The Speech of Moses Bon Sàam

ANONYMOUS

(fl. 1735)

An early abolitionist tract, "The Speech of Moses Bon Sàam" appeared first in Aaron Hill's periodical the Prompter on 10 January 1735. Versions of this text appeared almost immediately afterward in the January issues of both the Gentleman's Magazine and the London Magazine. A vitriolic reply entitled "The Speech of Caribíes" appeared in the Gentleman's Magazine in the following issue in February 1735. The Speech of Campo-bell, published a year after the appearance of Bon Sàam, purports to be a reply spoken by a freed African slave, but it is in fact the work of a white pro-slavery advocate named Robert Robertson. Robertson appended the London Magazine's version of the "Speech of Moses Bon Sàam" to the 1736 printed edition of Campo-bell, which is the copy text for the "Speech" included here.

Virtually no clue exists as to the authorship or identity of Moses Bon Sàam. Readers are divided over the question of whether this speech is a fabrication by a British abolitionist or a genuine representation of an actual Maroon leader's arguments. In the Prompter (3 January 1735), the editor indicates the upcoming publication of Bon Sàam by saying:

An Eminent Merchant has communicated to me, in a Letter which he lately received from an Island in that Part of the World I have been speaking of [i.e., the West Indies], the Speech of an Old Free Negro, who seems to have put himself in the Front of a Revoluted Body of those People, who have fortified themselves in the Mountains, and made Head against the united Power of their Masters,—I shall publish it, in another Paper, for the Sake of some Warnings that may be drawn from the dangerous and unexpected Use, they are preparing to make, of Arts, and Lessons, which were taught 'em, no Doubt, with a View to the Profit, of their Masters; and without the least Reflection on the Probability of their being, one Day, turn'd, against their Bossons. (2)

The length of this chain of communicators (a speaker, a letter writer in Jamaica, the "Eminent Merchant," and the editor) suggests a fabrication.
Further, Robert Robertson, the author of *Campo-bell*, appears to have believed the speech to be a fabrication. In his letter to the editor of the *Gentleman’s Magazine* (March 1741), he remarks,

> as nothing on the Subject has appeared since from the Author of Moses Bon Sãam’s Speech, tho’ he was told by Talbot Campo-bell to speak again if he had any Reply to make, I think there is Ground to conclude, that he rests satisfied with Campo-bell’s Answers, tho’ at the same Time I think his owning so much to the World could have done him no Dishonour. (145)

On the other hand, Wylie Sypher supports the opposite view that Bon Sãam represents an actual Maroon leader: “the tradition of noble-Negro eloquence surely begins with Moses.”

If Bon Sãam is a fiction, his life story and name may have been suggested by the life of Job Ben Solomon (c. 1702–73), a learned West African who arrived in London in April 1733, having been purchased by General James Oglethorpe (the founder of Georgia and head of a House of Commons committee that investigated prison conditions in England). Ben Solomon translated Arabic manuscripts at the Bodleian Library at Oxford University and for Sir Hans Sloane in London, and was much feted by London society throughout the 1733–34 social season. His freedom was bought by subscription at Christmas 1733, and he sailed home to Africa in June 1734. Douglas Grant argues that Ben Solomon arrived in England at the “turning point in the relations between the black and white races.” Another antecedent may have been Francis Williams, a free black whose education at Cambridge was sponsored by the second duke of Montagu and whose Latin poetry (included in this anthology) is quoted, translated, and derided by Edward Long in his *History of Jamaica* (1774). Williams’s life span is much in doubt, with birth year as early as 1697 and as late as 1712 and death date as early as 1762 and as late as 1774. In any case, enough of the story of Williams’s extraordinary career may have been known to the author of “The Speech of Moses Bon Sãam” to suggest the character.
The Speech of Moses Bon Sāam, a Free Negro, to the revolted Slaves in one of the most considerable Colonies of the West Indies
At the Head of those Revolted Slaves, who have betaken themselves to the Mountains, in one of the most considerable Colonies in the West-Indies.³

Taken from the London Magazine for the Month of January, 1735, p. 13.

Dear Fellows in Arms, and Brothers in Adversity!
HAD your Sufferings been less painful, I might have enjoyed my own Ease, in an Exemption from Danger. But in vain did my Courage once exerted, as you have heard, in Defence of a Master, redeem me from the Name of a Slave! I found no Blessing in Freedom; tormented with a livelier Sense of your Groans, because no longer a Partaker of your Misery.

While I was, formerly, one of your Number, and but a Wretch, among Wretches, I wanted Sentiments to reflect, with Justness, on the Wrongs we are accustomed to suffer. Whether ignorant of the Bliss of others, I discern not my own Misery. Or, that the Part I was condemn’d to bear, in so general a Calamity, had deaden’d in my Heart that Pity, which has been awaken’d by my Change of Fortune. But, I have since been taught your Wretchedness, by sixteen Years of Liberty; not spent in Ease and Luxury, like the Lives of your Oppressors; but in long, laborious Diligence in Pursuit of their Arts, and Capacity, whereby to know, and make known, that only Education, and Accident, nor Difference of Genius, have been the Cause of this provoking Superiority, that bids the Pride of a white Man despise and trample on a black one.

