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God, Satan, and the Birth of Haiti

Part One

Jean R. Gelin, Ph.D.

Explaining Haiti

Right or wrong, Haiti is considered the point of entry of Christianity into the New World because it is the place where Christopher Columbus built the first Spanish colony after landing on December 5th, 1492. Roman Catholicism was the official religion of Spain, and thus was imposed on all the original inhabitants of the island. The natives were made Christians by force and the island was called 'Hispaniola', meaning 'little Spain'. Before long the Indian population was enslaved and wiped out, and Africans were imported as replacements. But that's not all.

Haiti is the only place in the world where revolutionary African slaves successfully ended slavery and colonialism to build a new and independent country. All this happened when Jean-Jacques Dessalines, his Generals, along with the indigenous army, proclaimed Haiti's independence from France on January 1st, 1804. On that day, they rejected the colonial name 'Saint-Domingue' and reclaimed the Indian name Haiti (Ayiti¹) for the country.

In celebration of Haiti's bicentenary, the United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed 2004 the 'International Year to Commemorate the Struggle against Slavery and its Abolition'. Ironically, in that same year, several thousands soldiers from different countries landed in the country as the 'United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti' (MINUSTAH²). Two hundred years after its independence and at less than 700 miles from the coast of Florida, Haiti has become the most unstable and the poorest country of the western hemisphere. Although Haiti's free fall can easily be understood from a strictly historical perspective, religious arguments have been used by many to follow and explain the demise of this tiny nation.

Have you ever heard how some preachers or theologians try to explain the unspeakable misery that is crippling most of Haiti's population of 8 million? Everywhere you go, from your television screen to the Internet, what you are most likely to find is a reference to a spiritual pact that the fathers of the nation

supposedly made with the devil to help them win their freedom from France. As a result of that satanic alliance, as they put it, God has placed a curse on the country some time around its birth³, and that divine burden has made it virtually impossible for the vast majority of Haitians to live in peace and prosperity in their land. Surprising, right?

The satanic pact allegedly took place at Bois-Caïman near Cap-Haïtien on August 14, 1791 during a meeting organized by several slave leaders, under [Dutty] Boukman's leadership, before launching what would become Haiti's Independence War. This brutal period lasted 13 years until the last survivors of the French expeditionary forces, dispatched to Saint-Domingue with the sole purpose to re-establish slavery, were allowed by Dessalines to leave the island and return to Napoleon. Those who made it safely to France wrote and reported about the utmost bravery and supreme courage of Haiti's indigenous army.

Obviously, the idea that Haiti was dedicated to Satan prior to its independence is a very serious and profound statement with potentially grave consequences for its people in terms of how they are perceived by others or how the whole nation is understood outside its borders. One would agree that such a strong affirmation should be based on solid historical and scriptural ground. But, although the satanic pact idea is by far the most popular explanation for Haiti's birth as a free nation, especially among Christian missionaries and some Haitian Church leaders, it is nothing more than a fantasist opinion that ultimately dissipates upon close examination.

Exploring the religious argument

I was born and raised in Haiti, and I am a graduate of the State University in Port-au-Prince. I am also a believer in the Lord Jesus-Christ in accordance with the Bible. In all of my studies of Haitian history, however, I have yet to find a good evidence of even the idea of Satan's assistance in the Independence War, let alone a satanic pact.

For quite some time now, several articles on the Internet have mentioned the existence of an iron pig statue in Port-au-Prince as a monument to commemorate Haiti's so-called pact with the devil through Vodou. The statue would be in remembrance of a pig that was killed during the gathering by the African slaves. In an effort to know more about that rumor, I contacted several authors about the exact location of the pig statue that's incidentally nowhere to be found in the country. Their answer was complete silence, a simple apology, or just the removal of the reference from their texts.

One writer was grateful to me for pointing out the inaccuracy of her article, and she made the necessary adjustment. But I am sure that the same allusion can be found somewhere in other published pieces of writing and documents. The worst part of the whole picture is that the story is believed by many sincere Christians in America and around the world; and not only do they believe it,

they also spread it as fact. The tragedy of our age is that repeated lies are often mistaken for the truth, especially when repeated long enough. That's particularly the case in religious circles where faith on the part of the audience is generally expected, but that should never be so for those who believe in the Bible.

Maybe, believers need to return to biblical texts like 1 Thessalonians 5:21, "*Test everything. Hold on to the good*".

