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"And So My Soul Shall Rise": Enslaved and Free African American Christianity Before Emancipation

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Introduction

The Christianity of enslaved and free African Americans in the years immediately following the first Great Awakening through the end of the Civil War (roughly 1750-1850) evidences a complex cultural fusion and a complicated theological depth. It shares many characteristics with the earliest ancient Christians in issues of slavery, persecution, dispersion, suffering, and lack of ecclesial organization. Some of the core theological issues faced by the earliest African American Christians in America are perennial issues in the church: acceptance or social revolution, violent or non-violent resistance, mistreatment at the hands of other professing Christians, assimilation and acculturation to Christianity, differing expressions of religious fervor and experiences, the providence of God amid intense suffering, and an eschatological perspective of life. There were many different aspects of these African American Christians' religious and spiritual practices, including preaching, baptism, ecstatic spiritual experiences, evangelism, violent and non-violent forms of resistance to slavery, and, possibly the most prevalent of all, music and singing.[1]

African Religious Roots on American Soil

The hundreds of thousands of African people unwillingly brought to America brought with them their African heritage.[2] The survival of their African cultural roots was severely tested in their new home.[3] In comparison to Caribbean and Latin American plantations, North American plantations were small and widely dispersed, forcing African people to lose most of the available contact with others of their home culture and increase contact with Europeans.[4] Coupled with the inherent isolation of their new context, the dehumanization of slavery and its accompanying restrictions and ideology further hindered Africans from retaining their cultural traditions. Despite the obstacles in the way, "[o]ne of the most durable and adaptable constituents of the [African] culture, linking African

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[1]The title of this paper is taken from the lyrics of a hymn in an early African Methodist hymnbook entitled "Earth has detain'd me pris'ner long," from *A Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, ed. Richard Allen (Philadelphia, PA: T. L. Plowman, 1801): hymn 20. The seventh stanza reads, "I would begin the music here, / And so my soul shall rise; / O! for some heav'nly note to bear
My spirit to the skies!"

[2]Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5.

[3]Ibid., 48, 53.

[4]Ibid., 53.

past with American present, was … religion."[5] Even once African American people began converting to Christianity in large numbers following the first Great Awakening, their Christianity bore African-derived distinctives.[6]

The majority of African people trafficked to America came from West African regions.[7] In general, religion in these regions contained certain characteristics that made it especially adaptable to Christian conversion. These included belief in a single Creator God who was a parental figure, belief in other gods or spirits who involved themselves in the daily lives of humans as mediators of God, belief in actions of praise and obedience that are pleasing to God, belief in religious devotion and service to God, and belief in symbolic death and resurrection religious rites.[8] Unlike their European counterparts, West Africans viewed all life as interconnected and all parts of life as equally important.[9] They also possessed an incredible degree of openness to new ideas and valued hidden, inner realities over observable, external ones.[10] Despite attempting to remove and destroy every semblance of African culture from the African people brought to America, the institution and agenda of slavery stripped the external cultural realities away, which were subsequently replaced with new practices; the inner African cultural realities of these people provided the interpretative framework for understanding and adopting European cultural characteristics.

Some elements of European and African cultures blended particularly well; these primarily included ecstatic religious experiences and superstitious folklore.[11] These two aspects of life found expression in both European and African Americans of the day. African Americans did seem particularly open to the ecstasy of the Great Awakening revivals and subsequent meetings, and their physical responses were somewhat different.[12] Still, these experiences were shared by White and Black people alike. Possibly the strongest African influences that survived in the Christianity of African Americans were those on religious song and dance.[13] The practices of enslaved and free African Americans in these areas were distinctively different from their White contemporaries. Additionally,

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[5]Ibid., 5.

[6]Ibid., 8, 51; Noel Leo Erskine, *Plantation Church: How African American Religion was Born in Caribbean Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 5.

[7]Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 7.

[8]Ibid., 9-11.

[9]Ibid., 11.

[10]Ibid., 52.

[11]Ibid., 59.

[12]Ibid., 59-61.

