A Bible Study of Spirituals and

*Songs of Zion*

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Introduction

Spirituals are a timeless piece of the fabric of human history. Ranging from songs of freedom from captivity during the human slave trade, to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, to the struggles of marginalized groups today, spirituals are a powerful way of seeking God’s deliverance and pointing to the hope of a brand new day. This four-week study may be used any time of the year and may even bring new light to the struggles of those facing persecution today, including immigrant families, women, and the LGBT community. At the same time, this study could also provide a framework for ways in which spirituals can be incorporated into our weekly worship services. In the class that made this study possible, Spirituals & Songs of Zion, one of my professors teaching the course, Dr. William Bobby McClain, said that there is “no correct arrangement of Negro spirituals,” which shows how spirituals still have their power in arrangements by artists such as the group Take 6, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Mark Hayes, the men’s group Chanticleer, Moses Hogan, Aretha Franklin, and other arrangers and groups who keep this musical heritage going.

This study will focus on a biblical theme with a group of spirituals, give some context, and provide time for discussion. It is my hope that we will be able to see how spirituals have had an impact on human history and how they are still relevant in today’s context. I cannot conclude this introduction without saying a word of thanks to Dr. William Bobby McClain, who brought to light the personal struggles faced during the Civil Rights Movement, but also how spirituals provided a source of hope for his work with Songs of Zion and Zion Still Sings. And I want to thank Dr. Eileen Guenther for her mentoring and work on keeping spirituals alive and showing us how the power of music can have an impact on our everyday lives.
Session One – Captivity and Context

Materials needed: Bible, Songs of Zion singer’s edition, or local church hymnal (please check for copyright if you choose to print the words; if there is a copyright, please make sure it is covered under CCLI, or seek permission directly from the copyright holder).

Scripture Reading:
Exodus 1:8-14
2 Kings 25:1-21

Sing: “Oh, Freedom,” v. 1, Songs of Zion, 102
“I Been in de Storm So Long,” Songs of Zion, 144

When we stop to think about it, these two Scripture passages are similar to what the slaves experienced in the slave trade to the Americas in the 1700s. Israel’s time in Egypt and the beginning of the Babylonian Exile are two of our key passages for today’s lesson because they talk about how one group uses its power to oppress and capture another group of people. Just like the Israelites, millions of people from Africa were carried off and “brought to slavery in the mines, plantations, and households of the New World” in which “they were torn away from the political, social, and cultural systems that had ordered their lives.”¹

The longing for freedom was naturally prevalent throughout captivity and is the main theme of “Oh, Freedom.” It is a song with “a thinly veneered message of emancipation” and has also “remained popular among black people and was certainly a favorite during the Civil Rights Movement” (which we will explore more in session four).² When I think of “I Been in De Storm So Long,” I think about a storm at sea, tossing and turning the ship; but I also think of storms raging in my own head if I were in that situation. William Bobby McClain explains, “the slaves felt that their whole life was darkened and dampened by a torrential downpour of trials and tribulations.”³

Sing: “Oh, Freedom,” verses 1 and 2, Songs of Zion, 102

Discuss: As we sing both of these songs and recall the Scripture readings, think about some images that resonate with you. What are some feelings that would come to your minds if someone came and invaded your home, taking you away to somewhere unfamiliar?

Albert Raboteau writes, “African liturgical season, prescribed rituals, traditional myths, and languages of worship were attenuated, replaced, and altered, or lost.”⁴ Those brought over during the slave trade were forced to forget what they had and in the film,

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³ McClain, 114-115
⁴ Raboteau, 16.
*The Middle Passage,* were forced to dance to fiddles, which was a far cry from the “dancing, drumming, and singing [which played] a constant and integral part in the worship of the gods and ancestors” in the African traditions. However, in the docudrama, *The Middle Passage,* death was oftentimes a desirable alternative to enduring the harsh treatment. Not only was there harsh treatment, there was also the emotional burden of being separated from family, which is reflected in “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Chile.”

**Sing:** “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Chile,” *Songs of Zion,* 83.

It is a song of “pure sorrow” in both its minor key and imagery. Being separated from family was one of the worst aspects of captivity.

**Discuss:** What are some feelings or images that are brought up in the song? If you were in a situation where you were taken from what was known to you, and if your captors attempted to force you to forget what you knew, what would you do to uphold your practices and traditions, even if it was illegal to do so?

