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Book Review - Christian Citizens: Reading the Bible in Black and White in the Postemancipation South

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Off the SHELF

Christian Citizens: Reading the Bible in Black and White in the Postemancipation South by Elizabeth L. Jemison (University of North Carolina Press, 2020: ISBN 9781469659695, paperback, \$29.95; 9781469659688, hardcover, \$95.00)

Christian Citizens examines the tumultuous and uncertain period of American history from emancipation to the turn of the 20th century. Elizabeth L. Jemison focuses on events in the Mississippi Valley to chronicle the diverging paths of White and Black Southerners as each group used widely different interpretations of the Bible and Christian life in their attempts to define the future for freed slaves entering mainstream society.

Black Southerners sought to become equal intellectual, moral, and political members of American society with a certainty that the US Constitution and the Bible clearly articulated their rights to self-determination and citizenry. They were able to attain many elected offices in the early 1870s with a majority of eligible voters in Mississippi, becoming a locus of Black political power. This was unacceptable to White Southerners who sought to return to an antebellum-era patriarchal social order. They, too, used the Bible to justify their beliefs, conceiving of a theological interpretation of Southern history, which depicted an idyllic and peaceful plantation life in which White men were divined by God as the benevolent keepers of social order. This false theology conveniently

avoided recognition of slavery's physical and psychological violence and its lasting effects.

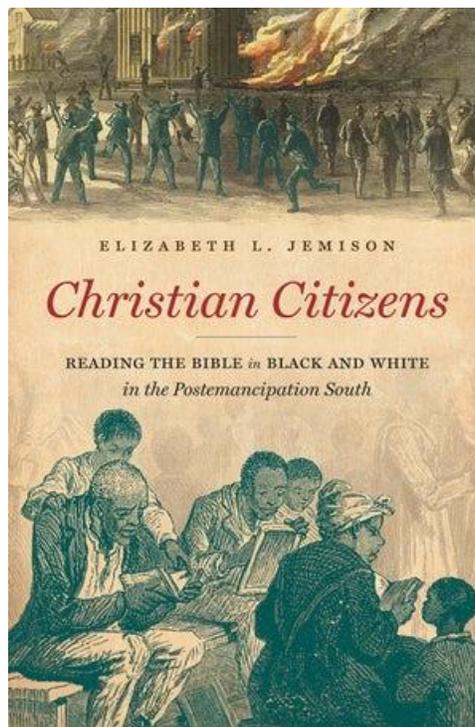
Without federal oversight or the continuing support of Northerners after Reconstruction, White supremacy was formed and flourished throughout the Southeast. It was encouraged by Protestant ministers speaking and writing in support of this antebellum theology, which they saw as necessary to stop the perceived heretical viewpoints of Northern Christians. Newspapers

followed suit when excusing racial violence as a necessary part of preserving families and social order.

White Southerners engaged in mob violence and intimidation to prevent Black Southerners from voting and achieving equality, resulting in the vicious decades-long plague of lynching that occurred across the American Southeast. Eventually, Jim Crow laws were enacted as a final step towards creating legal segregation. To merely say that the effects of these laws, prevailing attitudes, and horrendous behaviors from this period of Southern history are still apparent in

present-day American life is a gross understatement.

Jemison's research is deep and thorough, using a wide variety of primary sources to explain the stages of development through which White supremacy and systemic racism arose. She masterfully weaves together complex narratives of Black and White Southern experiences into a complete picture of racial oppression and lays



the groundwork for readers to understand its ongoing effects on American society.

This fascinating book is highly recommended for college and university collections, particularly those supporting academic programs in

American history, sociology, and religious studies.

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