

## The Modern Christ

### Adam Goes

Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831 prompted attorney Thomas R. Gray to interview the man and commit his story to writing prior to his execution. During the course of the interview Gray posed the question "Do you not find yourself mistaken now?" and Turner's response was simply "Was not Christ crucified?" This was the beginning of a common theme of comparing Turner to Christ that would continue throughout the study of the man and the rebellion. The comparison of Turner to Christ and the emphasis on religion in the study of Turner and his use as a symbol was especially prominent in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred* and in Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner*, but the idea carried over into every aspect of Nat Turner's legacy, including both academic and popular literature written about the man. The continued comparison to Christ is important to understanding how humanity views Turner and why he is still so contested today.

The original story of Turner, *The Confessions*, holds more comparison to Christ than simply the direct answer that Gray received. Without doubt, Turner at least felt he was very religious, and even a prophet of the modern era, just as those of Biblical times, "Question - what do you mean by the Spirit? Ans. The Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former times" (qtd. 46). Additionally, Turner felt he was marked for greatness from an early age, "and caused them to say in my hearing, I surely would be a prophet" (qtd. 44). Turner said this during discussion of his knowledge of events prior to his birth. There are two pieces of Turner's personal history, however, that echo the life of Christ: his relationship with Ethereld T. Brantley, and the final dinner with his recruits before the rebellion. Gray recorded this statement in *The Confessions*, "About this time I told these things to a white man (Ethereld T. Brantley) on whom it had a wonderful effect - and he ceased from his wickedness" (qtd. 47). Further, Turner baptized himself and Brantley, providing a skewed echo of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, and much like Christ's disciples, Brantley was taken from the low end of society. In an essay, Patrick H. Breen blatantly names Brantley "Turner's only religious disciple named in *The Confessions*" (qtd. 111). There is a difference between Brantley as a religious follower of Turner and those blacks that joined Turner's rebellion. At the echo of Christ's Last Supper, Turner was surprised by the presence of Will and Breen notes that "He expressed no fealty to Nat Turner, his religion, or his vision" (qtd. 118). In this way, Turner is unlike Christ, but the similarities are surprisingly abundant and it is understandable why Turner would be compared to Christ so often, especially with his chilling answer to Gray's question.

Robert Hayden's "The Ballad of Nat Turner" is based off a few details that Turner revealed during his interview with Gray, though it is not completely accurate. The religious tone is very heavy in the poem, and comparisons to the life of Christ abound throughout. The poem itself is an echo of Christ's time in the wilderness, where he was tempted by the Devil into forsaking God. Several of the passages tempt Turner himself into forsaking Christianity or make mention to pagan ritual, "Then fled, O bretheren, the wicked juba" and in relation to hanging lbo warriors Turner wonders "Is this the sign,/the sign fore promised me?" (qtd.). These passages are the temptations of Turner, just as the Devil's promise of riches and the power of rule were Christ's temptations, if only he would bow to the Devil. However, both Christ and Turner withstand these temptations. The passage "Speak to me now or let me die./Die, whispered the blackness" (qtd.) is reminiscent of Christ's "Oh why have you forsaken me?" as a plea to God as he was dying, suspended from the cross. Finally, the most interesting comparison to Christ in Hayden's poem comes from the last two stanzas, "till a sleep came over me./a sleep heavy as death. And when/I awoke at last free/And purified, I rose and prayed," is an eerie echo of Christ's death and resurrection. Thus, Hayden's poem makes a considerable connection between Turner and Christ, in very thoughtful and unsettling ways.

Another account of Nat Turner, Kyle Baker's graphic novel *Nat Turner* takes a drastically different approach to comparing Turner to Christ because he uses only the text of *The Confessions* and supplements that with images which make up the main body and story of the novel. The first image that depicts Turner in a religious or Christ-like fashion is the bottom frame of page 85. The image shows Turner reading a Bible that he stole and shunning his responsibilities as a slave. This image likens Turner to a young Christ, particularly the episode where his Joseph and Mary find him in conversation with religious leaders in the temple. In both accounts, Christ and Turner have disobeyed one of the Commandments, "honor thy father and thou shalt not steal," respectively, but both did so out of naivety and a desire to be closer to God. On page 111 Baker also gives life to Turner's Last Supper, but contrary to the popular painting, the central figure, Turner, is vehemently pointing and discussing plans, rather than being demure and peaceful, as Christ is portrayed. If compared to the Biblical account of the Last Supper, however, Baker's image may be more accurate, as this was when Christ accused one of his disciples of plotting against him, and very nearly ordered him to go through with it. The most direct and significant images that Baker used in his novel to liken Turner to Christ, however, appear between pages 194 and 197. These images show the execution of Turner to an excited, eager crowd, but after Turner passes on peacefully, their expressions lose the eagerness and instead become confused and fearful. This is an obvious echo of Christ's execution at the hands of the Romans, and in the case of both leaders, their people did not raise a hand to stop it. In the final images of the novel, Turner's earlier theft of the Bible is mimicked by a young female slave stealing and secretly reading *The Confessions* which very directly links Turner to Christ and the other prophets of the Biblical era. Baker's use of imagery in an attempt to tell Turner's story allowed him to more easily portray a heroic and Christ-like Turner, especially with the poetic license Baker took from the source material.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred* pulls inspiration largely from Nat Turner, though Stowe altered some aspects of her character in order to fit the role and reason she wrote the novel. Her character also possesses some Christ-like qualities that are significant in the study of Turner because of his role in Stowe's creation. In the novel *Dred* has a very intimate relationship with children. In discussing the importance of rebellion with a pacifist character, Tiff, *Dred* discusses the fact that children are vulnerable and need to be protected. The quote "Well," said *Dred*, "the children are too tender to walk where we must go. We must bear them as an eagle beareth he, young. Come, my little man!" (Stowe, Vol. II, 174) demonstrates *Dred's* concern for children and the future and brings to mind Christ and the idea of "let the children come unto me" as well as the common analogy of there only being one set of footsteps because Christ carried, not abandoned, humanity. The manner in which *Dred* dies, is, however, a much stronger comparison to Christ than his relationship with children. *Dred* died from a wound to his side, in the same place that Christ was stabbed while he hang from the cross. Furthermore, *Dred's* last words were "All over!" (Stowe, Vol. II, 295) which is an echo of Christ's final words "It is finished." The fact that *Dred* died as a martyr also links him to Christ as they both died for the salvation of their people, *Dred's* being blacks, Christ's being humanity.

Turner was first compared to Christ in *The Confessions* by Turner himself. This tradition was continued by both scholars and popular authors in order to serve a purpose. Turner's heroism is often called into question because of the brutality of his rebellion, but by making him more Christ-like authors can gloss over the negative aspects of Turner's life and rebellion and instead focus on him as a martyr and symbol of the evil of slavery. The direct impact of Turner's original comparison to Christ "Was not Christ crucified?" (*Confessions*, 48) was chilling and more powerful than the subsequent references to Christ in Turner-based literature because of its directness. However, the subtlety that later authors used in comparing Turner to Christ more effectively made him a sympathetic character and a symbol of martyrdom because they played on ingrained ideas in people's minds rather than blatantly declaring Turner Christ-like.

#### Works Cited

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