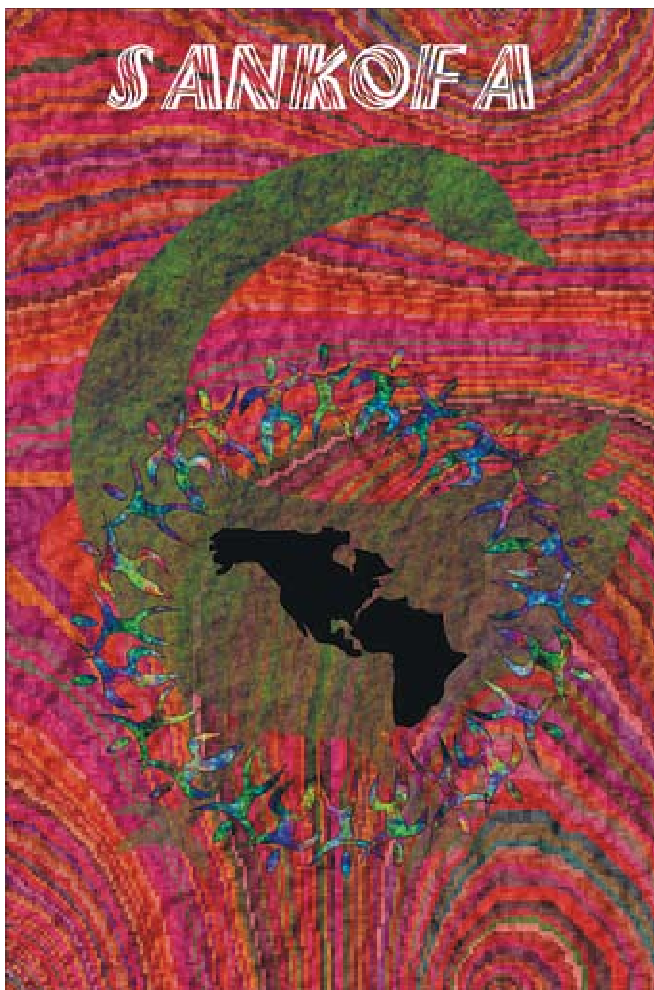
SANKOFA PAPER #2

Singing Heaven's Music in God's World: Further Explorations in African-American Spirituality



By Dr. James Earl Massey

Second Annual Gathering of the African-American Sages
University of Indianapolis
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Second Annual Gathering of the African-American Sages took place on March 10–11, 2006, in the metropolitan area of Indianapolis, Indiana. On Friday evening, the congregation of Barnes United Methodist Church hosted "The Great Banquet," a fellowship meal that brought together Euro-Americans and African-Americans from two United Methodist congregations. Later that evening, the congregation of Barnes UMC also hosted the service at which the University of Indianapolis paid tribute to the Rev. Dr. James Earl Massey before he preached a remarkable sermon titled "A Grand Word about a Great Savior." We are grateful to the pastor of Barnes UMC, the Rev. Dr. Charles Harrison, for his willingness to host this occasion, and to Mrs. Audrey King and the women of the congregation for preparing the meal. The following day, Greenwood United Methodist Church in Greenwood, Indiana, hosted the morning and afternoon sessions as well as a luncheon for participants in the daylong gathering where we had the privilege of hearing Dr. Massey. We are also grateful to the pastors of Greenwood UMC, the Rev. Dr. Bill Hoopes, and the Rev. Mary Wilder Cartwright for their support of this venture, and to Mrs. Jane Stilley and the women of the congregation for providing food for the luncheon.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank the other volunteers who gathered from around the United States and helped to constitute this second annual gathering of the African-American Sages:

Dr. Eugene A. Blair, *Detroit Annual Conference*
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Finally, I want to take this opportunity to thank the Religion Division of Lilly Endowment, Inc., for funding *The Crossings Project*, the name that we have given to the series of theological exploration of vocation initiatives at the University of Indianapolis. Without such generosity, this opportunity would not have been possible.

Michael G. Cartwright
Dean of Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs

James Earl Massey

"SINGING HEAVEN'S MUSIC IN GOD'S WORLD" INTRODUCING JAMES EARL MASSEY, AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN SPIRITUAL SAGE

BY MICHAEL G. CARTWRIGHT

In the spring of 2004, when the Office of Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs at the University of Indianapolis first proposed to host a series of annual gatherings of the African-American Sages, we knew that we were taking a risk that we might not succeed. The intuition that informed our intentions to host such these gatherings, however, was that if someone took the time and trouble to lift up the contributions of African-American spiritual sages, then clergy and laity from Christian congregations would participate in such gatherings. In retrospect, our decision to invite the Rev. Dr. James Earl Massey to be the "guest sage" for this second annual event turns out to have been apt. Dr. Massey embodied our intent for this venture and he helped us enact a two-day event that could very well serve as a model for future gatherings. For that we owe him a great debt.

James Earl Massey is Dean Emeritus and Distinguished Professor, Anderson University School of Theology. He also holds the titles of Emeritus Dean of the Chapel, Tuskegee University and Pastor Emeritus, Metropolitan Church of God, Detroit, Michigan. Throughout his ministry as a pastor, theologian, campus minister, and professor and academic dean, Massey has displayed a remarkable ability to proclaim the gospel in various settings. As Barry Callen aptly states in his introduction to *Singing Heaven's Music* (1995), James Earl Massey "has crossed racial and denominational lines freely, troubling the security of old and humanly prejudiced paradigms with the sharp edge of the biblical word." Even in retirement, Dr. Massey continues to be a winsome "ambassador for Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 5:19-20), and we were blessed to have had the opportunity to host him for a visit to the Indianapolis metropolitan area in March 2006.

The three texts by James Earl Massey that we have gathered in this volume are not intended to provide a comprehensive assessment of his life work. They are, however, representative of three areas of his lifework to which readers should be pointed as they explore the spiritual wisdom of this particular African-American Sage.

1. **Preaching:** James Earl Massey, is well-known for his preaching. Although no text can do justice to the power of the spoken word, we are very pleased to be able to have a sermon to use as the first item in this second set of "Sankofa" reflections. "A Grand Word about a Great Savior" displays Massey's talent for choosing words wisely to convey the good news of the gospel without letting the persona of the preacher get in the way of the message. As such, this sermon is an apt example of one who has spent a lifetime practicing the craft of preaching. Shortly before he visited Indianapolis, Dr. Massey published a book entitled *Stewards of the Story: The Task of Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2006). Readers interested in exploring

more of Massey's sagacious reflections about proclamation of the good news are encouraged to read the essays collected in that volume.

2. **Interpreting the Bible**: James Earl Massey also displays the ability to discuss difficult matters of interpretation in ways that are accessible and concise. His second essay, "Reading the Bible as African Americans," provides a lucid and careful distillation of contemporary scholarship about the way the Bible has been interpreted in the African-American Christian tradition over the past four centuries. Readers should be aware of the fact that this essay is adapted from James Earl Massey's two essays which were published in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. I. Those essays from "the General Articles" section of the first volume were: "Reading the Bible from Particular Locations: An Introduction," pp. 150-153; and "Reading the Bible as African Americans," pp. 154-160. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. I. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), ed. by Leander Keck. We are grateful to Abingdon Press for granting permission to use this material.

3. **The Music of the African-American Spirituals**: Dr. Massey's third presentation, "Faith and Christian Life in the African-American Spirituals," was adapted from an essay to be published in *God and the Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice* ed. by Timothy George in Beeson Divinity Studies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006). We are also grateful to Baker Books for permission to use material taken from that essay. Dr. Massey's reflections about the spirituals display the sensibilities of a musician, preacher, and theologian even as that essay reveals the ways in which African-American spiritual sages like Howard Thurman have influenced his understanding of the wellspring of wisdom associated with the tradition of the Spirituals.

We chose the title "Sharing Heaven's Music in God's World" as the overall title for James Earl Massey's presentations because it incorporates the themes of the sermon and two essays. Arguably, that title is also an apt way to describe the totality of what Dr. Massey has done throughout his ministry, and therefore offers a musical image for Massey's vocation as a servant of God throughout the world. Nor should we ignore the fact that this particular African-American sage stands within the Church of God Anderson, and he has contributed in important ways to the development of that denomination as well as served as a mentor to thousands of clergy and laity associated with the Church of God Anderson "reformation movement." Dr. Massey has not only served as the dean of the principal theological seminary of that denomination, but he has also offered some of the most perceptive reflections about the social history of interracial fellowship and conflicts within that denomination's history.

