

Jupiter Hammon And His Works: A Discussion Of The First Black Preacher To Publish Poems, Sermons And Essays In America

Perhaps no writer who published in the eighteenth century has been more consistently misunderstood than the first published Black American poet and essayist, Jupiter Hammon. He was the first preacher of the gospel in America who managed to write aesthetic expression while in the throes of slavery. In all of his works and public protestations he espoused the tenets of Christian thought as the only bases for individual freedom and equality and for national reconciliation. Yet he has not received the same historical acclaim for this position as Jonathan Edwards, John Woolman, Francis Asbury, William Atterbein, or other minister/writers of the era.

Hammon was born some forty years before Phillis Wheatley, and his earliest poem, "An Evening Thought, Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries," the first poem by any Black American to be published in this country, appeared one year before she was brought to the Philadelphia slave market from Africa. However, Miss Wheatley received international acclaim while heretofore scholars believed that Hammon's recognition was limited to a small circle of sympathetic acquaintances, provincial newspaper readers, and anxious slaveholders who wished to exploit his works. (We now know that Hammon's poems, sermons and essays were major tools used by middle colony abolitionists in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to encourage slaves to know and expect that they had every equality in the salvation of Jesus Christ; and that God would judge the white slaveholders and would effectively end slavery.) The poems of his younger contemporary are often included in major anthologies of American literature while Hammon's offerings are sparingly limited to a few anthologies of Black American literature. Even the editors of these works, while acknowledging him as the first

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published Black author in America, simultaneously apologize for his excessively "religious" style and his supposed failure to address the slavery issue.¹ Moreover, much of Wheatley's poetry is extant while volumes of Hammon's poetry, as well as his prose, are probably irretrievable.² Nonetheless, that literature which remains must be examined in the light of Scriptural symbolism which did indeed address slavery, not as the devotional songs of a Black man too concerned with his God to consider his enslaved condition.

Hammon has not even been "rediscovered" during the renewed emphasis on Black awareness in these last few years. The affluent religious publishing industry which has made some recent attempts to present historical and aesthetic offerings by Black authors of Christian persuasion has overlooked the compatible Jupiter Hammon. Yet his poetic themes of freedom and equality are solidly based on Biblical principles. He was one of few literate Blacks of his day who knew the Scriptures well enough to join in a national Biblical debate over the "Christian" justification of slavery. But he was still a slave and prudence demanded that he mask his position with Biblical allusion. He was not emasculated by Christian thought because he seemed less militant than the pre-Civil War poet-preacher and ex-slave David Walker or Nat Turner, for his thesis is the same as theirs. Only his methods were different because his times, his slave status, particularly the philosophical basis for action in his times, were different.

Jupiter Hammon was born on October 17, 1711, and he died around

¹For critical reception of Jupiter Hammon one should check the works of Oscar Wegelin, Stanley Ransome, and Vernon Loggins, all with complete bibliographical information listed below. Additional mention is made in some anthologies of Black American literature such as Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology by Richard Barksdale and Keneth Kinnamon (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1972); To Make A Poet Black by J. Saunders Redding (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939) and The Negro Author: His Development in America to 1900 by Vernon Loggins (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1959). Additional critical works which have limited discussions of Hammon are The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature by Dr. Benjamin E. Mays (New York: Russell and Russell, 1938) and Early Black American Poets by William. Robinson (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company, 1969).

²Oscar Wegelin, Jupiter Hammon: American Negro Poet, Selections From His Writings and a Bibliography (New York: Carroll and Patterson, 1915), p.16. (Wegelin says: "Overton's Long Island Story states that in 1782 Hammon composed a set of verses, not yet found and possibly not published, to celebrate the visit of young Prince William Henry, later King William IV, to Lloyd Manor House. This was the first visit to America by any member of the British royal family, and the Prince, then called Duke of Clarence, displayed a lively and democratic temperament which delighted Jupiter Hammon. The Prince visited nearby Fort Franklin accompanied by its designer, Colonel Benjamin Thompson, latter Count Rumford, who together with other officers from the Fort was residing in Lloyd Manor House. Wegelin also mentions various Long Island residents who claimed to have read other Hammon poems but so far none others have been located).

