




Spring 2014

# I AM WHO I AM: The Book of Exodus and African American Individuality

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# I AM WHO I AM: The Book of Exodus and African American Individuality

## **Abstract**

Scholars often attempt to construct collective ideologies in order to generalize the beliefs and views of entire populations, with one target population frequently being the African American community during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, doing so fails to recognize the individuality of the population's members and, especially in the case of the country's oppressed Blacks, establishes a system where assumed notions and ignorant ideas abound. One might argue that the popularity of the book of Exodus in the time's African American expressive outlets indicates that there did exist a collective ideology based upon the biblical narrative. However, when one examines the black community's varied implementations of the book of Exodus in the spirituals sung during the Civil War and the poetry published in the years following it, it becomes apparent that not every member of the time's African American community adhered to a collective ideology. Rather, they formulated their beliefs based on their own unique circumstances that did not necessarily adhere to the Bible's text, demonstrating their individuality and refuting any theory that suggests there was a universal black consciousness.

## **Keywords**

Exodus, African American, Ideology

## **Disciplines**

African American Studies | Christianity | Ethnic Studies | History | History of Christianity | Inequality and Stratification | Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Religion | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion | Social History | Sociology | United States History

## **Comments**

English Honors Thesis

I AM WHO I AM: The Book of Exodus and African American Individuality

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English Honors Thesis

28 March 2014

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## **I AM WHO I AM: The Book of Exodus and African American Individuality**

Scholars frequently attempt to craft a collective African American consciousness, claiming that there is an “underlying unity stemming from an overall milieu of oppression, the experience of which, being differentiated intersubjectively, remains nevertheless, within the boundaries of a certain worldview” (Noel 28). In other words, individuals such as James Noel, author of the essay “Memory And Hope: Toward A Hermeneutic Of African American Consciousness,” claim that the collective oppression of the African American race gives rise to a unified consciousness, despite the unique circumstances of its subjects. One can attempt to make the case that this is true, not only in the present but throughout history, by citing the prevalence of the book of Exodus in African American spirituals during the Civil War and the poetry in the years following it. As will be explained in the following pages, it is no surprise that the Black community latched upon the Biblical text during this time, due to the many similarities that existed between the Exodus narrative and the state of black Americans. However, theories such as Noel’s generalize the country’s African American population and take away from the uniqueness of its members.

African Americans have continually struggled to establish their humanity and the years surrounding the Civil War were no exception. When the southern states were advocating for a reopening of the African slave trade, they attempted to designate Blacks as subhuman. One Mississippi State Senator, Henry Hughes, made this quite clear when he called for the brutal treatment of enslaved Negroes, asking that authorities should, “mark them like hogs, brand them like bees” (Crowe 58). The only way that the South could justify bringing Africans away from their homeland and to America was by claiming that they were akin to animals: not members of

the human race. This example appears extreme and out of place by today's standards, but modern scholars who abstain from examining the individual worldviews of Blacks in favor of a collective one are performing a similar act; they are stripping away the individuality of the population's members in order to fit an entire race into a single ideology.

By examining the black race as a single entity, and not as a collection of individuals, one is adhering to the same system that led to the initial debasement of the race. Winthrop Jordan in his essay, "The Emergence of Racism," observes that the differences between Africans and white visitors to the country prompted the latter to place the former into a subservient role. He writes that the foreign religious attitude, appearance, style of eating and language of Africans appeared savage to Whites and allowed them to create a sense of difference between the two races, providing the justification for "placing the European on the deck of the slave ship and the Negro in the hold" (Crowe 224). These white pioneers did not distinguish Blacks from each other and instead categorized them as a single entity foreign to the human race, allowing them to establish a system of oppression. Few scholars have attempted to establish a worldview for the entire white population, but scholars continually attempt to do so for African Americans. By doing so, they are setting them up as separate from the rest of world's population and inviting the creation of a system that fails to recognize Blacks as individual human beings on the same level as other races.

Many examinations of the book of Exodus' role in the lives of oppressed African Americans offer a similarly broad view of the country's black population. One author who analyzes the relationship between the race and the biblical narrative during the nineteenth century is Rhondda Robinson Thomas. In her book, *Claiming Exodus: A Cultural History of Afro-Atlantic Identity*, she identifies the links between Blacks of the time and the Israelites of the

Bible. According to Thomas, they allowed the former to view the text as “a narrative that depicted God’s love for all oppressed populations and his willingness to intervene on their behalf” (Thomas 3). While it is true that many African Americans did relate to the liberation focused themes contained within the book of Exodus, believing that the narrative only “empowered Afro-Atlantic people and sustained their struggle” undermines the complexity of both African Americans and the biblical text (7). These complexities allowed African Americans to relate to the story of Exodus in a multitude of ways, which were often at odds with each other. By examining the various components of the book of Exodus and how they interacted with the views of different black Americans, one can see how it is incorrect, and potentially dehumanizing, to assume that Blacks, both during and after the Civil War, held a singular system of beliefs based upon the basic ideas present in the biblical narrative.

## **The Black Community and the Book of Exodus: A Complex Relationship**

The Exodus-oriented collective consciousness that is frequently assigned to African Americans of the Civil War era is based upon the similarities that existed between the narrative's Israelites and the lives of oppressed Blacks; however it often only draws upon the simplistic elements of the book of Exodus. The Israelites were enslaved and, through the will of God, liberated. Black Americans were similarly oppressed and, as a result, scholars, such as the aforementioned Rhonnda Thomas, claim that the race universally engaged with the narrative due to their desire for the same in their lives. However, the book of Exodus contains many nuances that also allowed the country's black population to relate the story to their secular lives in other ways. Throughout the Civil War and the years following it, the book of Exodus was used to express a wide range of views that drew upon the less liberation-oriented aspects of the text.

### *The Oppression of the Mighty*

The book of Exodus begins with a chronicling of the enslavement of the Israelites and sets the groundwork for the oppressed to become a proud, unified people. The Israelites are enslaved by the Egyptians as a result of the fear that the Egyptians have of their growing power. The Pharaoh does not initially enslave the Israelites; he first "set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens" (Exodus 1:11), in order to quell their growing influence. This oppression does little to alleviate Egyptian fears. The Israelites continue to proliferate and seek out lands abroad in order to escape persecution. After recognizing that they are losing control over their laborers, the Egyptians force slavery upon the Israelites.

The powerful Israelites are now enslaved under their Egyptian masters. The cowardly Egyptians, rather than coexist with the Israelites, create an institution that would ensure that their



own way of life would be preserved. By highlighting the fear Egyptians have of the Israelites, the book of Exodus immediately dispels any notion that the Israelites are inferior to the Egyptians and deserve their life of bondage. This not only casts the Egyptians in a negative light, but also creates a sense of pride for the Israelites that stems from their rich heritage. The universal suffering experienced by the enslaved, in conjunction with their sense of pride, unifies the Israelites and instills in them a strong sense of identity. The craven actions of the Egyptians and the unifying nature of the Israelite's oppression are themes that make the depiction of the institution of slavery in the Bible resonate strongly with enslaved Blacks throughout their years of bondage in the United States of America.

The history of the Israelites' bondage provided a relatable biblical narrative to the black population of the Civil War era. The powerful conditions of the Israelites before their bondage allowed the enslaved to create a source of ethnic pride if they placed themselves into the Israelites' biblical history, by relating it to their African heritage. Black Americans were not subhuman, as their oppressors would have them believe; they were God's chosen people and deserved a life free from torment, allowing them to retain a sense of identity throughout their years of oppression. In addition, identifying with the Israelites also provided the promise of eventual liberation from slavery, despite how grim conditions might have seemed, because the Israelites face countless years of persecution before their release from bondage. This belief in freedom's inevitability gave the enslaved hope and further incentive to align themselves with the Israelites during the hundreds of years when liberation seemed impossible.

The historian Leon Litwack observes in his text, *Been in the Storm so Long*, that it was not until the time of the Civil War and the enslaved began to notice that the southern institution was in danger of being eradicated that they began resisting against their masters en masse, citing

the fact that some enslaved Blacks went as far as to poison their white owners (Litwack 61), who had previously viewed the enslaved as “placid, docile, kind and obedient” (60), when the Union army began moving South. This shift in the oppressed Blacks’ demeanor demonstrates how the enslaved black population did not feel the need to rebel, due to their identification with the long suffering Israelites, until it appeared that God was finally working for their liberation. However, neither the Israelites nor the enslaved Blacks fully obtained their freedom from within; they were assisted by individuals from the outside, such as Moses in the case of the Israelites.

### *The Complexity behind Moses*

The figure of Moses provides an easily identifiable leader for the Israelites and, subsequently, for the oppressed African Americans. Moses does not immediately ascend to a leadership position amongst the Israelites; his transformation into the Israelites’ savior draws upon complex thematic elements. Moses is blessed with good-fortune from his infancy. The Pharaoh, once again prompted by his fear of the Israelites, commands his subjects to cast all newborn Hebrew sons into the Nile River. Unsurprisingly, the Israelites are reluctant to do so and one woman decides that instead of drowning her child, she will float him down the river in a basket. This child is Moses, who is eventually picked up and raised by the Pharaoh’s daughter. Not only has Moses narrowly avoided an early death, but he has also found himself in a position of status amongst the ruling class. However, Moses does not lose touch with his Hebrew roots. He falls from his lofty position when he kills an Egyptian who is mercilessly beating an enslaved Israelite. As a result of his commitment to his heritage, Moses is forced to flee Egypt and live in exile.

During this time, Moses comes into direct contact with God, who lets him know of his intentions to liberate the Israelites from bondage. God tells Moses that he is to be his messenger and lead the Hebrews out of Egypt to a “good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8). Moses is told he is to wield the magic of the Lord and use it to demonstrate God’s power to the Pharaoh, transforming his staff into a serpent, altering the appearance of his flesh and even turning water into blood. Moses is reluctant to become the harbinger of the Israelites’ freedom and lets God know of his doubts, but the Lord tells him to have no fear as he is to “be with (his) mouth and teach (him) what (he) shall speak” (Exodus 4:11). Moses then uses the powers bequeathed to him and wins the support of the Hebrew community.

Moses’ upbringing and divine support makes him a dynamic leader of the Israelite people. Although he is raised as an Egyptian, he shares the same blood as the enslaved Israelites. This gives him sympathy for the oppressed, in addition to helping him establish credibility amongst the Hebrews. One might fear that Moses’ privileged upbringing, which comes about through no actions on his part, might cause him to be regarded with scorn by the Israelites; however, his murder of the abusive Egyptian demonstrates where his loyalties lie. Moses is also divinely appointed and communes directly with God. His actions and deeds are supported by the Lord and, as a result, those who do not obey him are going against God’s will, further establishing him as an effective leader. Moses does not let his position of power go to his head; he is humble throughout and thinks himself unworthy of being God’s spokesman. Moses is not a one-dimensional leader of the Israelites. His heritage, divinity, mysticism and humility paint him as a capable leader of the Hebrews. These aspects of the biblical hero prompted the African American community during the nineteenth century to frequently identify their leaders with the liberator of the Israelites in an attempt to find a similar figure to deliver them from oppression.

Allen Callahan, in *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*, attributes Moses' popularity amongst Civil War era Blacks, not to his liberating ideals, but to his mysticism. He writes that the Bible "ascribes to Moses occult powers greater than those of his adversaries" (Callahan 90) and that black music and folklore from the time typically gave him greater mastery over his divine powers than shown in the book of Exodus. Specifically, African American culture held Moses in high esteem because of his ability to exercise control over his staff-turned-serpent; the serpent was an object of veneration in African culture (92). Rather than label Moses as a prophet, proponents of an occult-like Moses identify the biblical figure as a conjurer. This association further complicates Moses' identity due to the demonic nature of conjuring magic shown in the spirituals of the enslaved, demonstrated by the song that contains the lines "Satan is a liar and a conjurer too, / If you don't mind, / He'll conjure you" (91). By relating African culture to the Bible, spirituals such as this demonstrate how the book of Exodus could be adopted to fit the beliefs of America's black population. The veneration of Moses' mystical powers was not confined to the individual seen in the Bible; Blacks would come to recognize his otherworldly qualities in real life Moses figures as well.

Harriet Tubman was an obvious choice for a Mosaic leader of the black community, not only because of her secular and physical similarities to Moses, but also because of the supernatural powers people believed she possessed. Much like the biblical Moses, Harriet Tubman shared common ancestry with the enslaved Africans, so when she dedicated her life to leading enslaved Blacks to freedom in the North on the Underground Railroad, it only seemed natural that she be called Moses. The similarities did not stop there; her humble appearance also related back to the book of Exodus. Whereas Moses is a poor speaker whose humility draws God's anger, Harriet Tubman was uneducated, partially deaf and missing her front teeth (Darden

95). The similarities between Tubman's and Moses' efforts to free their people were not the only reason Tubman was portrayed as a Mosaic leader. She also connected with the biblical figure's humble nature and demonstrates that the book of Exodus provided more than just liberation centered concepts for the black community.

Tubman also appeared to possess supernatural powers. Robert Darden, in *People Get Ready! A New History of Black Gospel Music*, describes how when individuals she had helped escape from bondage were questioned, the interviewer noticed that they "would have died for this woman, for they believed that she had a charmed life" (Darden 95). They claimed that she was never captured during her escapades because "she's born wid de charm. De Lord has given Moses power" (96). Here one can see a mix of African mysticism and Christian divinity. Rather than just claim that she had magical powers, the black community believed she was blessed by God Himself. Much like the biblical Moses, her otherworldly powers were believed to be derived from God's blessings and, as a result, Harriet Tubman was not merely a deliverer of the enslaved's freedom; she was a deliverer supported by the Lord. Once again, Tubman was seen as a Mosaic leader for reasons that went beyond her actions to liberate her people. However, although Tubman led many Blacks to freedom, she did not deliver the entire oppressed population from bondage like her biblical counterpart. This means that relying on her as the black community's singular Mosaic leader is potentially a fallacy. A different type of Moses figure would be needed to free the country's Blacks en masse.

An individual who assumed this role, albeit not without controversy, was President Abraham Lincoln. One unlikely proponent of Lincoln as a Mosaic leader was Milton Holland, a black officer for the Union army. Black Union soldiers during the Civil War were paid significantly less than their white counterparts, but were still expected to perform the same

duties. Rather than stir up negative feelings towards political leaders, Holland stressed increased loyalty to the government by calling upon the Exodus narrative. He claimed that, in order to gain support from Lincoln, the African American community would need to support him as well. Holland compared this reciprocal relationship to the loyalty given to Moses by the Israelites (Thomas 93). The Israelites needed to trust Moses to obtain their freedom, despite his shortcomings, and the black population must do the same with Lincoln. Doing so would not only allow them to eventually achieve liberation, but also give leaders such as Lincoln reason to have faith in the country's Blacks. However, not all black Americans held a sympathetic view of Lincoln.

