

“An’ He Nevah Said a Mumbalin’ Word”

Melva W. Costen

Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia

“They crucified my Lord . . . an’ he nevah said a mumbalin’ word.
They nailed him to a tree . . .
They pierced him in the side . . .
The blood came a-streaming down . . .
He bowed his head and died . . .
He rose up from the dead . . . an’ he nevah said a mumbalin’
word, not a word, not a word, not a word!”

The biblical narrative depicting the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus provided fertile ground for the literary propensity of the Afro-American slave. With the African gift of a creative, imaginative mind, the slave could re-create the horrid scene, poetize about the cruel deeds of the murderers, participate as an eyewitness, and still find hope in the midst of it all! In keeping with the African folk tradition and an unusual African gift for melody, the entire community would then shape and reshape the story until all who sang and listened would be transported back in time to places of sacred history. New words would be added by the community in order to prolong the story as if in anticipation of the glorious Resurrection. “They mocked and whipped and killed our Lord, but he rose up anyway.”

The anthologies of Afro-American Spirituals, hymnbooks, and other published sources examined for this study list some forty-three Crucifixion-Easter Spirituals. In addition to this published documentation, many Afro-American churches and communities sing songs and “snatches” of the narrative from the “oral tradition.” The underlying theme of *hope* in the midst of human suffering penetrates not only the poetry but the manner of expression as well.

There are five basic categories of Spirituals expressive of Jesus’ last days on earth and the meanings implied in the light of existential situations: Jesus’ Trial, The Crucifixion, The Resurrection, Human Response to the Acts of God (witnessing), and The Whole Life of Christ (from birth to resurrection).

There are numerous singular reference fragments to the Crucifixion and Resurrection narratives which are not included in these categories. It is not unusual for Afro-American Spirituals to include portions of Scripture apparently unrelated. Examples abound with Old Testament personalities interacting with persons of the New Testament. Scholars have concluded that this manner of “literary interplay” might have reflected secret codes, dual forms of communication, uncertainty about the difference in the Old and New Testament, or the natural phenomenon of oral transmission between and within communities.

An examination of some of the Crucifixion and Resurrection Spirituals will provide some clarity as to the intent of the “eyewitnesses” who walked and talked with Jesus.

The Crucifixion

The crucifixion for the creators of the Spirituals was an experience of brutal treatment and ultimate death of a human being like themselves. It was an experience with which they could identify. They were also created in God's image and innocent of any wrongdoing of their own volition. In their "mind's eye" Jesus was their brother. He, like they, was innocent, mistreated, and forced to suffer under human hands. The pain which Jesus felt was their pain; the nails hammered into his flesh were not unlike the torture which they felt; his blood running warm was their blood. Steeped in an African understanding of communal oneness, the slaves could enter into the "fellowship" of Jesus' suffering and invite others to participate as well.

In the midst of this strong identification, their concern was not merely for themselves nor their plight. Their poignant cries in song were also a way of including concerns for the entire community, oppressors as well as oppressed. The story is told for all to hear: "They nailed him to a tree . . . They broke his lifeless bones . . .," and you were there, since you claim to have faith in the God who walked the earth in human form! The suffering of Jesus is an example of suffering which reached beyond any one particular level of society. Perhaps with each musical phrase there was an emotional cry: how can anyone claim to have faith, to believe that this death had particular meaning, and still not hear the message of inhumanity implied in any human suffering? Perhaps the Africans in a strange and alien land pointed to Jesus' suffering as a way of pointing to their own plight—not merely for themselves but also for those who caused the suffering.

As in their identification with stories of Moses, the deliverer; Joshua, the warrior; and the divinely protected Hebrew children, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; slave and free Afro-Americans participated with Jesus, God Incarnate. It took a lot of courage for the Almighty God to "come down here and die like a slave." It is no wonder, then, that so many of the Spirituals identify so strongly with Jesus, especially at the time of his crucifixion. Identification in suffering with Jesus on the cross affirms in a significant way that the mystery of the cross is deeply rooted in the experience of identification itself. Few people, especially those with deep and abiding faith, can relate to the Crucifixion without in some manner participating in it.

