

From the Underground Railroad to the Promised Land: The American Negro Search for Spiritual Geography

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1. Introduction

By way of an introduction, I will begin with three explanatory notes:

1. The subject of this paper is a part of a more general work that deals with various aspects of American Orientalism on which I have been working for over twenty years. The work, parts of which have already been published, is based on the premise that very early in the history of the colonization of North America seeds of Orientalism were sown in the attitude of the immigrants to the concept of the Land of Promise. To give one illustration only, one of the Puritan leaders, John Cotton, wished his fellow Englishmen God's speed on their journey to the New World in an essay he called "God's Promise to His Plantation." Cotton quoted from Scripture: "Moreover I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and I will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more (2 Sam. 7. 10).¹

Early immigrants saw an analogy between their journey to the New World and the biblical trip of the Israelites from Egypt to the Land of Canaan. The theme has been present in the writings and behavior of Americans down the centuries. I have documented this subject elsewhere.²

2. The Underground Railroad is the name that was given to a secret network of agents and safe houses used in mid-nineteenth century by abolitionists to smuggle Negroes to the North or to Canada.
3. The terms 'Negro', 'Blacks', 'African-Americans' are used to refer to the African-American community in the U. S. I will try to be politically correct by using these terms each its in the historical context.

2. The African-American Experience

One curious aspect of this theme of the Land of Promise in American history is its application by African-Americans to their own situation and experiences both as slaves and as free people. I hope to show how pervasive this theme is in most spheres of life: in politics, in the struggle for freedom, in religion, and in entertainment.

Indeed, I find it historically ironic that those Africans who were abducted and forcefully carried across the ocean to a life of bondage and exile should find in the faith of their white masters the solace and hope they variously call 'the Promised Land', 'Glory of God', and 'home', among other such descriptions derived from religious terminology. This is the region of spiritual geography sought by the Africans when they realized that they were destined for a life of bondage in a strange land with no hope of returning *home*. It was sought by slaves as they tried, and often failed, to run away to freedom. It was also the symbolic goal of the struggle for emancipation and equality with white Americans.

In a certain sense, this was a process of finding solace and exacting some kind of revenge; solace and comfort in the 'Promise' which the God of all humanity made to those who receive Christ as their redeemer, and a secret sense of revenge in the equality that this faith forced on both black and white, slaves and masters. Thus in this spiritual refuge, this Promised Land, there was to be freedom from slavery and oppression and ultimately, perhaps more probably in death, equality with the oppressors. In fairly recent times, the passionate cry by Martin Luther King, Jr., "I have reached the mountain top. I see the Promised Land" is reminiscent of the subject at hand and it still echoes in the circles of freedom-loving people.

Yet this is a far cry from the screams of anguish and pain which issued forth from earlier generations of African-Americans; those who struggled and suffered through a life of slavery and cruel discrimination and those who fought for the abolition of this ugly institution.

3. The Institution of Slavery

It has puzzled many students of American history that the nation which has always prided itself on its principles of human rights and equality, whose Constitution begins by celebrating the 'inalienable rights', and that now judges others on the basis of their human rights record, that this nation should have tolerated and sustained the institution of slavery for almost three centuries. Perhaps Dr. Samuel Johnson's brief rhetorical question sums up the riddle: "How is it that we hear the loudest *yelps* for liberty among the drivers of negroes?"³

Undoubtedly, most whites in America—especially the liberals among them—faced a painful dilemma when dealing with the problem of slavery. There were many brave men who raised the banner of emancipation at a rather early stage. To take one notable example from the world of literature, there was John Greenleaf Whittier who lashed against not only the institution of slavery but also those who proposed worse solutions for the problem. In his essay, "Man's Property in Man" Whittier said: "We have found that this evil has preyed upon the very vitals of the union." He derided those who claimed that slaves had their *sympathy*: "Can such hollow sympathy reach the broken of heart, and does the blessing of those who are ready to perish answer it?"⁴ With about two million human beings held in bondage, and with one million helpless slave women unprotected from sexual assault by whites, Whittier concluded that slavery was actually protected by constitutional concept, by a standing army, and by the militia of the free states.

