



William B. McClain\*

## THE BIBLE AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.  
*Colossians 3:16 NIV*

Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all the lands! Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into his presence with singing.  
*Psalms 100: 1-2 RSV*

### Introduction

The Bible has played an important role in each period of African-American development. A casual survey of this history reveals overwhelming evidence of the use and influence of the Bible in the songs of the African Diaspora on the North American continent. It has been a primary source for spirituals, hymns, and gospel songs composed by African Americans. Even the spiritual's secular progeny—blues, soul, and jazz—sometimes make reference to the Bible's concepts and context due largely to its being a common language for a displaced people unable to trace their native tongue to their own country. Africa, a vast continent of many spoken languages, is an example of a disinherited people who were forcibly taken to the New World with no national language except the Bible.

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### The Bible and the Slaves

The Africans brought to America were uprooted from their homeland, their culture, their environment, their religion, and the people who spoke their language, and forced to labor for free in an unfamiliar land. They were human beings, just as their captors, and naturally felt strangely displaced. They had been forcibly torn from the regular routine of settled life in their villages and towns without their consent, herded on death ships like cattle, and stripped of every vestige of dignity. Here in this New World they experienced the full weight of this capricious act of cruelty: They were to work from sun up till there was no more light in the sky in the tobacco fields of Virginia, the rice swamps of South Carolina, and the huge cotton plantations of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi. They experienced what has been called by one writer a kind of "disorientation."<sup>1</sup> It was an obvious device that worked to their oppressors' advantage—tribe from tribe, kin from kin, sons from fathers, and husbands from wives so that there would be no possibility of communication or the ability to unify, organize, and revolt against those who held them captive.

There were protracted efforts on the part of the white British Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts to convince the plantation owners that the slaves ought to be instructed in the Christian faith and converted. It was argued eventually by the members of this missionizing group that the Christian gospel would be a useful device to autocratically control slaves and the relations between slaves and masters. Therefore, missionaries should be

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<sup>1</sup>See Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 97-113.

allowed access to the "heathen souls" of these benighted slaves. The planters ultimately gave in: not out of concern about the souls of the Africans but from fear of losing their human property. Besides, Christians would make better slaves: safer, more reliable, more obedient, and less troublesome.

In 1701, missionaries and other exhorters inaugurated a systematic process to convert the slaves to Christianity under the watchful plantation owners. In this nascent mission, the Bible was introduced with the intent of indoctrinating slaves to believe that they and their descendants were cursed by God and preordained to be forever "hewers of woods and drawers of water" for the plantation owners and their families. Donald Matthews in an excerpt from a typical catechism demonstrates that the intent was to have the slaves believe that not only was the government and the master against them, but even "God" condoned their condition of servitude:

Q.What did God make you for?

A.To make a crop.

Q.What is the meaning of "Thou shalt not commit adultery"?

A.To serve our Heavenly Father, and our earthly master, obey our overseer, and not steal anything.<sup>2</sup>

When the Bible and Christianity were finally introduced, the Methodists, Baptists, and some Presbyterians involved the slaves in the camp meetings of the Great Awakening with extemporaneous preaching from the Bible and

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<sup>2</sup>Donald G. Matthews, *Slavery and Methodism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 87.

singing hymns composed by Isaac Watts, Charles and John Wesley. With references to the Bible, this was a new way of appropriating the meaning of the sacred texts. In those hymns they heard the spirit and mood of the Gospel that would influence African-American music—religious as well as secular.

As Tony Heilbut calls to our attention in *The Gospel Sound*:

By an obscure twist of cultural history, that dour  
Methodist hymn

Father I stretch my hand to Thee  
No other help I know.  
If Thou withdraw Thyself from me  
Oh, whither shall I go?

became an ancestor of the blue mood of isolation and loss, having tried the world and found it wanting. This is itself a cosmic lament with simple metrical structure anticipating—the sixteen-bar blues—a form so common in gospel which this writer calls the “Baptist blues.”<sup>3</sup>

As slaves became converted to Christianity during the Great Awakening Camp Meetings, they added their own improvised choruses to the hymns of Watts and the Wesleys. Their appending phrases and lines of the spirituals to be repeated after verses of the standard hymns account for the refrains in later Protestant hymns, e.g., those of Fannie J. Crosby’s “Blessed Assurance” and “Pass Me Not, O Gentle

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<sup>3</sup>Anthony Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound: Good News and Bad Times* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975; reprint, New York: Limelight Editions, 1992), xxi (page number refers to reprint edition).

