

Jupiter Hammon's "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries: An Analysis"

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ABSTRACT: This paper attempts to explicate the biblical theme of salvation in Jupiter Hammon's "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries" and then tries to see the multi-layered significance in the theme embedded in the historical circumstances in which Hammon lived.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Any reader of Jupiter Hammon's "An Evening Thought. Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries" will be struck by the word "salvation". The word which appears in the title of the poem is repeated in all the nineteen stanzas and in the third stanza, the word appears twice. The poem opens with a very powerful categorical, line "Salvation comes from by Christ alone". If we take the line to be a personal declaration of the speaker's faith, we may appreciate his ardent and compelling devotion to Jesus Christ. In fact in the course of the poem, the name "Jesus" is repeated seven times and the name "Christ" thrice. Now the pertinent question here is whether the term "salvation" go beyond limits of a private declaration of devotion to herald some social changes. The fact is that Hammon's theme of salvation and his sole reliance on Biblical concepts apparently explicit in the poem could be a veneer used to protect himself from punishment by the pro-slavery establishment very powerful at the time. Following his attempt to camouflage anti-slavery sentiments in "An Evening Thought", he developed in the subsequent writings a method of infusing multiple layers of meaning. Arien Nydam has pointed out that in his works, "The discursive meaning is plain: invariably biblical, preaching obedience and peace, it was sure to be approved by even the most censorious reader. But his works also possess encoded subtexts. "

This paper attempts to explicate the biblical theme of salvation and then tries to see the multi-layered significance in the theme embedded in the historical circumstances in which Hammon lived.

Etymologically the word "salvation" comes from the Latin stem "salvare" which means "to save". The word "salvation" in Semitic religions would mean saving the soul from sin and its consequences. In the first stanza the word "redemption" (which again is repeated at two other stanzas) is a word aligned to "salvation" which means deliverance from sin and its consequences. The word redemption is a crucial word in Semitic religious traditions and belief. The Hebrew equivalent term is *Yahadut* which is found occasionally in medieval literature. According to it Abraham was the founder of monotheism and originator of Semitic faith. God entered into a covenant with him. This covenant in the subsequent history was renewed through Isaac and Jacob as an eternal one. One element of that covenant was God's redemptive relationship with believers. The messianic idea of redemption is developed in Judaism as a response to the national catastrophe and it was to give hope to those people whose circumstances were often precarious.

The terms "salvation" and "redemption" can be understood only with reference to a situation from which one requires deliverance. Now the whole idea of "salvation" in the poem has autobiographical links to the author's own life. Jupiter Hammon was born into slavery in a house now known as Lloyd Manor in Lloyd Harbour, New York and lived out his life between 1711 and 1806 as a slave and never was emancipated. His mother and father were part of the first shipment of slaves to the Lloyd's estate in 1687. Unlike most slaves, his father, named Obadiah, had learned to read and write. When Hammon's poems were published in 1761, he was acclaimed as an African American writer and now we consider him as one of the founders of black literature. He was also a devout Christian, which is validated by the poem itself.

There is an obvious shift from the initial declaration of the speaker's faith to a fervent prayer in the second stanza beginning with an apostrophe, "Dear Jesus". There is also an image of flight which is from a state of sin

to the "tender mercy" of the "victorious King" in the third stanza. This flight is a redemptive flight for redemption in the Biblical understanding means "repurchase" or "ransom". Jack Zavada, a Biblical scholar identifies three Greek words to explicate the meaning of redemption thus:

Redemption is the English translation of the Greek word *agorazo* meaning "to purchase in the market place". In ancient times, it often referred to the act of buying a slave. It carried the meaning of freeing someone from chains, prison or slavery. Another Greek word relating to this term is *exagorazzo*. Redemption always involves going from something to something else. In this case it is Christ freeing us from the bondage of the law to freedom of new life in him. The third Greek word connected with redemption is *lutroo*, meaning "to obtain release by the payment of a price". The price (or ransom), in Christianity, was Christ's precious blood obtaining our release from sin and death (Zavada)

Hence the Biblical redemption centres not on man's effort but on God's action. In stanza seven the speaker in the poem speaks of "salvation from above". God is the redeemer saving mankind from bondage and death. Redemption is the act of God's choice, "His grace to rescue and restore His people". In the book of Exodus in the Old Testament, God spoke to the people of Israel thus: "I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm..." (EX. 6:6). The Christian belief is that every person is a slave to sin; and a sinful person is redeemed from sin through the price Jesus paid on the cross. And so the poet says, "His holy name will be adored" probably following St. Paul's exhortation to Philippians (2: 10-11): "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." This acknowledgment of Jesus as the Lord is taken up in stanza thirteen where the speaker says, "Ten Thousand Angels cry to Thee,/ Yea, louder than the Ocean./ Thou art the Lord". Thus the shift from declaration to a prayer acknowledges who God is and what he offers to mankind.

