explain how he ordered the communities of faith which he oversaw in the region, in a letter to contacts in Leicestershire, published in the Evangelical Magazine in 1803 which began “I soon recommended”²⁰ was actually a word for word copy of Liele’s covenant. Yet so impressed were his hearers in Britain that they were led to introduce him in such glowing terms as “The eminent Black Preacher, Moses Baker.”²¹ In Jamaica too, he made a good impression with a Mr Hill describing him as:

A plain, home-spun man, rugged as a honeycomb rock; his eyes were then failing; his head was bound with a handkerchief, for he had suffered torture in America, which had injured both his ears and eyes. His appearance was that of no common man. His language was direct, and his demeanour was marked with simplicity.²²

Significantly the BMS missionaries were also won over, missionary James Coultart on visiting Baker in 1821 commented that:

Baker was neither superstitious nor enthusiastic...He possessed good, plain common-sense; he spoke like a spiritual-minded person, and with much feeling. He was decisive and firm in religious discipline; always consistent and influential.²³

As a consequence Baker over time was as much a correspondent as Liele, with Baptist groups in Britain, including the New Connexion General Baptists and more particularly John Rippon and John Ryland leader of the BMS who sent the first BMS missionary John Rowe to Jamaica in order to support the work of Baker who despite the many restrictions was able to contextualise the gospel in such a way that by 1814 it had grown to 8,000 members.

Thomas Swigle unlike Baker was a free creole coloured Jamaican. Born on the island he was baptized by Liele and his role is best summed up in his own words:

I am one of the poor, unworthy, helpless creatures, born in this island, whom our glorious master, Jesus Christ, was graciously pleased to call from a state of darkness to the marvellous light of the gospel; and since our Lord hath bestowed his mercy on my soul, our beloved minister (Liele), by the consent of the church appointed me deacon, school-master, and his principal helper. We have great reason in this island to praise and glorify the Lord, for his goodness and loving-kindness, in sending his blessed gospel amongst us, by our well-beloved minister, brother Liele...The blessed gospel is spreading wonderfully in this island: believers are daily coming into the church; and we hope in a little time to see Jamaica become a Christian country. I remain respectfully, Rev. and dear Sir, your poor brother in Christ, Thomas Nicholas Swigle.²⁴

It is clear from this one letter that Swigle too was an articulate man, and it is therefore no surprise to learn that he too became the influential minister of a second church in Kingston, which he described thus:

Our church consists of people of colour and black people; some of free condition, but the greater part of them are slaves and natives from the different countries of Africa...We have 5 trustees to our chapel and burying-ground, 8 deacons and 6 exhorters.²⁵

Throughout his correspondence with Rippon, Swigle continued to confirm the connectedness of, and his relationship with other leaders of the EB, saying of Liele, "Myself and brethren were at Mr Liele's chapel a few weeks ago, at the funeral of one of his elders; he is well and we were friendly together." Commenting on Baker's need for assistance he stated, "I gave him Brother George Vineyard, one of our Exhorters, an old experienced professor to assist him."²⁶

George Gibb is perhaps the least known of the three leaders, but his contribution is no less significant. An African American, he accompanied Liele to the church in Spanish Town and

worked closely in the same region with him until his own death in 1826. Many of his members later became the foundation for Philipppo's church and such was his abilities that BMS records state, "Some of our best people came from the churches first formed by Liele, Gibb, and Moses Baker."²⁷

Working Together: EB and BMS Missionaries

Enslaved Africans having run the daily gauntlet of violence, rape, and abuse saw in the legislation brought in 1802 and following, the removal of their one and only refuge, their church. Such was their need in the years which followed that missionary Lee Compere upon his arrival in 1817 wrote home that he been approached many thousand Baptists in Kingston who were in need of a pastor. The situation was confirmed by reports from other respected gentlemen on the island who told of situations where they knew of some ten to twelve thousand Baptists who were in need of a preacher. So, the existing EB rather than considered to be a 'native' faith, were accepted by the BMS as a Baptist enclave, of that there is no doubt, and so how the BMS chose to work in partnership with the EB should be seen in the context of this truth.