the last decade of the eighteenth century.³ Thus his life spanned an era of tumultuous change in this country as well as in Western civilization as a whole. He was born and reared as a quasi-member of the British empire, a slave within the household of a loyal British aristocrat of considerable wealth. For his senior master, Henry Lloyd, there was "a divine order of things," ordained by God, sustained by the power of the British Empire and the doctrine of the Church of England, and proved by the "blessings" of vast wealth in the new American Canaan. He, Lloyd, was a chosen, predestined part of the privileged ruling class and was near the top of that "Great Chain of Being" while he, his cultural milieu and his church held that his vassal, Hammon, was "justifiably" on the divinely-constructed bottom rung. However during his lifetime Hammon would see the "comfortable" beliefs of the oligarchy give way and power passed from the plutocracy to the common man in the French and American Revolutions. He would live to see the emotionally-explosive Great Awakening and egalitarian Baptist and Methodist evangelism shift the Christian focal point away from the doctrines of predestination and classism such as held by the eighteenth century Anglican church. More important to his own slave status, he would see these forces converge with the pervasive anti-slavery resolution of the Quaker brotherhood into a powerful abolitionist movement, a movement that within a few decades after his death would lead to the Civil war.

As the slave identity of the mother and not the father determined the slave status of the child,⁴ it is assumed that Hammon's mother was also a slave in the Lloyd household. She would have been born in the latter half of the seventeenth century and was thus probably a native African. Of Hammon's father we have no records to indicate if he was black or white, slave or free. Historic knowledge of the Northern slave system, as well as Hammon's reticence to discuss any family ties except that of the Lloyd's, make it doubtful that a father was ever a part of his own Black family unity. However the Lloyd papers do mention several other Africans held in their household, farm and business. Undoubtedly Hammon found slave familial community among these. An adult male Black slave named Opium is mentioned several times in the Lloyd archives before Jupiter's birth. Quite possibly he could be the poet's father.⁵

Hammon was born at a time when the first stirrings of slave rebellions

³Stanley Austin Ransome, Jr., ed, America's First Negro Poet: The Complete Works of Jupiter Hammon of Long Island (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1970), p. 10.

⁴Edgar J. McManus, A History of Negro Slavery in New York (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1966), p. 60.

⁵Papers of the Lloyd Family of the Manor of Queen's Village, Lloyd's Neck, Long Island, New York, 1654-1826, Volume I, 1654-1752 (New York: The New York Historical Society, 1926), pp. 110, 111 and 187.

were awaking colonial fears and those early revolts were in his home state, practically in the Lloyd's backyard. In 1712, slaves in New York City staged a bloody insurrection, led by native Africans who preferred death to bondage. Edgar McManus reports that as a result of the uprising some 127 slaves were tried and publicly executed by burning at the stake. One effect of such uprisings was the tightening of controls over slaves. When Hammon was one year old a law was passed prohibiting free Blacks from owning property. When he was a young adult, a bloody panic occurred in which slaves were suspected of conspiring to burn New York City and massacre whites.⁶

There are apparently no baptismal or initiate communicant records for Hammon, but we do know that he was deathly ill at the age of nineteen. A concerned nephew of the Lloyds who had some medical background wrote extensive directions as to how the slave should be cared for directing that he drink a concoction of "Horse Reddish roots" and "elder Root Pine Budds."⁷ Shortly after the illness Hammon was apparently converted. Three years later, at the age of twenty two, he purchased a Bible with Psalms from Henry Lloyd for the price of seven shillings and six pence.⁸ That anyone could "sell" a Bible to a family member with whom he had lived for twenty two years suggests the paradox of Christian slaveholding. That Hammon was aware of the bitter irony in the incident is evident in his works. But he did not allow Lloyd's Yankee mercantilism to crush his spirit. Instead he followed established tradition in the English speaking world and used that Bible as his major resource for allusion and theme in his literary works.

Few slaves in eighteenth century New York were married. Hammon fails to mention either wife or children, despite references to status as an artisan, preacher, and slave. Hammon was especially concerned about children, and in both poetry and prose he admonished slaveowners to educate children and prepare for their eventual manumission. If he had had wife or children of his own he probably would have spoken of their wishes and welfare just as he spoke of his own in sermons and essays such as "A Winter Piece."

