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Mordecai W. Johnson

The Relevance of Mordecai Wyatt Johnson

By Benjamin E. Mays

Editor's note: The following was excerpted from the inaugural lecture in honor of the late Dr. Mordecai Wyatt Johnson. Dr. Johnson, who died in 1976 at the age of 86, was the president of Howard University from 1926 to 1960. The annual lecture series in his honor was inaugurated on January 27, 1978 with an address by Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, president emeritus of Morehouse College and a friend of Dr. Johnson's.

Mordecai Wyatt Johnson could have easily escaped into the white world. He had the mental ability, the prophetic zeal, and the integrity to have made it in any white world in the United States and in any white world anywhere on this earth. But like Moses, he preferred to suffer with his people, rather than enjoy the privileges in the white world. Years ago, Mordecai and I were on the same program at the King's Mountain Y.M.C.A. Conference. I was to board the train going South and Mordecai was to board the train going North to Washington. Black passengers in those days were not allowed to enter the white waiting room. The ticket agent wanted to sell Mordecai a pullman ticket. He literally begged Mordecai to come around to the white waiting room and get the pullman ticket. He said, "Why be so stubborn?"

Mordecai, like the Mordecai described in the *Book of Esther*, our Mordecai elected to remain Black and champion the cause of the Black minority. This stubbornness stood Mordecai in good stead, for he carried that stubbornness into the federal government. He laid the foundation for Howard University to become a great university.

When I saw Howard University for the first time in the early 1920s, I was a

disappointed man. It was a puny thing. I had known Howard by a few eminent men on its faculty: Kelly Miller, Reverend Sterling Brown, Sr., and Lewis Baxter Moore. They had gone throughout the nation talking about Howard. James Hardy Dillard, a white man, a friend of Blacks and of all mankind, coined the phrase that Howard University was the capstone of higher education for Blacks.

Mordecai saw the need of bringing able Black scholars to Howard as deans and as heads of departments—not because he was prejudiced against whites, but because he knew that at that time whites had all the doors open to them. And white universities hired only a token number of Blacks. Had W. E. B. Dubois been white, he would have been hired by Harvard University; but he had to go to Fisk. Had Ernest Just been white, the University of Chicago would have hired him; but he had to come to Howard University.

Johnson brought in Black deans and placed them in positions of trust and responsibility. He did not try and he did not want to fire any white person to give a Black man a job. What I am saying here is relevant for our time.

I characterize Mordecai Johnson as one of the great prophets in the 20th century. I place him along with Amos and Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Micah. Hosea demonstrates love of God and forgiveness by forgiving his unfaithful wife. Another prophet, Amos states the urgency of his call in these words: "When the lion roars, who can but fear? When the eternal God speaks, who can but prophesy?" Let justice roll down as water, and righteousness as a mighty stream. Isaiah made it plain when he expounded the justice of God—requiring justice not only of other nations but of Israel: "Wash you, make you clean, put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes, cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgement, relieve the

oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now let us reason together saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

Micah tells us what God requires: "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first born for my transgression, the fruit of my body, for the sin of my soul? He hath showed thee O man, what is good, and what doth the Lord require of thee, but do justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God."

Jeremiah 12:5 tells us never give up, never lose hope, "If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? And if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?" In hard times, Jeremiah spoke centuries before Christ, and He speaks to us in 1978, saying don't give up, cheer up, the worst is yet to come.

Isaiah says something similar to Jeremiah. Don't give up in hard times: "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles: They shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint." Isaiah spoke to nations just as Mordecai spoke to America. Speaking to the nations, Isaiah prophesied that nations someday would be ruled by God as one world. He tells all mankind in Isaiah 2, verse 4:

"And He shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against

nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

If these men were called of God to prophesy in the 6th, 7th, and 8th centuries B.C., and if their words are quoted by millions of people today to support their argument in tackling the issues in 1978, surely Mordecai is relevant in 1978. He was just as fearless, just as sure of his call as the prophets were of theirs. I heard Mordecai 40 years ago talking against injustice, war, poverty, unemployment, and racial injustice—current topics on Capitol Hill and issues facing Congress and President Carter, as the President pinpointed in his State of the Union Message. These are definitely issues in 1978.

As an educator, Mordecai ranks along side of William Rainey Harper of the University of Chicago, Nicholas Murry Butler of Columbia University, and James Conant and Charles Elliot of Harvard University. He set out to make Howard University a truly interracial university, one of the great universities in the United States. He went about doing this by increasing federal appropriations, paying competitive salaries, emphasizing academic excellence, building a decent plant, and standing steadfast for freedom to teach. He not only proclaimed these principles, but he was an epitome of these principles. He did these things in a government-financed institution.

Howard University started as an institution for all races, ethnic, and national groups. In a government-supported institution, Mordecai resisted political pressures from some congressmen to hire their favored Negro, appoint him to the faculty. As dean of the School of Religion for six years, the president and I got recommendations from several Southern politicians. We responded by saying that the man's credentials will be examined along with other applicants and that the best qualified would be selected.