The first BMS missionary John Rowe arrived in Jamaica in 1814. He was sent with specific instructions to report to Moses Baker and support his work in the region, and this appears to have been the tone of the relationship between the EB and all newly arriving BMS missionaries. The EB appears to have taken the lead, giving direction to a cadre of supportive BMS missionaries, some fresh out of Bible College, but all with no real understanding of African cultures and African people. An example of how secure in their positions were members of the EB that Baker when accused in 1811 of preaching to 'slaves' from other plantations which took him beyond agreed parameters, he wrote with boldness to the BMS explaining that:

Mr Vaughan and some other Gentlemen seeing this congregation he was angry, knowing they were not all his own and said to me, Mr Baker, you must order this people away. I answered him, Sir, I am not to leave the word of God, but if these Gentlemen do not choose that their servants should hear the word of God, let them send their Bookkeepers to order them away.²⁸

And it was in fact Baker who sent the letter of condolence upon the death of Rowe in Falmouth, explaining to the BMS his ministerial achievements up until his death in 1816.

Yet despite this potential for growth and a successful Baptist witness in Jamaica, the reality on the ground was that by the time these new missionaries began arriving, the pioneering leaders of the EB were by then at least 60 years old, and the toils of enslavement and life itself had taken its toll on them, so that they had grown increasingly frail and disabled. Additional African leaders were developing, but many of them were executed after the 1831 Baptist Revolt, and so there were few of them, if any, who were ready to take the 'reigns' or have the influence of the original leaders when Emancipation did finally come.

The EB had nevertheless pioneered a movement across the island which was to be the foundation stone of BMS involvement on the island and so Baker's ministry in St James having thrived for 40 years, became the foundation for believing populations developed under the leadership of William Knibb and Thomas Burchell. Swigle having pastored members in Kingston until his death in 1811, saw Lee Compere (1816) and then James Coultart (1818) inherit much of his work, including taking over the pastorate of church and the school at East Queen Street, with Joshua Tinson pastoring Liele's first church, the Winward Road Church, before establishing Hanover Street. George Gibb also died in 1826, and James M Phillippo, who had arrived at about the same time as Knibb and Burchell, was known to have inherited a significant majority of his members.

It is clear that the BMS missionaries in arriving in Jamaica inherited thriving congregations, building on the work of the EB, and taking their lead from these brave pioneers. It is also clear that in so doing they were sympathetic to the cause of the EB and emancipation, even though they had been instructed to take up their mission with no thought for political involvement. They rather than import their own cultural perspectives to a 'foreign' situation, as other missionary organisations had done, chose instead to learn from their African brothers and sisters, by embracing their church rituals, roles and responsibilities.

It was as a result of this that BMS missionaries often faced a great deal of opposition from other denominations as well as their own leadership. Lee Compere for example, averted a crisis in these early missionary encounters by returning home a year or so after his arrival, stating his wife's ill health as the cause, rather than forcing the BMS Committee to deal with the political issues which he was facing in regards to the injustices of enslavement. We know that this was an issue, for his fellow missionary John Clarke who was based in Brown's Town, St Ann's Parish gave some indication of the tensions which had arisen when he asked the BMS, "Was Lee Compere before his time in his hatred of slavery, and was this the real reason for his leaving the work of the BMS?"²⁹

The BMS went to Jamaica perhaps believing as William Wilberforce did when advising the BMS about their desire to be involved in Jamaica that:

I am inclined to believe that preachers in a white skin would be likely to be treated better and respected more than black ones. This is all I can now say. When the meeting of Parliament shall bring me within reach of West Indians again, I will try in private to soften the prejudice of some leading men connected with that country: but I fear that the prejudices of the resident colonists, and their irreligious habits, are such as to render all attempts to soften them unavailing.³⁰

Yet for this ministry to have succeeded there had to be more about it than merely the colour of their skins. How were BMS missionaries able to turn the hearts of the black majority population, given the racism and hostility which existed? How were they able to endear themselves to the African majority who would naturally have considered any 'white' missionary to be in sympathy with those who were a part of the established order, as many of

them in the church were also ‘owners’ of slaves too? How did they enable the growth of a Baptist movement from 8,000 in 1814, to over 20,000 by Emancipation. I believe that the answer is to be found in a closer look at William Knibb, the most successful of all BMS missionaries to Jamaica, and now deemed to be a Jamaican national hero.

