

2017

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### Recommended Citation

Hasan, Ellie (2017) ““Gospel of Grace”: Understanding “Amazing Grace” with Musical and Theological Analysis,” *Denison Journal of Religion*: Vol. 16 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol16/iss1/5>

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# “Gospel of Grace”: Understanding “Amazing Grace” with Musical and Theological Analysis

*Ellie Hasan*

On June 26, 2015, President Barack Obama offered a eulogy in memorial of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church shooting in South Carolina that occurred a week earlier, of which Senator Clementa Pickney was one of nine victims. In the last few minutes of his address, he spoke:

History can't be a sword to justify injustice, or a shield against progress, but must be a manual for how to avoid making the mistakes of the past. How to break the cycle. A roadway toward a better world. He knew that the path of grace involves an open mind – but more importantly, an open heart. [...] If we can find that grace, anything is possible. If we can tap that grace, everything can change. Amazing Grace. Amazing Grace.<sup>1</sup>

With those words, he began to sing the hymn. The audience, familiar with that eminent chorus, followed: a precise example of “Amazing Grace” as a cultural force, which manages to touch almost every heart despite their religion or persuasion.

Born and raised in an American community, most know “Amazing Grace” by a young age. I, like many others, never learned for church or school, but to sing with family at cookouts and road trips. As religionist Kevin Lewis relates, the hymn “functions in the lives of Americans in a way perhaps similar to the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag,” the national anthem, or our country's geographical icons.<sup>2</sup> This poetry, originally written in a European context, has been adopted and claimed by American culture. The piece has a complicated history, and an even more convoluted social identity. As some of the best known liturgical and folk music, the song has been performed over and over by pop stars and gospel singers alike. The melody itself is used as an instructional exercise, and so broadly familiar that it is taught for intervallic recognition in music theory textbooks. The truth is, it is, and has always been, impossible to live in America without knowing

1 Office of the Press Secretary. “Remarks by the President in Eulogy for the Honorable Reverend Clementa Pickney.” *The White House*, 26 June, 2015. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/26/remarks-president-eulogy-honorable-reverend-clementa-pickney>.

2 Kevin Lewis, “America's Heirloom Comfort Song, Amazing Grace,” *Implicit Religion*, (Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishing, 2013), 279.

the words and sound of this famous anthem: a cultural symbol in every role of American life.

But it is out of this extreme prominence that the hymn becomes so difficult to analyze. Most people understand "Amazing Grace" as a gospel hymn, but also participate in its secularization. The piece, as we can see from its most recent national broadcast, is most often performed at funerals or memorials. But it is also played during national holidays, days of remembrance, and after important events (both celebratory and memorializing). Every civil group in American history has claimed "Amazing Grace", and it stands in solidarity with every side of our domestic conflicts. In other words, black families sang "Amazing Grace" to remember the oppression of their ancestors (and themselves), while Southern conservatives recited "Amazing Grace" to their fallen soldiers and cause. The Civil Rights Movement chanted the verse during the march on Washington, as uninvolved patriots proclaimed it in church. Of course, this tension does not only exist in the racial disunity of our country, but I find that conflict most relevant to the hymn's presence in the American gospel tradition.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound  
that saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now I'm found,  
was blind, but now I see.*

As the legend goes, there was a slave driver who worked the ships all his life, making journey after journey on the waters between Africa and the New World. One day, a few years before his death, he finally understood the terror of the slave trade. He became an abolitionist, declaring his soul saved by the grace of God. He wrote "Amazing Grace" as a testament to the forgiveness and enlightenment of God, and his true glory.

In reality, this story is one of folklore. "Amazing Grace" was written by an Atheistic slave trader named John Newton, who found his faith after surviving a harrowing storm. He wrote the hymn in reference to that experience.<sup>3</sup> But, despite its origin, "Amazing Grace" is undoubtedly one of the most performed and studied gospel songs of today. In fact, Newton wrote several pieces that are used in modern hymnals.<sup>4</sup> But despite their musicality, these are white hymns; and I would not consider them authentic gospel music. The gospel tradition is anchored in the black, American experience. It is a tradition of resistance and liberation

<sup>3</sup> Landon Jones, "The Incredible True Story Behind 'Amazing Grace,'" *Time Magazine*, June 28, 2015, May 19, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

from the white supremacy of the west: a musical culture that began in the Atlantic slave trade, and the New World south.

