

Transcending the dehumanising effects of slavery and racism

Hope and the African American Spirituals



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Dark midnight was my cry
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Give me Jesus
Give me Jesus
You may have the world
Give me Jesus¹

In February 2019, I was teaching at the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Mission, Theology and Culture in Akropong, Ghana, which is a local post-graduate theological institution on the mountain ridge surrounding the capital city of Accra.² Each week I would meet with a group of Masters students to watch and discuss a contemporary film. The aim was to deepen our understanding of gospel and culture matters.

One week I chose the Ethiopian-produced film *Sankofa* (1993). Directed by Haile Germina, the film focuses on enslaved Africans, and the varying ways of resistance and overcoming – armed and mental – the plantation system of the Americas. It is an illuminating, deeply educational film. It aims to restore human dignity to the Africans and their descendants who had been captured and enslaved by the European Christian enterprise of the Atlantic Slave Trade.

The trading of African human beings for profit lasted over 300 years and involved nations such as Portugal, The Netherlands, the UK, Spain, France and others. The eventual justification for this barbarity was concern for the souls of the Africans, that they would become Christians and by extension, be civilised. Moreover, ‘race’, as a

destructive pseudo-scientific ideology of superior and inferior humanity evolved in further support of this atrocity; and till today, humanity still suffers the destructively divisive effects of this constructed ideology that normalises economic exploitation. Ships from these nations carried manufactured goods such as faulty guns, mirrors and other such items from Europe to Africa, which were traded for captured Africans, who were then transported to the Caribbean and the Americas where they laboured on plantations to grow and harvest commodities such as sugar, tobacco, rice, indigo which were then taken back to Europe, where the cycle started all over again.

During the screening of the film the students were silent – their faces intent, eyes focused and brows furrowed. At times, some would recognise Twi³ words and phrases being spoken, and a lightness entered the room, but these were fleeting. Mostly, a heaviness hovered over us as the film continued to its climax and conclusion. And this time the usual comments were not forthcoming. The silence lingered, and some students began quietly to express their horror at what they had seen. After more deafening silence, I asked the student who had always been the most vocal during our discussions what he thought of the film. He looked at me with a most anguished expression and asked, just barely above a whisper, ‘Where was God?’ Then with his voice raised in anger, ‘Where was God? Where was God when all this was happening? Where was God in all this suffering?’

Was God there during the long, weeding out marches of Africans captured in the hinterlands to the coast? Was God there when captured Africans were being branded on their skins as if they were animals instead of being the priests and priestesses, teachers, griots, carpenters, fishermen, farmer, weavers, wives, husbands, daughters and sons that they were? Was God there when they were held for months in the slave dungeons on the West African coast, where the small, stone rooms were crammed with bodies, poorly lit, cold, and where there was no proper sanitation? Was God there in the bowels of the slave ships with such names as 'Jesus', 'Esperanza' and 'Mercy'⁴ on which Africans were packed like sardines for the six to eight weeks Atlantic Middle Passage⁵ journey that carried them away from their ancestral lands of West and Central Africa to the shores of the Caribbean Islands of Jamaica or Barbados, and then onto the United States and Central America? Was God there when women and girls were raped, and when attempted onboard ship resistances lead to their vicious deaths and to ruthless measures enacted to stamp out such resistance? Was God there when captured Africans were thrown overboard and became food for the sharks that followed slave ships as a matter of course? Was God there when upon discerning what these sea voyages would entail, many thousands upon thousands chose drowning in the ocean rather than undergoing what awaited them?