As one of Lloyd's servants, Hammon received enough rudimentary literate and vocational education to handle assigned business tasks. The Church of England's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts started a school in Lloyd's Queen's Village in 1723. It was run by Nehemiah Bull, a Harvard graduate who later became a prominent

⁶McManus, p. 125, 126.

⁷Papers of the Lloyd Family, Vol. 1., pp. 309-310.

⁸Charles A. Vertanes. "Jupiter Hammon: Early Negro Poet of Long Island," The Nassau County Historical Journal, Winter 1957, XVIII, No. 1, p. 5.

minister in New England.⁹ Several Anglican church and SPG records indicate that despite the wishes of some slave owners, SPG teachers insisted that Africans be included in all their rural schools.¹⁰ Jupiter Hammon would be one of those slaves. Once he could read, Hammon undoubtedly would have used the Lloyd library, an extensive collection for those times, to acquire such an exquisite command of the English language, and prominent among these books were a wide variety of religious writings by eighteenth century divines including Solomon Stoddard, William Beveridge, Bishop Burkett, and others.¹¹

Hammon came onto the American scene too late to know the possibility of freedom that earlier American slaves could expect from Christian baptism or from the indentured servant system. Almost simultaneous with the New York uprisings, the Quakers of Long Island joined their counterparts throughout the colonies in movements against slavery. Charles Vertanes believed Hammon "could not have been ignorant" of the Quaker demand for abolition, since Oyster Bay, near Lloyd Manor was a major center of Quaker activity.¹² Historians Oscar Wegelin and Arthur Schomburg agree that Hammon was probably an itinerant preacher, likely to preach at Hartford and New Haven as well as closer to home. They and other critics hold that Hammon was one of the eighteenth century revivalist Methodists,¹³ but that is improbable in view of the Lloyds' Anglican ties and other factors: American Methodism was most predominant in the southern states;¹⁴ its founder John Wesley did not issue general rules on the subject of slavery until 1743,¹⁵ by which time Hammon's church affiliation would have been established; and Francis Asbury, the vibrant Methodist missionary who almost single-handedly established the denomination in this country did not even come to America until 1771,¹⁶ when Hammon was sixty years old. However through the Lloyds' Anglican faith or the Congregation Church in nearby Huntington, New York, which they attended because there was

⁹Vertanes, pp. 5-6.

¹⁰William Webb Kemp, The Support of Schools in Colonial New York by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1969) pp. 183-187.

¹¹Hammon mentions these ministers in his essay "An Evening's Improvement," America's First Negro Poet, pp. 97-101.

¹²Vertanes, p. 3.

¹³Vernon Loggins, "Critical Analyses of the Works of Jupiter Hammon," America's First Negro Poet: The Complete Works of Jupiter Hammon of Long Island (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1970), p.36.

¹⁴Leonard Woosley Bacon, A History of American Christianity New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), p. 203.

¹⁵Donald G. Matthews, Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality: 1780-1845 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 5-6.

¹⁶Bacon, p. 200

no church in their denomination nearby,¹⁷ undoubtedly Hammon was touched by the Great Awakening which swept through New England in 1740, certainly his poetry includes insistence of Arminian equality for salvation and limits Calvinistic election to explorations of God's sovereignty in the slavery dilemma.

Hammon published a prose work entitled "An Essay on the Ten Virgins," advertised for sale as a broadside in the December 14, 1779 issue of The Connecticut Courant. The work has not been recovered but as far as we know it was the first of four published Hammon essays.¹⁸ His extant works and their dates of publication are, in order: a poem, "An Evening Thought, Salvation by Christ with Penetential Cries," December 25, 1760; a second poem, "An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley," August 4, 1778; an essay titled "A Winter Piece" to which was affixed an additional poem, "A Poem for Children With Thoughts on Death," in 1782; another broadside essay, "An Evening's Improvement: Shewing, The Necessity of Beholding the Lamb of God," to which he added a poem, "A Dialogue: The Kind Master and Dutiful Servant," in 1783; and finally a printed sermon, which was reissued by the Pennsylvania Quaker Association in the early nineteenth century, entitled "An Address to the Negroes of the New York State."

