

The Twisted Fate of the King James Version and the Black Religious Experience in America

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The only version of the Bible African slaves in the English colonies known to exist was the King James Version (KJV). In reflecting on the 400th centennial of the arrival of African captives to America and the 1611 King James Version, African American church scholars do well to mark this occasion, not so much for what the biblical text did to reform the church in Europe, but to commemorate its role in forming a people. When they published the King James Scripture, those 54 language scholars of 1611 no doubt understood the impact they would make as reformers of European Christianity. They may not have imagined their work would have such a profound impact on the formation of a community of abducted Africans. Their fellow brothers and sisters in captivity would teach the purveyors of the King James Version how subversive their text is to human political, economic, and religious institutions.

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The King James Version: The Making of a Book and a People

When Princeton Religion Professor Eddie Glaude, Jr. posted an announcement on *The Huffington Post* that read “The Black Church Is Dead” (2010), he not only started chatter beyond the blogosphere; he also unwittingly forewarned of another inevitable query about a threatened, enduring legacy; namely, the legacy of the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible. Timothy Beal, addressing the 400 year anniversary of its birth date, wrote in the same blog,

The King James Bible’s 400th may well be its biggest birthday ever, but also its most poignant. For its end draws nigh. Sure, it’ll hang around for a while, mostly in hotels and old folk’s homes. But it’s not long for this world, at least in any form we’d recognize from the bookish years of its youth. (2011)

Beal’s article focuses on the digital crisis. Text messaging conditions us to view the written word as an ephemeral product. Our culture may in the near future treat those cultural products of literature (those that were venerated during the age of print) with less care than they deserve. Will these two blog posts prove to be more than ephemeral grievances over two dying traditions, i.e., the Black Church and the KJV? This essay highlights

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an important (and for some early American patriots) unexpected connection between the King James Version of the Bible and the African American or Black religious experience. The author suggests that the possible end of the one may foretell the inevitable fate of the other. If Glaude and Beal are both right, then the twist of fate (surrounding the shared origin of the Black Church and the KJV, in the early 17th-century) may fortuitously predict a similar destiny of doom in the 21st century.

To answer the question “Will the King James Version survive?” is in one sense much easier than answering the question whether or not the Black Church is dead. The latter question simply cannot be answered by any empirical studies, whether those studies are derived from qualitative or quantitative research. A conceptual investigation is necessary to declare the death of the Black Church. What we mean by the concepts “black”, “church”, and “dead” determines the possible answers that could be offered. Obviously the term “dead” is used metaphorically and (in that case) not meant to be taken as literal. Even still, we probably do not mean “dead” in the sense that church growth scholars, figuratively, talk about church closure in a congregation’s life cycle: churches that develop from conception, birth, prime, and maturity to eventual death (Saarinen, 2001, pp. 6-7, 22). To talk about the death of the “Black Church” means much more than the closing down of a local storefront worship center. The metaphorical death of this amorphous entity called the “Black Church” is much more akin to a given social ethos that loses its “soul”. It is like a cultural movement that has been co-opted by different values: values driven by social and economic change (Jenkins, 1999).

The King James Version and Black American History: Reformation and Formation

For the sake of argument, we can stipulate that the term “Black” signifies a modern people whose contingent origins (in the western hemisphere) and whose historical connection with Africa sets up a peculiar problem in modern, western history. The author says stipulate because people who employ the ordinary use of the concept of race have yet to learn that “race” is a socially constructed category. As Paul Harvey notes, “A complex of historical factors (such as the gigantic global enterprise of the African slave trade) and mythic groundings (such as stories from the Old Testament) influenced the construction of modern racial categories” (2003, p. 14). It is important to review this history not only in light of the “mis-education of the Negro”¹ but more so in light of the mis-education *about* the Negro. Historian Lerone Bennett, Jr., acknowledges the possibility of pre-Columbian African contact with the new world, nevertheless he chooses to identify the month of August (in the year 1619) as the event, which defined the story of African America (1988, p. 29). This date is significant, despite the fact that scholars in the discipline of black studies challenge it as an adequate or accurate historical point of reference. For many, Africans first encountered the Atlantic shores not as a result of the explorations of Columbus and the Europeans. These scholars claim that there are hints of an earlier African exploration in the western hemisphere. Scholars like Ivan Van Sertima (2003) demonstrate with well-reasoned arguments (based on indigenous Amerindian oral tradition, linguistic studies, textual documents, and cultural artifacts) that evidence of an African presence in pre-Columbian America cannot be ignored. While this is not the forum to go into the details of his argument, it must be acknowledged that scholars can no longer dismiss the evidence upon which those arguments are based.