It's hard to know where the idea of a divine curse on Haiti following the purported satanic pact actually originated, whether from foreign missionaries or from local church leaders. In his book Ripe Now - A Haitian congregation responds to the Great Commission⁴, Haitian pastor Frantz Lacombe identified a 'dependence mentality' in the leadership of the Haitian church, which resulted from the way the Christian faith was brought to the country, historically and through various denominations. Apparently, this unfortunate manner of thinking, which tends to emulate the worldview and culture of North American and European Christian missionaries, has permeated the general philosophy of the Haitian church on many levels, including church planting, church management, music and even missionary activities.

In that context, I would not be surprised if the satanic pact idea (followed by the divine curse message) was put together first by foreign missionaries and later on picked up by local leaders. On the other hand, it is equally possible that some Haitian church leaders developed the idea on their own using a theological framework borrowed from those same missionaries who subsequently propagated the message around the world. Either way, because of this message, Haiti has been portrayed as the country born out of Satan's benevolence and goodwill toward mankind. Shouldn't such a fantastic idea be tested for its historic validity and theological soundness? I invite you to take with me a closer and possibly different look at the available records.

Watch for Part two of this article on BlackandChristian.com.

Footnotes

1 – Ayiti means land of mountains in Indian language. True to its name, the country has approximately ¾ of its territory made of rugged terrains, high mountains, hills and valleys. Some have said that it was Haiti's topography along with rains and tropical diseases that defeated the French soldiers during the independence war. While it is true that the environmental conditions favored the indigenous army, with the use of guerilla warfare, the Spanish and the French were able to establish and maintain slavery on the island for 300 years under those same conditions. Therefore it is safe to conclude that nature alone was not the factor and Haiti would have never won its independence from France if the leaders of the revolutionary army were not who they were and did not do what they did the way they did it.

2 – Information on the structure and mandate of the United Nations forces currently in Haiti can be found on the U.N. website at <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/minustah/>.

3 – Gelin, J. 2004. La malediction divine sur Haïti: un message ambigu et forcément caduc. Available online at http://www.alterpresse.org/article.php3?id_article=1766, this article in French addresses the ambiguity and abeyance of the whole divine curse idea.

4 - Lacombe, F. 2003. Ripe Now – A Haitian congregation responds to the Great Commission, JoniwritrProductions. Huntington Beach, CA. Pastor Lacombe is a graduate of Moody Bible Institute and he has recently launched a ministry aimed at encouraging Haitian believers to embrace the Great Commission.

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God, Satan, and the Birth of Haiti

Part Two

Jean R. Gelin, Ph.D.

A Closer Look At Bois-Caïman

The proponents of the supposed pact continuously refer to the Bois-Caïman gathering as the place where the satanic contract supposedly took place, even in the absence of solid historical evidence save their own prolific imagination. After extensive research on Haiti and several visits to the country, American writer Robert Heintz and his wife Nancy Heintz published in 1978 a volume on the Haitian revolution that deals with several aspects of Haiti's painful history including the Bois-Caïman meeting⁵. According to these authors, Bookman sought the help of the God of heaven in his prayer, and made no mention whatsoever of a spiritual agreement with Satan. Even though the text shows Bookman was talking to the creator and not the devil, some would still contend that he could not have been really talking to God because – the way they see it - Bookman did not know God as they think they know Him.

In addition to the complete absence of any reference to Satan or to a spiritual pact in Bookman's prayer, there are two other problems associated with such

an interpretation of the available records. First, those who hold that view say implicitly that God was in favor of slavery in Saint-Domingue whereas Satan himself was against it. How would they know? And how could that be? The God of the Bible created man in His own image⁶, and therefore sees all men, women and children as equal in terms of their intrinsic value, regardless of their ethnicity, education or economic status. Satan on the other hand is portrayed in the Bible as a liar, a destroyer of human life, and a murderer⁷. Therefore, it is logical – at least to me - to think that God and not Satan would be in favor of ending the sufferings of the African slaves in the French colony of Saint-Domingue.