Nor did those who made suspicious proposals to solve the slavery problem escape censure. The American Colonization Society in particular had rather transparent goals of ridding America of Negroes by sending them off to Africa; in today's language, a systematic plan of ethnic cleansing. Of course the scheme did not work, but that did not prevent many from modeling other plans on it. John O'Sullivan, the advocate of America's 'Manifest Destiny', supported his call for

annexation of more territories with the argument that the regions of Central and South America would be a perfect "receptacle of slaves when we are ready to slough it off" and to ultimately rid ourselves of the race.⁵

There was no dearth of people who joined the fray, but those who stood out were men of the cloth on both sides of the argument. Supporters of slavery used as their argument the example of the Old Testament Jewish patriarchs who themselves held slaves and the fact that Noah had cursed the ancestor of the Negro race, Canaan. But there were those who argued for the superiority of the white race, or, like Jefferson, were afraid of their mental backwardness and shifty habits.⁶

More baffling is the attitude of the majority of patriotic Americans who sincerely believed that their new experiment was even more glorious than the democracy of Greece, and that all nations of the world should strive to emulate it. One wonders if they were really oblivious to the plight of the slaves, or even to their existence. One obvious example of the enthusiasm over the new experiment is Longfellow's "The Republic" in which he takes pride in the American "The Ship of State":

Thou, too, sail on, O Ship of State!
Sail on, O Union, strong and great!
Humanity with all its fears,
With all the hopes of future years,
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!⁷

4. The Slaves and the Promise

Against this background we can now turn to the experience of the slaves themselves and at the way they resorted to the concept of the Promised Land and its accompanying ideas in their daily lives. And the first question I find myself asking is: Was this concept something they brought with them from Africa, or was it part of their newly adopted religion? Naturally, a very cursory look at the origins and the very early days of slavery in America will reveal that this concept is a basic element of the faith of the Slaves' white masters. It will also reveal another ugly aspect of the institution of slavery, which is the conscious effort by whites to completely obliterate any trace of the slaves' African cultures which they

may have retained after their arrival in the New World. The dominant white community gave the slaves new names –usually those of their owners--, they did their best to separate family members by selling them off to different owners, and they prevented slaves from practicing their own religious rituals or traditions.

The situation is described very effectively by Richard Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnamon in their edition of *Black Writers of America*. “Slavery,” they say, “had the negative effect of divesting Africans of a substantial portion of their own culture....It is clear that whatever literature survived the traumatic experiences of enslavement, the middle passage on crowded slave ships, and the brutal oppression and forced labor in America was oral in nature, not written.” They continue: “Not only did the agents of slavery attempt, often quite systematically, to obliterate the sense of culture and personality out of which literature usually grows, but slavery by its very nature as an economic institution largely denied the Blacks the opportunity and the occasion to create written literature.”⁸ It is this factor, the loss of their cultural identity, coupled with their forced total submission to the white community, which rendered them wide open to influences of the superior culture surrounding them, including its religion.

It was only natural that the Christian concepts that appealed most to the slave community were those associated with salvation through Christ, and the journey to some safe haven from suffering and pain. This process was strengthened by the religious enthusiasm of the nineteenth century and the rise of numerous churches which placed the concept of the Appocalypse and Jeremiad at the center of their ideology. Gabriel, the hero of James’ Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, provides an excellent example of this process. His conversion recalls the most basic ideas in the popular religious tradition, those associated with the religious songs, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” “Go Tell It On the Mountain,” and “Let My People Go”, in addition to using the theme of the Israelites in their flight from Pharaoh’s Egypt as an analogy to his people’s bondage.

This, of course, did not mean a complete understanding of white culture. Rather, as M. Kammen puts it, “Under slavery, African forms of social organization, family life, religion, language, and even art were transformed, leaving the slave neither an African still nor fully an

American, but rather a man suspended between two cultures, unable to participate fully in either.”⁹

The slave community, perhaps subconsciously, was collectively selective in adopting certain concepts the white masters' faith and subsequently adapting these concepts to its purposes and situation. The cultural implications of Martin Luther King's "I have reached the mountain top. I see the Promised Land" and of James Baldwin's novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* can best be understood in the context of these developments. The metaphors of the 'mountain', the 'river', the 'ocean', the 'promise', the 'rock', and others are all part of the complex paradigm of the Jeremaid that so appealed to African-Americans as analogous to their experience in their new home.

This African-American experience is a unique case of an oppressed community which was able to transform a place of bondage to a symbolic land of promise. The enslaved Africans gradually and incrementally adopted their captors' faith and turned it into a cure for their life of misery. The cure, the solace provided by ultimate salvation and the hope of a promised land, has been present in African-American religious rituals, writings and oral tradition throughout their existence in America. James Baldwin and Martin Luther King are only two modern representatives of those who used these metaphors to protest against the white oppressors.

