

# A Black Poet's View On Christmas 1760

A N

## Evening THOUGHT.

SALVATION BY CHRIST,

WITH

## PENITENTIAL CRIES:

Composed by Jupiter Hammon, a Negro belonging to Mr Lloyd, of Queen's-Village, on Long-Island, the 25th of December, 1760.

SALVATION comes by Jesus Christ alone,  
 The only Son of God;  
 Redemption now to every one,  
 That love his holy Word.  
 Dear Jesus we would fly to Thee,  
 And leave off every Sin,  
 Thy tender Mercy well agree:  
 Salvation from our King.  
 Salvation comes now from the Lord,  
 Our victorious King;  
 His holy Name be well ador'd  
 Salvation surely bring.  
 Dear Jesus give thy Spirit now  
 Thy Grace to every Nation,  
 That han't the Lord to whom we bow,  
 The Author of Salvation.  
 Dear Jesus unto Thee we cry,  
 Give us thy Preparation;  
 Turn not away thy tender Eye:  
 We seek thy true Salvation.  
 Salvation comes from God we know,  
 The true and only One;  
 It's well agreed and certain true  
 He gave his only Son.  
 Lord hear our penitential Cry:  
 Salvation from above;  
 It is the Lord that doth supply,  
 With his Redeeming Love.  
 Dear Jesus by thy precious Blood,  
 The World Redemption have:  
 Salvation comes now from the Lord,  
 He being thy captive Slave.  
 Dear Jesus let the Nations cry,  
 And all the People say,  
 Salvation comes from Christ on high,  
 Haste on Tribunal Day.  
 We cry as Sinners to the Lord,  
 Salvation to obtain;  
 It is firmly fixt his holy Word,  
 Ye shall not cry in vain.  
 Dear Jesus unto Thee we cry,  
 And make our Lamentation;  
 O let our Prayers ascend on high;  
 We felt thy Salvation.

Lord turn our dark benighted Souls;  
 Give us a true Motion,  
 And let the Hearts of all the World,  
 Make Christ their Salvation.  
 Ten Thousand Angels cry to Thee,  
 Ye louder than the Ocean.  
 Thou art the Lord, we plainly see;  
 Thou art the true Salvation.  
 Now is the Day, excepted Time;  
 The Day of Salvation;  
 Increase your Faith, do not repine:  
 Awake ye every Nation.  
 Lord unto whom now shall we go,  
 Or seek a safe Abode;  
 Thou hast the Word Salvation too  
 The only Son of God.  
 Ho! every one that hunger hath,  
 Or pineth after me,  
 Salvation be thy leading Staff,  
 To set the Sinner free.  
 Dear Jesus unto Thee we fly;  
 Depart, depart from Sin,  
 Salvation doth at length supply,  
 The Glory of our King.  
 Come ye Blessed of the Lord,  
 Salvation gently given;  
 O turn your Hearts, accept the Word,  
 Your Souls are fit for Heaven.  
 Dear Jesus we now turn to Thee,  
 Salvation to obtain;  
 Our Hearts and Souls do meet again,  
 To magnify thy Name.  
 Come holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove,  
 The Object of our Care;  
 Salvation doth increase our Love;  
 Our Hearts hath felt thy fear.  
 Now Glory be to God on High,  
 Salvation high and low;  
 And thus the Soul on Christ rely,  
 To Heaven surely go.  
 Come Blessed Jesus, Heavenly Dove,  
 Accept Repentance here;  
 Salvation give, with tender Love;  
 Let us with Angels share.

F I N I S.

By JONATHAN COHEN

**O**N Christmas Day, 1760, Jupiter Hammon, a Long Island slave-poet, published his broadside poem, "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries." For this accomplishment, literary scholars now consider him the first black American to have had a poem printed.

His pre-eminence rests upon the publication of four poems that represent a halfway stage between the "naïve" folk art of the unknown composers of spirituals and the already much-wordier style of the black popular preacher.

Little is known about Hammon's actual life and doings. One of eight slave-owned by Henry Lloyd, head of the family for which Lloyd Neck in Suffolk County is named, he lived as the property of three generations of the Lloyd family, and died a slave. There is no picture of him, nor a gravestone.