While it certainly would be a significant error for someone to think that it is possible to pin down Dr. Massey's theological wisdom by defining it solely with respect to the precincts of a single denomination, I think it would also be an unfortunate misrepresentation to the profound ways in which the themes of prayer and unity—hallmarks of the Church of God Anderson—are intertwined throughout his lifework. In that respect, James Earl Massey's practice of African-American spirituality is consonant with the virtues and

sensibilities of the Christian community that has drawn upon the spiritual wellsprings of Wesleyan, Anabaptist, and Pietist influences even as it has charted its own ecumenical vocation.

We are fortunate that Dr. Massey has had the opportunity in recent years to write about his life and ministry. For more about James Earl Massey's journey of faith in the context of a ministry that has taken him from Detroit, Michigan to Anderson, Indiana to Tuskegee, Alabama and elsewhere, see his autobiography, *Aspects of My Pilgrimage* (Anderson, IN: Anderson University Press, 2002).

“A GRAND WORD ABOUT A GREAT SAVIOUR”

A SERMON BY JAMES EARL MASSEY

Textual Passage: I Timothy 1:12-17 NRSV

> “I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Across several years now my wife and I have been living in our nation’s “Bible belt” region, and in the state of Alabama where there are many church-sponsored events. Many use large church signs to draw attention to those events. The signs identify the sponsoring church, advertise the church services, and sometimes sport a concise message to prod thought and promote faith. One message I read on a church sign was: “Satan Subtracts and Divides, God Adds and Multiplies.” Another sign warned: “Forbidden Fruit Creates Many Jams.” Another church sign advised: “Read the Bible: Prevent Truth Decay.” [1] What a worthy message during these days when there is a plethora of unbiblical notions being voiced in our religiously pluralistic society.

At the center of the textual passage I read stands a concise saying that the earliest Christians repeated during worship, and they elaborated on the truth in that saying when they sought to reach the lost with the Gospel. That saying reads: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1:15 NRSV). Paul lauded the saying as “sure and worthy of full acceptance” by all. And so it is, because the truth it reveals is fundamental for human life as God desires that it be.

I

We are all familiar with “sayings.” Any one of us, if asked, could stand and repeat some important maxims we have been taught; we all know many concise sayings which embody true-to-life wisdom to guide our thinking and behavior. But the saying voiced here is more than a general truth arrived at by human trial and error, it is a revealed truth that only God could disclose. Thus the heavenly angel’s instructive word to Joseph: “[Your wife Mary] will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt.1:21 NRSV). And thus that self-declaration Jesus spoke

1. See “Divine Signs” (Markeshia Ricks, staff writer), *Tuscaloosa News*, Saturday April 2, 2005, section D-1.

to Zacchaeus, “The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost” (Lk. 19:10 NRSV). “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

The Prophet Isaiah had this to say about humans: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way” (53:6a NRSV). The result has been lostness, with its many fated ills. Jesus came to seek, find, and save us from that lostness.

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” Those who accept his help, who let Jesus do his God-purposed work in their lives, are rescued, here-and-now. The rescue is from two life-threatening realities: the one reality is the wrath of God. “Wrath” is the biblical word for God’s indignant anger against sin. Sin angers God, and dire consequences result in human life when God’s wise will for human life is violated. Some of those consequences are sad here-and-now outcomes from selfish choices, happenings for which we have sayings like “You reap what you sow,” and “No one can do wrong and get by.” What we humans do produces effects and has results. So many lives are complicated because people refuse to recognize the law of cause and effect; they act as if there is no connection between choice and outcome, between sowing and reaping, between sinful actions and inevitable disorder.

But God’s wrath is associated in Scripture with greater consequences than sad here-and-now events. A life of sinning invites eternal consequences as well, consequences the Bible refers to as “the wrath to come.” “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,” and all who believe on him will be “saved through him from the wrath of God” (Rom.5:9 NRSV). The Apostle John preserved a sobering word about this from what he heard Jesus himself teach: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath.” (John 3:36 NRSV).

The salvation Jesus came to effect not only delivers us from the wrath of God but it delivers us also from a wayward heart whose interests and deeds make one deserve God’s wrath. I speak of “waywardness” here. Yes, selfish waywardness, precisely describes the attitude that sin produces in us, and that waywardness embraces the gamut of human failures which the Bible condemns as sinful actions. “Waywardness” is an umbrella word for unrighteous attitudes, unjust actions, the disobeying of known and understood moral law, all resistance against God’s stated will, all overstepping the boundaries God established for right living. Waywardness involves wrongdoing, and as the Apostle John explained it, “All wrongdoing is sin . . .” (I John 5:17 NRSV). Christ Jesus came into the world to save us from the waywardness that makes one merit the effects of God’s wrath.

II

You have already noticed that this saying about Jesus as Saviour occurs in a testimony Paul gave about how he came to experience such a salvation. Paul’s testimony is bold, forthright, and full of joy. It calls attention to the mercy and grace and love Christ showed which changed Paul from sinning against God and made him a servant of God. Paul’s testimony is so strategically worded that no paraphrase of it will do, so I must quote him:

> "I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." (vss. 12-14 NRSV)

That was Paul's testimony, and in making this confession he included that pertinent creedal saying which is our text: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

Like every other human, Paul had a God-offending past that needed to be forgiven and he had a personality that needed to be changed. Paul was a highly-educated and tough-minded man with tremendous energy and a personal forcefulness which he had dedicated to the service of religion. But although intensely religious, Paul needed to be saved from his sins and from himself. Paul's confessional statement tells us how his inward change took place, and as he lamented his pre-Christian past he readily named his sins: "I was a blasphemer," he confessed, remembering how he had spoken so slanderously against Jesus. "I was a persecutor," he admitted, remembering how he had zealously sought out and arrested followers of Jesus. "I was a man of violence," he lamented, remembering how he had persecuted and then caused the death of some Hebrew Christians, Stephen being one of them. Paul had been religious, yes, but he was also wrong. He had been an enthusiast, yes, but an enthusiastic advocate for the wrong side of things. Paul the religionist had ignorantly but actively opposed the Son of God.

As Paul thought about how his life had opposed Christ, his past was so shameful in his sight that he saw himself as heading the long line of sinners whose actions have marred the world, and so he labeled himself as "foremost," chief, among them. Paul saw his past as the sinful mess it had been, and he rejoiced about being saved from that past and from his faulty inner conditioning. So deeply did Paul feel about his past, even long after his experienced call to be one of Christ's apostles, that he declared to the church at Corinth: "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (I Cor. 15:9 NRSV). He always attributed any good in his life to the steady working of God's grace in his life. Paul had been saved from his sins. Saving people, changing their lives, is what Jesus intended by coming into the world, and that intention was with all of us in its focus. "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." We have only to accept him into our lives for salvation to become our experienced benefit.

III

Sometime ago I received a telephone call from someone who had read some of my writings and wanted my help with some writing they had done. The person had written about their conversion and wanted to publish the story of it as a book. The person asked if I would be willing to read through the manuscript and offer suggestions for improvement. I agreed to help.

The manuscript arrived a few days later and I read it. I later called the writer and offered some comments, grammatical concerns, and the need for clearer expression at several points in the manuscript, but I also raised some pertinent questions about content. I had noticed the writer's rather lurid description of some specific sins being confessed, and the willful "tell-all" seemed excessive in my view. I asked the writer if being so extensively detailed was intended, or even necessary. I also asked what their spouse had to say about the vast array of disclosures. The writer readily and without defensiveness explained that the manuscript was written that way in order to attract and identify with anyone who had sinned much, anyone who might feel that their sins were to many and too horrible to be forgiven. I was told that the disclosures had been elaborated to bear witness that Jesus can forgive as much as we have lived—that Jesus can save anyone and everyone for anything and everything. That writer's extensive disclosures of past sins seemed excessive, in my view, but although we differed on how much should be publicly told in giving witness about our conversion, we were in full agreement that Jesus Christ can and does forgive anything and everything. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

Paul concisely labeled his sins in this account of his conversion, and he took responsibility for them: "I was a blasphemer," he confessed. "I was a persecutor," he admitted. "I was a violent person," Paul added. In Acts 7-9 NRSV, Luke reported some of Paul's blasphemous acts, his work as a violent persecutor, and the effects they had upon the church. Here, in the passage before us, Paul himself referred back to his horrid past, but only mainly to show the gracious love and reaching grip of Jesus Christ that saved him from those sins and from himself. Since being delivered, Paul had spent his life witnessing about Jesus and giving praise to God: "I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost [among sinners], Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life" (1:16NRSV). Paul was saying that what had happened for him and within him was an illustration of God's love; he was thrilled to be understood as an example of what mercy and grace can effect in and through a life that Jesus Christ has claimed. As a saved man, Paul forever afterward let his life speak for the Saviour. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." This is a grand word about a great Saviour.

