THE WORD OF GOD MADE SONG: THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN SPIRITUAL

David Livingstone

I arrived in Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1990 and was impressed by many things, among them the musical culture of the country. One of the puzzling aspects, however, was the startling interest in American country music, a genre I had always despised growing up (I have changed my opinion since). I was also pleasantly surprised when I first saw a grainy recording of the crowds on Wenceslas Square in Prague singing the American hymn or gospel song "We Shall Overcome" ("*Jednou budem dál*") in Czech on 17 November 1989 in connection with the so-called Velvet Revolution. Although not an official African-American spiritual, having been written by Charles Albert Tindley in 1901 and later changed slightly and popularized by Pete Seeger, I began to be curious as to how these kinds of songs made their way to the Czech Lands. Soon after I came across the music of the band Spirituál kvintet and their wide repertoire of songs many of which were translations and adaptations of American classic spirituals, hymns, gospel standards and folk songs. Having grown up (like many Americans) in a conservative Christian household, I was curious as to why these particular songs resonated with people who were so, on the whole, diametrically non-religious. Many people seemed to be singing the songs without any knowledge of the biblical origins of the words and the cultural significance of the imagery.

Previous papers from this journal have helped me reach an understanding of the Czech/Slovak fascination with this specific genre. Irena Přibylová outlined the history of the first concerts of spirituals by African-Americans in the Czech Lands, including of course Paul Robeson, in her contribution to the volume *From Folklore to World Music: Music and Spirituality* (Přibylová 2019). This helped me understand how the spiritual initially took root in the country. Kristýna Navrátilová, in the same volume,

looked at how these songs were then translated and/or adapted in Czechoslovakia in the second half of the twentieth century (Navrátilová 2021). She specifically points out how a lack of knowledge of the history of slavery and the Bible made translation and interpretation problematic. Both articles drew attention to the fact that the 'spiritual' aspect of spirituals was often ignored in favor of the political, with its implied criticism of capitalist racist USA. At this year's colloquium, Aleš Opekar provided an enlightening, comprehensive overview of the sources which Spirituál kvintet drew from for their recordings.

Just as anonymous ballads are often the first texts included in literary anthologies of English literature, spirituals are placed first in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (Gates – Smith – Andrews /eds./ 2014),[1] these being among the first texts which have survived down to the present day. The beginnings of the African American spiritual are hidden from us, but date back to the early days of slavery, with the rhythms, of course, originating back in West Africa. Slaves in the Deep South and elsewhere were rapidly converted to Christianity and exposed to biblical stories and European hymns. The words of this tradition were consequently 'translated' into the idiom of the slaves and often made into song. Christianity was often viewed by the white population as a way of controlling and reconciling the slaves to their lot, along the lines of Marx's celebrated view of religion as "the opium of the people." This was far from the case, however, as the biblical stories, particularly those in the Old Testament dealing with the enslavement and liberation of the Israelites, struck a deep chord in relation to their own struggle for freedom. Spirituals make reference to Moses, obviously a symbol of a leader guiding the people toward freedom, contrasted with "Old Pharaoh" as the slave-master or the political leadership in the South. Prophets such as Elijah in "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" are also symbols of righteous leaders voicing dissenting voices to the subjugation of the slaves. The river Jordan, referenced in "Roll Jordan, Roll" and elsewhere, is of course

1. The texts of the songs are all taken from here unless stated otherwise.

a symbol of cleansing and reaching the Promised Land of freedom. The focus of spirituals is almost exclusively on the stories and accounts from the Old Testament as opposed to the New Testament.