"An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penetential Cries," was published on Christmas Day, Seventeen Hundred and Sixty. The poem established Hammon as not only the first Black American poet but the forerunner of those Black poets who in the next hundred years would use Biblical philosophy as the basis for proclaiming their right to equality. In this poem Hammon insists that Christ's salvation would be available to "every one" of "every nation":

Dear Jesus give thy Spirit now,
Thy Grace to every Nation. . .

Dear Jesus by thy precious Blood,
The World Redemption have: . . .

Dear Jesus let the Nations cry,
And all the People say,

And let the Hearts of all the World,
Make Christ their Salvation.

Increase your Faith, do not repine:
Awake ye every Nation.¹⁹

In "An Evening Thought. . .", Hammon used a surreptitious tech-

¹⁷Papers of the Lloyd Family. Vol. 1, p. 335 note.

¹⁸Wegelin, p. 13.

¹⁹Hammon, "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ With Penetential Cries," America's First Negro Poet, p. 45.

nique for protest against slavery that he would use throughout his career. Wary slaveholders who professed to be Christians could not overtly object to Hammon's persistent theme that every nation should receive Christ because that was the motivation behind Christian missions. He subtly accuses slaveholders with, "Salvation doth increase our Love," a cornerstone of the Christian message incompatible with the house of slavery. Such cries as "Redemption now to everyone," would not be strange in any eighteenth century meeting house of white worshippers, but to hear a Black slave utter such cries would indeed give the "free" members of the congregation uncomfortable reminders of their hypocrisy.

Thus very early in his ministry, Hammon learned to wield that two-edged sword: offering the worth of rightful, guiltless equality to the Black slave while at the same time delivering gloved but scathing condemnation to his white readers (i.e. "Haste on Tribunal Day"). Of course, the gospel itself afforded him that tool and no other method would have worked as well in the more Biblically aware eighteenth century. He was indeed the unsung Black Poet Laureate of America and he is still today the unrecognized father of Black Protest Literature.

Hammon's most complex poem is "An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley." Like his other works it has a distinct hymnotic four-three beat such as was chanted in an antiphonal chorus of the Black slave church. The first line of each couplet has four beats and the second has three, the last of which is to be extended by the responding chorus while the leader introduces the next two lines through an accelerated chant. The poem is divided into three parts: Stanzas I-VI offer a personal invocation and greeting to Phillis; Stanzas VII-XVII cover instructions as to how the moral Christian life is accomplished on earth; and Stanzas XVIII-XXI conclude with a triumphal praise section lauding the eternal rewards promised to those who have attained that moral commitment. There are at least seven distinct but interdependent themes which are ballasted by appropriate Bible scriptures after each stanza. The themes can be categorized as the omnipotent purpose and mercy of God; Christ's sacrifice; man's responsibility; slavery; "heathen" Africa; death, judgement and reward; and praise. Hammon admonishes Phillis not to be militant but rather follow the paths of peace. Moreover, she was not to strive for a change of contemporary social and governmental institutions but to work for a radically new political establishment where Christ, the citadel of justice and truth, was to be the King. It was in this new Kingdom that Phillis would know the full intent of God's purpose in permitting the slave trade. Just as Christ promised in the gospels, the oppressed are to inherit all the earthly wealth that unbelievers seek to amass. Hammon says to Phillis,

In Christian faith thou has a share,
Worth all the gold of Spain.²⁰

Hammon was aware of the correct historical view of slavery because in the use of "Spain" he rightfully puts the onus on that nation, and not England, as the originators of the slave trade in the Western Hemisphere.

But this is not Hammon's final word on slavery. While the reward of everlasting gold may suffice in heaven or during Christ's earthly Messianic reign, and while God may punish the wicked eventually, it is clear that Hammon still agonized over slavery in eighteenth century America. Here the outlook is not praiseful but abjectly pessimistic. He does not expect a "human" solution. Nor does he expect slavery to end in their lifetimes. In fact, the only "freedom" that he can offer Phillis is the promise of Christ that He will see her through this life—if she lives in piety and reverence for Him. In the second section of the poem he points out that for the slave these rewards will not be in temporal values, but in Heavenly ones—collectable only in death. Thus in 1778, despite the continuing Revolutionary War, Hammon saw no earthly solution for the slavery problem. Never did he advise Phillis that the moral standard set forth in the second section of the poem meant that docility resulted in earthly reward. Rather her reward for a righteous life would come from accepting Christ's sacrifice as advised in Stanzas VII and VIII, avoiding riotous living, meditating on the Scriptures and continuously praising God. When this was Phillis's daily practice then Christ would be her Shepherd, Stanza XII, and He would provide relief for her hungry and weary soul, Stanza XIII. Thus the second section of the "Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley" proves that Hammon did not expect an easy life of slavery for Phillis, such as it has been wrongfully suggested that he experienced, but rather a painful, arduous, and humiliating one. In fact, he tells her that the answer for the suffering of slavery is death:

