

# SPIRITUALS AS GOD'S REVELATION TO THE AFRICAN SLAVE IN AMERICA



A Theological Analysis by  
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**I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.**

Frederick Douglass<sup>1</sup>

**What are these songs, and what do they mean? I know little of music and can say nothing in technical phrase, but I know something of men, and knowing them, I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world.**

William Edward Burghardt Dubois<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This quote was taken from Frederick Douglass' spellbinding autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (see full citation in "Works Cited" section on p. 36).

<sup>2</sup> This quote was taken from W.E.B. Dubois' prophetic collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk* (see full citation in "Works Cited" section on p. 36).

## **Slavery: A Historical Background**

The history of the African Slave Trade conducted largely by British and European colonists to the Americas is well-documented and a major point of departure if one hopes to say something meaningful about the slave spirituals of America with regard to their theological significance (attached photo taken from <http://www.michaelcgibson.com/img-port/Slavery.jpg>).



Certainly, Africans were not the only people to experience enslavement in the history of humankind. Amiri Baraka points out that the Babylonians, Israelites, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Romans, and Greeks all propagated and fell victim to the institution of slavery.

Africans themselves participated in the selling and buying of human slaves before the first Europeans entered the continent of Africa. Melville Herskovits writes: “Slavery [had] long existed in the entire region [of West Africa], and in at least one of its kingdoms, Dahomey, a kind of plantation system was found under which an absentee ownership, with the ruler as principle, demanded the utmost return from the estates, and thus created conditions of labor resembling the regime the slaves were to encounter in the New World” (Baraka 1).

Nevertheless, the enslavement of Africans in North America marked a new and peculiar twist to the institution of slavery in human history. For the first time a race of people became identified as non-human. One quote from a white Southern actress of the 1830s makes the point:

*“The only exception that I have met with yet among our boat voices to the high tenor which they seem all [slaves] to possess is in the person of an individual named Isaac, a basso profundo of the deepest dye, who nevertheless never attempts to produce with his different register any different effects in the chorus by venturing a second, but sings like the rest in unison, perfect unison, of time and tune. By-the-by, this individual does speak, and therefore I presume he is not an ape, orangutan, chimpanzee, or gorilla; but I could not, I confess, have conceived it possible that the presence of articulate sounds, and the absence of an articulate tail, should make, externally at least, so completely the only appreciable difference between a man and a monkey, as they appear to do in this individual ‘black brother.’ Such stupendous long thin hands, and long flat feet, I did never see off a large quadruped of the ape species. But, as I said before, Isaac speaks, and I am much comforted thereby” (Baraka 2-3).*



This offhand quote from a white woman in the South expresses the general belief of many white slave owners. Although there were humane moments between Africans and European settlers in North America before emancipation, generally the belief in the sub-humanity of the African was widespread. “It was this essential condition of non-humanity that characterized the African slave’s lot in this country (America) of his captivity....” (Baraka 3). (Attached picture taken from <http://www.stanford.edu/class/history29s>).

A chief goal of American slavery was to destroy all natural ties the slaves might have to their humanity. Family ties, language, homeland, religion, and education were systematically denied to the majority of slaves. “When the slaves were taken from their homeland, the primary social unit was destroyed, and all immediate tribal and family units were ruthlessly broken. This meant the severing of the link that gave the individual African a sense of *persona*. There is no more hapless victim than one who is cut off from

family, from language, from one's roots" (Thurman 35). Sadly, "in instance after instance, husbands were sold from wives, children were separated from parents; a complete withering attack was made on the sanctity of the home and family" (Thurman 36).

Imagine the helplessness and great uncertainty the slaves must have felt when the ground seemed to nearly slip from under them. Listen to the cries of the enslaved African women who "were constantly at the mercy of the lust and rapacity of the master himself, while the slave husband or father was powerless to intervene" (Thurman 36). Nothing was certain—the world must have seemed to forsaken the slave.



Given the cruelty and inhumanity of the slave enterprise it is then all the more astounding that there arose from the slaves' mind and heart a music and song that would change the course of American history and the world's understanding of the human spirit—the slave spirituals. The threat of annihilation did not wither away their souls, but opened a deep reservoir of hope that would be expressed in the most beautiful music known to American soil. The slave spirituals are African America's testimony— nay, humanity's testimony to the unshakable quality of the human spirit, and because of their ability to reveal God's work, this project will argue that the spirituals demonstrate three important aspects of God's revelation (the attached picture above is taken from [http://homepage.sunrise.ch/mysunrise/holzer.ramsen/body\\_illustrationen.html](http://homepage.sunrise.ch/mysunrise/holzer.ramsen/body_illustrationen.html)).



### **History of the Slave Spirituals**

The history and origin of the spirituals is hotly debated by scholars. Miles M. Fisher argues that the spirituals, although newly formed by enslaved Africans, demonstrate important similarities to songs in West Africa. He asserts that both the West African song and the slave spirituals were primarily concerned with the entire history of the people (Fisher 1). “Whenever African Negroes assembled they accompanied their songs and dances with percussion, wind, and stringed instruments. They used their voices and their bodies as well as instruments in making music....African music was employed during love-making, at marriage, at child birth, at the child’s initiation into the tribal cult; in farming, fishing, and hunting; in the educational process...for recreation such as telling tales, proverbs, riddles, and enigmas; and for promoting the military spirit. There were songs at feasts for the dead, at wakes, and at funerals” (Fisher 5). African music is a towering historical, cultural and religious text of the struggles and strivings of African peoples.

