

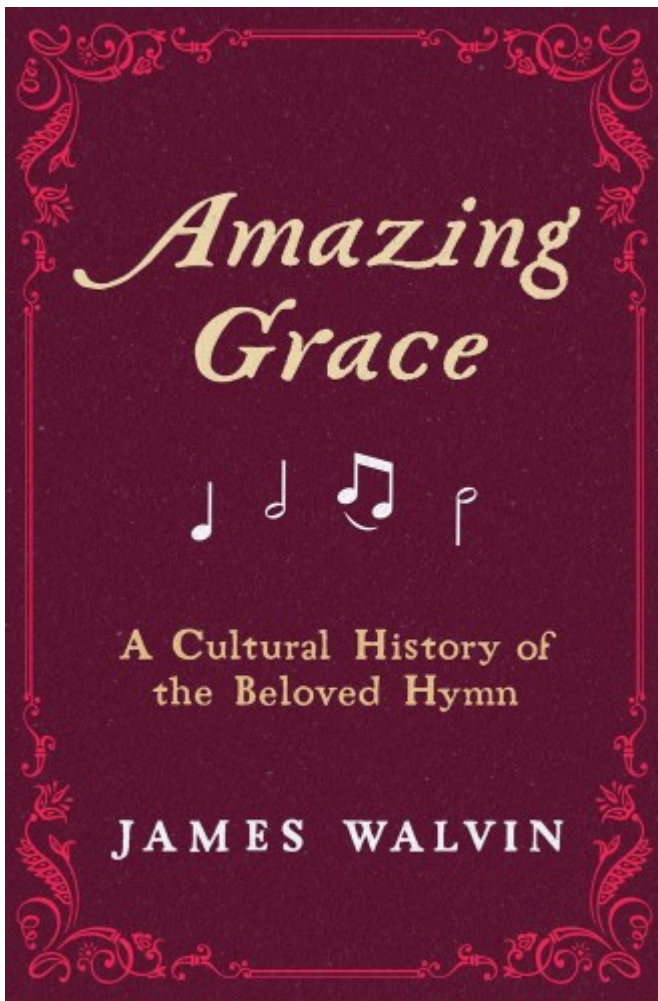
Written by the oppressor, sung by the oppressed

James Walvin traces a beloved American hymn on its winding journey across racial divisions through the centuries.

by [Jeffrey L. Johnson](#) in the [September 2024](#) issue

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In Review



Amazing Grace

A Cultural History of the Beloved Hymn

By James Walvin

University of California Press

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

At a 2015 service in memory of the nine people shot and killed at the oldest Black church in the South, eulogist Barack Obama began to sing. Vested clergy behind him and thousands of mourners assembled on the floor in front of him stood and sang along. James Walvin, a British historian of slavery and the slave trade, presents this moment in Charlotte, North Carolina—when “Amazing Grace” was sung a cappella by a Black president of the United States more than 200 years after it was written by a pious British cleric and former master of slave ships—as an enduring spiritual artifact of America.

The *Olney Hymns*, a collection published by John Newton and William Cowper in 1779, contained the first printed version of what would become “Amazing Grace.” The hymn crossed the Atlantic to an America that seemed to be waiting for it. The new nation of outcasts, misfits, adventurers, and entrepreneurs was “an astonishingly religious society,” Walvin writes. Churches dotted the mostly rural landscape, and the congregations assembled within those churches were “enthusiastic about and widely committed to singing hymns.”

A former lead choirboy, Walvin writes with personal investment as he traces the tale of “Amazing Grace” on a winding journey across racial divisions and regional musical genres through the American centuries. Remarkable spiritual fervor and vocal vigor within early American churches ignited entrepreneurial engines that published, circulated, recorded, and broadcast religious music and devotional material in evolving print formats and eventually in the technologies that followed print. Perhaps most importantly, there was—and still is—the longing of a nation of mismatched immigrants and enslaved people for words of acceptance, security, and love.

Others prepared the ground for the emergence of “Amazing Grace.” Isaac Watts released Christian worship from routines of metrical psalm singing with his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* of 1707, which cleared a path for songs of personal spiritual experience. In 1735, John Wesley witnessed the spiritual passion generated by congregational singing in colonial America. Enslaved Africans and illiterate European immigrants repeated melodies and words lined out by worship leaders.

A century later, the simple, confessional verses of “Amazing Grace” suited the purposes of 19th-century musical preachers and teachers such as “Singing Billy” Walker (1809–1875), who traveled throughout the South listening to local melodies, creating his own compositions, joining texts to tunes, and teaching people to sing. Before Walker’s peripatetic music ministry, Newton’s words had been paired with a number of musical partners of sacred and folk origins. Walker set the text of “Amazing Grace” to a shape note tune, “New Britain.” Published in the 1844 first edition of *The Sacred Harp*, it is the version we know today.

As hymns and spiritual songs became normative spiritual authority for many American congregations, musical styles in churches blended with musical genres outside of church. Shape note singing became a foundation for White gospel music, which in turn influenced country and bluegrass. While New England Puritans and Anglicans stayed close to accepted patterns of intoning the Psalms, Baptists and Presbyterians developed hymn repertoires that included “Amazing Grace.” American Methodism was born in the passion of unreserved preaching and corporate singing under the stars, a setting suited to “Amazing Grace.”

Publishers, including Benjamin Franklin, capitalized on the religious inclinations of colonists and early Americans. During a period of evangelical revival in the late 19th century, waves of hymn books landed in the hands of eager worshipers. “Amazing Grace” appeared in many of them, under various titles, tethered to several different tunes. Singing evangelist and businessman E. O. Excell (1851–1921) included Newton’s words set to “New Britain” in his popular *Coronation Hymns* of 1913, confirming this combination of words and music as the standard.

Southern camp meetings brought together White and Black Americans in what Walvin calls a “uniquely North American cultural expression: a distinctive American voice and sound.” The most enthusiastic voices heard singing “Amazing Grace” in camp meetings were those of Black Americans. Written by a White man who’d prospered from an ungodly and monstrous slave trade, the earnest and honest “Amazing Grace” reached the suffering hearts of enslaved people.

Walvin notes that Newton wrote “Amazing Grace” and many other compositions out of devotional seriousness and pastoral concern for the people in his priestly care, not out of remorse for his former slave-trading occupation. A confession of his direct involvement in the slave trade, and repentance for the same, would only come years after “Amazing Grace” had been received and cherished by the people Newton had brutally exploited for profit. In a bitter but ultimately blessed irony, “Amazing Grace”

freed the hearts of the descendants of the very people whose bodies Newton had captured and chained.