Savior." One cannot even imagine a Crosby hymn as "Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross" without the refrain: "Near the cross, near the cross be my glory ever. Till my raptured soul shall find rest beyond the river."

The slaves identified particularly with the Hebrew children, the prophets, and the crucified and resurrected Jesus. They heard the stories and the oracles of the prophets, particularly the eighth-century prophets of the Old Testament and their condemnation of social injustice and their proclamation of a new social order where justice would reign. They were enthralled by the life, teachings, miracles, parables, stories, crucifixion, and victorious resurrection of Jesus; Paul praying his way out of confinement; and the experience of John, the Revelator, out on the Isle of Patmos. This identification manifested immediacy and intensity in their contemporary setting. The characters of the Old and New Testament became dramatically alive and present. Their interpretation was controlled, not by the literal words of the texts, but with vivid imagination and creativity. The slaves could readily see Jesus, the Son of God, being whipped up a hill, being lynched on a cross, and being delivered from the grave in triumph over sin. These actions were ways a mighty God delivers God's struggling people in danger of their enemy overtaking them, when trouble is getting them down. And so they sang of their most powerful Friend who could do anything:

God is a God!  
God don't never change!  
God is a God!  
An' He always will be God!

And it was this powerful Friend to whom they referred when they sang:

I'm gonna tell God how you treat me.  
I'm gonna tell God how you treat me  
...some of these days.

As Vincent Wimbush points out, the Bible became “a language, even a language-world...a ‘language’ through which they negotiated both the strange new world that was called America and the slave existence.”<sup>4</sup> This communication was used not only to wax eloquently with the slave masters but also to communicate with each other about their situation of slavery. One of the earliest ways the Bible was applied when this “language” was pressed into service is expressed in songs later called spirituals.

### **The Bible and the Spirituals**

The slaves transported to America sang the Bible before they could read it. They heard the stories of the Old Testament: accounts of heroic people and their victory—with God’s help—over their foes. These disinherited people identified with Jesus, a poor carpenter from a small village who declares the gospel to the poor, deliverance to the captives, and to set at liberty those that are bruised. But this same despised Jesus becomes the Master, the Messiah who is “bruised for our iniquities” and conquers death by rising from the grave. These stories were reminiscent of an African

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<sup>4</sup>Vincent L. Wimbush, “The Bible and African Americans: An Outline of an Interpretive History,” in *Stony the Road We Trod*, ed. Cain H. Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 82-83.

past of oral tradition and storytelling. But more importantly, they were the account of a powerful God who always came through for the people who were the weakest and were hurting the most, if they were faithful.

The spirituals were created as songs by the slaves in which they translated these characters, themes, and lessons of the Bible preached and taught by the white missionaries, exhorters, and preachers at first into special meaning in terms of their own experience. Using familiar tunes and remembered music even more ancient than these words, *the slaves sang the Bible before they could read it*. After hearing one of the white preachers preach on Ezekiel 37:14, which interestingly enough ends with the verse: "And I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken," an ex-slave tells how spirituals were created from the Bible:

I's seed 'em start in meetin.' We'd all be at the 'prayer house' de Lord's Day, and de white preacher he'd 'splain de word and read whar Ezekiel done say—Dry bones gwine ter lib again. And, honey, de Lord would come a-shining thoo dem pages and revive dis old nigger's heart, and I'd jump up dar and den and holler and shout and sing and pat, and dey would all cotch the words...and dey's all take it up and keep at it, and keep a-addin to it and den it would be a spiritual.<sup>5</sup>

One can guess that several spirituals about Ezekiel such as "Dry Bones, Now Hear the Word of the Lord" (Ezekiel

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<sup>5</sup>Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 245.

