

African American Advent and Christmas Spirituals

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Waiting, expectantly and patiently waiting, for one who has already come. Waiting, hopefully waiting, in anticipation of the promised peace and justice in a world besieged with injustices of all kinds. Longing, waiting, yearning, and simultaneously rejoicing that the Prince of Peace has appeared and is to be remembered in a special way. Preparing to receive again the ultimate gift from God - Emmanuel - God with us. Looking forward, eschatologically, to the day of the Lord! These are themes of Advent, a season in which the church attempts to witness to the coming of Christ as a sign and symbol of new beginnings. The memorial acclamation in the Eucharistic prayer comes alive for believers: "Christ has come! Christ has risen! Christ will come again!"

One can never quite be sure to what extent African American slaves were aware of a season in the Christian year known as Advent. A delineation of events in the life of Christ was perhaps not carefully nor uniformly observed in their neighborhoods. The earliest Africans in America were perhaps unaware of the period in Rome from the fourth through sixth centuries during which time Advent was developed as a season of preparation for Christmas. American evangelizers might not have mentioned Advent to their slaves. If so, attitudes of "waiting" and "patience" might have been emphasized, but surely not "promised peace and justice!"

Nevertheless, there are spirituals with themes of preparation for the coming of Jesus as slaves looked forward eschatologically to the day when Jesus would come. Since a yearning for justice and liberation was prominent for this oppressed people, it is natural that they would turn to the coming of the risen Lord. Eschatology, as understood by the slave, had as much to do with the change of situations in the present world as it did with the end of the world. One needed to be properly prepared for both. The slave preachers provided important leadership in helping to determine the spiritual life and destiny of the slave community. As they validated the humanity of this marginalized people, their own spiritual and physical preparation was encouraged. Their hope-filled sermons elicited such responses in songs as "Rise, Shine, For Thy Light Is A-Coming" and "Oh, Yes, Yonder Comes My Lord." "Getting ready" and "readiness" are themes of many of the songs created by the unlettered community, deeply rooted in biblical faith. They could sing, "I want to be ready" or "I wanna be ready" and live expectantly because of the faith and hope which sustained and moved them to prepare for the coming of Jesus who was sure to "come right on time!"

From extant historical records it is clear that the Christmas season was familiar to most of the slaves. The celebration of the birth of Christ by slaveholders (particularly in the South) was chiefly a time for frivolity.¹ Christmas day was a time given to (some) slaves for an experience of "limited" freedom from regular toils. On some plantations, alcoholic beverages were distributed, and the day was "celebrated" with singing, dancing, "guzzling, glutton, and debauchery."² It is very likely that this did nothing to enhance the spiritual life of slaves, nor provide any connection between the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ and ultimate justice or permanent liberation. The absence of Christmas spirituals in song collections before Emancipation has led researchers to conclude that spirituals are post-Civil War creations.³ Howard Thurman wisely observed that

It was dangerous [for slave holders] to let the slaves understand that the life and teachings of Jesus meant freedom for the captive and release for those held in economic, social and political bondage.⁴

It would follow then that the communities of faith which shaped spirituals with references to the centrality of the birth of Christ were developing their own perceptions of the significance of the lowly birth of Jesus as they related it to their own marginal existence. In separate environments, where by law, African Americans were now free, there could be release and rejoicing over firsthand biblical knowledge of the birth of a Baby King who was God incarnate!

The repertoire of twenty-two Christmas spirituals examined by the writer provides some indication of the early African American's biblical knowledge and religious insights into the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. It is conceivable then that some of these religious folk songs may have been lost since, as an oral art form, communities are bound to keep the songs alive in their memories by constant use. In communities where many of the songs remained a part of the oral tradition, this powerful folk art retained much of the original naivete, beauty, bonding, dialect, and freshness as, perhaps, in the earlier period of their creation and use.

The reflections which follow are categorized according to themes: spirituals about the birth of Jesus, spirituals about the Star, spirituals about Mary, the mother of Jesus, and spirituals addressed to Jesus.

Spirituals About the Birth of Jesus

The song which burst forth from the community of faith gathered at the beginning of the Christmas celebration would be a reminder of the importance of the festival:

Wasn't that a mighty day, wasn't that a mighty day,
Wasn't that a mighty day, when Jesus Christ was born!

Star rose in the East, Star rose in the East,
Star rose in the East, when Jesus Christ was born!

Excerpts from the story would continue in a call and response manner until someone introduced another song. Most often the reference was to the Christ child:

Baby born in Bethlehem, Baby born in Bethlehem
Baby born in Bethlehem, Glory to the new born Babe!