The slave spirituals are no different. The slave spirituals must be understood broadly to encapsulate the diverse dimensions of the slave’s experience as a continuation of the West African tradition. “The historical burden of the Negro spirituals was settled upon by another who wrote that ‘there is more, far more than the ordinary Christian zeal embedded in Negro spirituals. They are not mere religious hymns written or recited to sweeten the service or improve the ritual. They are the aching, poignant cry of an entire people’” (Fisher 25). This fact is corroborated by the well-known use of the spirituals by slaves for religious purposes, as forms of communication, as melodic geographical maps toward freedom lands, satirical songs, as comforters of the unique experience of women,

and as love songs. The slaves' whole lives were embedded and sewn into the fabric of the spiritual music.

Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to neglect the deep religious meaning of the spirituals. Of the religious meaning of the slave spirituals Howard Thurman wrote "When the master gave the slave his (the master's) God, for a long time it meant that it was difficult to disentangle religious experience from slavery sanction. The existence of these songs is in itself a monument to one of the most striking instances on record in which a people forged a weapon of offense and defense out of a psychological shackle. By some amazing but vastly creative spiritual insight the slave undertook the redemption of a religion that the master had profaned in his midst" (Thurman 36). For Thurman, the spirituals were religious songs that spoke of God's revelatory and redemptive power through suffering.

It is this profound witness to the nature of God's revelation in the spirituals that is the subject of this project's theological analysis. Our goal is to allow the spirituals to speak to the reader about the nature of God's revelation and to discover three theological insights that will deepen the religious seekers understanding of God's revelation.

### **Charlie: “The Slave Who Joined the Yanks”**

In order to begin a clear theological analysis of the slave spiritual “Wade in the Water,” with the intention of proving that God’s revelation is the ultimate answer to the question posed by the slaves suffering, I will first set the spiritual within a particular slave’s life. This will give the spiritual a deeper and clearer meaning for the reader who dares intimacy with its inner feeling.

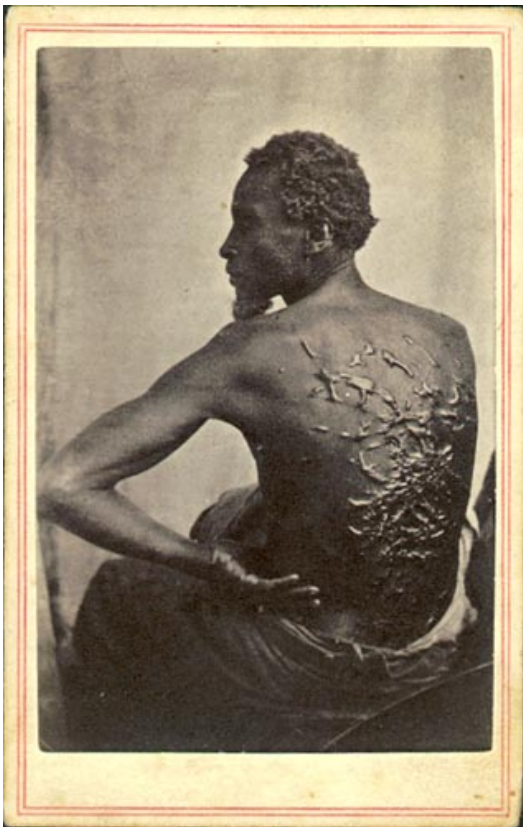
In the years directly preceding the American Civil War, slaves in the South were subject to the hopeful but terrifying chance of gaining freedom from the horrible institution of slavery by joining northern soldiers. One such slave was Charlie, a young man enslaved by native Virginians in the South. Charlie’s life as a slave both before and after the war is illustrative of the cruelty of slavery and the immediate shock of the Civil War.

Charlie’s most vivid memories of his boyhood were the whippings he received by the plantation owners. Charlie woke up in the morning before sunrise to work all day around the house of his “mistress and Mars’ Bill” (Johnson 24). Charlie was often wrongfully beaten for the laziness of those he served. Of one instance Charlie wrote “Little Missey was sleeping late....Ole Missey told me to go and make up her bed. I went in, and she didn’t want to get up so that I could make up her bed....she got mad, jumped up in the bed, and said, ‘You black dog, get out of here. I’ll get up when I’m ready.’ With that she slapped me as hard as she could....I saw stars....I swung at her....I was just about ready to jump on the bed and choke the life out of her when Ole Missey happened in....Ole Missey turned on me and said, ‘What do you mean, you black devil? I’ll strap



your back good for this'....She tied my crossed hands to the bedposts and gave me a lashing with a buggy whip" (Johnson 24-25).