Abraham Lincoln's hesitance to emancipate the enslaved Blacks prompted some members of the African American community to compare him to the biblical Pharaoh instead of Moses; he was reluctant to sign the Emancipation Proclamation until he was forced to do so by the severity of the Civil War (Thomas 89). Henry Turner, a black minister and correspondent for the Civil War era newspaper, *The Christian Recorder*, published pieces that compared the repeated appeals from enslaved Blacks to Lincoln for their freedom to God's words to the Egyptian Pharaoh: "Let my people go" (Thomas 89). He even linked Lincoln's eventual Emancipation Proclamation to the book of Exodus by claiming that, by freeing the enslaved only when faced with a large number of Union soldier casualties, he was effectively reinforcing his image as the Egyptian Pharaoh, who only released the Israelites after Egypt's sons were killed (91). Turner and Holland offer completely divergent views of Lincoln that both draw upon the Exodus narrative, demonstrating how the nuances of the text allowed the country's Blacks to engage with the narrative in different ways.

Unfortunately for Lincoln, these nuances meant that he was quite dissimilar from the complex Moses of the Bible. Unlike Harriet Tubman, Lincoln did not share his ancestry with the oppressed. Despite allowing him to ascend to a political position of power, Lincoln's white heritage alienated him from the black population. Rather than be a member of the oppressed who was placed into a position of power by divine intervention, Lincoln went against this aspect of Moses' past and was portrayed as a self-made man who ascended to the presidency. One would think that Lincoln's climb to greatness through his own efforts would have made him a more endearing leader than one who was merely placed there inadvertently; however this was not the case for a Mosaic leader. Moses' placement into his leadership position is not achieved through secular means, but is instead brought about by the actions of God and displays his divine intentions to liberate the oppressed, a key aspect of the book of Exodus that was missing from Lincoln's story. Even though Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing countless Blacks, his dissimilarity from the biblical Moses meant that he would not be universally accepted as the black community's Mosaic leader, demonstrating how the country's Blacks identified with more than just the theme of liberation from oppression found in the book of Exodus.

### *Dealing with the Oppressors*

Moses meets much resistance from the Egyptian Pharaoh during his efforts to liberate the Israelites. The Pharaoh is not impressed by Moses' bid for the Israelites' freedom and, rather than lessen their woes, he imposes harsher conditions upon them. The Hebrews and Moses appeal to the Lord, who tells them to go before the Pharaoh and once more demand the Israelites' freedom. However, this time God commands Moses to demonstrate his power by performing acts of magic, but the Pharaoh's magicians are able to replicate Moses' miracles and the Pharaoh

remains steadfast in his refusal to free the Israelites. God then tells Moses to, yet again, call for his people's liberation and to warn the Pharaoh of the impending plagues that will befall him if he refuses to do so. A cycle of the Pharaoh refusing to yield and conceding to Moses's demands once faced with the plagues, only to harden his heart again after Moses lifts the plagues repeats, several times. It is not until God strikes down all the firstborn sons of the Egyptians that the Pharaoh finally releases the Israelites. Moses' convoluted process of liberation is effective in freeing the Israelites, but the liberated peoples' troubles do not end upon their release from bondage.

The Israelites are not allowed to leave Egypt completely unmolested. Once he realizes that his laborers have departed, the Egyptian Pharaoh gathers his army and sets off in pursuit of the Hebrews. The Israelites are cornered against the Red Sea and believe that their doom is imminent, crying to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?...for it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness" (Exodus 14:11). However, the Israelites have no reason to fear; God has inspired the Pharaoh to pursue them in order to demonstrate his power by destroying the Egyptian army. Moses wields God's power and parts the Red Sea, creating a path for his followers. When the Egyptians try to pursue them, Moses releases the waters and destroys the Pharaoh and his men. In one fell swoop, God displays the extent of his power to his followers, while at the same time ensuring that the Israelites remain free from further persecution at the hands of the Egyptians.

The vengeful actions of God in this section of Exodus are a far cry from the benevolent and compassionate deity found in the New Testament. The Pharaoh's pursuit of the Israelites is spurred by God, who seeks to "get glory over Pharaoh and all his host" (Exodus 14:17).



Although he has beset Egypt with various plagues and has killed thousands of Egypt's sons, God seeks additional glory and is prepared to sacrifice the lives of the Egyptians in order to attain it. God's aspirations seemingly provide an element of divine retribution to the book of Exodus; one cannot help to recognize that the Egyptians receive punishment for their years of persecution against the Hebrews. Despite this, the less than favorable conditions that the Israelites find themselves in bring God's motives into question. Instead of freeing his people and allowing them to live in peace, God has them confront a terrifying image of a charging army and wish for a return to captivity. The Israelites already have proof in the form of Moses' plagues and miracles that the Lord is on their side; however, by destroying the Egyptians in order to prove his power, God demonstrates that his motives are not entirely philanthropic. God's complex motives for destroying the Pharaoh and his army mean that the treatment of the Egyptians in the book of Exodus is susceptible to varying interpretations. As a result, the African American community, both during and after the Civil War, was able to use the Exodus narrative to express divergent ideas regarding the fate of their oppressors.

The destruction of one's former oppressors is a theme that was not lost upon the Freedmen in the southern United States. For generations, they had suffered under their white masters and it was not unexpected when many of the formerly enslaved sought retribution against them. One prominent individual that received a large amount of attention from the black population was the Confederacy's former president, Jefferson Davis. Because he was the figurehead of the slaveholding South, Jefferson Davis was an obvious outlet for pent up aggression. His political leadership also allowed him to be aligned with the biblical Pharaoh, a position that would make him even more deserving of punishment in the eyes of the black community. Formerly enslaved individuals were not shy about expressing their vengeful beliefs,

with some black children recorded singing, “we’ll hang Jeff Davis to a sour apple tree,” even when faced with severe punishment at the hands of southern Whites (Litwack 303). While these children’s simplistic expression of their beliefs was passionate, other black Americans offered a much more sophisticated portrayal of their scorn for their oppressors.

The previously mentioned Henry Turner offers his own depiction of the oppressive South. Rather than identify the Confederacy with the human figures of the Bible, he characterized the rebellious region as “a power organized for the purpose of crushing down the manliness of loyal hearts as ever owned fealty to the God of heaven” and went on to describe the country’s conflict as a “hell-forged schism” (89). The South is labeled here as a supernatural force akin to the biblical Satan; therefore the only way it can be dealt with is through God’s direct intervention. Turner clearly supported the destruction of one’s oppressors at the hands of God depicted in the book of Exodus. If the South was indeed a satanic figure, then the only way the country could be free of turmoil would be to eradicate the region. However, the conditions surrounding other Blacks dissuaded them from desiring the destruction laid out in the Bible.

One key difference between the freedmen of the United States and the Israelites of the book of Exodus is that, when the Israelites were freed, they physically left the land of their bondage. However, when Blacks were emancipated, they were often forced to remain on their plantations. Not only did economic conditions force liberated Blacks to continue working for their former white masters, but, now that they were no longer considered property, they were also prime targets for dissatisfied and angry Whites. As a result, when questioned as to whether or not they wanted to see their former masters or prominent pro-slavery figures, such as Jefferson Davis, killed, many formerly enslaved replied that they “can’t see massa suffer” and that “some of us wish Mr. Jeff Davis to be set at liberty for we know worse Masters than he was. Altho he

tried hard to keep us all slaves we forgive him” (Litwack 201). They responded in this way in order to avoid persecution at the hands of their former masters. The situation these freedmen found themselves in meant that they could not adhere to the theme of the destruction of one’s former oppressors found in Exodus narrative, displaying the black community’s inability to identify with all aspects of the biblical text’s portrayal of the Israelites’ liberation. This is one more example of how it is a fallacy to claim that the book of Exodus provided a universally accepted description of the path out of oppression for the country’s Blacks and that individuals’ unique circumstances influenced their identification with the biblical narrative. However, the book of Exodus’ failure to provide freedmen with a clear fate for former Confederates did not dissuade them from attempting to implement it in other aspects of their lives.

Although some of the formerly enslaved realized the futility of seeking biblical revenge against their oppressors, they still drew upon other lesser known aspects of the Israelites’ liberation. During his initial briefing of Moses, God informs him that after he leads the Israelites out of Egypt that “you shall not go empty, but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing...so you shall plunder the Egyptians” (Exodus 4:22). God clearly intends for his people to receive reparations for their years of servitude and, when the liberated Blacks found themselves in a similar situation, they requested the same sacrifices from their former masters.

The freedmen did not demand gold and silver, but instead asked for forty acres and a mule (Litwack 402). However, their appeals often fell on deaf ears and were completely silenced when President Andrew Johnson issued his Proclamation of Amnesty in 1865, which officially reinstated the property rights of former Confederates, who had already been holding onto their pre-Civil War land (402). The freedmen staunchly believed that they should be compensated for

their years of servitude and this belief closely aligned with the book of Exodus. Unfortunately, historical conditions dissuaded them from replicating the events laid out in the biblical text. Former slave-owners were unwilling to bestow upon the black population their valuable land and even the President of the United States deemed it unwise to grant the newly liberated Blacks property. Although the book of Exodus may have closely mimicked the lives and aspirations of the country's black population, they were unable to implement it in their lives. This demonstrates how, even though it may seem logical to create a unified black consciousness around the Exodus narrative, the circumstances of the country's Blacks made it impossible to actualize much of the biblical text in the secular world. This is a trend that can also be seen in the Promised Land, as described in the book of Exodus.

### *Identifying Canaan*

The eventual goal of the Israelites is to reach the Promised Land, or Canaan, described to Moses by God himself. The land "flowing with milk and honey" offers the liberated Hebrews a much better life than they experienced in Egypt (Exodus 3:8). However, the journey to the Promised Land is a long and arduous one. The Egyptians find themselves starving in the wilderness, quarrelling amongst themselves and incurring God's wrath at the foot of Mount Sinai. It is here that the Lord gives his people specific instructions on how to carry out their lives, eventually resulting in the Ten Commandments. The Israelites then obey God's commands and construct the Tabernacle and it is here that the book of Exodus comes to a close. It is not until the book of Joshua that the Israelites finally cross the River Jordan and arrive at the Promised Land.

The main theme throughout the Israelites' journey to the Promised Land is perseverance. The story does not end with the destruction of the Egyptians and the Israelites' freedom; it takes

another three books of the Bible for the Hebrew people to reach their destination. The trials they face along the way often distract them from their end goal, but they do not lose sight of their objective. They even go as far to set up their new lives before they reach Canaan, establishing rules and laws prior to their arrival at the Promised Land and not the other way around. This foresight shows the confidence the Israelites had in their savior. If they had doubted that they would cross the River Jordan and live a better life, they would have not bothered to abide by the Ten Commandments. All these conditions of the Israelites' freedom paralleled many conditions of the African American population's freedom and allowed individuals to identify with the biblical text in various ways.

During the time of slavery, the Promised Land of freedom seemed almost unattainable for the country's Blacks. However, once they had been freed from bondage following the Civil War, they soon found that their Promised Land was closer than ever. Despite this, the black community, much like their Israelite counterparts, continued to face many hardships. Black activists, such as Alexander Crummell, were upset with the continued oppression of Blacks throughout the United States following the Civil War. His solution was a mass migration of the African American community to a colony in Liberia. He shared the commonly held belief that the country's Blacks had not reached their Promised Land with the abolition of slavery and contended that, in order to fulfill their biblical destiny, they needed to emigrate away from the United States. However, Liberia was far removed from the utopia described in the Bible; it was a land ravaged by disease and made up of uninhabitable swampland. Rather than let Liberia's less than ideal conditions detract from his vision, Crummell declared that the trials Blacks would face in this new land were their form of sacrifice to God, just as the Israelites had been required to offer their first harvest to the Lord (Exodus 23:29). He also argued that African Americans

would make their own Promised Land by creating a thriving community filled with churches and schools (Thomas 108-110).

Beliefs like Crummell's, in a distant Promised Land far away from America proper, were not shared by everyone in the black community. Leaders, such as the formerly enslaved escapee, Frederick Douglass, believed that the country's Blacks should dedicate themselves to solving the societal problems plaguing the nation, rather than leave it altogether. Even though he agreed that leaving the United States would alleviate the woes facing many Blacks, he stressed that the optimal solution would be to remain in the country and better, not only the black community, but the country as a whole. He sought to replicate the biblical narrative by firmly establishing laws that would be sympathetic to the black community and foster racial harmony prior to their arrival at the Promised Land. Crummell's and Douglass' differing views on the nature of the Promised Land both draw upon the Exodus narrative in their justifications and, once again, highlight the fact that members of the black community drew upon different aspects of the book of Exodus in order to relate the text to one's individual beliefs and that it did not have a standard interpretation amongst the African American community based around its basic themes.

### *Life after Moses*

The Israelites do not reach their Promised Land without any casualties; Moses, their leader, dies just before they cross the River Jordan. Although he does not arrive at Canaan with his people, he does gaze upon it before his death. This indicates that although he does not physically lead his people there, he does know what it was before he died, thereby making his death even more tragic due to him not being able to experience the Promised Land firsthand. However, being so close to the Promised Land also means that he knows that his efforts have not

been in vain, as it is extremely likely that his people would be able to make the final push without him. Fortunately for the Israelites, they have a capable leader in Joshua to guide them during the remainder of their journey, but America's black population had no such luck with their leaders.

The death of Moses also aligned with the current affairs of the country's Blacks, with many relating it to the death of Abraham Lincoln. Whereas the Israelites had Joshua to lead them following their leader's demise, the freedmen had Andrew Johnson. The black community enthusiastically embraced Johnson as their new Mosaic leader when he first assumed the presidency following Lincoln's death, exclaiming "You are our Moses! We want no Moses but you!" (Thomas 99). However, the black community would soon find his policies less than liberating. He vetoed several bills that favored the newly freed enslaved, including the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Freedmen's Bureau Act of 1865, and even granted amnesty to former Confederates.

His fall from the Mosaic position was made evident when he was compared to another Mosaic figure, Harriet Tubman, who was viewed as brave and selfless, while he was regarded as cowardly and deceitful (Thomas 100). Johnson's fall from his initial good standings with the African American community eventually led him to be viewed as akin to the Pharaoh attempting to recreate the biblical Egyptian land of bondage, with Charles Sumner claiming that he "(was) a usurper, who, promising to be a Moses has become a Pharaoh" (102). Clearly, Andrew Johnson was seen as an unacceptable replacement for Lincoln as a Mosaic leader, although he shared similar differences from Exodus' Moses with his more accepted predecessor. It was a combination of both his oppressive policies and his deviance from the biblical leader that prompted such scorn from the African American community.

Johnson's rejection and Lincoln's acceptance as a Mosaic leader is a result of the former's oppressive political actions when compared to the latter's liberating statutes, despite their similar deviances from the book of Exodus. Neither of these men shared their lineage with the oppressed. However, Lincoln's decision to sign the Emancipation Proclamation still enabled him to be viewed favorably by the black population, and even gave him at least some similarities to the biblical Moses. Johnson, on the other hand, worked politically against the freedmen and received their disapproval. Another, less obvious, reason for the contrasting views of these two figures was the way in which they stepped into the role of Moses. Lincoln's reluctance to free the enslaved Blacks may have been received negatively by his critics, but it was still reminiscent of Moses' trepidation to being the Israelites' liberator.

