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The Story of the Exodus and the Images of the Promised Land and Heaven in the Poetry of African American Spirituals

Abstract

Since the beginning of slavery blacks discovered in the Bible stories which provided not only narratives and language to delineate the difficulty of being a slave, but also hope for a better future in the afterlife. The Exodus was perceived as the Bible's main argument that God denounced slavery and would come in a catastrophic event to judge those who mistreated blacks. This article is devoted to the exploration of the biblical figure of Exodus as a recurring trope in selected lyrics of slave spirituals and spirituals recorded by bluesmen. Scholars seem to agree that the Exodus is the migration narrative, but in this article I seek to demonstrate that it may also represent the theme of going on a spiritual journey to the other side in the hereafter or the end of time city the New Jerusalem.

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Since the beginning of slavery blacks discovered in the Bible stories which provided not only narratives and language to depict the difficulty of being a slave, but also hope for a better future in the afterlife. The Exodus was viewed as the Bible's main argument that God condemned slavery and would come in a catastrophic and apocalyptic event to judge those who mistreated slaves. This article will explore the biblical figure of Exodus as a recurring trope in selected lyrics of spirituals. The theme of drama of deliverance from bondage will be discussed in slave spirituals such as *Go down Moses* and *Didn't Ol' Pharaoh Get Lost*. Scholars seem to agree that the Exodus is the migration narrative, but in this article I seek to demonstrate that it may also represent the theme of going on a spiritual journey to the other side in the hereafter or the end of time city the New Jerusalem. Spirituals such as *My Army Cross Over* and *We Will March through the Valley* will be discussed to show the religious and martial spirit of blacks.

In the discussions of images of heaven my overall argument is that the eschatological hope embedded in the slave religion to be delivered from the horrible conditions of slavery and to have a chance for a better world in the Promised Land is sounded in the poetry of spirituals. Selected spirituals will be discussed to reveal the persistence of these themes. They include the lyrics of spirituals such as *I Want to Go Home*, *I Want to Walk in Jerusalem Just Like John and My Father*, *How Long?*

In the case of spirituals recorded by blues musicians, I want to argue that they projected the image of heaven as the place of eternal rest in the Kingdom of God in the land beyond death. For a number of them death was not the end of human existence, but it was a vehicle of obtaining a further spiritual life. I intend to examine the visions of heaven in blues spirituals such as Blind Willie Johnson's *Bye and Bye I'm Going to See the King*, and *Trouble Will Soon Be Over*, Charlie Patton's *Lord I'm Discouraged*, Blind Gary Davis's *The Angel's Message to Me*, *Twelve Gates in the City* and *Goin' to Sit Down on the Banks of the River* and Blind Willie Davis's *I've Got a Key to the Kingdom*.

The Theme of Drama of Deliverance from Bondage in Selected Spirituals

Now there arose up a new king over Egypt... And he said unto his people, "Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we: Come on, let us deal wisely with them; lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that, when there falleth out any war, they join also unto our enemies, and fight against us, and so get them up out of the land". Therefore they did set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens. (Ex. 1: 8–11)

As African American scholar, theologian and musician Jon Michael Spencer notes it is not difficult to envision how African slaves could have understood the above passage from the Book of Exodus:

'Behold the people of Africa are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them. Lest they multiply, and, if civil war befall us, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the South.' Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They whipped them into submission, lynched their men, raped their women, and sold their children downriver. (Spencer 1990: 3)

Thus, many lyrics of the spirituals reflected the pain of slavery, as exemplified in *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*, some of which reads:

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
 Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
 Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
 A long ways from home
 A long ways from home.

(*Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child* available online)

In his study *Conjuring Culture. Biblical Formations of Black America*, Theophus Smith states that black Christians compared themselves to Mosaic slaves and induced God to grant them freedom as the Hebrew slaves were given it in the book of Exodus (Smith 1994: 60). The Christian slaves, as Albert Raboteau notes, "applied the Exodus story, whose end they knew, to their own experience of slavery, which had not ended. Exodus functioned as an archetypal event for the slaves. The sacred history of God's liberation of his people would be or was being repeated in the American South" (Raboteau [quot. too:] Smith 1994: 63).

