



SUPERSTOCK

Keeping Our Own Vineyards: Why Black Christians Should CELEBRATE KWANZAA

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SONG OF SOLOMON 1:5-6, KJV

I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon. Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me; my mother's children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept.

This passage has always fascinated me. I believe it is part of one of the most under-read and underappreciated books in the Bible. And I would submit to you that these verses represent the most Afrocentric passage in the Bible.

In these verses, we hear the voice of a woman we don't know very much about.

Some say that she was a Shulamite woman, while others believe she was the fabled Queen of Sheba, who we know had contact with King Solomon. Others say she was a nameless wife or mistress of King Solomon, and some scholars refer to her simply as an Egyptian slave girl or a nameless peasant woman. There is no scholarly agreement on who exactly this woman was.

We don't know her identity, but we do know her situation. She was black. History is



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unclear about the source of her blackness. Perhaps she was racially black, the way we think of black. Perhaps her body contained high levels of melanin, producing pigmented skin that actually is a shade of brown. Or perhaps her color was a sign of her poverty. Perhaps she had to work outside during the hot hours of the day. As the sun shone upon her back and neck, arms and legs, she had been permanently turned a sun-kissed color.

How ever she became this way, we know that she was black, and we know that society looked down upon her. We know that she was a minority. She was oppressed. She was mistreated, and she believed it was because she was black. She was too dark. She was too ...something. Maybe she was too female, too young, too old, too dark, too light, too ethnic, too poor, too thin, too fat, or her hair is too short, too nappy, her hands are too rough, and she is too tired...she is too black. Most of us know what it is like to be too something. We know how it is not to fit society's mold for perfection, to be excluded, laughed at, overlooked, mistreated, underpaid, underappreciated...because we're too...something.

But this woman had what I call "Song of Solomon self-esteem." Look at her self-esteem. She said, "I am black and beautiful." Now I want to pause here for a grammatical analysis. Many of you are reading out of the King James Version, and your verse 5 reads, "I am black, but comely." This is a mistranslation on the part of the English King James's translators. The original version says "black and beautiful," but when the English, who we also know were British, read "black and beautiful," it was beyond their imaginations, outside of their understandings, removed from their narrow-minded racist comprehension that someone, anyone, could be black and beautiful. So they wrote it the only way they understood it: "I am black, but comely."

But this woman saw no contradiction. She accepted her blackness and her beauty. She knew that the world's treatment of her did not define her. I wish we had enough self-esteem to say to the world, "I am black and beautiful." I am a woman and beautiful. I am a child, and I'm beautiful. I am a man, and I'm beautiful. I've been hurt, and I'm beautiful. I've been abused, and I'm beautiful. I'm poor, and I'm beautiful. I've got cancer, and I'm beautiful. I'm HIV-positive, and I'm beautiful. Whatever it is that society doesn't like about me, that's okay, because I'm beautiful! I am black, and I'm beautiful!

But sometimes it's hard to have that kind of self-esteem when you're the keeper of the vineyard. This woman planted the vineyard; she weeded the vineyard; she harvested the vineyard; she kept the vines from being tangled; she protected the vineyard; she nurtured the crop; she worked hard. And she reaped nothing. In fact, she was so busy planting, weeding, harvesting, straightening, protecting, nurturing, and working someone else's vineyard that she neglected her own.

And we know what that's like. We come from a people who have picked other folks' cotton, cleaned other folks' houses, washed other folks' floors, cared for other folks' children, nursed other folks back to health, learned other folks' history, taught in other folks' schools, assembled cars for someone else to drive, trained people for someone else to get promoted, built houses for someone else to live in. We've been the keeper of others' vineyards, but if the truth be told, we can say, "But my own vineyard have I not kept." My own crops have I not harvested; my own house have I not cleaned; my own health have I not maintained; my own children have I not given time; in my own schools have I not taught; my own culture have I not learned; and my own homeland have I not

visited. They made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard have I not kept.

This is what Maulana Karenga, the founder of Kwanzaa, saw. This is what Kwanzaa is about: keeping our own vineyards. Kwanzaa asks us to set aside seven days a year to tend our own gardens. Seven days a year to focus on our own culture; seven days a year to learn our own history; seven days a year to celebrate the accomplishments of our people; seven days a year to emphasize the values of our ancestors; seven days a year to give money to our businesses; seven days a year to invest in our communities; seven days a year to honor our faith. Sure, we should do this year round, but most of us don't. So at least we need to give seven days a year to keep our own vineyards.

Now I know we haven't always been able to keep our own vineyards. There were things in our way. Slavery was an obstacle to our vineyards. Reconstruction got in the way of our vineyards. Jim and Jane Crow got in the way of our vineyards. Segregation got in the way of our vineyards. But if we would tap into the true vine, we can become the keepers of our own vineyards. Jesus is the true vine, and he can empower us to overcome any obstacles in our way. Jesus, the true vine, can help us pull the weeds that hinder the growth of our gardens. Because Jesus is the true vine, we can become the keepers of our own vineyards.

And we will become known as those who keep our own vineyards. We will have self-esteem, saying, "I am black and beautiful." Keeping our own vineyards, we will learn our own culture and tend to our people. Keeping our own vineyards, we will be the ones cleaning our homes. Keeping our own vineyards, we will be the ones teaching our children. Keeping our own vineyards, we will be the ones providing services to each other. Keeping our own vineyards, we will be the ones naming ourselves. Keeping our own vineyards, we

will be the ones who leave our communities better off. Keeping our own vineyards, we will be the ones who have faith in our God, our communities, and ourselves. We will be the ones celebrating Kwanzaa and keeping our own vineyards.

Jesus once said, "I came that you might have life and have it more abundantly."¹ And the question comes forth: "But, Lord, why are we not finding life in our community? Where is this life that you speak of amid the weeds of poverty, the strangling vines of violence, and the wild shrubbery of hopelessness and despair? How can we, O Lord, find this life in a ramshackle vineyard ruined by unemployment and miseducation?" And the answer comes back: "Tell my people to tend their own gardens." The answer comes back: "Tell my people to accept water from the Lily of the Valley and the true Vine, and then their crops will bear the fruit of the spirit. If they nurture joy, it will weed out despair. If they nurture peace, violence will no longer plague our children. If they nurture patience and faithfulness, hopelessness will no longer be the word of the day. If they nurture goodness and self-control, then we will again trust one another."

That's all Karenga wanted through the principles of Kwanzaa. If we nurture Umoja, our people will be one. If we nurture Kujichagulia, no one can ever call us out of our names. If we nurture Ujima, we will carry each other's loads. If we nurture Ujamaa, no black child will go hungry. If we nurture Nia, we won't have to turn to drugs or gangs for fulfillment. If we nurture Kuumba, creativity will inhabit our children. If we nurture Imani, we as God's people will help bring about that day when the glory of God will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together.² ✦

NOTES

1. See John 10:10.
2. Isaiah 40:5.