37:1-14) and "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel" (Ezekiel 1: 1-20) were created in such fashion. One can surmise that spirituals such as "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel" (Daniel 6:14-24) and "Little David Play on Your Harp" (I Samuel 16:14-23) and literally hundreds of other spirituals that tell the biblical stories were created in similar fashion as retold in song by these slaves who could neither read nor write. Biblical stories became a part of oral tradition. Remembering the stories that they had heard in the Sunday School lessons and the Scriptures read and preached in the services, they committed them to memory and repeated them.

Texts from the Bible were explicated by verses from these songs created by the slaves. In doing the research to write the historical notes on *Songs of Zion*, J. Jefferson Cleveland and this writer examined several dozen collections of spirituals and other documents in order to be as authentic as possible in publishing the spirituals and writing an accurate historical account. We discovered that a spiritual like "Go Down Moses Way Down in Egypt Land," for example, could have as many as twenty-six verses with call and response. This spiritual retold in great detail the deliverance of the Israelites from Moses' calling on Mount Sinai by God (Exodus 3:14-22) through the blowing of the East wind all night causing the sea to part, becoming a wall on each side (Exodus 14:21) for their crossing of the Red Sea on dry ground (Exodus 14:1-22). There was a verse following their successful crossing to say that God had been victorious and their enemies had been slaughtered and lay dead on the sea shore (Exodus 14:3-31). After each new event is reported in the song, the chorus repeats: "Let my people go," and then "Tell ole Pharaoh to let my people go." The spiritual is a remarkable way not only of telling the story but also teaching the



Bible. As one missionary to the slaves reported: "To those who are ignorant of letters, *their memory is their book*...I was forcibly struck by their remembrance of *passages of Scripture*."<sup>6</sup>

Even though the slaves could not at first read and were subject to the interpretation of the Scriptures read to them by whites, they did not always trust this explanation. Besides, they were aware of their own experience of cruel treatment often from those who were doing the teaching and preaching. They observed their "devilish behavior" in other arenas as well and were skeptical of this religion. Unable to speak out directly, they used innuendoes to criticize their masters' religion and their preachers' behavior. They are subtle in song, registering "veiled social comment and criticism." For example, we see it in the spiritual, "I've Got A Robe," an otherworldly spiritual about getting shoes, harps, wings, and crowns in heaven—the things they did not have in their deprived earthly situation of slavery. But then they slip in the rejoinder: "Everybody talking 'bout heav'n, ain't goin' there," and then return to the assumed theme of the song: "Heav'n, heav'n,—Goin' to shout all over God's heav'n."

But they longed to learn to read the Bible for themselves. With much effort there were some slaves who learned to read despite the masters' disapproval, sneaking into the woods at night, using lighted torches, pine knots, and firebugs to teach themselves. Distrustful of white folks' reading of the Bible, they were anxious to probe the sacred book for themselves. Not only did learning to read the Bible affect their preaching; it also changed their songs.

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<sup>6</sup>Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 241.

### The Slave Preachers and Song

The role of slave preachers in the development of Black religion and song cannot be overestimated. Often the link between slaves, masters, and missionaries, slave preachers were able to appease those in control of their lives on the one hand, and satisfy the hunger for faith of their fellow slaves on the other hand. Whether licensed or unlicensed, literate or illiterate, with or without permission, they found a way to get the people together to sing, pray, and preach. It was here that the *real* meeting took place, here that the spirituals were born. It was here that "a little talk with Jesus" made it right.

Most of the times in secret meetings, without permission, the people could safely gather in the wilderness, the woods, the thickets, the brush arbors; these preachers and their people made Christianity their own as the Bible spoke to their situation and created the songs that expressed the Gospel of Jesus. In sometimes devious ways, the slave preachers fanned the flames for freedom with interpretations of Scripture, improvising songs not those of white Christians. An ex-slave preacher's testimony is a typical example:

I been preachin' the Gospel and farmin' since slavery time....When I starts preachin' I couldn't read or write and had to preach what massa told me and he say tell them niggers iffen they obey the massa they goes to Heaven but I knowed there's something better for them, but daren't tell them 'cept on the sly. That I done lots. I tell them iffen they keeps prayin' the Lord will set 'em free.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, vol. 16, *Texas Narratives*, parts 1 and 2 ([Washington, DC]: Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938, 1941; reprint, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972), 9 (page number refers to reprint edition).