Most people would probably assume the song's creation to have evolved from the slave experience, as is true of most gospel music. But few are aware of the piece's specific history – which becomes extraordinary when paralleled to the use of the song today. "Amazing Grace" was written and composed by Anglican Priest, John Newton, in 1764.<sup>5</sup> Newton, born in 1725, had undertaken an intense journey of faith before this time. Newton joined the Atlantic Slave Trade as a young man, and he was often considered one of the most profane and cruel men aboard. While working as a captain in the 1740's, he experienced a moment of 'salvation' when he was spared during an extreme storm at sea. He considered that moment to be his conversion, and afterwards pledged to resist profane ways of life.<sup>6</sup> But that did not stop his career as a seamen slave driver. In 1751, Newton worked a ship called the African, which was headed to gather slaves.<sup>7</sup> Historian William Phipps ensures that understanding the development of Newton's faith is not as simple as avoiding rum. In other words, Newton did not become a pious man overnight. After boarding the African, Newton continued to drive his slaves like livestock, treating them with the terror of the environment. He wrote in his ship journals, telling of limiting the standing space of the slaves to fit more on the ship, trading guns for men, and getting rid of sick slaves.<sup>8</sup>

Phipps is good to account John Newton for the man he was. He iterates the crimes against blacks that Newton recorded, and notes the actions he was most likely responsible for alongside his fellow ship-mates (such as raping the women, and killing impractical cargo like infants, elderly, and the ill).<sup>9</sup> All the while, as a 'man of God,' he conducted Anglican services aboard for the White sailors.<sup>10</sup> But in 1754, medical necessity required Newton to a land job in Liverpool.<sup>11</sup> It was in this position that Newton began a long friendship with John Wesley, George Whitefield, William Wiberforce, and William Pitt: all of which questions the morality of slavery.<sup>12</sup> It was in the communications with these individuals that Newton began to re-think his own career as a slave driver, and eventually find his way into an abolitionist political presence.

5 William Phipps, "Amazing Grace' in the Hymnwriter's Life," *Anglican Theological Review* (1990), [6 \*Ibid.\*](http://0-web.a.ebscohost.com.dewey2.library.denison.edu/ehost/detail/detail?sid=50e03ce3-e122-4641-8f02-5f561939f8e4%40sessionmgr4009&vid=7&hid=4212&bdata=jnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=ATLA0000829500&db=reh, Ebsco Host, May 23, 2016.</a></p>
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7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

Newton was ordained as a minister in 1764, and began preaching in Olney; there he began composing hymns for his congregation, which included "Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken," "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds," and "Amazing Grace."<sup>13</sup> He spent fifteen years in Olney, during which he made his social transition, and preached against slavery and the social injustice surrounding race, both in England and in the New World.<sup>14</sup> Wiberforce and Pitt were greatly influenced by Newton's words and friendship; they were eventually elected to Parliament and lead the movement against slavery.<sup>15</sup>

Pitt became prime minister, and they believed they could begin a push against slavery in the government.<sup>16</sup> They asked Newton to prepare a pamphlet of his experience in the slave trade, which he entitled, "Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade."<sup>17</sup> In this text, he gave his own telling of slaver, in which, as Phipps recounts, Newton reports:

A mate of a ship, in a long-boat, purchased a young woman, with a fine child, of about a year old, in her arms. In the night the child cried much, and disturbed his sleep. He rose up in great anger, and swore that if the child did not cease making such a noise, he would presently silence it. The child continued to cry. At length he rose up a second time, tore the child from the mother, and threw it into the sea.<sup>18</sup>

The story haunted its audience, and, although the push against slavery failed in 1789, the publication of Newton's experience continued to pass through the political scene.<sup>19</sup> And he went on to further the abolitionist cause in England. In 1791, he directed an organization that helped freed slaves, and in 1794 he publicly supported a movement in the government to refuse slave-produced sugar of the west.<sup>20</sup>

John Newton died in 1805. But his narrative lives in the music he composed – which might actually be the most effective abolitionist action he made in his life. Most people understand the themes of forgiveness and salvation in "Amazing Grace," but few people know the entire picture of its creation. Newton was not a man of sudden change, and he terrorized blacks under the entitlement of slavery "as the appointment Providence has marked out for me."<sup>21</sup> But Newton grew to a

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

place of revelation, and saw the inhumanity and barbarity of human slavery. He used his guilt and enlightenment to show others the same. "Amazing Grace" certainly began as a testament to the mercy of God in the face of worldly peril. But it became the insight of our own trespasses, and thanks to the reprieve of God. That identity of "Amazing Grace" is the character that exists in the piece today, and, in fact, the music surrounding it.