These songs were passed down from generation and generation and, of course, evolved over time. Sandra Jean Graham, in her book dedicated to spirituals, points out the folk nature and fluidity of the songs: "In the absence of a permanent written aural record they lived only in performance, and each performance was unique." (Graham 2018: 1)

The development of the genre can arguably be seen as the mirror image of Blackface Minstrelsy of the nineteenth century where white musicians and performers appropriated and adapted (and ridiculed) African American cultural traditions. The texts and themes of the spirituals were drawn from the religion of the oppressor, but subverted to be used against them and provide community and hope. Many of the spirituals seemingly had coded, veiled messages concerning escaping slavery or divine punishment for the white masters. Nathan Huggins expressed this powerful aspect of the songs as follows: "And like many spirituals, there is great pathos in its promise of ultimate justice..." (Huggins 1971: 67)

Many of these songs were also impacted, if not inspired, by the revival movements within American Protestant Christianity of the late nineteenth century and the Pentecostal movement of the early twentieth century. These developments within both the Black and White Church often revolved around themes connected with baptism, the wearing of white robes and 'going down to the river'. The concepts of 'speaking in tongues' or being moved in the 'spirit' with fainting spells and reviving were also part and parcel of the tradition.[2] Finally, the camp meeting with the preacher calling out to his lost sheep to repent and embrace salvation profoundly impacted not only the spiritual, the gospel tradition, but also the look and sound of the Black Church. Henry Louis Gates Jr. discusses the seminal role of the Black Church in the African-American community and how it provided a forum for musical genres like

2. The soul legend James Brown would often dramatize these religious states of transcendence in his performances.

the spiritual, which challenged the status quo: "What the church did do, in the meantime, as Black people collectively awaited freedom, was to provide a liminal space brimming with subversive features." (Gates 2021: xix) This subversion was fascinatingly taking place right under the noses of the slave-masters.

The genre of the African-American (Negro) spiritual finally moved from the log cabin and the cotton fields to the international stage in the nineteenth century with the founding of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a university choir established at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee in 1866.[3] The choir went on tour in the North in 1871 featuring mostly traditional songs and arrangements of the day popular with white audiences. To their surprise, the most positive responses came from the songs they had previously usually only sung among themselves, which came to be known as the spiritual. One of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, Ella Sheppard, explained why they had originally been reluctant to include the spirituals in the program, these being, "sacred to our parents, who used them in their religious worship and shouted over them" (Robbins 2017: 230). Once performed in public, however, there was no looking back and the songs became the focus of the performances, not merely a novelty. "It was only after many months that gradually our hearts were opened to the influence of these friends and we began to appreciate the wonderful beauty and power of our songs." (Robbins 2017: 230). Additional African American choirs soon emerged. It should be noted that the Fisk Jubilee Singers, at least initially, tried to 'dignify' the songs (understandably given the circumstances) by 'correcting' the grammar and singing in 'standard' American English. The spiritual eventually gave rise to the gospel tradition which continues to flourish up to the present day.

Arguably the most well-known spiritual is "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot", dated around 1865, which references, as mentioned earlier, the prophet Elijah and his ascending to heaven by chariot, escaping death.

3. The Fisk Jubilee Singers are still going strong and continue to perform and record to much popular and critical acclaim.

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see,
Coming for to carry me home.
A band of angels coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.

The appeal of the message is obvious, celebrating the consolation of eternal life and the final heavenly reward which should compensate for all of the earthly woes which the slaves have experienced. Unlike many of the spirituals, the author of this song is known, this being the author Wallace Willis, a Choctaw freedman,[4] who also wrote the spiritual "Steal Away to Jesus".

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.

The spiritual was eventually called to the attention of the Fisk Jubilee Singers who were instrumental in popularizing it with the first recording of the song (in 1909). The version given above is the one which has become most well-known worldwide, but one can get a sense of what the song might have sounded like, prior to being dressed in 'suit and tie', from a version in John A. Lomax's collection of folk songs, published originally in 1934, which is based on a field recording from, in all probability, one year earlier.[5]

I ain't never been to heaven but Ah been told,
Comin' fuh to carry me home,
Dat de streets in heaben am paved with gold,
Comin' fuh to carry me home.

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin' fuh to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin' fuh to carry me home.