What Preference, in the Name of that mysterious God, whom these Insulters of our Colour pretend to worship; what wild imaginary Superiority of Dignity has their pale sickly Whiteness to boast of, when compar’d with our Majestic Glossiness! If there is Merit in Delicacy, we have Skins as soft as their Velvet. If in Manliness, Consider your Shape, your Strength, and your Movement! Are they not all easier, firmer, and more graceful? Let a white Man expose his feeble Face to the Winds; let him climb Hills against Rains; Let him go burn his uncover’d Temples in the Heat of High-Noon, as we do. Will he bear it too, as we do? No: The Variations of his changeable Countenance will make manifest the Paintness he was born to. He will be sick, and grow pale, and red, by Turns: He will be haggard, rough, and Sun-burnt. Tho’ terrible and haughty to his Slaves, he will lose all Fierceness in his Eye, by the smallest Struggle with those Elements, which we are Proof against the Rage of.
The whole Advantage, then, of these proud Spoilers of the Works of God, who dare make Beasts of human Forms, as noble and more manly than their own, in what consists it, but superior Happiness? They are not wiser by Nature, but more exercis'd in Art, than we are. They are not braver, but more crafty, and assist their Anger by Discipline. They have Rules and Modes in War; which actuate, as by one Soul, the most numerous Bodies of arm'd People. While we, depriv'd of such Improvement, and acting resolutely, but not dependently, divide and lose our Firmness. You saw the Representation of it, but last Week, in an Example, from this neighbouring River. As if the God, that animates your Purpose, had commanded it to overflow, for your Instruction and Warning! Observe, how narrow it looks at present: Yet, because it runs confin'd, within its Banks, hark! How roaringly it rushes down upon the Low-Lands of our Enemy! And with how steady and resistless a Torrent! The other Day, you saw it broader: For it rose among the Woods, and almost floated our Savannah. But, was it the louder, for such Breadth? Was it, then, thus foaming and terrible? Far from it; you can all remember, as I do, that it was then flat, tame, and muddy; and had neither Violence nor Tendency.

As soon as I became able to read, I discover'd, in the holiest of all Books, in the Fountain of white Men's Religion; I discover'd there, with a Mixture of Amazement and prophetic Joy, that the very Man, from whom they had deriv'd the Name they had given me, of Moses, had been the happy Deliverer of a Nation! Of a Nation chosen and belov'd by God! the Deliverer of this chosen Nation, from just such a Slavery as ours! Just so unfair, oppressive, and unnatural; and, in every Act and Circumstance, resembling that, which you and your Forefathers have groan'd under! Innumerable Thousands of his captive Countrymen were as darkly ignorant as you are: All unknowing their own Rights; and for'd, like you, to labour for ungrateful, and merciless Masters: Till this first Moses, this great Giver of my Name, was called out by Heaven; and thro' a Course of miraculous Events, instructed in the Arts and Learning of those insolent Enslavers: That so he might be worthy, in the Fullness of God's Time, to stand out, his Instrument, for the Redemption of a People.

What now will our Task-masters pretend to object against the Lawfulness of our Revolt? If they say our Forefathers were Slaves: So were the Ancestors of those Heroes, whom their Moses, their almost worship'd Moses, deliver'd from Slavery. Will they urge, that they have paid a Price, and, therefore, claim us as their Property? Grant them the Life of a first unhappy Captive, to repay this Claim of his proud Purchaser. But did they also buy his Race? Must the Children of this Wretch's Children be begotten, and transmitted to Slavery,
because that single Wretch himself was unsuccessful in a Battle, and had been put to Sale instead of Slaughter?

Perish the provoking Image of so shameless a Pretension! Let them recollect, how soon the Profits, which they too well knew to make, from any one of our poor Father's Toils, repaid them for his barbarous Purchase. Let them tell us, (if they dare see Truth, in any Light that shews them not their Interest) whether all the Pomp, the Pride, the Wantonness, of that Prosperity we see them live in, is not the Purchase of our Sweat, our Tears, and our Distresses? And shall they derive their very Luxury from Wretches, to whom they grudge the Bread of Nourishment? Shall they rejoice, but by our Affliction, yet deny their Pity to our Agonies?

Indulge me, dear Friends! Your Permission, to stop here and sweep. I know it is a Weakness: And it shall possess me but a Moment. I will recover my Voice as soon as I am able; and go on to enumerate your Miseries.