The story, however, has a twisted beginning. For, the first three Black literate voices in America, Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon and Alouda Equiano, rather surprisingly, found in their experiences of being captured, removed forcibly from the land of their birth and being held as slaves a way to salvation. And yet this may not be so surprising, after all. That experience, they were taught in the context of their masters' religion was what brought them to 'see the Light of the Gospel' and that of civilized society, thus making them deserving of the saving Grace of Christ. In this faith they too found their promised land. The following verses by Equiano illustrate this point:

Strivings and wrestling seemed in vain;
Nothing I did could ease my pain:
Then gave I up my work and will,

Confess'd and owned my doom was hell!

Like some poor pris'ner at the bar,
Conscious of guilt, of sin and fear,
Arraign'd, and self-condemned, I stood—
“Lost in the world and in my blood!”

Yet here, 'midst blackest clouds confin'd,
A beam from Christ, the day star shin'd:
Surely, thought I, if Jesus please,
He can at once sign my release.

I, ignorant of his righteousness,
Set up my labors in its place;
“Forgot for what his blood was shed,
And pray'd and fasted in its stead.”

When sacrifices, works, and pray'r,
Prov'd vain, and ineffectual were—
“Low, then I come!” the Saviour cried,
And bleeding, bow'd his head, and died!

He died for all who ever saw
No help in them, nor by the law:
I this have seen: and gladly own
“Salvation is by Christ alone!”¹⁰

Wheatley, in her turn, not only expressed gratitude to captivity and slavery, but used the same imagery used by whites and taken directly from the biblical story of the Israelites:

While an intrinsic ardor prompts to write,
The muses promise to assist my pen;
'Twas not long since I left my native shore
The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom:
Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.¹¹

In fact, Wheatley's attitude was not only that of a sincere acceptance of the white folks religion, but also a total repudiation of the old ways of Africa. The loss of cultural identity and the adoption of the new-found faith became complete for her only when she acknowledged the errors of her old faith and atoned for the collective sin of the whole continent of Africa:

'Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

Some view our sable face with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Christians, Negroes*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.¹²

Thus, as a result of this drastic cultural transformation, these early writers believed that atonement was not to be only for the individual's past sins; there was need of redemption for the soul of Africa which was steeped in darkness and ignorance. The fruits of the redemption was realized for them in this land of promise, in Samaria, as a former fellow slave, Jupiter Hammon, told Phillis Wheatley in these verses:

Oh, come, you pious youth! Adore
The wisdom of thy God,
In bringing thee from distant shore,
To learn His holy word,

Thou hast left the heathen shore;
Through mercy of the Lord,
Among the heathen live no more;
Come magnify thy God.

Come, dear Phillis, be advised
To drink Samaria's flood;
There nothing that shall suffice
But Christ's redeeming blood.¹³

This total acceptance of Christianity notwithstanding, there was another aspect of the slaves' adoption of their oppressors' faith. This is the logical use of that faith as an argument against the inhuman treatment meted out to them by the very Christian community whose religion they had adopted. An early example of this aspect is this incident related by Equiano in his autobiography: "One Mr. D----- told me that he had sold 41,000 Negroes, and that he once cut off a Negro man's leg for running away. I asked him if the man had died in the operation, how he, as a Christian, could answer for the horrid act before God? And he told me, answering was a thing of another world, what he thought and did were policy."¹⁴

This argument has become a constant practice in African-American struggle against injustice. In mid-nineteenth century, for example, Martin Luther King went a step further by proposing that ultimately the Negro would provide salvation for white Americans. He said:

This is a great hour for the Negro. The challenge is here. To become the instruments of a great idea is a privilege that history gives only occasionally. Arnold Toynbee says in *A Study of History* that it may be the Negro who will give the new spiritual dynamic to Western civilization that is so desperately needs to survive. I hope this is possible. The spiritual power that the Negro can radiate to the world comes from love, understanding, good will, and nonviolence. It may even be possible for the Negro, through adherence to nonviolence, so to challenge the nations of the world that they will seriously seek an alternative to war and destruction. In a day when Sputniks and Explorers dash through outer space and guided ballistic missiles are carving highways of death through the stratosphere, nobody can win a war. Today the choice is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence. The Negro may be God's appeal to this age—an age drifting rapidly to its doom. The eternal appeal takes the form of a warning: "All who take the sword will perish by the sword."¹⁵

Just as potent are the verses by the African-American poetess Gwendolyn Brooks in which she condemned all kinds of cruelty—including Israeli practices—of man towards fellow man, all in the context of Christ's walk to Calvary:

I recollect the latter lease and lash
And labor that defiled the bone, that thinned
My blood and blood-line. All my climate my
Foster designers designed and disciplined.