IV

Some of you who have traveled abroad to England might well have visited Firbank Fell where a bronze table affixed to a commemorative stone holds some signal words from George Fox, the Quaker leader. The words were addressed to his followers: "Let Your Lives Speak." That was and is no simple demand, nor is it a single-deed; it is the business of a lifetime. It is the necessary and urgent business of every Christian in every generation. Let your life speak!

That is what Paul was doing as he witnessed to others about Jesus—he was letting his life speak about the effects of having met the Lord. Although formerly "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence," he was now a claimed and changed person. Showing mercy, Jesus Christ had confronted,

claimed, and changed him. Paul was now an example for others to see what salvation produces in anyone who believes. Having received mercy, Paul was a living illustration of what salvation means and what salvation does.

By his coming, Jesus made our misery his own; he became a sin-offering for us. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Jesus came to help sinners. Jesus helps by saving us from the wrath God deals out against sinful offenses, and he helps by saving us from the waywardness that makes one worthy of that wrath. By saving us, Jesus gathers us up into his purposed life; he rescues us from Satan's control and sets us on a right path with a renewed life. He does it all, showing a sweet mercy toward us, mercy being an aspect of his nobility as the true Saviour.

Charles Wesley was rejoicing about that mercy when he penned these stirring lines:

> And can it be that I should gain
> An interest in the Saviour's blood?
> Died He for me, who caused His pain?
> For me, who Him to death pursued?
> Amazing love! How can it be
> That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?
>
> He left His Father's throne above,
> So free, so infinite His grace!
> Emptied Himself of all but love,
> And bled for Adam's helpless race!
> Tis mercy all, immense and free,
> For, O my God, it found out me.
>
> Amazing love! How can it be
> That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me! [2]

That kind of praise grew out of his experience of being claimed by Jesus Christ. And that kind of experience that always leads one to exult. The One who saves is worthy of praise, and true worship involves the praise that experience inspires. Thus Paul's attitude of worship as he wrote to Timothy: "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen." (1:17 NRSV). Sinners sing blues, thinking of fate. The saved sing hymns, thankful in their faith. And, grateful for grace, they let their life speak.

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2. Verses 1 & 3 of "And Can It Be that I Should Gain." For the full text of Charles Wesley's hymn, see No. 363 in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989).

"FOOTPRINTS OF AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTIC"

JAMES EARL MASSEY

The practical prospects from reading the Bible are largely dependent upon how the reading person has experienced and views life. This statement should not surprise, because whether one is dealing with the Bible or with any other written materials, our thinking is influenced by what has impacted our lives. To a more than considerable extent, our thinking has been influenced by elements of rationalism, by some brand of nationalism, perhaps by a narrow individualism, and especially by some communal identity. In various combinations these factors have affected us; they have shaped the way we view the world, and that world-view influences the way we read the Word of God and seek to understand and use it.

The differing social communities within the larger society within which we live have given us not only our identities but have influenced our perspectives on Scripture. The fact is that we all read and interpret the Bible from a set of understandings influenced by the history we have experienced as sharers within a particular social community. We can refer to this as a community-situation approach in reading the Bible. This approach takes the community's life experiences into account, and one of the critical principles of this approach is to ask and explore how biblical texts relate to a specific community's needs.

The bearing of experience and social location upon the reading of the Bible is certainly revealed in graphic, detailed fashion in the history, religious heritage, music, folklore and literature of African-Americans. In innumerable songs, speeches, sermons and writings the African-American approach to the interpretation and use of biblical materials is abundantly instanced. [1] But in addition to these, the very mention of "The Bible" in relation to Afri-

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1. On early African-American music and songs, one of the most comprehensive studies is that by John Lovell, Jr., *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame: The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual Was Hammered Out* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1972). See also Miles Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1953)

   On some early speeches and writings, see Carter G. Woodson, *Negro Orators and Their Orations* (Washington, D. C.: Associated Publishers, 1925), and Carter G. Woodson, editor, *The Mind of the Negro As Reflected in Letters Written During the Crisis: 1800-1860* (Washington, D.C.: The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Inc., 1926); for some orators and sermonizers of a later period, see Marcus Hanna Boulware, *The Oratory of Negro Leaders: 1900-1968* (Westport, CN.: Negro Universities Press, 1969). An additional helpful study that provides some insight into reflections of biblical motifs in black narratives, see Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), especially the sections which treat the writings of James Baldwin and Zora Neale Hurston, among others. Earlier, Benjamin E. Mays sought to distinguish between what he termed "mass" and "classical" black literature (from within the period 1760-1937); he arbitrarily placed spirituals, sermons and Sunday School materials in the "mass" category, and poetry, fiction and various essays in the "classical" category. See Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God As Reflected in His Literature* (New York: Chapman & Grimes, Inc., 1938; reprinted by Atheneum, 1969).

can-Americans recalls, first, the unswerving drive for literacy and schooling among Black slaves in the antebellum South—and the part the Bible played in fueling that desire and shaping their religious life; and, second, mention of "the Bible" reminds us about how questions about basic human capacities and the risk of literacy and religious instruction with respect to slaves became both a sectional and national issue which resulted in costly divisions in several national church bodies and in the nation itself. [2]

Historian Earl E. Thorpe has written that "the master-slave relationship was not an ideal posture for white Americans to introduce transplanted Africans to the Christian religion. Despite this very serious difficulty," he added, "an effective transmission was made, and this religion became not only the dominant thought stream in the mind of the Negro, but a major vehicle for transmitting Occidental culture to this alien race." [3] The Bible was a major instrument in that transmission process, although it is possible that some slaves might have brought with them from Africa some knowledge of the Christian faith and/or some acquaintance with the Christian Scriptures since Christianity had been rooted in North Africa and Ethiopia as early as the First Century (see Acts 2:10; 8:26-40). John S. Mbiti, African scholar, states that long before the start of Islam in the Seventh Century " Christianity was well established all over north Africa, Egypt, parts of the Sudan and Ethiopia," and that because of this early entrance upon the African continent Christianity "can rightly be described as an indigenous, traditional and African religion."[4] Other scholars, however, have disputed any prior Christian influence upon the enslaved Africans since most of them were brought from the coastal states of West Africa where traditional African religions and Islam were observed. [5]

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2. The literature treating these matters is vast, but for an overview see Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), especially Part VI which discusses "Slavery and Expiation," pp. 635-729, and the extensive bibliography Ahlstrom has listed for the section on pp.1117-1118. See also Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1968); Louis Ruchames, editor, *Racial Thought in America, Vol. I: From the Puritans to Abraham Lincoln, A Documentary History* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1969); John R. McKivigan, *The War Against Proslavery Religion: Abolitionism and the Northern Churches, 1830-1865* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), and Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).
3. Earl E. Thorpe, *The Mind of the Negro: An Intellectual History of Afro-Americans* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1961), p.104.
4. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co. Inc., Anchor Books edition, 1970), p.300. In Ethiopia, Christianity became the state religion, boasting of a tradition of beginnings there traceable back to the Acts 8:26-40 account of the conversion of the Ethiopian treasurer who served Candace, queen of Ethiopia (Nubia).
5. See C. Eric Lincoln, "The Development of Black Religion in America" in *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, edited by Gayraud Wilmore (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989), esp. pp. 7-9. See also Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Nationalism: An Examination of the Black Experience in Religion* ("C. Eric Lincoln Series on Black Religion") (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973), est. Ch. 1, pp. 1-39.

The Bible and the Slaves: Problems and Prospects

Every slavemaster who gave religious instruction to his slaves was placed in a situation that was immediately and steadily ironic: (1) the very act of teaching slaves argued the case for their capacity to learn and receive nurture; (2) every conversion among the slaves argued for a relationship between master and slave as fellow-Christians, begging the question of the rightness of holding a fellow-believer in slavery; and (3) the use of the Bible as the prime instrument of authority in religious instruction continually fed the slaves' interest to become literate in order to read on their own. Legal restrictions were instituted and maintained in slaveholding states to help slavemasters handle some of the complexities and risks inherent in such an ironic situation, but despite legal barriers, brutal sanctions and grim threats designed to intimidate and control slaves, many slaves learned to read and secretly shared the benefits from their skill with other slaves.