Oh when I get over Jordan, Oh when I get over Jordan,
Glory to the new born Babe!

He was wrapped in swaddling clothes. . .
Glory to the new born Babe!

"New Born," a spiritual giving a more detailed description of the birth would likely follow. This time the singers would be admonished to go tell the good news to other people of faith as did the shepherds:

New born! New born!
Oh, my good Lord,
Tell all the members: New born!

Men from the East, Men from the West,
Oh, my good Lord,
Follow the star to Bethlehem,
Tell all the members: New born!

There in the manger lies the Savior,
Tell all the members: New born!
A manger is his only bed,
Oh, my good Lord.
No other place to lay his head,
Tell all the members: New born!

The manger is envisioned as a cradle, rocked by Mary in a spiritual which is heard frequently in Louisiana and Georgia. This musical reflection of the coming of peace on earth through the Christ Child combines the motion of a gentle lullaby with highly syncopated rhythms. It is as if the gifted creators understood that peace would not come easily in a world where humanity continued to “study war” in an attempt to find peace! The lilt which can be felt when the words are read or said with an accent on the first and third beats of “The Little Cradle Rocks Tonight in Glory” (or De Leetle Cradle...) also allowed the community to tap their feet in unison:

The LIT-tle cradle ROCKS to-NIGHT in GLO-ry,
In GLO - ry, in GLO - ry;
The LIT-tle cradle ROCKS to-NIGHT in glory,
The CHRIST Child BORN in glory.

Peace on earth! Mary, rock the cradle,
Rock the cradle, rock the cradle,
Peace on earth! Mary, rock the cradle,
The Christ Child born in glory.

A vision of the boy child evokes an urgency for others to come and see the light and love of God which shines in his face and in his eyes:

I Believe this is Jesus, come and see, come and see,
I believe this is Jesus, come and see, come and see.

The light of God shines in his face,
Come and see, come and see -
He offers all his pard'ning grace,

Come and see, come and see.
The love of God shines in his face.

Did you ever see such love before,

Saying "Go in peace and sin no more."

One Christmas spiritual raises and answers the question "What month was my Jesus born in?" "The last month of the year," and more specifically "the twenty-fifth day of December." Such concern for an exact time is not often found in songs of the oral tradition. This rehearsing of the months of the year in the spiritual may reflect a period when the community out of which it emerged had found meaning in the ordering of time. Ex-slaves in the South could identify further with the newborn baby, wrapped in swaddling clothing since December for them was also cold.

Singers also admonished each other in such songs as "Children, Go Where I Send Thee! How Shall I Send Thee?" and "Go Tell It On The Mountain." The first is a "cumulative" song which provides an opportunity for a communal "collective recall" of biblical stories from the Old Testament, culminating in the birth of Jesus.

Like many spirituals, the original stanzas of "Go Tell It on the Mountain" were apparently lost through oral transmission. Singers often replaced the stanzas with different versions of the biblical story or any couplet that could be matched with the tune. One can also find different versions of the chorus shaped by particular communities of faith. The last line may be rendered, "...that Jesus Christ is-a-born," or at times other than Christmas, "...that Jesus Christ is-a-Lord," and "...to let my people go."

The stanzas authored by John W. Work, Sr. and quoted here are perhaps the most familiar:⁵

While shepherds kept their watching
O'er silent flocks by night,
Behold throughout the heavens,
There shone a holy light.

The shepherds feared and trembled
When lo! above the earth,
Rang out the angel chorus,
That hailed the Savior's birth.

Down in a lonely manger
The humble Christ was born,
And God sent out salvation,
that blessed Christmas morn.

A few stanzas found in some publications include the following:

He made me a watchman upon the city wall,
And if I am a Christian, I am the least of all.

An angel came from glory, To hail the Savior's birth,
And then a light from heaven shone on the holy place.

Spirituals About The Star

African Americans often utilized materials from their natural environment as a

source for song texts. It is little wonder that they would be moved by the brightness of certain stars in the sky. The biblical reference to the star that guided the wise men and the shepherds to the birth place of Jesus would have fascinated them. To be able to look up into the heavens and imagine that the brightest star over their heads might have been the same star that shone that night over the stable of Bethlehem would evoke the reminder to the community: "Look! Behold the star!" The light of God which breaks through spontaneously, symbolized by a bright star in the sky, is a sign of hope for an oppressed people. The hope embodied in the light of Christ is relived again each time this moving spiritual is sung!

Behold that Star! Behold that star up yonder.
Behold that Star, it is the star of Bethlehem.

There was no room found in the inn,
It is the star of Bethlehem.
For him who was born free from sin.
It is the star of Bethlehem.