Furthermore, scholars of African American religious traditions dispute the suggestion that European spirituality played a large role in the formation of the African religious consciousness. Here again, the work of

¹ This was the title of Carter G. Woodson’s famous book.

pan-African scholars like Cheikh Anta Diop and W. E. B. Dubois (and Americana scholars like Albert J. Raboteau) exhibit how Africa's cultural gift to the world was a sophisticated religious sensibility and spiritual understanding (Diop, 1974; Raboteau, 1978). This is true of early African Christianity: whether Athanasius, Frumentius, king Ezana, Tertullian, Origen, or Augustine (Snowden, 1983, Illustration 31a-b).² It is an assertion that unsettles the religioracial myths surrounding a Europeanized historical account of Christianity (Oden, 2007). At this point it may be helpful to note the way Wayne Proudfoot defines myth as an interpretative activity "addressed to questions of origin, of moral ambiguity, of the meaning of suffering and death, and of anomalous phenomena that cannot be assimilated to existing conceptual systems" (Proudfoot, 1985, p. 42). Africans were the major fathers who shaped the early Christian Church: during the patristic period. Early African Christianity had a sophisticated religious sensibility and spiritual understanding and the case is the same regarding non-Christian African theology. Arguably, one the first documented monotheist in human history was the African monarch Akhenaton.³ Moreover, during the early post-Medieval period, Africans did not have a primitive animistic theology of nature worship, as has been taught for so long. African traditional religion is more accurately described as bureaucratic monotheism (Mitchell, 2004, p. 17).

This view of divine reality imagines the spiritual energy of heaven as that which is scattered to various agents, and yet at the same time God is exalted as the Most-High spiritual entity. The African religious mind recognized the omnipresent divine spirit. The notion that God's spirit permeates in all places influenced the thinking of those captives who made up "the 'greatest migration in recorded history'" (Bennett, Jr., 1988, p. 29). It is because African religious consciousness was open to the divine spirit (in *all* places and *all* people) that their first encounter with the Bible brought complex responses. God's presence everywhere harnesses a view that allowed Africa's children to receive the Bible as an object of reverence (Wimbush, 2003, pp. 12-20). However, (because of the African openness to the divine presence in *all* things and places) unlike their European counterparts, Africa's children did not restrict their theological resources to revelation in a book (Wimbush, 2003, p. 17). The captives in the new world did realize however that as a people with few material resources this text was an indispensable resource for cultural competency (not to mention human spirituality).

The only Bible or version of the Bible that the African slaves in the English colonies knew to exist, in the new land, was the King James Version. Eight years separate the 1611 publication of the King James Version and the 1619 dramatic scene at a sea port where the "first permanent English settlement in America" (Bennett, Jr., 1988, p. 29) tested not only the fortitude of a stolen people, but also the subversive power of the authorized text of Holy Scripture. For most of the Africans, the Sacred Story initially came as an oral tradition based on and informed by the language of the King James Version. In reflecting on the 400th centennial of the arrival of African captives to America and the 1611 King James Version, African American church scholars would do well to mark this occasion, not so much for what the biblical text did to reform the church in Europe, but to commemorate its role in forming a people, who were no people.⁴ Linking the events—so closely related in time

² While the actual complexion of the peoples of ancient North Africa cannot be conclusively determined, Frank Snowden suggests that we may be able to infer from a third century B.C.E. Etruscan coin (that shows the head of a Negro on the obverse and an elephant on the reverse) that ancient North Africans would be considered black under the modern racial scheme.

³ Although it is considered that Moses was a monotheist, a good case has been made (and popularized by Harry Emerson Fosdick) that the early Hebrew people are more accurately to be described as henotheist: They believed in the existence of other gods, but were only to worship Yahweh. Compare Fosdick *A Guide to Understanding the Bible: The Development of Ideas Within the Old and New Testaments*.

⁴ This is expressed as an allusion to Hosea 1:10; 2:23 cf. Romans 9:25-26.

and placing them together in one scope reveals both the subversive and discursive power of the Africans' use of the King James Version. This was likely never anticipated by religious scholars.