There were many reasoned arguments for providing religious instruction to slaves. [6] The first was that of duty. Some masters were professing Christians and some viewed their plantation as a mission field and sought to show concern for the eternal salvation of their slaves. The second argument was that of profit, since religious instruction, if successful, was expected to influence the character, morale, behavior and work-output of the slave. The third argument was that of decreased risk of possible slave rebellions, since converted slaves would be expected to obey the Pauline injunction to be obedient to their master (Eph. 6:5). As for this third concern many slave narratives document the persistence the masters exercised to keep the Pauline injunction about slave obedience before their slaves.

J. W. Lindsay, a former slave, reported in a 1863 interview what has been paralleled in many documented interviews with former slaves. Speaking about the religious services conducted by the master's minister for slaves, Lindsay stated that "Their biggest text is, 'Servants, obey your masters'; and 'he that knoweth his master's will & doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes', is a favorite text with them." [7]

Howard Thurman (1900-1981), grandson of slaves, reported about the attitude his grandmother held toward such texts after being freed. Born in slavery, she lived until the Civil War on a plantation near Madison, Florida, and she never learned to read or write. "Two or three times a week I read the Bible aloud to her," Thurman stated.

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6. See Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831-1865* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1978), esp. pp. 43-58; Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), esp. pp. 96-150; Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861* (Washington, D.C.: The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1919; reprint, New York: Arno Press and the *New York Times*, 1968), esp. Ch. II, "Religion With Letters" pp. 18-50 and Ch. VIII, "Religion Without Letters,", pp. 179-204; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1976), esp. pp. 561-566.
7. See John W. Blassingame, editor, *Slave Testimonies: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), p. 402; for additional similar testimonies, see also pp. 130-131, 411, 420, 465-466, and 642.

“I was deeply impressed by the fact that she was most particular about the choice of Scripture. For instance, I might read many of the more devotional Psalms, some of Isaiah, the Gospels again and again. But the Pauline epistles, never—except, at long intervals, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. My curiosity knew no bounds, but we did not question her about anything.” [8]

When he was older and half through Morehouse College, Thurman mustered enough courage to ask his grandmother why she had not allowed him to read any of the Pauline letters to her. “What she told me I shall never forget.”

“During the days of slavery,” she said, “the master’s minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: ‘Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters . . . as unto Christ.’ Then he would go on to show how it was God’s will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.” [9]

The selectivity expressed by Howard Thurman’s grandmother was rooted solidly in rejection against every selfish manipulation of scriptural words to control others, a deep faith in self-worth, an intuitive understanding that God is just, and a hermeneutical alertness about how the Bible is to be rightly “read.” That sense was quite widespread among religiously sensitive slaves. That valuing with respect to portions and central teachings within the Bible was later institutionalized in the churches and theology African-Americans shaped.

The basic theology shaped by the slaves from their experiential reading of the Bible are found in the Spirituals, which are testament of both individual and communal religious experience and aspirations. With the social location and experience of African- American slaves in his view, and with an awareness of the spiritual discernment reflected in the songs the slaves created to inform and sustain them during their troubles, Howard Thurman wrote:

“There were three major sources from which the raw materials of Negro spirituals were derived: the Old and New Testaments, the world of nature, and the personal experiences of religion that were the common lot of the people, emerging from their inner life. Echoes from each source are present in practically all the songs.” [10]

John Lovell, Jr.’s, work *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame* is regarded as one of the most comprehensive studies of the Spirituals. Lovell treated not only the religious and spiritual concerns expressed in these songs but also the

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8. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1949), p. 30.
9. Ibid., pp. 30-31.
10. Howard Thurman, *Deep River: Reflections on the Religious Insight of Certain of the Negro Spirituals* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), p. 12. For additional theological interpretations of the Spitituals, see Thurman’s *The Negro Spiritual Interprets Life and Death* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947); Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro’s God As Reflected in His Literature*, esp. pp. 19-30; James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972).

ways the songs became agencies and models of transformation. Whether sung privately or communally, the spirituals were used to instill a sense of well-being; an increased determination and fortitude to struggle, resist, and hold fast; a deepened awareness of a just God and a meaningful world; and a renewed commitment to gain freedom. [11] Quite crucial to these ends were "readings" about major Bible characters, decisive events, suggestive expressions and faith-inspiring promises. Lovell has written:

"To say that the slave poet borrowed from or utilized the Bible is to say little about his literary propensities or values. His special attitude towards the Bible, his selectivity with respect to its contents, and his special way of turning Biblical materials to imaginative purposes make him quite distinctive." [12]

Eileen Southern has more recently traced how the improvisations later African- Americans made upon their spiritual songs contributed to the development of a Black hymnody, spiritual ballads, and the well-known gospel music tradition so widely honored in the Black churches. [13] John Michael Spencer's *Protest and Praise* chronicled the way many traditional spirituals were creatively adapted for use as freedom songs during the Civil Rights Movement era, while his Black Hymnody treated the history of how the Spirituals have been incorporated with other formal hymns, in contemporary hymnals of ten prominent mainline African-American denominations. [14]

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11. John Lovell, Jr., B*lack Song: The Forge and the Flame* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1972), see esp. chapters 17-20.
12. Ibid., p. 255. See also Lovell's chart on the use of biblical items in the Spirituals, pp. 258-262; and see Charles B. Copher, "Biblical Characters, Events, Places and Images Remembered and Celebrated in Black Worship," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, Vol. XIV, Numbers 1/2 (Fall 1986-Spring 1987), pp. 75-86.
13. See her *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., second ed. 1983), esp. pp. 127 ff, 259-261, 444-456, 461-474. See also Eileen Southern, "Hymnals of the Black Church," in *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, Vol. XIV, Numbers 1/2 (Fall 1986-Spring 1987), pp. 127-140; Wendell Philips Whalum, "Black Hymnody," in *Review and Expositor: A Baptist Theological Journal*, Vol. 70 (Summer 1973), pp. 341-355. For ballads and gospel music, see Bernice Johnson Reagon, editor, *We'll Understand It Better By and By: Pioneering African American Gospel Composers* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).
14. John Michael Spencer, *Protest and Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), see esp. pp. 83-105; Jon Michael Spencer, *Black Hymnody: A Hymnological History of the African-American Church* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992). In their massive study on *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya devoted a chapter to offer a sociological analysis regarding the musical forms and styles favored by contemporary African Americans for their worship, with traditional Spirituals distinguished from standard hymnody, jazz forms, and the Gospel music tradition (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), see Ch. 12, pp. 346-381. See also Portia K. Maultsby, "The Use and Performance of Hymnody, Spirituals, and Gospels in the Black Church," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, Vol. XIV, Numbers 1/2 (Fall 1986/Spring 1987), pp. 141-159.

The Bible and African-American Churches

The theology reflected in the Spirituals, the rise of independent African-American churches, and a particularized way of "reading" the Bible are not separate but integrally related stories. Victimized by a slavery system that was "Christianized" by a skewed reading of scripture by the Southern church, and dominated, even after emancipation, by a racist majority culture, African-Americans were faced with the necessity to construct a world-view and world of their own, a world in which their selfhood, meaning, pride, solidarity and advancement could be nurtured. One result of that effort was the development of an independent religious movement rooted in a unique Black Christian tradition. [15] In a strategic essay about this development and its relation to a biblical rationale, Peter J. Paris wrote:

"In the Bible, Blacks found a perspective on humanity that was wholly different from that which they experienced in the teachings and practices of white Americans. The universal parenthood of God implied a universal kinship of humankind. This is the basic proposition of the hermeneutic designated as the Black Christian tradition." [16]

Paris also stated: "Accordingly, the Black churches have never hesitated to disavow any interpretation of Scripture that would attempt to legitimate racism, slavery, or any other form of human bondage. One can conclude that there have been no sacred scriptures for Blacks apart from the hermeneutical principle immortalized in the Black Christian tradition."

Writing to address the need for a working outline of the history of the role of the Bible in the religious traditions of African-Americans, from the slavery era to the Twentieth Century, Vincent L. Wimbish offered a schema divided into five "reading periods." [17]

According to Wimbish, "Reading Period" One involved the first decades of the enslaved Africans in the New World, and their response of suspicion and rejection as a "Book Religion" was forced upon them. But although well-established in sometimes elaborate oral traditions, their final response was one of awe, and a willingness to deal with their sense of disorientation and social death by entering into the language-world of the Bible. This accommodation proved successful because it gave the slaves a common ground upon which to "meet" and engage their captors.

