The Slave Preacher—Portrait of a Leader

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That a slave preacher was the author of the first printed production written by a Negro in the continental United States offers little surprise to the person who is familiar with the conventionally popular conception that the early Negro possessed a peculiar bent for religious enthusiasm and emotionalism. In the same connection, the student of the literature published in America during the Revolutionary period notes that the earliest prose writings by American Negroes were suffused with religious fervor and with references to the "remarkable providences" which preserved so humble—and imaginative—a "believer" as perhaps, Briton Hammon or John Marrant. While one recognizes the limitations of these early works in light of their crudities, inaccuracies, and irrelevancies one may not overlook the fact that the pioneers of Negro writers in America were religious leaders. These precursors sketched the pattern of activities which many slave preachers and exhorters,[1] were to follow in the years to come.

Although Colonial days saw the beginning of the ministry of Negro preachers in America, and Revolutionary days witnessed the widespread fame of a few Negro preachers like Black Harry,[2] it was on the plantation during the thirty or forty years preceding the Civil War that the leadership ability of the Negro preacher most completely expressed itself. In the rural community where large masses of ignorant, more often illiterate, slaves participated in whatever social and religious relationships they were allowed, the preacher became one of the most powerful figures in controlling the life patterns of this group of people. A vital factor in solving everyday problems, in offering hope and inspiration to the depressed or suffering, the old slave preacher was himself a worker on the plantation, a man who intimately associated with his fellow slaves. Like Jupiter Hammon, the first Negro poet, this old type preacher who was usually "able to do almost any kind of business," was not a licensed preacher but, permitted by his master to preach at certain times, was thus singled out and saddled with a degree of responsibility for directing the actions of other slaves.

If one reads the travel accounts and journals of persons who visited plantations a century ago, one sometimes finds descriptions not only of plantation life in the early 19th century but also delineations of individual slaves who impressed the visitor. For instance Reverend Samuel Davies, a missionary to the slaves, enthusiastically describes the efforts of the Negroes to learn catechisms and sing hymns, and refers generally to the qualities of leadership exhibited by certain slaves.[3] Another missionary,

[1] Carter G. Woodson points out the restrictions against pioneer Negro preachers in the South (*The History of the Negro Church*. Washington Associated Publishers, 1921, chap. iii).

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

[3] William Henry Foote, *Sketches of Virginia, Historical and Biographical*. First Series. Philadelphia: William S. Martin, 1850, p. 284. Letters dated March, 1775.

Rice, writes with obvious satisfaction of the slaves' serious attitude toward religion and of the appointment of "men of good character" as watchmen, "to take the lead in their religious matters and make their regular reports of the moral and religious conduct of those committed to their charge."[4] These "watchmen" were usually exhorters and preachers on the plantation and after emancipation often became the regular ministers.

In such accounts as these and the famous *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation* one finds that the early exhorters were slaves with outstanding intelligence, men who were devout and were interested in learning to read the Bible. Such a one is described by Fanny Kemble as "London, Mr. ——'s cooper, an excellent and pious man, who Heaven alone knows how, has obtained some little knowledge of reading and who reads prayers and the Bible to his fellow slaves and addresses them with extemporaneous exhortations."[5] The diarist explained how white missionaries were sometimes welcomed by the slave owners, who wished their slaves to feel reconciled to the divinely appointed bondage. And frequently the "free black preachers" would be ejected from the neighborhood in favor of the white missionary. One gets the impression that the slave preacher was favored next to the white missionary, especially if the exhorter was apparently docile and taught his flock no revolutionary matter. Effective pro-slavery propaganda could be included in the religious teachings of the white missionary, and sometimes it presented a challenge to the slave preacher who had to choose between saying what he wished to say and what he was expected to say if he was to be allowed to hold his meeting. The diplomatic handling of a situation of this sort reveals the intelligence and cleverness of the plantation preacher.

