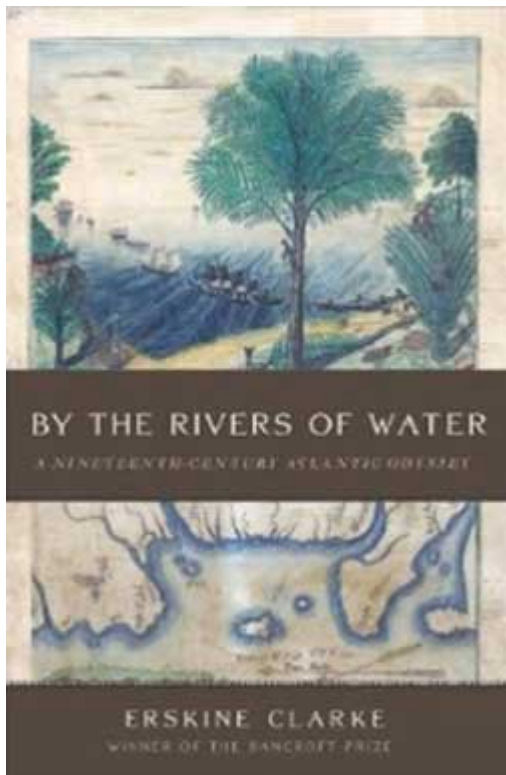


# The Great Commission and the Constraints of Home



In the 1847 *Grammar of the Mpongwe Language*, principally authored by John Leighton Wilson, the American missionary to Gabon marveled at the flexibility of the central African language despite what he perceived to be the “contracted world” of the Mpongwe people themselves. Erskine Clarke’s *By the Rivers of Water* narrates the Atlantic journeys of this gifted linguist and earnest minister, revisiting the places that broadened—and constrained—the white missionary’s worldview. Despite his expansive and even global sense of Christian calling, the minister returned to his Southern homeland as his family, church, and nation divided over the issue of slavery; his world proved equally contracted.

The Presbyterian missionary, whom the author refers to as Leighton, is survived by an ample documentary record that warrants his central position in the narrative. Clarke approaches these sources with care and imagination to honor the journeys, struggles, and perspectives of less-chronicled others: enslaved Gullah people of the Carolina Lowcountry, the women of the American missionary movement, free or formerly enslaved American colonists, the Grebo people of Liberia, and the Mpongwe of Gabon. He masterfully explores conflicted definitions of freedom and faith, the problems of slavery and racism, and the many human choices that shaped nineteenth-century America and the broader Atlantic World.



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The book's opening chapters provide vivid social and spatial contrast between the Gullah and the affluent white Presbyterian families that together populated the coastal lowcountry of South Carolina and Georgia in the early nineteenth century. As demonstrated by his 2006 Bancroft Prize-winning *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic*, Clarke adeptly mines genealogies and household records to reveal the intertwined relational networks of Southern plantation households and religious communities. Leighton and his future wife, Jane Bayard, both inherited slaves in their native states of South Carolina and Georgia. Extended stays among the Presbyterian elite of Philadelphia, however, stoked a passion for foreign missions in Jane and her sister Margaret. By 1832 the sisters were both engaged to aspiring young missionaries, and Jane looked forward to service with Leighton in West Africa.

The second part of the book follows Leighton and Jane Wilson to Cape Palmas, Liberia. Leighton first visited the site in 1832, and after their 1834 nuptials the young pair conducted their gospel labors among the Grebo and African American colonists. With the cooperation of these neighbors, the Wilsons worked to help erect new buildings, start schools, and combat the common threats of malaria and disease. The Wilsons maintained amicable relationships with the indigenous residents, and prominent Grebo not only chose Christianity, but also advanced the educational agenda of the mission. In a particularly fascinating chapter, Clarke illustrates the forms of accommodation and selective appropriation that characterized the conversion of the polygamous Grebo leader known both as William Davis and Mworeh Mah.

The missionaries rarely preached in Grebo, but worked tirelessly to translate and print the Bible. Of interest to scholars of print culture, African American printer B.V.R. James established a printing press at Cape Palmas, trained local apprentices, and with the Wilsons sent a young Grebo man to New York to study book binding. Christian texts were published both in Liberia and later in Gabon.

Leighton opposed Iberian slavers and the ongoing Atlantic trade. While still an owner of slaves in the U.S., the white minister disdained African American colonists who supplied the ships of slave traders. He also scorned the imperialistic sensibilities he perceived among some African American colonists and the racist deceptions of white promoters of the African colonization movement back in the U.S. In contrast to the amity and respect shared with his printer colleague, Leighton frequently contested the decisions and authority of the African American governor of the colony, John Brown Russwurm. Clarke might be at times overly sympathetic to Leighton's point of view, but remains mindful of the white Southerner's racial biases. In his final analysis of these combatants, Clarke suggests both were shaped by and sought two different worlds

with respect to race and justice.

