



CHRISTMAS

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction: Christmas and Cultural Renewal

“Glory to God in the highest” So exulted and exclaimed the shepherds upon hearing the angel’s message: Israel’s Messiah, the Lord, was to be born (Luke 2:11). On this blessed Christmas day we join shepherds’ jubilation and praise, proclaiming along with them: *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on the earth”*—Yes, on the earth and in our world—*“peace”* (v. 14). This peace, a peace that “surpasses all understanding,” because it is inseparable from the renewal God has instituted in the fragile form of Bethlehem’s baby, is total. It is total, which is to say, spiritual peace. As such, it includes all aspects of life, from the most personal to the most public aspects, from the most individual to the deeply social and cultural aspects. All of life, like the shepherds who first received the angelic message and who sought for the Savior in a humble manger, is turned to this lowly one and so is transformed.

I submit for our consideration this Christmas day that this too is the case for our culture. Indeed, it is a lesson well-learned by some in the history of Afro-Christian faith who

turned to the lowly manger to make Jesus their choice. In so doing, they embraced in Jesus' birth the radical renewal, revolution and transformation of culture.

I want to consider this embrace in Jesus' birth as the beginning of the revolution of culture by some of the forebears of black Christianity. But before turning to this, it is worth lingering a bit longer on the lections for this day, Isaiah 9: 6 and Luke 2:8–14. For the genius of these texts is that they lodge the revolution and renewal of politics, society and culture deeply inside of God's self-revelation in the birth of Jesus Christ.

II. Lection Commentary: Isaiah 9:6 and Luke 2:8–14

We are told in Luke's gospel that the sign that God's reign of politics of peace has begun, and that God's renovation of the social, political, and cultural order has dawned, is Christmas or God's coming to us. This coming is not a disembodied or spiritual (in the sense of "ghostly") appearance. It is the epiphany of God in the flesh as one of us and as one among us. To consider Christmas, or God's coming in the flesh, is to consider a sign. Christmas points to a magnificent thing that has happened. But because it is a sign that indicates more than what we see (this is the case with all signs), its true significance is often misunderstood and not grasped in its fullest sense. It can be misunderstood because the new politics and new culture that Christmas points to is revealed in a strange form: the unexpected form of "a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." The new politics and new cultural and social reality of God does not come in grandeur but "in a manger," a lowly place (v. 12).

We must not move past this too quickly. For Luke's account of the birth of Jesus signals that the era of cultural, social, and political despair has been overturned. But it has not been overturned with high-flying banners that say, "Mission Accomplished." Guns nor bombs, nation states nor Wall Street markets can fix cultural despair and social anguish. Revolution is the work of the "The Mighty God, the Everlasting Father," as the prophet Isaiah puts it (Isaiah 9:6). The revolutionary cultural politics of Jesus' birth as the birth of God in the flesh is often not seen for what it really is because in it God is revealed in infantile weakness. This is the robe of God's glory.

But let's stay with Isaiah for a moment, for it is in light of his prophecy that Luke interpreted the birth of Jesus Christ. "The Mighty God" and "Prince of Peace," who would appear as a child," is in Isaiah's prophecy the sign of a new beginning, of a new creation, of a new social order.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel had been plundered by war and politically taken over. The culture was ruined as a result of war. And now the Southern Kingdom of Judah, to whom Isaiah was issuing his prophecy, stood poised for similar plunder. His prophecy was that they were on the verge of being invaded by the Assyrians and banished from the land. The temple and the other monuments of their culture stood on the brink of devastation or of being lost. Israel was on the brink of its own cultural "Middle Passage." In fact, so vividly did Isaiah deliver his prophecy of impending doom and cultural devastation that a deep sense of anxiety set in among the people. "Would God utterly

forsake God's people?" "Would God utterly abandon God's beloved?" "Has Zion, the place where God is to dwell on the earth and in the midst of God's people, met its end?" These questions distill the essence of Israel's anguish recorded in Isaiah 8.

Isaiah 9:1–7 confronts Israel's anxiety head-on. It provides a response to their sigh of cultural and political despair. It provides a word of cultural and political comfort and hope. Light will come (9:1), it says. Cultural, political, and social oppression will not have the last word. But the passage also affirms that the removal of cultural and political darkness cannot be accomplished by human strength alone. It will require God's intervention. Just as God had done in miraculously intervening in the time of Gideon (Isa. 9:3; cf. Judg. 7:15–25), God must again intervene miraculously to renovate society and culture. But this can only happen, say the despairing Israelites to whom Isaiah is speaking, if the royal throne of David is restored, a prospect that seemed well nigh impossible at that historical moment, as the Assyrians were in view sharpening their swords.