My startling response was, 'Yes, God was there.' For where else could God be if life would continue despite the prevalence of such distilled deaths? I insisted to them, 'I know God was there because I am here now. I am descended from those enslaved Africans who chose to survive the Middle Passage voyage through death to life upon these shores'⁶ and the mass torture and murders on the plantations. I am of that New World African tribe, that tribe formed in the unimaginable 'womb' of that Middle Passage and the 'Invisible Institution'.⁷ This is the 'Beloved Tribe'⁸ which continued to survive and overcome by 'imagined grace'.⁹ Moreover, I am a Christian descended from that new world, Beloved Tribe, as had been my mother, my grandmother, my great-grandmother and so on. The almighty, grace-full, life-sustaining God was there because it was out of that tsunami of suffering that the haunting hope of the African-American Spirituals had emerged in all their multifaceted creativity, purpose, power and majesty.¹⁰

Survival

Clearly, no captured or enslaved African survived such orchestrated annihilation without making up his mind, or her will and their spirit most importantly, to survive and, then, to overcome. For contrary to the portrayal of Solomon Northrop in the film *12 Years a Slave*, where he exclaims in anguish, 'I don't want to survive, I want to live'

there is no living without first surviving and it is not any kind of survival that constitutes living. The kind of survival from which the creative genius of a people can be expressed in myriad forms of complex life affirming art and spiritual beliefs is the kind that is infused by eternal life, or timelessness, itself, surely. Thus, it took supernatural, divine intervention for any African to have survived the Middle Passage and then to keep on surviving the plantation system; not just in terms of remaining physically strong enough to endure the voyage, but most importantly, in terms of remaining mentally, emotionally and spiritually sound, especially when the full impact of being ruptured from their ancestral land/home registered on their psyche. Such ruptures would destabilise their physical connection to places and spaces of the kinship structures and worldview that had nurtured their humanity. What, if anything, could have created life-affirming-life out of such prevailing, destroying death? I am insisting here that choosing to survive, and then to actually survive, required divine intervention and power. Those who survived did so because they were divinely aided by divine powers to achieve the kind of survival that they did.

For even before slave ships would reach the new world, captured Africans had begun to reform kinship structures from among those with whom they were chained. For any African chained to a sick person to survive, he or she would have to be and do something to assist the sick one to not become too sick, otherwise, they could both die. So those who had been enemies prior to being chained together, would have had to become 'un-enemied' as quickly as possible to increase both of their chances of survival. Ordered to dance (and sing, supposedly to provide the musical accompaniment for the dancing) onboard slave ships as a means of exercise to ensure relative physical health during the journey, captured Africans danced movements and sang songs and chants that belonged to their primal or traditional ways of worshipping the supreme being they knew as God before getting on those ships. In routinely doing so, they maintained the very forms that would later become the foundations upon and structures through which their beliefs of and in Jesus and biblical interpretations would be built and woven to become what we know today as an Africanised or a primal Christianity in the Americas.

The emergence of the Spirituals

The story of the Atlantic Slave Trade Middle Passage is ultimately one of hope and creativity despite the immense mental, emotional and physical torture and destruction experienced by the Africans who continued to make that crossing for some 300 years. Moreover, the completion of that voyage extended the dehumanising experience when they were placed on 'auction blocks' where their human worth was measured

NOTES

1. An illuminating verse from the African American Spiritual, 'Give me Jesus' of transcending the depth of suffering experienced by enslaved African Africans of the forced migration of Africans to the Americas; and insight into the redefining power of the liberating Jesus they chose to believe in despite the worldly, enslaving Christianity of the enslavers in which he was presented.

2. Founded by the late Ghanaian Kwame Bediako and his wife, Mary Bediako, the institute is remarkable because its location combines the history and legacy of both the traditional religion and customs of the Akwapim people and that of the nineteenth-century Basel missionaries whose renovated buildings the students and staff use today.

3. The major language of the Asante people of Ghana.

4. See R Hayden, 'Middle Passage' from *Collected Poems*. © 1962, 1966 by Robert Hayden. © 1985 by Emma Hayden, Liveright Publishing Corporation. Many slave ships bore evidence of the Christian faith of many of the ship owners and business of the trade.

5. The Atlantic Middle Passage is the phrase used to identify the deadly, disorienting and dehumanising six to eight weeks' journey endured in the bowels of those slave ships as captured Africans were

forcible transported from their ancestral homelands to the new world of the Americas.