But my detention and my massive strain,
And my distortion and my Calvary
I grind into a little light lorgnette
Most sly: to read man's inhumanity.
And I remark my Matter is not all.
Man's chopped in China, in India indented.
From Israel what's Arab is resented.
Europe candies custody and war.

Behind my exposé
I formalize my pity: "I shall cite,
Star, and esteem all that which is of woman,
Human and hardly human."

Democracy and Christianity
Recommence with me. ¹⁶

5. Negro Songs and Spirituals

Preoccupation with the dream of a promised land where misery and pain end and a safe haven is found has been a permanent feature in African-American songs and spirituals and other forms of written and oral tradition. Undoubtedly, the use of spirituals and songs had psychological and social therapeutic benefits. In spite of adversities, the African-American community in general remained close-knit, helped mainly by the church and religious activities. Whether on the cotton fields, at social events or at church activities, African-Americans chanted songs and danced to their tunes as a means of alleviating their burdens and getting some comfort and relief. In short, these songs and spirituals formed an essential part of their daily lives. There must have been some kind of solace for the slaves working the cotton field to sing together something like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot":

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

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

If you get there before I do,
Coming for to carry me home;
Tell all my friends I'm coming there too.
Coming for to carry me home.¹⁷

Or, when overwhelmed by the trials of slavery, to dream of freedom and hum to oneself "I Want to Be Ready":

I want to be ready, I want to be ready,
I want to be ready to walk in Jerusalem just like John.

O John, O John, what do you say? Walk in Jerusalem just like John.
That I'll be there at the coming day, Walk in Jerusalem just like John.

John said the city was just four square, Walk in Jerusalem just like John.
And he declared he'd meet me there, Walk in Jerusalem just like John.

When Peter was preaching at Pentecost, Walk in Jerusalem just like John.
He was endowed with the Holy Ghost, Walk in Jerusalem just like John.

They sang in the field and they chanted in church, usually as a psychological relief from their unbearable situation. It was a means of transcending the pain of bondage and oppression and reaching for a goal, usually expressed in religious terms. These songs also helped to provide a

bond to members of these communities, thus giving one another moral and spiritual support.

Transcending the pain and misery of this life, the spirituals, in particular, promised better things to come which would bring happiness and peace. And, given the fact that in most cases there was no end to slavery in this life, the promise had to be something of a spiritual nature, usually referred to as 'home', 'Glory', 'freedom', sometimes 'death' as a place of peace and salvation. The following verses picture such a dream:

Ev-ry Time I Feel the Spirit

Ev'ry time I feel the spirit moving in my heart, I will pray, oh
Ev'ry time I feel the spirit moving in my heart, I will pray.

Upon the mountain
When my God spoke,
Out of His mouth
Came fire and smoke.
Looked all around me
It looked so fine,
Til I ask my Lord
If all was mine.

Jordan's River runs
Chilly and cold,
Chills the body
But not the soul.
Ain't but one train
On this track,
Runs to heaven and then right back.

This is the realm of spiritual geography traveled by the Negroes during the time of slavery; In the twentieth century, the promise developed to include liberty and a life of justice and equality.

It was that process of psychological transcendence that must have inspired the phrase "chains do not make a slave" in Albery A. Whitman's epic "The Rape of Florida":

The negro salve by Swanee river sang;
Well-pleased he listened to his echoes ringing;
For in his heart a secret comfort sprang,
When Nature seemed to join his mournful singing.
Song is the soul of sympathy divine,
And hath an inner ray where hope may bask;
Song turns the poorest waters into wine,
Illumines exile hearts and makes their faces shine.¹⁸

This is not an expression of defiance as much as it is a way of clinging to the prospect of moral and spiritual salvation. And, the worse the cruelty and oppression inflicted, the stronger the certainty of reaching that promised land became. One senses that certainty in the power of the refrain, 'soldiers of the cross' in the following spirituals:

We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder

We are climbing Jacob's ladder, We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
We are climbing Jacob's ladder, Soldiers of the cross.