[13]Ibid., 15, 65, 68; Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Negro Spirituals," *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 1867, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1867/06/negro-spirituals/534858/.

dance and music were some of the most important aspects of early African Americans' Christianity.[14]

African Americans in White American Christianity (c. 1750-1850)

No account of early African American Christianity would be complete without discussing, however briefly, the White Christian context from within which African Americans adopted and practiced their faith. Unfortunately, there are too few positive aspects of this context to discuss. The greatest role of the White Christian context of the time was suppressing, as far as possible, the evangelization and discipleship of the African American people. There were some brave missionaries, pastors, and circuit riders who desired to see Black people evangelized and instructed in the faith, but they met with constant opposition.[15] Few Black people were reached for Christ prior to the revival of the first Great Awakening (1740s).[16] The evangelistic and religious fervor of the Awakening brought White and Black people together in altogether new ways.[17] The focus of the Awakening was conversion; continued education in the faith was a separate matter. The Methodist and Baptist denominations gained the most converts during this time, and these two organizations would play the most prominent role in later African American Christianity (see Figure 1.1).[18]

[14]Erskine, *Plantation Church*, 5; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 66.

[15]Erskine, *Plantation Church*, 109, 129; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 102-5; Paul Harvey, *Through the Storm, through the Night: A History of African American Christianity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 29.

[16]Erskine, *Plantation Church*, 129.

[17]Ibid., 128-9.

[18]Harvey, *Through the Storm*, 35; "Religious Practice of Enslaved African Americans in the Southern United States," The Making of African American Identity: Vol. I, 1500-1865, National Humanities Center, 2007; Peter Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life: Or, Illustrations of the 'Peculiar Institution': Electronic Edition* (Boston, 1855. Documenting the American South, 2000), 33; Erskine, *Plantation Church*, 3.

Figure 1.1 *Methodist Prayer Meeting in Philadelphia*. Painting by Pavel Petrovich Svinin, c. 1813, watercolor. Located in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/12733.

The Awakening had significant effects on conversion, but the religious life of African Americans still suffered severely under oppression and slavery. "The majority of [enslaved people]… remained only minimally touched by Christianity by [1820]."[19] As early as 1667, Virginia state law addressed the baptism of enslaved people, stating that "baptism does not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedom."[20] This was a primary concern of slaveholding people who feared that the spread of Christianity among enslaved people would cause increased discontent and rebellion.[21] Pastors and missionaries eager to reach the enslaved people on plantations began adapting the teachings of the Bible to convince slaveholders that Christianity would make African Americans more docile and obedient.[22] Eventually, "obey your master" became the leading religious teaching for Black people in the South. Many formerly enslaved persons reported that "obey your master" was the primary religious teaching delivered to them, along with not stealing, talking back, lying, or running away.[23] One Baptist

[19]Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 149.
[20]Harvey, *Through the Storm*, 121.
[21]Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 129; Erksine, *Plantation Church*, 99.
[22]Ibid., 114-7.
[23]National Humanities Center, "Religious Practice," 2007.

preacher went so far as to preach that running away would send them to hell.[24] The Gospel and actual Bible teaching were notably absent.

Most Christian exposure, particularly in the South, was orchestrated, permitted, and supervised by Whites. As far as they were able, White slaveholders attempted to control all African American access to and experience of Christianity. In general, an enslaved person was viewed as an animal in the master's eyes. Many masters saw no reason to evangelize Black people at all, and many others wanted the exposure as minimal and controlled as possible. On various plantations, reading and praying were prohibited and severely punished.[25] Further hindering the spread of the Gospel message were the actions of supposedly Christian slaveholders. Truly, when the unbelievably brutal actions of professing Christian slaveholders are fully considered, it is astonishing that any enslaved person was open to Christianity. Frederick Douglass (see figure 1.3) testified to desiring a non-Christian master over a Christian one due to Christian masters being more brutal and distinguished between the religion of slaveholders and true Christianity.[26] He famously wrote:

> [B]etween the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels.[27]

The path of entrance into Christianity for African Americans was paved and guarded by Whites, a group that dehumanized, oppressed, and persecuted their African American brothers and sisters to the furthest extent imaginable. Everything that is known about the Christianity of the earliest African Americans, when viewed against this exceedingly cruel backdrop, is even more astonishing, humbling, and beautiful.