6. See Hayden's poem, 'Middle Passage'.

7. See A Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The 'invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

8. I am doing two things simultaneously here, both of which are in honour of our recent literary ancestor, Nobel Prize winner, Toni Morrison: I am borrowing the title of her Pulitzer prize novel *Beloved*, as well as the combined scriptural reference from Hosea 2.23 and Romans 9.24–26 on which Morrison named this novel in tribute of the millions forcibly wrenched from the African continent and survived the Middle Passage crossing and enslavement; it reads, 'I will call them my people, who were not my people, and her beloved, who was not beloved. And it will come to pass in the place where it was said to them, "you are not my people", there they shall be called children of the living God.'

9. Again, I am indebted to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987) here for the concept of 'imagined grace', as that grace which the Beloved Tribe had to conjure whilst undergoing the Middle Passage to survive it, and to transmit this grace to future descendants so they too would keep on surviving the atrocities of plantation existence with transcending

economically as a prelude to being bought and sold as chattel and property; then came the terror of the forced labour plantation systems of the Americas. Yet, it was from these same people and their descendants, apparently stripped of all human agency, that the world received the unending gift of the African American Spirituals. What is the transforming, transcending agent or agency at work here?

I find the ideas in Emmanuel Katongole's text, *Born from Lament*, most useful in answering this query. Although Katongole is exploring and conceiving of hope for and in the African continent amidst the harrowing experiences of the Rwandan Genocide and its effects on the neighbouring Congo, his take on biblical lament as a vehicle of hope is instructive in imagining what must have been the reality of those captured Africans during the Middle Passage and beyond. He writes:

Biblical lament, then, has the potential to bring one to a new place, to a new depth, and thus to a new song of praise, which is qualitatively different from the praise before. This new place is also a kind of seeing, not simply in terms of mental insight, but in the sense of a depth of knowing and experience. It is the kind of seeing that Job points to when he notes, 'I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you' (Job 42.5). It is as if Job is saying that through his experience of loss, abiding uncertainty and unrelieved suffering – and his relentless turning toward and around God – he has come to 'see' in a new way. It is this kind of seeing generated by way of anguished turning toward God and around God that is the basis of an odd and yet profound song of praise.¹¹

This capacity and ability to envision a new, future reality of freedom from torture and the ensuing despair of enslavement was rooted in that 'biblical like lament' that would have arisen during the Middle Passage; it was from within such a lament that those captured Africans began to receive the new vision of hope that enabled a choice for survival. The ongoing lament in response to enslavement would have brought them to a 'new place, to a new depth, and thus to a new *song of praise*': the African American Spirituals derived from that 'new way of seeing' not only themselves, but also the supreme God of their homeland. For in this harrowing new world existence, their God had to have a new potency, a new degree of empowering and enabling them to live regenerated lives despite the destruction to their bodies.

For they had not entered those slave ships bereft of knowledge of God, the supreme being of all life. So that lament of 'turning toward God and around in God' became the psychic or spiritual space of 'imagined grace' in which they apprehended in a new world context, the survival and overcoming grace of the supreme God they had brought with them from Africa. Imagined grace enabled ways

of seeing things that can only be 'seen with eyes that have cried'. And crying here is to lament, and in that lamenting, seeing all things differently, including one's relationship to self, to other selves like them, and to those selves unlike them as well as seeing their renewed position in relation to the supreme being.

This 'new song of praise', this African American Spiritual, is derived then from the initial sounds of torment wrenched from those slave ship Africans and that continued to pour from their minds once they had landed and begun to live as enslaved human beings living in a strange land, in a strained, unnatural environment of labour intertwined with mental and physical torture. Much later, these Middle Passage sounds of torment and songs of danced survival evolved into field shouts and 'call and response' hollers, work sounds and songs, which became the foundation for the Spirituals once the biblical stories were received and reinterpreted via the barely literate African descended plantation preachers, who would have been the primary means through which these stories became known to the forcibly made and kept (under the threat of death) illiterate enslaved people.