Ev'ry round goes higher, higher, Ev'ry round goes higher, higher,
Ev'ry round goes higher, higher, Soldiers of the cross.

Sinner, do you love my Jesus? Sinner, do you love my Jesus?
Sinner, do you love my Jesus? Soldiers of the cross.

If you love Him, why not serve Him? If you love Him, why not
serve Him?

If you love him, why not serve Him? Soldiers of the cross.

And, indeed, sometimes one senses a timid saber-rattling, only to see it couched in religious metaphor, such as appears in songs on the battle of Jerico:

Joshua Fit De Battle of Jerico

Joshua fit de battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho;
Joshua fit de battle of Jericho, an'de walls come tumb-lin down.

You may talk about the man of Gideon,
 You may talk about the man of Saul,
 But not like good old Joshua,
 At de battle Jericho. Dat mornin'.

Up to the walls of Jericho He marched
 With spear in han';
 "Go blow ram horns," Joshua cried,
 "For de battle is in my hand." Dat mornin'.

It was a revelation for me to see how pervasive the theme of the promised land is in these songs and spirituals, and, to a lesser degree, in other kinds of expression. This dream of a land of promise took on a number of forms and metaphors in these writings. The haven sought by slaves could be as ephemeral as 'the bosom of Abraham'; the resting place after death, as we see in the following song:

Rock-a-my soul in the bosom of Abraham,
 Rock-a-my soul in the bosom of Abraham,
 Rock-a-my soul in the bosom of Abraham,
 Oh, rock-a-my soul!

Why don't you Rock my soul.
 The Bridge so high you can't go over it.
 So low you can't go under it.
 So wide you can't go around it.
 You must come in at the door.

Tied more closely to the biblical tradition, the dream of peace in the 'bosom of Abraham' takes an added dimension in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* where Gabriel dreams of 'climbing the mountain' in order to reach a land of peace and comfort where only the 'elect' may go. Baldwin's conversion to the Pentecostal church and his service as preacher for three years must have helped form this Calvinistic view of the universe. Thus, the 'promise' which he hears a voice give him, is in line with that religious tradition. His hypocrisy makes Gabriel believe that he, and he alone, has arrived at the Kingdom of God. The promised land has been achieved, only because Gabriel is one of the 'seed'. I

believe that Martin Luther King's 'Dream' is in part a reflection of this search for the 'bosom of Abraham'. The speech ends with this passionate statement:

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hand and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"¹⁹

This is confirmed also by this last paragraph of King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail":

One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values of our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.²⁰

I do believe that King's universal human appeal is genuine; yet, one cannot overlook the exclusion from his dream of all but those who qualify for the promise: Jews and Gentiles, in the context of Western culture, are members of what has been commonly described as followers of the Judeo-Christian tradition. All other members of the human family are technically excluded from the promise.

In many of the Negro spirituals and songs the search in this realm of spiritual geography ends with physical death and spiritual rebirth. Where misery and the trials of life come to an end, bliss and salvation commence. The spiritual "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me" is an expression of the certainty of salvation in the midst of the troubles of life:

I want Jesus to walk with me;
I want Jesus to walk with me;
All along my pilgrim journey, Lord,

I want Jesus to walk with me.

In my trials, Lord, walk with me;
 In my trials, Lord, walk with me;
 When my heart is almost breaking, Lord,
 I want Jesus to walk with me.

When I'm in trouble, Lord, walk with me;
 When I'm in trouble Lord, walk with me;
 When my head is bowed in sorrow, Lord,
 I want Jesus to walk with me.

Walk with me, Lord; Lord, walk with me
 Walk with me, Lord; Lord, walk with me
 All along my pilgrim journey,
 Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.

The symbolic journey of life, the pilgrimage, which ends in peace, is often associated in these songs with the topology of physical geography; metaphor and reality come together in "Down By the Riverside"

Going to lay down my sword and shield, Down by the riverside,
 Down by the riverside, Down by the riverside;
 Going to lay down my sword and shield, Down by the riverside,
 Study war no more. I ain't goingt' study war no more,
 Ain't goingt' study war no more, Ain't goingt' study war no more,
 I ain't goingt' study war no more, Ain't goingt' study war no
 more,
 Ain't goingt' study war no more.