When they published the King James Scripture, those 54 language scholars of 1611 no doubt understood the impact they would make as reformers of European Christianity. They may even have anticipated the impact their translation would have on reforming the political order. Their text hastens a world steadily emerging from autocratic monarchs to democratic public servants (Adler, 1996, pp. 131-144). But they could not have imagined that their work would have such a profound impact on the formation of a community of abducted adults and kidnapped youth. Could they possibly have expected that this text of Scripture would provide a language world for those captives, who came from vastly different areas of a continent, searching for a common language and culture to help them to transcend a coerced identity as chattel? (Wimbush, 2003, pp. 1-11) While they believed in its religio-political reforming work, the European descendants who gave us the King James Version could not have foreseen that the same text would also become the thrust for reforming their economic vision of a slaving industry. The 17th-century European vision of the *oikos* (household) looked to expand markets that included the trafficking of human cargo. Their fellow brothers and sisters in captivity would yet teach the purveyors of the King James Version just how subversive their text is to human political, economic, and religious institutions.

Material Poverty, Political Struggle, and Spiritual Wealth

These African peoples through a process of miscegenation and enculturation became African Americans. This "becoming" is in part due to how they appropriated the Bible as an instrument in their fight for civil rights within a nation state—the United States of America. Civil-rights have always been an issue for African Americans from the founding of the nation. In order to appreciate the weight of this claim, one must recall that before the founding of this nation, blacks in the colonies lived as (1) free people, (2) indentured servants, and (3) slaves. Sadly, they also lived as slavers. It was during this period that black people owned white indentured servants and intermarried freely with people of European descent. Furthermore, there is evidence that, historically, slavery was not based on race but on the idea of the contraband of war. In fact, ancient peoples were not xenophobic. They saw human difference in phenotype and complexion as an exotic novelty expressing divine creative joy (Snowden, 1983).

It was the modern forces of material greed that corrupted, even further, an already depraved economic system. Religious clerics sedated the disturbed Christian psyche by assuring the European religious mind and spirit that the Bible condoned the practice of African enslavement (Du Bois, 2003, pp. 6-12). The combination of a perverted theological tradition along with the economic benefits of the trans-African slave trade influenced the founding fathers of the United States of America to author a pro-slavery document as the legal basis upon which the nation was constituted (Osborn, 2010, p. 74).⁵

Members of The Free African Society, founded by black men in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (before the United States Constitutional Convention assembled) anticipated that the document coming out of that momentous convention would protect the civil rights of those patriots of European descendants, but not those of its Negro patriots. From the start, African Americans fought for civil rights with scarce material resources. The

⁵ Osborn points out the complicated relationship that early Americans, like William Lloyd Garrison, had with the paradoxical embrace and challenge of the constitution: "The violence of the proslavery mobs allowed Garrison to heap still greater scorn on the slavery clauses in the constitution. At the same time, it enabled him to appeal, ironically and not entirely consistently, to the Constitution's authority" (2010, p. 74).

Bible became the material basis and the primary spiritual resource for the forming and burgeoning community. How they used this text tells us as much about the true spirit of the Sacred Scriptures as it does the religion of the enslaved.

How the Black Church Created a Third Way

The formation of the African American people (a people whose cultural heritage emerged around the language-world of a sacred text) can teach the Christian world today a new way of viewing discourse communities and what it means to be the Church. What is the relationship between the Bible and the Church? The debate between Roman Catholics and Protestants has centered on the old question of which came first the Bible or the Church (Livingstone, 1977, p. 519). Catholics argue that the Church created the Bible. Protestants argue that the Bible created the Church. Catholics invoke the authority of Church tradition: the authority to decide on what is acceptable as Holy Scripture. Protestants invoke the principle of *Sola Scriptura*: The Bible alone is the rule for faith and practice and it offers the only authority in defining the Church.

African Americans exposed the fallacy of this debate: It posed a false “either/or” dilemma. In African American history, we see that the Bible did not form a Church nor did African Americans (as a cultural community or a community of faith) produce the Bible. For African Americans, their community was formed in-and-by the language-world of the Bible. Their faith was forged in-and-through the fires of Slave Religion. And as they heard the stories of Jesus, they identified his suffering with their suffering; his death with their death; his resurrection with their resurrection and their spirits were renewed and their faith in God revived and their hopes were fused with the risen Lord.

This came as good news. As an overworked people, African Americans conscripted a book to become co-laborers with them: Rather than doing all the work, they made the Bible work for them. The King James Version helped African Americans to solidify their people-hood. This power of Christian faith offers a third way for understanding what it means to be the Church. For African Americans, the Church did not create the Bible. Even before Slave Religion had morphed into an indigenous American Christianity, the Bible was already the established text in the colonies. For African Americans, the Bible did not create the Church. African Americans did not believe in Jesus because of the Bible; they believed in the Bible because of a living encounter with the risen Christ. These resourceful sojourning people allow us to analyze the structure of the relationship between Church and Bible. The Bible first creates the community, the community then under divine mysteries receives the commission to become the Black Church, and the Black Church ultimately resources the Bible (like a tool box) for community growth, health, and protection. The author suspects it will be this way for many others who join the faith of Christ in this postmodern era. And it should continue to do so: as long as it serves the pastoral purposes of healing, sustaining, and guiding (Hiltner, 1954, pp. 15-29) and resisting.