The second difficulty of that position lies in the fact that God is above all as the God and creator of all. What do I mean? The Bible contains many instances where God was involved with or answered the sincere prayers of people who were not partakers of His existing covenant but nevertheless acknowledged His existence, power and character. The supremacy and sovereignty of God is a central and undeniable truth in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. To deny this fact would be to lean toward what I call tribal theology, usually conceived or expressed in terms like these: if you are not a registered member of our church and if you do not serve and worship God the way we do, God cannot and will not answer your prayers. Those who operate under that skewed theological umbrella fail dramatically to understand that the God who said, *"You shall have no other gods before me"* (Exodus 20:3) never once said, *"I shall answer no other prayers but yours"*. David was absolutely right about God when he cried: *"O you who hear prayer, to you all men will come"* (Psalms 65:2). For those of us who believe in God we know that we belong to Him, but God Himself does not exclusively belong to us or to anybody for that matter since He created us all. As much as we are totally dependent upon God the Father for our very existence, God in contrast is totally independent of His creation, and He transcends us all.

So, when Bookman addressed his plea for help to the God of heaven, as the historical record seems to indicate, was it just pure theism? Was it a kind of simple theistic philosophy? You can debate that. But as for a spiritual pact with Satan, I have not yet seen the evidence.

Now, someone could readily ask a legitimate question about the significance of the blood shared by the participants during that unprecedented meeting. The drinking of animal blood could be easily understood in the context of a simple cultural phenomenon. Warm animal blood was routinely used as a source of strength in many ancient cultures. Even today, animal blood is consumed in many parts of Haiti, generally fried or transformed in some other way, but without any spiritual or religious connotation. It's worth recalling that this particular event took place in 1791 in rural Saint-Domingue during a gathering of malnourished, tortured, violated, abused, and terrorized men and women. The African slaves who needed their physical strength just to stay alive on the plantations found themselves in greater need of their vitality as the time of the

general insurrection was approaching. It was neither the first nor the last time they had a taste of animal blood. Furthermore, as reported by the World Health Organization⁸, blood derivatives and blood-based products are used by many in developed countries for therapeutic purposes, among other things.

But, if there is no good evidence that there ever was a satanic pact, and if the devil didn't play a role in the success of Haiti's revolution, who or what did? What most people have probably never heard about Haiti is the real reasons the revolution was possible in the first place, 200 years ago.

Moving From Saint-Domingue Into Haiti

The heroes of Haiti's independence succeeded in defeating slavery and colonialism for two main reasons. First, they were united by a clear and common goal – and that's not a small thing considering the extent of the fragmentation of the colonial society. These brave men and women were united in their misery and humiliation, and that made them ready to die fighting for their common freedom rather than continue to live as mere disposable properties of the French slave masters.

Prior to 1791, there were several isolated attempts by various socio-economic or ethnic groups to bring about profound structural changes in the colony. Some wanted to escape slavery whereas others needed to maximize their profits or to reach their goals of liberty and equality with the most privileged of the system.⁹ Among the Indians (native Haitians) who very early fought against slavery stands the name of Chief Henri who succeeded in building a small independent community of people living freely in the mountains. Many years later, mulattoes such as Ogé and Chavannes lost their lives trying to reach equality with the whites. At the same time, African slaves were constantly fleeing to the mountains to live freely whenever they had the opportunity to escape the horrors of the plantations in the plains. Even underprivileged and poor whites were also unhappy with the system and wanted to see significant changes that would give them greater advantages.

In the movement that followed Bois-Caïman, however, the revolting African slaves and the already free mulattoes were united in one big army with one purpose: abolish both slavery and colonialism in Saint-Domingue. With such a clear goal, their combined strength made them unstoppable. Unity among men is so powerful that even God at some point had to come down from heaven to stop a rebellious design put together by united men and women who apparently did not like the divine plan for their lives¹⁰. Conversely, Jesus explained what happens when unity is absent in any human institution: *“Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand”* (Matthew 12:25). It was obviously because of their intense unity that the heroes of Haiti's Independence were able to succeed. And until today, Haiti's maxim remains *“L'union Fait La Force”* (translated *“Unity Creates Strength”*). But the principle of unity itself was not the only factor for

Haiti's early success.

The second reason for 1804 is that as many of Haiti's first leaders were Catholic Christians¹¹, they believed with all their heart and mind that it was the will of God for them to either live as free men and women or at least die fighting for their freedom. I invite you to read for yourself how these heroic men described their conditions and motives – in their own words:

*God who fights for the innocent is our guide, He will not forsake us. To win or to die! There lies our motto that we will defend up to the last drop of our blood. We lack neither powder nor canons. So, Death or Liberty! May God grant it to us without the shedding of blood. Then all our wishes will be fulfilled.*¹²