Charlie got whipped for the Ole Mistresses' penchant for stealing from her husband as well. Of one instance Charlie recalls seeing her steal money from her husband's pants' pocket. In a rage the husband stormed towards Charlie to discover if he stole the money. In fear Charlie told the truth to Mar's Bill that the Ole Mistress had



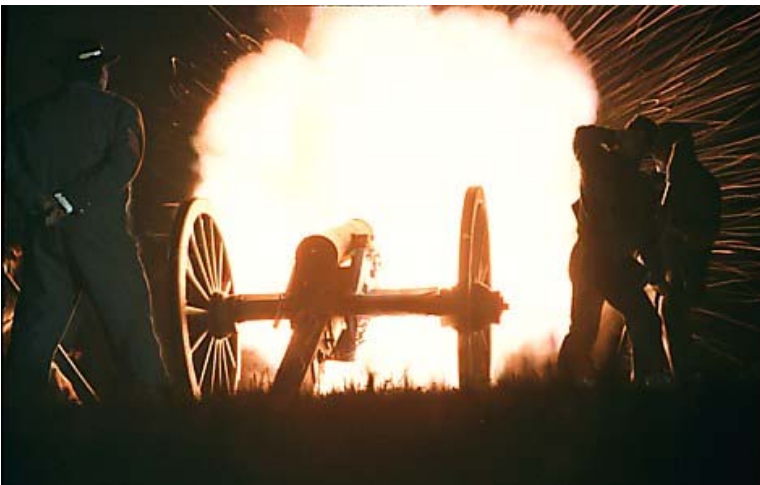
taken the cash. Soon after "She got awful mad, and when Mars' Bill went out she came over to me and shook her fist in my face and said, 'You black, ugly devil, as soon as your master leaves I am going to tear your back to pieces'....Sure enough, as soon as Mars' Bill left she called me in....She grabbed me by the back of the head and pulled it down between her knees. She had me there and commenced to working on me" (Johnson 26). (Attached picture taken from <http://www.behold.com/content/Catalog28.htm>).

Beaten persistently, Charlie often found solace in his biological brother Jeff, who worked on the field of the plantation. Once when the two of them were starving from lack of food, they stole chickens and cooked them together "guts and all" (Johnson 28). He and Jeff were often beaten for stealing food to eat, and probably because of Jeff's hard labor in the sun he often thought of escaping to freedom (Johnson 30).

Charlie's estrangement from Jeff when Jeff finally did escape during the Civil War to fight for the Union was hard to bear. "Jeff was gone, and I sometimes cried because he was my only brother and I felt lonesome all the time" (Johnson 30). No doubt, beaten, hungry and torn from family Charlie often despaired and sent out cries of anguish.

It must have seemed like the world had been removed from under him. It was a miracle then when Jeff returned to bring his brother to freedom's land. Although scared, Charlie took what food and belongings he could and dashed off into the woods with his brother to meet the union soldiers not too far off. He had the faint hope that he would be free, and that his circumstance might be different.

His glimmering hope soon turned to his most terrifying despair, however, when he reached the union soldiers. Instead of freedom he found cannonballs destroying great patches of land all around him and he did not know if he would survive. In the confusion of running bodies, explosions, and sharp commands Charlie became lost in the wilderness. "Such scrambling...I never saw....The shots were flying like bees, but I



slipped away and ran...until I came to an old hollow tree...I crawled up in there and hid. I thought I was safe, but...a cannonball came over and cut off the top of a tree nearby....I got

up and ran. I ran nearly all night scared to death” (Johnson 34-35). (Attached picture taken from <http://www.homepages.dsu.edu/jankej/civilwar/pastphot.htm> ).

Scared to death, no mother, father or brother to rely upon, face to face with the imminent threat of annihilation Charlie called out “O Lord, save me, save me!” (Johnson 36). Charlie was in a constant state of fear and shock. He “was just nervous and scared. Times were so desperate along these days. All I did was to call on the Lord. ‘Lord , save me; save me, Lord!’ He saved me, and that is why I trust in him today” (Johnson 37).

Charlie did eventually obtain his physical freedom from slavery, but what is more remarkable is the spiritual freedom he gained from his encounter with God in the time of his deepest suffering and despair. A few years after Charlie gained his freedom he met his former plantation owner Mars’ Bill and had this to say to him:

*“...you whipped me. I used to serve you, work for you, almost nurse you, and if anything bad happened to you I would have fought for you, for I am a man among men. What is in me, though, is not in you. I used to drive you to church and peep through the door to see you all worship, but you ain’t right yet, Marster. I love you as though you never hit me a lick, for the God I serve is a God of love, and I can’t go to his kingdom with hate in my heart....I done left the past behind me.’ I had felt the power of God and tasted his love, and this had killed the spirit of hate in my heart...”* (Johnson 40).

God revealed God’s redemptive power to this slave in the time of his deepest trouble and the result was trust in God and an inner freedom from hate in his soul. It is clear that God became the ultimate answer posed by Charlie’s threat of annihilation. Certainly out of Charlie’s life and slaves like him must have arisen a spiritual like “Wade in the Water:”

**“Wade In the Water”**

**Chorus:**

Wade in the water (children).

Wade in the water.  
 Wade in the water.  
 God's gonna trouble the water.

**Verse 1:**

If you don't believe I've been redeemed,  
 God's gonna trouble the water.  
 I want you to follow him on down to Jordan stream.  
 (I said) My God's gonna trouble the water.  
 You know chilly water is dark and cold.  
 (I know my) God's gonna trouble the water.  
 You know it chills my body but not my soul.  
 (I said my) God's gonna trouble the water.  
 (Come on let's)

Repeat Chorus

**Verse 2:**

Now if you should get there before I do,  
 (I know) God's gonna trouble the water.  
 Tell all my friends that I'm comin' too.  
 (I know) God's gonna trouble the water.  
 Sometimes I'm up Lord and sometimes I'm down.  
 (You know my) God's gonna trouble the water.  
 Sometimes I'm level to the ground  
 God's gonna trouble the water.  
 (I know) God's gonna trouble the water.