For African Americans the Bible was more like the scaffolding from which they could frame any and all their beliefs forged in the experience of slavery and an encounter with the risen and ransoming Lord. Not only did the King James Version provide a new, new world: a “language world” (Wimbush, 2003, p. 1), but it also provided the psychic space for those enslaved people who needed to find their creative energy. And create these people did! The Bible became that inexhaustible cistern to which they would constantly return. While the goal of the masters was a firm commitment to maintain an illiterate subject group, they failed to see the pedagogical power in Christian faith. By exposing the enslaved community to the sacred Christian story, they also exposed them to a text that was a valuable founding and forming document. The King James publication of that text, in

beautiful English prose and poetry inspired the enslaved community to become literate. Thereby that same community found in that founding Christian document, the seeds of resistance. As a religion of the book, Christian community requires literacy. Hearing and eventually reading the Bible, the enslaved community came to learn of the God who redeems the slave in Egypt, the exiles of Babylon, and the Jesus of occupied Palestine. They realized that this God can redeem them, as well. The Bible as a pedagogical tool was a tool of freedom and education.

The Bible was first that source from which their folk rhymes and cultural traditions emerged. An example is found in the Negro parody on the Lord's Prayer:

"Our Fadder, Which are in Heaben!"—
 White man owe me leben and pay me seben.
 "D'y Kingdom come! D'y Will be done!"—
 An' if I hadn't tuck dat, I wouldn' git none. (Randall, 1971, p. 5)

The enslaved people could draw on the Bible as a resource to craft sermons of hope and songs of resistance as witnessed in James Weldon Johnson's seven sermons in verse entitled, *God's Trombones*:

O Lord, we come this morning
 Knee-bowed and body-bent
 Before thy throne of grace.
 O Lord—this morning—
 Bow our hearts beneath our knees,
 And our knees in some lonesome valley.

 Mount your milk-white horse,
 And ride-a this morning...

 And now, O Lord, this man of God,
 Who breaks the bread of life this morning—
 Shadow him in the hollow of thy hand...
 Wash him with hyssop inside and out...
 And set his tongue on fire. (Johnson, 1976, pp. 11-12)

The Bible became a source for inspiring hymnody (the sacred music of the Negro Spirituals):

There is a balm in Gilead,
 To make the spirit whole.
 There is a balm in Gilead,
 To heal the sin-sick soul. (Johnson, 1976, p. 86)

The African American Church could now resource the Bible for the purpose of crafting new sacred and secular texts. Like a scaffold, the King James Version Bible was a tool in the divine establishment of a community of disinherited, forced-labor, migrant workers. Once the community was formed, the text served to create other texts: some secular, others sacred, some for sermon, others for song, some for healing, and others for resistance; but nevertheless, all public texts for the benefit of the people. The scholar and activist W. E. B. Dubois wrote "Reader of dead words who would live deeds... This is this book of mine and yours" (2007, p. 261). The Bible became a living text not by simply being vocalized in King James' English, but by the lived witness of a community who claimed it as their heritage.

Where Do We Go From Here

The question for us today is: Will the King James Version Bible remain a tool in the hands of this unique and modern people? Or will this modern ecclesial body that we have called the Black Church only survive by searching out newer translations (retooling as it were)? Better yet, what kind of tool can the Bible be for shaping postmodern ecclesial communities? The King James Version Bible shaped a modern peoples' identity; nevertheless, identities are malleable. We construct them and then we reconstruct them. We do this in the same way that we revise our sacred texts. We write them and we rewrite them. The religious consciousness of Africans and African Americans realized that the text (that was always bound in leather, and locked in sacred buildings) was a text still open to a new future. The stories in them continue to speak to the reality of new possibilities. Our realizing those possibilities allows the text to live on. This text of reformation, we now know, has done the unexpected work of formation: forming the people now known as "African Americans". Is the Black Church dead? Will the King James Version survive? Should the Black Church continue to live if it forfeits being a doer of the word? "Reader of dead words who would live deeds... This is this book of mine and yours" (Du Bois, 2007, p. 261). Maybe we can expect this Sacred Text to give birth to another task: the task of transforming the faithful ecclesial communities who read it and hear it, in our postmodern world, to do its bidding. Let's put it to work once again and see its magic.

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