

City Called Freedom

Biblical Metaphor in Spirituals, Gospel Lyrics, and the Civil Rights Movement

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Scholars have often viewed African American folk religion as either harmless, irrelevant or as downright detrimental to African American progress. For example, William Pipes openly patronizes black folk preaching. Wilson Moses prizes African American jeremiads but clearly regards nineteenth-century folk religion as useless to the racial struggle. In an award-winning book, Bruce Rosenberg reduces 1970s African American folk preaching to collections of oral formulas without social application. Following Frederick Douglass, Lawrence Levine views slave spirituals as displaying a double meaning — salvation from slavery on earth and salvation from death in heaven. But Levine argues that, after emancipation, African American gospel lyrics point entirely toward heaven, ignoring earthly concerns altogether. According to this view, gospel lyrics would never prove salient to the achievement of civil rights. Perhaps E. Franklin Frazier, a famous black sociologist, best articulates the critique of folk religion as a regressive social force:

The petty tyrants in the Negro churches have their counterparts in practically all other Negro organizations. As a consequence, Negroes have had little education in democratic processes. Moreover, the Negro church and Negro religion have cast a shadow over the entire intellectual life of Negroes and have been responsible for the so-called backwardness of American Negroes.¹

The relative paucity of strong research in popular African American religion — a situation that remains unchanged during the 1990s — may reflect the well-entrenched, widely shared views of Levine and Frazier.²

The glaring problem with their interpretation is that civil rights protestors of the 1950s and 1960s eagerly embraced the tunes and lyrics of spirituals, hymns, and gospel songs — music alleged to be irrelevant or even harmful to the struggle for racial equality. Fannie Lou Hamer, an extremely important grassroots activist in Mississippi, inspired many with her songleading as she typically retained a familiar, religious tune while slightly altering the lyrics. Hamer was not alone. Demonstrators

sang spirituals, hymns, and gospel songs at virtually every civil rights rally that Martin Luther King, Jr., ever addressed. In many speeches and sermons — including virtually all of his most important addresses — King not only quoted the lyrics of this music, he habitually orchestrated those lyrics into his dramatic, oratorical climaxes. He once praised freedom songs as “the soul of the movement.”³ One could also call them the soul of his rhetoric.

Consider a night rally during King’s Birmingham campaign, a rally in which King urged the crowd to march and to commit civil disobedience against apartheid in Alabama. Soloist Cleo Kennedy prepared the crowd for King’s speech by singing “City Called Heaven.” Why did Kennedy choose this particular song at the very moment when the Birmingham movement — a crucible for the entire freedom struggle of the 1960s — was reaching a fever pitch as protestors filled the jails? If black folk religion, and specifically gospel lyrics, only lead people to heaven, as Levine claims, how could Kennedy be igniting activists with her singing?

While a few scholars note the process of crafting specific religious songs into civil rights anthems, no one has attempted to explain how and why this transformation occurred or suggested why Kennedy would sing about heavenly salvation during the Birmingham crusade.⁴

Here I supply a reason. Examining the lyrics of African American spirituals and gospel songs, I identify a previously unnoticed network of interlocking metaphors that organizes these lyrics. That network is a variation and elaboration of what George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Mark Turner propose as the structure of everyday metaphors. After summarizing the metaphor system identified by these authors, I explore the elaboration of this system in the Bible and in black Baptist gospel lyrics.

While I think this analysis is potentially useful for interpreting a vast number of prayers, sermons, and songs prized by African American Christians, I focus on two recordings by Clara Ward and her ensemble and on a single recording by Aretha Franklin.⁵ After analyzing the metaphor system in these lyrics, I explain why the metaphors served the civil rights movement as well as traditional black Baptist worship.