Repeat Chorus two times

**“Wade in the Water”**

Lesson Connection: Harriet Tubman Integrated Unit: Lesson 3  
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**“Wade in the Water” and God’s Revelation as an Answer to “Nonbeing”**

The beauty of this spiritual is that the slave took the story of the ill man of chapter 5 of the Gospel of John who sat by the pool in hopes of being carried into the stirring waters, and applied it to his or her own situation existential doubt (Thurman 89). The

slave affirmed that no matter the duration of one's suffering, God will answer one's cry by troubling the waters of healing and redemption ("Now if you should get there before I do, ( know) God's gonna trouble the water").

Note the first two lines of verse one: "If you don't believe I've been redeemed, God's gonna trouble the water." The first line testifies to the chronic presence of doubt in the slaves' lives, but immediately the slave stubbornly retorts "God is gonna trouble the water." Slowly, the oft repeated line "God is gonna trouble the water" seeps into the very soul of the listener until we too are convinced that no matter what problem we may have, or seemingly insurmountable condition we may be in, there will be a moment when God reveals God-self to us and takes away our sorrows. Of this revelatory experience Howard Thurman wrote "This is the great disclosure: that there is at the heart of life a Heart. When such an insight is possessed by the human spirit and possesses the human spirit, a vast and awe inspiring tranquility irradiates the life. This is the message of the spiritual. Do not shrink from moving confidently out into choppy seas. Wade in the water, because God is troubling the water" (Thurman 94).

God's revelation in the experience of suffering is expressed poignantly by Tillich's discussion of ontology (although we realize experience is a medium and not a norm for revelation for Tillich which is Jesus Christ). For Tillich, the human being is an ontological problem. The fact of existence both points to the human being's finite nature and his or her orientation towards something prior to his or her own existence which is infinite. This self-estrangement from one's ultimate origins is a constant cause of human existential anxiety. "Selfhood, individuality, dynamics, and freedom all include manifoldness, definiteness, differentiation, and limitation. To be something is not to be

something else. To be here and now in the process of becoming is not to be there and then. All categories of thought and reality express this situation. To be something is to be finite” (Tillich 190).

The human being is necessarily confronted with his or own finitude and the threat of “non-being” or of not being one amongst other beings. To face this threat of nothingness would seem to be the horrific fate and privilege of the human spirit. To acknowledge that one is finite is also to acknowledge one’s relationship to the infinite (Tillich 190). In our uncertainty is the possibility of becoming open to God’s revelation.

It is this insight, that in one’s deepest moments of despair there is the grand opportunity to meet the presence of God, to experience God’s revelatory power, that is the extraordinary insight of the slave spiritual “Wade in the Water.” Much like all human beings, the slave was imprisoned by the categories of the finite universe (Tillich 190). But the slaves, much like Charlie, were forced to face the fact of their own imprisonment, to be deeply aware of it, because of the extreme threat of non-being in their daily lives. Searching for an answer beyond all answers, and a power beyond all powers, for the very “ground of being” itself beyond all imprisonment, the slave cried out “Lord, Lord, save me.” The slave realized that in “the threat of nonbeing which is implied in existence, God must be called the infinite power of being which resists the threat of non-being....God must be called the infinite ground of courage” (Tillich 64). It is this theological insight, that human finitude is an existential cry answered by God’s revelation that is given in those first lines “If you don’t believe I’ve been redeemed, God’s gonna trouble the water” and is the theological insight of the spiritual “Wade in the Water”.

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## **SPIRITUALS AND THE OPRESSION OF THE BLACK FEMALE SLAVE**

In this section we will seek to uncover deeper insight into God’s revelation in the suffering of African female slaves through the analysis of certain slave spirituals.” We will illustrate a particular account of an African-American slave women in Antebellum America in order to provide a window through which we might analyze the suffering of enslaved women and the spirituals that arose from that suffering. The main theological insight of this



section is that the unique suffering of women is a condition of God’s revelation (attached picture taken from <http://americanhistory.si.edu/vidal/images/slave.jpg>).