The Gospel accounts reflect little of the physical pain that Jesus must have experienced. The report that Jesus was "nailed to the cross" is from the testimony of Thomas regarding the print of the nails (John 20:25-27). Apparently the Gospel writers were encouraging a response of faith emanating from God's life-creating action in and beyond the horrible death. There was no empathy sought for the sufferer nor hatred or abhorrence for those responsible for the killing. Luke alone reports the sufferer's plea, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

The churches in which most of the slaves and early so-called "free" Afro-Americans were introduced to the Christian faith displayed the Latin or "empty" cross as a symbol for the risen Lord who had overcome all suffering. In fact, their experience of the faith among those who taught Christianity was filled with inconsistencies. Simply stated, God Incarnate lived on this earth

humbly, trod the earth lightly, suffered (a bit) under Pontius Pilate, died a martyr's death, was raised, and lives again. There was little emphasis on his human suffering, his marginality in a world that still looked for a king on a throne who would be flanked by mighty warriors. Such a king would not suffer, so suffering was played down. The humble, suffering slaves were able to see through all of this, however. They could see that Jesus, God Incarnate, was more like them, thus capable of pain from the driven nails and the thrust of the sword!

The account of the story from the minds and lips of the forgers of the Spirituals provides great detail about the acts of torment leading to Jesus' death. In the Spirituals, "An' He Nevah Said a Mumbalin' Word" (often entitled "The Crucifixion") and "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" detailed accounts are given in sequence from Jesus' trial, his struggle up the hill with the cross, the Crucifixion with each agonizing blow recorded, and concluding with the Resurrection.

The cross upon which he was nailed was clearly the tree upon which they had seen others die. Their version of the biblical story included the symbol of such a tree—"They nailed him to the tree . . ." Immediately, the community would be drawn into the divine story, and all eyes would angle upward toward heaven. The sequence would continue with each gory detail expressed with the pathos of familiarity. "They pierced him in the side," the story continues, and the life-giving blood begins to drain down Christ's side. Much care is taken in the reporting process. When the emotion is extremely high and the act of torment reflects the deep pain of the Savior, the account of the flow of blood is expressed in these words: "De blood come a-streamin' down." A more restrained emotional rendition is "De blood come a-trinklin' down" or "De blood come a-twink-a-lin' (or trinklin') down."

"He bowed his head and died" is rendered quietly as the community lowers its heads out of respect for its lifeless savior. This stanza is often followed by a verbal reflection on the sad events of Good Friday, "Oh, wasn't that a pity and a shame." It is not uncommon for the sound of weeping to be heard in the community or church setting as each person relives this high sacred moment as if it were actually occurring. A leader emerges at the kairotic moment to remind the community of God's promise and presence throughout the episode—"He 'rose up from the dead . . .!"—and the community comes alive again and jubilantly expresses the note of hope.

Four Crucifixion Spirituals follow this or a similar sequence when the entire narrative is sung: "The Crucifixion," "Were You There?" "Did You Hear How Dey Crucified My Lord?" and "I'm So Glad." Other versions generally end with the death scene: "Calvary," "Mary Wept and Marthy Moaned," and "Look-A How Dey Done My Lord."

In addition to the picturesque description of Jesus' death as told in the Crucifixion, one is fascinated by the Spirituals' focus on his silence throughout the ordeal. "They whupped (whipped) him up Calvary's hil', nailed him to the tree, pierced him in the side, yes, they crucified my Lord . . . and he nevah said a mumbalin' word."

One explanation from the oral tradition is that the passage from Matthew

(KJV) was highly emphasized by certain slave owners in order to control the slaves. During his trial Jesus was asked questions by Pilate, "And he answered him to never a word" (Matt. 27:14 KJV). Utilizing their gift for creating duality of meanings in their use of language, the Afro-Americans could affirm Jesus' obedience while reflecting their own ability to theologize. God, rather than the persecutors, encouraged the divine silence. The setting was reminiscent of the story of the Hebrew children who were denied entrance into the promised land because of their "back talk" (Numbers 14:2, 26-32). Silence was necessary for fulfillment of God's plan. Jesus, because of his silence, his not murmuring against God, is thus able to lead all the faithful into the eternal promised land. "An' he nevah said a mumbalin' word."

Jesus, the divine king of kings for the slaves, demonstrated divine strength and conviction in his silence. He did not speak back at a time when the normal human impulse would have been to attempt to save himself through choice words. He did not lash out at his executors when he was in pain. For the slave no "murmur against God" emanated from his being. In silence Jesus blessed those who persecuted him. The love that he spoke through his silence opened the future to divine good for the persecutors.

It is indeed consoling for the enslaved and oppressed to empty themselves as full participants in the Savior's Crucifixion. Silence, rather than unbridled human response to strike back, is most appropriate in unjust situations totally dominated by others. Rather than a demonstration of cowardice, Jesus' silence was filled with power—the power to love in the midst of human hatred.