Johnson had no such qualms about his biblical role. Rather than display Mosaic reluctance, he fully embraced the role of America's Moses, telling his constituents that he would "be (their) Moses, and lead (them) through the Red Sea of war and bondage to a fairer future of peace and liberty" (Thomas 100). Johnson's enthusiasm would only further differentiate himself from the hero of Exodus and contribute to his eventual portrayal as the treacherous Pharaoh, a role that was made even more damning when the Egyptian's tragic fate in the Bible is taken into account. By applying the Exodus narrative to Andrew Johnson, the black community was able to express their discontent with him while simultaneously glorifying Lincoln, demonstrating the African American people's penchant to relate their secular situation with the biblical narrative. The black population's implementation of the book of Exodus in their universal rejection of Johnson due to his anti-Black views gives credence to the notion that there was a unified black consciousness during the Civil War era. However, although the country's black population may have been united in their hate of Lincoln's successor, this was not an indication that there was a



singular system of beliefs based on the Exodus narrative. It was merely a reflection of the president's abhorrent political agenda.

## **Scholarly Stances**

As shown above, the events in the book of Exodus were strikingly similar to the situation facing the United States' black population during the years surrounding the Civil War. As a result, the African American community used the biblical text to demonstrate their views. However, these views were not part of a collective worldview independent of individual circumstances, even though the situations facing the country's black population frequently paralleled the narrative of the biblical Israelites. Members of the black population would use many aspects of Exodus to demonstrate divergent and often contradictory beliefs. This is a trend that can be clearly seen through an examination of the spirituals sung during the Civil War and the poetry written in the years following. However, some scholars recognize the prevalence of the book of Exodus within these pieces and attempt to generalize the beliefs held by the black population.

### *Spiritual Divergence*

One scholar who examines African American spirituals in order to draw conclusions about the views of black Americans as a collective is Wayman B. McLaughlin. In his essay, "The Human Riches of Slave Religion," he looks at the relationship between enslaved individuals and their temporal states depicted in their spirituals. According to McLaughlin, the spirituals deny temporal time, i.e. the past, present and future, and instead solely focus on the future. Rather than concentrate on the secular flow of time, the spirituals deal with the eternal future offered by religion. By doing this, the spirituals diminished the earthly torment that enslaved Blacks were forced to experience and instead turned towards a life with God: "Soon I will be done with the / troubles of the world / Going home to live with God" (Crowe 141).

McLaughlin claims that the singer's perceived future life with God gave him hope and allowed him to cope with the "troubles of the world" (141).

McLaughlin argues that this ideal end, or Promised Land, offered affirmation of their lives. The enslaved individual's tortured temporal existence suddenly had purpose if it was all working towards a life of eternal bliss in Heaven. He cites the following lines of a spiritual as evidence, "No hope in this worl' for to-morrow, / I'm strivin' – for heav'n my home" (Crowe 142). In these lines the singer simultaneously rejected his secular existence and indicated that he was instead working towards his true home in Heaven. Unlike the previous example, McLaughlin expands his theory by having the singer blatantly state his hopelessness in his current existence, instead of simply indicating that his existence is difficult. However, in both of these spirituals, the end result is the same; the singer's earthly life prompted him to turn towards his religious future.

McLaughlin then goes on to identify the specific aspects of Heaven that made it such a pleasing alternative to the singers of these spirituals. Although entry into Heaven meant the end of one's current life, the prospects it offered made it all worth it. He describes how, according to the spirituals, "death was not an end, but the means of entering into God's eternity" (143). This eternity offered the singers "the priceless treasure of worth and dignity" that they never received during their lives of bondage (143). When the singers exclaimed "I got shoes, / You got shoes, / All God's children got shoes. / When we get to Heaven / We're going to put on our shoes / And shout all over God's Heaven" (142), they were describing how heaven granted them the opportunity to utilize their talents and abilities that they were denied in life. McLaughlin's examination of how enslaved African Americans used spirituals to portray their belief in religious liberation through death connects with the Exodus narrative by assigning a singular

desired destination to the entire black population, where all their desires will be fulfilled and troubles will be terminated, much like the Promised Land of the Israelites. However, views such as this ignore the many Blacks who sought freedom during their mortal lives.

Other scholars ignore McLaughlin's spiritual interpretation of these songs and instead portray the singers as temporally-minded individuals. James Cone in *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation* examines the meaning behind the spirituals of enslaved Blacks in the article, "Black Spirituals: A Theological Interpretation." He claims that the Christian motifs found within the spirituals point towards a renouncement of the system of slavery and that they call for the immediate punishment of the enslaved Blacks' white oppressors. He writes that "the basic idea of spirituals is that slavery contradicts God" and draws upon the African belief in the cyclical nature of life when he writes that "if God could...cool the fire for the Hebrew Children, then he certainly could deliver black people from slavery" (Cone 18). He further emphasizes the black population's willingness to strictly adhere to literal biblical interpretations when he writes that the singers of spirituals were expressing their belief that "God will vindicate the suffering of the righteous Blacks and punish the unrighteous Whites for their wrongdoings" (19).

While it is no doubt true that a large portion of the black population during the Civil War held these beliefs, this theory still wrongly generalizes African American community of the time. It neglects to account for the wide range of individual circumstances that surrounded the country's Blacks, which gave rise to complex ideologies. Not all members of the black community were still held in bondage; there were free Blacks in both the northern and southern states. Furthermore, some of the enslaved did not even desire freedom or destruction of the current system at all. Every black American held unique ideologies contingent upon their own

lives. In order to fully appreciate the individuality and humanity of the black population during the Civil War, it is important to understand their individual perspectives. This, at least partially, can be discerned through an analysis of the book of Exodus' differing role in their spirituals.

### *A Singular View*

The implementation of the book of Exodus extended beyond the spirituals of those held in bondage and was also prominently featured in the poetry of black authors during the years following the Civil War. One scholar, Allen Dwight Callahan, correctly identifies how the book of Exodus allowed the oppressed to grasp the hopelessness of their existence, while also providing them with the eventual hope of salvation at the hands of God. He states that these contradictory ideas of hope and hopelessness were “the faith of the slave” (Callahan 86). Instead of looking at the story of Exodus figuratively, those facing oppression instead interpreted it literally and that interpretation gave them hope throughout their existence. He then uses a detailed analysis of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “An Ante-Bellum Sermon” to support this claim.

Dunbar’s poem, first published in 1895, features an enthusiastic black preacher delivering a sermon describing the story of Exodus to his enslaved congregation in Southern-black dialect. The preacher explains to his listeners how God’s power had the ability to liberate the Israelites:

Dey kin fo’ge yo’ chains an’ shackles  
 F’om de mountains to de sea;  
 But de Lawd will sen’ some Moses  
 Fu’ to set his chillun free (Callahan 87)

However, the speaker claims that these lines only deal with the liberation of the biblical Hebrews and do not deal with the lives of the currently oppressed. This was a common practice amongst

black preachers during the time of slavery, who often hid subversive messages within biblical rhetoric in order to escape persecution at the hands of their masters (Litwack 24). This is further emphasized when the poem's speaker says:

But fu' feah some one mistakes me,  
 I will pause right hyeah to say,  
 Dat I'm still a preachin' ancient,  
 I ain't talkin' bout to-day (Callahan 87)

Callahan then uses the preacher's continued denial that his words have any subversive message, "Now don't run an' tell yo' mastahs / Dat I's preachin' discontent" (88), as evidence for his interpretation that the poem is a means to express the black community's desire for a Promised Land of freedom. By preaching one message while simultaneously advocating for the opposite, the speaker is implementing double-speak and attempting to rally his people around a movement towards temporal liberation.

Callahan also draws upon Dunbar's past as evidence for the poem's message of secular freedom. Dunbar grew up listening to stories of southern slavery and, as a result, he knew the horrors of the institution. Callahan argues that Dunbar recognized that the enslaved could not openly express their desire for freedom and instead hid their true desires behind biblical stories, despite the preacher's claims that he was just "talkin' bout our freedom / In a Bibleistic way" (88). Dunbar's final lines of the poem have the preacher forego this subterfuge and instead link the story directly to his congregation's temporal lives:

We will praise de gracious Mastah  
 Dat has gin us liberty;  
 An' we'll shout ouah halleluyahs,

On dat mighty reck'nin day,  
 When we'se reco'nized ez citez'-  
 Huh uh! Chillun, let us pray! (Callahan 89)

By having the preacher almost say “citizens” and use the collective pronouns “us” and we,” Callahan argues that Dunbar is indicating how the story of Exodus can be applied to the lives of those in bondage, both to describe their enslavement and offer a chance for liberty. This is an extremely simple view of the book of Exodus’ role in poetry following the Civil War. The complexity of the country’s political and social landscape meant that the biblical narrative was used in diverse ways that reflected the black population’s similarly diverse beliefs. Close readings of additional poems written during the time period and examinations of how they engage with the book of Exodus begin to reveal the numerous and varied ideologies held by the country’s newly liberated Blacks.

### *Dissent*

All of these examinations of the book of Exodus in African American expression focus primarily on how it was used to portray themes of liberation and freedom. McLaughlin argues that the spirituals sung during the Civil War used the biblical story to demonstrate the singers’ belief that they could be free from earthly torment through death and Cone offers a divergent view of the same songs that encompasses those who sought temporal liberation. Callahan uses poetry from the years following the Civil War to expand upon Cone’s theory and claims that the Exodus narrative was used to describe freedom from one’s secular woes in their mortal life during that time as well. All of these scholars seem to believe in the idea of a singular and liberation oriented black worldview, similar to those laid out by Rhonnda Thomas and James

Noel. However, as previously described, the book of Exodus has connections to many aspects of African American culture, not just the idea of liberation. Furthermore, the black community is comprised of individuals who do not share a centralized ideology.

The individual circumstances surrounding members of the country's black population during and after the Civil War caused them to hold varying views that were expressed through the book of Exodus, not formed around it. Exodus' popularity in African American expression is not an indication of a unified consciousness, but rather it was merely a tool of expression implemented differently in relation to various beliefs and ideologies. By examining these divergent views and portrayals of the book of Exodus in spirituals sung during the Civil War and African American poetry in the years following it, one can see that the idea of an "underlying unity stemming from an overall milieu of oppression," is an oversimplification of the time period (Noel 28) and that African Americans held unique views formulated around their individual experiences and circumstances.



## **Who are the Members of the Angel Band and what is the Destination of the Ships of Zion**

A way to examine and begin to understand the beliefs held by African Americans during the Civil War is to perform close readings of the spirituals that were overheard during the time period, specifically investigating the relationship between their implementation of the book of Exodus within their songs and the singers' current situations. The spirituals were a major form of expression for the black population of the time. They initially rose to popularity because of the black community's need to veil their beliefs behind apparently benign music, due to fear of white retribution. However, they quickly became a key aspect of black culture outside of such oppressive situations, as seen through their continued popularity amongst free black soldiers. In addition, the lack of education available to the country's Blacks means that there is a severe lack of written texts, such as poetry and periodicals, which demonstrate the thoughts of the time's black population at large. As a result, the spirituals recorded by members of the ruling authority offer some of the only records of the greater African American community's ideologies, beyond those published by prominent figures.

As stated earlier, the book of Exodus is frequently referenced in these spirituals and this fact has led many to believe in a unified black consciousness formed around the biblical text, but a close examination of its varied portrayals makes it apparent that this is not the case. In order to accurately compare multiple spirituals, it is most effective to find common themes from the book of Exodus within them and analyze the differences in their implementations of these themes. Because of their prevalence during the spirituals of the time, the four themes used in this paper are unity, fate of oppressors, Moses and the Promised Land. By comparing and contrasting their meanings, one recognizes, despite their focus on a singular biblical text, the absence of a

cohesive black worldview and starts to see the individuality of the singers come through in the songs.

### *Diverse Alliances: Unity*

A theme that can be frequently seen throughout African American spirituals is the theme of unity, which is often expressed through the use of the Exodus narrative. Its prevalence means that it demonstrates the diverse range of viewpoints of the black community during the time of the Civil War. These songs not only express the surface idea that the black community came together through their universal plight, but also put forth more complex ideas through their subtleties. The theme of unity can be seen being applied, not only to those in bondage, but also to soldiers fighting for liberation, both white and black alike. In addition, the singers of spirituals often expressed feelings of unity shared between them and the white population. All of these different portrayals of unity call upon the book of Exodus in one way or another and, when examined alongside each other, highlight how the book of Exodus was used as a medium through which to display the complex views held by members of the African American community.

A spiritual that deals with the theme of unity and its importance in the lives of the singers is “Archangel Open the Door.” The song includes repeated uses the term, “brudder” with the refrain, “Brudder, why can’t you pray for me?” (Smith 32). Rather than pertaining to secular efforts, it emphasizes the importance of unity in obtaining religious freedom. The singers not only asked for “brudder” to pray for them, but also called for a religious figure to show them the way: “Archangel, open de door.” Although the spiritual may not directly deal with the book of Exodus, it still relates to the themes found in the Exodus narrative by acknowledging the

necessity of a religious figure in obtaining liberation. The Israelites had little hope of obtaining freedom without the divinely ordained Moses and the singers of this spiritual expressed their need for a similarly divine figure in their quest for freedom. However, the singers still infused the song with their own belief in the necessity of unity amongst the oppressed, displaying how, even when some aspects of their views adhered to the biblical text, the black community did not use it as the basis of their ideologies. Rather than believing that their own efforts were sufficient, the singers expressed how their cooperation would allow them ascend to Heaven, and therefore spiritual freedom, only with the assistance of a figure of religious authority, such as the biblical God or Moses.

Other spirituals forego the need for a religious leader and instead solely focus on the unified secular efforts of those held in bondage. The singers of these songs typically implemented collective pronouns in their expressions of their desire for freedom. Songs, such as, “The Coming Day,” contain repeated refrains of the line, “O brudder, let me go to Canaan, / To meet ‘em” (Higginson 155). The appeal to “brudder” to let the singer go to Canaan demonstrates the singers’ belief that only through the cooperation of the oppressed would they successfully experience liberation and do not describe the need for a religious figure to lead them. In addition, this spiritual was sung by African American boatmen in time with their oar strokes while they rowed their boats (155). The rowers were united in their efforts to propel the boat forward, displaying their belief in the effectiveness of their collective action, both through the words of the song and their physical efforts. Collective action as a means of making progress towards freedom, while logical in the secular world, goes against the traditional Exodus narrative due to its emphasis on the importance of the oppressed’s action, rather than the actions of a higher power, God, or a divine leader, Moses. The practicality of this form of unity led the singers of

“The Coming Day” to embrace it and reject the ideas contained within the book of Exodus, even though they used its language to express their beliefs in their spirituals. These two spirituals express the same theme of the oppressed coming together, but their differences, one pertains to the temporal world and solely focuses on the actions of the oppressed while the other draws upon spiritual elements that highlight the need for a religious leader, demonstrate how it is wrong to assume that all members of the oppressed black community held the same beliefs that strictly adhered to the book of Exodus.