Thou Phillis, when thou hunger hast,
Or pantest for thy God;
Jesus Christ is thy relief,
Thou hast the holy word.

Psal. xiii, 1, 2, 3.

The bounteous mercies of the Lord,
Are hid beyond the sky,
And holy souls that love His word,
Shall taste them when they die.

Psal. xvi, 10, 11.²¹

His dejection with earthly possibilities is also seen in the Biblical ref-

²⁰Hammon, "An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley," *America's First Negro Poet*, p. 49.

²¹Hammon, "An Address. . .," p. 51.

erence from Psalms 16: 10-11:

For thou dost not give me up to Sheol, or let
thy godly one see the Pit. Thou dost show me
the path of life; in thy presence there is full-
ness of joy, in thy right hand are pleasures
forevermore.

Thus the holy life enjoined in the poem's second section is not to promote "good Christian slavery," but to save Phillis from Sheol, the Hebrew place of everlasting torment, i.e., the New Testament Hell.

The last two verses of the second section, Stanzas XVI and XVII, are a transitional enjoinder to leave mundane issues and turn to the two primal symbols of the Christian religion for solace—the Blood and Water of the Cross of Jesus Christ:

Come, dear Phillis, be advis'd,
To drink Samaria's flood;
There nothing that shall suffice
But Christ's redeeming blood.

John iv. 13. 14.

"Samaria's flood" is, of course, the "Living Water" offered to the Samaritan woman as was discussed in "A Winter Piece," and the "redeeming blood" is the price of eternal salvation that is the only entrance fare to heaven. It is a closing tribute to that member of the Godhead who was shown in the second section as 1) setting aside His divine power in order to share human suffering in verse VII; 2) entering the realm of time and sin so that He could redeem mankind, verse VII; 3) assuming the metaphoric role of Shepherd so that he could gather and succor the lost sheep, verse XII; and 4) receiving the prize of his spotless lambs only in His death and theirs, as seen in verses XIV and XV. Subtly, Hammon simultaneously contrasted Christ's trip from the distant realm of heaven with Phillis' trip from the "distant shore" of Africa; her sacrifice of self-denial compares with Christ's triumphant entry.

The older poet's charge to the younger poetess is complete. Just like the writer of the Ecclesiastes passage, he knew that his sojourn in life would soon be over so he promises Phillis that she too can know the valorous honor of a good soldier.

When God shall send his summons down,
And number saints together,
Blest angels chant, (triumphant sound),
Come live with me forever.²²

The accompanying scripture verse, Psalm 116: 15, reads: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." Hammon ends the poem

²²Hammon, "An Address. . .," p. 52.

with a note of Hallelujah praise, very much mindful of the Book of Revelation:

Behold! the soul shall waft away,
 Whene'er we come to die,
 And leave its cottage made of clay,
 In twinkling of an eye.

1 Cor xv, 51, 52, 53.

Now glory be to the Most High,
 United praises given,
 By all on earth, incessantly,
 And all the host of heav'n.

Psal. c, 6.²³

Ironically with a closing that was to be joyously supernal, Hammon began a tradition that other Black antebellum poets were to continue: the only undamnable escape, the only hope of retribution, the only promise of authentic freedom—was death. Those who take early Black American poets like Hammon to task for too readily accepting Western Christianity should realize that the religion provided 1) order and reason to the existential chaos of the slave experience; 2) a platform for metaphoric communication with the white hegemony; 3) a faith in an eventual non-violent political solution to slavery that would not leave an onus of guilt on the slave; and 4) a promise of equitable judgement and restitution in the life to come. Jupiter Hammon merely artistically interpreted the eighteenth century slave's response to, and acceptance of, the religion.

