Old-School
Season 1, Episode 2.1
Sidebar: 'An Evening Thought'

Chi: Welcome to Old-School! A podcast about African American studies and the classics. Our mini-episode today is a sidebar to "Bibleistic," our full-length episode on the life and poetry of Jupiter Hammon. I'm your host, Chiyuma Elliott.

Chad: And I'm your other host, Chad Hegelmeyer. In this sidebar, we take a look at Jupiter Hammon's first published poem, "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ, with Penetential Cries."

Chi: Ah yes, his Christmas poem!

Chad: I know! For a poem published on Christmas day 1760, it could not be less Christmasy. At least by our standards.

Chi: Because this is a sidebar episode, we're not going to read the poem for you. So maybe give it a read before you listen to the podcast. You can find a link to the poem in our show notes.

Chi: We learned so much from the folks at Preservation Long Island about Jupiter Hammon's life— but we didn't get to talk very much about his poetry. So, to make up for that, Chad is going to tell us about how this Christmas poem sent him down a surprising intertextual rabbit hole. So, Chad, what happened? What did you come away with when you read this poem?

Chad: It may not be a festive poem, necessarily, but it *is* deeply religious. And I really wanted to wrestle with that aspect of it. Cedric May, in his new, edited collection of Jupiter Hammon's work writes that this poem, "*seems* to be purely religious in content; but even here it is possible to find specific, faint echoes of a slave's complaint and an appeal for mercy in the temporal world of slavery." I think that's exactly right, but I wanted to see how those two things—the religious content and the "faint echoes" of Jupiter's life and circumstances—come together in the poem, rather than just trying to read past the religious stuff to get to the autobiographical and the political.

I think the Bible and Christian theology offer Hammon the possibility of change. Christianity is all about these ideas of repentance and conversion–words that are translations of Greek terms from the New Testament that literally mean to "change one's mind" or re-orient one's life. But does this change include, for Hammon, the possibility of

changing his enslavement? In this poem, it's not smart to exclude the political and the autobiographical…but it takes a while to get to those things. They're not the point of departure.

Chi: So where did you start?

Chad: Well, right away—in the title and first quatrain—we get two really important pieces of information about this poem and what it's trying to do. First, it's a poem that starts with a thought: that "Salvation comes by Jesus Christ alone." And then it proceeds to deeply explore this thought: what does it mean? What are its implications? The poem almost becomes, in a way, about the motions of thought itself; the quatrains repeat and recontextualize, almost like a mind turning over an idea again and again. It feels really–it feels really *active* that way.

Chi: By quatrain you mean the groups of four lines that this poem is divided into. I count twenty-two of them.

Chad: Yeah, exactly. They have a formal structure: the second and fourth lines of each quatrain always rhyme, and often the first and third lines rhyme too.

Chi: But you're saying that they also have this thematic coherence: each quatrain is a different way of considering the initial thought.

Chad: I think so. Some of them are more recognizable as expressions of the initial thought than others, like the sixth quatrain. But others are more like prayers or direct addresses to the poem's audience, such as the second or eighteenth quatrains. So I think the poem would suggest that these moments of prayer or address are an essential part of the thinking that the poem is engaged in.

Chi: Chad, you said we get *two* important pieces of information from the beginning of the poem. The first is that it expresses the poem's thesis. What's the other?

Chad: The other is that this poem makes dense, complex, almost obsessive reference to Scripture. It's *constantly* drawing on the Bible in both explicit and implicit ways. And it does this to consider the initial thought about salvation. In fact, the poem tells us that God's redemption comes "now to every one,/ that love his holy Word." So salvation is sort of inextricable from this deep connection to the Bible, a literal love for it.

Chi: Yes! "An Evening Thought" seems like a poem that's so in dialogue with the Bible—almost like I'm supposed to have the Bible open next to me as I read.

Chad: Totally. A large part of close reading this poem for me was wrestling with its intertextuality. It's talking to another work. Since I knew that this poem begins with and explores a single thought, the question was: where in the Bible would Hammon have gone for this idea that salvation comes from Christ alone?

