

## God in chains: hymn reflections on the film *12 Years a Slave*



*12 Years a Slave* is a 2013 British-American historical drama film and an adaptation of the 1853 memoir of the same name by Solomon Northup. Northup was a New York State-born free negro who was kidnapped in Washington, D.C. in 1841 and sold into slavery. He worked on plantations in the state of Louisiana for 12 years before his release.

The film\* is remorseless in portraying the physical and emotional realities of slavery. This is a world in which human compassion “stretches the length of a coin”. One of Northup’s several owners believes his right to abuse his slaves is biblically sanctioned, and encourages the slaves to accept their allegedly predestined, divinely-sanctioned fate by reading to them pro-slavery Bible verses, both real and fraudulent.

The tradition of singing spiritual songs that arose amongst the slaves of America is not highly represented in *Singing the Faith*. However, *My Lord! What a morning* (StF 179), which has appeared in a number of hymn books since the early 1950s, is one example. (It has been recorded by artists as varied as Harry Belafonte, Joan Baez and The Seekers.)

“Spirituals” (not always regarded as “hymns”) were often sung as work songs, to aid hard labour: they also expressed personal feeling and offered encouragement, inspired by a message of God’s saving grace.

In his important book, [The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches](#) civil rights campaigner W. E. Burghardt Du Bois described the “melody of the slave songs,” or the negro spiritual, as the “articulate message of the slave to the world”:



the music “of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways.”

Like other spirituals, *My Lord!* reflects the lives of slaves both in its religious aspiration and its coded messages. One source suggests a [variety of meanings](#) for this text:

“The text can mean either morning (the beginning) or mourning (the end). It refers to the morning when the dead will be raised, or the slaves emancipated, but also the false dawn of reconstruction failed. The trumpet sounds will wake the nations of "underground" Americans both black and white to challenge racism and segregation. The metaphor of falling stars may stand for the Union Army's campfires, the beacons of freedom, or perhaps the great black men whose spirits flash like falling stars in *The Souls of Black Folk*, a usage that may be traceable to the Kongolesse belief that falling stars are "spirits flashing across the sky.”



Also in *Singing the Faith* are four hymns by the writer James Montgomery (left) (1771 – 1854) who campaigned against slavery and wrote an [epic anti-slavery poem called 'The West Indies'](#). Perhaps his most well-known hymn is [Hail to the Lord's Anointed](#) (StF 228). Often sung during Advent, a period of watching and waiting for God's justice and vision to be seen in the coming of Christ, its words take on refreshed power in the light of the issues against which Montgomery fought:

He comes to break oppression,  
to set the captive free...

He comes, with succour speedy,  
to those who suffer wrong;  
to help the poor and needy,  
and bid the weak be strong.

Amongst other campaigners against slavery was the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, whose [Thoughts Upon Slavery](#) was described in 2007 (the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act) as “truly a seminal publication”. “Slavery went against Wesley's belief in the dignity and equality that should be given to everyone made in the image of God,” wrote campaigner Richard Reddie. Over 200 years later, however, the abuses that Montgomery and Wesley confronted are still present in other ways.

In their November 2013 newsletter, Methodist/Church of Scotland mission partners Keith and Ida Waddell wrote with anger and power about the continuing existence of slavery, “euphemistically nowadays called “trafficking”:

“The sale of people as commodities, whether as domestic servants, as sex workers or as bonded labourers is happening in both Zambia and Scotland. In spite of laws to the contrary, people are still

keeping their fellow human beings in economic and physical bondage. This will only change when the welfare and needs of people take precedence over the economy and profit.”

In researching the background to My Lord! What a morning (above), it was sobering to search the question “What is the story behind the song My Lord What a Morning?” and to be offered a link to an online dating option: “Single Woman Ukraine”.

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\**12 Years a Slave* received a great number of nominations and awards, including nominations in nine categories at the 2014 Academy Awards, where it won for best motion picture, supporting actress (Lupita Nyong’o) and adapted screenplay (John Ridley).