William Knibb: Inheritor and Messenger of the EB traditions

Little is known of the relationship between George Liele and William Knibb, but it is clear that Knibb was probably made aware of him as he was the only African preacher authorised to preach widely in Jamaica at the turn of the century, he also visited the BMS in 1822, and their paths must have crossed as Liele appears to have outlived all of his colleagues by the time Knibb arrived in Jamaica in 1824. Baptist records also significantly note that Knibb not only attended Liele’s funeral in 1828, but that Baptists understood him as having been tasked with the responsibility of fulfilling the mission of Liele and the EB by leading the African majority to their Promised Land – Emancipation.

Knibb was indeed a man on a mission who unlike many of his peers, never attended Bible College and only went to the ‘mission field’ in order to complete the task begun by his brother Thomas, who had died in Jamaica in 1823. Yet Knibb did not simply become the completer of his brother’s task, but that of the EB, making enemies as he did so.

Knibb was often accused by fellow missionaries from other denominations of allowing African leadership to thrive and allowing the continuance of syncretism by:

Letting congregations grow beyond the personal supervision of the minister, giving too much power to the leaders (African)...requiring special dreams and seizure by ‘the spirit’ as a qualification for baptism, and ... made baptism by immersion into a superstitious rite.³¹

He supported the ‘class and leader’ system begun by Liele. This was a means whereby congregational members who were unable to meet regularly in one place were appointed leaders or ‘Daddys’ who would watch over them, providing much needed support in the absence of the pastor who had many congregations to oversee. Each member was then given a ticket with their name on it, which not only confirmed their membership, but gave the church a clear understanding of its membership. The leader or Daddy system was a way of contextualising the tribal or family systems which they would have experienced at home in Africa. Yet though it was not too dissimilar from methods employed by European missionaries, many criticized it, defining it as syncretic. The most significant of all ‘Daddys’ was Sam Sharpe, a member of Burchell’s church, who was advised by Knibb during Burchell’s sabbatical trip to England at the time of the 1831 Baptist War.

Knibb was ‘a thorn in the flesh’ to the authorities in Jamaica, never failing to challenge any attitude which belittled or denigrated his African brethren. He also made a stance against his own BMS missionaries when they suggested that in the face of impending Emancipation, that they buy slaves as a means of purchasing their freedom. His negative response led to him being labelled an ‘officious meddler.’

He demonstrated a relentless desire and support for the developing a relevant African Jamaican church as a witness to the world, and whilst he did not use the term 'Ethiopian' as Liele had done, he often used the term Africa and African. This gave encouragement to a freed people many of whom had never lost the notion of Africa as their home, and remembered and returned to using many of the languages which they had spoken as free Africans.

The increased 'Africanisation' of the church then widened, his enemies broadening to include some of the BMS Committee members in England, which resulted in his being recalled home to explain himself in 1832. His speech to his colleagues was perhaps his greatest of all speeches in support of the Baptist work in Jamaica. In it he declared:

I appear as the feeble and unworthy advocate of 20,000 Baptists in Jamaica who have today no places of worship in which to meet, their chapels have been destroyed, and no Sabbaths, and I believe and solemnly avow my belief, that by far the greater part of that twenty thousand will be flogged every time they are found praying. I call upon you all by the sympathies of Jesus, whose mission was, and is, to bind up the broken-hearted, and to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound. O Lord, open the eyes of Christians in England to see the evils of slavery and to banish it forever from the earth.³²

Knibb may have increased his enemies as a result, but he showed himself to be a true pastor to his people. He survived the experience but it was an experience which led him to develop his own doubts as to whether there could ever be an acceptance and support for an African led Jamaican Baptist church guided by the BMS. He therefore returned to Jamaica, and with the support of Burchell determined that they would separate the church in Jamaica from its British Baptist cousins, in order to establish a native church able to develop in its own way.

To this end he worked to consolidate their African identity beginning 'The Baptist Herald and Friend of Africa' newspaper in 1835, as well as creating missionary journals which encouraged the work of those once enslaved Africans who had returned home to their roots as missionaries. Such was his success in this area that in Jamaica 'Baptist' became a term synonymous with African, so much so that when renegade Portuguese and other slave ships found themselves in the Caribbean, those slaves who were made free were immediately taken to the Baptist church where it was expected that they would best be integrated into Jamaican society.