Alas! It is not possible! It is too terrible a Task! I have neither Patience nor Breath enough to find Names for your Sorrows! Wou'd to Heaven I could as easily banish them from my Memory, as I can forbear to disgrace you by their Description! But Fancy will not suffer me to forget them. Imagination, officious to torment me, invades my Sleep with your shrivell'd. My very Dreams are made bloody by your Whips. I am insulted by the Scoffs, the Cruelties, the grinding, biting, Insolence, which we train up our poor Children to the Taste of! Why rejoice'd we at their Birth, unhappy, innocent, Bleeders? Or, why do they smile in our Faces, since we intend them but for Anguish and Agony? Yet, they know we have no Comfort to give them. Such as is ours, they inherit! Happier Parents bequeath Money, and Vanity, and Indolence, to their Offspring. Alas! these are Legacies, for Freemen! We have nothing but our Shame to bestow on our Posterity: Nothing, but the Shame of our Baseness, who have lengthen'd out our Slavery to out-last even Life, by assigning them our Children, on whom to practice our Tortures. But I have done with the Horrors of this Subject. You have awaken'd me, by that lamentable Howl, into a Repentance that I touch'd you too sensibly. Let us think then no more upon what we have suffer'd. Let us resolve to suffer no longer.

In the Pastinesses of these inaccessible Mountains, and among Forests, so dark and impenetrable, we shall have little to fear, if we but continue on the Defensive. Here are Savannas for Cattle; and burnt Woods for Corn: and as other things, which we have not, shall be wanted, there are so many Outlets and Descents, on every Side, for Excursion, that we can break down, unexpected, upon the scatter'd Plantations below us; and return with whatever we
wish, from the Store-houses of our Enemy. Let us therefore repress Malice and Cruelty: Let us rather study to support our new Liberty, than revenge our past Slavery. While we train and confirm our Forces, by the Discipline and Exercise they are beginning to practice, we shall grow stronger, both by our Skill, and our Numbers: For all of our Colour, whose Hearts have not whitened themselves, in Terror of their imperious Torturers, will borrow Safety from the Night, and escape to us from every Quarter. Or, should such Opportunities be taken from them, by the Vigilance of their Masters, we can encourage, and draw them with us, as often as we make Incursions, thereby weakening at once our Enemy, and encreasing our own Strength, till our very Numbers shall have made us invincible.

I know there are some rash Spirits among us, who affirm that much more is possible: Perhaps it may be so, to our Courage; but it ought to be unattempted by our Prudence. For, even could we extirpate our Enemies, and drive them out of the Island, it would be found an unsurmountable Difficulty, without Ships, and unskill'd in Navigation, to maintain our Possession of the cultivated and open Coasts, against perpetual fresh Supplies, which would be pour'd in, by their Fleets, for Recovery of rich Townships, and Settlements. Whereas, here, we shall have only their Pride to contend with: Their Avarice will not envy us our Mountains, where, yet, we have every Art, within ourselves, that can be necessary for our Support and Security. They taught us these Arts, for our Misery: But God, more just, and more merciful, has turn'd them to our Benefit.

I have shewn Sulphur and Saltpetre to your Captains, in several Places, upon our Hills. You have Hand-mills in every Company, for preparing your Gun-powder, that most precious of all your Possessions. You might every where find Iron; but that it abounds in your Enemies Warehouses. Having Artists too, who are capable, we might forge our own Arms, if so much trouble were necessary: But there is a nearer Way to obtain 'em. It is but to prevent the Return of those who shall dare to invade us, and the Arms, which they bring for our Ruin, will enlarge and perpetuate our Protection.

Let us understand then, and accept God's Bounty. Let us divide, and appropriate, the Highlands. Let us plant, and possess, for Posterity. Cultivating Law, too, as well as Land, let us, by submitting to Government, become too generous for Slavery. As often as the Enemy, from the Coasts of the Island, shall attempt to dislodge us from its Centre, let 'em find us too strong for their Anger. But if they content themselves with their own, and leave us in Possession of our Lot, let them acknowledge us too kind for their Cruelty. They must always want the Cattle, which we can never be depriv'd of, but in Traffick: And we
may receive, in *Exchange*, a thousand Things, for our *Ease*, which it will be
more for their Benefit to *sell* us, than provoke us to *conquer*.

Be of *Comfort* therefore, my Friends! and *hope all things from Patience*. Even
*Time* that runs on encreasing, till it shall be *lost in Eternity*, forms its *Progress*
but *slowly*. Tho’ *Ages* appear *vast Spaces*, they have all been measur’d by *Mo-
ments*. Be not, therefore, *too hasty*. Content yourselves to be thought *weak*, for
*a while*, till you have secur’d and deepen’d your *Foundation*. The *Building* will
rise, *stronger*, more *broad*, and more *beautiful*. You have all heard talk of the
*Dutch*; those *Rivals* in Riches and Power, to the most considerable Princes of
the *Earth!* What were *these*, about a hundred Years past, but a *Kind of white
Slaves*, to a *Monarch*, who *now* calls them his *Brothers*? Keep this inspiring
*Example* in your *Eye*; and assure yourselves, that the *proudest of your En-
emies* will *embrace* you, in spite of your *Colour*, when they *foresee Destruction* in
your *Anger*; but *Ease* and *Security*, in your *Friendship*.

FINIS