We will continue with the theme of captivity setting the context of spirituals next week. As we close this session, let us lift up the captors of today, such as greed and consumerism. Let us also lift up the victims of human trafficking.

**Closing Prayer**

Sing: “Oh, Freedom,” v. 1-3, *Songs of Zion,* 102

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5 Raboteau, 15.
7 McClain, 92.
Welcome back! This week, we will continue with the theme of captivity and setting the context for the spirituals that we are singing and exploring. To recap, we talked last week about the slave trade, where people of Africa were taken from their land and forced to come to the Americas through the Middle Passage. We compared slavery with the biblical themes of Israel’s captivity in Egypt, then later in Babylon. Captivity during the slave trade left a sense of anger, a sense of powerlessness, and a sense of hopelessness among those taken.

Spirituals came out of traditions from parts of Africa and provided a source of comfort amid the oppression and hopeless nature of captivity that the slaves faced. The songs that became spirituals were a source of hope. In verses 2-6 of “Oh, Freedom,” the words do not show anger, but a source of hope, an assurance that there is a better day. The songs pointed toward a “new social order where justice would reign” as they developed. Let’s sing all of “Oh, Freedom” together, followed by “I’ve Been ‘Buked.” As we sing “Oh, Freedom,” look for signs of hope amid the longing. And as we sing “I’ve Been Buked,” look for the hope, especially in the last verse, which “does not end in despair,” as “sorrow is turned into renewed determination.”

Sing: “Oh, Freedom,” Songs of Zion, 102
“I’ve Been ‘Buked,” Songs of Zion, 143

Discuss: What kinds of words or actions come to your mind when you think of hope in the midst of captivity? What images or key words come to mind as you sing these songs?

For Israel, the Book of Lamentations was one example of the hope that came after anger and grief were expressed. For example, see Lamentations 3: 21-24:

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him” (NRSV).

For the slaves brought to the New World, singing was a major source of hope. Albert Raboteau writes that “drawing from the Bible, Protestant hymns, sermons, and African styles of singing and dancing, the slaves fashioned a religious music which expressed their faith in ‘moving, immediate, colloquial, and, often, magnificently dramatic terms.’” At the same time and in their desire for freedom, “it is at least important to understand

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9 McClain, 114.
10 Raboteau, 243.
consciousness of the slaves,” as the slaves “believed that the supernatural continually impinged on the natural, that divine action constantly took place within the lives of men, in the past, present, and future.”  

Let us sing one song of hope, “Give Me Jesus.”

Sing: “Give Me Jesus,” Songs of Zion, 165

The other world could be both looking back at what was in longing for the homeland, but also to the future, the future of freedom and hope. As we look toward some further themes of spirituals and how spirituals were used, J. Jefferson Cleveland writes of a paradox, saying that, “the Negro Spirituals are the songs of an unhappy people, and yet they are the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas.”

Discuss: What are some songs that you can think of when you are unhappy? How do they help you through the unhappiness? Can anything beautiful come out of unhappiness?

In captivity, whether on the ships or plantations, there was not much to be happy about for slaves, especially when they were forced to arrive in a strange land and endure ruthless treatment from those who worked the slave ships. Biblical messages were taught to the slaves, who were not allowed to learn to read and write. A high emphasis on obedience was stressed in order to “keep slaves as slaves.” “Slaves, obey your master” was a common thread. Colossians 3:22, Titus 2:9, and Romans 13:1-5 are a few of the Scriptures used to enforce the rules.

Our next session will focus on liberation and the Underground Railroad.

Discuss: As we look toward liberation, what are some things in our own lives that we need to be liberated from? Where are places in our world and in our community that need to be liberated and need to experience God’s love and hope? Let us pray...

As we close our time together, let us sing together, “This Little Light of Mine” followed by “Glory, Glory, Hallelujah.”

