

Ida B. Wells-Barnett: An Afro-American Prophet

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IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT (1862-1931) was a strong, determined and proud Afro-American woman whose life and witness were one. Her crusade against the lynching of blacks drew on her lifetime experiences as an active churchwoman in Memphis, Tennessee and Chicago, Illinois. She was a powerful leader, whose unequivocal stances sometimes impeded her ability to join forces with others. Her prophetic voice is one that still challenges us today.

The 1892 lynching of a dear friend, Thomas Moss, launched Wells into international prominence as leader in the anti-lynching crusade. Her contribution was crucial: she spoke out at a time when few voices challenged the horror and injustice of the lynch law, and her research, writing and public speaking informed people of the facts. She was convinced that the public's awareness of the atrocity of lynching would lead to its demise.

Wells organized Illinois's first black woman's club at the end of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. One of the club's early projects was to raise money to prosecute a police officer for killing an innocent black man on Chicago's west side. The club helped establish the first black orchestra in Chicago, opened the first kindergarten for black children, and was a charter member of the Cook County Women's Clubs—thereby crossing the color line in clubs.

Following the 1908 riot in Springfield, Illinois, Wells organized the young men of her Bible class at Grace Presbyterian Church in Chicago into what would eventually become the Negro Fellowship League, which existed until 1920. The league established a Reading Room and Social Center for men and boys. In 1919, Wells led the fight against the reinstatement of Frank Davis as sheriff in Alexander County, Illinois, because he did not prevent the lynching of a black man in

Cairo, Illinois. Wells investigated the facts of the case and presented them to Governor Charles Deneen, who ultimately refused to reinstate Davis despite political pressure to do so.

Wells attacked vice, housing conditions and discrimination wherever she found them. Expressing herself with strength and willfulness, she used the lecture podium and newspaper articles to reveal in an uncompromising manner the injustices and outrage of racial bigotry.

Jacquelyn Grant, in her essay "Tasks of a Prophetic Church" (*Detroit II Conference Papers*, Orbis, 1982), delineates five key threads in the prophetic voice of the church. I would appropriate her categories to describe individual black leaders. The first element if the prophetic voice is the ability to discern the will of God, to see how God is on the side of oppressed peoples. Wells certainly evidenced this capacity and commitment.

Second, in discerning the will of God, the prophetic voice also exposes the oppressive nature of society. The committed Christian must stand for justice and transformation. Again, Wells is an excellent example of this concern. She believed the only recourse for the black folk of Memphis after the lynching of Thomas Moss was a boycott and an exodus. Moss's crime was opening a successful grocery store that took business away from a white grocer across the street. No attempt was made to punish the murderers, whose identities were known. Wells urged the blacks of Memphis to leave.

Memphis has demonstrated that neither character nor standing avails the Negro if he dares to protect himself against the white man or become his rival. We are outnumbered and without arms. There is only one thing left that we can do—leave a town which will neither protect our lives and property, nor give us a fair trial, but takes us out and murders us in cold blood [quoted by Dorothy Sterling in *Black Foremothers: Three Lives* (Feminist Press, 1979), p. 79].

Entire churches left the city. Over 2,000 blacks left in two months' time. Businesses that depended on black patronage began to fail. The superintendent of the railway company called on Wells at her newspaper, the *Free Speech*, to ask her to urge readers to ride the streetcars again. White homemakers complained about the shortage of domestic workers. When a white real-estate agent remarked, "You got off light. We first intended to kill every one of those 31 niggers in jail, but concluded to let all go but the leaders," he revealed the true intention behind lynching. It was not an isolated event, but part of a broad-based movement to intimidate blacks.

Wells saw lynching as whites' tool for repressing emancipated blacks. Whites resented Afro-Americans who could compete with them economically and move ahead in the social structure. She knew blacks could be enormously influential in electoral politics. This fact did not elude white southerners who knew Afro-Americans had the potential to upset their longstanding political and economic power base.

A THIRD FEATURE of the prophetic voice is that it is an agent of admonition. Wells forcefully warned about the consequences of continued disharmony. In attacking popular assumptions about black men's propensity for raping white women, she unmasked southern sexual mores.