The forty-six songs included in the three recordings by Ward and Franklin merit discussion for two reasons. First, virtually all of them were classics before Ward and Franklin further popularized them. The three recordings feature some of the best-loved of all spirituals and gospel songs. Second, during the 1950s and 1960s, Ward figured importantly in the music. Not only did she perform at the National Baptist Convention and other major church venues, she also appeared at the White House, the Newport Jazz Festival, Disneyland, Vietnam, Australia, Europe, and even a club in Las Vegas. In the U.S. she toured the tent circuit with Rev. C. L. Franklin, a famous folk preacher and father of Aretha Franklin, who imitated Ward before becoming a pop diva of the 1960s and 1970s. While the spectacular voices of Ward and Franklin make their music exceptional, they sing gospel warhorses and thus represent popular African American Baptist music. (Their standards are definitely not exclusive to that community: many are beloved by other Christians as well.)

Here comes the network of metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson explain that LIGHT/DARK metaphors animate everyday speech. In this system, LIGHT is good and DARK

is bad. Lakoff and Johnson also note the commonplace metaphors of UP/DOWN. In this system, UP is good and DOWN is bad.⁶

Metaphors of LIGHT/DARK and UP/DOWN structure much biblical language: LIGHT and UP often signify holiness, while DARK and DOWN typically indicate sin, loss, and evil. For example, the Bible presents heaven as ABOVE the earth and hell as BELOW. When Adam and Eve sin, they FALL and thereby LOWER themselves. God appears as a burning bush—an image of LIGHT—to Moses, who is UP on a MOUNTAIN. God hands the Ten Commandments to Moses when he is UP on another MOUNTAIN and, much later, leads Moses to view the Promised Land from yet another MOUNTAIN. In the extremely familiar Psalm 23, the narrator walks through a LOW, frightening place—the VALLEY of the shadow of death. In His most cherished and most sublime sermon, the Sermon on the MOUNT, Jesus praises the faithful as the LIGHT of the world. Later He rises to the MOUNT of Transfiguration, the site of a holy experience. After dying, He is buried in a tomb—a DARK, LOW place—and then ASCENDS to heaven.

The same metaphor system governs much subsequent Christian discourse, including, for example, the poetry of John Milton, the speeches of Frederick Douglass, and many Protestant hymns. When modified in lyrics favored by African American Baptists, these tropes exemplify what Lakoff and Turner call “poetic thought,” which, in their words, “uses the mechanisms” of standard metaphor systems but “extends” those mechanisms, “elaborates them, and combines them in ways that go beyond the ordinary.”⁷ In effect, different spiritual and gospel lyricists together further extend and elaborate a biblical system of “poetic thought.” This system of gospel lyrics can profitably be studied as a single “text.”

This system consists of the following metaphors:

I. LIGHT/DARK

Elaboration:

DAWN, SUN, STARS, NIGHT, MIDNIGHT

II. UP/DOWN

Elaboration:

MOUNTAINS, VALLEYS

III. LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT JOURNEY MADE EASIER BY GOD OR JESUS

Elaboration:

CLIMBING MOUNTAINS

SURVIVING STORMS

GOD CALMS STORMS

WALKING WITH JESUS

IV. FOR THE FAITHFUL, DEATH IS ARRIVAL AND FULFILLMENT IN HEAVEN

Elaboration:

HEAVEN IS A CITY OF GREAT WEALTH

HEAVEN IS HOME

V. FOR SINNERS, DEATH IS HELL

In these lyrics:

LIGHT signifies God, Jesus, holiness, revelation, joy.

LIGHT can appear as DAWN, DAYBREAK, NOON, DAY, BEAMS, STAR, SUN, SUNSHINE, SUNLIGHT, RAYS, or BRIGHTNESS.

DARK indicates sadness, sin, ignorance, or evil.

DARK is manifested as DARKNESS, DREAR, GLOOM, NIGHT, or MIDNIGHT.

In the logic of the Christian LIGHT/DARK metaphor system, sinners can repent and move from DARKNESS to LIGHT, which is provided by Jesus or God. For example, from slavery to the present, African Americans have often called Jesus "the bright and morning star."

Further:

UP designates spiritual progress, holiness, or revelation.

HIGH and HIGHER serve as UP metaphors. STAND, RISE, EMERGE, CLIMB, and LIFT also function as UP metaphors.

DOWN represents evil, suffering, regression, sin.