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[24]Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life*, 32.

[25]Ibid.; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 214-5.

[26]Ibid., 166; Frederick Douglass and Andrea Worthington, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2014), 109-110; 130; 184-5.

[27]Ibid., 184-5.

Figure 1.2 *Several Prominent Christian African Americans*. Top left to right: Frederick Douglass,[28] Bishop Richard Allen,[29] and Sojourner Truth.[30] Bottom left to right: Juliann Jane Tillman,[31] Lemuel Haynes,[32] and Jarena Lee.[33] Photographs and sketches provided by several different sources (see footnotes).

Early Black American Churches

"The tendency of evangelical religion to level the souls of all men before God became manifest when awakened [black people] preached to unconverted whites."[34] African American converts to Christianity were eager to share their faith with others. Surprisingly, the earliest known African American-founded churches were established in the South: one in Silver Bluff, South Carolina, around 1774, and the other in Savannah, Georgia, in 1773—both of which were Baptist churches.[35] The Baptist denomination especially appealed to Black people for multiple reasons, including independent church governance and pastor selection.[36] Baptist churches appealed to poorer White people as well. In the Baptist organization, African American members could easily become teachers, evangelists, and preachers and set up their own congregations. Despite the presence of these churches in the South, the religious experience of most Black people in the South was much different from those in the North. Free northern Black people could attend White churches (which were mostly still segregated) without the many restrictions of slavery. Even in these northern churches,

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[28]Photograph by George Schreiber, 1870, albumen print. Located in the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004671911/.

[29]Engraving by John Sartain, 1891, book illustration. Located in History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church by Daniel A. Payne (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the A. M. E. Sunday School Union, 1891). https://archive.org/details/historyofafrican00payn/page/n9/mode/2up.

[30]Photograph by unknown photographer, c. 1864, albumen print. Located in the Gladstone Collection of African American Photographs, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/98501244/.

[31]Lithograph print by Peter Duval, c. 1844, based on a portrait by Alfred Hoffy. Located in the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC. https://lccn.loc.gov/96508292.

[32]Portrait by unknown artist, c. 1780-1833, engraving. Located in The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-de6e-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.

[33]Portrait by Alfred Hoffy, 1849, engraving. Published in Lee's autobiography, located in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/adeef885-b392-cb33-e040-e00a1806300a.

[34]Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 133-4.

[35]Ibid., 139; Erskine, *Plantation Church*, 3; Milton C. Sernett, *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, 2nd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 44.

[36]Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 54, 58.

however, Christian African Americans experienced marginalization and persecution.

An African American Methodist traveling preacher named Richard Allen was attending St. George's Church in Philadelphia around 1786 when he and others with him were forced up from their knees during prayer and told to leave.[37] This event was the impetus for Allen, Rev. Absalom Jones, and several others to form a new African American Methodist congregation that became the Bethel Church and opened in 1794 (see Figure 1.2).[38] In his autobiography, the Rev. Allen recounts the relentless opposition of White Methodists to the founding of the church. The larger White Methodist denomination tried to wield as much control over the project as possible, from trying to claim the property bought by Allen for themselves, hindering financial support to the church, and refusing to preach to the newly formed congregation. Allen writes, "Mr. C. proposed that we should make over the church to the conference. This we objected to, [sic] he asserted that we could not be Methodists unless we did, we told him he might deny us their name, but they could not deny us a seat in Heaven."[39] The Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church remains active to this day. "The God of Bethel heard her cries, / He let his power be seen; / He stop'd the proud oppressors frown, / And proved himself a King."[40]

[37]Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen: Electronic Edition* (Philadelphia, 1833. Documenting the American South, 2000), 13.

[38]Ibid., 18.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid., 21.