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His was a stormy career. He had convictions and stood by them, even at the risk of being labeled erratic and stubborn, at the risk of losing his job. He understood that no man can do a great job if he has to be afraid of losing his job. He understood what Franklin D. Roosevelt meant when he said, "We have nothing to fear, but fear itself." He made some enemies. A few disliked him because of his uncompromising stand against injustice and man's inhumanity to man. In public addresses, he explained the virtues of Communism, pointing out its strengths and weaknesses at the same time. He was extolling the virtues of Mahatma Gandhi, and the philosophy of non-violence. Only a tough man, intellectually able and morally secure, could have weathered the storm as president of Howard for 34 years.

Mordecai not only talked and preached nonviolence, he lived it. When a newspaper printed weekly articles under the caption, "The Case Against Mordecai Johnson," Mordecai never replied. I asked him once why didn't he answer the false charges. He said, "The people will find out that they are false." He was right. Nobody believes now that those charges were true. On one Founder's Day celebration, Mordecai invited Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes to give the Founder's Day address. When Ickes arrived, some young men, looking like thugs, appeared from the darkness and gave Ickes a written statement, "The Case Against Mordecai Johnson." This episode was so dastardly and so embarrassing that the enemies of Mordecai condemned this method.

Ickes, whose department Howard was under, did his own research on Mordecai and concluded that this was a smear campaign. Not long after that, Ickes gave a dinner in honor of Mordecai Wyatt Johnson. Johnson invited his deans and some department heads to the dinner. It was a beautiful affair. This was a

vindication of Mordecai and proved that those people who had sent spies to Charleston, West Virginia, where Mordecai had pastored, in an effort to get something on him, were evil men. Shakespeare was right when he wrote centuries ago: "Thrice is he armed who hath his guards just." So, you know by now that my task is not "A Case Against Mordecai Johnson," but "In defense of Mordecai Johnson."

He never ceased to fight the battle of Black people, though he could have easily evaporated into the white world. He was paving the way for Martin Luther King, Jr., who got his first doctrine of nonviolence from Mordecai. Likened unto Moses, Mordecai preferred to suffer with his people rather than live in luxury as the son of pharaoh's daughter. He preferred to go through the agony of the wilderness and die before reaching the promised land than to enjoy the riches in pharaoh's house. But Moses has long since been vindicated. The scripture tells us that Moses has the unique distinction of being buried by God.

Crusade for a Black President

I have great admiration for Howard University. In its origin in 1867, it had the germ of a great university. It was unique from the beginning. Although it has graduated more Blacks than perhaps any other university in the United States, Howard was established to serve students of all races, all ethnic groups, all countries scattered throughout the world.

The university has been true to its mission. It had white friends from the beginning who saw the need of education for the newly emancipated people. Its first president was a white man, General Oliver Otis Howard.

It is not generally known, as Michael Winston [director of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard] points out in his research, it was Kelley

Miller—then dean of the College of Arts and Sciences—who led the crusade for a Black man to succeed J. Stanley Durkee, who served as president from 1918 to 1926 before resigning under pressure.

Prior to Durkee, and including him, all presidents of Howard had been white and all had been retired congregational ministers. The elderly white ministers had minimal power and the deans of the university were Black educators.

Durkee was young and able and moved to consolidate power into a central administration. It is highly conceivable that the tampering with the dean's power caused the row that finally led to his resignation. He was accused of being a racist and "high handed" in his dealing with his colleagues. Had he been Black, he might have weathered the storm. The alumni were organized against him and students staged strikes against him. But it must be said that Durkee paved the way and made it easier for Mordecai to complete the reorganization plan.

Durkee succeeded in getting a building program, and increased federal appropriations. He started the new Medical School Building, which was completed under Johnson. Here again, Durkee was paving the way for Johnson.

The first effort to legalize federal appropriations for Howard began under Durkee. The bills to amend the Charter for federal support were first presented but defeated in 1924, 1925, 1926 and 1927. Approval came in 1928 under the administration of Johnson. To his credit, Johnson kept Howard a federally-funded institution under a private governing board of trustees.

Against some faculty opposition, Johnson pushed the first Ph.D. program at the university, approving the chemistry program in 1955. At that time, many people thought Howard was "not ready" to begin so ambitious an undertaking. Now it is taken for granted. In his early

years, similarly Johnson was obsessed with the task of getting all of the university's schools and colleges accredited, which he did. It is also often overlooked that he attracted more support for Howard from private philanthropists and foundations than *any* of his predecessors.

Johnson's defense of academic freedom at Howard will be one of his enduring legacies. An especially important psychological point is that he defended the freedom of the faculty at a time when his relations with many of the leaders of the faculty were strained. He fought the efforts of some congressmen to censor liberal and more outspoken members of the faculty, even though the threat of reduced appropriations always hung in the air. This is in sharp contrast to Durkee, who in January, 1920, removed from the library a book by Albert R. Williams entitled, *Seventy-Six Questions and Answers on the Bolsheviks and Soviets*, at the demand of Senator Reed Smoot. Senator Smoot said on the floor of the Senate that "If Howard University is to keep such literature in their library to be read by the students attending that university, they will not ask for future appropriations from the treasury of the United States. . . ." Durkee wrote to Smoot saying that "The government should suppress" the printing of such publications.

Mordecai Johnson would have none of that, and he preserved the integrity of Howard as a place of free inquiry—for all ideas, including unpopular ones.

All of these men are relevant for our time, 1978. All this is in line with my subject—"The Relevance of Mordecai Johnson."□