From the fifth stanza onwards the speaker's thought dwell on the "Tribunal Day"/ Judgment Day and on the preparation to meet the trial day with proper preparedness. This preparedness is to be made with true penitence, being repentant of one's sins and seeking to be "poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3). The "penitential cry" as specified in stanza ten is to "cry as Sinners to the Lord" to obtain salvation. And St. Paul says such "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation" (2 Cor7:10). The "penitential cry" in stanza seven thus asks God "Turn not away thy tender Eye" on all those who "seek thy true salvation". The stanzas ten and eleven continue with the idea of penitential lament "firmly *fixt*" in "his holy word/ *Ye shall not cry in vain*". This faith is confirmed in stanza sixteen where the speaker says that every one that hunger hath,/ Or pineth after me,/ Salvation be thy leading Staff". The final line of the ninth stanza "Haste on Tribunal Day" calls for certain promptitude and alacrity in this preparation to confront the last judgement day when God separates the good from the bad. The imminence of the Tribunal Day is powerfully expressed in stanza fourteen: "Now is the Day, expected Time;/ The Day of Salvation". The "penitential cry" of the individual is to have universal ramification in stanza nine when the speaker says, "let the Nations cry,/ And all the People say'/ Salvation comes from Christ on high". This sentiment is repeated in stanza twelve when the speaker exhorts, "let the Hearts of all the world / Make Christ their salvation"

The colour code in the phrase "dark benighted souls" represents imposed negritude condition of being both physically and spiritually dark. The speaker is a black slave, and the phrase possibly point to racial and spiritual issues of being black in America. Besides this the adjective "benighted" meaning "unenlightened" or ignorant makes the souls doubly dark. In an unpublished poem of Hammon entitled "An Essay on Slavery" he says,

Dark and dismal was the Day
When slavery began
All humble thoughts were put away
Then slaves were made "by Man
It was God's redemptive mercy that brought light within.

From the language of the poem we can understand that Hammon was hardly a benighted slave, rather, he was more educated than the average slaves of America and developed steadfast relationship with God. The Bible was possibly the only source of literature available to him during his time and his insights on salvation make him especially enlightened. He invokes God for "a true motion" i.e. an action of the soul in all who come to read his poem so that the entire world would be goaded to "Make Christ their salvation". If this happens, the slaves would be at least recognised spiritually free people, partakers of the same portion of Christ's kingdom of inheritance. Hammon in his poem "An Essay on slavery" says,

When shall we hear the joyful sound
Echo the Christian shore
Each humble [voice with songs resound]
That Slavery is no more.

Hammon says in stanza sixteen that if the world is moved to Christ, it will "set the sinner free". The phrase "set the sinner free" is an instance of double language, meaning free from slavery as well as sin. In fact Hammon participated in new Revolutionary War groups such as the Spartan Project of the African Society of New York City. At its inaugural meeting on September 24, 1786, he delivered his "Hammon Address", also known as "Address to the Negroes of the State of New-York". He was seventy-six years old and had spent his lifetime in slavery. He said, "If we should ever get to Heaven, we shall find nobody to reproach us for being black, or for being slaves." ("An address to the negroes in the state of New-York". *University of Virginia Library. Archived from the original on 28 November 2009.*) The speech draws heavily on Christian motifs and theology. For example, Hammon said that Black people should maintain their high moral standards because being slaves on Earth had already secured their place in heaven. He promoted gradual emancipation as a way to end slavery.

The poem closes sounding an alarm and urgency, almost coercing his readers to "Awake ye, every Nation" and accept God's Salvation. Hammon's "An Evening Thought" is thus an invitational poem which embody a declaration, acknowledgement and celebration of God's salvation and preparation for things to occur, and finally a command and call to action or response to what has been declared.

It is also important to note that Hammon's poems "An evening Thought" and "An Essay on Slavery" along with other intertextual features his poems share with Phillis Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America". This indicate the long-standing influence of Phillis Wheatley's own writings on Hammon's sensibilities as a poet and thinker attempting to address the topic of slavery and freedom on the American continent. Eight years after writing "An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley," Hammon chooses, once again, to appropriate the theme and sentiments of his literary colleague, but infuse it with his own, seemingly more outspoken, statement on the sinful nature of the institution of slavery. From this point of view his invitation to partake in God's salvation in "An Evening Thought" is civilized invitation to set black community free of the yoke of slavery.

An extract from Loggins' book *The Negro Author: His Development in America* would suffice to conclude on the way Hammon learned to use biblical assumptions and generalizations to develop multiple layers of meaning:

There is strength of wild and native religious feeling in what he wrote, a strength which he achieved without conscious effort. From hearing evangelical sermons and from reading the Bible according to his own untrained fancy, he picked up strange notions regarding salvation, penitential cries, redeeming love, tribunal day, the Holy Word, bounteous mercies. His mystic Negro mind played with these notions; and, endowed with the instinct for music which is so strong in his race, he sang out his impressions in such meters as he had become familiar with in the hymns of Charles Wesley and Augustus Montague Toplady, and in such rimes as for the moment pleased his ear. Indeed, his method of composition must have been that of the unknown makers of the spirituals (11)

Thus in poem which consists of 19 quatrains rhymed in the pattern of abab on the theme of salvation and redemption, we have every reason to suspect that Hammon is double- talking, and doing it so artfully at that. Here the words "salvation" and "redemption" is to be understood in the sense of deliverance from slavery. The use of religious theme was to escape his Master's admonitions and to constitute a statement of protest against slavery.

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