"Reading Period" Two marks the time when the slaves transformed the "Book Religion" of their captors into a religion informed by their own experience. This occurred, Wimbish suggested, during the time of the mass conversions associated with evangelical activities and agencies during the Eighteenth Century. "By the end of the century 'the Book' had come to represent a virtual language-world that they, too, could enter and manipulate in light

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15. Peter J. Paris, "The Bible and the Black Churches" in *The Bible and Social Reform*, edited by Ernest R. Sandeen (Philadelphia, PA. and Chico, CA.: Fortress Press / Scholars Press, 1982), p. 135.
16. Ibid., p. 135
17. See Vincent L. Wimbish, "The Bible and African Americans: An Outline of an Interpretative History," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 81-97.

of their social experience." [18] The results of their engagement with scripture stands documented in Spirituals, sermons and testimonies from the period. "The spirituals reflect the process of the transformation of the Book Religion of the dominant peoples into the religion reflective of the socio-political and economic status of African slaves," Wimbish asserted. [19] He further explained that the hermeneutic discerned in these creative interpretations and uses of scriptures by the slaves is "a hermeneutic characterized by a looseness, even playfulness, vis-à-vis the biblical texts themselves." He added, "The interpretation was not controlled by the literal words of the texts, but by social experience. The texts were heard more than read; they were engaged as stories that seized and freed the imagination" making the songs and sermons of the enslaved "reflect a type of indirect or veiled commentary on the social situation that the African slaves faced." [20]

All other readings to come would in some sense be built upon and judged against it. This reading is in fact the classical reading of the biblical text for African-Americans; it reflects the classical period in the history of African-Americans (the eighteenth century). [21]

Thus the African-Americans accepted the Bible, "but not in the way white Americans accepted it or in the way the whites preferred that others accept it." [22]

The third "Reading Period" Wimbish isolated in his schema included the beginnings of the independent church movements in the Nineteenth Century, the time when independent Black churches and local and regional denominational bodies developed among African-Americans. The reading of the Bible during this period strongly informed the churches for oppositional action in the face of societal racism. Claims were made and pressed from a Black consciousness and self-assertiveness, based on a reading of the Bible that had made African-Americans view their experience and position as a true antitype of the ancient Hebrews.

According to Wimbish, the fourth and fifth "Reading Periods" are embraced within the Twentieth Century, with Blacks influenced, like many others with religious interests, to emphasize religious differences in esoteric and elitist religious sects and cults, or in many ways showing the marks of a fundamentalism that emphasized an inductive reading of scripture and an insistence upon a "Bible-believing" stance that sometimes clashed with the traditionally social and experiential reading.

Scholars on the subject will differ about what is the most useful schematic to trace the history of how African-Americans have read, appropriated and used the Bible, but there is unanimous agreement among them that that reading, appropriation and use has been complex rather than simple, and while definite quite diverse. The Black Church movement has never been homogeneous, and it remains as diverse and complex in form and activities as

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18. Ibid., p.86.
19. Ibid., p.87.
20. Ibid., p.88.
21. Ibid., p.89.
22. Ibid., p.89.

are those members who comprise it. While all the African-American churches are in agreement with the basic hermeneutical principle of the parenthood of God and the kinship of humankind, the ways that hermeneutic informs church activities and emphases are quite diverse.

In the essay by Peter J. Paris on "The Bible and the Black Churches," referred to above, he elaborated on how the basic hermeneutic of "the Black Christian tradition" has influenced at least four different forms of religious life and action in the African-American church setting. Sifting the history of the churches in general and the sermons of five representative and highly influential African-American preachers in particular, Paris isolated four major strands of emphasis in the way the Black Christian tradition has been taught and applied. There is the "pastoral" emphasis, in which the Bible is used mainly to comfort, console and nurture in the faith. There is the "prophetic" emphasis, in which scripture is used to provide a base of understanding for redemptive action toward social change. There is the "reformist" emphasis, which uses scripture to strengthen, resolve and assure one of victory because of divine support for efforts to seek peace and effect justice. Paris categorized the fourth emphasis as "nationalist," a use of the Bible to liberate Blacks and build the race into a distinct, independent, central and productive nation. Each emphasis had its beginning in a particular historical period, Paris explained, and although modified some by time and changing circumstances, each one continues to influence the present. [23]

Footprints of a Broadened African-American Hermeneutic

Some have criticized what Peter J. Paris isolated as the basic hermeneutic within "the Black Christian tradition" discussed above, as being too narrow to allow for an adequate reading of the Bible. In actual fact a much broader hermeneutic for reading the Bible has evolved within the African-American church setting of late.

Because of a growing interest among contemporary African-Americans about religion in general and about the Bible in particular, an increased number of Black biblical scholars have been at work assessing and reporting what the Bible is really about, and how its contents are best understood and appropriated. Some among that number have addressed themselves to the problem of the way many European and American exegetes and commentary writers have overlooked or, at worst, distorted the factual details about an active African presence within the biblical record itself. As example, in a descriptive essay, "Three Thousand Years of Biblical Interpretation with Reference to Black Peoples," Charles B. Copher offered a critical assessment of some skewed interpretations of selected biblical accounts. [24] Copher's published studies reflect extensive historical and exegetical work not only within the

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23. See Paris, "The Bible and the Black Churches," pp. 133-154.
24. See Charles B. Copher, "Three Thousand Years of Biblical Interpretation with Reference to Black Peoples," in *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, edited by Gayraud Wilmore (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989) pp. 105-128.

biblical texts themselves but within correlative ancient periods, documents, places and languages as well. [25] Influenced both by the "assured benefits" of the historical-critical method and an appreciation for the African-American heritage of biblical understandings, several among contemporary Black biblical scholars have been busy broadening and writing about the African-American hermeneutic. Among those who emerged as leaders in the field, mention must be made of: Charles B. Copher, David T. Shannon, Cain Hope Felder, Thomas Hoyt, Jr., John R. Waters, Robert A. Bennett, Vincent L. Wimbish, Renita J. Weems, Clarice J. Martin, William H. Myers, Lloyd A. Lewis, and Randall C. Bailey.

A seminal and pathbreaking volume on the subject was published in 1991. It was titled *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, with Cain Hope Felder as editor. [26] The book was the culmination of a five-year collaboration between African-American biblical scholars in the United States, all of them professors in theological seminaries. Some of these Black scholars served in predominantly white schools, and others within predominantly Black institutions. The idea for the consultation was conceived by Thomas Hoyt, Jr. (New Testament scholar) and John W. Waters (Old Testament scholar); both men selected the participants, worked with other leaders and officials in the Society of Biblical Literature to schedule study sessions during the annual academy meetings, and secured a grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc. (Indiana) to fund the study project. Hosted by the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research (Collegeville, Minnesota), the group of Black scholars met each summer from 1986 to 1989. The book produced from their collaboration consisted of eleven essays. In his preface to the volume, editor Cain Hope Felder explained that the presupposition for the book was to "engage the new challenge to recapture the ancient biblical vision of racial and ethnic pluralism as shaped by the Bible's own universalism" and to "gain a new appreciation for the varied uses of Scripture within the Bible itself as a means of developing more sensitivity for the positive elements in such phenomena as modes of African-American biblical interpretation, which at times are closer to scriptural usage within the Bible and within first-century churches." [27] Felder added:

"Thus, we arrive at the burning question that makes this volume distinctive: How can the Bible break down the "dividing walls of hostility" (Eph. 2:14) that recent centuries of Eurocentric biblical translations and interpretations have, however unwittingly in some cases, erected between us? To this question, the present volume attempts to provide some answers; in this regard, such answers take the form of both descriptive and prescriptive narratives and studies." [28]

Stony the Road We Trod reflected a combination of historical inquiry, sophisticated exegesis, and a special sensitivity for the African-American

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25. See esp. his essay on "The Black Presence in the Old Testament," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp.146-164.
26. see footnote 25.
27. Ibid. pp. ix-x.
28. Ibid. p. x.

heritage of experience. The volume redefined, reshaped and restated the questions, basic concerns, and the scholarly methods that should determine how the Bible is to be read, not only by African-Americans but by the church at large, by the academy, and the larger society.