In 1842 the appropriately named Calabar College and School, (named after an African city in Nigeria) was completed, with the intention of preparing indigenous men and women for the leadership of the Jamaican church, society and the mission fields. However, before it could take root and be the vehicle Knibb had envisaged, both he and Burchell died in 1845 and 1846 respectively, and with them too, all the hopes and dreams of the EB.

The Global Missionary movement of the Ethiopian Baptists

The work of George Liele and the suggestion that he and the EB were the first credible Baptist witness to the world is consolidated by the fact that their missionaries, many having survived the American Revolutionary War, travelled throughout the world, taking the gospel with them.

Of Liele's converts, Andrew and Hannah Bryan, along with Kate Hogue, Hagar Simpson, and Samson Brown and his wife, converted in Savannah, chose to remain there, Bryan becoming the first 'official' pastor of the Ethiopian Baptist Church of America, which in a very short time is believed to have developed a membership of about 300. Such was the effectiveness of Bryan's ministry that on his death not only was he known to Dr Rippon and the Baptist in England, but the Savannah Baptist Association, a 'white' organisation situated in the heart of the pro-slavery South, passed the following resolution on hearing of his death:

The Association is sensibly affected by the death of the Rev. Andrew Bryan, a man of colour, and pastor of the First Coloured Church in Savannah. This son of Africa, after suffering inexpressible persecutions in the cause of his divine Master, was at length permitted to discharge the duties of the ministry among his coloured friends in peace and quiet, hundreds of whom, through his instrumentality, were brought to a knowledge of the truth as 'it is in Jesus.' He closed his extensively useful and amazingly luminous course in the lively exercise of faith and in the joyful hope of a happy immortality.³³

David George, a friend of Liele and previous member and pastor of Silver Bluff Church after Liele departed, left to plant a Baptist church in Nova Scotia where he stayed for ten years, developing a worshipping community, despite racial tensions, made up of 60 members, both black and white. George continually faced opposition and never having got used to the very cold weather in Nova Scotia, relocated with a group of fellow African 'Americans' to the Sierra Leone, East Africa in 1792. Once there he once again pioneered Baptist ministry, not only making links with Baptist in Britain, but travelling to the UK and interacting with the Baptist colleagues in the BMS in order to engender sympathy for the Baptist cause in Sierra Leone. Of his standing as a missionary Rippon wrote:

Governor Clarkson, in the most unreserved manner assured me that he esteemed David George as his brother, and that he believes him to be the best man, without exception, in the colony of Sierra Leone.³⁴

Hannah Williams a female member of the EB, whose work has thus far been left undocumented, was also a previous member of Liele's church in Savannah, and was known to have travelled to Britain where she made links with the Baptist Missionary Society and the Baptist Union, having received a letter of introduction from Liele. Jesse Peters (previously Gaulphin) was one who also had previously attended the church in Savannah. He chose to return to South Carolina and plant a work in Augusta. A 'Brother' Amos also of the church in Savannah embarked on a work in New Providence, in the Bahamas. By 1791 he was reported to have had a membership of some 300 people, growing to 850 by 1812.

Records show that Liele stayed in contact with all of these missionaries and he never failed to be respected by them as their pastor. Each one consolidated the credibility of this movement as the first Baptist witness to the world.

Conclusion

The history of the Ethiopian Baptist Church is one which was birthed in the bosom of the Americas, grew to adulthood in the crisis of the American Revolutionary War and found its true identity on the mission fields of the world, whose headquarters was in Jamaica, perhaps the most volatile of all slave enclaves of the British Empire.

George Liele its visionary leader saw his task as enabling his African brothers and sisters to receive the truth of the gospel for themselves, and despite the attempts of the Jamaican Assembly, the plantocracy and the Church of England to prevent him establishing an inclusive church, available to all, he triumphed. Liele and his colleagues demonstrated a maturity of faith which saw them receiving support not only from the wider Baptist family, but ‘sympathetic’ members of the Jamaican Assembly, and the British aristocracy.