Chi: It almost sounds like a Choose Your Own Adventure novel. Jupiter Hammon tells you what page of the Bible to turn to, but then whatever happens after that is up to you...

Chad: It did feel like that sometimes! And, actually, it felt even more open-ended than that because there isn't actually a little note at the end of the quatrain saying, you know, "If you would like to think about our salvation not being in vain, turn to Jeremiah 3:23," [Chi laughs] like there is in his tribute poem to Phillis Wheatley. Instead, there are these ideas or bits of language that seem to evoke the Bible, and you have to go hunt them down yourself.

Chi: So where *does* Hammon get that idea from?

Chad: I mean, there are probably lots of different passages from the Bible that could be good candidates, but I landed on a passage from chapter four of a book in the New Testament called the Acts of the Apostles that expresses the same theological concept in slightly different language. I'm not sure which translation of the Bible Jupiter Hammon would have read–possibly the Geneva Bible or the King James Version. But I'm going to read from the King James, just to make it a little easier for all of us. So here's what the apostle Peter says in Acts 4:12: "Neither is there salvation in any other [than Jesus Christ]: for there is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."

Chi: Right, that does sound like the same theological idea that Hammon is thinking about.

Chad: But it's not just the similarity of the ideas being expressed here that sent me down the intertextual rabbit hole. It's the context of this verse. In fact, it's a gate.

Chi: A gate? [Chi laughs]

Chad: Yeah, my rabbit hole was a particular gate in the Jewish temple.

Chi: This is kind of ringing a bell, but why don't you go ahead and tell the story.

Chad: So, I should say that this takes place after the events in the gospels. Jesus has already died and resurrected and ascended into heaven. He's no longer around in the story. But in Acts chapter 3, Peter and John—two of Jesus' disciples—are going to the temple to pray. And before they get inside they meet a man who can't walk. We're told that every day, this man's friends carry him to the gate of the temple to beg for money. And we're also told—kind of randomly—that he is brought to a *specific* gate. Here's verse 2, again in the King James: "And a certain man lame from his mother's womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms of them that entered into the temple."

Chi: So the gate isn't just described as beautiful—Beautiful is literally its name.

Chad: Exactly. So, this man who can't walk, sees Peter and John and asks them for alms. But Peter says, "Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk." He takes the man by the right hand, lifts him up, and we're told "immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. And he leaping up stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God."

Chi: Ok, I do know this story. But how do we end up at Peter talking about salvation?

Chad: Well, the healing of this man causes a pretty big commotion. A bunch of people see it and swarm around Peter and John. So Peter takes the opportunity to give this big sermon, which I won't read to you. But the relevant bits are that Jesus has been raised from the dead; Jesus is the messiah; and everyone listening should "repent…and be converted." Okay? This sermon attracts the attention of the Sadducees who have some theological bones to pick with Peter, so they get Peter and John thrown into jail. The next day, they're brought before Annas the High Priest, who asks them, "By what power, or by what name, have ye done this?" And Peter, of course, says in the name of "Jesus Christ of Nazareth"—and that's when he claims that there is no other "name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."

Chi: Ok, so… why is it important that the gate is called Beautiful? It doesn't seem like a crucial detail.

Chad: No—you're totally right. [laughing] I mean, it doesn't seem like an important detail at all—maybe even more like an arbitrary one. But I guess that's why it jumped out at me. Why am I being told the specific gate they were at? There's so little of that kind of detail here otherwise. And actually, the chapter mentions the name of this gate

twice. There's another verse I didn't read to you where it reiterates that this happened at "the Beautiful gate." So the detail felt like a question: Why am I being given this information? And that's where I often begin when I close read. I think a lot of literature plays with the ambiguity of details and bits of information. Is this relevant or not? Is it meaningful or not? Is this just description meant to bring the story to life? Or is it a fact meant to convince me that the story is historical? Or is it crucial to the larger meaning of the story?