Yet, the people held out hope that if need be God can do the impossible. God can raise up a child and in effect kick-start or reboot the life of God's people and set the wheels of deliverance turning. God can start a revolution and, indeed, can be the revolution. God can subject Israel and its total cultural and political life to a new birth, to a rebirth. It can be born again. And thus we come to the Old Testament lection: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" (9:6). So far-fetched or seemingly impossible this sounded that Isaiah's audience cried out, "[only] the zeal of the Lord of hosts [can] perform this" (9:7).

Christians, beginning with Luke in our New Testament lection (2:8–14) and the other evangelists as well, have understood the Christmas birth of Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, as fulfilling Isaiah 9:6. Jesus is the child born of God, the one born in weakness and in the poverty of a manger. His birth disrupts the social order and sets culture and politics on a new and redemptive path. With his presence in the world, the insular, closed, and self-contained realities of politics and culture are opened up. Revolution has dawned. New cultural possibilities are envisioned. We live no longer out of a confined and constricting past, but into the future, God's future with us. With God's presence, and in the form of his child-like weakness and glory, God has opened up all closed systems and made freedom an embodied reality. This freedom is called liberation, which is the freedom that is now oriented to the God of creation who is revealed in Jesus Christ.

It is precisely this Christmas reality that Christians connected to historic black churches birthed as a result of modern slavery, racial oppression, and the colonial realities of the "black Atlantic." lived into. Against this backdrop, Afro-Christianity (understood as an aspect of black culture) has at its best embodied this freedom, the freedom of liberation by which the Christmas birth of Christ has set all of humanity free.

III. Cultural Resources: Literature

To illustrate this understanding of Christmas as setting in motion a new social and cultural order and as judging the structures of social oppression in the inauguration of freedom, I offer two examples from black literary culture.

The first example comes from The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African (Figure 1), which was first published in 1789.

In this document, considered to be the first “slave narrative” (perhaps the most familiar slave narratives is Frederick Douglass’ 1845 Narrative and Harriet Jacobs’ 1861 Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl), Equiano recounts how at the age of eleven he was

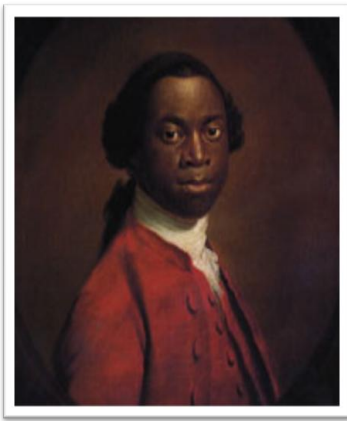


Figure 1.

This image portrays Equiano in his youth and as a man of distinction.

abducted from his Ibo village in the present-day area of Benin, West Africa and sold into slavery. Destined for a life of distinction, Equiano was abducted, along with his sister, from his home in Africa. In the second chapter of his narrative, Equiano recounts the horrors of the slave ship. There he underwent a kind of distorted baptism. On the waters of the Atlantic Ocean, he was submerged into the logics of human inferiority grounded in white-over-non-white domination. Equiano, in this false baptism, became locked into the reigning definitions of supposed black racial and cultural inferiority in relationship to whiteness. This supposed inferiority worked in tandem with an economic system that exploited black bodies for purposes of labor and that exploited those same bodies, in sexual terms, for purposes of reproduction to sustain the cultural, political, and economic system.

In due course, Equiano acquired his freedom and began to work for the cause of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain. The significant turning point, both personally and in his abolitionist endeavors, as Equiano tells the story in his narrative, was his conversion to Christianity.

I wrestled hard with God in fervent prayers, who had declared in his word that he would hear the groanings and deep sighs of the poor in spirit. I found this verified to my utter astonishment and comfort in the following manner: . . . In the evening of [the 6th of October], as I was reading and meditating . . . I saw clearly with the eye of faith, the crucified Saviour bleeding on the cross on Mount Calvary: the scriptures became an unsealed book, . . . I saw the Lord Jesus Christ in his humiliation, . . . I was then convinced, that by the first Adam sin came, and by the second Adam (the Lord Jesus Christ) all that are saved must be made alive. It was given me at that time to know what it was to be born again, John iii: 5.¹



Figure 2

The front page from an early edition of *The Life of Olaudah Equiano*.