We must remember that the enslaved could be killed for learning how to read or write. Literacy was illegal because enslavers understood that once the enslaved learned to read the Scriptures for themselves, they would understand better the power in them for equality and liberation from human bondage, and an enduring struggle for liberation would ensue. This was exactly what happened with three of the most prominent slave rebellions in plantation history arising from those whose interpretations of Scriptures had informed their vision of physical and spiritual resistance to enslavement: Prosser, Vesey and Baptist preacher, Turner. Indeed, the Bible became the enduring vehicle through which African Americans of the first African diaspora in the Americas engaged all manner of political struggles for justice and equality within the American landscape.

Thus, as people of an oral culture, the enslaved committed those biblical stories to memory, and danced them, embodying and re-articulating them in a choreography that they stamped into the soil of the new world during the hidden praise and worship held in the praise-houses and the 'clearings' of the Ringshout.

The Ringshout

The Ringshout is a ritual of remembrance in the America's that had its antecedents in the funeral dances of central and west Africa. It enabled enslaved Africans to reconstruct individual and collective tribal links to their ancestral homeland through danced worship. 'Wherever in African the anticlockwise dance ceremony was performed ... the dancing and singing were directed to the ancestors and gods ... the ring in which Africans

danced and sang is the key to understanding the means by which they achieved oneness in America.¹²

Through this ritual, these new world Africans established a new, yet ancestral identity as the Beloved Tribe in the Americas by assuaging their longing for an original homeland by re-establishing old tribal links even as new ones were being established. With Africa as the ancestral homeland of both, they reoriented their nascent American soul identity to Africa. They were Africans in America, and as such some of America was also becoming part of who they were.

Ringshout participants collectively sang Spirituals that encompassed the range of daily experiences, as well as their reflections and interpretations of biblical stories they had memorised. Moving in a counterclockwise circle in those shuffling steps that inscribed their footprints on the earth, they were re-enacting and embodying an ever continuing life journey – past, present and future – as historical subjects and as timeless people who were re-connecting all the time to their ancestors, to their present and to their future generations. Thus, they would and could eventually be the timeless people who would transcend the limitations of their present socio-political realities: they would overcome every day in this new land, and they would simultaneously overcome someday, as well.¹³

Conclusion

In gaining a new way to see the supreme being that we call God during their lament of hope during the Middle Passage and beyond, captured and then enslaved Africans and their descendants were equipped with the reinterpreting tools to reject annihilation and affirm a right to divine

life. The centre of focus was a combined vision of themselves with a God who was a companion in their miseries, even as he enabled them to transcend those miseries and their causes. This is miraculous news. This is no ordinary achievement. This is a radical attainment; radical in the sense that, individually and collectively, African Americans of that first forced migration constructed a belief in Jesus as God that in essence made them 'beyond Christian' for the times in which they had been living. They were beyond Christians because they could not and did not become Christians like those that had enslaved them; indeed, they rejected the enslavers' God and Christianity, for neither offered them freedom or liberation from bondage; and neither offered them equality nor a sense of their own autonomy and beauty as humans beings worthy of dignity and love. So, instead of accepting the limitations inherent in their handed rendition of the biblical God, Jesus and Christianity, they had the cultural and spiritual tools to recreate and reinterpret that God, that Jesus and that Christianity for themselves from the biblical stories they heard, danced and re-worded as they recast themselves as those in need of liberty, even as the children of Israel held in captivity had been and done. Scripture became the means for many forms of radical resistance thinking and actions, of which the original African American Spirituals was only one such coded message of ways to freedom and escape from physical, spiritual and eventually, economic bondage. In both the geographic and psychic (or spiritual) places where the height of evil destruction exists and seems to exercise ultimate control and power, there too exists the height of God's powerful grace to deliver, restore and recreate life from death, and light through the depth of 'dark midnight' cries.

hope for future generations who like me, would not be enslaved in body, soul or spirit.

10. See H Thurman, *Deep River: An Interpretation of Negro Spirituals* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2010).

11. See E Katongole, *Born from Lament: The Theology of Politics and Hope in Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

12. See S Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

13. See my unpublished PhD dissertation, *Dancing the 'Clearing' in African diaspora literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University), 2000.

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