LOW is a DOWN metaphor. So are SINK, LOWER, STUMBLE, TUMBLE, and FALL.

In the logic of UP/DOWN, the ungodly go DOWN while true believers advance from a LOW place to a HIGH one. Sinners often STUMBLE and FALL before God LIFTS them UP to a MOUNTAIN and, finally, to heaven.

As Lakoff and his co-authors suggest, metaphors often interlock and reinforce each other. For example, in these biblically based lyrics, the SUN and STARS are HIGH, close to heaven and holy. For that reason, SUN and STARS fuse metaphors of LIGHT/DARK with those of UP/DOWN. Consistent with the Bible, these lyrics present MOUNTAINS, which enjoy a close proximity to the SUN and to heaven, as sites of holiness and revelation. Images of HIGHER GROUND, HILLS, and MOUNTAINS merge metaphors of UP/DOWN with those of LIGHT/DARK.

Lakoff and Turner analyze another workaday metaphor: LIFE IS A JOURNEY.⁸ Christians often modify this trope to: LIFE IS A JOURNEY MADE EASIER BY GOD AND JESUS. Believers blend this modified metaphor with UP/DOWN: everyone moves UP or DOWN in a JOURNEY of spiritual gain and loss. In the lyrics of African American Baptists, the commonplace LIFE IS A JOURNEY becomes LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT JOURNEY MADE EASIER BY GOD AND JESUS. Images of STORMS evoke the extreme hardships that African Americans endure on their spiritual odyssey. Because storms are literally dark, the metaphor of STORM not only instantiates difficulties, it also overlaps LIGHT/DARK. For example, in the traditional gospel song "Stars in De Elements," the narrator contrasts STORM to LIGHT by asking God: "When de storm is raging so, / Good Lord, let me shine."⁹

Further, HILLS and MOUNTAINS link UP/DOWN with LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT JOURNEY MADE EASIER BY GOD AND JESUS. Accounts of climbing HILLS or cloud-piercing MOUNTAINS indicate hard work to achieve spiritual rewards and holiness.

In the imaginative logic of metaphor, STORMS also overlap UP/DOWN, for one escapes a STORM by hiking a MOUNTAIN. In these lyrics, STORMS — unlike literal storms — never occur on such sacred places as MOUNTAINS. For example, in a well-known spiritual recorded by C. L. Franklin, the narrator plaintively and repeatedly laments, "Been in the storm so long." But he adds, "If ever I get on the mountaintop . . . I'll shout and shout and never stop." If the narrator succeeds in climbing the MOUNTAIN, he will have achieved sanctity and triumphed over the STORM.¹⁰

For Lakoff and Turner, LIFE IS A JOURNEY is followed by another metaphorical commonplace: DEATH IS GOING TO A FINAL DESTINATION.¹¹ Spiritual and gospel lyrics modify this trope too: FOR THE FAITHFUL, DEATH IS ARRIVAL AND FULFILLMENT IN HEAVEN. The lyrics feature two supplemental metaphors: HEAVEN IS A CITY OF GREAT WEALTH and, more commonly, HEAVEN IS HOME.

In the lyrics of Clara Ward and Aretha Franklin, which I examine as a single "text," all these metaphors interlock.

Ward uses the LIGHT metaphor most prominently in "This Little Light of Mine," in which the narrator brandishes the "light of Jesus," cheerfully declaring that she will "let it shine, let it shine, let it shine."

The UP/DOWN metaphor structures the spiritual "Jacob's Ladder," in which Ward's narrator and other Christians are "climbing Jacob's ladder." As "soldiers of the cross," they overcome "tribulations" and "hard trials" while "traveling through an unfriendly land." Despite travails, they progress by climbing UP "every round" of the spiritual ladder. UP/DOWN also arranges "Come By Here," in which Ward's narrator petitions God, explaining that she and others are "down here" and require God's assistance.

LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT JOURNEY MADE EASIER BY GOD AND JESUS underlies and sustains many of the lyrics that Ward and Franklin sing. In the extremely famous "Amazing Grace," Franklin's narrator praises God for leading her "through many troubles, toils, and snares" in her journey. In "Somebody, Sometime" (more commonly titled "If I Can Help Somebody"), Ward's narrator explains that the journey is rugged and that travelers need assistance: "If I can help somebody as I pass along" and "if I can show somebody that he's traveling wrong," then "my living will not be in vain." Also, Ward's narrator repeatedly affirms that God and Jesus lighten pilgrims' burdens. In one popular song, Ward's narrator prays that Jesus will allow her "just a closer walk with thee." In "I Opened My Mouth to the Lord," Ward's narrator announces her willingness to "go . . . see what my end will be." In "I'm Packing Up," she declares that she is "getting ready to go" to heaven. In "Silver Wings," she explains that God supplies "silver wings," and thus eases her trip to the next life.

Ward's narrator also notes STORMS, especially in "The Storm Is Passing Over." That happens because God prevails, enabling the narrator to continue her religious trek. In another song, Ward's narrator attests: "I trust in God . . . on the mountaintop and on the stormy sea." When "billows roll" in a STORM, God protects the narrator who weathers the STORM and ventures onward.

Ward also belts out "When the Saints Go Marchin' In" — the traditional New Orleans funeral song, which proclaims: FOR THE FAITHFUL, DEATH IS ARRIVAL AND FULFILLMENT IN HEAVEN. When performed during a funeral, these lyrics celebrate a recently deceased person as a spirit-filled believer, one of the "saints" who "go marchin' in" to heaven. In "I'm Going to Walk and Talk with Jesus," the narrator explains her perfect fulfillment in the afterlife: she will meet Christ, "sit at the welcome table," and sing unceasingly.

In "Twelve Gates to the City," Ward's narrator instantiates the metaphor HEAVEN IS A CITY OF GREAT WEALTH by describing heaven through the familiar image of "streets . . . paved with gold"; if that were not enough, she adds that the "walls are made of jasper."

In another song, by affirming "I'm only on a visit here" — that is, here on earth — Ward's narrator implies that HEAVEN IS HOME.

Other lyrics clearly reveal the interlocking nature of these tropes. For example, in "Come in the Room," Ward's narrator invites the uncommitted to enter the church, where the stained glass of the sanctuary is "filled with the light of heaven." By identifying literal, glass-stained sunlight with heaven, this trope combines LIGHT with UP/DOWN.

In the most famous of all spirituals, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," God's chariot swings "low" to the earth as it lifts Ward's narrator "home" to heaven. The lyrics imaginatively merge UP/DOWN, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, and HEAVEN IS HOME.

In "You've Got To Stand Your Test in Judgment" (more commonly titled "Walk that Lonesome Valley"), Ward's narrator affirms: "You've got to walk that lonesome valley by yourself." This line fuses UP/DOWN (valley) with LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT JOURNEY (lonesome walk).

In another song, Franklin's narrator explains that she is "climbing higher mountains, trying to get home." She approaches heaven not by ambling a country road, but by scaling rugged peaks. These lyrics skillfully blend UP/DOWN (mountains), LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT JOURNEY (climbing), and HEAVEN IS HOME. In "How I Got Over," a song popularized by Mahalia Jackson, Franklin's narrator rejoices that she "got over" into heaven, where she wears "a diadem" down streets of "gold." The lyrics combine UP/DOWN (over) with HEAVEN IS A CITY OF GREAT WEALTH (diadem, gold). In "Jacob's Ladder," Ward's narrator attests that she will wear a "starry crown" after her death. This two-word image skillfully fuses LIGHT/DARK and UP/DOWN (starry) with HEAVEN IS A CITY OF GREAT WEALTH (crown).

Interlaced metaphors organize the first stanza of the most famous of all gospel songs, Thomas Dorsey's "Precious Lord," which both Ward and Franklin sing. The narrator petitions God: "take my hand, lead me on, let me stand. . . . Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light." This single, remarkable stanza

blends LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT JOURNEY MADE EASIER BY JESUS (storm, lead me on), UP/DOWN (stand), and LIGHT/DARK (night).