Whilst Liele and his fellow leaders of the EB died before they were able to see the fruits of their labour in a freed African Jamaican people, and the developing of a truly contextual church on the island, what they did leave was a strong Christian witness, of over 20,000 Baptists able to be smoothly transitioned into their new lives as freed people by a BMS leadership in sympathy with their original intent. It was indeed a triumph of belief and faith over injustice and his influence upon William Knibb, who later went on to be considered one of the greatest of men in Jamaica, cannot be under estimated.

So the Ethiopian Baptist Church far from being an insignificant native religion, as has often been said in recent times, were in fact a group of Baptists who believed and demonstrated themselves to be ministers and leaders of equal standing to those in Britain, the Americas and the world, thereby proving themselves to truly be the first credible Baptist witness to the world, and of Liele himself, the last word is best left to biographer, E K Love who said of him:

This man doubtless has long since finished his labours and has entered the saints’ rest...But he will be remembered, and his name honoured, both here and in Jamaica while memory holds its place. Whatever the Negro Baptists here and in Jamaica are, they owe it to his humble beginning. And whatever may be written of either of us, it cannot be complete if his name is left out. His record is here, there and in heaven.³⁵

NOTES

¹ John Rippon, *Baptist Register*, 1791. Letter from George Liele to Dr John Rippon dated 18 December 1791, The Angus Library: Regents Park College, Oxford.

² Edward Holmes, Jr., 'George Liele: Negro Slavery's Prophet of Deliverance' in *Baptist History and Heritage* (August 1965): 28.

³ *George Liele: Negro Slavery's Prophet of Deliverance*, 341. Available from www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bq/20-8_340.pdf.

⁴ The Cross and Faithful Ministry as Seen in the Pastoral and Missionary Ministry of George Liele: First Baptist Missionary to the Nations. Galatians 6: 11-18, 11. Available from www.danielakin.com/wp.content/uploads/2010/08Galatians6:11-18 The Cross and the Faithful...Manuscript ds1pdf.

⁵ "An Account of Several Baptist Churches, consisting chiefly of Negro Slaves; particularly of one at Kingston, in Jamaica; and another at Savannah, Georgia" in *An Account of Baptized Negro Churches* 1791.

⁶ The Cross and Faithful Ministry, 14.

⁷ John Rippon, *Baptist Register*, 1791. Letter from George Liele to Dr John Rippon dated 18 December 1791, The Angus Library: Regents Park College, Oxford.

⁸ Charles W Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990, 190.

1796 Covenant of George Liele

1. We are of the Anabaptist persuasion because we believe it agreeable to the Scriptures. Proof: - (Matt.iii.1-3; 2 Cor. Vi. 14-18.)
2. We hold to keep the Lord's Day throughout the year, in a place appointed for Public Worship, in singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, and preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (Mark xvi. 2, 5, 6; Col. iii.16.)
3. We hold to be Baptised in a river, or in a place where there is much water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. (Matt. iii. 13, 16, 17; Mark xvi. 15, 16; Matt. xxviii.19.)
4. We hold to receiving the Lord's Supper in obedience according to His commands. (Mark xiv. 22-24; John vi. 53-57.)
5. We hold to the ordinance of washing one another's feet. (John xiii. 2-17.)
6. We hold to receive and admit young children into the Church according to the Word of God. (Luke ii. 27-28; Mark x.13-16.)
7. We hold to pray over the sick, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. (James v.14,15.)
8. We hold to labouring one with another according to the Word of God. (Matt. xviii. 15-18.)
9. We hold to appoint Judges and such other Officers among us, to settle any matter according to the Word of God. (Acts vi. 1-3.)
10. We hold not to shedding of blood. (Genesis ix. 6; Matt. xxvi. 51-52.)
11. We are forbidden to go to law with another before the unjust, but to settle any matter we have before the Saints. (1 Cor. Vi. 1-3.)
12. We are forbidden to swear not at all (sic). (Matt. v.33-37; Jas. v.12.)
13. We are forbidden to eat blood, for it is the life of a creature, and from things strangled, and from meat offered to idols. (Acts xv. 29.)
14. We are forbidden to wear any costly raiment, such as superfluity. (1 Peter iii. 3, 4; 1 Timothy ii. 9-10.)
15. We permit no slaves to join the Church without first having a few lines from their owners of their good behaviour. (1 Peter ii.13-16; 1Thess. iii. 13.)
16. To avoid Fornication, we permit none to keep each other, except they be married according to the Word of God. (1 Cor. Vii. 2; Heb. xiii. 4.)
17. If a slave or servant misbehave to their owners they are to be dealt with according to the Word of God. (1 Tim. i. 6; Eph. Vi. 5; 1 Peter ii. 18-22; Titus ii. 9-11.)
18. If any one of this Religion should transgress and walk disorderly, and not according to the Commands which we have received in this Covenant, he will be censured according to the Word of God. (Luke xii. 47-48.)
19. We hold, if a brother or sister should transgress any of these articles written in this Covenant so as to become a swearer, a fornicator, or adulterer; a covetous person, an idolater, a railer, a drunkard, an extortioner or whoremonger; or should commit any abominable sin, and do not give satisfaction to the Church, according to the Word of God, he or she, shall be put away from among us, not to keep company, nor to eat with him. (1 Cor. V. 11-13)
20. We hold if a Brother or Sister should transgress, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, and he, or she, after being justly dealt with agreeable to the 8th article, and be put out of the Church, that they shall have no