The essay, "A Winter Piece," is undoubtedly a reworking of a Hammon sermon. As if speaking to a visual audience that was seated according to race, as was the universal practice of the day, he first addresses himself to those whites who had asked him to offer Christian admonitions for their slaves. Then in the main body of the work he uses Old and New Testament references as sermon texts which were carefully selected to let his Black audience know their worth, their equality, yea, even their own predestined state in the eyes of God. In every instance he uses Scriptural passages that proved God always to be on the side of the downtrodden, the outcasts, the alienated rejects of society. Finally he ends the essay, as he ended all of his prose works and most of his poems, on the subject of death, judgement and eternal reward—a theme in which he purposely reunited the white audience as answerable to God for the institution of slavery.

First, for those whites who would also attune themselves to his message he strongly reminds them of their Christian responsibility to those slave children born in their charge:

²³Hammon, "An Address. . .," p. 53.

But it may be objected by those who have had the advantage of studying, every one is not calculated for teaching of others. To those I answer, Sirs, I do not attempt to teach by divine assistance to enlighten the minds of my brethren; for we are a poor despised nation, whom God in His wise providence has permitted to be brought from their native place to a christian land, and many thousands born in what are called christian families and brought up to years of understanding. In answer to the objectors, Sirs, pray give me leave to inquire into the state of those children that are born in those christian families, have they been baptised, taught to read, and learnt their catechism? (sic) Surely this is a duty incumbent on masters or heads of families. Sirs, if you had a sick child, would you not send for a doctor? If your house was on fire would you not strive to put it out to save your interest? Surely then you ought to use the means appointed to save the souls which God has committed to your charge, and not forget the words of Joshua, as for me and my house we will serve the Lord. . . .

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The sentiment in this section is followed up in the poem affixed titled "A Poem For Children With Thoughts on Death." At the conclusion of the admonition, he made it clear that his message was not for whites: "But I turn to my Brethern for whom this discourse is designed."

"My Brethern." That was Hammon's cry and for those who insist that Hammon had no interest in the slave condition there is no greater evidence than "A Winter Piece." He immediately identifies his "Brethern" with three distinct classes of disenfranchized outcasts in the Palestine of Jesus' day: the Samaritans, the publicans and the poor. The allusion to Samaria is a favorite theme of Hammon's. He used it in "An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley" and in an essay, "An Evening's Improvement." At the start of "A Winter Piece," after introducing a text from Matthew 11:28 that was already heavily weighted in favor of Christ's concern for the physically oppressed, "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden," he introduces the Samaritan theme:

Here, my brethren, we have great encouragement to come to the Lord, and ask for the influence of his holy spirit, and that he would give us the water of eternal life, John 4:14. Whosoever shall drink of this water as the woman of Samaria did, shall never thirst; but it shall be in them a well of water springing up to eternal life, then we shall believe in the merits of Christ, for our eternal salvation, and come labouring and heavy laden with a sense of our lost and undone state without an interest in the merits of Christ.²⁵

The eighteenth century reader learned in Old and New Testament Biblical background, would know full well that in referring to Samaria, Hammon was putting the onus on the Christian establishment to follow the example set by Christ in breaking down racial barriers and offering

²⁴Jupiter Hammon, "A Winter Piece: Being a Serious Exhortation with a Call to the Unconverted: and a Short Contemplation on the Death of Jesus Christ," *America's First Negro Poet: The Complete Works of Jupiter Hammon of Long Island* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1970), pp.69-70.

²⁵Hammon, "A Winter Piece," p. 67.

the hand of fellowship and equality to the most traditionally hated class of people in his society. Indeed, the Samaritans were the feared and cursed "niggers" of Jerusalem. The most patriotic and conservative a Jew was, the more he would circumspectly avoid the Samaritans. In fact to go from one section of Judah to another, the shortest route would have been to go through Samaria. Instead, Judean travellers were known to walk some seventy miles outside of their way to go around the region in order to avoid contact with what they considered to be accursed, mongrel "dogs."²⁶ Yet in the fourth chapter of John which Hammon cites, Christ deliberately walks through Samaria, chooses to send His protective disciples away and then reaches out to the lowest possible common denominator in even Samaritan society.