Although he possessed no formal education and little knowledge of procedures involving church ritual, the old type slave exhorter was called upon to officiate in all the capacities of the regular pastor of the church. In these situations his initiative and inventiveness are obvious as he rose to the occasion often with no guide or text other than his own memory and imagination. The grace and dignity with which the old exhorter conducted a funeral or marriage service was especially attractive to plantation visitors and travelers. Fanny Kemble very vividly describes the emotional effect of such a ceremony upon her, when she writes:

> I cannot tell you how profoundly the whole ceremony, if such it could be called, affected me; and there was nothing in the simple and pathetic supplication of the poor black artisan to check or interfere with the solemn influences of the whole scene. It was a sort of conventional Methodist prayer and probably quite as conventional as all the rest was the closing invocation of God's blessing upon their master, their mistress and our children; but this fairly overcame my composure and I began to cry bitterly. . . . The service ended with a short address from London upon the subject of Lazarus, and the confirmation which the story of his resurrection afforded our hopes. The words were simple, and rustic, and of course uttered in that peculiar sort of jargon which is the habitual Negro speech; but there was nothing in the slightest degree incongruous

[4] *Ibid.*, Second Series, p. 302.
[5] Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*, 1838-1839. New York: Harper and Bros. 1863, pp. 56-57.

or grotesque in the matter or manner, and the exhortations not to steal or lie, or neglect to work well for massa, with which the glorious hope of immortality was blended in the poor slave preacher's closing address, was a moral adaptation, as wholesome as it was touching. . . .[6]

Frederick Law Olmsted was similarly impressed with the observance of a funeral ceremony, obviously impromptu. Note the additional touch which offers possibility for comedy.

Most of the company were of a very poor appearance, rude and unintelligent, but there were several neatly dressed and very good-looking men. One of these now stepped to the head of the grave, and, after a few sentences of prayer, held a handkerchief before him as if it were a book pronounced a exhortation, as if he were reading from it. His manner was earnest and the tone of his voice solemn and impressive, except that occasionally, it would break into a shout or a kind of howl at the close of a long sentence. . . .

I never in my life, however, heard such ludicrous language as was sometimes uttered by the speaker. Frequently, I could not guess the idea he was intending to express. Sometimes it was evident that he was trying to repeat phrases that he had heard used before, on similar occasions, but which he made absurd by some interpolation or distortion of word; thus, 'We do not see the end here! oh no, my friends; there will be a purification of this body!' the context failing to indicate whether he meant purification or putrefaction, and leaving it doubtful if he attached any definite meaning to the word himself. He quoted the Bible several times, several times from hymns, always introducing the latter with 'in the words of the poet.' . . .[7]

To Olmsted, the whole matter of the religion of the Negroes was especially interesting. Throughout his account he discusses the causes and effects of laws against Negroes' assembling in meeting houses, and the effect of the missionary efforts of several denominations, but he mentions the slave minister more frequently than any other slave character. In one instance he describes the slave preacher as "a very intelligent man" and in another points out the loyalty of the preacher whose owner had such complete confidence that he wrote about the slave: "he could have left me any time in 20 years if he had wished to." It seems that the preacher appeared to be one of the chief characters on the plantation, noteworthy alike for his intelligence and his initiative. To a traveler like Olmsted these ministers were held apparently in high social position by their fellow slaves and were themselves rather well filled with higher ambitions and self respect.

One of the reasons why the slave minister held a unique position on the plantation, being often highly admired by his fellows and well regarded by his master, possibly emanated from his talent for oratory. Almost all writers who had a first hand view of this old type religious leader point out the strange gift for elocution which seemed on the one hand to draw to him the less fortunate among the slave population, and on the other, to offer to the white members of the community an interesting spectacle in the way of religious devotion, or a comic diversion for entertainment of guests. In the case of the sympathetic and emotional listener like Fanny Kemble, the "jargon" of the slave preacher was anything but amusing. The more de-

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 112-13.
[7] Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey Through the Seaboard Slave States.* New York: Dix and Edwards, 1856, I, pp. 27-28. Compare this portrayal with that of W. S. Gordon, *Recollections of the Quarter, infra,* p. 19.

tached observation of Olmsted indicated the possibility of grotesque and ludicrous effect. However, Olmsted spent some time in analyzing this oratorical ability of the slave exhorter by pointing out that it was a "curious sort of poetic talent" which was distinguished by a "habit of rhapsodizing and exciting furious emotions to a great degree—spurious and temporary in themselves and in others through the imagination." The funeral scene, apparently the most popularly described of all the scenes depicted by writers of diaries, journals, and memoirs, probably furnished an excellent opportunity for spectacular oratory.