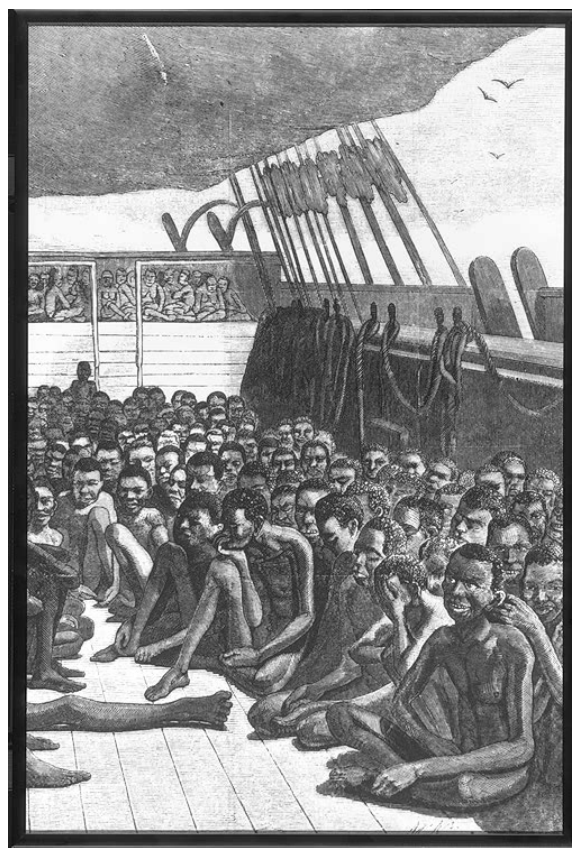
### **The African Women as Slave**

African women worked equally as hard as African men in the slavery system. They were expected to contribute to pick cotton on the plantation and were often brutally whipped. Their hardships included their children and husband sold. Some of these children were mulattos— children of their own masters. In addition, “many women were exploited as ‘breeders’”; others were treated as objects of sexual pleasure. William Wells Brown’s sister was sold into a life of enforced prostitution with a sensual master, who bought, at the same time, three other women “for his own use” (Braxton 20). In addition, the horrors of watching their children get whipped was a heartbreaking experience for many slave mothers. One narrative notes, “observing the other slave

mothers on the plantation, her chief fears are for her daughter, I daily saw him beat other little ones. The spirit of the mothers was so crushed by the lash that they stood by, without courage to remonstrate” (Braxton 34).

In the face of these horrors, many African female slaves chose Christianity as a route through identification with Jesus’ suffering. It was often not an easy choice for many enslaved African women to become Christians.

In fact, “while Christianity was emerging as the religious tradition in America, black women had to reach into the depths of their own faith to endure the consequences of the daily contradictions of practicing Christians....they were raped by Christian plantation owners....they were ferried to America on slave ships with the name Jesus painted on the sides..... Christian captains allowed men and women to lay in excrement and stench throughout the Atlantic voyage” (Gill xx).



Many slave owners whipped their slaves to the point of death during the week and then dutifully went to church on Sunday. Christianity was even used to legitimize slavery. “During slavery blacks were encouraged to be obedient slaves because it was the will of God. After all, Paul did say ‘slaves obey your masters’, and because of the ‘curse of Ham,’ blacks have been considered inferior to whites” (Cone 32). (Attached picture

“Africans on Board the Slave Bark *Wildfire*, April 30, 1860,” from *Harper's Weekly*, June 2, 1860; taken from <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/exhibit/aopart1b.html>,

This is another unfortunate example of scripture being taken out of context to validate inexplicable cruelty to humanity and is a false use of the notion of God's revelation.

### **Vignettes of the Female African slave suffering**

Suffering was often inevitable and unlike the myth of the fragile Southern Caucasian woman, the black female was not treated like cherished property. Here are a few examples:

*“Uncle Edd Shirley remembered, “I once saw a light colored gal tied to the rafters of a barn, and her master whipped her until blood ran down her back and made a large pool on the ground” (Goatley 25).*

*Minnie Fulkes mother “was beaten because she refused to succumb (sexually) to an overseer. “Dis ol’ man now, would start beatin’ her nekkid till the blood run down her back to her heels. I took an ‘seed th’ whelps an ‘scars for my own self wid dese her two eyes” (Goatley 27).*

*Luke Dixon related “They sold Grandma’s (Dixon) daughter to somebody in Texas. She cried and begged to let them be together. They didn’t pay no tension to her. She couldn’t talk but she made them know she didn’t want to be parted” (Goatley 21).*

The pain of cruel separation, emotional and physical beatings was the everyday reality for the female slave. Grandma Dixon's, as well as other women's, living faith and hope in Jesus Christ who revealed himself in their suffering became a crucial part of their survival. This fact is poignantly illustrated by certain spirituals.

### **The African Female Slave and the Essence of spirituals**

As Grandma Dixon watched her child sold from her forever, her wrenching, sorrowful heart must have often begged to die. This popular spiritual would have characterized her earthly weariness and bonding with the suffering of Jesus Christ.

#### ***“Shall I Die?”***

Believer, O shall I die?  
O my army shall I die?

Jesus die, shall I die?  
Die on the cross, shall I die?

Die, die, die, shall I die?  
Jesus da coming, shall I die?

Run for to meet him, shall I die?  
Weep like a weeper, shall I die?

Mourn like a mourner, shall I die?  
Cry like a crier, shall I die (Goatley 57).

Dying and death were constant realities for slaves like Grandma Dixon. Her parents, her children, her spouse and herself were constantly endangered by whippings, lynchings and wholesale extermination from slave masters. “Just as Jesus died, the slaves would die. Further, the reality of death is indicated in that members of the community knew what it was to weep and mourn the death of others. It is clear that death was a well-known companion to slaves” (Hopkins 143).

## **Theological Analysis:**

### **The Revelation of Jesus Christ and His Suffering**

Revelation of God for the female slave was closely equated to fully understanding the depth of Jesus' suffering which is expressed in the above Spiritual. God was a real help to women and "the God of these



spirituals was no abstraction, but a Being who took an interest in the lowly slave and interceded in his behalf" (Goatley 49). As we look at the Jesus whose death is intimately described in "Shall I Die?" we understand that Grandma. Dixon would have felt a special bond with this man who also faced a cruel death on earth. "This confidence in Jesus' understanding of the troubles of slave life is related in some way to the slaves' understanding of the suffering and death of Jesus. Slaves had an intimate awareness of death" (Goatley 57). Lyrical rhapsodizing about death also depicts the understanding that as death for Jesus was necessary for eternal redemption, so too was death a means of release from the female slave's earthly sorrows (attached picture taken from [archive.wn.com/2004/03/17/1400/moviehello](http://archive.wn.com/2004/03/17/1400/moviehello)).