It becomes clear that the Exodus story was in the words of Spencer: "the pattern of liberation — *confrontation, conflict, revelation*. The singers believed that God would do for them what was done for the Israelites" (Spencer 1990: 18). Jewish liberation theologian Mark Ellis points out that: "The songs of African slaves in nineteenth-century America calling on God for freedom echo the lamentations of the Jews in Egypt" (Ellis [quot. too:] Spencer 1990: 19). African American theologian James H. Cone asserts that: "The resurrection-event means that God's liberating work is not only for the house of Israel but for all who are enslaved by principalities and powers" (Cone [quot. too:] Spencer 1990: 19).

The theme of drama of deliverance from bondage may be seen in the lyrics of the spiritual *Go down Moses*. As we read:

Go down Moses
 Way down in Egypt land
 Tell ole Pharaoh
 To let my people go
 When Israel was in Egypt land
 Let my people go
 Oppressed so hard the could not stand
 Let my people go.

(*Go down Moses* available online)

The above lines of this spiritual refer to the Book of Exodus: “And the LORD spake unto Moses, Go unto Pharaoh, and say unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Let my people go, that they may serve me”. (Exod. 8:1) The lines: “Thus spoke the Lord”, bold Moses said: “If not, I’ll smite your first born dead, Let my people go” have a clear reference to the Book of Exodus (11: 4–5). As we read in the Exodus chapter 11: “And Moses said, Thus saith the LORD, About midnight will I go out into the midst of Egypt: And all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die”.

The Exodus phrase “Let my people go” is also utilized in the spiritual *Didn’t Ol’ Pharaoh Get Lost*:

Den Moses an’ Aaron
 To Pharaoh did go
 ‘Thus says de God of Israel
 Let my people go.

(*Didn’t Ol’ Pharaoh Get Lost* available online)

The spiritual recounts the story of the parting of the Red Sea in which Moses and the Israelites managed to cross the sea whereas the entire Egyptian army was drowned. Importantly, God in this spiritual is referred to as “Jehovah [who] hears his people pray” (*Didn’t Ol’ Pharaoh Get Lost...*). Deliverance from bondage can be observed in the following lines:

Den Moses said to Israel
 As they stood along the Shore
 ‘Yo’ enemies you see today
 You’ll never see no more’
 Den down came raging Pharaoh
 Dat you may plainly see
 Old Pharaoh an’ his host
 Got los’ in de Red Sea.

(*Didn’t Ol’ Pharaoh Get Lost...*)

The slave bards identified with the Israelites not only in their slavery but also in their wretchedness; they were also slaves under the wicked regime (Callahan 2006: 86). The Exodus story gave the black slaves a myth which enabled them to come to terms with the brutality of slavery and their powerlessness to do anything about it, whereas concurrently holding a firm belief that God can make the impossible possible (Callahan 2006: 86).

The Exodus as the theme of going on a spiritual journey to the other side in the hereafter and the end of time city the New Jerusalem

In his seminal article *Black Spirituals: A Theological Interpretation* James H. Cone points out that black slaves realized that the North was not the Promised Land due to unjust and racist laws made by the American Government such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the Dred Scott case in 1857 (2000: 787). Therefore, in Cone's view the slaves' concept of heaven was created in response to the limitations and restrictions of the hostile earthly world. The vision of a just afterlife was to affirm the dignity and value of slaves' lives when other people regarded them as nonpersons (2000: 788).

Despite Cone's observation that some blacks may have found the North little better than the South, for black slaves in the South who would not have known about the Dred Scott case or the Fugitive Act, the North was still perceived as the Promised Land as it represented freedom from the brutality of southern slavery, and which was home to numerous free blacks and the Abolitionist and Underground Railroad movements. To them the North was a better place and those that could would continue to escape to it. In slave spirituals, crossing the Jordan typically meant crossing over into death but it could also refer to crossing over into the North, so that spirituals and slave songs raised the question of freedom and the Promised Land in these two ways. Often, the slave masters were not aware of the fact that certain spirituals talked of escape to the North rather than just going to heaven.

