In *The Cross and the Machete*, Devon Dick—a Ph.D. historian from Warwick University, UK, and pastor of the Boulevard Baptist Church in St. Andrews, Jamaica—offers an innovative, theologically-sophisticated reassessment of the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865. Expanding on his previous book, *Rebellion to Riot: The Jamaican Church in Nation Building* (2004), Dick cogently argues that the uprising known as the “Morant Bay Rebellion” should more accurately be known as the “Native Baptist War of 1865.” Dick’s major goal is to demonstrate that prominent leaders of the uprising—most notably Native Baptist Deacon Paul Bogle and Assemblyman George William Gordon—were motivated to political action by their readings of “Creolized” versions of the English Baptist Bible. Unlike earlier studies of Morant Bay by Robert J. Stewart (1992) and Gad Heuman (1994), Dick deftly shifts the focus from European missionaries and suggests instead that the focus should be on Afro-Jamaicans who reinterpreted the practical applicability of selected Biblical passages to fit their daily lives and aspirations. The author’s conclusions are often incompatible with those of his dissertation advisor at the University of Warwick, Gad Heuman. And it is a tribute to Heuman that he encouraged and promoted research questioning many of his earlier assumptions about Morant Bay.

What sets this volume apart is its exacting historiography. In chapter two, “Identity of the Native Baptists,” Dick counters Shirley C. Gordon’s widely-accepted assertions that “statistics for Native Baptists are nonexistent” (Shirley 1998:46) and that “it is impossible to quantify their membership” (Shirley 1998:69). He marshals compelling evidence that between September 1839 and July 1840 the Native Baptists became an established organization with multiple church buildings, schools, a viable financial base, regulations, growing membership, quality leaders, a clearly defined mission, and a central office.

The author also provides a critical examination of the founders of the Native Baptist movement—who they were, what they did, and most important, *who they were not*. He credits George Liele with starting the first Baptist mission to Jamaica and counts him among the movement’s
founders, but concludes that Sam Sharpe and Moses Baker exerted little direct influence on Jamaica’s Native Baptists (p. 48).

Dick convincingly contends that Paul Bogle and George William Gordon each took different approaches to the Bible based on their personal religious experiences—not based on the teachings of European missionaries. Assertions regarding the religious beliefs of Native Baptists remain speculative since they were not theologians and left few written records. Whenever possible, Dick brings in original documents attributed to Bogle and other Native Baptists of the period and attempts to establish motivations for Native Baptist actions. In so doing, he introduces a new paradigm for the understanding of Native Baptist struggles for equality, justice, and liberation and lays the foundation for a more complete understanding of Paul Bogle.

Of course, some of Dick’s “evidence” is more convincing than others. He offers quotes from George William Gordon’s speeches to the Jamaican Parliament which were widely reported in newspapers and in other public documents. But he also brings in selected annotations and marginal notes from Bogle’s personal hymnal. Quotes from Gordon’s public speeches constitute good evidence, but how do we know that annotations to a hymnal were actually made by Bogle or that these annotations were of particular significance to him? Bogle left no theological writings and there is much about Bogle’s beliefs and motivations that will forever remain unknown.

Ultimately, the author concludes that Jamaican Native Baptists should not be seen as rebels but as “men of faith” who fervently believed in and advocated principles of equality and justice. Of course, rebellion and advocacy can exist within the same person at the same time, and it is possible that Bogle and Gordon were both rebels and advocates of justice. Dick’s major accomplishment has been documenting how a recently emancipated people were able to develop ways of reading the Bible that provided them with a social ethic and reinforced their commitment to social justice. Applications of this study transcend historiography of the nineteenth century. In the twenty-first century, similar approaches to the Bible may prove useful in the development of a public theology and public policy.

References