Programmatic works directed toward applying a broader hermeneutic in pulpit ministry have also appeared. This was to be expected, given the role African-American clergy play in their churches and the Black community. Such prominence for Black clergy within church and community has a long and treasured history behind it, dating back to the ante-bellum era. As Howard Thurman once explained it: "The ante-bellum Negro preacher was the greatest single factor in determining the spiritual destiny of the slave community. He it was who gave to the masses of his fellows a point of view that became for them a veritable Door of Hope. His ministry was greatly restricted as to movement, function, and the opportunities of leadership, but he himself was blessed with one important insight: he was convinced that every human being was a child of God. This belief included the slave as well as the master."[29] African-American preachers are still entrusted with and expected to model and convey that biblical "point of view," providing vision, wisdom, and spiritual guidance to bless the lives and paths of those who look to them. Crucial to such necessary ends is the preacher's reading and handling of the Bible. [30]

African-Americans accept the Bible as an adequate, practical and immediate statement of the divine intention for humankind. Although like all others they must interrogate the manifold forms and genres in the Bible for their "life-meanings," Blacks seldom, if ever, read the Bible to gain some analytical absoluteness about the nature and scope of scripture. The concern is forever practical – to discern the voice of God addressing the self and one's people in the context of life's immediacies. The cultural rootage of this approach to the Bible honors the folk appeal reflected throughout its pages, and it explains why most African-American pulpits have remained free from divisive controversies and why the sermons preached from them have escaped becoming deadening abstractions. In the African-American reading of the Bible, and the preaching which follows from it, the ruling principle has been to read scripture in light of the deliverance theme highlighted therein, the oft-repeated theme about how God acts to deliver humans from their plights. This approach places even Paul's more creative contribution in clearer perspective, especially since his shared understanding about what God has accomplished in the human interest through Jesus Christ is best summed-up in the word "freedom." To sense the many dimensions within the word as the apostle used it, one need only consider how he applied it: freedom from sin (Romans); release from subjection to the powers of an evil age (Ephesians); escape from bondage to the elemental spirits of the universe (Colossians); freedom from

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29. Howard Thurman, *Deep River: Reflections on the Religious Insight of Certain of the Negro Spirituals*, p. 11.
30. For an interpretative overview of the hermeneutical perspectives which inform the contemporary African-American pulpit, see James Earl Massey, "An African-American Model," in *Hermeneutics For Preaching: Approaches to Contemporary Interpretations of Scripture*, edited by Raymond Bailey (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), pp. 135-159.

confinement in legalisms (Galatians); and even ultimate release from a limiting mortality by means of a promised resurrection of the body-self from death (Corinthians).

African-Americans readily acknowledge that approaching the Bible to understand its contents in light of its theme of freedom does not answer all of the questions which inevitably arise when confronting its pages. But neither does the Covenant theme answer all of such questions, nor does the promise and fulfillment approach, nor the revelation as history framework, nor the sacrifice motif. African-American hermeneuts and preachers know that more than one conceptual framework must be utilized in order to view and appropriate the meanings within the Bible with fruitful understanding, aware that not everything in the Bible can be made to fit neatly into any one interpretative scheme. But meanwhile, the one perspective that rules every reading of scripture is to test all that is read by the human need for freedom, since God as Deliverer is one of the obvious thematic continuities by which the two testaments cohere. That theme has surely had the strongest and most fruitful appeal as African-Americans have read the Bible, and as it has been used to address them in their history of oppression and social trauma.

"CHRISTIAN LIFE IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN SPIRITUALS"

BY JAMES EARL MASSEY

This address treats the faith witness voiced in the "Spirituals" of African Americans. I have chosen to explore the Spirituals for three reasons: First, these historic, history-laden songs, particularly those from the pre-Civil War period, that infamous slavery era, reflect the earliest documented worldview of African-American spirituality. Second, the present hymnological tradition within most branches of the Black Church is based upon the faith and world-view to which the Spiritual give such poignant witness. [1]

Third, I have chosen to call attention to these songs because their confessional content is usually overlooked by scholars when theological reflections are being advanced. I greatly value these historic creations, deeply aware that beyond what Black philosopher Alain Locke referred to as the "ingenuous simplicity" [2] of the Spirituals there lie not only social protest and aspirations but some instructive faith perspectives and inspiring theological insights. The Spirituals give us something more than poignant poetry and plaintive music, they also give us Scripture-informed and soul-engaging musings about God, human experience, Christian faith, personal responsibility, and human destiny.

I

I follow a respected tradition in referring to these songs as "Spirituals," although several other descriptions have been, and can be, used for them. Influenced by the heart-wrenching experiences which inspired these songs, W. E. B. DuBois called them "sorrow songs." [3] Mindful of the settings in which they were fashioned and used, during and after slavery, Booker T. Washington referred to these songs as "plantation melodies." [4] After researching the history of these creations, and the strivings and aspirations they voice, historian Miles Mark Fisher discussed them as "Negro Slave Songs." [5] Impressed by the

1. See Jon Michael Spencer, *Black Hymnody: A Hymnological History of the African American Church* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992). John Lovell, Jr., writing with respect to the contemporary use of the gospel music genre in the Black Church, has explained that "What is called gospel music is hardly anything more than an effort to give the spiritual a modernity in form, content and beat." *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1972), p. 467.
2. See Alain Locke, "The Negro Spirituals," reprinted from *The New Negro: An Interpretation* [(New York: Borsi, 1925) pp.199-210], in *Freedom on My Mind: The Columbia Documentary History of the African-American Experience*, Manning Marable, editor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) p.587.
3. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [A Norton Critical Edition], edited by Henry Louis Gates and Terri Hume Oliver (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999) see esp. pp.154-164.
4. Booker T. Washington, "Preface," to *Twenty-Four Negro Melodies: Transcribed for the Piano* by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (Bryn Mawr, PA: Oliver Ditson Co., 1905), p.viii.
5. Miles Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1953).

number of these songs, their folk origins, topical range and transforming applications, musicologist John Lovell, Jr., referred to these creations collectively as "Black Song." [6]

As for the universal importance of "song" itself in human life, Scotsman Thomas Carlyle alertly suggested in one of his writings that music is our deepest human reality, saying, "All inmost things . . . naturally utter themselves in Song." "All deep things are Song. It seems somehow the very central essence of us, Song; as if all the rest were but wrappages and hulls." "See deep enough," Carlyle continued, "and you see musically." [7]

The deep substructure of the Spirituals, the foundation on which they rest and from which they rise, is faith. These songs reflect Black beliefs, Black hopes, and Black aspirations rooted in faith: faith in the creative, all-powerful, delivering, sustaining, energizing, and fulfilling activity of a just and loving God. Howard Thurman was right in voicing his convictional comment that "the clue to the meaning of the spirituals is to be found in religious experience and spiritual discernment." [8] These songs are the musical response of dynamic African sensibilities to teachings drawn from the Bible, insights from the observed processes of nature, and raw experiences in life. The Spirituals are songs of faith-content sung and used with intent; they were originally an expressive agency to give witness, to teach, to nurture, to remind, to encourage, to sustain, to convict, to convince, to inspire.

II

God in the Spirituals. In 1938, Benjamin Elijah Mays published an important study entitled *The Negro's God* whose purpose was, in his words, "to tell America what the Negro thinks of God." [9] That book was a first of its kind. It was based on Negro literature dating from as early as 1760, and the research included insights from slave narratives, biography, autobiography, addresses, novels, poetry, prayers, sermons, catechetical productions for church use, and Spirituals. *The Negro's God* is informative, and particularly valuable as the first attempt by any scholar to study the development of the idea of God in the literature of African-Americans. In summarizing what he discovered and reported about ideas of God as expressed in 122 Spirituals he examined, Benjamin F. Mays wrote:

> "The ideas reflected in the Spirituals may be briefly summarized: God is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. In both Heaven and earth God is sovereign. He is a just God . . . . God is revengeful . . . . God is a warrior and He fights the battles of His chosen people . . . . God takes

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6. John Lovell, Jr., *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1972).
7. See Thomas Carlyle's essay on "The Hero as a Poet," in *Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, edited by Archibald MacMechan (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1901), p.95.
8. Howard Thurman, *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947), p.12.
9. Cited from the Preface, Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God: As Reflected in His Literature* (New York: Atheneum, 1969 reprint of 1938 edition), with a new preface by Vincent Harding.

