

## **SPIRITUALS AS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION AND MOTIVATION**

One important purpose of many spirituals during the slave period was to provide motivation and inspiration for the ongoing struggle for freedom, a struggle which included systematic efforts to escape<sup>5</sup> from bondage as well as numerous slave-led revolts and insurrections<sup>6</sup>. In the African tradition, stories of ancestors' bravery, victories in battle, and success in overcoming past hardships were often marshaled as inspiration to face current life challenges. As stories of specific African ancestors faded over time, enslaved people appropriated heroes from the Christian Bible as ancestral equivalents<sup>7</sup>.

The stories of Old Testament figures - often perceived by enslaved Africans as freedom fighters - held particular significance as models of inspiration. For example, a surviving spiritual entitled "Moses," and still sung today in the Georgia Sea Islands, draws its inspiration from the Biblical story of Moses, commanded by God to lead the Hebrew people out of Egyptian bondage. [Harriet Tubman, the famous Underground Railroad conductor was known as Moses by many slaves.

As another example, "Go Down, Moses," similar in meaning to "Moses, Moses," has been a staple of the concert spirituals tradition that has featured solo artists and choral ensembles in world-wide performances dating back to the 1870s tours of the Fisk Jubilee Singers<sup>8</sup>, and continuing with the performances of diverse artists and ensembles up to the present day. The singer-activist Paul Robeson, for example, sang "Go Down, Moses" frequently in his concerts, and his comments about spirituals as songs of inspiration in the continuing struggle for freedom<sup>9</sup> were very much in line with the tradition of spirituals as songs of inspiration and motivation during the slave period.

In "Joshua Fit (Fought) the Battle of Jericho," another of the many spirituals that Robeson performed frequently in his public concerts, both the upbeat rhythms and lyrics of the song provided a needed burst of energy and inspiration for weary activists. The metaphorical text of the song is drawn from the Biblical story of Joshua and his band of musicians who, bearing the ark of God, successfully brought down the walls of the city of Jericho through the spirited use of trumpets and other musical instruments. It is almost as if the creator of this song were saying, "If Joshua could achieve victory over evil through the blowing of trumpets, then we can ultimately achieve victory over evil (slavery) through the singing of our songs!" Ultimately, lyrics, melody and rhythm combine to help us understand why "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho" has been a perennial favorite of both singers and listeners.

### **MOSES**

When Israel was in Egypt's land,  
Let my people go,  
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,  
Let my people go.

Go down, Moses,  
Way down in Egypt's land,  
Tell old Pharaoh,  
To let my people go.

Thus spake the Lord, bold Moses said,  
Let my people go.  
If not I'll smite your first born dead,  
Let my people go.

Go down, Moses,

<http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/Freedom/source.cfm>

Way down in Egypt's land,  
Tell old Pharaoh,  
To let my people go.

No more shall they in bondage toil,  
Let my people go.  
Let them come out with Egypt's spoil,  
Let my people go.

Go down, Moses,  
Way down in Egypt land,  
Tell old Pharaoh,  
To let my people go.

### Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho

Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho,  
Joshua fit the battle of Jericho,  
And the walls come a-tumblin' down, that mornin'.

Repeat...

Good mornin' brother Pilgrim,  
Pray tell me where you bound,  
Oh tell me where you travelin' to,  
On this enchanted ground.

My name it is, poor Pilgrim,  
Through Canaan I am bound,  
Travelin' through this wilderness,  
On this enchanted ground, that mornin'.

Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho,  
Joshua fit the battle of Jericho,  
And the walls come a-tumblin' down, that mornin'.

Repeat...

You may talk about your King of Gideon,  
You may talk about your man of Saul,  
There's none like good old Joshua,  
At the battle of Jericho.

Up to the walls of Jericho,  
He marched with a spear in hand,  
Go blow them ram horns, Joshua cried,  
'Cause the battle am in my hand.

Then the lam-ram sheep horns begin to blow,  
The trumpets begin to sound,  
Joshua commanded the children to shout,  
And the walls come a-tumblin' down.

Refrain...

## **SPIRITUALS OF INSPIRATION AND MOTIVATION QUESTIONS**

1. Why are the traditional African stories of ancestors and their victories important? What did they do for people in Africa?

2. How did these stories change when Africans were enslaved (became slaves) and sent to America?

3. Who were the “ancestors” now, the heroes now for the slaves?

4. Who was the most popular bible hero and what person was called by his name?

5. How does “Go Down Moses” connect to spiritual life?

5. How did Joshua achieve victory? How are slaves supposed to achieve victory? In “Joshua Fit Battle of Jericho”?