Chi: So where did you go after that?

Chad: Well, I was mindful that I was reading a work in translation. So I looked at the Greek word for Beautiful here, which is ὡραῖος–I think I'm pronouncing that correctly**?** Then I found it in a New Testament Greek lexicon to better understand what it meant. And that's where it got exciting because here are some of the senses of ὡραῖος: belonging to the right hour or season, timely, ripe for a thing, in the prime of life, youthful, beautiful, graceful. This word describes something that is beautiful by extension of its happening at the right time.

Chi: Ok, now I think I can see how it's important to the story. Because it's about a chance encounter—about this guy being in the right place at the right time to meet Peter and to miraculously be healed.

Chad: Exactly! He's hanging out in this gate, the very name of which suggests the beauty or timeliness of his seemingly chance encounter with Peter and John.

Chi: But it also makes me think of all the time that he spent there when he *wasn't* healed. We're told that he was brought there *daily*, right? There were so many other untimely moments at the Timely gate.

Chad: That's a good point. And it's not even like he's waiting there to be healed. He's just trying to collect enough money to live. The timeliness is totally unanticipated. It comes by surprise. He's just asking for enough money to survive on but his life is totally changed instead.

Chi: Ok, I feel like I've just touched the bottom of your rabbit hole, Chad. But at what point does this lead you back into Jupiter Hammon's poem? Or does it? Like, is that even the point? Does Hammon even care about that, or would he prefer it if we just stick around and read the Bible?

Chad: [laughing] That's another good point, because Jupiter is clearly, like, a Bible superfan. I didn't know this detail from Acts before I close read his poem. And he would probably be pretty stoked about tricking me into reading the Bible more closely! [Chi laughs] But I think he's up to more than that in this poem. Because, actually, when I read the lexicon entry for ὡραῖος, my mind *immediately* went back to "An Evening Thought." I even found myself thinking, like, wait, did Jupiter Hammon know Greek? And, specifically, did he already know what I had just learned from the Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek/English Lexicon?

Chi: That is a *wild* thought! Because fluency in Koine Greek would be a huge deal for an enslaved man in the 18th century. I mean, Philis Wheatley is famous for reading Latin, and maybe also Greek. But do we know if Jupiter Hammon also read Greek?

Chad: As far as I know, there's no evidence that he did. But I had this thought anyway because questions of time and the timeliness of salvation come up over and over again in Hammon's poem, and they stay really charged for him throughout his life.

Chi: Right—the poem's title locates us in a particular moment. It's this one evening's thought.

Chad: Yeah, and the temporality of the present, the now, really seems to occupy the speaker over the course of the poem. The word "now" is repeated eight times: redemption comes "now" to everyone in line three. Salvation comes "now" from the Lord in line nine. And line 53 tells us: "Now is the Day, excepted Time;/ The Day of Salvation."

Chi: Interesting…There's something strange about his repeated use of the word now: it's both emphatic, and it's ambiguous. *When* is it? When is the right time for the kind of salvation he's talking about? It's now, right? But when is now? And, actually, now that you've mentioned it, there's something particularly weird going on in line 53. It says "now is the Day, *excepted* time"—e-x-c-e-p-t-e-d. What does it mean for a time to be excepted?

Chad: Ok, I hoped you'd notice this because it's something I got really hung up on, too! And it brings us to the second passage of scripture that I think is crucial in this close reading of the poem: 2 Corinthians 6:2. Here, the apostle Paul quotes the Hebrew Bible in his letter to the church in Corinth: "We then…beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. (For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succored thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold now is the day of salvation.)"

Chi: So, unlike the passage in Acts of the Apostles, this is an explicit reference in the poem to this particular scripture. I mean, it's nearly word for word.

Chad: Yes. This is one of the clearest biblical allusions in the poem. But, as you pointed out, Jupiter Hammon does something strange with the language. Because that phrase he borrows from Paul "accepted Time" is *accepted*–a-c-c-e-p-t-e-d–in the Bible. Other translations will say it's the "acceptable time" or the "favorable time." In other words, it's the *right* time. The timely time.