In "A Winter Piece," Hammon took the only stance that he felt he could have as a Black and a Christian. He would not deny his African heritage nor pretend that it did not exist, but he felt he had to follow the example of Christ Who did not offer a political or socialistic solution to Samaritan-Jewish racial relationships but Who offered a spiritual solution—Himself, the Living Water, "welling up into Eternal Life." If Blacks in slavery were in bondage, then like all other human beings they are just as much in need of God's mercy as the Israelites were when they were in bondage, then like all other human beings they are just as much in need of the warning of judgment and salvation. To have offered them less than that life promised the Samaritan woman would have been a paltry exchange. As a dedicated Black leader, Hammon could do no more, and as a committed Christian, he could do no less.

Another segment of New Testament society that received the blunt end of Jewish hatred was the tax-collecting publican. In "A Winter Piece" Hammon applied this Biblical example to the orthodox Christian doctrine that the ostracized, humbled by their social condition, are therefore in a position to be closer to God. Hammon tells his readers:

I now assure you that God is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth; therefore if ye would come unto me, come as the poor publican did, and say God be merciful to me a sinner; Luke xv, 11. And the publican standing afar off would not lift up so much his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. For if we hope to be saved by the merits of Jesus Christ, we cast off all self-dependence, as to our own righteousness; for by grace ye are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.²⁷

²⁶W. Barclay, The Gospel of John, Vol. 1, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 147. See also J. L. Kelso, "Samaritans," Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, M. C. Tenney, ed., Vol. 5, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Press, 1978), p. 245. Edith Deen, "Woman of Samaria," All the Women of the Bible (New York: Harper and Row, 1955), pp. 195-200. See also Henrietta G. Mears, What the Bible is All About (Glendale, California: Regal Books, 1966), p. 415.

²⁷Hammon, "A Winter Piece," p. 70

The Publican metaphor was intended to remind readers of that class of hated Jews who were grouped with the lowest of criminal elements in the society. The publicans were considered traitors because they not only collected taxes for the Roman oppressors who occupied Palestine but they overcharged the Jews and put the overage into their own pockets. But more importantly, Hammon's readers would know that just as He sought out the rejected Samaritans for personal invitations into the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus also went out of His way to minister to publicans. He did eat with them, and confronted the self-righteous religious leaders directly by saying:

The publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John (the Baptist) came unto you in the way of righteousness, and you believed him not; but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.²⁸

Obviously Hammon's position is that it is not the rich, powerful and exploitive self-righteous who find Christ but those humbled, suffering confessors who do not have to be convinced of their sins.

There is a section in "A Winter Piece" with three symbols even more overt than the publican and Samaritan. Hammon proclaims that Christ's promise of freedom can be applied to the slaves' physical as well as spiritual shackles because the same God who freed Israel from bondage was no respecter of persons:

Come my dear fellow servants and brothers, Africans by nations, we are all invited to come, Acts x, 34. Then Peter opened his mouth and said, of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons, verse 35. But in every nation he that feareth him is accepted of him. My Brethern, many of us are seeking temporal freedom, and I wish you may obtain it; remember that all power in heaven and on earth belongs to God; if we are slaves it is by the permission of God, if we are free it must be by the power of the most high God. Stand still and see the salvation of God, cannot that same power that divided the waters from the waters for the children of Israel to pass through, make way for your freedom, and I pray that God would grant your desire, and that he may give you grace to seek that freedom which tendeth to eternal life, John viii, 32, And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free verse 36. If the Son shall make you free you shall be free indeed.²⁹

This is one of the most stinging quotations in all of Hammon's work. It presents a three pronged attack: 1) there can be no freedom in an authentically Christian land which practices slavery because Christianity is supposed to be "Truth" and its Founder promised that "Truth" would free all men; 2) that God made even the patriarchial pillar of the New Testament Church to confess the sin of prejudice and admit God's standard of equality; and 3) that God Himself had shown His aversion to

²⁸The Bible, KJV, Matthew 21:31-32.

²⁹Hammon, "A Winter Piece," p. 73.

slavery by freeing the Jews from Egypt and raining judgement and death upon their oppressors.