Spirituals such as the ones discussed above related to the efforts of those held in bondage; however, once African Americans found themselves fighting for the Union army, the benefits of their unified actions became much more relevant to their temporal existences. One of the first uses of spirituals by black soldiers was as a learning tool (Fisher 151). When thrust into military service, black soldiers often felt restricted by their limited knowledge and used spirituals not only to express their views, but also to educate themselves. The hymn, “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks,” is one such example. The line, “O I look to de East, / And I look to de West” (152), was used to demonstrate their knowledge of the directions on a compass, but it is the song’s other verses that draw upon the book of Exodus. Lines, such as “O Jordan’s bank is a good old bank. / And I hain’t but one more river to cross; I want some valiant soldier / To help me bear the cross” (152), infuse several thematic issues into one passage. The River Jordan was the final obstacle that the Israelites had to conquer on their way to the Promised Land. By indicating their close proximity to the biblical landmark, the singers of the spiritual were identifying how their militaristic efforts were bringing them closer to their own land of freedom.

The singer’s expression of his desire for a “valiant soldier” to help him “bear de cross” highlighted his belief in the importance of unity in the soldiers’ actions, while also drawing upon

New Testament influences. The use of the phrase, “some valiant soldier,” indicates that the singer was asking for his comrades in arms to help him “bear de cross,” with the act of bearing the cross indicating the idea that their sacrifices on the battlefield could be related to the sacrifices Christ made for mankind, adding greater significance to the soldiers’ militaristic actions. The black soldiers’ unified efforts allowed them to draw ever closer to freedom and they used the book of Exodus in their spirituals, such as this one, to demonstrate their belief in the power and weight of their actions.

Black soldiers did not naively believe that only their unity was needed to obtain their freedom; they also recognized the need for bloodshed. The spiritual, “My Army Cross Over,” demonstrates how African Americans believed their engagement in combat brought them closer to their freedom. Some versions of the spiritual open with the line, “My brudder, tik keer Satan, My army cross ober” (Smith 38). The singers were describing their goal to destroy their oppressors, indicating that they were participating in the Civil War’s violent conflicts. The landmark the soldiers were “crossing ober” is later identified in the song as the River Jordan, once again indicating the soldier’s belief that his proximity to freedom was a result of the unified actions of the singer and his “brudder.” Later lines in the song stray from a purely spiritual interpretation of the biblical narrative when they link the River Jordan to physical locations in the soldier’s mortal life, such as “de mighty Myo,” with “Myo” being interpreted by the spiritual’s recorder, Colonel Higginson, as the black soldiers’ way of saying bayou (38). By linking biblical landmarks with the temporal world within the context of war, the soldiers were expressing how they believed that they were recreating the story of Exodus in their lives and, as a result, would obtain their freedom.

Black soldiers used motifs from the book of Exodus in their spirituals to display how they believed that their unified actions, both in their educational and militaristic efforts, would allow them to experience liberation during their mortal lives. Rather than relying on a religious leader, such as the biblical Moses, to achieve freedom, soldiers altered the themes of the Exodus narrative. The biblical theme of the oppressed coming together and still being unable to rid their lives oppression without outside assistance was rejected. Instead, they highlighted in their spirituals how they believed that their unified efforts, in conjunction with their actions on the battlefield, would allow them to earn their temporal freedom on their own. Not all black Americans felt the need to rely on others, whether it was a Mosaic leader or politician. Black soldiers ignored the passive depiction of the Israelites found in the book of Exodus and channeled their energies into militaristic endeavors, demonstrating that it is false to believe that the African American community depended on a biblical leader to lead them out of bondage. They were earning their freedom with their own blood.

It should come as no surprise that those being held in bondage and fighting in the Civil War expressed feelings of unity amongst themselves, but certain Negro spirituals emphasize the unexpectedly affectionate relationships that existed between some members of the black and white populations. These individuals used the book of Exodus in their spirituals to express this idea of unity as well. A rendition of the hymn, "Roll, Jordan Roll," contains references to a white Southern minister (Darden 104). The opening line, "Mr. Fuller settin' on de Tree of Life," places the white man in a position of power by associating him with a powerful biblical concept. The following line "Fur to hear de ven Jordan Roll," subsequently identifies the man with the singers' freedom by placing him close to the final barrier to their Promised Land, the River Jordan (105). The singers then expressed their desire to join the minister in his favorable position by

exclaiming, “My arise in heab’n Lord, / Fur to hear de ven Jordan roll!” (105). Rather than renounce their association with this member of the oppressive white population, the singers of this spiritual believed that by aligning themselves with him they could move closer to their eventual liberation in “heab’n.”

One may contend that this song might not be entirely sincere and offer a different interpretation, but evidence detailing the context of the song’s performance suggests that it is not to be viewed as subversive double-speak. Charlotte Forten, an African American teacher and the spiritual’s recorder, noted that the singers “seem(ed) to have been much attached” to “Mr. Fuller,” and also identified him as a white Southerner (105). Forten’s black heritage meant that it was likely that the views expressed by the singers in her presence were genuine and not a means of appeasing the ruling authority. Instead of seeking the removal of the oppressive population from their lives, the oppressed singers demonstrated through this song that they believed that they should aspire to unite with some of them in their efforts to attain their freedom, straying from the Israelites’ disassociation from the Egyptians contained within the book of Exodus. Similar to the controversial notion that not all Blacks were victims under slavery, this spiritual displays the notion that not all white men were seen as oppressors, an idea that is absent from the biblical text. This spiritual demonstrates that the African American community during the Civil War held extremely nuanced views of unity that did not adhere to a single ideology influenced by the book of Exodus, even if it was used to express them. Individuals formed their own beliefs concerning whom they should cooperate with based off of their life’s unique circumstances.

Although this spiritual deals with a figure of religious authority in the lives of the enslaved, other songs sung by those held in bondage dealt with men who were directly responsible for their captivity. The song, “Join de Angel Band,” was sung by enslaved Blacks

when their owners came across their secret meetings and continued to be sung throughout the Civil War (Fisher 77). Rather than openly lament that their gathering had been discovered, the singers expressed joy that “Moses” had joined them. They acknowledged in their song that by working alongside those in power they could accomplish more than if they acted against them. The lines, “Do, fader Mosey, gader your army, / O do mo’ soul gader togeder. / O do join ‘em, join ‘em for Jesus, / O do join ‘em, join ‘em archangel,” simultaneously identifies the ruling power’s ability to organize an army and bring the oppressed “togeder,” while also detailing that doing so was their religious obligation (77). One may say this faith in the dominant figures to lead them out of bondage is misplaced, but it is still another example of how the Exodus narrative lent itself to unlikely cases of unity. However, the subversive intent of many spirituals of this nature complicates the song’s meaning.

Similar to “Roll, Jordan Roll,” the song may have had a hidden meaning. The singers’ appeal to a Moses figure could have been a veiled calling for an army to fight against their white masters and the call for unity might have had an underlying message of a collective rebellion. However, the feelings of some enslaved Blacks towards their masters indicate that this might not have been true for all singers of the spiritual. When a certain white slave-owner informed his recently liberated workers of their freedom, many refused to leave, claiming that “he had done tried to be good to us and had done de best he could for us” (Litwack 190). These newly liberated Blacks continued to follow their former masters due to a belief that aligning themselves with powerful individuals offered the best opportunity for both parties. The loyalty of body servants also demonstrates the goodwill some Blacks felt toward the country’s Whites. One body servant, Stephan Moore, wrote to his wife describing his contentment with his position alongside his master on the battlefield and, displaying his belief that others would be happy for him, told



her “to take this letter and read it to all my people” (40). Body servants, such Moore, continued to be loyal despite their close proximity to freedom at the hands of the Union army, indicating how some members of the black population believed that standing united with southern Whites provided them the best possible future.

The existence of individuals who held the beliefs described above shows that some singers of “Join de Angel Band” may have sung it intending to sincerely express their faith in their masters. The army that the song’s Moses was asked to assemble may have been an army to repel Northern invaders and its religious language possibly gave their masters divine approval. Loyal Blacks may have been present at these secret meetings because of their desire to participate in the prayer that frequently took place at them and not because they held subversive intentions (Fisher 77). Instead of rejecting their oppressors and working actively against them, an action that would call upon Moses’ subversive actions in the book of Exodus, certain enslaved Blacks believed that cooperation with the white man would allow them to live a better life. By displaying beliefs similar to those found in “Roll, Jordan Roll,” this spiritual perpetuates the divergent theories surrounding the theme of unity. A number of African Americans shared sentiments that went against the typical Exodus narrative and, instead of crafting them around the text, used it to highlight their personal beliefs.

During the time of slavery, the African American community primarily used the book of Exodus to relate their plight to the biblical Israelites, but the advent of the Civil War caused the spirituals to take on a much different tone. The songs shifted from lamentations of their worldly struggles to an expression of the potential for unified action, but this unity took on many different forms. Some songs, such as “The Coming Day,” asked for cooperation between those in bondage in order to move towards their land of freedom, while others dealt with the positive

effects of unity amongst black soldiers. Still others addressed the complex relationships between Blacks and Whites by emphasizing the benefits of cooperation with figures of authority. In any case, the use of biblical language from the book of Exodus provided a way for the singers of these spirituals to express in-depth themes of unity that transcended the idea of a people coming together through their collective suffering. This demonstrates the diverse range of views held by individuals in the African American community during the Civil War, challenging the traditional consensus held by scholars that the book of Exodus offered the framework for a singular black worldview born from the race's oppression.

*Dealing with the Fire: Fate of the Oppressors*

The viewpoints of the preferred eventual fate of the black population's oppressors expressed in African American spirituals are as equally complex as the views regarding unity. The book of Exodus offers a fairly straightforward depiction of the eventual fate of the Egyptians; their land is ravaged by plagues and the Pharaoh is destroyed in the Red Sea alongside his army. While it is true that this narrative is idolized in many spirituals during the Civil War, some offer a conflicting depiction of the desired outcome for the country's Whites. The varied nature of the relationships between Blacks and Whites that brought about nuanced views of unity also gave rise to divergent portrayals of the preferred final fate of the slaveholding South that went beyond the complete destruction laid out in the book of Exodus. The often contradictory views of the black community regarding the fate of their oppressors demonstrates that there was not a singular ideology regarding the issue based upon the book of Exodus, but instead individuals held their own beliefs, which were expressed with the biblical narrative in their spirituals.

The call for the destruction of authoritative Whites was brought about by the notion that they represented an obstacle on the oppressed Blacks' road to liberation and this view was reflected in many of the spirituals sung throughout the Civil War. One such spiritual was "Hold Your Light," the most popular song amongst the black soldiers in Colonel Higginson's colored regiment (Higginson 150). The Exodus narrative is invoked with the line, "Hold your light on Canaan's shore," identifying the singers' desire for freedom by asking for assistance in finding the biblical Promised Land. However, it is soon evident that the way to the Promised Land is being obstructed. The lines, "What make ole Satan for follow me so? / Satan ain't got notin' for do wid me" (150), which are placed amidst a description of the singers' journey to the Promised Land, implies that Satan was working against their efforts to obtain freedom. This aspect of the song allows the listener to conclude that Satan's secular equivalent in the lives of the soldiers was southern oppressors and their removal from the lives of the black community would allow easier access to their freedom. However, by placing the white Southerners in the role of the everlasting Satan, the singers are acknowledging that it may be impossible to remove this obstacle, recalling Henry Turner's view that God's direct intervention was required to overcome the oppressive South. The soldiers in Higginson's unit had yet to accomplish any major victories and their doubts concerning the effectiveness of their militaristic endeavors were reflected in spirituals such as this one (54). This spiritual adheres closely to the book of Exodus by indicating the need for religious empowerment, such as God's divine destruction of the Egyptians, in order to eliminate one's oppressors. It is further linked to the themes of the Exodus story due to the fact it was sung by soldiers who fought directly against Southern forces, indicating that the singers also desired for the destruction of the oppressive population depicted in the biblical narrative. However, believing that this was a universally held belief is misleading. Other

spirituals implement the book of Exodus to express divergent views of the desired fate of the country's southern Whites.

The obstacle to freedom that Southerners represented in the lives of the country's enslaved Blacks prompted the creation of spirituals outside of military forces that also called for their destruction. One such spiritual is "Satan's Camp A'Fire." It was sung in the deep South and contains the lines, "Fier, my Saviour, Fier, / Satan's camp a-fire / Fier, believer, fier / Satan's camp a-fire" (Smith 27). The singers believed that their liberation and salvation stemmed from fire, a destructive force. For many freedmen in the South, their freedom was a direct result of destructive military action. The southern white population's suffering at the hands of Union forces and Black revolts that would eventually break the chains of slavery afflicting the country's Blacks is represented by the titular line of the song, "Satan's camp a-fire." The Israelites' freedom was earned in a similar fashion. It was literally obtained with fire through one of God's plagues that rained hail and fire down on Egypt and figuratively through the destruction of the Pharaoh's army. The singers of the spiritual acknowledged their view that destructive actions such as these were necessary in order to obtain their freedom and, unlike the previous spiritual, were possible, as shown by Satan's camp being destroyed. This is a result of the song's historical context. The song was recorded being sung amidst Union victories during the Civil War, where liberation from bondage started to seem more plausible to enslaved Blacks (Smith iii). Therefore, the differences between "Satan's Camp A'Fire" and "Hold Your Light" demonstrate how the individual situations of black Americans influenced their portrayal of biblical themes.

The turmoil created by the black population's liberation in the South did not appeal to all its members. "I Can't Stand the Fire" is a spiritual that possibly states the singers' inability to cope with the destruction around them. The song was sometimes sung by enslaved Blacks during

slavery in order to ensure that they remained in their master's favor when white Southerners began fearing large-scale revolts due to abolitionist pressure (Fisher 134). Once slavery was no more, the freedmen were no longer property and were subject to violence at the hands of the southern Whites. Some liberated Blacks found they could not cope with these conditions and began to desire a return to a system similar to the one that existed during slavery (Litwack 215). The liberating fire that made them so vulnerable to southern aggression, which was detailed in other songs, is repeatedly denounced with the line, "I can't stan' de fire...while Jordan da roll so swif'" (Smith 42). Although enslaved Blacks may have initially sung this song in order to remain in their oppressors' favor, the loyalty of various Blacks described earlier, when combined with the unexpected negative consequences of freedom, suggests that, following emancipation, this spiritual may have been sung to demonstrate some freedmen's actual distaste for the destructive upheaval of the social order around them.

When one takes into account the varying views of those living in oppression, this song has the potential to reflect some of the Blacks' desire to allow their former masters to maintain their previous way of life, with these individuals often going to great lengths to ensure that this happened. They would refuse to divulge information about hidden valuables and would prevent the northern soldiers from sexually mistreating the plantation's white women (Litwack 150). Freedmen would quite literally go against the fire sweeping the South by hindering soldiers from burning down their former masters' homes (151). These enslaved Blacks' continued loyalty, even in the face of potential freedom, displayed their affection for their masters and the current system and, as a result, the spiritual potentially takes on a genuine meaning. Rather than call for the biblical destruction of their oppressors detailed in the book of Exodus, some singers of spirituals, such as "I Can't Stand the Fire," expressed their desire for the continuation of the

affluent lives of their southern masters and demonstrate how the Exodus narrative was manipulated to expound contradictory ideas based on the singers' complex beliefs and personal situations.