The wise men come on from the East. . .
To worship him, the prince of peace.

The shepherds also saw the star, and for the creators of "Rise up Shepherd and Follow ('Foller')," the sight of the star and the message of the angels would cause one to forget all other tasks and seek the baby Jesus. The rich religious experiences of this people allowed them to creatively shape poetic thoughts from biblical stories and relate them to their humble existence as shepherds. Although this Christmas spiritual might have emerged after Emancipation, it has many of the elements of other spirituals with dual meanings which were shaped prior to the Emancipation. The actual unfolding of the story of the shepherds of old might have carried an underlying message, calling contemporary shepherds to rise above daily tasks and follow the star which still leads to the light of Jesus the Christ. The second and third stanzas follow:

If you take good heed to the angel's words,
Rise up shepherd, and follow,
You'll forget your flocks, you'll forget your herds,
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.

Leave your flocks and leave your lambs. . .
Leave your sheep and leave your rams. . . .

During slavery, the message could have been a call to escape via the underground railroad under the skillful guidance of the "escape conductor," Harriet Tubman, God's star, who provided a light on the path toward freedom!

Spirituals About Mary

In addition to the spiritual about Mary rocking the cradle, there are at least six spirituals found about Mary, the mother of Jesus. Four of them express simply and emphatically "Mary had a baby," but with slightly different texts and completely

different melodic lines. It is likely that the different settings are variations of one (or two) basic spirituals, a frequent occurrence in the oral transmission of songs. Each unfolds the biblical story, beginning with the fact that "Mary had a Baby," followed by a question about an event of that Holy night: "Where was he born?" . . . "Born in a stable" (or "Born in a Manger"); "Where did she lay him?" . . . "She laid him in a manger;" "What did she name him?" . . . "She named him [King] Jesus" (or "Mary named him Jesus"). Some versions include, as if in exhortation or advisement to the singer, "Oh, name him Mighty Counsellor," or "Prince of Peace. . .Mighty God... Everlasting Father."

In some versions of the spirituals entitled "Mary had a Baby, Yes Lord" and "... Aye Lawd," each stanza ends with the line, "The [De] people keep a comin' an' the [de] train done gone." Since this line does not relate at all to the biblical story, one can only conjecture what it means. It was not unusual for creators of the spirituals to relate biblical stories, characters, and symbols beyond their actual historical contexts.⁶ This is especially true in reference to the biblical message and existential situations. References to "train" occur in a number of spirituals with implications for the fastest mode of transportation of that day, as well as the train which ran on the underground railroad. In these instances of its use in Christmas songs, singers might have reached out for an expression merely to end the story line.

"Mary had de leetle baby," the first line of a very short spiritual, emphasizes the motherly role of Mary for "...eb'ry time de baby cry she rock in a weary lan', now ain't dat a rockin' all night. . .all night long." The strength of Mary the mother is also implied in the symbolic reference to "rock in a weary land." This gentle lullaby still can be heard in orally transmitted forms in some congregations in Southern states and in choral arrangements in traditional African American schools of higher education.

"Sister Mary had-a but one child" is a spiritual which refers to Mary only in the first line of what is often sung as a refrain. This spiritual, also titled "Three Wise Men to Jerusalem Came," is an unfolding of the story including the visit of the wise men and the escape of the Holy family into Egypt. It is also unique in that it provides one of the few references to Joseph in a Christmas spiritual:

Sister Mary had-a but one child, Born in Bethlehem
And-a everytime-a the-a baby cried,
She'd-a rock him in the weary land.

O Three Wise Men-a to Jerusalem came,
They'd travelled very far,
They said, "Where is he born, King of the Jews,
For we have-a seen his star?

King Herod's heart was a troubled,
He marvelled but his face was grim;
He said, "Tell me where the Child may be found,
I'll go and worship him.

An angel appeared to Joseph,
And gave him-a this command,-
'Arise ye, take-a your wife and child
Go flee into Egypt land.

'For yonder comes old Herod,
A wicked man and bold,
He's slay-in' all the chillun-
From six to eight days old.

Mary is addressed directly in two Christmas spirituals: "Oh Mary, Where Is Your Baby?" and O Mary, What You Goin' To Name That Pretty Little Baby?" (sometimes titled "Glory! Glory! Glory to the New Born King!"). The first spiritual raises a rhetorical question which is contextualized around the entire life of Jesus from birth to death. In the oral tradition this spiritual is quite lengthy. Only two stanzas are cited here:

Read in the Gospel of Mathayew,
The Gospel of Luke and John,
Read in the Gospel and learn the news,
How the little boy child was born.
Read 'bout a Mary and Joseph come -
A ridin' a donkey from far
Slept in a stable of Bethlehem,
Where the Shepherds all saw the star.⁷

Refrain:
Oh Mary, where is your baby? They done took him from
A manger and carried him to the throne.