Although he was a slave, he was treated well, according to his own testimony. He had been taught to read and write, educated along with Lloyd's children in a small school built on the estate. In 1733, at the age of 22, he bought a Bible with psalms for 7 shillings sixpence. He was an intelligent and privileged slave, a favorite of the family, and it is believed that at one time he may have handled business matters for the Lloyds.

Much of the early literature written by black Americans was merely imitative of popular 18th-century literature, its racial facet being the attempt to exhibit the author's intrinsic effort as sufficient refutation of the belief that the black

was an inherently inferior creature unable to develop his mind.

Often early works were pious tracts written to assure the masters that the servants wanted nothing more than to serve in religious humility, as with Hammon. In contrast to these, however, there was a long succession of autobiographical narratives by ex-slaves who attacked the existing system in an attempt to force white America to look into the human face of black America.

The earliest authors were a few highly favored slaves, like Hammon, whose masters allowed or even took interest in their education. A filip to the master's vanity sometimes resulted, for the bystanders regarded such slaves as prodigies, brilliant exceptions.

According to Ruth Miller, professor of English at the State University Center at Stony Brook, and editor of "Blackamerican Literature 1760-Present" (Glencoe Press, 1971), Hammon's ideas were "the concern of all devout Christians in colonial times and in the revolutionary period, when great controversy raged over the state of a man's soul: How may we be sure of our salvation? Whose soul is in a state of grace?"

"Blackamerican writers had a special stake in this religious issue: if redemption may come only through the Grace of Christ, and no mediator were needed to awaken the spirit, may not a black man hope for redemption?" Professor Miller said. "If Whiteamericans justified the practice of slavery by saying they were bringing the light of Christianity into heathen darkness, how could they continue to keep a converted

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# America's First Black Poet

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man enslaved? Is enslavement compatible with a state of grace and salvation? Jupiter Hammon thought the answer to the latter question was 'yes,' and he counseled patience, assuring his listeners that life hereafter would bring more than enough consolation for their earthly hardships."

In his poem, "An Evening Thought," published through Henry Lloyd's influence, Hammon celebrated his road to

salvation. He sonorously repeats the word "salvation" 23 times in 88 lines filled with biblical teachings and aphorisms. The modern reader immediately senses the contrived and forced rhymes and the poor quality of the verse patterns, which are based on the early Methodist hymns.

Yet one must realize the spoken art of the original composition. Like the spirituals, the poem was most likely composed to be heard, not seen and read. Modern readers cannot hear how the

poet intended it to sound. The word "salvation," appealing to his ear, was used over and over in order, it seems, to cast a spell with it. By shifting tonic accents and even dropping syllables in the poetic lines to syncopate the rhythms, his preacher's voice would bring the verse to life.

In later years, Hammon apparently was able to combine service to the Lloyds with some itinerant preaching in what is now the metropolitan New York area. In his "Address to the Negroes in

the State of New York," first published in 1786, and reprinted in 1787 by the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, he delivered arguments in favor of ending slavery.

"That liberty is a great thing," he says, "we may know from our own feelings, and we may likewise judge so both 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. . ."

All of his published works—the four

poems and the surviving three of four prose pieces—with a number of essays about the man and his writings and a bibliography, have been collected in "America's First Negro Poet: Jupiter Hammon of Long Island" (Kennikat Press, 1970.) The book was edited by Stanley Ransom Jr., former director of the Huntington Library, who is now trying to get more recognition for Hammon by having Black Poetry Day celebrated on Hammon's birthday.

In 1973, the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities acquired the Joseph Lloyd Manor House, which was once Jupiter Hammon's home.

Last June, the first official national

recognition was given to Hammon. Dr. J. Rupert Picott, executive director of the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History, presented its National Historic Marker to the Lloyd Harbor Historical Society.

The ebony plaque, which will be kept temporarily by a trustee of the Historical Society until Lloyd Manor House has been fully restored as a colonial mansion, reads:

*In recognition of Jupiter Hammon  
America's first Afro-American poet  
Published "An Evening Thought"*

*Dec. 25, 1760*

*Born here Oct. 17, 1711*

*Died circa 1806.*