

Jared E. Alcántara. *The Challenge of Joseph H. Jackson: How America's Most Powerful Preacher Became a Forgotten Man*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 376 pages. \$34.99.

Few would disagree that there are innumerable untold stories of Black clergy that have been discarded into the dustbin of history. The collective narrative of the institutional Black Church contains main characters who were the architects of culture and visionaries for Black futures over the decades through their leadership as pastors. Still, little exists in pure biographical form to tell the stories of these remarkable figures whose towering legacies petitioned for the possibility of immortality. Yet, through the inevitable passage of time and generations since, these Black luminaries have faded in influence and memory. In *The Challenge of Joseph H. Jackson: How America's Most Powerful Preacher Became a Forgotten Man*, Jared Alcántara tempts fate to rescue the legacy of one such man.

The Reverend Joseph H. Jackson, as Alcántara notes, “remains one of the most important, but least known figures of twentieth-century religious history” (xiii). Regarded most for his 29-year presidency of the National Baptist Convention (NBC), USA, then the largest Black Protestant denomination by far, from 1953 to 1982, Jackson holds a mythic quality within Black Baptist culture. As a form of African American midrash, conventional wisdom remembers the story of Jackson, during his tenure as convention president, leaving Martin Luther King, Jr. denominationally homeless over the issue of civil rights, as Jackson advocated incrementalism in contrast to King, Jr. and others who organized around civil disobedience. Alcántara’s book finally offers a fuller historical account of King, Jr.’s exodus from the convention resulting in a schism that rocked the Black church world. This book is not so much interested in relieving the myth of its duties, but rather in offering a rigorous account of a man who “like other human beings... contained multitudes” (xxii).

Alcántara’s aim in this biography is to present a study of Jackson that “will reveal a dynamic preacher, enigmatic leader, and cautionary tale” of a man “whose life and ministry merit historical recovery and contemporary humanization” (xv). Part of this aim is achieved by archival research at the Chicago History Museum where 350 boxes of Jackson’s public addresses, articles, denominational records, and over 1,000 sermons exist. Along with the short biography *Images of a Preacher: A Study of the Reverend Joseph Harrison Jackson* by Sherman Tribble, Alcántara’s research benefits greatly by having access to Jackson’s archives after his death in 1990, whereas Tribble conducted his research during the 1980s when no such archive existed. This monograph also includes significant sourcing from Black-owned newspapers, especially the *Chicago Defender*, which cared deeply about the goings-on of the Black Baptist church world.

Perhaps leaning into the way larger-than-life leaders are better understood, even the ones reviled by history, Alcántara uses chapters 2 through 6 to provide an origin story. A product of the Great Migration, Jackson’s story begins in the South, namely Mississippi. Spending considerable time accounting for the migration of Blacks to northern cities, Alcántara is keen in noting that “if Harlem was the center of Black cultural production in the 1910s and 1920s, then Chicago was the center of Black hopes for freedom” (48). Alcántara also provides a thorough history of Olivet Baptist, the church where Jackson pastored from 1941 until his death, the second oldest Black church in Chicago established in 1850 when the city itself was only 13 years old.

Chapter 3 provides information about Jackson's early years before he accepted the call to pastor Olivet. Beginning as an itinerant preacher in Mississippi, he eventually accepted a pastorate in Omaha in 1927. After pursuing higher education degrees, he eventually moved to Philadelphia in 1934 with his wife and child to pastor until 1941 when Olivet called him as their pastor. Condensed in a time frame barely spanning one calendar year, chapter 4 provides granular detail of both personal and public correspondence that led to his acceptance of the pastorate at Olivet. Chapters 5 and 6 are an account of Jackson's denominational activity while serving at the denomination's flagship church and the political shrewdness that made his ascendancy to president of the National Baptist Convention almost ineluctable.

