



Letters from Africa Daniel Coker (1820)

Daniel Coker was born into slavery in Maryland. As a teenager, he escaped to New York, where he became a Methodist, a licensed preacher, and later a deacon. He was able to return to Maryland thanks to free black and white friends who purchased his freedom for him. For a time, Coker led a black congregation in Baltimore that broke away from the white-dominated Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) and became part of the emerging black-run African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Bethel, referred to in the selections below, is the AME congregation that Coker led; Sharp Street is the MEC congregation from which they separated.

In 1820, Coker emigrated to western Africa as a member of the first party sponsored by the American Colonization Society (ACS), an organization of whites who encouraged free blacks to leave the United States and resettle in Africa. To promote that project, Coker allowed the ACS to publish the journal he kept during his voyage to Africa, along with some letters he sent home upon arrival. The two letters excerpted here, Coker wrote within the first optimistic days of the colonists' effort to settle on Sherbro Island, not far from the British colony of Freetown, Sierra Leone. Less than a month after Coker wrote these letters, a quarter of the Sherbro Island colonists had died, mostly from disease; within a year, the survivors abandoned the site and, under Coker's leadership, took refuge in British-held Sierra Leone. Most of the group eventually joined a new American colonial venture in present-day Liberia, but Coker and his family settled permanently in the British colony.

1. To all my dear African brethren in America (March 29, 1820)

Dear brethren! To all you who love the Lord Jesus Christ and his kingdom, I would with pleasure inform you that I, with about 90 of our American colored brethren, have arrived safe in Africa. We find the land to be good and the natives kind, [except for] those who, from intercourse with the slave traders, become otherwise.

There is a great work here to do—thousands and thousands of souls here to be converted from paganism and Mahometanism to the religion of Jesus. Oh! brethren, who will come over to the help of the Lord? If you come as Baptists, come to establish an African Baptist church, and not to encourage division. If you come as Presbyterians, come to support an African Presbyterian church, and not to make divisions. If you come as Protestants, come to support an African Protestant church, and not to make divisions. If you come as Methodists, come to support an African Methodist church. We wish to know nothing of Bethel and of Sharp Street* in Africa—leave all these divisions in America. Before these heathens, all should be sweetly united; and if darkness is driven from this land, it must be by a united effort among Christians. The Sharp

* This observation alludes to a dissension, or disagreement, which has existed in Baltimore between the congregations of Bethel Church and the church in Sharp Street, both congregations composed of colored people of the Methodist society—the former holding an independent government and not in connection with the society.

[Footnote from the source publication]

Street brethren will be to me as the Bethel brethren; all will be alike. I wish to forget all such names and distinctions.

Those who will come, in love, to do good and spread the gospel—come, in the name of God, come! Otherwise, they had better stay away, for nothing but love and union will do good among these heathens. God grant that many such may come over to help with this great work.

* * *

2. To Jeremiah Watts of Baltimore, Maryland (April 3, 1820)

Dear brother— This comes to inform you of my good health and safe arrival in Africa. [...H]aving just returned from a visit to one of the kings, with the agent, and finding the ship not gone, I snatch the passing moment to inform you that I have seen and passed through strange things since I last saw you. Oh! my brother and sister, how great a work is this! The millions in this land are the thousands in America, and the thousands unborn are deeply interested in it. Oh! my dears, what darkness has covered the minds of this people. None but those who come and see can judge.

You would be astonished to see me traveling in the wilderness, guided by a little footpath, until coming suddenly upon a little town of huts in the thickets, and there to behold hundreds of men, women, and children, naked, sitting on the ground or on mats, living on the natural productions of the earth and as ignorant of God as the brutes that perish. You would see them coming round me, shaking hands (but very different from our way of shaking hands) and gazing on me, and spreading a mat and offering me of such food as they live upon. In a word, they are friendly and kind. Such is their conduct that anyone who loves souls would weep over them and be willing to suffer and die with them.

I can say that my soul cleaves to Africa in such a manner as to reconcile me to the idea of being separated from my dear friends and the comforts of a Christian land. But, I confess, when I think of you all, it is as much as I can bear. But, my brother and sister, if we don't meet soon in this life, we may soon meet in heaven. I expect to give my life to bleeding, groaning, dark, benighted Africa. I expect to pass through much, if I should live. I should rejoice to see you in this land. It is a good land, it is a rich land, and I do believe it will be a great nation, and a powerful and worthy nation; but those who break the way will suffer much.

If you ask my opinion as to coming out, I say: Let all that can, sell out and come. Come and bring ventures to trade, etc., and you may do much better than you can possibly do in America and not work half so hard. I wish that thousands were here and had goods to trade with. Bring about two hogsheads of good leaf tobacco, cheap calico and cheap handkerchiefs, pins, knives and forks, pocketknives, etc.; with these you may buy land, hire hands, or buy provisions. I say, come—the land is good. [...] This land only wants industrious, informed, and Christian people to make it one of the greatest nations in the world.

Source: *Journal of Daniel Coker, a Descendant of Africa* [...] (Baltimore, MD: Edward J. Coale, 1820), 42-44, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.69015000002887>. Public domain.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy and Henry Testerman. Additional paragraph and sentence breaks inserted for readability. Spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and typography (italics) emended in line with modern American conventions. &c. spelled out as *etc.* The religious labels *Baptist*, *Presbyterian*, *Protestant*, *Methodist*, and *Christian*, lowercase in the source publication, have been capitalized here. The word *church* in the name *Bethel Church* (referring to Bethel AME Church in Baltimore, Maryland) was likewise lowercase in the source but has been capitalized here.

These edited excerpts from Coker's letters are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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