> Care of His own. He will see to it that the righteous are vindicated and that the heavily laden are given rest from the troubles of the world . . . . God is near and there is a feeling of dependence upon Him. In times of distress, He is ever present . . . . He answers prayers . . . . God is observant. He sees all you do and He hears all you say." [10]

Those ideas in the Spirituals regarding God are traditionally biblical; some of them, such as God is a warrior and deliverer, were appropriated from the Bible, as illustrated in "Go Down, Moses" and "Joshua Fit de Battle ob Jericho," while other ideas, such as God is always near and observant, were stimulated by statements and accounts reported in the Bible. In any instance, these God-ideas in the Spirituals fully correspond with ideas expressed in the Bible about God.

Special attention in the Spirituals is devoted to the idea of God as deliverer, and some of the most vibrant lines treat God's dramatic work in changing situations for people, and God using chosen persons to change situations for others. Thus this reference:

> "Thus spoke the Lord," bold Moses said;
> Let my people go,
> "If not I'll smite your first born dead,"
> Let my people go. [11]

Or this reference to Joshua in the well-known song that honors him:

> You may talk about yo' king ob Gideon,
> You may talk about yo' man ob Saul,
> Dere's none like good ole Joshua,
> At de battle ob Jericho. [12]

John Lovell, Jr. has commented about this Joshua song that "Only the most naive reader [or singer, or listener] misses the point that what Joshua did can be done again and again, wherever wrong and evil are to be overthrown, wherever promised good and right are to be established." [13] The same message comes through in the Spiritual "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?"

> He delivered Daniel f'om de lion's den,
> Jonah f'om de belly of de whale,
> An' de Hebrew chillum f'om de fiery furnace,
> An' why not every man. [14]

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10. Ibid., p.21.
11. "Go Down Moses," *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson (New York: The Viking Press, Publishers, 1969), for the full text, see pp. i, 51-53.
12. "Joshua Fit de Battle ob Jericho," *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, see pp. i, 56-58 for the full text.
13. Lovell, Op. cit., p. 229.
14. "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?" *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, see pp. i, 148 151 for the full text.

The dominant view expressed in the Spirituals about God is of a sovereign creator who has the whole of life under his care, and that, being God, he will make things right in the end:

> God is a God!
> God don't never change!
> God is a God
> An' He always will be God!
>
> The earth His footstool
> an' heav'n His throne,
> The whole creation all His own,
> His love an' power will prevail,
> His promises will never fail.
> God is a God!
> An' always will be God! [15]

III

Jesus in the Spirituals. The most important thing to be said about how Jesus is mentioned in the Spirituals is that he is never viewed as a distant figure, or only an object of faith, but always as a living person, someone whose warmth, concern, love, trustworthiness, helpfulness, power, steadiness, exampleship, and availability can be experienced. That Jesus is Son of God, and Christ, is understood, but these basic descriptions of his personhood do not adequately convey his personality as experienced and regarded by the singers of these songs; and by "personality" I refer to the personal attributes and traits of Jesus which allow us to anticipate and value his responses toward those who approach him in openness and faith.

The Spirituals speak of being in a relationship with Jesus; they reflect a valued familiarity and companionship with him as religious subject. Jesus is viewed as one who knows life as the singers knew it, and one who knows them as suffering suppliants as well.

The impact of the circumstances and plight of the Hebrews upon the creation of the Spirituals can be readily traced, and the knowledge that God delivered the Hebrews from their struggles helped the slave singers to discern God's caring concern and to trust God's power.

Although Old Testament narratives provided dramatic resources for faith, the slave singers were especially sensitized by the New Testament story about Jesus, especially his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Jesus' handling of his experiences informed the slaves' resolve for facing and handling their experiences. They identified with Jesus, deeply aware that he had already identified himself with them:

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15. "God is a God! God Don't Never Change," in John Lovell, Jr., *Black Song*, p.238.

Dey crucified my Lord,
An' he never said a mumbalin' word.
Dey crucified my Lord,
An' he never said a mumbalin' word.
Not a word – not a word – not a word. [16]

Among the many oft-sung elegies about our Lord's ordeal as suffering Savior, there is that unique and universally beloved Spiritual that asks "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" [17] In that Spiritual, the singers confessed their understanding and voiced their lament concerning what Jesus underwent: they speak of Jesus being "nailed to the tree," "pierced in the side," and "laid in the tomb," and they responded to the meaning of it all with full openness of soul:

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Howard Thurman tells in his autobiography about the visit he and his wife Sue had with Mahatma Gandhi while in India in 1935 as guests of the Student Christian Movement of India, Burma, and Ceylon. After a long visit, with deep conversations, as their allotted time with the Mahatma came to a close, Gandhi asked the Thurmans not to leave before favoring him by singing one of the Negro Spirituals. He specifically requested that they sing "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?', with the comment, "I feel that this song gets to the root of the experience of the entire human race under the spread of the healing wings of suffering." Mrs. Thurman, an Oberlin Conservatory of Music graduate, led in singing that Spiritual as Gandhi and his associates bowed their heads in prayer. [18] Although Gandhi sensed something of universal import in the undeserved suffering Jesus underwent, he missed the expiatory meaning of Jesus' death. The slave singers did not miss that meaning. They understood his death as an atoning deed, and they rejoiced about it as a completed task in these lines:

Hallelujah t' de Lamb,
Jesus died for every man.
But He ain't comin' here t' die no mo,
Ain't comin' here t' die no mo.

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16. "He Never Said a Mumbalin' Word," in John Lovell, Jr., Op. cit., p. 261.
17. For the full text, see Johnson and Johnson, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, pp. ii, 136-137.
18. Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1979) p.134.

He died for de blind, He died for de lame,
He bore de pain an' all de blame.
But He ain't comin' here t' die no mo',
Ain't comin' here t' die no mo. [19]

Several Spirituals treat the Lord's resurrection, but representative of the note of victory sounded in them all is the Spiritual "Dust an' Ashes" – also known as "An' de Lord Shall Bear My Spirit Home" [20] After acknowledging that death does its work on all humans—"Dust, dust an' ashes fly over on my grave"—the Spiritual voices faith that death is not the end: "An' de Lord shall bear my spirit home." Successive stanzas picture the Lord's crucifixion, the burial of his body in Joseph's tomb, the descent of an angel to roll the stone from the entrance, and then, death's loss:

De cold grave could not hold Him,
Nor death's cold iron band,
An' de Lord shall bear my spirit home,
An' de Lord shall bear my spirit home.

He rose, He rose, He rose from de dead.
He rose, He rose, He rose from de dead,
He rose, He rose, He rose from de dead,
An' de Lord shall bear my spirit home.

The point of witness is clear: what God did for Jesus, God is going to do for those who believe in Jesus.

As regards the Christian life, the creators of Spirituals were deeply concerned about the inner life of the soul. They sensed, quite rightly, that sincere religion and courageous living call for a heart that God has touched and controls. Being enslaved, oppressed, unfairly treated, there were times when the heart's attitudes provoked alarm and dismay, times when the impulse to deal with things on a purely selfish basis was strong, so a penitent appeal was made to God or Jesus for help:

"Tis me, 'tis me, 'tis me, O Lord,
Standin' in the need of prayer.
'tis me, 'tis me, 'tis me, O Lord,
An' I'm standin' in the need of prayer." [21]

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19. "But He Ain't Comin' Here t' Die No Mo', in *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro: As Sung at Hampton*, edited by R. Nathaniel Dett (Hampton, VA: Hampton Institute Press, 1927), p.103.
20. "Dust an' Ashes", in Dett, Op. cit., pp. 213-218.
21. "Tis Me," Ibid., p. 183.

The singers knew that God and Jesus give aid for character-change. That was the concern behind these lines:

> Lord I want to be a Christian
> In-a my heart, in-a-my heart,
> Lord, I want to be more loving
> In-a my heart.
> I don't want to be like Judas
> In-a my heart.
> Lord, I want to be like Jesus
> In-a my heart. [22]

The insistence was always up to faith in Jesus, trust in him as a concerned helper, understanding companion, a brother, although he is also Lord.

> Oh, Jesus my Saviour,
> On Thee I'll depend,
> When troubles are near me,
> You'll be my true friend. [23]

Given the peace and hope from being in relationship with Jesus, even dying was not viewed as an ultimate threat:

> You needn't mind my dying,
> You needn't mind my dying,
> You needn't mind my dying,
> Jesus goin' to make up my dying bed. [24]

This attitude of confidence in God and sense of companionship with Jesus, including even the hour of death, is never absent from the Spirituals. Urgency of need, and sincere longing of soul, made these questors strive for survival, courage, solace, stability, and meaning. To gain these benefits the sufferers had to reach for the ultimate. In seeking the ultimate, informed by biblical truths, they found the Triune God. Thus the Christian orthodoxy these songs reflect.