Figure 1.3 *Presentation at the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church*. Engraving by an unknown artist, 1845, large print lithograph. Located in the print collection of the H. Furlong Baldwin Library at the Maryland Center for History and Culture. https://www.mdhistory.org/resources/the-presentation-of-a-gold-snuff-box-to-the-reverend-r-t-breckenridge-d-d/.

Aspects of Enslaved and Free Early African American Christianity

The individual experiences of the earliest African American Christians varied widely depending on circumstances: enslaved or free, North or South, plantation or city, church or none, literate or not, etc. (see Table 1). In general, enslaved people who were allowed to attend church attended their White master's church, which often delivered separate teachings for Black people. Sometimes, enslaved people were allowed to listen in on the White sermon but only from the outside of the building. A White congregation or slaveholder might dispatch a White preacher to hold services for Black people on the plantation, with teaching approved by the slaveholder.[41] If an African American preacher was allowed to speak, he might be told exactly what to say, given a book to use, or restricted to certain pastoral duties.[42] Of course, even if Black people were allowed to attend

[41]Erskine, *Plantation Church*, 98.
[42]Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 136; National Humanities Center, "Religious Practice," 2007.

church, seating was segregated. Some masters tried to prohibit religion entirely on the plantation, forbidding enslaved people from praying, singing, reading, or meeting together without permission. They were severely punished if they were caught doing any of these things. Regardless, many enslaved people defied their earthly masters in these matters so they could worship and relate to their God.

Table 1. *First-Hand Reports of Religious Experiences in Slavery*

	Christian Religious Experiences										Voodoo	Funerals
State	Attended Church?	White Church?	Separate Location?	Segregated Seating?	Taught to Obey?	Taught the Bible?	Secret Meetings?	Punished for Praying?	Baptisms?	Black Preacher?	Voodoo or conjuring?	Funeral service?
Alabama	•••	•••		•	••							
Arkansas		•	•		•							
Florida	•	•			•							
Georgia	••••	••••		••	••				•	•	• XX	•
Louisiana	•	X	•				•			•	•	
Mississippi	•				•	•						X
Missouri											•	
North Carolina	•	•	••	•	•	••	••	••		•	X	
South Carolina											• X	
Tennessee			•		•	•		•		•	•	
Texas	••	• X	••	•	•••	•	••	••	•	••	•	•
Virginia							•	•				

Symbol Key: • = *reported by a single person* *White Church* **X** = *Black Church* *Voodoo* **X** = *not allowed or discouraged* *Funeral* **X** = *no funeral allowed*

Source: Data drawn from a sample of interview accounts conducted in 1936-1938 with formerly enslaved persons, presented in "Religious Practice of Enslaved African Americans in the Southern United States," The Making of African American Identity: Vol. I, 1500-1865, National Humanities Center, 2007, https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/community/text3/religionslaveswpa.pdf.

Conversion and Baptism: "God Moves in a Mysterious Way"[43]

Just like their White contemporaries in the years following the Great Awakening, conversion experiences, stories, and subsequent callings or ecstasy

[43]From the hymn by William Cowper, 1774, and quoted in the autobiography of Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia, 1849; Project Gutenberg, December 16, 2021), 46. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/66953

were the focus of much African American Christian spirituality. After their own conversion, many Black people sought to share that experience and awaken it in others. Keeping with the Methodist renewal tradition, sanctifying experiences were also common and sought out.[44] Periods of doubting or spiritual struggle, sometimes for years, would lead to a new awakening or realization of God's love and calling.[45] Baptisms were important as well, especially to the enslaved people on plantations. If a baptism were happening somewhere within walking distance, many would travel to attend.[46] The largest gatherings were usually baptisms, where special baptism-themed songs were sung, like "On Jordan's Stormy Bank," "Roll, Jordan Roll," "Go Down, Moses," and "De Livin' Waters."[47] Shouting and experiences of ecstasy rose from the crowds and the river during these gatherings.