Chi: But Jupiter changes it to "excepted." So not the favorable time but something like the excluded time?

Chad: Yeah, I'm honestly not sure how we should read this. It's really ambiguous.

Chi: I think we have to keep in mind that spelling was not as regularized in the eighteenth century as it is now. So "accepted" and "excepted" sound very similar, so maybe this is just a spelling variation? But it's so tempting to read it as a deliberate change because of the way it shifts the meaning!

Chad: I totally agree. One thought I had is that "excepted Time" could be something like "exceptional time." That would still be interpreting it as meaning something like the right time–but it would emphasize the extraordinariness of the time over its rightness or timeliness. To read it the other way, as something like "excluded time," is weirder but also maybe more interesting? Excluded from what exactly?

Chi: I think sometimes part of close reading a poem like this is just learning to sit with those ambiguities. Both "what does this word choice mean?" and "when does salvation come? and what does it mean?"

Chad: I think this is what Cedric May is pointing to when he says that this very religious poem contains "faint echoes of a slave's complaint and an appeal for mercy in the temporal world of slavery."

Chi: Yeah. So for Christians like Jupiter Hammon, the "Day of Salvation" could mean both something that takes place in an individual's life at the present moment *and* something apocalyptic–something that won't be completely fulfilled until the end of time.

Chad: Right, there's this temporal ambiguity: is Hammon only talking about spiritual destiny? Or is he also talking about salvation from the conditions of slavery in the

present? The stakes–to put them really bluntly–are: does salvation look like being released from bondage here on earth? Or does it look like enduring slavery for one's entire life and then going to heaven? Would heaven be able to redeem a life of slavery?

Chi: So this poem is really trying to get us to think about what salvation means–spiritually, politically, and personally.

Chad: Yeah, because Hammon had to think about it! When he was younger, as he was when he wrote this poem, salvation still seemed like it might be in the here and now–that it might include salvation from enslavement for himself and other African Americans. But as he aged, his understanding of how that might play out in his own life changed. By the time he's in his seventies and writing "An Address to the Negroes of the State of New York," he is still absolutely in favor of emancipation, especially for young people. But he seems to think that the timing may not be right for him. He worries that to be emancipated in his old age would mean poverty and difficulty for the last stage of his life.

Chi: So it's not just that salvation offers Hammon a way to think about how the conditions of his life and enslavement might change. It's also a question about the *timeliness* of that change. When is the accepted time? And how should he live in the meantime?

Chad: Totally. There's another scripture where Paul writes to the Philippians and tells them to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." So salvation is also this thing that requires working and figuring out. As you said, it's a question about how we should be living. And that's what I think this poem is about: it's Hammon working out his salvation in thought and in poetry, figuring out what salvation means to him now and what it might mean to him in twenty years.

Chi: So where does that leave us? What are you thinking at the end of this?

Chad: I guess I'm doing the thing that I usually do at the end of close reading a good poem, which is sitting with my appreciation for the poem itself, enjoying all of the stuff I now see in it that I couldn't see before.

Chi: So the conclusion is that Hammon is a ninja? A poetry ninja? [Chad laughs] And we should appreciate that fact?

Chad: Exactly.

[“Who Dat” by Amber Spill]

Chi: Thanks for joining us for this sidebar episode of Old-School!

Chi: Old-School is brought to you by the Berkeley Institute and the Department of African American Studies at UC Berkeley. The podcast is funded by gifts from Boyd and Jill Smith and the Foundation for Excellence in Higher Education. Thanks to Amber Spill for our theme music.

Chad: Check out our show notes if you want some reading recommendations and sources for this episode. You can find them at the African American Intellectual Traditions website: aaiti.berkeley.edu.

Chi: See you later back at the podcast. It’s Black + Classics, folks! Thanks for listening to Old-School. Bye for now.