One Spiritual most often sung as a solo, "Look-A How Dey Done My Lord," includes in the opening stanza, "He nevah said a mumbalin' word." In one version following the traditional flow of the Crucifixion narrative, the poets remind us that Jesus cried "Eli, Eli" just before he died. In another version as Jesus' blood "twinkles down," Thomas appears and expresses doubt about the resurrected Christ. Jesus speaks to Thomas and extends his nail-pierced hands to assure Thomas of the authenticity of his Crucifixion. Then he bows his head and dies. The sudden verbal interruptions in the narrative appear awkward, especially after an affirmation of Jesus' complete silence. Upon hearing the complete flow of the creative poet without superimposing a Western analysis of "correct ordering," one is able to sense the predilection toward hope in the midst of a horrid attempted but aborted destruction. It could also mean that the creative forgers of the Spirituals experienced among the community a need to reflect upon that hope, God present and acting in the death of the Savior.

"Were You There?" the most familiar and universal of the Afro-American Spirituals, literally draws contemporary singers and hearers of any age into the biblical experience. The simple, probing rhetorical question sets up a dramatic period of anamnesis—a remembering as if one were truly there. The constant repetition of the question propels the entire community into the arena. No one is allowed to hide behind an unfeeling, uncaring attitude. We were there as individuals and as members of the community. The real question is: did *you* pierce him in the side, or drive the nails, or break his lifeless bones? Did you watch from a distance, or were you among the jeering crowd?

The African communal sensitivity infers that we *were* there. We can know

what Jesus suffered because we have met him in the midst of our own pain and we can claim him as brother. We can grasp the quality of Jesus' experience by virtue of the frustrations we encounter in an unjust society.

The extensive version includes the trial, the Crucifixion, the feel of the cold grave, the dark entombment, and the joyful Resurrection.

The lyrics of this dynamic Spiritual cause hearers to hide their faces in shame and then rise to Christian witness as people of faith. Serious participation in divine acts causes one to become a more responsible witness. The uncontrollable "tremble" over what others have done becomes shameful trembles as one thinks about what we, too, have failed to do. The stanzas are easy to recall and to be kept in mind whenever they are intoned.

For the Afro-American Spirituals, time is relative. The Crucifixion Spirituals, especially, evoke the frequency with which God's love has been crucified, quenched, bombed, and assassinated. No one can deny having been an eyewitness or a participant. We have the feeling of being there in the midst of the brutality.

Few of the current hymnals include the last stanza, "Were you there when he 'rose from the dead?" Therein lies the hope! Yes, we were there—suffering, agonizing in pain—but then there was the Resurrection, the central focus of the Christian experience, and we *were* there, then and now!

Resurrection

"He 'rose, he 'rose, he 'rose from the dead, chillun, did you hear when Jesus 'rose?" These words sung in a fast, joyous rhythm vibrate contagiously among a people of faith. They "raise our spirits," moving us emotionally from a sad, dejected state to a joyous engagement with the community of faith. This hope-filled news has to be repeated over and over again: "Angels rolled the stone away and Christ has risen from the dead."

One less familiar Spiritual, "Chillun, Did You Hear When Jesus 'Rose?" describes the risen Son's arrival in heaven. There is a beautiful family scene with a joyful reunion dinner. Mary, the mother of the Savior, is portrayed as a busy housewife attending to practical family responsibilities. Mary, unlike in medieval portraits in which she is attended by angels and saints, sets the dinner table.

Mary set her table
In spite of all her foes;
King Jesus sat at the center place
An' cups did overflow.

The Father looked at his Son an' smiled,
De Son did look at-a him
De Father saved my soul from hell
An' de Son freed me from sin.

The good news of the Resurrection is that we are all "chillun" of the same God who, "at the welcome table," waits for all sons and daughters. The forgers

of this Spiritual give a liberating foretaste of the eternal heavenly happiness assured by the resurrected Christ.

"'Twas on One Sunday Morning," and there are a lot of reasons for rejoicing and a number of biblical characters involved. Many of the Spirituals speak to the role of Mary as the bearer of the good news.

Sister Mary come a-runnin'
Just at the break of day.

As in other Spirituals the sequence of Mary's experiences follow the biblical ordering. She went to the sepulcher and discovered that the Lord wasn't there. The man she saw "a-comin'" was not the gardener as she thought but was the risen Lord. Mary is admonished not to touch the Lord for he had not yet ascended.