Despite their work abroad, the bonds of slavery still tethered the Wilsons to the Southern worlds of their youth. Leighton was slow to emancipate his own two slaves that remained in South Carolina, in view of laws that demanded newly freed blacks leave the state. Eventually liberated, they declined Leighton's recommendation to relocate in the Northeast. They instead elected to keep their freedom quiet and illegally remain with their families in the South. The Wilsons emancipated Jane's slaves and encouraged their migration from Savannah to Liberia in 1838. A number accepted the Wilson's suggestion to leave Georgia and joined the American missionaries in West Africa. Even as they received the newly emancipated, the Wilsons harbored growing dissatisfaction with the colonization project at Cape Palmas.

In the 1840s the Wilsons explored alternate sites and relocated the mission hub to the Gabon estuary of the Como River. As in Liberia, most white Americans sent to the new mission quickly died of malaria. Jane and Leighton enjoyed their work among the Mpongwe people and labored alongside surviving whites and a group of mixed-culture black families. The educational attempts of the mission and Leighton's convictions sought to prove black intellectual capacity. Yet sadly, his anthropological correspondence to missionary publications and delivery of a gorilla's skull to American scientists inadvertently reinforced pseudo-scientific racism. Clarke notes the intended and unintended cultural imperialism of the missionaries, though Leighton decried other instances of imperial overreach, such as the U.S. removal of the Cherokee from Georgia, African American colonists' disrespect of the Grebo in Liberia, and French Catholic impositions on the native people of Gabon.

The final section of the book details the homecoming of Leighton and Jane after seventeen years abroad. In 1853 Leighton accepted an appointment as a secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions and moved to New York. Though he envisioned global Christian expansion and understood slavery to be a sin, Leighton believed the election of Lincoln an imperialist violation of Southern planters' moral exercise. Leighton and Jane said goodbye to friends and family and returned to the South by 1861. During and after the Civil War, the Wilsons kept busy. Leighton oversaw the chaplaincy needs of Confederate soldiers and led the missionary attempts of a newly formed Southern Presbyterian Church while Jane administered a boarding school for black children at their Old Homestead plantation.



Title page from *A Grammar of the Mpongwe Language, with Vocabularies...*, attributed to J. Leighton Wilson, New York, 1847. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

The titular allusion to Psalm 1:3 fits the book's riverside settings—alongside the swirling Black River, tidal waters of the Georgia Sea Islands, the Atlantic shore of Cape Palmas, and the broad Gabon Estuary. Furthermore, the psalmist's metaphor likens the human to a tree rooted at the river's edge. Despite the

Wilsons proximity to the diverse cultural flows of the broader Atlantic, their roots ran deep into plantation soil and held to the slaveholding traditions of the white South. Near the end of his life Leighton reflected on the idolatry of homeland and church. Clarke suggests that Leighton's loyalty "to a history and people committed to maintaining slavery and its deep oppression ... was both an act of deep love and the desertion of moral vision" (337).

*By the Rivers of Water* significantly contributes to the study of American religious history. Clarke proves the heuristic value of an Atlantic/world paradigm for the study of Christian missionaries and extends this conceptual framework deep into the nineteenth century. Beyond his extensive research in archives that directly pertain to the missionaries, Clarke uses anthropological and historical accounts of the African diaspora to honor the narratives and voices of African Americans and Africans on both sides of the Atlantic.

Counter to the paternalism and imperialism of the American missionary endeavors, Clarke asserts that subsequent generations of Grebo and Mpongwe people reinterpreted and reappropriated the African-language bibles and Christian traditions that the Wilsons left behind. West African Christians developed their own contextual theologies, new practices of faith, and independent African churches. The epilogue speaks to a shift in the "demographic center of Christianity ... to the 'Global South,'" evidenced by numerous West African missionaries currently deployed to the U.S. and a white Episcopalian church in South Carolina that recently joined the Anglican Diocese of Rwanda (377-8). In these considerations, Clarke—a professor emeritus from Columbia Theological Seminary—brings to the monograph a keen awareness of historical and emergent developments in the world Christian movement.

Clarke brilliantly explores the contradictions between Leighton's expansive missionary travels and the limits of racial constructs and sectional divides. He succeeds in narrating the mysteries "of good intentions and cruel consequences, and the enigma of human freedom in the midst of slavery and the contingencies of human life" (xxii). Frequent reminders of characters' relationships to one another are at times repetitive, but understandable given the book's complex social networks. Effusive descriptions are most effective when advancing the narrative, though Clarke's lively pen will undoubtedly attract and satisfy a wide audience. Concluding with Leighton's reflections on the idolatry of home, Clarke occasions the humble reader to consider the moral constraints of one's own time and place.