Because of its appeal to the emotions, it strongly impressed the observer, furnishing vivid examples of the oratorical powers of the preacher. A physician, William S. Gordon, recalling the days on his father's plantation, describes a funeral scene in which three preachers followed the mournful procession to the grave where the leading preacher made his exhortation. To Gordon this was "genuine oratory, if by the term is meant the power which moves the heart in spite of all resistance." The tall, serious, "black specimen of his race" read a well-known chapter from Revelations and then proceeded to give his eulogy:

> At first his voice is calm, and the utterance slow and distinct, as he begins by referring to the suffering of one who has been "recked on de bed uv pain an anguish"; but continuing his voice grown louder, his sentences are poured out more rapidly while the eyes of all are fastened upon him with attentive reverence. The dew of mental work drips from his forehead, his arms are moved passionately to assist in the expression of the emotion, his head is thrown spasmodically backwards, his eyes are firmly closed, and after finishing the sentence he sucks in the air with that peculiar gasp and groan so effective with his people. . . . "An now we 'sign dis body to de grave, waitin' de ris'rection uv de jus."[8]

Undoubtedly these masters of vivid phrase, picturesque word, and eloquent appeal were endowed with powerful imaginations, however crude or grotesque. No one of the listeners, especially the white members of the audience could sit unmoved. In nearly every account of this oratory the journalist expresses the effect of the speaker upon himself and other persons in the audience. Mrs. Lydia Maria Child recalls her experiences under the effect of the oratory of a Negro woman preacher by saying that "her description of the resurrection and the day of judgment must have been terrific to most of her audience, and was highly exciting to me whose religious sympathies could never be roused by fear. . . . So powerful was her rude eloquence that it continually impressed me with grandeur and once only excited a smile. . . ."[9]

From the available records it is clear that the old slave exhorter on the plantation was, first of all, a slave of an appreciable degree of native ability and force. To an impartial stranger who visited the community, he was a striking figure because of his impressive personality. Something about him might attract the attention of the visitor who would ask the master about the particular slave, and elicit the information that it was "Un-

[8] William S. Gordon, *Recollections of the Old Quarter*. Lynchburg: Moose Brothers 1902, pp. 109-10.

[9] Lydia Maria Child, *Letters from New York*. New York: C. S. Francis & Co., 1846, p. 77.

cle ———," the religious leader of the plantation. In most cases the old preacher would be in reality a mature person, a man who was at least in middle life, one who had worked hard and well, one who apparently exerted some control over the slaves. From the point of view of the slave owner, the teachings of Christianity suited the situation admirably, for usually the exhorter taught principles of honesty, piety, and love. From the view point of the slave population the preacher served as arbiter, general counsellor, and mediator, even at times between master and slave. His advice was often proved to be sound, and his shrewdness in handling a delicate situation, on occasion worked to the advantage of the slave.

In the early days, usually the slave preacher was one of the few slaves who had learned to read. The Bible was his text—his history, geography, and spelling book. He believed it implicitly and literally. Possessing remarkable powers of memory and imagination, he could recite whole passages verbatim—even when he had merely listened to the reading by some kindly disposed member of the master's family. As teacher and biblical interpreter to the young and old slaves, the preacher touched the lives of all in a most unique way. In most cases held in high respect by the other slaves, he wielded the most powerful influence of any other figure among Negroes. While his errors of ignorance in interpreting the scriptures have served as source for comic entertainment, as an individual the preacher was rarely amusing to his own folk. Even to the white persons who knew him intimately, he was seldom the comic character which later writers, especially writers of fiction, have made him.