The slave poets include "my mother, my sister, John and Peter and Martha" as early visitors to the sepulcher. They are admonished to go tell others the good news, "Yes, Jesus is risen from the dead."

"He 'Rose" is considered to be the most familiar of the Resurrection Spirituals. As many as seven stanzas plus a refrain have been transmitted and subsequently published for this detailed account of the Resurrection. One version begins with a stanza depicting a grave scene: "Dust, dust an' ashes, fly over my grave." It concludes with the basic idea which permeates all versions: "An' de Lord shall bear my spirit hom'." Since Jesus rose from the dead and was the conqueror of death in his own life, we can be assured that he is able to do the same for us. This central christological focus is significant for its relevancy in the slave's own life. There is hope for all of us because of the death and Resurrection of Jesus.

Conclusion

"But he ain't coming here to die no mo' . . . He died for you, for me, for the rich, the po', the blind, the lame, but he ain't coming here to die no mo'."

The religious experiences of the Afro-American slaves were rich and rewarding because of the songs which were freely created and continually sung by the community. Their religious aspirations were expressed in songs of hope based on their own understanding of God in Jesus the Christ. When all hope for release in this world seemed impossible, there were opportunities to express the depth of their soul in song. Their belief in God led to a shaping of a unique theology out of the context of their existential situation. There was uncertainty, desolation, fear, and loneliness, but always hope!

Religion, so basic to an African people, was a source of consolation rooted in the power of Almighty God. Religion, viewed holistically rather than opportunistically, provided a social arena in which song was the basic means of communication and, indeed, sharing.

Most of the songs emanated from the slaves' physical suffering not unlike Jesus' own sufferings. Freedom from the harsh realities of life was the basic foundation out of which the songs were born. The community knew that no

one of them could be free until all were free. They also knew that the oppressor could never be free until the world was free of all oppressors.

Perhaps the greatest offering given to the world through the Crucifixion-Resurrection Spirituals is the manner or style of the songs. The message is a familiar one: Christ came into the world and gave of himself so that we can all have eternal life.

The manner of delivery is unique, however. Each community is *free* to hear the message through the eyes and ears of a suffering people. The songs are gifts from ordinary people to an ordinary world in need of an open channel to hear God's Word.

The Spirituals, inspired by the *Word* of God Incarnate and shaped out of the context of a particular people, have leaped racial and national barriers. God is obviously at work in and through the songs and the people as a testimony to the requirement that any talent given to humans should be used to God's glory.

These songs from the soul of a people have the effect of uniting and freeing people. As we continually ask in song, "Were you there?" and call to the attention of the faithful that "He nevah said a mumbalin' word," we can truthfully model God Incarnate. Let us henceforth allow our *actions of love* to speak louder than our spoken and often empty words.

LIST OF SPIRITUALS FOR THE CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST

Jesus' Trial

They Led My Lord Away

The Crucifixion

Calvary
Cruel Jews, Jes' Look at Jesus
Did You Hear How Dey Crucified My Lord?
Look-A How Dey Done Muh Lawd
Mary Wept an' Marthy Moaned
O They Took My Blessed Lawd
Po Li'l Jesus, Hail Lawd
See How They Done My Lord
The Crucifixion
They Crucified My Lord
They Led Him to Pilate's Bar
Those Cruel People! Hammering!
Wasn't It a Pity an' a Shame!
Weepin' Mary
Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?

The Resurrection

Chillun, Did You Hear When Jesus 'Rose?
De Angel Roll de Stone Away
Do, Don't Touch Muh Garment
Dust, Dust an' Ashes Fly over My Grave

Happy Morning
He Is King of Kings
He Is Lord
He 'Rose
In-A This-A Band We Have Sweet Music
Jesus Is Risen from the Dead
Mary Came A-Running on a Sunday Morning
Oh Mary—Oh Marthy
O Run, Mary, Run, Hallelu (The Resurrection Morn)
The Jews Crucified Him, and Nail'd Him to the Tree
There's a Heavenly Home up Yonder
'Twas on One Sunday Morning

Human Response

But He Ain't Comin' Here t' Die No Mo'
He Was Dying for Me
I Know It Was the Blood
I Want to Go to Heaven (To See the Bleedin' Lam')
Jesus Getting Us Ready
Little Children, Then Won't You Be Glad? (Verse 2)
O de Lam' Done Been Down Here an' Died
(Sinner Won't Die No Mo')
Yes, He Did

LIFE IN STORY

Amen
Glory Be to God on High