(Lomax 1994: 608–610)

4. Freed slaves who were adopted by the Native-American Choctaw tribe.
5. John Lomax carried out his first field recordings for the Library of Congress in the year 1933, a year before the publication of the volume.

The anonymous spiritual "Down By the Riverside, or Ain't Gonna Study War No More" was once again first recorded by the Fisk Jubilee Singers in 1920. It also became a folk, gospel and jazz standard having been recorded by a wide range of artists. A few of the most famous names will have to suffice: Louis Armstrong, Pete Seeger, Elvis Presley, Mahalia Jackson, etc. The anti-war sentiments of the song also made it of particular interest during the 1960s in connection with the protests against the Vietnam War. The text of the song is once again drawn from and inspired by Old Testament imagery, this time from the book of Isaiah 2:4, which is as follows in the King James translation which would have been the standard of the day.

"And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."[6]

This is usually interpreted as a prophecy about the coming of the Messiah, who for Christians would be obviously Jesus, who will bring peace and justice and comfort the oppressed.

> Gonna lay down my sword and shield
> Down by the riverside
> Gonna lay down my sword and shield
> Down by the riverside
> To study war no more

The song mixes apocalyptic imagery from the Bible with additional references to baptism and the abandonment of earthly possessions and concerns. The chorus is the most memorable and ideally suited for call and response (so called responsorial singing).

> I ain't gonna study war no more
> gonna study war no more
> gonna study war no more
> I ain't gonna study war no more
> gonna study war no more
> gonna study war no more

6. King James Version.

The song also makes reference to ‘war shoes’ and a ‘long white robe’, with many other possible added verses which can be added to extend it.

Alan Lomax, the legendary musicologist and collector of field recordings, along with his pioneering father John Lomax, does not mince words when lauding the spiritual “Go Down Moses”: “In the editor’s opinion it is the finest of American folk songs.” (Lomax 1964: 82) The language, story and imagery are once again drawn from the Bible, specifically the book of Exodus which relates the struggles of Moses, with God’s vengeful assistance, to gain freedom for the Israelites from the Pharaoh in Egypt. The following version, by the Fisk Jubilee Singers from 1872, was among the first spirituals recorded in sheet music.

When Israel was in Egypt’s land
Let my people go
Oppress’d so hard they could not stand
Let my people go

Go down Moses
Way down in Egypt land
Tell old Pharaoh
Let my people go

Unlike some of the earlier discussed songs, the message of this spiritual sounds out loud and clear and would have undoubtedly made the white slave owners fairly apprehensive.

Thus said the Lord, bold Moses said,
Let my people go
If not I’ll smite your firstborn dead
Let my people go

No more in bondage shall they toil
Let my people go
Let them come out with Egypt’s spoil
Let my people go

There are various theories as to the authorship of the spiritual, including the possible contribution of the African-American abolitionist Harriet Tubman. If not penning it herself, she definitely made use of it as another of the code songs used to help slaves escape along the Underground Railroad.[7] The song has, once again, been covered by numerous artists, most famously by Paul Robeson, whose deep bass voice provided the spiritual with suitable grandeur and poignancy.

One of the most powerful depictions of the importance of the spiritual during slavery is in the Oscar-winning film *12 Years a Slave* from 2013 directed by British director Steve McQueen and based on the autobiographical book by Solomon Northup. The protagonist is an African-American classical musician from the North who has been kidnapped and sold into slavery in Louisiana. Initially maintaining a certain distance from his fellow slaves due to a sense of superiority, he finally has an epiphany on the occasion of a singing session at the funeral of one of his fellow slaves involving the spiritual "Roll, Jordan Roll". The slaves are gathered outside around the makeshift graveyard where the African-Americans are buried and the song leader (the actress and singer Topsy Chapman) sings out the first verse only accompanied by the clapping of the others.