Sing: “This Little Light of Mine,” Songs of Zion, 132
“Glory, Glory, Hallelujah,” Songs of Zion, 98

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11 Raboteau, 250.
13 Class Discussion, July 2, 2014
Session Three – Liberation & Freedom Seen Through Biblical Themes

Scripture Reading:
Exodus 3:16-22; 5: 1-3
Leviticus 25:8-13
Ezra 1:1-11

Sing: “Go Down Moses,” Songs of Zion, 112
“De Gospel Train,” Songs of Zion, 116
“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” Songs of Zion, 104

I am sure we have heard two of these three songs at one time or another. After exploring the notions of captivity and context in spirituals the last two weeks, we now move to another theme that is central in spirituals, liberation and freedom. We have just read about three instances in the Bible about being liberated, when Moses asks Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, the year of Jubilee in Leviticus, and when Cyrus ended the Babylonian Captivity in Ezra. However, for the slaves brought to the Americas, particularly in the United States, one figure who arose and whom many of us know about was Harriet Tubman. She often had the nickname, Moses. Harriet Tubman led escaped slaves to freedom in the North through the Underground Railroad, hence her nickname of Moses. Every time I hear “Go Down Moses” or “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” I think of the Underground Railroad and Harriet Tubman risking her life in the name of freedom.

Discuss: When we think of liberation and freedom, what are some images that arise? Is there any thing in the words that we read from the Scriptures or songs that comes to mind?

The Old Testament played a significant role, particularly in the imagery of the spirituals. One instance is the Jordan River, which served as the “divide between Earth and Heaven,” and the difference between “Freedom and Slavery.” Some other biblical images in spirituals include Canaan, King Jesus, and the second coming. Similarly, some of these images are also a part of the Underground Railroad, such as “Sweet Chariot,” Canaan, the river. Lawrence Levine explains that many of these spirituals “extended the boundaries of [the slaves’] restricted universe backward until it fused with the Old Testament, and upward until it became one with the world beyond.” In the songs that we sang earlier, some of this imagery from the Old Testament is very clear, but let us take a look at some more spirituals.

Sing: “Deep River,” Songs of Zion, 115
“Ride On, King Jesus,” Songs of Zion, 77

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14 Class Discussion, July 3, 2014
15 Class Discussion, July 3, 2014; July 8, 2014.
“Mah God is So High,” *Songs of Zion*, 105

**Discuss:** What were you able to see in these songs that you also saw in the Old or New Testament? Are there some other images in the songs that come to mind that the commentary did not mention?

Of course, “Deep River” corresponds with the Jordan River, which “bring[s] to life the deep yearning of the slaves to reach that physical *and* spiritual ‘promis’d land where all is peace.”¹⁷ In the case of the Underground Railroad, Jordan River was the Ohio River in the North United States. The King Jesus metaphor in “Ride On, King Jesus” is “drawing on biblical imagery from the Old and New Testaments,” which depicts “Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.” It could also serve as a text for liberation, triumphantly escaping bondage and captivity.¹⁸ The vertical imagery is seen in “Mah God is So High” in which for many of the slaves, “life held no other option but to serve the Lord.”¹⁹

When it came to liberation, Lawrence Levine explains that

> The emphasis of the Spirituals...was upon the Old Testament and the exploits of the Hebrew children. It is important that Daniel and David and Joshua and Jonah and Moses and Noah, all of whom fill the lines of spirituals, were delivered in *this* world and delivered in ways which struck the imagination of slaves.²⁰

We see the deliverance of the Israelite people in “Go Down, Moses,” the yearning to be delivered from slavery and suffering in “Deep River,” deliverance from the sufferings of life in “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” To the slaves, each of these meant deliverance, liberation from the present life, and pointed toward a yearning for freedom.

**Discuss:** As we consider liberation in the spirituals and stories from the Bible and consider the present day, what does liberation mean to you?

We will be wrapping up in our next session with the role of spirituals and fast-forward to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s in which spirituals took a high precedence and saw a major revival. As we close with prayer, let us remember those who are liberated from illness and pain and liberated from whatever captivity they may find themselves in.

**Closing Prayer.**

**Sing:** “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” *Songs of Zion*, 104

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¹⁷ McClain, 103.
¹⁸ McClain, 90.
¹⁹ McClain, 99.
²⁰ Levine, 78.
**Session Four – Spirituals & the Civil Rights Movement**

**Opening Song:**
“Oh, Freedom,” *Songs of Zion*, 102
(Add additional verses, “No Segregation,” “No More Dogs” and other verses)

**Scripture Reading:**
1 Corinthians 2:1-11  
John 2:1-11  
Luke 19:37-44

**Songs:**
“Welcome Table” (please follow song leader)  
“Let Us Break Bread Together,” *Songs of Zion*, 88  
“We Shall Overcome,” *Songs of Zion*, 127  
“Kum Ba Yah,” *Songs of Zion*, 139