There are similarities between Christian immersion baptism and certain African water rituals.[48] Contrary to what may seem true on the surface, the practice of fully immersive baptism by the Baptist denomination was not the main appeal of this denomination for Black people. Rather, it was the Baptist (and Methodist) emphasis on energetic evangelism efforts and the Baptist organizational appeal for poorer, undereducated classes of people that drew Black people to these denominations in large numbers.[49] Many African American converts were illiterate and uneducated, so denominations that allowed and encouraged the participation of the most unlearned and new to the faith were the ideal place for these passionate believers. With the legislation surrounding baptism that stated no enslaved person would gain their freedom through Christian baptism, some African American converts had to assent to a special declaration that their admittance to baptism would not grant their temporal freedom in order to be baptized. White Christians, who could receive baptism while viewing another human being as their property, continued to fear that baptizing African American Christians would result in their increased bids for freedom.

[44]Ibid., 7-8.
[45]Ibid., 9.
[46]National Humanities Center, "Religious Practice," 2007.
[47]Ibid.; Erskine, *Plantation Church*, 134.
[48] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 54.
[49] Ibid.; Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life*, 33.

Public and Secret Meetings: "Steal Away to Jesus"[50]

Experiences of church gatherings took many different forms for the earliest Christian African Americans. Sunday was a workday; many masters required work on this day, hindering religious attendance and instruction.[51] Even for those who were allowed a day off on Sunday, sometimes this was their only chance to tend to their own needs: gardening, mending, gathering, etc. It is important to note that many enslaved people did not convert to Christianity.[52] For those who wished, they could spend their Sunday drinking, dancing, and playing games.[53] Many masters and enslaved people had alcoholism.[54] Drinking was a common way of controlling and inflicting violence on enslaved people. Many African Americans testified that their masters would go to church on Sunday, and the next morning, they would be drinking, raging, and whipping someone. Others testify to the non-Christian actions of ministers and church leaders. Sadly, camp revival meetings were often simultaneously slave-trading meetings.[55] Slaveholders would gather in a tent to drink, gamble, and trade "property." Christian proselytizing and education efforts were often tied intimately to the ideology and practices of slavery.

For those that could attend church, they did not always receive the same teaching as White Christians. Few African American churches existed at the time, but many African-Americans still became preachers, some of whom could read and some who could not. For those that were prohibited from attending church, they would hold their own services, and they would do so secretly if needed.[56] Secret prayer or "'ligious"[57] meetings took place in the woods, swamps, fields, or cabins (see fig. 1.4). "One practice was to meet in secluded places—woods,

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[50]The title of one of the most famous slave spirituals, sometimes used as a signaling device for secret religious meetings. National Humanities Center, "Religious Practice," 3; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 215; Sernett, *African American*, 112; Harvey, *Through the Storm,* 54, 134. The first stanza reads, "Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus / Steal away, steal away home / I ain't got long to stay here." From *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* by James Weldon Johnson, ed., J. Rosamond Johnson, and Lawrence Brown (New York: Viking Press, 1925), 114-7.

[51]Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 99.

[52]Ibid., 47.

[53]Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 66.

[54]Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life*, 17.

[55]Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 225-6.

[56]Erksine, *Plantation Church*, 134; National Humanities Center, "Religious Practice," 2007.

[57]Ibid.

gullies, ravines, and thickets (aptly called "hush harbors")."[58] When they met, these African American Christians would sing, shout, dance, pray, and preach, sometimes all night long. They would sing passed-down spiritual songs or craft new ones. Their songs were filled with biblical illusions: Israel, Moses, Exodus, Jacob, Jordan, Jesus, Mary, Peter, Thomas, Satan, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell.[59] "As one missionary to enslaved people reported: 'To those who are ignorant of letters [unable to read], their memory is their book.…'"[60] One scholar writes this of their dancing and singing:

> The strong emphasis on rhythmic preaching, singing, moving, and dancing in the religious behavior of the American [enslaved people] has long been noted by observers. … The stories of the Bible were placed into words that would fit the music already used by the [Black] people. While singing these songs, the singers and the entire congregation kept time to the music by the swaying of their bodies or by the patting of the foot or hand. Practically all of their songs were accompanied by a motion of some kind. … [T]he weird and mysterious music of the religious ceremonies moved old and young alike in a frenzy of religious fervor. … We also had religious dances, which were expressions of the weird, the fantastic, the mysterious, that was felt in all our religious ceremonies.[61]

[58] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 215.
[59] Ibid., 74, 239; Higginson, "Negro Spirituals," 1867.
[60] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 241.
[61] Ibid., 65.