Much has been written about the fact that the Exodus is the migration narrative, but I want to argue it may also represent the theme of or going on a spiritual journey to the other side in the afterlife. Many spirituals tackle the motif of marching or going on a metaphysical journey to the hereafter. For example, on the one hand, the spiritual *Many Thousand Go* may be perceived as a protest song denouncing slavery; on the other hand, however, it may be read as a song about going to heaven. As the slave poet announces:

No more peck o' corn for me,
No more, no more;
No more peck o' corn for me,
Many thousand [sic] go

(Allen, Ware, Garrison 1995 [1867]: 48)

In the song *I Want to Go Home* the black slave poet wants to embark on a spiritual journey to heaven and clearly refers to the afterlife in "de kingdom" when whippings, tribulation, slavery and evil will refer to the past:

Dere's no rain to wet you.
O yes, I want to go home,
Want to go home.
Dere's no sun to burn you—O yes, etc.
Dere's no hard trials.
Dere's no whips a—crackin'.
Dere's no stormy weather.
Dere's no tribulation.
No more slavery in de kingdom.
No evil-doers in de kingdom
All is gladness in de kingdom

(Allen, Ware, Garrison 1995 [1867]: 46)

Black theologian Howard W. Thurman comments that in the slaves' concept of heaven "there will be no prescription, no segregation, no separateness, no slave-row, but complete freedom of movement — the most psychologically dramatic of all manifestations of freedom" (Thurman 2000: 47). The unknown bards of the spirituals not only recited the history of enslaved blacks but also expressed the desire for freedom on earth in addition to spiritual freedom.

Significantly, the recurring trope of going to heaven can be also observed in the poetry of spirituals depicting visions of the New Jerusalem. In the Book of Revelation 21 and 22 the Apostle John envisions the New Jerusalem as an end of time city in which people have been liberated from injustice and oppression. In this heavenly city God will put an end to human pain and sorrow: "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Rev: 21:4). Slaves lived in the hostile world of oppression and therefore it is no wonder that the image of the heavenly city in which all enslaved blacks will be finally freed from pain and troubles of the earthly life appealed to the unknown authors of spirituals.

In the spiritual *I Want to Walk in Jerusalem Just Like John* the poet expresses his desire to walk in the eschatological city Jerusalem:

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

John said de city was jus' four square,
Walk in Jerusalem jus' like John,
An' he declared he'd meet me dere;
Walk in Jerusalem jus' like John.

(Johnson, Johnson 2002 [1926]: 58–59)

Clearly, the line "John said de city was jus' four square" brings to mind the image of the New Jerusalem which was depicted by St. John as "the city lieth four square, and the length is as large as the breadth" (Rev: 22:16).

In another version of this spiritual the poet ponders on the Last Judgement, death and the afterlife and at the moment of his physical death he expresses his longing for walking in the New Jerusalem just like the Apostle John:

When I come to die,
I want to be ready,
When I come to die,
Going to walk Jerusalem just like John.

Walk Jerusalem in the morning,
I'm going to walk Jerusalem in the morning;
Walk Jerusalem when the world's on fire,
I'm going to walk Jerusalem just like John;
Walk Jerusalem when the tombstones busted,
Walk Jerusalem like John.

(Peters 1993: 397)

The theme of embarking on a spiritual journey to the eschatological city New Jerusalem can be seen in the spiritual *My Father, How Long?*, some of which reads:

We'll soon be free,
De Lord will call us home.
We'll walk de miry road
Where pleasure never dies.
We'll walk de golden streets
Of de New Jerusalem.

(Allen, Ware, Garrison 1995 [1867]: 93)

In the Book of Revelation the New Jerusalem is made of pure gold and the foundation of the wall of the city are garnished with twelve precious stones (Rev. 21: 18–19). In the spiritual *My Father, How Long?* the slave poet envisioned the picture of a better future for blacks “where pleasure never dies” and people “will walk de golden street”.