Today, we come to the final session of our study based on spirituals and *Songs of Zion*. We fast-forward from the days of slavery to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, although we also hope to keep our eyes on the present. Our Scripture readings today talk of seeking God’s wisdom, hospitality, and a longing for peace. The late 1940s and 1950s saw plenty of legislation and unrest, but 1963 was a pivotal year in the Civil Rights Movement when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested that April.\(^{21}\)

However, the movement that went into high gear used spirituals as a link to the past and the new movement for freedom from segregation. The spirituals linked segregation with slavery from the past; but during the Civil Rights Movement, spirituals became political statements by connecting freedom and religious fervor.\(^{22}\) The songs we sang to open with all deal with overcoming obstacles, but they also speak of community and unity. “We Shall Overcome” stands out because it is “sung today, not only by Americans who struggle to finish resolving the American dilemma,” but it is also “sung by Nicaraguans who struggle for freedom, by Polish workers who seek justice,” and by other groups “who seek to overcome oppression and deprivation.”\(^{23}\)

**Discuss:** How many of you know someone who was involved in the Civil Rights Movement or was affected by the movement? If you were involved in the movement, what insights could you share with the group? What do the songs and Scriptures bring to your mind about peace, unity, and overcoming obstacles? What are some places of oppression in our world today where we need to seek God’s wisdom, practice better hospitality, and practice peace?

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\(^{21}\) Class Discussion, July 9, 2014.
\(^{22}\) Class Discussion, July 9, 2014
\(^{23}\) McClain, 76.
Sing:
“Turn Me Round”
“Freedom” (to the tune of “Amen”)
“Woke Up Dis Mornin’,” Songs of Zion, 146

How many of you have seen the 2009 documentary, *Soundtrack for a Revolution*? It is a documentary that covers the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s in depth, but also shows the role that music, particularly spirituals, played during the movement. The singing was oftentimes spontaneous, but was also a show of solidarity through the nonviolent protests that were going on.²⁴

So much can be said about the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as his leadership was paramount to the movement and his ability to bring people together to rally around an important cause. While I was reading and researching for our study, I came across an essay by Clayborne Carson, who writes, “just as Joseph and Mary had returned to rejoin Jesus, King advised [that] society should rediscover the precious values that had become lost in the rationalizations that guided behavior in the modern world.”²⁵ Furthermore, “the moral decay that King identified in modern culture could be recovered only by ethical living,” hence his Christ-like leadership in the movement by speaking out against oppressors and injustice in any form, but also using nonviolent tactics to move the dream forward.²⁶ In talking about some of his struggles, Dr. King said, “I have always believe[d] in the personality of God. But in the past the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical category that I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been validated in the experience of everyday life. God has been profoundly real to me in recent years.”²⁷

The struggles experienced during the Civil Rights Movement brought to light that faith was essential to moving through these struggles, which is where the spirituals played a major role. They were an affirmation and an act of faith, singing of freedom from captivity, but also showing that God is real even in the struggles.²⁸ Has the dream been fully realized? What work do we still have to do?

In the gospel genre, Kenneth Morris’ hymn, “Yes, God is Real” seems appropriate, followed by “Lift Every Voice and Sing.”

Sing: “Yes, God is Real,” Songs of Zion, 201.
(Please Stand) “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” Songs of Zion, 32.

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²⁶ Carson, 357.
²⁷ Qtd. In Carson, 358.
²⁸ Class Discussion, July 9, 2014.
As we close this time together, think about how can we use spirituals each week in worship. How can we incorporate spirituals into the struggles of the oppressed today? Let us pray...

**Conclusion**

While spirituals have played an important role in human history when it came to the struggles of captivity and prejudice, they can still be relevant today, just as they were then -- if we can make it happen. Although we would like to think that we have moved forward since the days of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement, we still have a lot of work to do. We still do not have full racial equality in the United States or the greater world for that matter, because there is still oppression today -- toward immigrant families, women, the LGBT community; and a new form of slavery in human trafficking today.

I hope that at some point in my lifetime, I will see Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream fully realized, and I vow to continue working toward it. Even when it is time to go home to my God, I know that freedom from this world will be fully realized. Just as in many of the songs we sang through this study, I hope that we will see the message and keep the message going. While we tend to lump spirituals into Black History Month, spirituals can easily be sung throughout the entire year and should be incorporated into worship regularly, as we can connect them to many of the stories in the Bible, just as we connected Israel's captivity in Egypt and Babylon to the slaves in the early Americas.

What are the stories we need to be telling through spirituals?
Bibliography