Figure 1.4 *Antebellum Plantation Burial Scene in the Woods.* Painting by John Antrobus, c. 1860, oil painting. Located in the Historic New Orleans Collection in New Orleans, LA. http://www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/1850.

Prayer: "A Voice Was Heard in Ramah"[62]

As mentioned earlier, some slaveholders prohibited praying on their plantations. Those that allowed it usually still prohibited praying for freedom. During the Civil War, some slaveholders tried to force the enslaved people to pray for the success of the Confederate army. White slaveholders seemed to try as hard as they could to legitimize their beliefs and practices using Christianity and the Bible. Praying sometimes had to take place in secret, even in whispers. In the brutal anguish of slavery, praying might be the only comfort available to an African American Christian in a given moment: when a child or spouse was ripped away and sold, when someone was being punished or whipped, when someone had to watch someone else be punished or whipped; when a soul was grieved and weighed down by personal sin or despair; when starved, freezing, or

[62]Matt. 2:18, Christian Standard Bible (CSB); Enslaved family members identified with this verse and the weeping of Rachel for her children when they were separated from each other. Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life*, 10.

physically unable to go on. When they could do nothing to better their immediate situation, these early African American Christians could pray like the authors of the Psalms. According to a formerly enslaved man named William Moore, praying continued regardless of prohibitions. He said it seemed like half of their lives were spent praying. Someone would be on the lookout while others sat on the floor and prayed.[63] "O! save [sic] us, we pray thee, thou God of Heaven and of earth, from the devouring hands of the white Christians!"[64]

Preachers and Evangelism: "Arise Dear Brethren, Let's Be Doing"[65]

Like the revivalists of the Great Awakening, the early African American Christians felt an urgency to engage in preaching and evangelism. They embraced an eschatological theology in life and practice. Considering that they usually faced poverty, racism, and other forms of opposition wherever they went, their persistent, notable efforts are incredible. Traveling preachers were common, and African American preachers could move more freely in the North than in the South. Women made up many of the African American preachers, and audiences were made up of both Black and White people. Male or female, ministers and preachers were often self-educated; not only did Black people have to teach themselves to read and write, but they also had to convince the world of their moral equality with Whites.[66] African American ministers and laypeople were sometimes the only people willing to help the sick. Even when they humbly served, their actions were subject to prejudiced interpretation and stigmatization. Still, many African American Christians were driven to reach others with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, whether those others were enslaved or free, White or Black people.

[63]National Humanities Center, "Religious Practice," 2007.

[64]David Walker, *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles* (Boston, 1830. Documenting the American South, 2001), 75.

[65]From the lyrics of a hymn in an early Bethel AME hymnbook entitled "See! How the nations rage together," from *A Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, ed. Richard Allen (Philadelphia, PA: T. L. Plowman, 1801): hymn 58. The fifth stanza reads, "Ye ministers that wait on preaching, / Teachers and exhorters too, / Don't you see your harvest wasting, / Arise, there is no rest for you."

[66]A common racist argument in favor of slavery was that Black people were morally inferior to White people and no amount of education (religious or otherwise) could change that.