As the agitation for the abolition of slavery became more pronounced toward the middle of the century, the slave preacher was more and more prominent as the courageous responsible leader who guided his people from the blind ignorance of bondage to the knowledge and hope of freedmen. With typical vividness, the old exhorter would often encourage and invigorate the timorous and fearful bondmen whose faith was weak, using some such words as these:

"Tain't no dream nor no joke," cried one of them (a preacher of thrilling eloquence); "de time's a'most yere. Der wont be no mo' whippin', no gwine to pay 'em for der work. O, my drudders! de bressed time's a knockin' at de door! De good Lord'll ramshackle de devil, and all de people in dis yere world, bof white and black, is a gwine to live to gedder in peace."[10]

Although the illiterate or ignorant exhorters could persuade the slaves to abandon or pursue policies that, in their opinions, would forfeit or procure freedom, more often than not they enjoined their fellow slaves to accept the consolation of the scriptures and pray for a better day. Apparently, these religious leaders seldom incited their fellow slaves to imprudent or rash actions, although there were times when the masters felt that insurrections had been initiated by preachers.[11] Frequently some old Bap-

[10] Kate Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed*. Syracuse: Hamilton, 1856, p. 160.

[11] *Authentic Narrative of James Williams*. New York: The American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838. p. 26.

tist preacher like Archie Eggleston[12] "had zealously preached . . . the love and compassion of Jesus and had sought . . . to encourage them to hope for a home among the spirits bright." His language was filled "with the quaint idioms of his race," and his words helped them to visualize happiness beyond the present ills so that "their hearts were filled with heavenly consolation."

In addition to the slave preacher who felt the responsibility of formulating a philosophy by which his fellow slaves might see the hand of God working for their freedom, and thereby might console themselves to await their freedom through the wisdom of providence, there were a number of slave preachers and exhorters who boldly attempted to escape their bonds. Since they were usually the most intelligent and aggressive slaves on the plantation, they had frequently, by virtue of their position as preacher, come in contact with the outside world through trips to neighboring plantations or conversations with white visitors. Moreover, fugitive slaves, entirely ignorant of geographic locations and of the dangers and difficulties of the flight, depended largely upon their religious faith to bring them to free land. With faith strengthened by the successful outcome of his perilous journey, the fugitive who had started from the plantation with only the North Star for his guide and his prayers for consolation, responded to the urge to "spread the glorious message of God's power" and consequently either became a preacher himself or somehow wove into his tale some mention of a preacher's good deeds or good influence.

Thus when the rising tide of anti-slavery propaganda brought into fashion the pseudo biographic writing known as slave narratives, the slave preacher played a significant rôle. Under the garb of truth these narratives, "edited" by the white abolitionists to whom they were told and by whom they were attested, reached an enormous vogue partially because of their appeal to the public taste for strong emotional and sensational fare. Naturally a large number of these narratives recounted the escape and flight of religious leaders. Here are exhibited in no uncertain terms his character traits—his courage, resourcefulness, tenacity, and ingenuity. And in the instances when the narratives merely portray the preacher as a part of the setting, the reader sees him as an interesting person, like Abram Hall who was an intelligent man of medium size, "tall, dark chestnut color and could read and write a little . . . a member of Mount Zion Church and occasionally officiated as an exhorter."[13]

At least a score of these slave narratives relate the experience of the slave preacher, combining the sensational account of persecutions like the other "biographies" together with the sentimental portrayal of sufferings for sake of religious faith. Thus are mingled the self assertion of the bold man of action with the piety of the martyr to form the outline of the full portrait of the Negro preacher who having

[12] Kate Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed*. Syracuse: Hamilton, 1856, p. 180.

[13] William Still, *The Underground Railroad*. Philadelphia: People's Publishing Co., 1878.

gained his freedom, became instrumental in the efforts to aid his enslaved brothers. Among these narratives appear the names of some of the earliest leaders of the Negro church organizations which developed after Emancipation. Significant among these narratives are the following: *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen,* 1887; *Narrative of the life of J. D. Green, A Runaway from Kentucky,* Containing the account of his three escapes, 1839, 1846, 1848; *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada,* 1849; *The Rev. J. W. Loguen, as a Slave and as a Freeman,* 1859; *The Looking-Glass, Being a True Report and Narrative of Life, Travels and Labors of Rev. Daniel H. Peterson, A Colored Clergyman,* 1854; *From Slave Cabin to Pulpit* by Rev. Peter Randolph, 1893.