Black men were charged with rape so frequently that most people (including, at first, Wells and other blacks such as Frederick Douglass) were inclined to believe the charges. In 1904, *Harper's Weekly* carried an article on "The New Negro Crime" which claimed that middle-class blacks were a greater threat than lower-class blacks because they were more likely to pursue social equality and to have lost their awe for the women of the superior race. The predominant southern white belief was that any liaison between an Afro-American man and a white woman was involuntary on the

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woman's part. Wells clearly suggested that black men were weak if not stupid to contract such alliances, but she also insisted that white women were willing participants.

Miscegenation laws, she observed, protected white women: they left black women the victims of rape by white men while granting these men the power to terrorize black men. Wells was incensed

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that the same mob that lynched a Nashville black man accused of visiting a white woman had left unharmed a white man convicted of raping an eight-year-old black girl.

Wells related political terrorism, economic oppression and conventional codes of sexuality and morality in an analysis that rocked the foundations of the southern (and northern) patriarchal manipulation of race and gender. In *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892), she examined the connection between charges of rape against blacks and lynching and argued there was no historical foundation for that association: "The crime of rape was unknown during four years of civil war, when the white women of the South were at the mercy of the race which is all at once charged with being a bestial one."

Wells studied the lynching of 728 black men, women and children in the ten-year period preceding the Moss lynching. In only a third of those cases were blacks accused of rape, and in fewer of them were blacks actually guilty of the crime. Most died for crimes like incendiarism, race prejudice, quarreling with whites and making threats. Thirteen-year-old Mildrey Brown was hanged on the circumstantial evidence that she poisoned a white infant. Wells's investigations also

uncovered a large number of interracial liaisons, and she asserted that white women had taken the initiative in some of these liaisons.

Grant's fourth point is that the prophetic voice must confront evil, and clearly Wells did not shrink from confrontation. Two months after the Moss lynching, Wells wrote in the *Free Speech* an article that led to her being banished from Memphis:

Eight Negroes lynched since last issue of the *Free Speech*, three for killing a white man, and five on the same old racket—the alarm about raping white women. The same program of hanging, then shooting bullets into the lifeless bodies. Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will overreach themselves, and public sentiment will have a reaction. A conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women ["Lynch Law in All Its Phases," in *Our Day* (May 1893), p. 338].

Finally, according to Grant the prophetic voice seeks to create a community of faith, partnership, justice and unity. This was Wells's goal and dream. She devoted her life to attaining that dream for her people.

BUT AT MANY POINTS Wells was herself unable to work with others. Some black activists struggled with her inability to combine conviction with compromise for the sake of achieving some goals.

To her credit, she held fast to her view of the power of economics in shaping and changing social opinion in the United States. She gave new vision and provided new possibilities for black interactions with a racist culture. She also decried the stereotype of black women as mammy or slut. But she risked falling into the trap of believing that she was the only one able to discern God's will for the liberation of the oppressed.

She often took unilateral actions which destroyed opportunities for coalition and dialogue. In her description of these events in her autobiography, her inability to grasp how her actions could hurt or

anger others is evident. She reacted to other activists' resistance to her ideas with puzzlement and even indignation. As she tried to work in the various women's groups in Chicago, she was sometimes cut off from decision-making, to which she responded with bitterness rather than self-examination. She did not understand why her experience with groups followed this pattern.

In her autobiography, Wells details the disappointment she experienced from the ascendancy of Booker T. Washington. It seems she was not fully aware of the long shadow cast by Washington and his representatives and the effect on her organizing and agitation for social change on the behalf of Afro-Americans. Wells asked various organizations for their endorsement of her already-formulated proposals. When she did receive endorsement, her proposals were often sidetracked or derailed by the representatives Washington had among various women's clubs and church associations, who favored a more gradualist approach.

While Wells was excellent at addressing unjust structures, she did not always remember that people are the ones who create, maintain and even tear down those structures. In being confrontational, the prophet must always keep in mind that a root meaning of confrontation is "to face together."

In short, Wells lacked the ability to combine the prophetic with the pastoral. Her passion for social change was deep and abiding, but her impatience with those who might cooperate with her prevented her from using her passion most effectively. Wells did not understand that the personal side of transformation, in which individuals are changed and renewed, requires its own set of critical and analytical skills. Yet she was a powerful agitator, who motivated others with prophetic and pastoral skills to mobilize black folk for social change. When she died of uremia poisoning on March 25, 1931, the obituary in the *Chicago Defender* captured her essence: "elegant, striking, and always well groomed . . . regal though somewhat intolerant and impulsive." ■



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