Other spirituals drew upon the book of Exodus in their predictions of the eventual fate of their masters if they refused to renounce their wicked ways. When questioned by Union soldiers as to whether or not they cared if their former masters' property was destroyed, many formerly enslaved Blacks expressed that it was only right. One black woman commented that it was acceptable to burn her mistress' house because "there has been so much devilment here...whipping n\*\*\*\*\*s most to death" (Litwack 163). Some black spirituals acknowledged these sins of the white population, but also simultaneously pleaded for their redemption. Lines such as "Turn, sinner, turn today, Turn sinner, turn O! / Turn, O sinner, de worl' da gwine...the sun may shine, but on your grave" (Smith 36), from the spiritual, "Turn, Sinner, Turn O!" reflect this view. Much like the Egyptians in the book of Exodus, the white population had greatly sinned through their treatment of the African American population and, unless they turned away from their sinful ways, would meet the same fate as the Egyptians: death. While not explicitly using the language of Exodus, this spiritual still exemplifies how it did not serve as the basis for individual's beliefs by attempting to prevent some of the biblical text's events from coming to fruition in the temporal world. Rather than merely asking for the Old Testament God's punishment seen in the book of Exodus, "Turn, Sinner, Turn O!" calls for the Christian ideal of divine forgiveness in the face of contrite sinners, demonstrating that, even within similarly sympathetic beliefs concerning the fate of one's oppressors, there was variance amongst the African American population's views during the time of Civil War.

Complexities surrounding the preferred fate of Blacks' oppressors during the Civil War were not only seen in spirituals sung by those still laboring under oppression or recently released from it. The spirituals sung by those fighting directly against the institution, such as black soldiers, portray similarly divergent views of the conflict's final outcome. Once again, "My Army Cross Over" provides an excellent demonstration of the sentiments held by black soldiers during the time. Not only does the opening line insinuate that the black soldiers were going into combat against the southern population, but it also implies that they were seeking to destroy them: "tik keer Satan" or "take care of Satan" (Smith 38). The phrase, "take care," should not be misconstrued to have a benevolent meaning. The song leaves little doubt of the outcome and purpose of the singers' actions with the line, "Pharaoh's army drowned, my army cross ober" (38). Clearly, these soldiers were able to stand the fires of destruction, to which some African Americans had an aversion, and directly called upon the language of the book of Exodus to express their desire for the destruction of their white opponents in order to cross their metaphorical River Jordan and experience freedom. The song was sung by a black Civil War veteran who had seen firsthand the effectiveness of his actions during the war, accounting for the differences between this spiritual and "Hold Your Light" (Fisher 153), with the latter being immensely popular amongst soldiers still participating in the conflict.

The individual circumstances surrounding the singers of these spirituals can be seen affecting their implementation of the book of Exodus. Some drew upon it to call for the complete annihilation of southern society due to its obstruction of Blacks' path to freedom, but differed on the plausibility of such an outcome. Others, influenced by their loyalty for their masters and the turbulent state of their freedom, expressed distaste for such destruction and yet other singers of spirituals instead implored Southerners to cease their sinful ways, lest they meet the same fate as

the doomed Egyptians. In addition, some singers who had seen and directly contributed to the end result of the war acknowledged the effectiveness and necessity of their destructive actions. Even though these viewpoints work directly against each other, they all draw upon the motifs contained within the book of Exodus. This demonstrates how the conditions and views of individuals affected the singers' desired fate of their oppressors, which were expressed with the Exodus narrative, thereby refuting the theory that the black population during the Civil War collectively formulated their views based off the Exodus narrative.

### *The Many Faces of Moses: Moses*

The figure of Moses as seen in the book of Exodus is typically thought of, first and foremost, as the liberator of the Israelites and his depiction in African American spirituals sung during the time of slavery and into the Civil War reflected this portrayal. However, where the spirituals do diverge is who is assigned the biblical role. The position of Moses amongst the time's black population was filled by figures ranging from the obvious choices, such as Harriet Tubman, to lesser thought of individuals, such as white Southerners and John Brown. The spirituals' varied depictions of Moses are a reflection of the complex landscape during the Civil War and the singers' ability to alter the book of Exodus' narrative to accommodate their individual circumstances.

One of the most well-known and obvious examples of a Mosaic leader of the African American community during the Civil War was Harriet Tubman. She frequently employed spirituals in her efforts to free enslaved Blacks and they became so popular that they eventually attracted the attention of Union officers (Darden 96). Her signature spiritual, "Go Down Moses," grew to fame during her liberating escapades and remained popular throughout the Civil War,



eventually being sung during Emancipation Proclamation ceremonies (106). It contains the lines, “Go down Moses / Way in Egypt’s Land, / Tell Ol’ Pharaoh, / To let my people go” (Jones).

This description of Tubman as a liberator is a result of her personal efforts to free those in bondage. Not only did she venture deep into the South, “Egypt’s Land,” but the singers of this spiritual also recognized their shared ancestry with her by having her directly tell the Pharaoh “to let *my* people go.” Linking Moses’ Hebrew lineage and pilgrimages into Egypt with Tubman made her an effective temporal equivalent of the biblical Moses; however, the events surrounding the Civil War allowed less likely candidates to pick up the well-known role.

The spiritual, “Come Along Moses,” casts the Union army in the role of Moses and the complex role of these liberators is reflected in its ambiguous portrayal of the hero of the book of Exodus. The opening line of the song, “Come along Moses, don’t get lost, don’t get lost, don’t get lost,” (Smith 104) is a plea from the singers of the time to their spiritual’s Moses to stay his course in liberating the enslaved Blacks of the South, with the Moses in question being the Union army that was sweeping the region. Enslaved Blacks believed that the northern troops were coming to free them: “We hear’d ‘bout de Yankees fightin’ to free us” (Litwack 118). After General Sherman’s victories in the South, he began to arrive at plantations and liberate the enslaved, thus earning him the moniker of Moses (122). However, the arrival of Union troops was not met without certain apprehensions by the South’s black population. They had been told by their masters that the Union army would perform terrible atrocities, such as the killing of babies (120). The conflicting ideas that the Union troops were evil and also liberators make the repeated inclusions of appeals to Moses, “don’t get lost,” justified and demonstrate that the Mosaic leader of the African American community was not always a one-dimensional paragon of freedom. The conditions surrounding the singers of the spiritual caused their Moses to be

viewed with less confidence than typically associated with Mosaic leaders, such as Harriet Tubman. The doubts surrounding this Mosaic figure stray from the book of Exodus and show that members of the black population did not hesitate to alter the biblical hero in order to accommodate their own unique situations.

John Brown was another figure whose liberating efforts caused him to be perceived as a Mosaic leader amongst the black population during the Civil War. The song, “John Brown’s Body,” was frequently sung as a marching hymn by Union soldiers during the war, demonstrating his prominence as a Mosaic figure during the time, despite his deeds occurring many years earlier (Darden 97). The song offers justification for why he was such a celebrated individual through its description of his actions, which were similar to the actions of Moses from the book of Exodus. It depicts his influence over the oppressive South with the lines, “He captured Harper’s Ferry, with his nineteen men so few, / And frightened “Old Virginny” till she trembled thru and thru” (law.umkc.edu). Moses similarly frightens the Egyptians through his efforts to liberate the Hebrew people, although he does not have a multitude of direct supporters. Even though Brown may have been a white man and thus did not share a common lineage with the enslaved Africans, the spiritual glorifies him. The repeated singing of “His soul goes marching on” indicates how his actions continued to inspire freedom fighters long after his death and, once again, is similar to the book of Exodus; the Israelites still sought their Promised Land after the death of their leader, Moses.

One can attribute the singers’ acceptance of John Brown, despite the singers of other spirituals simultaneously expressing their trepidations concerning other northern liberators, to Brown’s direct cooperation with oppressed Blacks and his actions that mimicked the biblical Moses. Even though Moses mainly acted alone or alongside his brother during his liberating

actions, Brown's collaboration with the black population actually made him a more accepted leader in the secular world. However, as mentioned earlier, many of John Brown's other characteristics were easily related to the narrative in the book of Exodus. In the end, the country's Blacks decided to ignore his differences from the biblical figure and celebrate his Mosaic efforts to liberate the oppressed. This phenomenon shows how the country's Blacks did not rely on adherence to all aspects the book of Exodus when identifying their Mosaic leaders. If they did, John Brown would have never risen to such popularity. Instead, the black population overlooked his differences from the biblical text in favor of his qualities that did lend themselves to the text and he became a Moses figure as a result.

African American spirituals did not assign the role of Moses only to those who were already working for the betterment of the black population, but also expressed a desire for white slaveholders to become their supporters as well. The previously discussed spiritual, "Join de Angel Band," potentially foregoes casting the typical liberation minded individuals as Moses and instead placed white Southerners into the biblical position. "If you look up de road you see fader Mosey, /Join de angel band...Do, fader Mosey, gader your army" (Smith 39) are fragments of the song sung by enslaved Blacks when their secret meetings were discovered by southern Whites. The song may contain a subversive message, but it may also depict the singers' desire for Whites in positions of power to work for the oppressed's well-being due to their great influence, which allowed them to enact powerful movements, such as raising an army. This portrayal of Moses demonstrates the greater understanding that the black community had of their position.

While an idealistic Moses, such as Harriet Tubman, who came from their community was appealing, by declaring a member of the dominant class their Mosaic leader, the singers

recognized that large scale liberation could only be brought about through the efforts of those in power. This is a case of enslaved African Americans using the Exodus narrative to describe not only their personal plight, but also the greater political landscape. The South's black population realized the power the white population held. In fact, many Blacks refused to acknowledge their freedom, even after learning it through a complex network of informed body servants (Litwack 181), unless "de Guvment man" arrived at the plantation to enforce it (183). When faced with the uncertainty and potential dangers of freedom, many of these loyal Blacks decided to remain allied with their former masters after the latter described their paternal feelings towards the freedmen (192). These members of the black population recognized the complexities that surrounded their freedom and, by refusing to leave the plantation, acknowledged that they would be able to thrive only through cooperation with the powerful white population. Therefore, the Moses in "Join de Angel Band," may be interpreted as a white Southerner and the appeals to him were possibly a way for loyal and understanding Blacks to request that they take Mosaic action to better the lives of the country's black population. This interpretation of the spiritual appoints unlikely individuals as Mosaic leaders and is a reflection of Blacks' ability to use the biblical narrative to express views that were influenced by the country's larger systems, which did not necessarily align with the Bible's text.

The differing portrayals of Moses in African American spirituals during the Civil War are a representation of the complex nature of the liberators of Blacks during the time. Some figures, such as Harriet Tubman, were given the title of Moses because of their shared lineage with the enslaved population and direct efforts to liberate the enslaved. Other Mosaic leaders, such as John Brown and Union forces, were similarly viewed due to their direct efforts to liberate the oppressed, despite their white heritage. The Exodus narrative was manipulated even further when

the moniker of Moses was given to southern Whites, displaying the ability of the singers to infuse spirituals with similar biblical themes to demonstrate their knowledge of the country's landscape outside of their immediate lives. Moses in the book of Exodus offers a leader for the black community to latch onto in their quest for their freedom, but the divergent portrayals of him in spirituals sung during the Civil War indicate that they relied on more than one Moses during their struggle. Moses was not a concrete entity for the country's black population during the Civil War, but instead the role shifted to reflect the singers' current situation and these shifts are represented by the divergent portrayals of the biblical leader in the time's spirituals. The complexity of America's political and social landscape during the Civil War meant that, unlike the Moses of Exodus, a single individual was not capable of liberating an entire population; a diverse range of leaders who did not always fit the biblical mold would be the only way for the country's Blacks to cast off the shackles of oppression.

#### *The Ideal Destination: The Promised Land*

Throughout the Negro spirituals of the Civil War era, a common recurring motif is the idea of a Promised Land. This Promised Land takes on many names in these songs, whether it is directly labeled as Canaan or implied through its proximity to the River Jordan. The Promised Land's portrayal in these spirituals is related to the lives of the singers and reflects their varying beliefs. As the temporal conditions of the African American population changed, so did their eventual Promised Land. Singers went from upholding the location as an ideal land of freedom only attained through ascendance into Heaven, to believing that it was a state of temporal freedom that could be attained through one's mortal efforts. In all cases, the themes of the book of Exodus are prevalent in these songs. When the spirituals are examined within the context of

the singers' conditions, one starts to ascertain the varying views of the country's black population in relation to the biblical narrative, demonstrating that the book of Exodus' Promised Land did not provide a cohesive end goal for the oppressed Blacks.

Various spirituals deal with the idea of a heavenly Promised Land and detail the process of arriving there as appropriately religious in nature. The song overheard being sung by black soldiers during the Civil War, "The Ship of Zion," is one such example that also demonstrates the appeal of this type of Promised Land. The singers believed they found themselves on the "good ole ship o' Zion / And she's makin' for de Promise Land" that has "angels for de sailors" (Higginson 166). The soldiers thought they were on the path towards their land of freedom and were being guided by God's angels, a course they displayed their approval of when they sung, "Good Lord, shall I be one?" (166). The spiritual rejects the idea that the soldiers were working towards temporal liberation and instead draws upon the concept of a religious Promised Land amongst God's angels. This discrepancy is most likely accounted for by the fact that these soldiers faced the possibility of death in their militaristic efforts and, therefore, required religious affirmation that their demise would grant them the liberation they sought for in their mortal endeavors. Therein laid the appeal of a heavenly Promised Land. As described in this song, the ship of Zion sails, "steady, steady, steady" and will "neither reel nor totter, totter, totter" (166). Unlike temporal freedom, which was not guaranteed, the path towards heavenly freedom was a surety, allowing these soldiers and many other members of the black community to rest easy knowing that their Promised Land could be reached, even if their mortal efforts left them in bondage. A heavenly Promised Land may have seemed to be appropriate for the soldiers' current situation and that is why they portrayed it in this fashion.

Other songs sung by black soldiers further emphasized the perils that one encountered on their journey to the Promised Land. “Down in the Valley” is another spiritual that deals with the destructive nature of liberation. This spiritual foregoes the traditional use of Moses as the singers’ liberator and instead places Jesus into that role. Regardless of the name assigned to the singers’ champion of freedom, the fiery descriptions of their liberation were extremely reminiscent of the Israelites’ destructive liberation in the book of Exodus. The singers’ freedom at the hands of Jesus was accompanied by “De lightnin’ and de flashin’” and the singers found this disturbing as they sang how they could not “stand the fire” from the “green trees a-flamin’” (Higginson 157). However, their suffering was not in vain because in the end, “Jesus set poor sinners free, / Way down in de valley” (157). The singers of this spiritual believed they were trapped in the valley and the way out to their Promised Land was possible through the fire used by Jesus to lift them out. However, the conditions surrounding Blacks’ freedom meant that the Promised Land that the singers believed they were being led to was not necessarily temporal in nature.