The Bible and Education: A Religion of Letters[67]

Although it can be spread orally, Christianity is a religion of the written words contained in the Bible. The ability to read was important to the Christian faith; hence, legislation prohibiting enslaved people from learning to read was common. On the plantation, any Black person who knew how to read was usually asked to teach others. Frederick Douglass learned to read mostly from poor White boys in his town, and Douglass recounts that some of his fondest memories were teaching his fellow enslaved African Americans to read.[68] Literacy opened the words of the entire Bible to Black people, which is important considering that the only religious instruction available to many consisted entirely of moral imperatives. A formerly enslaved woman named Margrett Nickerson reported, "We had church with the white preachers [sic] and they told us to mind our masters and mistresses and we would be saved; if not, they said we wouldn't. They never told us anything about Jesus."[69] Without the ability to read, African Americans were at the mercy of whoever could read to tell them what the Bible says. Not all African American preachers could read, but many learned so they could preach directly from the Bible. Some Black people became "preoccupied with the Bible, believing in its liberatory power to set African people free. ... [giving] particular value to the story of the children of Israel in Egypt."[70]

> [T]he biblical orientation of [enslaved] religion was one of its central characteristics. Stories, characters, and images from both Old and New Testaments pervaded the preaching, praying, and singing of [enslaved people]. Keenly aware of their inability to read the Scriptures, many [enslaved people] came to view education with a religious awe and bitterly resented the slaveholders' ban on reading. … [They] almost worshiped the Bible, and their anxiety to read it was their greatest incentive to learn.[71]

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[67]Slaveholders tried to legislate a "religion without letters" for the enslaved, prohibiting them from learning to read. As a result, African Americans treasured both the words of the Bible and the ability to learn to read. If they knew that the Bible said something (as opposed to being told what it said by a White slaveholder), it was considered overridingly authoritative. Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life*, 26; Walker, *Walker's Appeal*, 60-74; Erskine, *Plantation Church*, 98; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 161-3, 223, 239-40, 294; Sernett, *African American*, 40, 106.

[68]Douglass and Worthington, *Narrative of the Life*, 76-8, 135.

[69]Vernacular expressions corrected for ease of reading; National Humanities Center, "Religious Practice," 2007.

[70]Erskine, *Plantation Church*, 146.

[71]Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 239-40.

Reading and the Bible became primary ways of fighting against the ideology of slavery and the religion presented by cruel slaveholders. Not all African American Christians embraced the Bible, though; some turned completely to an experiential form of Christianity to do away with anything that reminded them of their masters' religion. "[T]heir masters and families were Bible Christians, and they did not want to be like them."[72] Of course, some rejected Christianity altogether. Still, many of the arguments against slavery lodged by African American Christians in their writings are drawn from the Bible and the Declaration of Independence. The very reason reading was prohibited by White people was due to the Bible's teachings on equality.[73] Access to those teachings and the ability to use them skillfully in writing became primary tools of African American abolitionists and preachers. When Emancipation was granted in DC in 1862, Bishop Daniel Payne wrote to his fellow African Americans and specifically encouraged them to read the Bible and make education a priority for their children.[74] The formerly enslaved Jupiter Hammon urged his fellow African Americans, "Those of you who can read, I must beg you to read the Bible; and whenever you can get time, study the Bible; and if you can get no other time, spare some of your time from sleep, and learn what the mind and will of God is."[75]

Spiritual or "Sorrow" Songs: "O, That I Had a Bosom Friend"[76]

What is typically called slave spirituals or negro spirituals W.E.B. Du Bois called "sorrow songs" due to their content and often minor key.[77] Into their songs, enslaved people poured all their emotions. Not all the songs were sad, though; some were for everyday activities like working in the fields or singing a baby to sleep. Some of these songs were fast with stomping, clapping, and shouting (see Figure 1.5), while others were slow and intensely mournful. The lyrics drew on Protestant hymns, Bible stories, daily life activities, and traditional expressions.[78] Like most everything they did, singing these songs was a communal activity. "In

[72]Ibid., 243.

[73]Erskine, *Plantation Church*, 135.

[74]Sernett, *African American*, 234.

[75]Ibid., 40.

[76]From a slave spiritual that speaks of Jesus as the "bosom friend;" Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life*, 31. The full stanza reads, "O, that I had a bosom friend, / To tell my secrets to, / One always to depend upon / In everything I do!" Also included in *A Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, ed. Richard Allen (Philadelphia, PA: T. L. Plowman, 1801): hymn 9. The tenth stanza reads, "The Saviour is thy real friend, / Constant and true and good; / He will be with thee to the end, / And bring thee safe to God."