Among popular tunes, Ward and Franklin choose Rodgers and Hammerstein's "You'll Never Walk Alone." "When you walk through a storm," the narrator advises, "hold your head up high and don't be afraid of the dark." This single, memorable line merges LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT JOURNEY MADE EASIER BY GOD OR JESUS (storm, you'll never walk alone), UP/DOWN (hold your head up high) and LIGHT/DARK. Hammerstein's ability to weave these metaphors seamlessly explains why "You'll Never Walk Alone" is one of the only examples from the Great Broadway Songbook ever recorded by black gospel singers.¹² The pattern of tropes fits that of so many African American gospel lyrics.

In "Traveling Shoes," Ward's narrator celebrates a mother who, upon receiving death's call, announces that she is wearing "traveling shoes" that equip her to cross the Jordan River into heaven. This lyric combines LIFE IS A JOURNEY MADE EASIER BY GOD AND JESUS and FOR THE FAITHFUL, DEATH IS ARRIVAL AND FULFILLMENT. In the second verse, death calls a sinner who, unprepared for eternity, lacks "traveling shoes." When this unfortunate soul attempts to cross the Jordan River, death drowns him. Through this verse, the lyricist adds the often implied, rarely stated, supplemental metaphor: FOR UNREDEEMED SINNERS, DEATH IS HELL.

In "Never Grow Old" (which Ward titles "I Have Heard of a Land"), both singers' narrator celebrates a land "on a faraway strand." Reached after an earthly odyssey, this destination is "the beautiful home of the soul" that is "build by Jesus on high." These lyrics blend LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY LONG JOURNEY (to a faraway strand) with HEAVEN IS HOME and UP/DOWN (on high).

This entire, elaborated system is extremely strong and durable because all the interrelated metaphors uphold and reinforce an African American rhetoric, sociolinguistics, theology, and epistemology. The system is epistemological because one knows one's self by identifying one's position in the JOURNEY and in the entire metaphorical system. The system appears in so many prayers, sermons, and songs in African American Protestant worship — especially among Baptists — that one can call these tropes pervasive, so pervasive as to form a system of knowledge that is inseparable from the black Baptist experience itself.

In addition to sturdiness and interrelatedness, this metaphor system offers four large rhetorical advantages:

First, the binary oppositions of LIGHT/DARK, UP/DOWN, MOUNTAINS/VALLEYS, and HEAVEN/HELL are consistent with biblical metaphors and therefore seem to articulate ultimate truth. The metaphors lend a striking clarity to the mystery of human existence and the most profound issues of life and death.

Second the metaphors are extremely accessible. LIGHT/DARK and UP/DOWN are as simple as metaphors can be. SUN and STARS are obvious. MOUNTAINS and VALLEYS are the most conspicuous features of landscape. Anyone can grasp the binaries HEAVEN and HELL. LIFE IS A JOURNEY underlies much of the Bible (including the Exodus, the stories of Noah and Jonah, and Christ's final, earthly journey to Jerusalem); much Western literature (including *The Odyssey*, *Canterbury Tales*, *Moby Dick*, and *War and*

Peace) and many African American works (including slave narratives, *Quicksand*, and *Invisible Man*). The entire system of tropes is popular because virtually everyone can understand it and help sustain it.

Third, the stability of the tropes provides cohesion and continuity for an oppressed people. Any African American Baptist could move from one state to another and find the same tropes and the same religion readily available in countless churches, each of which serves as a black-controlled oasis in the desert of white racism. In addition, the longevity of the metaphors provides a sense of solidarity with the dead. The religion of the present strongly resembles that of one's parents and grandparents and of a large and long-enduring African American community. Upon death, every believer will enter heaven and reunite with family members and friends. No one is alone. No righteous person is ever lost.

Fourth, focus on life after death enhances, rather than diminishes, earthly existence.

That happens for three reasons. First, by pointing to perfect joy in heaven, the system affirms hope and assurance amid enormous troubles and hardships. No earthly travail can fully stymie a believer, for God looms far greater than white people. And every struggle against every storm, every climb up every mountain, is freighted with enormous, metaphysical meaning.