The recurring theme of a journey to the spiritual realm of human existence can be observed in spirituals which demonstrate the martial spirits of blacks. In June 1867 Thomas Wentworth Higginson — a white abolitionist, clergyman and army officer who served as a colonel in command of the first black regiment for the Union Army during the Civil War — authored an article for the *Atlantic Monthly* in which he presented his fascination with the religious songs of the ex-slaves of his army (Southern 1983: 175). Interestingly enough, he observed that in spirituals “the lurid imagery of the Apocalypse is brought to bear” (Higginson 1983 [1870]: 188). In his view the Book of Revelation and the books of Moses constituted “the black Bible” (Higginson 1983 [1870]: 188). He also noted that when blacks were marching and rowing they were singing the spiritual *My Army Cross Over*... some of which reads:

My army cross over,
My army cross over,
O, Pharaoh's army drowned!
My army cross over.

(Higginson 1983 [1870]: 185)

This stanza suggests how Union soldiers perceived themselves, as soldiers on the side of God fighting the armies of the South. They provided the war with religious rationale, viewed the military conflict as God's war and equated the army of the Confederates with that of Pharaoh. In the next verses the slave poet announced that his army will “cross de mighty Myo” which, as Higginson notes, “meant the river of death” (Higginson 1983 [1870]: 186). The spiritual evokes eschatological associations: the passing through the tunnel of death and crossing dangerous water. However, eschatology seems to have served not only the purpose of provoking a religious zeal in the listener but also of pointing him towards the issues of justice in the secular life. References to crossing the river may have indicated the desire for change and for a better life on the other side in the future world devoid of the sorrow, pain, and troubles of the evil system of slavery.

One can also observe the martial spirit of blacks in the lyrics of spirituals contained in the collection of *Slave Songs of the United States* 1995 [1867], eds. William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison. To provide one of the examples, in

the spiritual *We Will March through the Valley* Jesus is the leader of the army and gives his soldiers courage and peace to fight:

We will march thro' the valley in peace,
We will march thro' the valley in peace;
If Jesus himself be our leader,
We will march thro' the valley in peace.

(Allen, Ware, and Garrison 1995 [1867]: 73)

The martial spirit of slaves is revealed in the following verses:

We will march, etc.
Behold I give myself away, and
We will march, etc.
We will march, etc.
This track I will see and I'll pursue;
We will march, etc.
We will march, etc.
When I am dead and buried in the cold silent tomb,
I don't want you to grieve for me.

(Allen, Ware, and Garrison 1995 [1867]: 73)

It is not a coincidence, as Gayraud S. Wilmore notes, that John Lovell Jr. in his analysis of slave songs *Black Songs: The Forge and the Flame* placed songs that tackle the theme of struggle and resistance with those about the afterlife (Wilmore 1982: 96). In Lovell's words spirituals often make use of "«the soldier theme» — the call to fight for black manhood and womanhood in a hostile world" (Lovell [quot. too:] Wilmore 1982: 96).

The images of heaven in selected spirituals recorded by blues musicians¹

Akin to slave poets many blues musicians addressed the theme of heaven in their renditions of spirituals. Interestingly, a spiritual quest for the Promised Land which was viewed in a spiritual, heavenly sense found its reflection in the music of bluesmen who dabbled in preaching. Among spirituals tackling the motif of heaven one can observe tropes that repeat themselves in terms of the imagery of heaven: 1) the promise of seeing Jesus; 2) going "home"; 3) "heaven as a real place" — the city of New Jerusalem; 4) the image of the river, and of shores, or banks; 5) God's Kingdom.

Blind Willie Johnson touched upon the theme of heaven in his spiritual *Bye and Bye I'm Going to See the King* recorded by the musician on December 10, 1929 in New Orleans. The subject of the song is a dying man who states that dying is not the end of his human life as he hopes to see the King Jesus some day in the hereafter:

Bye and bye goin' to see the King
Bye and bye I'm goin' to see your King
Bye and bye goin' see your King
Wouldn't mind dying if dying was (all).