[77]Harvey, *Through the Storm*, 55.

[78]Raboteau, *Slave Religion*,73.

the creation as well as the performance of the spirituals, spontaneity, variety, and communal interchange were essential characteristics. One person's sorrow or joy became everyone's through song."[79] Like prayers for freedom, certain songs about freedom were prohibited, particularly "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing" and "We'll Soon Be Free."[80] It is true that some of the spiritual songs had dual meanings: a practical meaning for the present day and a spiritual meaning for eternity. This was characteristic more generally of the theology of these early African American Christians.

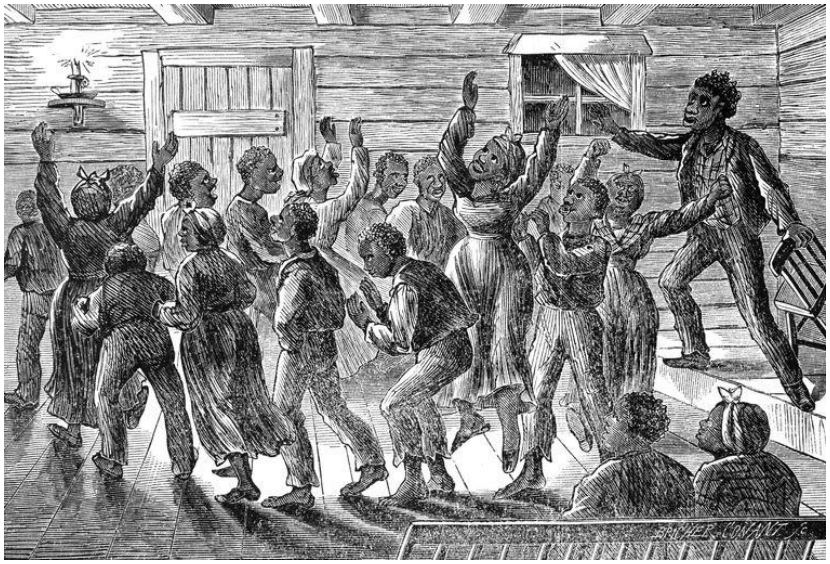

Figure 1.5 *African American Religious Dancing and Shouting*. Illustration by abolitionist Charles Stearns, 1872, engraving. Located in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, New York Public Library Digital Collections. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-a96b-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.

[79]Ibid., 246.

[80]Higginson, "Negro Spirituals," 1867; National Humanities Center, "Religious Practice," 2007.

Conclusion: "Until the Lord Looks Down from Heaven and Sees"[81]

Once the first Great Awakening hit America's shores, the opportunities for African Americans to hear the Gospel increased exponentially. It would still be over 100 years before Emancipation and many more long years of oppression and marginalization. In the North, African American ministers and preachers spread the Gospel message while tending to the poor and sick, and they fought for the betterment of their people and the abolitionist cause. In the South, enslaved people met in secret to pray, sing, and dance, and they fought for the chance to read the Bible for themselves. Despite the dehumanizing agenda of slavery, enslaved people clung to the inherent worth and dignity offered to them in the Bible as creations of God, made in His Image, saved by His Son, and indwelled by His Spirit. It would be hard to find a more powerful example in all of history of a people so oppressed and manipulated through the content of the Bible who decided to embrace the God of the Bible in the ways He revealed Himself to them through salvation, community, song, prayer, preaching, and the Word.

[81]Lam. 3:50, CSB; In context, the passage reads: "All our enemies open their mouths against us. We have experienced panic and pitfall, devastation and destruction. My eyes flow with streams of tears because of the destruction of my dear people. My eyes overflow unceasingly, without end, until the Lord looks down from heaven and sees" (3:46-50). The entirety of this lament speaks powerfully to the experiences of early African Americans.

Figure 1.6 *The Sanctuary.* Engraving by Edwin Forbes, 1876, copper plate etching. Located in the Archives and Special Collections of Dickinson College. Provided by House Divided: The Civil War Research Engine at Dickinson College https://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/40844.

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