### African-American Spirituals and the Old Testament

This writer notes in *Songs of Zion*: "The Old Testament is much more extensively represented in spiritual texts, for through its stories of the Hebrews in bondage, it immediately spoke to the slaves. Hence, 'Go Down, Moses' and 'Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel.'"<sup>8</sup> Many of the symbols of places and people found in the spirituals repeat themselves later in Black hymnody, gospel music, the music of the Civil Rights Movement, and they are even alluded to in blues and soul songs. The biblical knowledge is assumed a part of African-American culture and tradition.

The stories of the Lord delivering the Hebrews fired the imaginations of the slave preachers, and they preached and sang the weary travelers into a firm faith that just as God delivered Daniel in the lion's den, that same God would deliver them; just as God was with the Hebrew boys in the fiery furnace and brought them out, so God would be with them and bring them out of the heat of slavery and oppression; just as God had delivered Israel from their bondage in Egypt land, so God would deliver them.

As the slave people learned to appreciate the "Book," and some among them learned to read it, the Bible took on even greater significance, for they were not only able to hear what was read to them but were able to preach more than "slaves obey your master." This led the slaves to sing the spiritual:

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<sup>8</sup>William B. McClain with J. Jefferson Cleveland, "A Historical Account of the Negro Spiritual," in *Songs of Zion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), [75].

Holy Bible, Holy Bible,  
Holy Bible, book divine, book divine—  
Before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave,  
And go home to my Father and be saved.

Just as the white missionaries, overseers, and preachers had a “thin” Bible from which they preached to promote certain behavior and maintain the institution of slavery, so the slaves and their preachers chose those passages, events, and characters from the Bible that best suited their needs, situation, and goals as well. They took from the Bible what was useful in their present circumstances and left the rest for some other time. For example, certain names of heroes and events of the Old Testament recur quite often in the spirituals: Daniel, Ezekiel, Moses, Joshua, Jacob, Sampson, Hebrew boys, and Jonah. There are others seldom mentioned.

Certain events are prominent in spirituals and contemporary gospel songs as well. From the Old Testament, many popular people and places appear that relate to their confined existence and fuel the fires of their faith in freedom eventually coming: Joshua who fought successfully the Battle of Jericho, winning God's confidence so that the sun does not set until the job is finished. So we get the reference over and over in verses in spirituals: “Joshua was the son of Nun, He never would quit until the job was done.” Daniel, who defied the king and is thrown in the lion's den, won the battle with the king, and the lion is a symbol and proof positive that they can resist slavery and be delivered: “Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel, Why Not Every Man?” Jacob wrestles with the angel and will not let him go until he blesses him, winding up wounded but climbing a ladder:

"We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder. Every round goes higher, higher," indicating we rise step by step. So we get the verses repeated in many spirituals: "Jacob's ladder deep an' long..."

There are places in the Old Testament that become permanent symbols of significance. The Jordan River is sometimes used as that divide between earthly existence and the heavenly kingdom as "crossing over." But it is often a symbol of the line dividing the slaves between free land and slave territory. In the spiritual, Jordan is always "chilly and cold." It is also always turbulent: "Stand still, Jordan!" The Year of Jubilee [or the Day] the slaves took literally, as well they should, to mean the day of freedom. On the day of atonement the Lord told Moses "Ye shall hallow...and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof; it shall be a jubilee unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family" (Leviticus 25:10). No wonder the Fisk University Singers who first made these spirituals available to the larger world called themselves the "Fisk Jubilee Singers." A similar use is made of Canaan or the Promised Land. Frederick Douglass in his autobiography makes it clear that the use of Canaan in the spirituals involved more than "the other world":

A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of:

Canaan, sweet Canaan,  
I am bound for the land of Canaan

something more than a hope for reaching heaven. We meant to reach the *North*; the North was our Canaan.