Second, as portrayed in these lyrics, the concept of heaven militates against every form of white supremacy. As Eugene Genovese explains, slaveowners frequently suppressed slave religion because it essentially — albeit implicitly — affirmed racial equality.¹³ During and after slavery, in virtually all expressions of African American Christianity — including the lyrics of Ward and Franklin — the concept of heaven militates against any social hierarchy. Heaven admits no overseers to chain people's feet and no rapists to violate women's bodies. Heaven features no whips to flay skin and no cotton bolls to prick hands. Heaven includes no auction blocks to divide families and no bloodhounds to chase runaways. And no one "owns" anyone in heaven. Heaven is not besmirched by dirt streets or cluttered with woebegone shacks. Heaven includes no signs reading "For Whites Only." Instead, *all* believers go to the *same* heaven, where they are all equal and where *all* streets are paved with gold and *all* walls made of jasper. Because racial distinctions disappear in heaven, the concept of heaven implicitly — but powerfully — challenges racial distinctions on earth.

Third, for believers, the critical moment occurs not when one arrives in heaven but when one experiences salvation in this life. In "How I Got Over" Ward's narrator rejoices that she "got over" not by arriving in heaven but by realizing that reaching heaven was her certain outcome. In other songs as well — including "Come in the Room" and "Something Got a Hold of Me" — Ward's narrator celebrates the "unspeakable joy" of understanding her eternal destination.

The prevalent metaphor HEAVEN IS HOME underscores the value of earthly life. Yes, the pilgrim exits the evil world of pain and racism by moving to heaven. But, at the same time, the sojourner goes home. By definition, home is familiar and the memory of home and the longing for home sustain every traveler. While one

may struggle to arrive home in heaven, no one can ever completely leave home. Heaven may be a perfect city with golden streets; but, because heaven is home, heaven is also glimpsed, understood, and familiar. By the time death arrives for the narrator's mother in "Traveling Shoes," the older woman fears nothing. She simply takes the final step of the journey, making a transition to the afterlife as she crosses the Jordan River. The transition doesn't amount to much, for she has already experienced salvation and has long understood heaven.

For all these reasons, one can understand why, amid Ward's accounts of joyous salvation, one of her songs functions directly as a protest for civil rights, albeit a coded protest similar to what Frederick Douglass detected in spirituals. In "You've Got to Stand Your Test in Judgment," Ward's narrator announces that she will "sit at the welcome table" and "walk and talk with Jesus" in heaven. She also fervently insists that she will "tell God how you treat me." In other words, she will inform God that you, white people, treat me, an African American, badly. Ward's protest in this lyric helps clarify a line in "Jacob's Ladder" in which her narrator declares that she is "traveling through an unfriendly land." Why is the land unfriendly? Because white racists bedevil African Americans. One can easily imagine that racists create many of the hardships — the storms and mountains — that threaten, harass, and challenge African Americans on their spiritual trek.

When civil rights agitators confronted racism, they often sang lyrics structured by the metaphor system that I identify above. "This Little Light of Mine" (LIGHT/DARK) served as the theme song of Fannie Lou Hamer and, for that matter, the entire freedom movement in Mississippi before, during, and after the critical Freedom Summer of 1964.¹⁴ The spiritual "Go Down, Moses" (UP/DOWN) was sung at the March on Washington. Protestors in Birmingham favored "Over My Head" (UP/DOWN).¹⁵

In the lyrics of Ward and Franklin, the most frequent metaphor is LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT JOURNEY MADE EASIER BY GOD AND JESUS. Among the religious lyrics adapted by civil rights activists, the most frequent metaphor is the same. These modified lyrics include "Freedom Train," which was adapted from the spiritual "Old Ship of Zion"; the spiritual "Wade in the Water," which was popular among those doing "wade-ins" at segregated swimming pools; "Lord, Hold My Hand While I Run This Race"; "Get on Board, Little Children"; "Walk with Me, Lord," and "I'm on My Way to Freedom Land." LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT JOURNEY MADE EASIER BY GOD AND JESUS also undergirds the most famous of all civil rights anthems, "We Shall Overcome," whose narrator asserts "We'll walk hand in hand" (LIFE IS A JOURNEY), announces "We are not afraid" (LIFE IS A DIFFICULT JOURNEY that might induce fear), and assures everyone, "God is on our side" (LIFE IS A DIFFICULT JOURNEY MADE EASIER BY GOD).