2. Going to lay down my burden, Down by the riverside, ...
3. Going to try on my starry crown, Down by the riverside, ...
4. Going to meet my dear old father, Down by the riverside, ...
5. Going to meet my dear old mother; Down by the riverside,...

Going to meet my loving Jesus, Down by the riverside, ...

The battle of life, as seen in such a song, ends in a resigned appeal to meet the Savior by the riverside. The 'river' is a term used constantly in

Negro spirituals as a reference to the River Jordan. This is the theme of the following song where the journey ends in the peaceful repose of the Jordan:

Deep River

Deep, river, my home is over Jordan.
Deep, river Lord, I want to cross over into campground.

O don't you want to go to that gospel feast,
That promis'd land where all is peace?

The metaphor is extended further in some spirituals to include added elements from Physical geography in the context of the biblical story of the escape from Egypt to the land of Canaan, the promised land. The spiritual "Oh Mary Don't You Weep" is a good illustration of this:

Oh, Mary, don't you weep, don't you mourn,
Oh, Mary, don't you weep, don't you mourn,
Pharaoh's army got drowned
Oh, Mary, don't you weep.

Jordan's River is chilly and cold
Chills the body but not the soul
Pharaoh's Army got drowned
Oh, Mary, don't you weep. (Chorus)

One of these mornings it won't be long
Look for me and I'll be gone.
Pharaoh's army got drowned.
Oh, Mary, don't you weep. (Chorus)

If I could I surely would
Stand on the rock where Moses stood.
Pharaoh's army got drowned.
Oh, Mary, don't you weep. (Chorus)

The story in its metaphorical form is very common in African-American writings of all times. Baldwin's Gabriel in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* quotes the following verses to strengthen his claim to 'election':

On Jordan's stormy banks I stand,
And cast a wishful eye
To Canaan's fair and happy land,
Where my possessions lie.
A am bound to the promised land ...

Though obviously taken directly from the religious text, the story of Moses and Pharaoh have clear symbolic references to the Negro community and the white masters. The refrain 'let my people go' in the song by the same title has been for a long time on the repertory of church choirs as well as demonstrators against racial injustice:

Go down, Moses

Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land,
Tell ole Pharaoh, Let my people go.

When Israel was in Egypt's land, Let me people go.
Oppressed so hard they could not stand, Let my people go.

Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land,
Tell ole Pharaoh, Let my people go.

"Thus saith the Lord," bold Moses said, Let my people go.
"If not, I'll smite your first-born dead," Let my people go.

Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land,
Tell ole Pharaoh, Let my people go.

No more shall they in bondage toil; Let my people go.
Let them come out with Egypt's spoil, Let my people go.

Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land,
Tell ole Pharaoh, Let my people go.

I stated at the beginning that this paper is part of a project that deals with the general topic of American Orientalism. How does African-American symbolic use of this spiritual paradigm of the Promised Land contribute to a study of America's attitude to the Arab Orient?

Two rather important theories of the development of human culture come to mind in this connection: T. S. Eliot's suggestion that in the accumulation of a national culture "the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but its presence," and that all works of literature belonging to a certain culture "have a simultaneous existence." "Works do not signify in a vacuum; they are part of a system of relations and cannot acquire their complete meaning alone."²¹

Furthermore, T. S. Eliot and Northrop Frye advanced the firm belief that Western culture had as its principal wellspring the Christian religion with its sacred texts and all the myths and concepts derived from it. Words, especially those loaded with mythological and religious connotations, have a tremendous power in the structuring of a nation's thought and culture.²²

The cumulative use of the paradigm of the Jeremiad and the terms and words associated with it, such as 'Israel', the 'promised land', 'going home', 'Egypt', 'Moses', 'Pharaoh', 'Jordan' and many others have had a tremendous effect on America's self image in relation not only to the historical Orient but also to modern developments in the area. African-American thinking based on the use of this paradigm is a part of this attitude to the Arab-Muslim Orient, i. e., American Orientalism.

Notes & References

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11. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
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14. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 862.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 720.
17. All texts of Negro Spirituals have been derived from sources and websites on the Internet.
18. Barksdale and Kinnamon, p. 447.
19. *The Annals of America*, vol. 15, p. 159.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
21. See for this topic T. S. Eliot, "Notes on the Definition of Culture", London, 1953, and Northrop Prize, *The Great Code*, N. Y., 1982.