This portrayal of their freedom being accompanied by such chaos provides further evidence that the African American community was wary of the consequences of temporal freedom; a notion that prompted certain individuals to embrace the safer path to a heavenly Promised Land, detailed in spirituals such as “The Ship of Zion.” Free Blacks would face persecution at the hands of both southern and northern white racists. White Union soldiers often treated former enslaved Blacks poorly, with one example being their tendency to steal their scant possessions (Litwack 125). The country’s Blacks also had little direction in their newfound freedom. One freedman lamented how he refused to accept his liberation from plantation life by saying, “I ain’t got nowhar tuh go” (192). These factors meant that freedom from bondage was

not appealing to all members of the black population and establishes the possibility that some singers of “Down in the Valley” did not call for temporal liberation, but rather desired a heavenly Promised Land.

The infusion of the New Testament figure of Jesus in “Down in the Valley” has interesting implications. Jesus died and was brought back to the mortal world through the will of God. This shows that death or destruction does not mean the end of one’s mortal aspirations. As a result, the Promised Land detailed in this spiritual, although it may be potentially heavenly in nature due to the singers’ dangerous circumstances, could still be experienced in the temporal realm by future generations. Even if the singers lost their lives during their quest to reach their Promised Land, their New Testament belief in life after death meant that a temporal Promised Land might still be achieved by those still alive under more favorable conditions. The combination of Old and New Testament motifs in this spiritual demonstrate how the biblical ideas contained within the time’s spirituals were used to display the complex and varied desired final destinations of members of the country’s black population, which were formed in relation to their individual situations and beliefs.

Despite the benefits offered by a heavenly Promised Land, some spirituals sung by black soldiers expressed a desire for a temporal Promised Land within their lifetime, regardless of the dangers. Yet again, “My Army Cross Over” provides an enlightening depiction of this idea. The closing lines of the song describe the intended actions of the soldiers and how the singers would “cross de riber Jordan...cross de danger water...cross de Mighty Myo” (Smith 38). By crossing the River Jordan, the singers described how they would arrive in their Canaan and experience freedom; however the term “danger water” implied that they felt that the path would not be entirely safe. In spite of this, they still intended to continue and cross “de Mighty Myo (Bayou)”



en route to their liberation. These soldiers believed that their actions in the field of battle would allow them to reach their Promised Land within their lifetime, as reflected by the inclusion of the real world bayous of the South alongside biblical locations, such as the River Jordan.

This differs from the previous spiritual by indicating that the soldiers desired to experience this temporal Promised Land firsthand. By foregoing any New Testament references and instead describing the Promised Land found in the book of Exodus, the soldiers indicated their desire to imitate the biblical Israelites and reach it within their lifetime. The singers of “My Army Cross Over,” through their willingness to experience the turmoil that would accompany their temporal freedom, go against the ideas laid out in “Down in the Valley” and demonstrate that not all Blacks facing similarly oppressive circumstances formulated the same views. Their own individual desires and aspirations prompted them to identify with the book of Exodus’ Promised Land in different ways and the biblical narrative’s varied implementation in their spirituals was a reflection of the diversity of views held by the time’s black population.

Even though many singers used spirituals to portray the Promised Land as a place far removed from the singers’ current existence, whether it be heavenly or temporal in nature, others, such as “Away Down in Sunbury,” show how some African Americans believed they were already there. Singers described how they took up their master’s coat that he “hung up on de wall” and “wore ‘em to de ball” (Smith 99). The singer of the spiritual desired to continue with his current way of life and had no desire to travel to a foreign Promised Land, instead resigning himself to spend his remaining days in the land of his bondage with the line, “Away Down in Sunbury, I’m bound to live and die” (99). This song reflects the sentiments of many emancipated Blacks, who, immediately following emancipation, either remained on their plantation or quickly returned to it after a brief sojourn. As previously described, freedom

offered many Blacks no reason for celebration, with some believing the conditions under slavery left them “free all de time” (Litwack 214). However, other freedmen sought to take over their former masters’ plantations and continue their long practiced agricultural lives, refusing to relinquish their claim to the land to outraged Whites (210). These freedmen believed they had been living in their Promised Land of freedom all along and, although there were conflicting views as to the inclusion of their former masters in it, failed to see the need to aspire for a new heavenly or temporal one.

Much like “Can’t Stand the Fire,” there exists the possibility that the singers of “Away Down in Sunbury” recognized that separation from their current lifestyle did not mean they would lead a desirable life. However, this view is not necessarily a reflection of loyalty to the singers’ former masters. Many freedmen who left their plantations moved to a nearby one and continued to live as laborers under similar conditions (Litwack 227), demonstrating that they believed that life as a worker in an agricultural system provided them with their optimal situation. In this instance, some of the country’s Blacks favored a practical Promised Land over the glorified one depicted in the Bible. This interpretation of “Away Down in Sunbury” shows how the book of Exodus did not provide a singular Promised Land for the black population and that individuals held their own beliefs concerning their preferred final destination that did not always adhere to the biblical narrative, providing evidence against the idea of a collective worldview formed by those facing oppression.

The term Promised Land held many different meanings in the minds of singers of spirituals. It could have represented either a temporal state of freedom, often in a different physical location, as well as a state of heavenly liberation only attainable through one’s death, although the implications of one’s death vary from spiritual to spiritual. The popularity of a

heavenly Promised Land can be attributed to the guarantee that one would eventually arrive there, regardless of mortal conditions, an option that seems increasingly appropriate for some singers when the dangerous depictions of liberation described in the spirituals are examined. However, not all African Americans during the Civil War shared the same belief that they needed to aspire to arrive at a prophetic land of freedom. Certain spirituals indicate that some were quite willing to live out their days in much the same way they had during bondage, believing that they were already living their lives under the best possible conditions. The differing viewpoints shown by these spirituals indicate the fallacy in believing that the Promised Land of the book of Exodus offered a universally accepted goal for the entirety of the black population during the time of the Civil War. Instead, its varied use in spirituals was a reflection of the complex views and beliefs held by the African American community. The book of Exodus did not lay a blueprint for the final destination of the country's black population; it was actually used as a means of expressing each individual's own desires based on their unique and diverse ideals.

### *Conclusion*

The themes of unity, fate of oppressors, Moses and the Promised Land appear frequently throughout African American spirituals sung during the Civil War and the differing portrayals of these themes demonstrate the complexity of the oppressed people's views during the time period. Rather than molding their goals and beliefs around the biblical narrative, singers of spirituals drew upon it in order to relate to their varying experiences and situations. There was no collective black consciousness during the Civil War. To believe so is to undermine the individuality and humanity of the country's African Americans. The complexity of the time

meant that there would be an equally complex black population. Each member of said population could have been a freedman, soldier, enslaved Black, or even a white sympathizer. Obviously all these individuals would not hold the same beliefs and the diverse, and often contradictory, portrayals of motifs from the book of Exodus found in the spirituals of the time are a reflection of this. Although it may be convenient to assume that the beliefs of the black community closely followed the book of Exodus' narrative in order to create a collective worldview born from oppression, their spirituals indicate that they did not merely believe in the oppressed coming together, their oppressors getting destroyed, a single Mosaic leader leading the movement towards liberation, or entire populations striving for a specific Promised Land. Every singer of every spiritual led a unique existence and it is important to understand the conditions surrounding their lives in order to comprehend the true meaning behind the biblical motifs contained within their songs.

### **Have the Ships Sailed Away and who will be a Part of the Promised Land?**

The popularity of the book of Exodus in African American expression continued beyond the Civil War; it can also be seen in the poetry of the years following it. This paper's shift of focus from spirituals to poems is a result of the changing state of African Americans during the time. Now that slavery had been abolished, more Blacks than ever had access to education, becoming literate and able to express themselves via written text. In addition, although many Blacks still faced oppression, they were still allowed more freedom in communicating their views and, therefore, poetry, which was potentially dangerous once it became public under slavery, became a much more popular means of expression following the Civil War.

Poems differ from spirituals in several ways that should be taken into account when one examines the two genres side by side. Whereas the singing of spirituals represented a form of group expression, the author of a poem is a singular entity and, as a result, the views expressed in the text are much more personal in nature. This might lead some to believe that poems are not necessarily a reflection of the beliefs of a significant portion of the population, but it must also be understood that the primary goal of most poets is publication. Poets seek to have their work published and, in order to do so, have to be able to relate to a great number of readers. Therefore, the ideologies expressed in the published works discussed in the following section can be seen as being held by at least enough individuals to maintain credibility and that they were not merely irrelevant outliers from a universal black consciousness.

Once again, it is this idea of a unified black consciousness that is being disputed. The previous examination of how spirituals drew upon the book of Exodus demonstrated that this was not the case during the Civil War and an examination of the book of Exodus' role in the poetry written during the years following it shows that this theory is also erroneous during this

time period. The same themes of unity, fate of oppressors, Moses and the Promised Land will be examined due to their continued prevalence in the poetry of the time. A comparison of the different ways poems deal with these themes allows one to see the varied views held by members of the black population and that the popularity of the Exodus narrative was not an indication of a singular black worldview.

*Forging a New Community: Unity*

The poetry of African Americans following the Civil War and into the turn of the century draws upon themes of unity similar to those displayed in the spirituals, but the complex political and societal state of the nation's black community during the period led to the theme being interpreted in diverse ways. With slavery no longer an official institution and various compromises and statutes being implemented, members of the black population found themselves in a wide range of circumstances. Many African Americans were being elected into public office in the South, others were still held in virtual slavery through oppressive systems, while yet others were in relatively affluent situations in the North. Each individual's unique situation produced different ideas regarding unity and these ideas were depicted in the poetry of the time, often through the language of the book of Exodus. However, the biblical narrative was molded around their complex ideologies and its prevalence was not an indication of a collective black consciousness stemming from the book of Exodus.

Although the black population was no longer bound in slavery, they still faced their share of struggles and the poetry from the years immediately following the war highlighted that some Blacks believed that their people's collective suffering was a cause for unity. "Moses: A Story of the Nile," written by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and published in 1869, is a recreation of the

story of Exodus that gives the biblical players more human characteristics and uses the narrative to draw connections to the racial situation facing the United States. A section from the poem references the idea of collective suffering leading to unity. The poem's Moses has just killed an abusive Egyptian overseer and he comes across two quarreling Israelites. He thinks to himself, "They were brethren, sharers of a common wrong: should not their wrongs more closely bind their hearts, and union, not division, be their strength?" (Sherman 122). Moses then tells the Hebrews his thoughts and their subsequent rejection of him indicates that it is not the cooperation of the oppressed that will deliver them from bondage, but the later individual actions of Moses.

Unlike the spirituals that frequently expounded the virtues of collective action in obtaining freedom, "Moses: A Story of the Nile" adheres to the traditional Exodus narrative by emphasizing the importance of a single individual's efforts in obtaining freedom. Because the poem is frequently taken as an allegory for the plight of the black community, Harper is advocating for a powerful Mosaic leader to lead her people out of their oppressive state. The poem indicates Harper's belief that an individual leader from the collective will enhance the unity of the oppressed, allowing them to obtain liberation. This poem demonstrates how sometimes the literal interpretation of the book of Exodus was applied to a poet's work in order to reflect their individual beliefs, but other poems show that oftentimes the biblical narrative was altered to fit their own ideals.

Poets like Frances Harper may not have been ardent believers in the power of solely collective action, but other works published during the period offer a divergent view steeped in the same biblical rhetoric. 1868's "Hear, O Israel!" by Adah Isaacs Menken, is one example of such a poem. The piece is a recreation of a prophet's rallying sermon for her people's freedom.

The speaker tells her listeners to “fear not; for God hath at last let loose His thinkers, and their voices now tremble in the mighty depths of this old world!” (Sherman 188). She implores these “thinkers” to “Rise up from thy blood-stained pillows!” and “Come forth with the signs and wonders, and thy strong hands, and stretched-out arms, even as thou didst from Egypt!” (188). Although the newly liberated Blacks still faced oppression, they did gain access to an education. The poem’s “thinkers” can be interpreted as those Blacks that enthusiastically pursued the learning offered to them due to their belief that “education is what make’s a man free!” (Litwack 472). Menken was comparing the acts of these educated Blacks to the miracles of the book of Exodus and believed that a collective demonstration of their academic abilities would assist the entire population in obtaining its freedom.

While “Hear, O Israel!” may not reflect a belief in the power of universal action, it still goes against Harper’s belief in a single individual’s influence on the collective by emphasizing the power of the actions of an exceptional group of individuals. Her “thinkers” represent a unified group that can enable the oppressed to achieve their salvation that differs from the biblical narrative’s singular leader, but she still decided to relate the poem to the Bible’s Israelites regardless. The book of Exodus’ text in this poem is altered in order to reflect Menken’s own belief in the power of education, demonstrating how African American poets used the biblical narrative as a rhetorical tool to portray their views. As a result, Harper’s previously discussed adherence to the biblical text was because her views aligned with it, not the other way around.

Unity amongst members of the country’s black population following the Civil War was not merely seen as a means to achieve eventual salvation. It also reflected the loyalty that some individuals felt towards their peers, with the portrayal of such sentiments in the poetry of the



time drawing upon the book of Exodus as well. Loyalty did not only exist between Blacks facing oppression, but also between Blacks facing vastly different societal conditions. The poem, “Old Liberia is Not the Place for Me,” by Joshua McCarter Simpson, was published in 1874 and dealt with the Liberia colonization movement that started in 1816 and continued through the 1870s (Sherman 65). As the poem’s title suggests, Simpson did not support the migration of Blacks to Liberia. Although the poem suggests that Liberia may be “a goodly land, / Where milk and honey flows,” where “The sweet potatoes there may grow,...And purest waters ever flow” (65), the poem’s speaker still claims that “old Liberia / Is not the place for me” (65). Even when Liberia is described as akin to the Promised Land of the book of Exodus, Simpson refused to acknowledge it as his desired destination.

The poem goes on to give Simpson’s reasons for his rejection, saying that “Three millions slaves are in the South, / And suffering there to-day...We, we who in art and enterprise, / Are trudging on our way, / You’d have us all to colonize, / In old Liberia” (65). Much like Menken, Simpson believed that the efforts of a select group of Blacks could help liberate others facing oppression and that is why he refused to leave his country, expressing a racial unity that transcended societal status. Simpson’s feeling of responsibility towards his fellow Blacks still facing oppression caused him to reject the biblical Promised Land and demonstrates how his beliefs regarding unity outweighed the importance of the book of Exodus’ narrative, further emphasizing the idea that adherence to the biblical text was not the primary concern of the poets of the time.

Simpson’s poem did not simply attribute his desire to stay in the United States to his belief in the responsibility of Blacks in positions of power to aid their race; he also expressed a desire to unify with the nation’s white populace: “I have a mind to be a man / Among white men

and free” (65). In addition, Simpson acknowledged that race had taken on a much more complex meaning with the mixing of the races when he wrote, “(O)ur blood is now so far dispersed / Among the Anglo-race, / To rid the country of this curse, / Would need a larger space” (65). Simpson not only desired to live peacefully with Whites, but also those of mixed descent. This highlights an important distinction between the state of African Americans and the book of Exodus. The Israelites held no desire to comingle with the Egyptians and the book of Exodus makes no mention of the two groups ever bearing offspring together. It is this difference that led Simpson to reject a biblical, homogenous, Promised Land and instead opt for a unified land containing, not just the oppressed, but also members of the oppressive race and the mixed offspring of the two groups. The differences between temporal life and the Bible led Simpson to reject a literal interpretation of the book of Exodus. His poem serves as evidence that the book of Exodus was used as a rhetorical tool in the works of the African American community and was not a means of creating a unified consciousness.

