



OLAUDAH EQUIANO or GUSTAVUS VASSA The African

OLAUDAH'S STORY

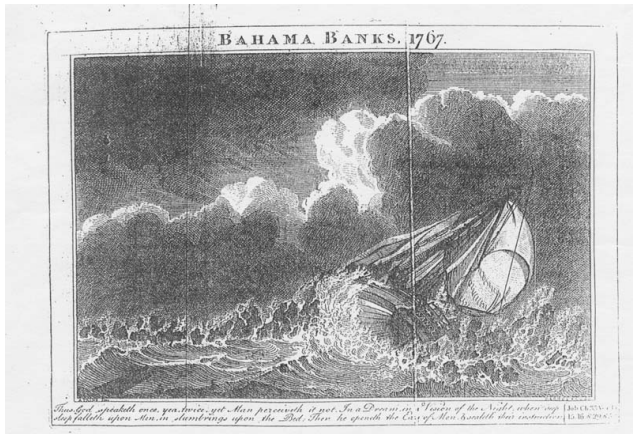
Olaudah published his autobiography in **1789** – when Jane Austen was in her mid teens. With gentle dignity he tells his story from the ugly underside of British society – how the trade that helped finance Jane's genteel world wrecked his life, along with millions of others.

GUSTAVUS THE SLAVE

He tells how he was kidnapped as a boy from an Ibo village, in what later became part of eastern Nigeria, marched to the coast and sold to slave traders who shipped him across the Atlantic in the hold of a slave ship. He never saw any of his family again. He was sold to a Virginian planter who resold him within a month to a British naval officer who named him Gustavus Vassa. For a number of years he mixed periods of wartime naval service around the coasts of Europe with spells ashore in London being educated by two sisters, friends of his master. Just when he began to imagine that his master would

set him free he was suddenly sold to a captain who took him to the West Indies, where conditions (even for ship-board slaves) were harsh and difficult. Here he was sold again and spent several years aboard ships plying between the islands and across to the Eastern States of America. Despite many reverses, he started with 3 pence and bought and sold tumblers and other goods until he first bought a Bible then, over years, put together **£70** to buy his freedom.

Olaudah gives many examples of cruelty, including the story of a well-known FREE 'mulatto' man with a wife & children whom a visiting captain falsely claimed was an escaped slave of his. The man was then transported in slavery to another island without ever seeing his family again. Olaudah comments: "I had thought only slavery dreadful; but the state of a free negro appeared to me equally so... [or] worse, for they live in constant alarm for their liberty"



JOURNEYING and JESUS

Continuing in shipboard service for some time Olaudah is twice shipwrecked (once on the Bahama Banks in 1767) before eventually returning to "Old England", which he now views as a sort of home. He makes further voyages to Turkey and Portugal and serves on an Arctic expedition. After yet more voyages he was much exercised about salvation whilst on a voyage to Cadiz, and recounts a vivid conversion experience. Echoing Acts 8 he says, "*Now the Ethiopian was willing to be saved by Jesus Christ*".

GUSTAVUS, ABOLITIONIST

After a brief spell as the overseer of a slave plantation in Central America, where the behaviour of other overseers disgusted him, Olaudah settles in Britain, marries an English woman (with whom he has two daughters) and writes his autobiography – telling his story as a contribution to the abolitionist cause and promoting it all across the country through several editions. Before its publication he had already made a name for himself with his interventions against slavery in the British press. He was the most

prominent of a whole group of black people writing and speaking as Christians in the abolitionist cause here in Britain at the end of the 18th Century. He surely had a right to speak and a powerful, convicting story to tell!

OLAUDAH & THE BIBLE

In recent years, R. S. Sugirtharajah has drawn attention to the way Olaudah used the Bible in his autobiography & his earlier letters to the press. Equiano shows how customs of his own Ibo people (e.g. circumcision of boys on the 8th day) echo those of the Hebrews in the Bible, subtly presenting Africans as God's People, not savages. He also connects his own story and the plight of his people to the stories of Jacob and Moses. Again, he tells how a Mr Drummond, a dealer in slaves, once told him how he had cut off a slave's legs for running away. Equiano (a slave himself at the time) responded to him that "*the Christian doctrine taught us to do unto others as we would that others should do unto us*". Most importantly, responding to an argument that *Paul's letter to Philemon* shows Biblical support for slavery, he assembles his own argument from the very nature of God and what Christ has done for us to argue for the worth of **every** human being in a way that is "*entirely subversive of the African trade and West India slavery*". His words have far more power because of his personal experience of this evil trade that was condoned by so many in the 'civilised' parts of the world. The life and words of Olaudah Equiano challenge us all. What will we risk to advance Christ's cause or address the evils of our day?

J. M. Campbell

EQUIANO'S OWN VERY READABLE STORY IS PUBLISHED IN "PENGUIN CLASSICS"...
Equiano, Olaudah (1789) "The Interesting Narrative & other writings" (Penguin Classics, 1995)
See also... Campbell, John (2003) "Being Biblical" pp.161-165 (the United Reformed Church)
Fryer, Peter (1984 & reprints) "Staying Power, the history of black people in Britain" (Pluto Pr.)
Sugirtharajah, R. S. (2001) "The Bible and the Third World" pp.75-87 (Cambridge Univ. Pr.)