(quot. too: Blakey 2007: 144–145)

¹ This part of the article draws on the material previously published in my book *Images of the Apocalypse in African American Blues and Spirituals: Destruction in this Land* (Ziółek–Sowińska 2017: 116–122)

In the second stanza Johnson refers to the Old Testament Prophet Ezekiel who envisioned the picture of the afterlife. As he sings:

Ezekiel saw a wheel, wheel in the middle of the wheel
Now old E'l saw a wheel
Ezekiel saw a wheel, wheel in the middle of the wheel.

(quot. too: Blakey 2007: 146)

In the Book of Ezekiel the wheel stands for the spirit of life and thus the vision of heaven as the wheel represents a further spiritual life in the Kingdom of God. It is of interest to note that in the Book of Ezekiel (Ez 1:7) the prophet envisions not only the wheel but also observes four creatures which have the face of a man, the face of a lion, the face of an ox, and the face of an eagle. If we read the Book of Revelation (Rev 4:7) we can recognize similarities to what St. John sees in his vision as he also notices the same four living creatures and the throne of God. By referring to the portrayal of heaven, depicted by the prophet Ezekiel, Johnson may have stressed the significance of the world beyond this world. At the same time, he makes it clear in the song that “after death, you’ve got to stand the test”. The intended message of the piece is that only those who lead a righteous life can enter the gates of heaven.

In another spiritual song *Trouble Will Soon Be Over* — which Johnson recorded on April 20, 1930 in Georgia after the economic collapse that began the Great Depression in 1929 had spread throughout the United States — the musician addressed the theme of the afterlife. Black Americans in particular found themselves in painful economic circumstances. Due to lack of work they were frequently “the last to be hired and the first to be fired”. When they had a job, they often had to work very hard for many hours to earn money. In the refrain of *Trouble Will Soon Be Over* Johnson sings:

Oh, trouble, soon be over,
Sorrow will have an end
Trouble, soon be over,
Oh, sorrow will have an end.

(quot. too: Blakey 2007: 261)

The word “end” is crucial here as this involves Johnson’s vision of the afterlife as the place devoid of sorrow and troubles of the earthly life. One also finds that the hope for a better and more perfect world is sounded in the refrain. In the first stanza Johnson suggests that man may find confidence in Jesus and he regards him as his “burden-bearer”, “his only friend”, and “his strong protection” (quot. too: Blakey 2007: 264). In other verses Johnson sings: “God will give me rest someday”, and “I’ll rest with Jesus and wear a starry crown” (quot. too: Blakey 2007: 265). Perhaps considering hard work African Americans were compelled to do to support their loved ones, it is not surprising that some believed that one day — in the afterlife — God will give them rest. Death may have indicated change for a better life in the future world free from sorrow and pain. African Americans may have viewed death as a release from the burdens of the current world, but one also finds a positive note here, as the end of human time does not have to only imply terrifying images of catastrophe and Christian judgement, but Christian salvation.

Charlie Patton was another bluesman who dwelled on the motif of the afterlife from the Christian perspective. On June 14, 1929 he recorded a spiritual *Lord I'm Discouraged* in Richmond. As the song opens, the singer reveals that sometimes he becomes discouraged but the Holy Spirit gives him the spiritual power to lead a Christian life. He envisions heaven as the place on "that other shore" where "there will be wondrous glory" and everybody will be "prayin' to Jesus evermore" (McLeod 1992: 22). In the lines that follow he views the hereafter as "that old happy land". He is on his way to heaven where he will live with God's "spiritual army" and "the Saints of God" (McLeod 1992: 22). In the last stanza Patton uses the image of the shore which is a prevalent theme in spirituals on the motif of the afterlife. He admits that despite the fact that sometimes he has moments of religious doubts, he believes that there is a future glorious life with Jesus when he crosses the other shore and reaches heaven:

Sometimes I have no religion, feel all hopeless here on
this earth.
Well, I think of sweet King Jesus, bringin' peace to all
men on
There will be glory, wondrous glory, when we reach that other
shore.
There will be glory, wondrous glory, prayin' to Jesus
evermore.