Other poems written during the latter half of the nineteenth century further emphasize the time’s Blacks’ desire to live with the oppressive population in peace, while simultaneously drawing upon the language and motifs found within the book of Exodus. “When Ol’ Sis’ Judy Pray,” by James Edwin Campbell, shows how some members of the black population desired that their oppressors renounce their wicked ways so that they could live together peacefully. Campbell was born in 1867, so he was present during the turbulent times following the Civil War and it was Campbell’s experience during this time that likely prompted him to recognize that some his race believed they should accept Whites as fellow people under God. Following the Civil War, many Blacks advocated for cooperation with the white population in rebuilding the country. They believed that only by collaborating with the influential ex-Confederate leaders

would they be able to create a viable society. This led them to support amnesty towards such individuals and work alongside them in politics (Litwack 526). Black supporters of racial unity also renounced segregation of any kind, even when it was separate but equal (551), and called for compassion towards southern Whites. Elick Mahaly, a black politician, when running for office in 1867 spoke sympathetically of his former masters in his speeches, saying “if I am elected, I shall use my influence to have the disqualifications (from political participation) removed from all (including former Confederates)” (551). Campbell grew up during this time period and, as a result, possibly desired to appeal to readers with such sentiments with his poem, “When Ol’ Sis’ Judy Pray.”

The poem describes how when “Sis’ Judy” prays “De thun’ers ur Mount Sin-a-i / Comes rushin’ down f’um up on high / De Debbil tu’n his back an’ fly / While sinnahs loud fur pa’don cry” (Sherman 322). Campbell separated the Devil from the sinners, thereby giving the sinners a chance at redemption for their actions. Later lines go on to ensure that this is not to be interpreted ironically when “Sis’ Judy...in sorrow ‘peat...O Shepa’d, dese, dy po’ los’ sheep!” (322). Both Blacks and Whites had to rebuild a ruined nation after the Civil War and, therefore, it is not unlikely to believe that both of these races are present at the bottom of Mount Sinai, the gathering place of the Israelites following their flight from Egypt, in Campbell’s poem. By describing the sinners as “po’ los’ sheep,” Simpson was potentially displaying a desire for society to look past the deplorable actions of Whites and instead offering an alternative: work for their redemption in order to help the nation achieve the biblical Promised Land. Rather than definitively placing the oppressive white population in the position of the eradicated Egyptian sinners, Campbell’s poem may have resonated with some Blacks, such as Mahaly, and their desire for a national unity that transcended racial lines. It may have also caused him to offer the

possibility of including them as members of the poem's Israelite population in their new land. This portrayal of the book of Exodus allowed Campbell to appeal to readers who desired a new bi-racial community in the secular world. Their willingness to forgive the sins of their oppressors in order to create a unified land went against the Exodus narrative's homogenous society, once again establishing the book of Exodus as a rhetorical tool, whose use related to individual's beliefs in the poetry following the Civil War.

Feelings of unity amongst the black community following the Civil War took on many forms, but many varied portrayals of the theme drew upon the same biblical narrative: the book of Exodus. Some, such as Frances Ellen Harper, used the Exodus narrative to indicate her skepticism of the effectiveness of only collective action by emphasizing Moses' unifying beliefs. The poetry of Adah Menken began to stray from this idea by highlighting the influence of a select group of educated Blacks in initiating change. However, other poetry of the time called for an even broader unity, whether it occurred between those in bondage and those outside of it or between the races. Different beliefs in who should be a part of the newly unified county following the war led to different implementations of the book of Exodus with little concern being shown for biblical accuracy. Rather than being an indication of an all-encompassing black consciousness formulated around the Exodus narrative, the prevalence of the narrative's motifs within African American poetry written after the Civil War was an indication of the story's ability to be used by poets as a means of expressing complex individual beliefs.

#### *Feelings of Retribution or Mercy: Fate of the Oppressors*

The fate of the Israelites' oppressors in the book of Exodus is fairly straightforward; they suffer through biblical plagues and the strength of the nation is crushed underneath the Red Sea.

One might expect that the recently emancipated black community would desire the same fate for discriminatory whites; however the use of Exodus narrative in the African American poetry of the time offers a more complex portrayal of the desired fate of the race's oppressors. While it is true that some poets called for the destruction of their oppressors, others offered a more sympathetic view. The book of Exodus was used in the poetry of black Americans during the years following the Civil War to offer up divergent and nuanced views of the preferred destiny of the country's oppressive white population, serving as a demonstration of how the text was used to portray individual ideologies that were not necessarily based around the biblical narrative.

A poem that did not explicitly call for retribution against oppressors of Blacks was "The First of August in Jamaica," by Joshua McCarter Simpson. The poem was initially published in 1848 in response to Great Britain abolishing slavery in the West Indies by paying off slaveholders on August 1, 1834. This peaceful emancipation apparently held resonance through the years, as the poem was published once again in 1874 (Sherman 55). The poem contains many lines referencing God's recognition of Blacks suffering under slavery: "He saw the tyrant wield the lash; / He counted every bleeding gash; / He heard our children beg for bread" (55). The same God that ends these sufferings and allows the oppressed to "Proclaim Jamaica's liberty" is also asked to bestow freedom upon the rest of the world, but, in the poem, Simpson also advocated for cooperation amongst his peers as well: "Wake the psaltry, lute and lyre, / And let us set the world on fire. / And may Jehovah blow the flame, / Till all mankind shall see the light / Of knowledge, liberty and right!" (56). The inclusion of "Jehovah" references back to the Old Testament and the biblical destruction of the Egyptians, but Simpson did not desire this outcome. Instead, Simpson described how the liberated Blacks' "hands are free of blood" (56). In fact, the ultimate goal of the poem's described mass liberation is for the oppressors and oppressed to be

“a happy, free and social band; / Each brother feels his brother’s care. / And each his brother’s burden bear” (56). By working with the Old Testament God of Exodus, Simpson hoped to spread racial harmony throughout the world and avoid the destruction depicted in the book of Exodus. The contradiction of working with the wrathful God found in the Old Testament demonstrates that poets, such as Simpson, would use elements from the Bible in their work to portray their own beliefs and viewpoints with little regard to biblical accuracy, providing evidence against the idea of a collective black consciousness formulated specifically around the book of Exodus.

Other poems may not have called for a world of joyous harmony, but they still did not advocate for bloody retribution. The previously referenced, “Hear, O Israel!” by Adah Isaacs Menken is one such poem that also contains Exodus references. The aforementioned participation of unified “thinkers” is offered in response to the speaker of the poem’s rejection of violent resistance. She says, “Back, tyrants of the red hands! / Slouch back to your ungodly tents, and hide the Cain- / brand on your foreheads! / Life for life, blood for blood, is the lesson ye teach / us” (Sherman 188). The speaker of the poem does not explicitly call for mercy towards the oppressors based off of purely benevolent purposes, but rather because of self-preservation. “Life for life, blood for blood” indicates that violence will beget more violence and the speaker then states that “We, the children of Israel, will not creep to the kennel / graves ye are scooping out with iron hands” (188). By sparing their former oppressors, individuals like Adah Menken hoped to avoid further suffering and even death. Once again, this depiction of the book of Exodus foregoes biblical accuracy and instead manipulates the narrative to fit the author’s views. The destruction of the Bible’s Egyptians may have spared the Israelites, but the secular circumstances surrounding the black population did not favor such violence in the eyes of Adah

Menken. As a result, her biblical prophet calls for exactly the opposite of what would be expected if the black community based its beliefs around the book of Exodus.

While these two poems serve as examples of the belief that mercy towards one's oppressors potentially has beneficial purposes, the language of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's poetic story, "Moses: A Story of the Nile," indicates that she advocated for mercy for the benefit of the oppressors by casting the Egyptians in a sympathetic light. As stated earlier, the poem is an allegory for the experience of black Americans and, as a result, the biblical portrayals can be interpreted as representative of secular individuals, with the black community as the Israelites and the Egyptians as their white oppressors. One instance in the poem where its language laments the suffering of the Egyptians is the death of the Egyptian's firstborn sons at the hands of God. After the last "dread plague" Harper writes that "a startling shriek rose from each palace, / home and hut of Egypt...in every home / a corpse – in every heart a bitter woe...burning kisses on cold lips / Of the dead, bitter partings, sad farewells" (Sherman 125). By giving the Egyptians the human emotions of grief and despair, the poem allows the reader to feel the sadness experienced by them and, therefore, makes them sympathetic characters, not merely antagonistic enemies of the oppressed.

This style can be seen once again in Harper's portrayal of the destruction of the Pharaoh's army. As the Pharaoh and his forces pursue the Israelites out of Egypt they find themselves about to be crushed by the waters of the Red Sea. Among the doomed men "arose / A cry of terror, baffled hate and hopeless dread...and the flower and pride / Of Egypt sank as lead within the sea...and the song of Israel's / Triumph was the requiem of their foes" (127-128). Harper made the Egyptians relatable to the reader by having them express fear of their imminent death and described them as the "flower and pride of Egypt," thereby making their destruction a

lamentable affair. Harper's depiction of the Exodus narrative warns against further violence, both from the oppressors and the oppressed, by using sympathetic language to describe the story's deaths. This makes the Egyptians, and perhaps by extension anti-Black Whites, appear to be victims. However, the violence directed at the Egyptians is a result of their refusal to let the Israelites leave in peace, so it can be inferred that Harper believed the same would be true of discriminatory Whites should they continue to oppress the black population, yet the poem's language shows that this is not what she desires.

The speeches of black politicians, such as the aforementioned Elick Mahaly, provide more evidence for this interpretation. His speech to a Black audience described his affection for his former oppressors, saying it stemmed from how they taught him "the principles of honesty and virtue" (Litwack 551). The fact he made these feelings clear at a political rally demonstrates that they were not aberrant; otherwise, he would have lost the voters' favor, but that they were common enough to warrant the public spotlight. In addition, Mahaly was not a singular radical individual. There existed a number of like-minded black politicians who offered similarly sympathetic views (Litwack 551). This indicates how the idea that the suffering of the country's white population was a lamentable affair to some Blacks, giving credence to the previous interpretation of the poem's language. Harper used the book of Exodus to send a message to both a white and black audience in order to prevent future violence and oppression, showing how the book of Exodus served as a tool with which African American poets expressed their views that often neglected to strictly adhere to the tone of the Exodus narrative.

James Monroe Whitfield's poem, "A Poem: Written for the Celebration of the Fourth Anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation," expresses a belief that violence and destruction were required for Blacks' liberation from oppression. The poem contains lines praising Abraham



Lincoln's efforts to end slavery, saying that he "stretched his rod / Four years ago across the sea,  
/ And through its blood-dyed waves we trod / The path that leads to Liberty" (Sherman 91).

Whitfield wrote that the "path that leads to Liberty" was through "blood-dyed waves," indicating that the destruction of the oppressors that was required for the Israelites' freedom was also necessary for the freedom of America's native black population. This concept goes against the traditional Exodus narrative because God's destruction of the Egyptians was a result of the deity's desire to demonstrate his power and not for the sake of newly liberated Hebrews: "I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host" (Exodus 14:17). In fact, God repeatedly hardens the Pharaoh's heart after Moses' plagues make him reluctant to hold the Israelites in bondage. Within the story of Exodus, God torments the oppressors in order to obtain glory. However, poets such as Whitfield depicted the suffering of the oppressive population as a necessary step on the road to freedom.

Here is an example of the Exodus narrative being modified to fit the intentions of the poem's author. The purpose of the poem was to glorify Lincoln and his Emancipation Proclamation. In order to do so, Whitfield had to ensure that Lincoln's actions appeared necessary and done for the liberation of enslaved Blacks. As a result, Whitfield had to manipulate the biblical text to fit the temporal world, accounting for the differences seen between this poem and the previously discussed pieces. Whitfield's divergent portrayal of the book of Exodus offers yet more evidence that the book of Exodus was used by African American poets as a tool to emphasize the ideas they wanted to put forward in their poems.

Once again the portrayal of the book of Exodus in African American poetry following the Civil War regarding the fate of one's oppressors was frequently not in line with the actual biblical narrative. The enemies of the black community following the Civil War were often

shown mercy or cast in a sympathetic light. Even when a poem did call for their bloody destruction, it was often to show it as necessary to obtain freedom based upon authorial intent, not as an act of vengeance. These varied uses of the book of Exodus are due to the text's complex reasoning for the Egyptian's destruction. While it is true that their deaths were seemingly necessary for the Israelites' freedom, the only reason both parties are placed in the situation is due to God's questionable motives. The ambiguous circumstances behind the Egyptians' destruction allowed poets following the Civil War flexibility in their implementation of the narrative in order to reflect their own stance on what should be done to their oppressors. This gave rise to the diversity of the narrative's depiction that demonstrates how the book of Exodus was used as a rhetorical tool and was not the focus of a collective black ideology.

#### *The Search for a Mosaic Leader: Moses*

Following the Civil War and throughout Reconstruction, the newly liberated Black population continually sought for a Mosaic leader to lead them to equality. However, unlike the other themes drawn from the book of Exodus, the portrayal of Moses in African American poetry in the latter half of the nineteenth century offers a much more focused view of the biblical leader, albeit the focus is on the failure to find such an individual. The death of Abraham Lincoln and the reduced role of other wartime Moses figures, such as Harriet Tubman and the Union army, meant that the black community would turn towards various other Mosaic leaders, but ultimately decide that the one to guide them would be a much more complex figure. Authors of poetry dealing with the search for a Mosaic leader drew upon the book of Exodus in order shed light on the difficulty in finding one during the turbulent times following the Civil War.

James Monroe Whitfield's previously discussed poem, "A Poem: Written for the Celebration of the Fourth Anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation," offers two different versions of a Mosaic figure and makes his opinions on both of them clear. As stated earlier, he defined Abraham Lincoln as the true Moses of the African American people. He likened him to the "prototype of old, / Who used his power, as Heaven had told" in his poem and described how he "showed the way...Toward the light of Freedom's day" (Sherman 91). As touched upon earlier, the purpose of the poem was to glorify Lincoln and Whitfield did this by casting him in the role of the biblical hero, Moses. The poem's use of the hero of the book of Exodus was used to further the poet's agenda and demonstrates that, much like with the themes of unity and fate of oppressors, the biblical narrative was implemented as a rhetorical tool.

Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was an important step towards freedom for black Americans that allowed Whitfield to easily portray him as a modern day Moses, but the actions of the United States' next president, Andrew Johnson, were far removed from the liberating actions of the biblical hero, resulting in Whitfield disassociating him from Moses. Whitfield's poem describes Johnson as a "self-styled Moses" (Sherman 91), recalling speeches in which he proclaimed that he would be the Moses of the country's black population and "a friend of humanity, especially a friend of the colored man" (Litwack 530). Whitfield detailed how Johnson allowed the former masters and oppressors of southern Blacks back into power by writing how he "brings the aid / Of power and place to help them (former Confederate Whites) through, / To crush the race (Blacks) by him betrayed" (Sherman 91). By writing how Johnson declared himself a Mosaic leader, an action the biblical hero did not perform, while having him work towards a system of oppression, rather than lead the oppressed towards liberation, Whitfield indicated that he believed that the true Moses of the black people, Lincoln, was gone

and the new Moses was a fallacy. Recalling Moses from the book of Exodus allowed Whitfield to emphasize the shortcomings of Andrew Johnson by contrasting him with the biblical hero. This projection of the Bible onto the secular world was a means to further the poem's message and not a demonstration of Exodus focused beliefs.