Inherent in Hammon's message on the words of Christ is the dilemma of the non-Black eighteenth century audience. Whereas they could condemn Hammon if he attacked them, or instructed their slaves with militant attitudes and secular weapons, they had no such recourse now because he espoused what they held to be truth spoken from the Bible which they said was written by God, uttered by the Christ Himself whom they held to be the Savior of mankind. Thus Hammon used the most effective tool possible in his day for arguing the overthrow of slavery. His method could not fail to bring conviction and repentance to his "superiors." "A Winter Piece," plus many of Hammon's broadsides were distributed throughout New York and Connecticut.³⁰ Within the next decade slave traffic was outlawed³¹ and mandatory manumission by the age of twenty-five was enacted as well in both states.³²

It is indeed regrettable that too often a passage from "An Address to the Negroes of New York State" is quoted to "prove" Hammon's acquiescence to the slave system:

"Now I acknowledge that liberty is a great thing, and worth seeking for, if we can get it honestly; and by our good conduct prevail on our masters to set us free: though for my own part I do not wish to be free, yet I should be glad if others, especially the young Negroes, were to be free; for many of us who are grown up slaves, and have always had masters to take care of us, should hardly know how to take care of ourselves; and it may be more for our own comfort to remain as we are. That liberty is a great thing we may know from our own feelings, and we may likewise judge so from the conduct of the white people in the late war. How much money has been spent, and how many lives have been lost to defend their liberty! I must say that I have hoped that God would open their eyes, when they were so much engaged for liberty, to think of the state of the poor blacks, and to pity us. He has done it in some measure, and has raised us up many friends; for which we have reason to be thankful, and to hope in his mercy. What may be done further, he only knows, for known unto God are all his ways from the beginning. But this, my dear bretheren, is by no means the greatest thing we have to be concerned about. Getting our liberty in this world is nothing to our having the liberty of the children of God."³³

Usually direct quotations of the passage are ended after the first full sentence wherein Hammon, then 76 years of age, said that he had no desire to be free. In all probability he was protecting himself from the cruel manumission of the aged that McManus spoke of. When the entire

³⁰Wegelin, p. 9-13, 18. See also Ransome, p. 14.

³¹Ransome, p.17.

³²McManus, Black Bondage in the North Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1973), pp. 174-179.

³³Hammon, "An Address to the Negroes," p. 112-113. See also J. Saunders Redding, To Make A Poet Black (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), pp. 7-8 and Mays, p.99.

passage is quoted, it is done to give a disdainful impression that Hammon was more concerned with heavenly salvation than earthly freedom. While that may have been the case for a seventy-six year old man who was himself "closer to heaven than to earth, it was clearly not the pattern of all of Hammon's works. The themes of his poetry and the topics of his sermons and essays seem always to have been selected with five major goals in mind: 1) To illustrate Christ's special concern for those whom society has rejected such as publicans and Samaritans; 2) To assure Black audiences that they were equally human descendants of Adam with a lineage that goes back to the anciently distinguished Ethiopians, a theme Wheatly would also use; 3) To counteract so-called Biblical justifications of racism with pertinent references that "God is no respecter of persons" but that He instead loves and offers salvation to "every nation;" 4) To deliberately cloak his use of the words "save," "salvation," "redeem," and "free," in such an ambiguous style that they could be used interchangeably in terms of a spiritual rebirth or a secular freedom from slavery (a ploy that would be used by Christian slaves for the next hundred-odd years); and 5) To hold the promise of God's ultimate restorative judgement as a vindication of the slaves and simultaneous threat to white slave holders.

It is hoped that just as Hammon's birth day and prose was discovered as late as 1970, so more of his poetry will be uncovered to vindicate his position as the true father of a tradition of Black literature which has always placed emphasis upon the uniqueness of America's Black-skinned peoples. Certainly his belief in the Christian religion did not hinder his expression on slavery and oppression. Instead he used the very religion of the oppressors to preach against their practices and to offer hope to the oppressed. It is time that these accomplishments be recognized and that Hammon be venerated, not as a weak beginning of Afro-American art shackled by his religion, but as a powerful spokesman for the cause of Black freedom and equality—the Father of Black Christian protest literature in America. Until more work is done in this regard an important element in the history of Black American literature and Christian experience remains unfulfilled.