I thought I heard them say  
There were lions in the way;  
I don't expect to stay  
Much longer here.  
Run to Jesus, shun the danger.  
I don't expect to stay  
Much longer here,

was a favorite air, and had a double meaning. On the lips of some of us it meant the speedy summons to a world of the spirits; but on the lips of our company it meant a speedy pilgrimage to a free state, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery.<sup>9</sup>

The writer remembers vividly from early childhood in Alabama the celebration of Emancipation Proclamation Day on January 1. While other folks reveled in New Year's festivities, the freedom-minded Black people in the city first celebrated in ecumenical worship the day of Lincoln's signing of the official document, freeing the slaves. Interestingly enough, this was a service attended by church people and those not so fond of the church. There were several ex-slaves still living in my Alabama hometown, and they would be seated in a special place of honor. But one of the old preachers, "Brother White," would always rise and take pains to make it clear: "It was not Lincoln who 'sot' us free. It was Mr. Lincoln's hand that signed [the] paper, but it was Almighty God 'hissself' in heaven who issued [it] from his own throne from on high." Then Brother White would lead

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<sup>9</sup>[Frederick Douglass], *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, (Hartford, CT: Park Publishing Company, 1881), 157.

the congregation in singing "Great Day! The Righteous Marching, God's Gonna Build Up Zion's Wall." He led the congregation in lustily singing that part of the spiritual which is obviously a reference to Joshua 5:13-6:27:

This is the day of Jubilee,  
God's gonna build up Zion's wall.  
The Lord has set his people free,  
God's gonna build up Zion's wall.

Great Day! Great Day the righteous marching,  
Great Day! God gonna build up Zion's wall.

Proceeding from his seat and up and down the aisles with his head raised high and his back arched, he represented "the righteous marching." He was to be "no coward," but one of the "valiant-hearted" who will "march out boldly into the field."

### **African-American Spirituals and the New Testament**

There is a larger number of spirituals based on the Old Testament because of the narrative nature of those writings: the heroes and heroines depicted in the stories; and the action of a mighty God on behalf of the weak, oppressed, and those hurting. With a number of preachers learning to read "by whatever means necessary" the New Testament acquires a new significance. However, there are few spirituals about the birth and the infancy of Jesus. A few examples of the exceptions are obviously "Sweet Little Jesus Boy," "Rise Up Shepherd An' Foller," "There's A Star in De East," "Mary Had a Baby," "Li'l Boy How Old Are You?"

“Go Tell It On the Mountain” and a spiritual that went:

Glory! Glory! Glory! to the newborn King!  
 Wasn't that a mighty day,  
 When Jesus Christ was born,  
 When Jesus took my sins away  
 That's what made the glory manger.

The greater preponderance of spirituals reflect the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. James Weldon Johnson pointed out many years ago that “Jesus, in the older spirituals, is given a title of power. Sometimes he is referred to as ‘Massa Jesus’; most often he is called ‘King Jesus.’”<sup>10</sup> One of the majestic spirituals with this title is still popular in churches and concert halls:

Ride on King Jesus,  
 No man can a-hinder me.  
 Ride on, King Jesus, ride on,  
 No man can a-hinder me.  
 If you want to find your way to God,  
 No man can a-hinder me;  
 The gospel highway must be trod,  
 No man can a-hinder me.  
 Ride on, King Jesus, ride on.  
 No man can a-hinder me.

The late Howard Thurman, this writer's teacher, explained: “It was dangerous to let the slave understand that

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<sup>10</sup>James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, “Preface” to volume 2 in *The Books of American Negro Spirituals: Two Volumes in One* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), 14.



the life and teachings of Jesus meant freedom for the captive and release of those held in economic, social, and political bondage."<sup>11</sup> The slave preachers and their people fashioned songs to identify with this mighty King who rode on a donkey into Jerusalem, hearing the crowds proclaim, "Hosanna, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Here is victory for the one who stood up in the temple and proclaimed, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, and has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, to preach deliverance to the captives, to set at liberty them that are bruised" [Luke 4:18]. The slaves interpreted Jesus's experience in light of their own. Their faith identified with the experiences and the long-suffering but the ultimate victory of Jesus. So did their songs.