A typical narrative which relates the difficulties of the fugitive preacher and at the same time portrays his character as a leader of his people is the "biography" of Moses Roper, a missionary to the West Indies. The *Narrative* was duly attested by William Lloyd Garrison and other abolitionists who knew Roper and verified the facts. Roper's master was forced to sell him because of the jealousy of the mistress since Moses was the master's son and a favorite on the plantation. Suffering painfully from wounds inflicted as punishment[14] after his several attempts to escape, Roper experienced most of the discomforts of slavery. Making his escape to Savannah, thence to New York and Boston, he finally sailed for Liverpool in 1835. Although rebellious against his bonds, he was nevertheless devout and prepared himself for missionary work in the West Indies. Compelling and sincere, the *Narrative of Moses Roper* presents the slave preacher not merely as the victim of the slave system but as a powerfully courageous and intelligent fugitive whose religious character recommends him to the admiration as well as the sympathy of the reader.

Somewhat different from the conventional harrowing adventures of the escaping slave is the biography of Josiah Henson, often accepted as the prototype of Mrs. Stowe's Uncle Tom. This narrative stresses the ministry of the escaped slave and reveals the elements in the formation of a character that illustrated the most common type of leadership in the early Negro church. *The Life of Josiah Henson* relates the incidents of Henson's boyhood in Maryland where his mother, having gained a slight knowledge of the Bible, taught him the Lord's prayer and inspired him to repeat and memorize certain parts of the scriptures. After he moved to Kentucky, he became prominent among the slaves as a preacher. He cultivated the art of public speaking by attending the services and camp meetings of the whites as well as of his own people. He realized that for his purpose, logical knowledge was not indispensable. "If it had been, it is manifest enough that preaching never could have been my vocation; but I am persuaded that, speaking from the fullness of a heart

[14] Roper records his numerous attempts to escape—each time suffering the most horrible punishments; forty pound iron bars, iron collars, solitary confinement in a vermin-filled dungeon. He includes a picture which shows the author stripped and suspended from a high rail to which his hands were tied.

deeply impressed with its own sinfulness and imperfection, and with the mercy of God in Christ Jesus, my humble ministrations have not been entirely useless to those who have had less opportunity than myself to reflect upon these all important subjects."[15] By such exertions as those suggested in this statement, "Father" Henson became a member of the Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1828. During the years from the time when he first heard a sermon to the time when he became a minister, Henson had also risen in the confidence of his master. In Kentucky he had been made Superintendent of the plantation, and accordingly had the advantage of religious privileges through wide opportunities for contacts with both white and colored ministers.

According to Henson's account, in the summer of 1828 a Methodist preacher of some reputation came to the neighborhood to visit and became acquainted with the slave preacher. This minister encouraged Henson in his ambitions and persuaded his Kentucky master to let him return to Maryland to purchase freedom from the former master. With a letter permitting him to travel, and with recommendations to pulpits in Cincinnati and other places, the slave preached all the way through Ohio to Maryland, receiving liberal offerings, especially from the Annual Methodist Conference in Chillicothe.

Although Henson's escape from slavery was astonishingly easy as compared with the lurid and hairbreadth flights of other preachers, he was always cognizant of the misfortunes of slaves and constantly aware of his own limitations. After his arrival in Canada his influence spread and his reputation for piety and Christianity grew as the legend of Mrs. Stowe's interest in him was heightened by her novel's popularity. Apologetically accounting for his success, Henson wrote:

> It may, nay, I am aware it must, seem strange to many that a man so ignorant as myself, unable to read, and having heard so little as I had of religion, natural, or revealed, should be able to preach acceptably to persons who had enjoyed greater advantages than myself. I can explain it only by reference to our Saviour's comparison of the kingdom of heaven to a plant which may spring from a seed no bigger than a mustard seed and may yet reach such a size that the birds of the air may take shelter therein. Religion is not so much knowledge as wisdom—and observation upon what passes within a man's heart, will give him a larger growth in grace than is imagined by the devoted adherents of creeds or the confident followers of Christ who call him Lord, Lord, but do not the things which he says.[16]