Here we see that Christmas, for Equiano, is at one and the same time the transformation of the self and of the social order as anchored in the Second Adam, the Christmas birth of Jesus. Christmas became for Equiano the entry into a new cultural reality. It is where freedom is worked out in the tight spaces of bondage. In Jesus, the Second Adam, the social order and culture itself in the broad sense is no longer a structure of containment within practices of racism as they are rooted in logics of race and the belief in racial purity. Rather, culture itself gets reoriented to become a site of transcendence for the realization of humanness, of humanity. Reoriented to Jesus and thus to the transcendence that is fulfilled in his flesh, culture becomes more than what racial engendered containment and slavery dictated. In turning to the Second Adam, to Christmas, Equiano seized upon and sought to live into precisely this dimension of Christian faith—the dimension that is Christmas.²

A second example about the significance of Christmas for black culture can be found in the Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, A Negro Man (Boston, 1760). Written in the genre of the captivity narrative, the precursor of the slave narrative, Hammon's tale is also framed in Christmas terms:

On Monday, 25th Day of December, 1747, with leave of my Master, I went from Marshfield, with the intention to go a Voyage to Sea . . .

So begins Hammon's story of his "uncommon sufferings, and surprising deliverance." Christmas, the day of God's appearance as the baby Jesus, is the day on which Hammon indicates that he left his "master" to embark on the journey to freedom. Christmas is the day on which the history of his release from bondage was set in motion. And by the time we arrive at the end of Hammon's Narrative, his portrayal of his Christmas release from slavery is solidified or ratified by the imagery of baptism (our being newly born through the Spirit of God) and Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Baptism, crucifixion, and resurrection are all compressed into the Christmas birth of God in the flesh in the man Jesus. In short, Hammon weaves a tale of his journey from "his bondage, [to] his freedom." (I am playing freely with the title of Frederick Douglass' second autobiography, My Bondage and My Freedom (1855), which was written just a few years before the Civil War and the end of slavery in the U.S.)

What is significant for Hammon, however, is that this freedom is one in which the appearance of God in the flesh has released black life, its social codes and its culture, from the pressures of white defined purity and conformity. It is set free to be for God and thus set free to be fully human and for others.³ In this moment, the moment of the Christmas birth of God in the flesh, the boundaries of confinement and containment are burst open. Transcendence invades the space of creation, the space of the creature, opening it to become more than bondage allows. This is the meaning of Christmas, the road journeyed upon by those within the history of Afro-Christian faith who made "Jesus their choice." This is the abiding cultural significance of Christmas, the reason we join with the shepherds to sing "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those whom God favors."

IV. Cultural Resources: Music

It is the gathering of the shepherds at the birth of God in the flesh as Jesus of Nazareth, and the freedom instituted through his lowly birth, that a well-known song of black culture celebrates. Indeed, it is the song that served as the theme around which James Baldwin constructed a celebrated novel. That song is “Go Tell It on the Mountain.” I conclude this meditation on the cultural significance of Christmas by quoting its lyrics. After these lyrics, see the YouTube performance of the song.

Go Tell It on the Mountain

Refrain:

Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere
Go, tell it on the mountain,
That Jesus Christ is born.

The shepherds feared and trembled
When low above the earth,
Rang out the angels chorus
That hailed our Savior's birth.

Refrain

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

Refrain

And lo! When they had heard it,
They all bowed down to pray,
Then travelled on together,
To where the Baby lay.

Refrain

Down in a lowly manger
The humble Christ was born
And God sent us salvation
That blessed Christmas morn.

Refrain

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-HHh-pSkiA>

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2RAXuHzhRaI>

V. Cultural Resources: Artistic Performances of Christmas

Aretha Franklin performing “Go Tell It on the Mountain”:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-HHh-pSkiA>

Kathleen Battle and Winton Marsalis Performing “Go Tell It on the Mountain”:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2RAXuHzhRaI>

VI. Bibliography

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Notes

1. Carretta, Vincent, ed. The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, in Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the 18th Century. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996. p. 265.

2. For more on Equiano, see Carretta, Vincent. Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man. New York, NY: Penguin, 2007.

3. I develop this way of reading Hammon’s story in chapter 6 of my book Race: A Theological Account. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008.