This is an excerpt from a letter sent to the French Governor Blanchelande who wanted to know why the slaves had revolted, as if being a slave was not in and of itself a sufficient reason. But what is interesting about the exchange is that it took place not before but after the Bois-Caiman meeting. Now, why would they claim God was on their side and guiding them, if – as the rumor goes - they had already made an alliance with the devil? It seems to me that if anybody had to know about the existence or non-existence of a satanic agreement it must have been the very people who made the deal, if such a thing ever took place. Among those who fought, bled, and died for Haiti's independence, there may have well been some who believed and practiced Vodou and others who probably had no religious faith at all and believed only in their weapons. But as for the actual leaders of the revolution, the letter says a lot about the object of their faith and the source of their strength and determination. The above excerpt clearly shows that the fathers of the Haitian revolution believed God was on their side, guiding them as the protector and defender of the innocent.

Watch for Part three of this article on BlackandChristian.com.

Footnotes

5 - A synthesis of Bookman's prayer, arranged from many oral traditions, can be found on page 43 of the book "Written in Blood - the story of the Haitian people, 1492-1971" by Heintz, R.D., Jr, and Heintz, N.G. 1978. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. Here is the text of the prayer: *"Good Lord who hath made the sun that shines upon us, that riseth from the sea, who maketh the storm to roar; and governeth the thunders, The Lord is hidden in the heavens, and there He watcheth over us. The Lord seeth what the blancs have done. Their god commandeth crimes, ours giveth blessings upon us. The Good Lord hath ordained vengeance. He will give strength to our arms and courage to our hearts. He shall sustain us. Cast down the image of the god of the blancs, because he maketh the tears to flow from our eyes. Harken unto Liberty that speaketh now in all your hearts."*

6 – The biblical account of the creation of man is found in Genesis 1:26-28, *Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over*

the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

7 – Jesus talks about Satan in those terms: *You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.* (John 8:44).

8 - Technical information on blood derivatives and blood-based products can be found at <http://www.who.int/bloodproducts/en/>, the website of The World Health Organization.

9 – See Victor, A.J. 2004. In the name of liberty - A story of Haïti (Pre-1492-1806). Linivè Kreyòl. Also on the World Wide Web at <http://www.ayitihistory.com>.

10 - *The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."* (Genesis 11:6-7, NIV).

11 – Toussaint Louverture, among others, was known to be of the Catholic faith; when he became Governor of the island only a decade after the Bois-Caiman meeting, he proclaimed Catholicism as the religion for the land.

12 - I made the translation from the original text written in French: *Dieu qui combat pour l'innocent est notre guide, il ne nous abandonnera jamais. Vaincre ou mourir! Voilà notre devise que nous soutiendrons jusqu'à la dernière goutte de notre sang. Il ne nous manque point de poudre ni de canons. Ainsi la Mort ou la Liberté. Dieu veuille nous la faire obtenir sans effusion de sang. Alors tous nos vœux seront accomplis.* Source: Césaire, A. 1981. Toussaint Louverture: La révolution française et le problème colonial. Page 196. Editions Présence Africaine.

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God, Satan, and the Birth of Haiti

Part Three

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Moving from Saint-Domingue into Haiti (continued)

Surprisingly, those who wrote to the French had a biblically accurate understanding of God's character. Didn't God free the Israelites from slavery in Egypt¹³, and didn't He deliver the young David from the giant Goliath who wanted to enslave the entire nation of Israel?¹⁴ And after Israel had become a stable nation and the Jews began to have their own slaves (usually prisoners of war or indebted people), God himself commanded that every 7 years all slaves should be freed and all debts cancelled, in order to teach them that He was against the idea that a man could live his earthly life as the property of another man – for whatever reason. That 7th year was called the year of the Sabbath in Israel, and after 7 sabbatical years, the year of Jubilee was celebrated on the 50th year with the same proclamation of liberty and forgiveness throughout the land.¹⁵

Haiti does not have a 'Liberty Bell' with a reference to the year of Jubilee stamped on it as does the United States¹⁶, but the story of Haiti's independence has absolutely nothing to do with the devil and corresponds a great deal to these biblical principles of liberty for all men, women, and children. Decades before President Abraham Lincoln issued the 'Emancipation Proclamation' to free the African slaves in the United States¹⁷, their brothers and sisters in Haiti had already broken their own rusty and bloody chains through unity, faith in God, bravery and determination.

