

Jallo, Job ben Solomon

(1702?-1773),

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rising member of a leading Muslim family in Senegal, a captive in Gambia, and later a slave in Maryland, was born Ayuba ibn Suleiman Diallo in Bondu, West Africa, to a prosperous family. Though little information about Job's early years is available, it is known that by the age of fifteen he was, his amanuensis wrote, well on his way to becoming an Alfa—following his father and grandfather—one of the religious leaders in an area of eastern Senegal renowned then and at the time of the explorer Mungo Park's 1775 visit as a territory where Muslims, at least, need not fear enslavement. Job not only advanced positively in his koranic and Arabic studies but he also proved to be a brave and resourceful trader. His growing wealth and respectability led to a marriage with the daughter of a neighboring Alfa of gold-exporting Tombut (Bambuk). After three children, he married a second wife, the daughter of the Alfa of the nearby Tomga (Damga), with whom he had a daughter.

In February 1730, with two servants, Job—as he was commonly called by later memoirists and thereafter into our own era—went to the Gambia River, a two-week journey, in search of paper and other goods in trade for two men his father wanted sold. Not agreeing with the English Captain Pike's offer instead he traded his captives for some cows. On his way home Mandingo kidnappers captured and sold him and his translator to the same Captain Pike Job had met earlier. His father attempted to ransom him but before the several slaves his father sent as trade could reach the ship, Job was carried off to Annapolis, Maryland. Such was Job's importance that Samba Geladio Jegi, one of his student peers—and himself the subject of popular local epics and later a prince in neighboring Futa Toro—sent an army to punish his captors.

Job was purchased by a Kent Island tobacco grower but proved to be a poor laborer, and within a year Job (there called Simon) took flight. Soon captured, however, he was imprisoned until June 1731, when he was visited by local clergy and his eventual amanuensis Thomas Bluett. Stories of his praying, of refusing pork and alcohol, his writing on the prison wall, and his calm manner led to favorable treatment. He was returned to his purchaser and to a life made easier, including a place to peacefully pray, but Job's discomfort and desire for freedom continued. He wrote a letter in Arabic to his father and gave it to Annapolis shipping agents. It came to the attention of the philanthropist James Oglethorpe, the future founder of slave-free Savannah, Georgia, who was impressed and set about securing Job's release. For some months Job remained in the care of several members of the Annapolis clergy until at last he set sail for England with Bluett in March 1733.

During the crossing, despite seasickness, Job prayed regularly, adhered to his dietary obligations, pleased all with his grace and manners, wrote the Koran from memory, and was taught enough English to roughly converse. Not yet legally emancipated, Job spent some time in limbo. In England Bluett introduced him to prominent ministers, scholars, philanthropists, antiquarians, nobility, and royalty.

George Sale, the eventual translator of the earliest respectable English translation of the Koran brought Christian texts in Arabic to Job to encourage his conversion. Sale was not alone in this effort, but Job went no further than admitting Jesus was a prophet—consistent with conventional Muslim thinking. He found nothing about the Trinity in his New Testament and argued so sensibly and sensitively for his own faith that he gained universal respect.

His memory astounded many as he wrote out three Korans without reference to any outside copies. The antiquarians Joseph Ames and Sir Hans Sloane, physician to the queen, who sought his help in translating Arabic writings in their artifacts, became helpful allies. Other Royal African Company directors—with some thought about possible uses of Job back in Bondu—were also admirers. Sloane introduced Job to their majesties King George II and Queen Caroline and their families who repaid the visit with valuable gifts. The wealthy duke of Montagu became a patron, beguiled by Job's tireless interest in various mechanical tools and objects. Despite Job's Muslim unease over images, the painter William Hoare produced a sensitive portrait of the man Bluett described as being “five Feet ten Inches high, straight-limb'd, ... His Countenance ... exceedingly pleasant, yet grave and composed; his Hair long, black, and curled” (Bluett, 51). The Gentleman's Society of Spalding, which counted Isaac Newton and Alexander Pope among its members, made Job any honorary member. By January 1734 enough money had been raised by his new friends to buy his freedom, and shortly thereafter enough money to send him back to Africa without requiring a ransom.

Job, it had been concluded by friends of the Royal African Company, might be useful in enlarging English and lessening rival French trade in Senegambia. Before going Job carefully prepared. Aware that his homeland was within shouting distance of a French fort and that his connection to the rival English would put him in danger, Job urged Sloane to obtain a French passport for him. By the end of July, accompanied by many good wishes, insistent orders on Job's behalf in royal and RAC letters, gifts both gaudy and useful (such as farming tools, a grist mill, clocks, candles, and lamps), Job was on his way. Seven weeks later he arrived at the Gambia. Almost simultaneously Bluett's book, written at Job's request, appeared. It gives its subject a positive character, a glimpse of Job's Africa, nothing about his Atlantic passage, something of his enslavement in Maryland, and his redemption in England. The role of providence and generous Englishmen in the latter are praised. Slavery is not criticized. As the first nonfiction narrative by a freed African enslaved in the New World, it offers another perspective on its age.

Job's post-emancipation history opened brightly, but dimmed quickly. The English factor on the Gambia, Francis Moore, who welcomed Job, liked him. He recorded commendable instances of Job's trading skills and philosophical and religious responses to his captivity and redemption. He and Job, via dictation or translation from Arabic, wrote to England about Job's meetings with messengers and friends relative to Bondu who told him that Job's father had died, that one wife had remarried, that civil war had disrupted the area, but that Job and his important Fula trader friends believed they could revive trade and bring it to the English on the Gambia.

By July 1735, however, Moore, carrying ivory, beeswax, and letters and gifts from Job to friends, had returned to England. One of his letters reminded the duke of Montagu about Job's translator still enslaved in Maryland. Bluett would eventually arrange for his freedom and his return to Africa. Moore also wrote a remarkably fair and sympathetic book about his African travels and about Job, further enhancing the latter's already sterling reputation. Still Moore's absence undoubtedly lessened the chances of Job having the effect on Senegambia that he and his English supporters might have hoped.

As Moore left Africa, Job and the nephew of the governor of Gambia were heading toward Bondu. Job was welcomed back and for six months strove to turn trade toward the Gambia and away from the French. His companion Thomas Hull kept a dull, only occasionally informative journal of the trip. Upon their return Job wrote again of promised trade. He and Hull soon left again for Bondu, nearby gum forests, and goldfields only slightly farther east. But Anglo-French disagreements and weather frustrated what might have arisen had Job been able to introduce to his countrymen some of the mechanical implements he had brought from England that so fascinated him. For some time in 1737 Job was either in a French prison or under their control while many of his gifts were destroyed on a ship off Senegal or by fire back in Gambia. Still French African records indicate something about Job's prestige as they describe a kind of blockade by Marabout (Muslim) traders against the French until Job was released.

Later in 1737 the Royal African Company sent Melchior de Jaspas, an Armenian fluent in Arabic, to explore and advance their trade from the Gambia. Trouble with the local RAC officers kept Jaspas on the river for a year before he, Job, and Job's redeemed translator could go again to Bondu. No records have been found on the two years Jaspas spent there. Something had gone wrong. Job asked the RAC for passage to England. Letters from the governor and the RAC denied Job's request but money was sent to Job already on another trip to Bondu. Only two more notices have been found. In 1744 Job sought RAC compensation on a bad deal and was again rebuffed. By then the RAC was failing in trade, exploration, and the utilization of Job. The last note on this remarkable man appears in the records of the Gentlemen's Society of Spalding noting his death.

Further Reading

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