> Went down to the River Jordan
> Where John baptized three
> Well, I woke the devil in hell
> Said, 'John ain't baptized me!'[8]

The river Jordan has great symbolic significance in both Judaism and Christianity, being the final crossing-point before entering the Promised Land for the Israelites. It is also a symbol of cleansing and baptism, being the place where John baptized Jesus. The song thus not only references seeking freedom through escape

7. "Wade in the Water" is yet another of the spirituals apparently used by Tubman, among others, to guide slaves to freedom, containing 'secret meanings' or 'coded' messages.
8. This version comes from the film *12 Years a Slave.* Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2013.

to the North, but also eternal freedom after death. In addition, the song seems to be a lament over the outsider, 'unbaptized', state of the slaves. The rest of the slaves join in on the chorus, with the exception of Northup, who is still holding back although obviously torn with sorrow and pain.

> I said roll, Jordan, roll
> Roll, Jordan, roll
> My soul'll rise in heaven, Lord
> For the year when Jordan rolls.

The verse is repetitive, as is often the case with spirituals, and seems to evoke the eternal flowing of the river, providing cleansing and healing. The words also express hope for eternal life and consolation. After the second verse and the repetition of the chorus a third time, Northup can no longer help himself and joins in hesitantly, but soon full-heartedly, visibly 'laying down his burden' and achieving, at least, temporary respite and consolation from his misery.

There are, of course, many different versions of this song, but this one in the film poignantly captures the essential role spirituals played in the lives of slaves. Anne Powers in a discussion of the use of music in the film demonstrates how this was an essential role of the spiritual:

" 'Roll, Jordan Roll,' a primary example of slaves' claiming and subverting a Christian message to express their own needs and send their own messages, becomes, voiced by Northup, a sound of pained acceptance but also a tool of empowerment within the system designed to dehumanize him." (Powers 2013)

Northup eventually gains his freedom, but this is the moment when he achieves a certain inner freedom and also a sense of community and solidarity. Powers goes on to discuss the importance of rivers generally in African-American spirituals:

"Songs like this one, speaking of rivers, often sent coded messages about the hope for escape—for passing over the Mississippi or the Ohio and northward. They also established a temporary autonomous zone within people's hearts." (Powers 2013).

African-American spirituals are not only the heart and soul, but also the root of almost all American music. Apart from their influence on later genres, they are essential and invaluable records and expressions of African-American history and culture. Alan Lomax has nothing but the greatest respect for them as cultural artefacts:

"By the time of the Civil War, the Negro had created a body of religious folk-songs which matched in beauty the best of European hymnology. These spirituals, collected by the abolitionists and used by them to demonstrate that the Negro had a Christian soul and therefore deserved freedom, were the first American folk songs to be seriously studied." (Lomax 1964: 12)

The songs were not only labor songs used to pass the time and make back-breaking work in the field a little bit more bearable, but also provided the singers with spiritual consolation and hope. The spirituals were the beginning of the African-American Church which played and still plays a key role in the Black community. The songs also spoke of retribution and punishment of the wicked, these being the white masters who had, in an irony of history, provided the raw material for the texts of the spirituals: The Bible and the sermons in Church. While the Blackface Minstrel tradition of the nineteenth century arguably robbed African-Americans of their culture, the African-American spiritual could be viewed as the flip side, so to say, using the White Man's religion against him. Finally, some of the songs were actually coded messages about escape to the North along the Underground Railroad, and abolitionists, both black and white, were instrumental in popularizing the genre.

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Summary

The paper focuses on several of the most well-known spirituals (*Sing Low, Sweet Chariot; Go Down Moses; Down by the Riverside*) and looks at how the words of the Bible and the sermons of preachers inspired the lyrics of these songs. The words of the spirituals, inspired in particular by the Biblical stories of the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt, liberation and the reaching of the Promised Land, mirrored the plight of African Americans not only during slavery, but during the Reconstruction era and up to the time of the Civil Rights movement. The Fisk Jubilee Singers were pioneers in introducing the genre, not only to the rest of the United States, but also to the world.

Key words: African-American spirituals; gospel music; Fisk Jubilee Singers; slavery.