For King, Hamer, and other agitators, the metaphor system supplied advantages similar to those that it provided black Baptist worshippers. First, the metaphorical binaries dispelled confusion during the tumultuous 1960s, offering clarity for activists who suffered from horrific violence, torture, and murder, especially in Mississippi and Alabama. Second, the metaphors reassured protestors because they were famil-

iar and accessible. Third, the sanctity of the tropes made the movement seem an extension of the church and therefore much more appealing and much less radical. One does not readily sneer at God's music. Further, not only did contemporary black Baptists support this worldview, so did their dead ancestors. When singing these songs, demonstrators seemed to speak for an entire, historical African American community consisting of a gargantuan number of people. Fourth, the frequent focus on heaven affirmed God's righteousness and the temporary nature of institutionalized evil. Because heaven does not tolerate segregation, segregation violates God's will and therefore can't last forever on earth. Racist violence is never final because everything occurs within an extremely dependable and righteous universe.

Like Ward's and Franklin's gospel lyrics, the songs and speeches at that single night rally in Birmingham can be usefully studied as a single "text," a single argument based on the metaphor system that organizes spirituals and gospel lyrics.¹⁶ At that Birmingham rally, when Kennedy sang "City Called Heaven," her narrator explained that she "started to make [heaven]" her "home." Her mother has already reached "the bright glory" there. The narrator is "tossed and driven" but is "trying to get in." This lyric combines HEAVEN IS A CITY, HEAVEN IS HOME, LIGHT/DARK, and STORM. When Kennedy sang "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," her narrator (like Ward's narrator) petitioned God's chariot to "swing down" for her, to "stop and let" her "ride." She explained that she had "a home on the other side," that is, in heaven. This lyric combines UP/DOWN, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, and HEAVEN IS HOME.

The choir at the same rally changed the lyrics of the gospel song "99 and a Half" from "Lord, I'm running, trying to make a hundred" to "Lord, I'm running, running to freedom" (LIFE IS A JOURNEY). Here "freedom" became an urgent spiritual destination parallel to heaven. On the same occasion, the choir altered the title of the familiar gospel song "I'm on My Way to Canaan Land" to "I'm on My Way to Freedom Land." As the narrator explains, this trip represents "an uphill journey" (UP/DOWN, LIFE IS A JOURNEY). Here the cliché "uphill journey" indicates the difficulty of reaching "freedom," which replaces "Canaan," the perfect place long sought by the Hebrews after their escape from slavery in Egypt. The narrator proudly announces that she already started and "There's nothing you can do to turn me around." Her arrival in "freedom land" is just as certain as the formerly enslaved Israelites' arrival in "Canaan land" and Ward's narrator's arrival in heaven.

At that same rally, further elaborating the metaphor LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT JOURNEY, Ralph Abernathy, King's best friend and close ally, mentioned the obstacles that protestors had already encountered — the soaking rain, gushing fire hoses, and snarling German shepherds of the Birmingham police — all of which seem to instantiate the STORMS of traditional gospel lyrics. Observing that such difficulties would continue, Abernathy instructed: "Keep marching!" Like a typical gospel narrator — and quoting lyrics sung earlier — he explained that no hardship could thwart him: "I'm on my way [to freedom land]." Adapting lyrics sung earlier, he urged: "Keep marching to freedom and let no man turn you around!"

Continuing the motif of JOURNEY, which appeared throughout the rally, King also urged the crowd to walk metaphorically into the storm and literally into the

whooshing fire hoses and sharp teeth of the police dogs. In his conclusion he argued that no one should stop: "If you can't fly, run. If you can't run, walk. If you can't walk, crawl. But by all means, keep moving!"