IV

The Holy Spirit in the Spirituals. The biblical teachings about the Holy Spirit point beyond themselves in two directions: one direction is Godward, disclosing that a Third Person is related to God the Father and Jesus the Son in the Godhead; the other direction is humanward, declaring that God relates to his open and obedient children in intimate and inward ways.

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22. "Lord, I Want to Be a Christian," Ibid., pp. 50-51.
23. "I'm Troubled in Mind," Ibid., p. 236.
24. See "Jesus Goin' to Make Up My Dying Bed," in Lovell, Op. cit., p. 319.

According to Romans 8:1-17 and Galatians 5:16-25, among other passages of instruction, the Christian life is a life lived "in" and "by" the Spirit. The pervasive presence the Holy Spirit with the believer is usually assumed in the Spirituals, but direct references to the Spirit are rarely made. There are Spirituals in which the deep intimacy between God and the soul is experienced as a sense of diving possession that makes one feel settled and secure, settled in grace and secure in God's love. Voiced affirmations by African-American Christians about divine grace and a sense of being filled or possessed by the Spirit are still two of the most persistent features in African-American worship. As regards God's grace, Henry H. Mitchell has explained that "No mere theological nicety, the grace of God was and is to the Black [person] a means of life and strength—a source of support and balance and self-certainty in a world whose approval of Blacks is still in extremely short supply." [25] As regards being filled or possessed by the Spirit, this can be understood as an experience of feeling settled, energized, and emboldened by the Holy Spirit. This is surely reflected in the Spiritual "Dere's a Little Wheel a-Turnin' in My Heart":

> Oh I don't feel no ways tired in my heart,
> In my heart, in my heart,
> O I don't feel no ways tired in my heart.
>
> I've a double 'termination in my heart,
> In my heart, in my heart,
> I've a double 'termination in my heart. [26]

The heart having surrendered to God's claiming grace, God has witnessed his approval through his Spirit, granting a convictional knowledge to the believer that he or she has become intimately linked with God.
Thus such lines as these:

> O I know the Lord,
> I know the Lord,
> I know the Lord's laid His hands on me. [27]

Such songs witness about a life activated and controlled from a new and ultimate center.

In one of those rare instances where the Holy Spirit is directly mentioned, he is understood in that particular Spiritual as one who "moves" or motivates the believer to prayer: Perhaps this was influenced by Romans 8:26 and/or Ephesians 6:18:

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25. Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Belief: Folk Beliefs of Blacks in America and West Africa* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975), p.130.
26. "Dere's a Little Wheel a-Turnin' in My Heart," in Dett, Op. cit., p.168.
27. "I Know the Lord's Laid His Hands on Me," Ibid., p.207.

Ev'ry time I feel the Spirit,
move-in' in my heart,
I will pray.
O, ev'ry time I feel the Spirit,
move-in' in my heart,
I will pray. [28]

The simple assumption regarding the Holy Spirit is that he joins the believer's life in a sensed filling and "possession," granting a sense of belonging (Romans 8:16) and of being girded (Acts 1:8). I use that expression, "sensed possession," purposely but advisedly. While it would be a mistake to identify the inward witness of the Spirit solely with what can be felt, and physically expressed in shout or movement, it is likewise a mistake to overlook the fact that feeling—which is the deepest, most immediate, and most vivid human experience—is sometimes the means by which the Holy Spirit allows us to realize his inward ministry to us. The singers understood this, and while some of them certainly enjoyed and expected times of "holy overwhelming" in their religious experience, they also sang about those private times when the Holy Spirit brought needed encouragement and renewal to their life:

Sometimes I feel discouraged,
And think my work's in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again. [29]

The human condition involves us in a range of experiences which demand that the Christian have a focused selfhood. One achieves that focus with the inward help of the possessing and renewing presence of the Holy Spirit. Our becoming, our growth in grace, is dependent upon the goals and means exhibited in Jesus and mediated within us by the Holy Spirit. Helped by the Holy Spirit, the believer receives strengthened resolve and readiness to live for God and to face any conflicts and opposition:

Done made my vow to the Lord
and I never will turn back,
I will go, I shall go, to see what the end will be.
Done opened my mouth to the Lord
and I never will turn back,
I will go, I shall go, to see what the end will be. [30]

The singers understood that the steadiness and stamina needed to fulfill such a vow depends upon a believer being possessed and enabled by the Holy Spirit.

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28. "Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit," Ibid., p.169.
29. "There is a Balm in Gilead," Ibid., p.88.
30. "Done Made My Vow to the Lord," in Lovell, Jr., Op. cit., p.323.

V

I have been speaking here about the Christian witness in some of the historic Spirituals, those worded songs about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and Christian life. Biblical truths and imagery influenced these songs, and African-American sensibilities and social experience shaped them. These Spirituals, with many others, reflect faith. They bear witness, reinforce meanings, inspire worship, and sustain hope. These Spirituals give us poignant music and so much more. They give is prophetic musings, flavored by the history, longings, experiences, religious discoveries and faith of a life-tested people. These songs nurture self-respect. They echo biblical theology. They voice an affirmative theodicy. They mirror the African-American soul. They helped a seeking people to face dark times and meet the exigencies of life with faith, fortitude, and essential pride. These songs are an important repository of spiritual insight and duly regarded, they stir one to reflection, faithfulness, praise, and an encouraged walk with God.

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The Office of Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs at the University of Indianapolis is pleased to make this resource available for use by groups associated with the Sankofa Spiritual Formation Community. As the Rev. Gene Blair and the Rev. Glandion Carney enunciated in Sankofa Paper #1 (2005), the Sankofa Spiritual Formation Community is a group of pastors and laity who seek spiritual renewal of the church in the context of recovering the practices and traditions of African-American Christian Spirituality.

We believe that God is calling forth a community of believers who long for the wisdom of African American spirituality. This spirituality is hewn from the rock of African spirituality, values, and disciplines as well as the slave religions and traditions that have evolved into the Black church community we know today. This community is covenantal in nature and intentional in the practice of worship, study, prayer, reflection and service. It is ecumenical in scope and invitation. This community is intensive and reflective in its relational life with God and all people. We believe that this spirituality is a threshold into wider Christian traditions of spirituality. We invite you to come and journey with us and explore the "sacred world of Black folks," the people who have traveled this road to know God.

The theme for our work has been what West Africans call sankofa. One translation of sankofa is: "We must go back and reclaim our past so we can move forward; so we can understand how and why we can to be who we are."

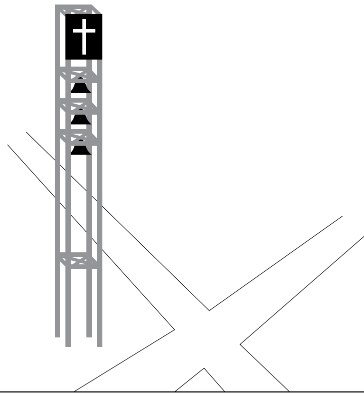
The word sankofa comes from the Akan, an ancient nation of people in the West African nation of Ghana. They believe the search for knowledge is a life-long process and journey of learning. The Akan believe that anyone can become knowledgeable if they are teachable. They regard the elderly as wise and believe that experience comes with age. Age and experience are to be revered and honored. This association of wisdom with age is incorporated in the Sankofa symbol.

The mythical Sankofa bird is a symbol of wisdom, knowledge, and the people's heritage. The word Sankofa is derived from the words SAN (return), KO (go), FA (look, seek, and take). The bird flying forward with its head looking backwards symbolizes the Akan's quest for knowledge with the implication that the quest is based on critical examination, and intelligent inves-

tigation. This also reflects the Akan belief that the past serves as a guide for planning one's future. Wisdom gained from the past is clearly a foundation for the future. Certainly time and people move forward. But one must not ignore the gems to be picked up from behind to be carried into the future.

Our vision is for a community of believers committed to this practice as described. Our vision is a two-year learning experience: a short-term residential learning experience, a pilgrimage to the south to travel the Civil Rights trail and visit the places where history was made and lives were lost and changed, a pilgrimage to west Africa to see the slave markets and trails of tears left by those loaded onto ships for the journey into slavery, and a gathering of African and African-American sages and teachers who can teach, mentor, and guide others with their wisdom, experience and learning.

Dr. Eugene A. Blair and Rev. Glandion Carney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