(McLeod 1992: 22)

Blind Gary Davis recorded a number of songs in which he portrayed the Christian images of the afterlife. In the early 1930s Davis not only grew interested in salvation and sacred music but was also ordained a Baptist minister and started to combine gospel with blues (Santelli 1993: 114). On July 26, 1935 he released *The Angel's Message to Me* in New York City. In the song he sings about the dying Christian man who strongly believes that there is life after death as God prepared a place for him:

I'm going home to see my Jesus.
I'm going home to see my Lord.
I'm going home to see my Jesus.
Where there's a mansion all prepared for me.

(McLeod 1992: 34)

In the following lines the dying man knows that he is about to pass away soon and pictures the hereafter as the glorious place devoid of crying:

Yeah, moan Sister, moan on.
Gonna be a-sitting in glory,
Won't be very long.
Where I won't have to weep any more

(McLeod 1992: 35)

In the closing lines Davis uses two tropes in terms of imagery of heaven: the promise of seeing Jesus and going "home":

I'm goin' home to see my Jesus.
 I'm goin' home to see my Lord.
 God knows I'm goin' home to see my Jesus.
 Yes I am.

(McLeod 1992: 35)

In the above lines one senses not only the closeness of the dying man with Jesus but also his inner peace of mind as he is certain he will go to the land beyond death.

In his spiritual songs Blind Gary Davis also presented his visions of the New Jerusalem. On July 26, 1935 he recorded *Twelve Gates in the City*. This spiritual opens with the singer's description of the New Jerusalem:

Oh, what a beautiful city.
 Oh, what a beautiful city.
 Oh, what a beautiful city.
 Twelve gates to the city, hallelu-lu-jah.

(McLeod 1992: 42)

David views heaven as a real place which is compared to a city from the Bible, but it is still about the vision of the afterlife. The singer indicates that the idea that heaven is a real place — and not a state of mind or state of being, but perceived as a real place — in this case a city. The lines “what a beautiful city” and “twelve gates to the city” bring to mind the vision of the New Jerusalem depicted by St. John as “that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God” (Rev 21:10) which “had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels” (Rev 21:12). As William G. Heidt observes using abundant vocabulary and repetition St. John makes an attempt to “convey unearthly beauty through the use of earthly media” (Heidt 1962: 120). With repetition of the phrase “what a beautiful city”, Blind Gary Davis also aims to emphasize the incredible beauty of the heavenly city.

In the lines, “If you see my dear old mother... tell her for me / That I'm on my way to the city”, Davis reveals, on the one hand, his firm belief that he would meet his mother in the hereafter; on the other hand, however, he demonstrates the Christian belief that “[t]he people of God are waiting for this city and are on the march to it” (von Allmen 1958: 57). According to J. J. von Allmen people wait and march, not because of their own action but because God has given them “freedom of the city by creating for them, in Jesus Christ, the past to which they can appeal and the future to which they may look forward” (von Allmen 1958: 57). In his view our present existence is “determined by our belonging to the future world” (von Allmen 1958: 57–58).

Interestingly, Davis's description of the New Jerusalem — which could be analyzed as the refrain is reiterated seven times in the song — seven is a symbolic number in the Bible. Scholars seem to agree that it is one of the most significant in biblical numerology. The number seven “indicates, in the first place, totality or plentitude of evil as well of good” (von Allmen 1958: 309). In Davis's portrayal of the end of time city, this number expresses God's totality and plentitude. In his song *Twelve Gates in the City* the singer makes a reference to the gates in the New Jerusalem:

Three gates in the North.
 Three gates in the South.
 Three gates in the East.
 And there's three gates in the West
 Those make twelve gates to the city, hallelu-lu-jah.

(McLeod 1992: 42)

Clearly, in his vision of the city, Davis drew on the St. John's image of the New Jerusalem, as contained in the twenty first chapter of the Book of Revelation: "On the east three gates; on the north three gates; on the south three gates; and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations" (Rev 21:13–14). The fact that Davis took his figure from the Book of Revelation means that the biblical vision of the end of time city had a profound influence on his own image of the afterlife.

