

Two books that provide an excellent discussion of the spirituals are Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977), pp. 30-55, and Albert J. Raboteau's *Slave Religion* (1978), pp. 243-66. Both authors argue that the spirituals were part of a religious expression that enslaved people used to transcend the narrow limits and dehumanizing effects of slavery. It was through the performance of the spirituals that the individual and the community experienced their God, a God who affirmed their humanity in ways whites did not, and a God who could set them free both spiritually and physically. Those "sacred songs," as Levine calls them, were also used as secret communication. That is not to say that all spirituals functioned as coded protest songs or as some sort of secret language. The structure of the spirituals and the way in which they were created and performed allowed for flexibility in their function and meaning.

The primary function of the spirituals was as communal songs sung in a religious gathering, performed in a call-response pattern reminiscent of West African traditional religions. As Raboteau points out, one person would begin to create a song by singing about his or her own sorrow or joy. That individual experience was brought to the community and through the call-response structure of the singing, that individual's sorrow or joy became the community's sorrow or joy. In this way, the spiritual became truly affirming, for it provided communal support for individual experiences. Slaves used the characters of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, to tell their stories. Jesus was called upon to help the individual find God who would set them free "on the inside." It was while the person had been "touched on the inside" that slaves believed they came in intimate contact with God and the heroes of the Bible. That intimate, immediate relationship is present throughout the spirituals, with Jesus and the characters of the Old Testament presented not as some far off deities, but as friends and family members who helped the individual in his or her struggle. The spirituals, then, tell the story of a spiritual journey toward spiritual freedom, while encouraging those who had not yet found that freedom to "go on through to the promised land."

That spiritual journey toward freedom dominates these songs, but the concern for physical freedom is there as well. The most pervasive image in the spirituals is that of the chosen people, for the slaves believed they had been chosen by God just as the Israelites had. They also believed they understood better than anyone what freedom truly meant in both a spiritual and a physical sense. The Old Testament figures that the slaves used in their songs experienced their deliverance in this world, and the slaves believed God would deliver them from bondage in this world just as God had delivered the people of Israel and all the Old Testament heroes. The slaves believed that the same God that had granted them spiritual freedom would someday loose the chains of slavery. The wonderful flexibility of the spirituals allowed for that double meaning of freedom. For example, Frederick Douglass claimed that the line "I am bound for Canaan" in one of the songs he frequently sang meant he was going to the North, not just that he would experience the freedom of the promised land in a spiritual sense. For many blacks, particularly as the Civil War drew closer and physical freedom become more likely, songs about the promised land took on a more literal meaning, even though the more spiritual meaning remained. That flexibility and multiplicity of meanings also allowed for slaves to use the sacred songs as secret communication. Some, such as "Steal Away to Jesus," were used to call a secret meeting where the people could worship without the supervision of whites. The spirituals functioned in different ways, but most importantly, they anchored the enslaved persons to a reality that allowed them to transcend the harsh limits of slavery. They helped the slaves to carve out a space in which they could live as human beings, loved and affirmed by a God and a host of Biblical heroes, a space that allowed them to be human in dehumanizing circumstances.