Sometimes slave preachers and their people reviewed much of the Bible's history with a roll call of the heroes in a chorus, combining Old and New Testament saints as recorded at a mid-nineteenth century North Carolina revival:

A local preacher among them started some well-known hymn of which they would sing a line, and then Joe [the preacher] would improvise a chorus to which they all kept admirable tune and time. A favorite chorus was

I want to die in the field of battle  
Good Lord, when I die;  
I want to die in the field of battle  
Fighting for the Lord.

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<sup>11</sup>Howard Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spirituals Speak of Life and Death* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1975), 21.

This would [be followed by] a line of "I want to die like Moses died," and [then] with Elijah, Daniel, David, and all of the Old Testament saints, and then Peter and John, Martha and Mary would be taken up, until they were exhausted.<sup>12</sup>

The most moving and memorable spirituals are about the death and resurrection of Jesus. In these sorrowful songs of pain and agony, those Black bards sang while lamenting injustice just as the Bible said Jesus suffered unjustly in his times. Just as he received cruel lashes from the whip in silence, so they would endure the floggings from their masters' rawhide with "not a word." But their faith was to be delivered just like Jesus, in their time. Thus they sang about his suffering, and it was their own for "the Lord shall bear my spirit home":

They crucified my Lord, an'  
 He never said a mumblin' word  
 Not a word, not a word, not a word.

They whupped him up the hill, an'  
 He never said a mumblin' word

The blood came tricklin' down, an'  
 He never said a mumblin' word

He bowed his head an' died, an'  
 He never said a mumblin' word

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<sup>12</sup>William Grove Matton, "Memoirs 1859-1887," in *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*, ed. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 351.

Ev'ry time I think about Jesus  
Sho'ly He died on Calvary.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Oh, sometimes, it causes me to Tremble, Tremble, Tremble.  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

But then they sang of his triumph over his foes and over  
death and the grave:

They crucified my Saviour  
and nailed him to the cross  
And the Lord shall bear my home.

He rose! He rose!

He rose from the dead!

And the Lord shall bear my home.

'Twas soon one Sunday morning

Just about the break of day

And the Lord shall bear my home.

He rose! He rose!

He rose from the dead.

And the Lord shall bear my spirit home.

### **The Bible and African-American Hymnody**

The use of hymns introduced to African Americans at the Great Awakening continued after emancipation, often with improvisation, as did the singing of spirituals. Although as the freed slaves became a part of the independent churches (mainly Baptists, Methodists, and a few Presbyterians), a few

educated particularly in the North, tried to forget the “slave songs” and the slave experience.

It took the singing of spirituals by the “Fisk University Jubilee Singers” and the “Hampton Institute Choir” traveling across Europe and America to change their minds. Only after these groups received acclaim from the critical public, as well as approving reception from presidents and royalty, were many aspiring middle-class Black persons able to accept these Bible-based spirituals as music to be sung in their new places of praise.

In the average Black church, especially in the rural South, spirituals based on the Bible and the slave experience are a prominent ingredient of African-American worship along with hymns and other songs from the hymnbooks of various denominations. In fact, until a few years ago and the advent of racially integrated schools, the spirituals were taught and sung in most of the public schools. This is why they could so easily be pressed into service during the Civil Rights Movement. The young people knew these songs and thus could change the words to fit their situations just as their slave ancestors had done. Thus, in the civil rights struggle of the sixties, “Over My Head I Hear Music in the Air” could easily become, “Over My Head I Hear Freedom in the Air,” several verses could be added to fit the situation they were facing—a mean sheriff, firehoses, or vicious attack dogs.