Read 'bout the elders and the Hebrew priest,
A-preaching in the tabernacle hall;
Standing in a wonder at the words they heard -
From a little boy child so small.
"O little boy, how old are you?
Tell it if you let it be told,
O little boy, how old are you?
"I'm only twelve years old.

The spiritual, "Amen, Amen!" popularized by Jester Hairston's arrangement for the motion picture, "Lilies of the Field," is another example of an unfolding of the life of Christ from birth to resurrection. The first five stanzas call the community to "see," to visualize Jesus as a little baby Jesus...on Christmas morning, as a boy in the temple, as a preacher and healer at the seashore, as a prayer contemplating death on the cross, and as Savior who gave up his life on the cross for the sins of the world. It concludes with an affirmation of the resurrection on Easter, and his living forever!

The naming of Jesus is an important theme in spirituals. In addition to songs cited above, Mary is asked: "What you goin' to name the pretty little baby?" And as if in humble submission to the child, the refrain is concluded: "Glory! . . .to the new born King." The singer injects a suggestions: "Some call him one name, I think I'll call him 'Manuel,'" and then reflects:
They're taking him on their shoulders
And making him their governor.
Glory! Glory! Glory! to the new born king.

Spirituals Addressed to Jesus

The freedom with which African Americans shaped spirituals indicated their wholistic understanding of Jesus the Christ, God incarnate, Emmanuel, Savior, and Redeemer. Although called by many names, it was important that those who experienced Jesus in their own lives would have the privilege of claiming and naming him in the light of their own experiences.⁸ The years of babyhood would quickly give way to childhood, and then adulthood, so that the majesty and “kingship” of Jesus could be affirmed. According to extant sermons and spirituals, for the early African American, Jesus and God are apparently synonymous. Thus, it is understandable how the nondegreed poets in the pulpit and pew could transcend the centuries, stand before Jesus and ask the question in song: “Lit’l boy, how ole are you?” A careful musical rendering of this spiritual would help recapture the inimitable style of Black preachers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The poetic flow creates an opportunity for anamnesis as the text is brought to life!

Lit’l boy, how ole are you?
‘Sir, I’m only twelve years old.’

This lit’l boy had them to remember,
He was born the twenty-fifth of December;
Lawyers and doctors were amazed
And had to give the Lit’l boy praise.

Lit’l boy, how ole are you?
‘Sir, Im only twelve years old.’

Lawyers and doctors stood and wondered,
As though they had been struck by thunder,
Then they decided while they wondered,
That all mankind must come under.

Lit’l boy, how ole are you?
‘Sir, I’m only twelve years old.’

The last time the lit’l boy was seen,
He was standin’ on Mount Olivet green;
When he’d dispersed of the crowd,
He entered up into a cloud.

Lit’l boy, how ole are you?
‘Sir, I’m only twelve years ole.’

Christmas spirituals, like other religious folk songs from the heart and soul of African Americans, are simple and yet profound reflections on the birth of One whose existence was in many ways similar to that of those who sang, “I believe this is Jesus, come and see, come and see!” With each singing and with each unfolding of a portion of the Christmas story, a person is able to see how a simple, uncluttered message of love, hope, and peace can have renewed meaning. The personal pronouns, “I” and

“me,” frequently found in many spirituals, are seldom used in the Christmas spirituals. It is as though with the coming of the “Word embodied in love,” the community comes together to talk about it as if they were there-”come and see, come and see!”

NOTES

¹ James Weldon Johnson, *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals*, 3rd paperback ed. (New York: Da Capo Press), 14. Johnson contends that “the earlier years of celebration were filled chiefly with gunpowder and whisky,” indicating that it might have been the more secular, even the most profane of all holidays.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 15.

⁴ Howard Thurman, *Deep River: Reflections on the Religious Insight of Certain of the Negro Spirituals* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), 16.

⁵ John W. Work, *American Negro Songs and Spirituals* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1940), 215. In a footnote, John Work indicates that the verses were supplied in place of the original ones which could not be found.

⁶ This is especially obvious in spirituals which mix Old and New Testament stories and characters.

⁷ The word, “read” is pronounced with a long “e” as in equal. “Mathayew” is dialect for “Matthew.”

⁸ The song, “Sweet Little Jesus Boy,” is often referred to as an African American spiritual. However, it was composed by Robert MacGimsey and copyrighted in 1934. It is believed that both the text and melody are based on a slave song.