An interesting point to note is the fact that unlike many of today's joyous resurrection hymns, many spirituals did not focus on Jesus' renewal and resurrection on earth. "They normally end with Jesus dying, dead or buried. The "Shall I Die?" spiritual indicates the intimacy and intensity with which the slaves related to the agony of the crucified Jesus"

(Goatley 89). They did not focus on the earthly miracle and joyousness of Christ's subsequent resurrection. "The finality of Jesus lies in the totality of his existence in complete freedom as the oppressed one who reveals through his death and resurrection that God is present in all dimensions of human liberation. His death is the revelation of the freedom of God, taking upon himself the totality of human oppression" (Cone 118).

We should also note that many of these songs interchanged God and Jesus Christ. "There is no evidence that antebellum African Americans made an ontological distinction between God as Father and Jesus Christ as God's beloved son. This theological conception includes the implication that as Jesus suffered in his death and as humans go through the extremities of human suffering, God suffers with God's creation" (Goatley 73). God had an intimate connection with suffering women as a condition for God's revelatory power.

### **A Further Explanation**

The female slave met her personal Christ in the form of Jesus that would conform to her reality of extreme suffering. This image was crystallized in her Spirituals that revolved around the suffering dying Christ. The female slave had seemingly insurmountable odds to overcome. Cone noted that black women were "double minorities" that had been oppressed in regards to her blackness, her poorness and her sex.

In light of these inequities, it was not possible to just adopt the Caucasian image of Jesus Christ that allowed her white, male, affluent oppressors to worship at his feet on Sundays and beat her on Mondays. In fact, "when people reach the sphere of extreme suffering, fundamental questions about God surface" (Goatley ix). The fundamental

question for the female slave was where were God and Jesus in the midst of her suffering. Was the female slave also made in the image of God who cared about her plight? This question was crucial when “the physical darkness of slaves was interpreted to indicate their anthropological inferiority in relation to the white slaveholding population” (Goatley 16).

That search often culminated in the Old Testament’s God of the Exodus and the New Testament’s crucified Jesus. In these images, “slaves found commonality in their suffering and that of God’s people—Israel (Goatley 4).

### **Cone on the Revelation of the Experience of Suffering**

The Spirituals sing about dying, weeping and mourning on the cross. It is evident that Jesus was in deep pain on the Cross. God understands suffering in the human race and through his identification with the Israelites pain, could also identify with the pain of the female slave. “The essence of the biblical revelation is that by electing Israelite slaves as the people of God and by becoming the Oppressed One in Jesus Christ, the human race is made to understand that God is known where human beings experience humiliation and suffering” (Cone 64).

It was clear that Jesus and suffering went hand in hand for the female slave’s experience. Cone noted that “the life of Jesus also discloses that freedom is bound up with suffering. It is not possible to be for him and not realize that one has chosen an existence in suffering. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you ...falsely on my account— Matthew 5:11” (Cone 101). How much more could the female slave



feel that she has been falsely accused of inhumanity, indignity and injustice? As Jesus on the cross suffered wrongfully in the Spiritual, so does the black female slave.

### **LaCugna on the Revelation of Suffering**

Finally, the African female slave realized that her suffering resonated with the suffering life of Christ. “Feminist theology might be found in the universal self communication of God in Christ the gospel of the passion and death of Jesus” (LaCugna 24). This prejudice against Christ that resulted in an unfair trial and unfair death represented an unjust society that the African slave lived in. Indeed, “sometimes the theologian means feminist experience, a response to socialized experience in an awareness of sexism and patriarch or a consciousness of the exploited or marginal status of women in the systems of society” (LaCugna 23). The exploitation of Jesus was both a ministry and a call to enslaved African women in the depths of their own exploitation by the slave institution.

Jacqueline Grant notes, “the experience of African American women is interpreted as Jesus as co-sufferer, divine friend and Lord who knows the troubles they’ve seen. Since he is in solidarity with the “least of the people,” he is with black women in their everyday lives, affirming their basic worth and thereby inspiring active hope to resist dehumanization” (LaCugna 117). Jesus revealed himself through suffering on the cross and his message of hope prevails even in the midst of extreme evil.

James Cone, Catherine Mowry LaCugna and others corroborate the meaning of Jesus’ suffering to the enslaved African woman as expressed in the Spirituals. Through the embodiment of the Spirituals African women expressed their intimacy with Christ in

suffering as a part of God's revelation. As they cried in deep despair, so did Jesus in the song "Mourn like a mourner, shall I die? Cry like a crier, shall I die?" The female slave often died a horrible death in the bondage of slavery, but through God's revelation in Jesus Christ as expressed in the Spirituals she did not have to die alone.

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## **SPIRITUALS AND THE LIBERATION OF THE BLACK SLAVE**

Despite having limited or no access to formal education, slaves in America, through innovation and necessity, fashioned a melodious mode of discourse through which they could speak about their experience and beyond it. Howard Thurman reflects, “The unique factor of the inspiring revelation is that...even without highly specialized tools or skills, the universe responded to them with overwhelming power” (Fluker 57).