Charles Albert Tindley of Philadelphia, a Methodist minister and son of a slave born on the eastern shore of Maryland, became the link to the spirituals, hymns, and the originator of gospel hymns that gave birth to the gospel songs in the North. Writing hymns to be sung by his more than ten thousand-member church in Philadelphia (later renamed after him as Tindley Temple Methodist Church), this hymn-writer taught

himself how to read by picking up scraps of discarded newspapers and lighting pine knots at night in the woods. He was later to teach himself Greek and Hebrew through a correspondence course from Boston University. He composed more than fifty gospel hymns of tabernacle style, basically an effort to augment the hymns of the church with a "black beat" for congregational singing. Adding a few blues notes, and a bit of "swing," these songs use the Black-folk imagery to interpret oppression as African Americans settled in the North with conditions not unlike those in the South.

In commenting on the Tindley songs, *Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion*, this author suggested that his

...gospel hymns comprised an entirely new genre as he allowed the Negro spirituals to heavily influence the words he produced. Incorporating proverbs, folk images, biblical allusions well-known to black Christians, he had considerable influence on black hymnody and a universal appeal to the human heart with words of hope, grace, love and pity.<sup>13</sup>

In the Tindley songs, the image of God is as Father, God Most High, and the Rock of Ages—all images from the Bible. The references to Jesus are far more numerous, and sometimes one cannot distinguish between the two for Jesus is referred to as Ring, Lily of the Valley, Bright and Morning Star, Truth Divine, Word Divine, Rock of Ages, Shepherd, Fortress, Rose of Sharon, Shield, Sword, Lord of All. Addressed in these songs are not only the social situation of Black people, poor and treated unjustly; these con-

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<sup>13</sup>William B. McClain, *Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 75.

ditions are related to the life and the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament: the Last Supper, prayer in Gethsemane, the Great Commission, the trial, and crucifixion.

### The Bible and Gospel Songs

Charles Albert Tindley and his style of gospel hymns was the genesis of gospel music which flourished with Thomas A. Dorsey, Sallie Martin, Lucie Campbell, J. Herbert Brewster, Doris Akers, James Cleveland, Mahalia Jackson, Dorothy Love, Theodore Frye, Kenneth Morris, Roberta Martin and others. These singers transformed Tindley's congregational gospel *hymns* into the solo, quartet, and choral gospel *songs*.

Thomas A. Dorsey, a former blues singer, became the leader of this genre of religious music. His most famous composition, "Precious Lord Take My Hand" is still the favorite of the Black Church and was requested by Martin Luther King Jr. the night before he died in Memphis. Some of his compositions were sung by whites as well. For example, most whites believe that one of his songs, "There Will be Peace in the Valley," was written by Elvis Presley or Red Foley since they sold millions of records singing it. As the noted musicologist, Eileen Southern, once remarked:

Every small storefront church in the ghetto had its gospel choir; the larger, established Baptist and Methodist churches maintained two or three choirs, one of which was inevitably a gospel choir....The recording industry was discovering that the recordings of gospel singers quickly became 'best sellers,' particularly those of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Clara Ward, and Mahalia Jackson.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 404.

Gospel music is a northern creation and differs from the southern-community-created-spirituals in that they have definite composers and arrangers. But their themes do not differ that much from those of the spirituals and the gospel hymns of Tindley. In later development they have taken rather literally Psalm 150 and Psalm 100 and set them as gospel music, especially in the Pentecostal churches and the charismatic Pentecostal churches of all denominations. Utilizing electric guitars, synthesizers, drums, saxophones, tambourines, cymbals, trumpets, and other instruments, this practice has affected all gospel music in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Many gospel songs relate the biblical message of good news to lives of people who walk the pathway of trouble. There is always room for improvisation, spontaneity, freedom of expression, and ornamentation. Their basic messages have been summarized in five categories by the late S. Paul Schilling and modified for this presentation:<sup>15</sup>

- *Our trust is in God.* Though there may be doubt, "God is real." As Kenneth Morris wrote and sang, "Yes, God is real, for I can feel him deep down within."
- *Jesus can be depended on to save and guide us.* Many gospel songs relate experiences of the New Testament and the trials of life. As the late Sam Cooke used to sing with the "Soul Stirrers": "Jesus, be a fence all around me....Oh, I know you and I know you will."