right or claim whatsoever to be interred into the Burying-ground during the time they are put out, should they depart life; but should they return in peace, and make a concession so as to give satisfaction, according to the word of God, they shall be received into the Church again and have all privileges as before granted. (2 John i. 9-10; Gal. vi. 1, 2; Luke xvii, 3, 4.)

21. We hold to all the other Commandments, Articles, Covenants, and Ordinances, recorded in the Holy Scriptures as are set forth by our Lord and Master Jesus Christ and His Apostles, which are not written in this Covenant, and to live to them as nigh as we possibly can, agreeable to the Word of God. (John xv. 7-14.)

⁹ George Liele: *Negro Slavery's Prophet of Deliverance*, 345.

¹⁰ Chatham County GaArchives History...The First African Baptist Church, Chapter 2, 2-3 Available from www.usgwarchives.net/ga/chatham/history/other/gms373the1staf.txt

¹¹ The Cross and Faithful Ministry, 15.

¹² George Liele, *Negro Slavery's Prophet of Deliverance*, 345.

¹³ Ibid, 8.

¹⁴ Ibid, 345 – 346.

¹⁵ Ibid, 346-347.

¹⁶ Shirley Gordon, *God Almighty Make me Free: Christianity in Preemancipation Jamaica*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996, 48.

¹⁷ Gordon, *God Almighty Make Me Free*, 47.

¹⁸ Moses Baker, 'An Account of Moses Baker, a mulatto Baptist Preacher near Martha Brea in Jamaica,' *The Evangelical Magazine*, September 1803.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Moses Baker 'Foreign Intelligence' in *The Evangelical Magazine*, 1804

²² Baptist Quarterly, 'Baptist Work in Jamaica before the Arrival of the Missionaries,' 23. Angus Library, Regents College, Oxford.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ The Cross and Faithful Ministry, 12.

²⁵ Baptist Work in Jamaica, 23.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 24.

²⁸ Timothy D Whelan, ed. *Baptist Autographs in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester 1741-1845*, Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2009, 164.

²⁹ Bristol College and the Jamaican Mission: A Caribbean Contribution. Available from www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bq/35-6_294.pdf, 297.

³⁰ The Baptist Quarterly, Bristol College and the Jamaican Mission: A Caribbean Contribution, 296. Available from www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bq.35-6_294.pdf

³¹ Philip D Curtin, *Two Jamaicas 1830 – 1865*, Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1955, 165.

³² George Liele, *Negro Slavery's Prophet of Deliverance*, 350.

³³ Carter G Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, (Washington DC: The Associated Publishers, 1921), 53. Available from www.docsouth.unc.edu/church/woodson/woodson.html

³⁴ Walter Henderson Brooks, *The Silver Bluff Church: A History of Negro Baptist Churches in America*, electronic edition. Page 24. Available from www.docsouth.unc.edu/church/broos/brooks.html

³⁵ E K Love, *History of the First African Baptist Church*, 1888. Available from www.reformedreader.org/history/love/chapter08,htm