While the exaggeration and propagandist appeal of the slave narratives raised the fugitives to almost heroic proportions, the more sober and realistic account like that of Father Henson set in clear perspective the essential values of the preacher who overcame the handicaps of slavery to rise to a position of eminence among people of other races as well as his own. Persistence and determination in surmounting the obstacles imposed by the ignorance which slavery induced were not the least of the qualities with which the preacher like Henson was endowed. In the life immediately fol-

[15] *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave Now an Inhabitant of Canada.* Boston: Phelps, 1849. p. 26.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

lowing Emancipation, this type of self educated minister enjoyed the distinction of unifying and organizing the masses of freedmen and leading them into some semblance of church affiliation and community relationships. Leaders of this type were acceptable to missionary minded and benevolent white organizations that desired to assist the freedmen in the establishment of channels for social uplift and religious intercourse.

From the days of men like George Liele and Andrew Bryan, early pioneer preachers who introduced the unlettered slave to the mysteries of religious teaching, to the time of those preachers who organized their recently freed congregations with some semblance of denominational affiliation, the story of the Negro preacher in America has been the history of an expanding leadership. Throughout the turbulent days of the anti-slavery struggle the local, less-renowned, plantation preacher was the true shepherd of his flock. His unique position as key figure in the Negro community was emphasized by the fact that he was able to establish a church or unify a group through the powerful impact of his personality. That these preachers were among the first of the slaves to be educated and were again precursors in establishing the small Negro school, is only another fact that illustrates their alertness and progressiveness. Moreover the roll of those who were in the foremost ranks of Negro journalism by establishing Negro magazines and papers includes a large number of preachers. In this lengthy list were many enterprising Negro ministers like Rev. G. W. Gayles, born a slave, and called to the ministry in 1867, founder of a Baptist paper; or Rev. J. Alexander Holmes who edited *The Central Methodist*.[17]

It is thus apparent that the leadership abilities of the Negro preacher found expression in his contribution to the many phases of the life about him—in activities often more closely linked to other professions than to his own. Hence the pages of history reveal the Negro preacher taking the lead in the schoolroom, in the news sheet, as well as in the church. In performing these self-appointed tasks, he exhibited again and again his powers of inspiration, his ability to interest others in his cause, his tact, his industry. Many early preachers were so compelling in their oratory and so intriguing in personality that wealthy white men gave them money for purchasing land upon which to establish churches, or to purchase their own freedom, as in the case of Josiah Bishop, Henry Francis and "Uncle Jack." The old type preacher could "sell" himself.

Not the least of his leadership qualities was the tact and diplomacy which he early learned in his dealings with rebellious slaves and arrogant masters. A trait necessary for survival in many instances, the tactfulness of the person who had to handle many unusual situations involving heavy passions and serious consequences led George Liele and many other pioneer preachers to use great discretion in such important matters as church attendance, or subject of discourse.

Rarely was the early preacher

[17] I. Garland Penn, *The Afro-American Press and its Editors*. Springfield, Massachusetts: Willey and Co., 1891. pp. 143-151.

guilty of the proverbial failing of slaves—idleness. In fact, on the plantation most of the preachers held two jobs—one as a house servant or field worker, and the other as minister of the gospel, performing marriages, preaching funerals and regular sermons. In the period after the Civil War it was a common thing to see the preacher as the community school master. The life story of many a slave preacher is the account of industry so noteworthy and commendable that his master and others, highly impressed, gave him opportunity to earn his freedom. This discipline meted out by the hard taskmaster, adversity, served only to educate the inexperienced and qualify the unprepared. With mettle sharpened by the problems thus met and solved, the religious leader became more and more significant in shaping the course which his fellows were to steer.

As the link between the practical world of toil intensified by the harsh bonds of slavery and the imaginary world of the supernatural, the Negro preacher led his people out of the superstition and ignorance of the alien slave toward the intelligent assurance of the freed man in a free land. Not only was he the interpreter of the unknown or the inexplicable in the scriptures but also, in many respects, he combined the ecstasy and fervor of the tribal regard for the African priest with the religious enthusiasm of rising denominationalism in such a way that for the slaves he became the symbol and embodiment of religious faith. No other person was capable of commanding and maintaining this wide and varied influence among a people so divergent and rebellious as the slaves. It is through his leadership that the Negro congregations were better prepared to face the multifarious difficulties of Reconstruction and later days.