"Amazing Grace," intended as an Anglican hymn and written well before Newton's conversion to abolitionism, has become an American identity and cultural mechanism. The piece is unique in its ability to manifest spirituality in entirely secular environments. The song is taught systematically. But "Amazing Grace" finds its greatest presence in the gospel music tradition. Adverse to almost all other gospel icons, the piece did not originate out of the black spiritual tradition. In fact, slave music did not appear to include "Amazing Grace" at all – and its American presence formed much later in the progression of gospel music. Nevertheless, the piece has been claimed by the music. And its chosen authority shows, perhaps most effectively, the liberating capacity of American gospel.

The original lyrics to the hymn, written by Newton, have presided in the song. Most people know at least the first few verses. Before its official publication, it appeared in several collections of folk and hymns.<sup>22</sup>

*Amazing Grace! (how sweet the sound)  
Thank sav'd a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.*

*Tw'as Grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears reliev'd;  
How precious did that grace appear,  
The hour I first believ'd.*

*Thro' many dangers, toils and snares,  
I have already come;  
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.*

*The Lord has promis'd good to me,  
His word my hope securse;*

22 Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), 113.

*He will my shield and portion be,  
As long as life endures.*

*Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,  
And mortal life shall cease;  
I shall possess, within the veil,  
A life of joy and peace.*

*The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,  
The sun forbear to shine;  
But God, who call'd me here below,  
Will be forever mine.<sup>23</sup>*

Since its conception, the hymn's lyrics have been subject to much change and alteration. In his book research of the piece, *Amazing Grace*, Turner articulates the way "Amazing Grace" mobilized through society. Just like the evolution of gospel music in general, "Amazing Grace" was passed through the years, changing with every performance. However, even as a white-originated piece, the song became an identity of black gospel.

We have emphasized the significance of the black experience in understanding American gospel music. Thus, it appears contrary and ironic that one of the most well known gospel hymns is historically separated from the black experience. But Turner notes that songs such as Newton's, or hymn writers like Isaac Watts, were actually adapted into the slave community because of their relevance.<sup>24</sup> Blacks would hear these hymns in required church services, and take them with them. Despite the author, they called these pieces "Dr. Watts hymns."<sup>25</sup> These hymns usually involved a lot of Old-Testament-esque language. The emphasis typically centered on suffering and struggle, which lead to an ultimate salvation. As Turner writes:

The hope expressed by these words made life bearable. [...] From the lyrics, the slaves gained assurance that it was possible to be physically enslaved and yet spiritually free. It was possible to be materially impoverished and yet have an overflowing account of righteousness in heaven.<sup>26</sup>

23 Ibid, i.

24 Ibid., 148.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

Regardless of the origin, the black community claimed songs, such as "Amazing Grace," and purposed them in their own identity: not by relenting to the Anglican, pew-poised, culture though. As I mentioned before, the most important aspect of black gospel music is its intention to liberate. Claiming "Amazing Grace" involved a re-imagination – a vision that has, in fact, resonated more prominently in American tradition. The concept is reminiscent of Jurgen Moltmann's "recognition;" possessing "Amazing Grace" was a way of transforming a status quo standard by applying the "arriving future," freedom. When white music changed, it changed through publication and notation – it was this literacy that gave it authority.<sup>27</sup> But, as Turner observes, the only aspect of black spirituals that declared authority was the sheer ability to communicate: "In the black community, where books were rare, fidelity was to emotional truth."<sup>28</sup>

All of the musical developments significant to the growth of black gospel certainly applied to this hymn (slave spirituals, minstrel, blues, etc.). The black "Amazing Grace" was characterized with the musical inflections trademarked in their music: shouts, call and response, moans, scats, and slides.<sup>29</sup> Even in the beginning of the introduction of "Amazing Grace" into American hymnal literature, black religious folk were transforming the piece. For example, Turner cites an ex-slave, who tells of camp meetings he attended just before the emancipation (1865):