Poets beside Whitfield lambasted Johnson as a failure of a Mosaic leader, with one such poet being James Madison Bell. His poem, "Modern Moses," or "'My Policy' Man," published in 1867, is a long tirade against the president. Johnson, the "Modern Moses" described in the poem, is identified as separate and inferior to his biblical counterpart. Bell wrote "'Moses! Moses!' should be my theme; / Not he that through the crimson stream / Led out from Egypt Israel's host" displaying his belief that Johnson was not a figure akin to the biblical Moses, but rather "'our Mose' of rant and boast" (Sherman 209). The new Moses of Bell's lifetime was a completely different entity than the one found in the story of Exodus. Rather than being a pious and humble individual, Johnson was boastful and slanderous, with Bell describing how he "Cajoled a drunken revelry" (209). Much like Whitfield's poem, Bell used the book of Exodus as an instrument to create contrast between the heroic Moses of the Bible and his real world counterpart. Both Bell and Whitfield displayed dissatisfaction with their current Mosaic leader and it was this dissatisfaction that caused other poets of the time to apply the label of Moses to extremely atypical entities.

The aforementioned poem, "Hear, O Israel!," by Adah Isaacs Menken, published in 1868, is written from the perspective of a Mosaic prophet speaking to the Israelites, however Menken never specified the speaker as the Bible's Moses. Instead, the speaker is seen as an entirely new figure with complex characteristics that both adhere to and stray away from the book of Exodus. The poem's prophet is aware of her faults, saying how she "departed from thee (the Israelites)

and spread (her) tent of many colors in the land of Egypt” (Sherman 186), indicating how she lived amidst her people’s masters, much like the Moses of Exodus. However, the prophet has been “wakened ‘midst the struggle of death” and now finds herself “come forth unscathed, to redeem thee (the prophet’s audience) from slavery, O my nation! And lead thee back to God” (187). The poem’s speaker is confident in her abilities, claiming that she will “rend the chains that bind” her constituents (187). The supposed power of this Mosaic leader stands in stark contrast to the failed leadership of Andrew Johnson.

Adah Menken’s prophet derives her power and credibility by adhering to the Exodus narrative, both by living amidst her people’s oppressors in addition to sharing a common lineage with the oppressed, but there is an important distinction to make between Menken’s prophet and Moses; the poem’s capable leader is a woman. The failure of Andrew Johnson and loss of Lincoln caused Menken to stray from the traditional leader of the Exodus narrative and instead seek an unlikely female Mosaic leader. However, unlike the Mosaic Harriet Tubman, who was unable to enact large-scale change due to her gender and race, this Moses figure offers to liberate the entire population, despite not being a member of the dominant male population. The turbulent political and social climate of the country prompted members of the black population, such as Menken, to desire an exploration of the alternatives to a traditional Mosaic leader, even if it meant transcending typical gender roles. This demonstrates how the country’s lamentable situation caused Menken to disregard certain aspects of the Exodus narrative and alter it in order put forward a possible solution to the black population’s woes, showing how the complex ideology and beliefs of individual African Americans outweighed strict adherence to the Bible’s text. Menken’s poem is yet another example of how poets drew upon the book of Exodus as a

means of expression and that its prevalence was not an indication of a singular black consciousness.

The search for a Mosaic leader following the Civil War proved troublesome for the black community and this difficulty was reflected in the poetry of the time. Now that slavery had been abolished, the means to obtaining equality and true freedom proved much more complex. Leaders, such as Lincoln, who worked towards the emancipation of the enslaved were viewed favorably in the eyes of many Blacks, but Lincoln's untimely death meant that it was up to Andrew Johnson to continue his work. However, his failures meant that there was no clear successor to the Moses of Lincoln and that the search for a leader who could be connected to the Exodus narrative was forced to continue. Lincoln's death and Andrew Johnson's failures created difficulties in applying a literal interpretation of the book of Exodus in the lives of black Americans and, as a result, new and unlikely leaders that did not fit the typical mold of a Mosaic leader were favored by some. The disassociation from the traditional biblical Moses in the poetry of the time demonstrates how the biblical narrative was used to outline poets' unique beliefs surrounding their secular lives and that members of the country's black population did not use the book of Exodus as a driving force in the formulation of their ideologies.

### *Defining the Goal: The Promised Land*

The Promised Land of Canaan in the book of Exodus is a clear destination for the Israelites. There they will be free to live their lives and their troubles will be no more. The spirituals sung during the Civil War indicated that the abolition of slavery had the potential to allow them to reach their own Promised Land, but the reality of history proved otherwise. After the Civil War, the country's Blacks found themselves in undesirable situations that were often

quite similar to their lives under the bondage of slavery. Even though recently liberated Blacks thought they “was goin’ to get rich like the white folks” off their newly acquired land, the Whites in power ensured that they could “scarcely get work anywhere but in the rice-fields and cotton plantations of a white man,” (Litwack 448). In addition, vagrancy laws ensured that in order for Blacks to keep out of prison they would have to work as virtual enslaved for white landowners (319). This meant that a new Promised Land was needed and the poetry of the time period indicates that there was no consensus on what this new goal should be, with the book of Exodus being used to express these divergent Promised Lands.

A poem that recalls the themes concerning the Promised Land laid out in the spirituals of the Civil War is “Ships that Pass in the Night” by Paul Laurence Dunbar, published in the 1890s. However, unlike its spiritual counterpart, “The Ships of Zion,” it paints a much bleaker picture. Whereas “The Ships of Zion” places its singers on a voyage to the Promised Land, “Ships that Pass in the Night” is a lamentation of the loss of an opportunity to reach the biblical utopia. The poem’s speaker states how he sees that “great dark clouds are massing,” but he finds that the “ship (he) seek(s) is passing” (Johnson 56). Even though he “would hail and check that ship of ships” and stretch his “hands imploring,” the ship that would take him away from his plight is still “passing, passing” (56). As a result, the speaker finds himself lost and afraid: “O Soul that dreads the dark! / Is there no hope for me?” (56). The singers of “The Ships of Zion” had an optimistic view of how their involvement in the Civil War would grant them equality and freedom, but Dunbar’s negative experiences with Reconstruction and the years following it gave him no such delusions, resulting in the hopeless tone of his poem. As mentioned earlier, the conditions for black Americans did not greatly improve with the abolition of slavery. The Civil War’s failure to take Blacks to Canaan caused them to continue their search for a Promised

Land, forcing them to reform their goals to fit their individual circumstances. This, in part, explains the complex portrayal of the biblical Promised Land in the African American poetry of the time.

The inability of the black population to reach their Promised Land through emancipation resulted in a reiteration of the idea that the Promised Land may not be able to be reached in one's own lifetime, but that there was still hope for future generations. This concept can be clearly seen in the previously discussed poem, "Moses: A Story of the Nile," by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. The poem's retelling of the book of Exodus comes to a conclusion with Moses' death before the Israelites cross the River Jordan into the Promised Land of Canaan. Moses is taken to the top of a mountain before his life leaves him in order to view the Promised Land and he is greeted by a beautiful landscape composed of "hills all bathed / In light and beauty" (Sherman 129). Although the Promised Land is "full of beauty and delight," it pales in comparison to his visions of oncoming Heaven, which is described as "another, fairer, vision" (129). The "land / Of crystal fountains, love and beauty, joy / and light" seen in Heaven is shown as superior to the physical land of Canaan and indicates Harper's belief that even if one is not able to reach their Promised Land within their lifetime, a far greater opportunity awaits them beyond Heaven's "pearly gates" (129).

Once again, this is a result of the disappointments that Blacks faced during the years following the Civil War. Although Moses dies before he reaches the Promised Land of Canaan, his constituents arrive there without him. Therefore, Harper's poem is attempting to give hope and comfort to her kin who may never reach the ideal Promised Land in their lifetime by simultaneously painting a beautiful picture of Heaven, while also inferring that future generations may reach a temporal Promised Land. Harper was indicating her belief that their



efforts would not be in vain. By offering two versions of a Promised Land, a secular and spiritual one, Harper demonstrated in her poem that the continued plight of the country's black population complicated the role of the biblical destination.

The previously discussed poem, "Hear, O Israel!," by Adah Menken, also demonstrates the belief in the power of a spiritual Promised Land. Menken focused a majority of the poem on the speaker's efforts to establish her credibility amongst her constituents, but when the prophet does propose her eventual goal she does not describe a physical location or even a concrete state of being. Rather, she says she will lead them "back to freedom," "back to God" and "back to the pastures of right and life!" (Sherman 187). Given that the poem is an allegory for the state of suffering that black Americans faced at the time of its publication in 1868, the repetition of the phrase "back to" is not to be interpreted literally. This would mean, in the minds of the poem's intended black audience, a return to the institution of slavery. Instead, Menken invoked the narrative seen in the Bible by having the speaker call for a return to the powerful past of the Israelites, a future that seemed impossible for Blacks at the time. As a result, the future Promised Land the poem is calling for is a religious one based on the concepts found within the Bible. As mentioned earlier, the poem does not call for a radical upheaval of society, giving further credence to the abstract religious goal of the prophet. Menken is using the motifs found in the book of Exodus to ground her goal in religion and, as a result, separate it from temporal goals. By identifying her Promised Land as a reunion with God and a land where freedom abounds, Menken attempted to create an appealing Promised Land compatible with the unique circumstances of the time, specifically those that could not reach it in their lifetime.

Other poets went even further in complicating the Promised Land's role by rejecting it outright due to their own beliefs. The previously discussed poem, "Old Liberia is Not the Place

for Me,” was published in 1874 and deals with the colonization of Africa by black expatriates. Joshua Simpson, the poem’s author, described how supporters of the movement claimed that the colony for emigrated Blacks in Liberia was “a goodly land, / Where milk and honey flows, / And every Jack will be a man” (Sherman 64). The language used in the poem is extremely reminiscent of the descriptions of Canaan in the book of Exodus, but Simpson rejected the colonization movement, even when offered with biblical descriptions of Liberia. In the poem, he claimed that “this (America) is my native land, / And here I’m bound to stay” (65). This was a result of his desire to live in harmony amongst all races: “I have a mind to be a man, / Among white men and free” (65). The Promised Land found in the book of Exodus only contained the Israelites and this went against the notion of racial unity for which many Blacks, such as Simpson, advocated. Although Liberia may have indeed offered all the bountiful opportunities its proponents outlined, by drawing upon the Exodus narrative, its supporters actually alienated those who wanted cooperation between the races when they drew upon the biblical text. The previously discussed poems by Menken and Harper may lead one to believe that members of African American population following the Civil War collectively identified the Promised Land described in the book of Exodus as their eventual goal, but Simpson’s outright rejection of it, at least as it is seen in the Bible, demonstrates that they formed their beliefs around their individual circumstances and not the biblical narrative. Simpson no doubt desired a Promised Land where he and his people could live free of torment, but he opted to craft one based upon the country’s temporal conditions and his own views instead of creating one in Liberia that adhered to the text of the book of Exodus.

The Promised Land laid out in the book of Exodus was frequently implemented as a means to describe a final destination for Blacks following the Civil War, but its identity was

often disputed and the concept's biblical depiction was even sometimes rejected entirely in favor of one that accounted for secular circumstances. Individuals, such as Dunbar, recognized that their opportunity for equality and true freedom was slipping away and this led many Blacks, such as Adah Menken and Frances Harper, to construct complex Promised Lands to accommodate those who could and could not reach it within their lifetime. The Promised Land in these poems was used to give comfort to those who died in continued oppression, while simultaneously giving motivation to those whose struggles would continue. However, even when the Exodus narrative was used to describe it as an attainable temporal destination, as with the colonization movement, the desires of some members of the black community led them to disregard the concept of a biblical Promised Land that is laid out in the book of Exodus and desire a unique one that adhered to their own idea of what a utopia for their race should be. Blacks had obtained their freedom from slavery following the Civil War, but their struggles continued. Therefore, the Promised Land needed to take on a new role, however the continued plight they faced meant that a "land of milk and honey" could still serve as a desirable end goal, but the complex depictions of it in the poetry of the time indicates the danger in assuming that the African American community held a single collective vision of their final destination.

### *Conclusion*

The book of Exodus was mainly used by African American poets following the Civil War as a way to emphasize their poems' messages. Poets that linked the biblical narrative to their secular world did so in order to demonstrate approval of certain individuals or events, while those that separated it from their temporal affairs did so to show how they believed other individuals and concepts were unacceptable. The authors of these poems did not share a unified

ideology and, therefore, their depictions of Exodus varied greatly. By seeing how the book of Exodus was altered to fit one's personal agenda, it is clear that its popularity in the poetry of African Americans during the time was not an indication of a singular black system of beliefs.

Depictions of the book of Exodus focused on the individual views held by the members of the black population, rather than the biblical narrative, resulting in the variance seen in the text's portrayal. Much like the spirituals of the Civil War, it is this variance between the common themes of the book of Exodus that shows the fallacy in attempting to construct a singular worldview of the country's Blacks. Not every black American faced the same circumstances or reacted to situations the same way. Their individuality gave rise to unique and complex ideologies that were reflected in the poetry of the time and generalizations of these ideologies, whether they are based on interpretations of spirituals or poetry, strip away the humanity that the African American race has struggled to have recognized for centuries.

## Afterword

The black population during the Civil War and the years following it may have frequently implemented the book of Exodus in their various forms of expression, but this does not suggest that they formed their ideologies around it or used it to display a collective worldview. The biblical narrative's role in these individuals' lives ranged from a way to connect their secular existence to their religious beliefs to a rhetorical tool. The varied portrayals of Exodus themes in both the spirituals and poems of the latter half of the nineteenth century indicate that there was no singular way the members of the black community applied it to their existence; their engagement with the text was contingent upon their individual situations. When scholars attempt to use its popularity as justification for their belief in a collective black consciousness, they are recalling a dangerous practice that may have dehumanizing consequences.

To be labeled as solely part of a collective is potentially dangerous. Doing so makes one vulnerable to having their individuality stripped away, and subsequently their humanity. This truth is no less applicable to members of America's black population. Throughout history, the race has been continually debased in order to justify a system of oppression. Although beliefs of this nature are typically regarded with scorn by modern society, scholars who attempt to place a single ideology on the entirety of the country's Blacks are moving one step closer to this abhorrent practice. When one ascribes any type of generalities to an entire population, whether they are black, white, men, women, homosexuals, liberal, conservative or any of the countless characteristics that make up one's identity, they are ignoring the diversity that exists within the population. Individuals are just as the term implies, individuals, and must be recognized as such. This means taking a meaningful look at their each of their lives' unique circumstances and their beliefs and views that stem from their unique experiences.

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