

Book Review

Anthony E. Kaye with Gregory P. Downs. *Nat Turner, Black Prophet: A Visionary History*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux Press, 2024. 321 pp \$30 (hardcover), ISBN 9780809024377.

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Between the limited source base and the amount of past attention that Nat Turner has received from scholars, it is difficult to imagine anything new remaining to be said about the 1831 Southampton slave insurrection. Yet, the late Anthony Kaye, along with Greg Downs, have produced a compelling new history of Nat's rebellion. Their work is much more than just another study of the uprising. Rather, Kaye and Downs have restored "three central aspects of Nat's story: his life as a Methodist, as a prophet, and as a man his followers called General" (xiv). Arguing that previous scholars underplayed Nat's religious beliefs in an attempt to make him more relatable to a modern secular world, the final product is as much a history of religion as it is a history of slavery or rebellion. It takes Nat's faith and vision seriously. Despite its title, the work follows newer trends within the literature on Nat Turner, referring to Nat only by his first name, rather than by the name of his enslaver. Recognizing the power of language, Kaye and Downs re-center the personhood of enslaved people while also emphasizing the active role of enslavers throughout.

A major theme of the work looks to place Nat into both the larger context of nineteenth-century religious prophets as well as into the various "types" found within the Bible that Nat would have learned from, been inspired by, and potentially taken solace with. As the authors make clear, Nat was born into a world "crowded with prophets": he shared a timeline with other prophets including Joseph Smith, Robert Matthews as well as lesser-known figures like the Black female, Zilpha Elaw (62). Kaye and Downs skillfully juxtapose Nat's religiosity to these other prophets, demonstrating where Nat was unique and where he conformed with the actions of others claiming to be mouth pieces for God. Kaye and Downs also delve deep into the *King James' Bible* to reveal the religious context for many of Nat's more militant decisions, particularly his choice to kill

women and children. Through the lens of how Black Methodists understood the Exodus, many of Nat's decisions become more comprehensible to modern readers.

The work also demonstrates that Nat's rebellion grew specifically out of nineteenth-century Methodism's complicated history with chattel slavery. While early Methodism raised concerns over the concept of property in man, Nat came of age at the same moment that proslavery Methodists throughout the South led bitter and prolonged battles to protect slavery from within the church. Having won control, proslavery white Methodists closed the door on manumissions and religiously motivated antislavery activity. Kaye and Downs hypothesize that Nat, and perhaps his family, once believed Nat would be emancipated by the Turner family, as several relatives had manumitted the people they held enslaved. They go so far as to speculate that Nat's grandmother and mother might have even attempted to negotiate with the Turner family to secure Nat's eventual freedom. However, if Benjamin Turner ever contemplated manumitting Nat, it went unrecorded. Their inability to secure Nat's freedom would likely have left Nat and his family with a deep sense of injustice.

The two scholars also emphasize the history of Black resistance and rebellion, particularly stories of Black Virginian soldiers during the American Revolution and the War of 1812. Noting that Nat was almost certainly aware of this tradition of Black military service, Kaye and Downs also convincingly speculate about what Nat might have known about other insurrections, including Haiti and Denmark Vessy's conspiracy. One clear lesson Nat derived from previous struggles was his insistence on keeping his plans secret to avoid the fate of other attempted rebellions like Vessy's, ensuring the attack was a surprise. Kaye and Downs speculate that by keeping their plans so secure, Nat's uprising caused havoc not only within the white community but also caught local enslaved and free African Americans unaware, ultimately hampering the insurrection's ability to rally additional troops to their cause. Kaye and Downs argue that when put into this larger context of a Black military tradition; Nat's actions are not just part of a struggle against slavery, but part of a larger, literal war against the peculiar institution. This helps justify the belief of many African Americans who eventually began to view the fifty-five dead white bodies left in Nat's wake as the first blow of the Civil War.

Readers familiar with Kaye's pioneering first book, *Joining Places* (2009), will not be surprised to see Nat's rebellion considered within the context of local neighborhoods. One particularly illuminating aspect of this is how white conceptions of neighborhoods are mapped differently from that of the enslaved. The further Nat and his co-conspirators were from home, the more doubt crept into

their decision-making. Kaye and Downs also demonstrate the limited support that Nat received the further away he was from his enslaver's plantation. This suggests the limited sphere of influence an enslaved field hand could have outside of their immediate surroundings. Compare this to the extended networks enjoyed by white Virginians. "Among the many advantages white Southsiders possessed," write Kaye and Downs, "these networks of communication and affiliation, imperfect though they could be, were perhaps the most significant" in rallying support to effectively end the uprising (186). Kaye and Downs demonstrate that most of the white men who responded to the call to arms came from outside Southampton. Men had to be near enough to care but far enough to feel able to leave their families safely at home.

A note about the authorship is also worth mentioning. According to the introduction and postscript by Downs, Kaye was already immersed in the research for this work before learning about his sickness. As it became increasingly unlikely that Kaye would be able to finish the work, he recruited Downs to assist him in completing the project. Through long conversations, shared research and notes, and parts or sections of previously written chapters, Downs attempted to produce the history that Kaye planned on telling. He writes that the "book remains Tony's work, even though I have written or rewritten almost every word of it" (xxiii). In a revealing and touching postscript, Downs steps out of Kaye's research and shares some of the struggles and doubts he faced. While we will never know how the finished work compares with Kaye's original vision, together Kaye and Downs produced an exemplary monograph worth serious attention from both scholars and a more general audience.

The book will remain a testament not only to their shared understanding of the events that took place in Southampton County almost two hundred years ago, but also to their lasting friendship, which more than anything, illuminates these pages.