Preachers in that day [...] would word out the song two lines at a time, the congregation committing this to memory would sing these two lines, then two more lines were worded out and so on until that song was ended. Then the preacher would get up and call on someone to pray. [...] (We) had very little preaching. Mostly praying and singing.<sup>30</sup>

Those styles of group, unorganized singing were crucial to the birth of following musical movements. Amazing Grace found its place among black gospel repertoire, alongside other spirituals such as "Steal Away to Heaven" and "Swing Low Sweet Chariot."<sup>31</sup>

American gospel boomed in the 1940's, and most of the well-known artists were vocal groups or soul singers such as The Blind Boys of Alabama and Mahalia Jackson. But, clearly, the styles did not begin there. Turner attributes the birth of popular gospel to men who were called "shouting preachers."<sup>32</sup> Using song

27 *Ibid.*, 149.

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*, 150.

30 *Ibid.*, 150-151.

31 *Ibid.*, 151.

32 *Ibid.*, 152.



and dramatic flair, these pastors would preach through these musical styles.<sup>33</sup> In "Amazing Grace," singers would omit verses they found irrelevant, but prolong the melody by "moaning" the melody (or singing neutral syllables to the same musical theme).<sup>34</sup> As Turner writes, "the 'shouting preachers' represented the transition from congregational hymn singing, camp meeting songs, and spirituals to the blues – and jazz – inspired music of gospel."<sup>35</sup>

And as Golden Age Gospel began to form, artists used Amazing Grace as the ultimate gospel testimony. By this time, the hymn was already extremely prevalent in everyday American culture. For that reason, gospel performers of this time focused on "stamping" the piece with something original.<sup>36</sup> For example, quartets used unusual and alluring dissonance in their harmonic vocal parts, Martha Wiltz sang her piece vocally acappella supported by an African drum, and Mahalia Jackson (probably the most popular version of the piece in that time) timed her singing very slow to emphasize the lyrics.<sup>37</sup>

Semantic changes also occurred in the hymn at this time. Several artists made small changes to the lyrics and organization of the song. Almost all gospel singers never sang the last three verses of the piece.<sup>38</sup> Several chose to omit the second verse, and use only the first and the third.<sup>39</sup> Some artists, especially vocal groups, chose to just continuously repeat the first verse.<sup>40</sup> As Turner notes, Roberta Martin actually rearranged and added to the song in 1938.<sup>41</sup> She published a piece called "God's Amazing Grace," which introduced the piece by recalling learning the hymn as a child, to which many people would relate:

*I was young but I recall singing songs was mother's joy.  
As the shadows gathered at the close of day  
And I'd sit upon her knee  
In those days that used to be  
As she sang of God's amazing grace.*

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound...<sup>42</sup>*

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 153.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 155; 157.

38 Ibid., 155.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 154.

42 Ibid.

A vocal group called The Soul Stirrers completely rearranged the lyrics so that the words of the chorus were repeated throughout the song.<sup>43</sup> In 1965, Arthur Crume of the same group added another verse to the piece, which was a stanza from the hymn "I Heard The Voice of Jesus Say:"

*I came to Jesus as I was  
I was weary worn and sad  
I found him in a resting place  
And he has made me glad.*

"Amazing Grace" has remained one of the most important songs in American culture. And despite its authorship, the black community claimed the piece and re-established its meaning: a meaning which, I suspect, has gone much further than the original intention. Similar to what Cone called a "secular sound," golden age gospel reinforced the civil movement. There is a reason that this music became the theme of the black experience in faith and Christianity. Mahalia Jackson once said in an interview: "I believe the blues and jazz and even the rock-and-roll stuff got their beat from the sanctified church [...] We Baptists sang sweet,"<sup>44</sup> "Amazing Grace" has taken on meanings that Newton would never have imagined: it became an anthem of liberation, a pop-gospel sensation, and is now widely used as the go-to funeral song.<sup>45</sup> Turner observes this occurrence with some complexity. "Amazing Grace" became most known for its "unique ability to calm and unite."<sup>46</sup> It is both a criticism of ignorance and denial of God, and an energizing force for those who find God in the freedom they believe is before them. The message of the song, a revelation in God's grace, is the very journey that this piece has traversed. A song that can cross an ocean, empower a whole community, and remain in the core of musical tradition is certainly a powerful force of liberation.

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43 Ibid., 155.

44 Ibid., 158.

45 Ibid., 159.

46 Ibid., 153.

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