While the average slave may not have grasped the complexity of the universe, they nonetheless found comfort in their unique relationship with the God who created it. The resilient slave refused to have her worldview limited by the horrific realities of life in chains. Rather, she was determined to utilize nature, experience and the Bible<sup>3</sup> to create a new world through song. Such songs, she believed, possessed the power to transform the singer and the situation. And with God’s help, the slave could confidently sing of a freedom that would one day become her destiny.

This section of our project will examine slave Spirituals in the context of liberation theology. We will explore the meaning of revelation vis-à-vis the slave’s movement towards freedom. We have included a brief narrative sketch of the life of Harriet Tubman as the looking glass for the untitled Spiritual (“When dat ar ole chariot comes...”). The selected song speaks to her journey towards emancipation as well as the slave community’s ultimate goal of liberation through the revelation of God.

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<sup>3</sup> Howard Thurman refers to these three elements as “sources of raw materials over which the slave placed the alchemy of his desiring and aspiring” (Fluker 57).

## **Harriet Tubman**

Harriet Tubman, the granddaughter of an African slave, was born into slavery on American soil circa 1820. Almost thirty years later on one fateful night in 1849 Tubman mustered the courage to escape her master's plantation in Maryland and head north to Philadelphia and freedom. Soon after reaching the North, however, she became discontent with the reality of her freedom. Her family and friends were still suffering under the cruel yoke of bondage so she was not truly free. Bolstered by an



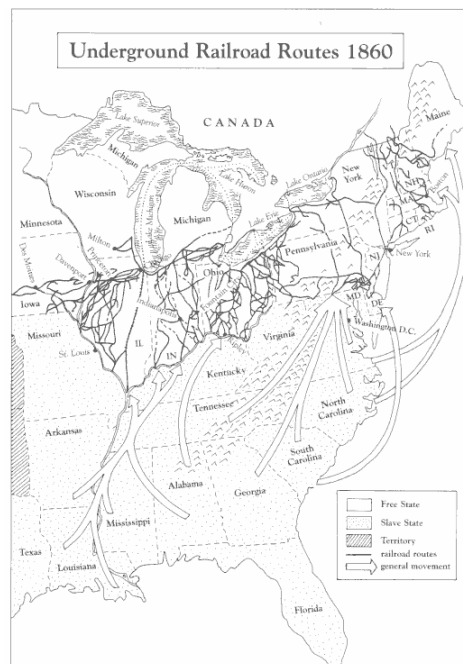
unflinching determination and a sense of divine purpose, Tubman would return to the South *nineteen* times, and single-handedly lead over 300 slaves to freedom (Bradford 6). “No fear of the lash, the blood-hound, or the fiery stake could divert her from her self-imposed task of leading as many as possible of her people ‘from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage’” (Bradford 11). (Attached picture of Harriet Tubman taken from <http://education.ucdavis.edu/NEW/STC/lesson/socstud/railroad/tubman.htm>)

Hence, Tubman earned the title “The Moses of her people.” At the time of her decision to escape from slavery the North was a place she has only heard about but never experienced. Nonetheless, with sheer determination, faith and fortitude she pushed forward to the “land of Canaan”— of freedom. Amazingly, Tubman navigated her way to

the North without the help of a compass or map. She relied on the North Star and Providence for guidance. It is a profound testimony to God’s powers of liberation through God’s revelation to the oppressed that Harriet Tubman never lost a passenger, that is, “of the three hundred and more fugitives whom Harriet piloted from slavery, not one was ever recaptured” (Bradford 46).

It is important to note that even as a young girl, Tubman was troubled with the harsh realities of slave life. In her own mind she often pondered, “Why should such things be?” and “Is there no deliverance for my people?” (Bradford 16). Rather than wait for a response to these questions, she would take matters into her own hands. Unwilling to rely on someone else to rescue her and her people, she resolved to take it upon herself to lead them to the “promised land.”

Importantly, Harriet Tubman credited her superhuman feats to her unyielding belief in God. She believed that her faith provided her with strength to move mountains and the wisdom to avoid danger. Her God was both personal and accessible revealing God’s wisdom in her journey towards freedom. Her religion was real and concrete. She would pray “when she felt a need” and trusted that God would “set the matter right” no matter how bleak the situation (Bradford 23). She served a God who could



not only alter circumstances but who could also transform lives. To the slaves whom she directed through the “Underground Railroad”<sup>4</sup>, Harriet Tubman was regarded as God’s chosen emissary and their guardian angel (attached map taken from <http://education.ucdavis.edu/NEW/STC/lesson/socstud/railroad/Map.htm>).

Her religious convictions led her to once as a slave to lay in bed praying for her master’s spiritual recovery. She trusted that even a person as heartless as her master could still become a Christian. She prayed to God to “convert ole master...change dat man’s heart, and make him a Christian” (Bradford 23-24). Upon hearing her prayer, the master planned to send her and two of her brothers to work on a chain gang in the deep South. Subsequently, Tubman changed her prayer to: “Lord, if you ain’t never going to change dat man’s heart, *kill him*, Lord, and take him out of de way, so he won’t do no more mischief” (Bradford 24). James Cone writes, “the sin of the oppressed is not that they are responsible for their own enslavement...Their sin is that of trying to ‘understand’ enslavers, to ‘love’ them’ on their own terms...they should have killed their oppressors instead of trying to ‘love’ them” (Cone 51). Harriet Tubman’s master died not long after she said her prayer.