On August 24, 1960 Blind Gary Davis released another spiritual song *Goin' to Sit Down on the Banks of the River* in which he delineated his vision of the afterlife. The lyric is rich with imagery for heaven as it contains the image of the river, and of banks, as well as the image of heaven as a real place, and a city with streets. As we hear in the beginning of this song:

I'm gonna run through the streets of the city
 Where my Lord have gone on before
 I'm gonna sit down on the banks of the river
 I won't be back no more.

(quot. too: Grosmann 2007: 8)

In the above lines the singer draws the picture of the New Jerusalem portrayed by St. John as the city in which there was "a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb" (Rev 22:1). In the lines, "All my crying over I won't have to cry no more", Davis reassures that in this heavenly city God will put an end to pain and weeping. Davis envisions the picture of the New Jerusalem as contained in the twenty first chapter of the Book of Revelation: "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Rev 21:4). In the lines, "We're gonna have a good time when we all get there" ([quot. too:] Grosmann 2007: 9), the singer gives an entirely optimistic view of life after death. The overall message of the song is clear — in heaven there will be neither sickness nor death and people will enjoy being there.

Some spirituals performed by various blues artists described how to get to heaven. In such lyrics Kingdom comes up as imagery for heaven, which is the place of God's richness and opulence. In these sacred songs, singers indicated that man can reach God's Kingdom — the land beyond death if he leads a good Christian life, follows the Scriptures, and has trust in God. In December 1928 Blind Willie Davis — one of the representatives of the blues bottleneck guitarists — recorded a spiritual song *I've Got a Key to the Kingdom* in which he discussed the ways of obtaining the Kingdom of God.

As the song begins, the singer expresses his optimistic view because he knows how to reach heaven and eternal life:

So glad, I've got a key to the kingdom,
 And the world can't do me no harm.
 So glad, I've got a key to the kingdom,
 And the world can't do me no harm

(McLeod 1992: 24)

These lines mean that the person is “saved”. Davis indicates here the key to the Kingdom of Heaven is to be born again in Christ, be baptized and then you are saved from hell and eternal damnation. The word “key” also refers to the promise of seeing Jesus in the afterlife. The above refrain recurs in the song seven times and it is probable that Davis deliberately repeated it exactly seven times as he drew an inspiration from the symbolism of the Book of Revelation.

In conclusion, this article has attempted to explore the story of the Exodus and the images of the Promised Land in selected lyrics of spirituals. Some spirituals such as *Go down Moses* or *Didn't Old Pharaoh Get Lost* examined the theme of deliverance from slavery. The theological message embedded in the texts contained the pattern of liberation as slave poets acknowledged God's liberating work for the enslaved. The Exodus story provided the black slaves with a myth not only to come to terms with the brutality of the slave system but also a strong belief that the Almighty would intervene and deliver his people from bondage.

I have argued that the Exodus may be perceived as the trope of going on a spiritual journey to the other side in the hereafter and the end of time city New Jerusalem. The unknown slave bards created spirituals which, on the one hand, may be perceived as protest songs denouncing slavery; on the other hand, however, may be read as songs about going to heaven. Slaves lived in the hostile world of oppression and therefore they depicted the image of the heavenly city in which all enslaved blacks will be finally freed from pain and troubles of the earthly existence. Interestingly, some slave spirituals also demonstrated the martial spirits of blacks. Union soldiers viewed themselves as soldiers on the side of God fighting the armies of the South. The blacks provided the war with religious rational, read the military conflict as God's war and equated the army of the Confederates with that of Pharaoh; hence it is evident that they closely identified with the Israelites from the Exodus story.

The last part of the article was devoted to the exploration of spirituals recorded by selected blues musicians who tackled the theme of heaven. In their renditions of spirituals, the Exodus may represent the theme of going on a spiritual journey to the other side in the afterlife or the eschatological city the New Jerusalem. Influenced by the biblical visions of life after death blues singers delineated heaven as: 1) a further spiritual life with Jesus in the place bereft of pain, crying, and suffering; 2) the end of time city in which there is neither death nor sorrow; 3) the place on the other shore — in the land beyond death where man will be reunited with the dead.

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