

really about America's founding or Jewish influence across Britain's mainland colonies, as its title suggests. It is an intriguing, learned book about the theological interests of five remarkable colonial figures who tenaciously pursued obscure Jewish traditions that had originated centuries earlier and, now, an ocean away. Anyone interested in the breadth of intellectual possibilities available to New World learners will find it curiously absorbing.

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***A Mere Kentucky of a Place: The Elkhorn Association and the Commonwealth's First Baptists.* By Keith Harper. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2021. xix + 197 pp. \$49.99 hardcover – printed case.**

So many Virginia Baptists made their way to Kentucky after the American Revolution that one observer called the territory “a vortex of Baptist preachers.” Kentucky drew Baptists in droves throughout the 1780s (including Lewis Craig’s entire congregation, the so-called “Traveling Church”) for a variety of reasons: the promise of rich land and a fresh financial start, a sense of duty to carry the gospel to the furthest reaches of the young republic, a simple thirst for adventure. According to Keith Harper, another factor driving the Baptist migration was just as important, though less appreciated by historians. Long consigned to the cultural margins of colonial Virginia, Baptists, led by their white male ministers, were eager to “consolidate their social, political, economic and religious gains” from the Revolutionary years, and finally attain “economic wealth, status, and full social and cultural acceptability (xvii, xvi).” Kentucky’s earliest Baptists hoped in their westward relocation to migrate from cultural outsiders to insiders. Their pursuit of this goal (and the challenges they encountered) is the story of *A Mere Kentucky of a Place*.

By raiding the extensive records of the Elkhorn Association, the oldest Baptist network west of the Appalachians, Harper belies a number of stereotypes attached to frontier religion. It has long been assumed that the way west had a leveling effect on frontier settlers and their churches. In the Elkhorn minutes, however, Harper sees less of Nathan Hatch’s *Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and more of the authoritative religious leadership found in Jon Butler’s *Awash in a Sea of Faith* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). The Elkhorn’s leaders (Harper focuses his brief book tightly on the white male ministers featured in the Association’s records) were “men on the make,” self-consciously fighting for a more respectable station while also remaining faithful to their spiritual priorities and theological convictions (xiv). The project required a precarious balancing act of three major dynamics that Harper identifies as evangelical religion, Jeffersonian Republicanism, and Southern honor culture (xv). The resulting ministry culture, beneath a patina of democratic religion, reproduced a system of deference and hierarchy not entirely dissimilar from what they had escaped in Virginia. The egalitarian practices of early Baptist churches have long fascinated historians: receiving all members through

gospel testimony and immersion, holding congregational votes, calling one another “brother” and “sister,” etc. Yet at the end of the day, a small group of formally ordained (sometimes formally educated), white, male ministers tended to call the shots. Tensions regarding religious authority run through Harper’s narrative, and, indeed, the larger Baptist story.

One recent monograph has claimed that “Baptists are notorious for two things—evangelism and schism” (Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins, *Baptists in America: A History* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2015], 251). Harper puts both dynamics on full display in his chronicle of the Kentucky Baptists. For instance, the Elkhorn Association leaders celebrated the revivals of the Second Great Awakening as a divine seal of approval on their own religious efforts. In addition to sweeping scads of converted sinners into their churches, the revival seemed to wash away old suspicions between the Regular and Separate Baptists of Kentucky, culminating in the “Union of 1801” (70–85). These gains were short-lived, however. A series of controversies roiled the Elkhorn Association from 1805–1810, most significantly around slavery. Baptists in the late eighteenth century often formed the vanguard of antislavery activity. Yet, in a trend documented by other historians of southern evangelicalism, as Kentucky Baptist leaders became ensconced in the state’s political and economic interests, they tended to disdain those who “meddled with emancipation.” The Elkhorn Association divided over the issue in 1807, with David Barrow organizing his own network of emancipationist churches, the delightfully named “Baptized Licking-Locust Association, Friends of Humanity” (87–91). In Harper’s story, the “honor culture” in the Elkhorn Association overwhelms the impulses of democratic religion time and time again.

When the modern missions movement swept American Baptist life in the second decade of the nineteenth century, it seemed Kentucky Baptists had finally struck upon a cause grand enough to unify them (a major strength of the book is Harper’s analysis of the pragmatic bonding agent that the missions movement offered to fissiparous Baptists like those of the Elkhorn). Yet the Elkhorn’s leaders found a way to divide even over missions, as John Taylor and other old-school brethren raised important objections to the modern methods and quasi-Arminian theology of the missionary movement. It was an early manifestation of the “anti-missions” controversy that would bedevil Baptist life in the South for decades (111–130).

By the end of Keith Harper’s lively account, the reader has a vivid sense of the struggles Kentucky’s early Baptist ministers underwent to create a new religious culture on the frontier. These trials ranged from land acquisition to personality conflicts, from theological division to slavery disputes. Harper’s tight focus on the Elkhorn Association yields helpful detail about the priorities and ambitions of early Kentucky Baptist ministers, even as it raises questions about how ordinary Baptist men and women, as well as outsiders, viewed these leaders. Well-written and often entertaining, *A Mere Kentucky of a Place* expands our understanding of early American Baptist church life and ministry culture, and adds texture to our prevailing images of frontier religion. Harper reminds us, next to the circuit riders and camp meeting revivalists in our imaginations, to make room for the Bluegrass Barons of the Elkhorn Baptist Association.

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