### **A Liberation Spiritual**

Slaves were not allowed to talk to one another during working hours. As a result, they developed an ingenious system of communicating via song. These songs are most often referred to as “Spirituals.” Since these Spirituals typically did not arouse the

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<sup>4</sup> The Underground Railroad was the name given to a covert network of freed slaves and abolitionists who provided assistance to fugitive slaves traveling to Canada or the free states in the US.



suspicions of the masters, they were able to cleverly transmit to other slaves “something more than met the ear” (Bradford 27).

On the day of her planned escape with her brothers (ca 1840), Ms. Tubman thought it only fitting to bid a proper farewell to those persons whom she might never see again (Bradford 27). These are the words she sang on that fateful day:

When dat ar ole chariot comes,  
I'm gwine to lebe you,  
I'm boun' for de promised land,  
Frien's, I'm gwine to lebe you.

I'm sorry, frien's, to lebe you,  
Farewell! Oh, farewell!  
But I'll meet you in de mornin',  
Farewell! Oh, farewell!

I'll meet you in de mornin',  
When you reach de promised land;  
On de oder side of Jordan,  
For I'm boun' for de promised land (Bradford 28).

### **Spirituals and Liberation**

The Spirituals of liberation testify to God's determination to reveal God-self to the oppressed in order to liberate them from bondage. In fact, Jesus Christ and Moses were regarded as physical embodiments of freedom. Furthermore, Jesus was often regarded as runaway slaves' personal escort to emancipation. The fugitive slave anticipated a transformation into new being after he or she overcame the death-grip of slavery through Jesus' work of liberation.

The Spirituals also depict Moses as a competent guide whose feats against Pharaoh and his army give hope to the runaway slaves. Moses' heroic deeds would be

heard from the mouths of slaves as they sang: “Oh go down, Moses, Way down into Egypt’s land, Tell old Pharaoh, Let my people go!” Not surprisingly, slave owners prohibited slaves from singing the words of this song for fear that it might lead to insurrection. Nevertheless, this Spiritual was sung in private with great delight by slaves, like Harriet Tubman, who were confident that the same God who freed Moses and his people would soon liberate them from the shackles of the South and lead them to the “land flowing with milk and honey.”

The slaves’ relationship with God was unique and personal. Harriet Tubman, for example, had a “strange familiarity of communion with God” (Bradford 113). For her, God was not some impersonal distant entity, but rather a present Protector, Guide and Companion.

According to Tubman:

...there was one of two things I had a *right* to, liberty, or death; if I could not have one, I would have de oder; for no man should take me alive; I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasted, and when de time came for me to go, de Lord would let dem take me” (Bradford 29).

Upon arriving in free territory, Harriet Tubman recalls: “Dere was such a glory ober eberything, de sun came like gold trou de trees, and ober de fields, and I felt like I was in heaven” (Bradford 30). She instinctively discerned that she was destined to fulfill a higher calling—the liberation of her people. And so it was, after prayerfully imploring God’s aid, it was borne in her mind and heart that the freedom would be hers. God silently spoke to her through her vision of the trees and fields that God liberates.

The quest for freedom from the experience of bondage for the slave then, was a profound source of revelation. The Spirituals sung by the slaves reflected the pathos of their experience along with their hope for God's imminent intervention. The slave Spiritual was a window through which he could encounter God and grasp God's purpose of liberation. The slave's view of God's revelation through experience enabled them to see beyond the mire of their present state of bondage to a future state of liberation.

### **Revelation as Ultimate Concern**

Furthermore if one argues, as Tillich does, that revelation is the expression of what ultimately matters (Tillich 110), then a claim can be made that in the context of slavery freedom is the ultimate concern. God remains a mystery and yet is revealed "within the context of ordinary experience which transcends the ordinary context of experience" (Tillich 109). The slave learns something more about God as a result of God's role in providing a means of escape from bondage and oppression. The slave's longing to become free is ultimately manifested in the actual act of emancipation. This is God's revelation. Therefore, revelation is "God's self-disclosure to humankind *in the context of liberation*" (Cone 45). Indeed, as Cone's states, revelation and liberation are indivisible (ibid). The slave's image of God was the vision to behold upon finally reaching the other side of Jordan.

## **Final Conclusion**

The slave Spirituals testify to the variety of sources of God's revelation in the life of African slaves in America.

As the ultimate "ground of being" God is the answer to the threat of non-existence. God met Charlie in his moment of essential doubt and "troubled the waters." Be patient and God will disclose God-self in your deepest sorrows.

However, God also discloses God-self uniquely to the suffering of enslaved African women. In her unique situation of sexual abuse, familial estrangement, and suffering, Christ reveals himself as her fellow sufferer who knows the pain of death. Like Grandma Dixon the suffering woman can yell out: "Believer, O shall I die? O my army shall I die? Jesus die, shall I die?"

On the other hand, the presence of Harriet Tubman with her song: "I'll meet you in de mornin', When you reach de promised land; On de oder side of Jordan, For I'm boun' for de promised land," is a monument to God's ability to liberate the oppressed in their situations of bondage by God's personal self-disclosure and identification with the oppressed.

Interestingly enough, the common fact within each insight gleaned from the Spirituals is that God meets the human being in his or unique situation in order that the human being might transcend their particular circumstance and commune with God. God is a revelatory God because the human being a creature in need of revelation. The slave Spirituals are powerful testimonies to this human need and to God's undying attempt to render that need fulfilled through God's self-disclosure.

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