In my opinion, the only story in the entire Bible that bears some good similarities with the mindset and stance of the leaders of the Haitian revolution is the story of Shadrach, Meshach and AbedNego. Like the first Haitians leaders, these young Hebrews were uprooted from their homeland, brought to Babylon (modern-day Iraq), and became human properties of king Nebuchadnezzar. While their physical body was under the King's complete control, they remained free in their spirit, their soul and their conscience. They were also supported by their strong faith in the God of their fathers, the God of Liberty, the God of forgiveness and emancipation. Therefore, when summoned by the king to bow before his statue in worship, they could do nothing but refuse. In that regard, their response was strikingly comparable to the response the Haitian leaders gave to the French - a response of unity, faith, courage, bravery and determination:

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." (Daniel 3:16-18).

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego chose death over idol worship, with the hope that God was on their side and was able to save them. Similarly, the leaders of the Haitian revolution chose death over slavery, with the hope that God, who fights for the innocent, was going to grant them their freedom and human dignity. Even if God was not going to intervene on their behalf, the Haitian leaders (like the young Hebrews before them) were ready to die rather than accept their subhuman status dictated by Napoleon. And in both cases, God's assistance was manifest for all to see. After independence, however, Haiti's leaders were faced with a new set of challenges, things they did not know and never expected.

Haiti's first steps after 1804

Haiti's emergence as a free nation in the New World was similar to the birth of an unwanted child. After winning its liberty through the literal destruction of the entire colonial structure, the new country was simply not welcome in the community of nations. Haiti was not needed as Saint-Domingue has been for so long in the past. The threat of invasion by France prompted Dessalines to order the construction of several fortresses throughout the country. The landmark of that campaign is the superb Citadelle, described by the world heritage committee of the United Nations as a universal symbol of liberty¹⁸. The invasion never materialized, and French troops did not return to the country until 200 years later under the command of the United Nations. Nevertheless, Haiti was forced to pay a large compensation to France before its independence could finally be accepted. Many historians believe that this huge financial burden, in the order of several millions and lasting one century, plays a critical role in the country's slow but steady descent into poverty.

Along with France, the United States and even the Vatican initially refused to recognize the new nation. For reasons known only to them, the leaders of the Catholic Church in Europe, who were very much involved in Saint-Domingue, declined to have diplomatic relations with Haiti, even after repeated attempts by several heads of state, and despite the fact that Catholicism was made the official religion of the new country¹⁹.

While efforts were being made by many for international recognition and acceptance, Haiti opened its door to protestant missionaries from England and the United States shortly after 1804. These missionaries started preaching in many parts of the country, building churches, schools, clinics, and hospitals – works they still do today to the benefit of the Haitian population. But one event worth recalling is how Haiti, despite all its difficulties, made room for Jews who were fleeing Germany's persecution and the upcoming holocaust in Europe. This hospitality offered to the Jews in their time of need could be seen as yet another fundamental difference of priorities between Saint-Domingue and Haiti, considering that under the 'Code Noir' published in 1685 the presence of Jews was not tolerated in the French colonies.²⁰ The Jewish families that found a safe haven in Haiti around World War II formed a small and prosperous community that still exists in the country today.²¹

Although profoundly tolerant in matters of religion and faith, the Haitian people in general have always been pro-God, and open to the ideals of peace, prosperity, and freedom shared by humanity. The next time you come across the baseless and ridiculous idea that

Satan himself, the greatest and most famous slave owner of the entire universe, somehow helped the Haitian revolutionary army defeat Napoleon's forces, please do yourself a big favor: Just don't believe it.

Footnotes

13 – The exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt is described in the Bible in Exodus

14 – The biblical story of David and Goliath can be found in 1 Samuel 17.

15 – The year of the Sabbath and the year of Jubilee are described in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15.

16 - Go to <http://www.ushistory.org/libertybell/index.html> for information on the liberty Bell.

17 – On January 1st, 1863, almost 6 decades after Haiti's proclaimed its independence from France, President Abraham Lincoln issued the 'Emancipation Proclamation' in the United States by declaring that all persons held as slaves shall be free. Blacks were accepted into the Union Army. See http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/.

18 – Reference to the Citadelle by the World Heritage Committee of the United Nations can be found at <http://whc.unesco.org/sites/180.htm>.

19 - Leyburn, J.G. 1941. The Haitian People. Yale University Press.

20 – The complete text of the Code Noir is available in French at http://www.haiti-reference.org/histoire/documents/code_noir.html.

21 - For information of the Haiti's small Jewish community, go to the Chicago Jewish Community Online at http://www.juf.org/news_public_affairs/article.asp?key=4870.

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