Chapters 7 and 8 tell the history of why Jackson's name exists in history books in the first place: the contested convention elections of 1957, 1960 and 1961 that caused a schism leading to the emergence of the Progressive National Baptist Convention. Alcántara is a careful storyteller in this regard. He lays part of the blame on Jackson himself who ran in 1953 on a platform of term-limits and then reneged on his own pledge in 1957. The faction that wanted new leadership grew to a head by 1960 with a disputed vote occurring at the convention's annual fall meeting where the anti-Jackson faction allegedly cut microphone cords to prevent speeches and in-fact staged a veritable sit-in. Chapter 9 starts in 1961 with the writing metaphorically on the wall for a split when a convention attendee fell from the main stage. The fall happened during a melee that broke out and the attendee ultimately died from his injuries. The chapter concludes with the immediate fallout between Jackson and King, Jr. as the two formally parted ways denominationally as well as ideologically.

Chapter 10 attempts to consolidate three decades of Jackson's life, from the schism to his death. Half of the chapter takes place in the remainder of the 1960s as Jackson was relegated to the shadow cut by King, Jr. who had a national spotlight shone on him. Alcántara's narrative seems to suggest that King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) would have had more successes in bringing the civil rights movement to Chicago in 1966 if they had had the cooperation of Jackson's massive network of Black Baptist churches and his political alliance with then-mayor Richard J. Daley. Ultimately, Jackson's fate was sealed when he committed an unforgivable sin that lives in both local Chicago lore and infamy in the Black Baptist world. After King, Jr.'s assassination, the city opted to rename the major thoroughfare on which Olivet Baptist Church stood from South Parkway to Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive. Jackson then successfully changed the church's main address to be on the cross-street, 31st Street, rather than have King's name on the stationary for the church or the denomination.

One clear contribution of Alcántara's archival research is that he successfully rebuts the minor details of civil rights history that accumulatively render Jackson as nothing more than a cartoon villain whose evil lair was located on 31st Street. Throughout the book, he notes embellishments and omissions made by civil rights historian Taylor Branch. One such example Alcántara refutes is Branch's claim that Jackson spent \$50,000 to effectuate the address change by sealing up the main entrance on what is now King Drive. According to Alcántara, no such efforts ever took place. He writes, "If Branch got these details wrong, perhaps he got the \$50,000 figure wrong as well" (293). This is notable in that Branch's *Parting the Waters* still exists as a pre-eminent account of the civil rights era thereby serving the narrative that Jackson fell on the wrong side of history. It is abundantly clear that this monograph is attempting to "resist the urge to engage in reductivism as it obscures rather than clarifies" as the civil rights canon paints Jackson as a two-dimensional character that was simply jealous of King, Jr. (321). For Alcántara, Jackson should be best understood as a "committed evangelist and a cautious optimist: a

committed evangelist for Black power devoid of militancy and a cautious optimist for integration devoid of power imbalances” (316).

The book’s epilogue does not provide any excuses for Jackson’s pettiness nor his political miscalculations, but instead offers a worthy rationale for the ideological differences between Jackson and King, Jr. as a faithful attempt to correct a historical record. But this book still leaves a notable question in the mind of readers: what made the presidency of the National Baptist Convention, USA such a powerful position? Was it simply the prestige accompanied with title? Was it the administrative and budgetary oversight? One wonders if a fuller treatment of this organization, especially its origin, would have painted a better picture for the reader as to how Jackson became so powerful and provide motivations as to why he sought the office. As the foremost religious denomination for Black Americans formally organized in 1895, the National Baptist Convention, USA still today boasts membership amongst its affiliated churches over 8 million. A reader may struggle to understand the motives for Jackson to attain and maintain his leadership beyond the title and prestige if ignorant of the intricacies of polity and the role of the preacher within Black Christian religious culture. Alcántara unfortunately leaves unexplored how Jackson forged relationships with those in denominational leadership as well as how he leveraged his connections with Chicago’s elected aldermen and mayors and to what institutional end.

Ultimately, Alcántara provides a blueprint for resuscitating the biographical witness of ecclesial leaders who were famous and have now faded from memory. In resisting the sensationalism of Jackson’s feud with King, Jr., he rescues him from being a mere cartoon villain, to someone who has earned their rightful place in the history books. I predict that this biography will stand the test of time as the solitary reference point for scholastic pursuits about the history of Black Baptists and for those interested in counternarratives to the modern civil rights movement.

Joshua Lawrence Lazard, Ph.D. Candidate, Boston University, School of Theology, Boston, MA