In "I'm on My Way to Freedom Land" and in the speeches by Abernathy and King — as elsewhere in the movement — "freedom" serves as what Kenneth Burke would call an absolute value, or, in Burke's phrase, "God term," replacing the literal "God term" of "heaven."¹⁷

By affirming the journey to heaven and then equating "freedom" and "heaven," Cleo Kennedy, the choir, Abernathy, and King together conflate literal protest marches down the streets of Birmingham with African Americans' normal Christian travel through earthly trials to death and heaven. In this argument, before the "sweet chariot" could carry African Americans in Birmingham up to their "home" in a "city called heaven," their spiritual journey would lead them through the fire hoses, police dogs, and jails (including an outdoor jail that admitted rain) that the racist police of Birmingham had prepared for them. Outlasting rain, surmounting fire hoses, and braving dogs — the Birmingham version of surviving storms and climbing mountains — was necessary to arrive at "heaven/freedom." Kennedy describes a tumultuous journey that will lead with certainty to the "city called heaven." The choir, Abernathy, and King sketch an equally arduous journey that will lead with certainty to a city called freedom — a new Birmingham, a new America. The hazardous storms are extremely tough, the passage excruciatingly difficult. But, as articulated and undergirded by the metaphor system of gospel lyrics, the journey will lead to a perfect result — a "home" in heaven and "freedom" in a reinvented America.

The spectacular political and rhetorical success of the civil rights movement in Birmingham and America sprang in large measure from the metaphor system in African American spirituals and gospel lyrics. Before the 1960s, this same metaphor system sustained millions of black Americans during long decades of torturous slavery and segregation. When African American lyricists and preachers developed this poetic system, they created an extremely powerful and resourceful theology, sociolinguistics, epistemology, rhetoric, and politics.

One might criticize this system of religious metaphors — especially its binaries — as simplistic. One might also argue that African Americans should value DARK instead of LIGHT. But by contributing enormously to the triumphs of the freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s, this metaphor system proved extremely important and extremely positive in achieving African American progress. No other form of American poetry has helped so many people.

Notes

1. William Pipes, *Say Amen, Brother: Old-Time Negro Preaching, a Study in American Frustration* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992); Wilson Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981), 84–85; Bruce Rosenberg, *Can These Bones Live? The Art of the American*

Folk Preacher (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken, 1974), 90.

2. But see Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1972).

3. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper, 1964).

4. See Keith D. Miller, "Taking a Ride on the 'Old Ship of Zion': Self-Making in Black Folk Religion," in *Ethos: New Essays in Rhetorical and Critical Theory*, ed. James Baumlin and Tita Baumlin (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1994); Jon Michael Spencer, *Protest and Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955-1963: A Study in Cultural History," Ph.D. diss., Howard University, 1975.

5. Clara Ward, *Meetin' Tonight!* (Vanguard Records, 145-46/2); Clara Ward, *Take My Hand, Precious Lord* (MCA Records, MCAD-20946); Aretha Franklin, *Amazing Grace* (Atlantic Records, 1972; now available on Rhino Records, 906).

6. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

7. George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 23.

8. Lakoff and Turner, *More Than Cool Reason*.

9. Willis Laurence James, *Stars in De Elements*, ed. Jon Michael Spencer (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 276.

10. C. L. Franklin, Aretha Franklin, and the New Bethel Baptist Church Choir, *Only a Look* (Jewel Records, JCD-3059).

11. Lakoff and Turner, *More Than Cool Reason*.

12. Although this song never refers directly to God or Jesus, the mere fact that Ward sings it implies the presence of God or Jesus as the reason one will "never walk alone."

13. Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 222-55.

14. Charles Marsh cogently analyzes the role of Christianity during Freedom Summer (1964) in Mississippi. Although Marsh sticks to Mississippi, his book is the best explanation of the role of Christianity in the entire Southern freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. See Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer: Studies of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

15. For the best account of church rallies that featured freedom songs, see Pat Watters, *Down to Now: Reflections on the Southern Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Pantheon, 1971).

16. *Birmingham, 1963* (Folkways FD 5487). Taped by Guy Carawan.

17. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950), 151.