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<sup>15</sup>See S. Paul Schilling, *The Faith We Sing* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 185ff.

- *Although God can be counted on to come through, we must do our part in life's ups and downs.* As one gospel song puts it: "I can put my trust in Jesus, can he put his trust in me?" And another classic gospel song by Doris Akers:<sup>16</sup>

Lord, don't move that mountain  
But give me the strength to climb it.  
Please don't move that stumbling block,  
But lead me, Lord, around it.

- *Our aim in the journey is to have a right relationship with God, not possessions or prestige.* Therefore, we plead to God with Margaret Pleasant Douroux by way of the Psalmist: "Give me a clean heart so I may serve thee. Lord, fix my heart so that I may be used by thee." Another gospel song writer, Kenneth Morris, declares that "Christ Is All."
- *Though our lives are full of trouble, we can look forward to eternal joy with God.* Aretha Franklin, as a fourteen-year old child in the church in Detroit where her father, Rev. C. L. Franklin, served as pastor, sang and played: "The Day is Past and Gone" and "Death shall soon disrobe us all of what we now possess here." But there is the assurance that "We shall behold him" and "behold his face." And then we "shall join the heavenly choir, sing and never get tired." With Walter Hawkins, we are "Going up yonder;" we can take the pain, the heartaches they bring. With Andraé Crouch we are sure that "Soon and very soon, we are going to see the king." With the Book of Revelation, the gospel

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<sup>16</sup>Copyright 1958 by Manna Music, Inc.



song reminds us: There will be “no more crying there, no more dying there; we are going to see the King.”

### **The Bible, the Future, and African-American Music**

There is a current trend in music of the African-American Church to use a good deal of “praise music”—in which verses are taken literally from the Bible and opened up to a fundamentalism not characteristic of this church. Especially used are the Psalms, passages from Revelation, and the Acts of the Apostle (the advent of the Holy Spirit as the Church was born at Pentecost). These verses are sung by choirs with encouragement to the congregation to join them in a rhythmic beat, handclapping, standing and swaying, and a sort of testimony is interspersed by song leaders and soloists.

The Charismatic-Pentecostal movement in all branches of the church has increased the use of the Bible in song as well as in study and preaching. The risk here is that there is no effort to interpret the passages and to put them in their historical and social context within the Bible itself. There is little use of narrative as is true of the spirituals in which the songs not only use biblical citations, but also express a point of view about survival, liberation, and freedom. When the slaves and their descendants sang “Go Down Moses, Way down in Egypt Land tell old Pharaoh to let my people go,” they were not just singing a song; they were expressing a theological point of view about who God was and who they were in relation to their God.

### Conclusion

The use of the Bible in worship and music must be welcomed, especially among young people who often come from homes, neighborhoods, and schools where they hear nothing of the Bible. The onus, though, is on those who have studied the Bible, theology, sociology, history and experienced the struggle for liberation and freedom, to interpret these passages in the light of the social reality of the Black experience in America. The challenge is for others to write gospel music and other forms of religious music that use biblical concepts; satisfying our souls and speaking to our social situation of continued oppression, the deprivation of our young people, the poverty of our community, and the attending problems in a racially divided nation and world. There is a need for new "songs of Zion" in this strange land that strengthen our resolve to give God the glory while we work at changing systems that degrade, deny, dehumanize, and debase.



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## Conclusion

The use of the Bible in teaching and study must be a renewed, especially among young people who often come from homes, neighborhoods, and schools where they hear nothing of the Bible. The main thought is we, those who have studied the Bible, theology, sociology, history and experienced the struggle for liberation and freedom, to interpret these passages in the light of the social reality of the Black experience in America. The challenge is for others to write gospel music and other forms of religious music that use biblical concepts and bring out words and speaking to our social situation of continued oppression, the deprivation of our young people, the poverty of our community, and the attending problems in a racially divided nation and world. There is a need for new "songs to Zion" in this strange land that strengthen our resolve to give God the glory while we work at changing systems that degrade, deny, dehumanize, and debase.





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