

**AFRICAN AMERICAN SPIRITUALS AND THE BIBLE: SELECTING
TEXTS FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION INSTRUCTION**

by

Michael Greenan

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Purdue University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in Education



Department of Curriculum & Instruction

West Lafayette, Indiana

December 2020

**THE PURDUE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL
STATEMENT OF COMMITTEE APPROVAL**

Dr. Tara Star Johnson, Co-Chair

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

Dr. Christian Knoeller, Co-Chair

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

Dr. Janet Alsup

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

Approved by

Dr. Janet Alsup

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Professor Tara Star Johnson, who provided invaluable feedback throughout this process and lit a fire under me in completing this project. I also thank the other professors on my committee, Christian Knoeller and Janet Alsup. Lastly, I thank my family: Jim, Pat, Katie, and Amy, as well as Dawoon Jeong for their constant love and encouragement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	5
ABSTRACT	6
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION	7
CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE	10
Background on the African American Spirituals	10
Background on the Bible	11
Legal Context for Bible as Literature	11
Educational Context for Bible as Literature	13
Educational Standards	16
CHAPTER 3. THREE COMMON THEMES	19
The Theme of Slavery	19
The Theme of “Chosenness”	25
The Theme of Coded Language	28
CHAPTER 4. METHODS (TEXT SELECTION)	34
Part 1	35
Part 2	36
Part 3	37
Part 4	38
Part 5	39
Part 6	42
CHAPTER 5. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION	49
Analysis and Recommendations	49
Exodus and its Spirituals	49
Revelation and its Spirituals	50
Other Recommended Biblical Books and Spirituals	51
Conclusion	53
REFERENCES	55

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: A Comparison of Common Core and Indiana Standards	17
Figure 2: Using Go Down Moses with Biblical Literacy	36
Figure 3: Using Go Down Moses with Independent Inquiry.....	37
Figure 4: Themes of the Biblical Passages	38
Figure 5: Themes of the Spirituals.....	39
Figure 6: Coded Language.....	40
Figure 7: Chosenness-War	41
Figure 8: Chosenness-Identity	41
Figure 9: Slavery.....	42
Figure 10: Recommended List of Biblical Texts and Spirituals with Coded/Chosen Themes	43
Figure 11: Recommended List of Biblical Texts and Spirituals with Slavery Themes.....	48

ABSTRACT

The research in this thesis attempts to select texts from the African American Spirituals and the Bible that are appropriate for secondary language arts instruction, specifically for grades 9-12. The paper first gives an overview of legal justifications and educational reasons for teaching religious literature in public schools. Then, relevant educational standards are discussed, and, using the standards as an initial guide, I identify common themes within the Spirituals and Bible, which, from my analysis of various literatures, are slavery, chosenness, and coded language. Next, I describe my systematic effort to choose texts from the Spirituals and the Bible. To help accomplish this, I draw primarily from two tomes: *Go Down Moses: Celebrating the African-American Spiritual* and *Biblical Literacy: The Essential Bible Stories Everyone Needs to Know*. After I describe the research process of selecting texts, I form judgments about which biblical passages and African American Spirituals are particularly worthy of study, along with their applicable and mutual themes.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

During my studies for a teacher education program at Purdue University, I found it helpful to reopen my language arts textbooks from my own high school days. Doing so gave me pedagogical tips and increased knowledge about the canon of literature I was about to teach. As I browsed through the pages of the Indiana version of *Elements of Literature: Fourth Course with Readings in World Literature*, which was published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston in 2003, I was impressed with the comprehensiveness of the textbook, which included information on many aspects, such as writing technique, studying tips, and thinking tools. I also recognized genres, texts, and authors familiar to many high school language arts curricula. In the short story collection contemporary authors included Ray Bradbury and Sandra Cisneros, as well as classical writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Willa Cather. The poetry collection featured names ranging from Robert Frost to Emily Dickinson and Gwendolyn Brooks. For drama, a play of Shakespeare was featured as well as *Antigone* and a contemporary play.

What especially caught my attention, though, was a unit on literature of the great world religions. This unit featured religious scriptures such as the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Koran, and Tao Te Ching. The unit also had other kinds of religious literature such as poems, narratives, Zen parables, Taoist anecdotes, and wise sayings. Literature from secular and contemporary writers was featured as well, to complement the religious scriptures and other works.

This unit gave me inspiration. When I was in high school, the normal genres were short stories, novels, poetry, and plays, which more or less came out of a traditional canon consisting of classical and contemporary authors. Literatures of religious texts were not taught, and I did not know until years after high school graduation that there might have been an opportunity to learn about such texts.

Why was literature of world religions never taught during my high school language arts experiences? There could be several reasons, but I speculate that a major reason is that teachers did not feel comfortable teaching such texts. Perhaps some version of the old saying to never discuss politics or religion may have been rooted in teachers' minds, as well as the specter of the separation of Church and State. I do not blame them for staying far from a taboo subject like

religion, even from a literary perspective, since the subject is one that has a likely potential to evoke strong feelings in people.

Some educators might frown upon the teaching of religious literature in public school, but I instead see it as a rich learning opportunity. The subject of religion is all around us in media, politics, and culture, but when it comes to actually learning about the subject in a meaningful way, it is often relegated to the private sphere and shunned from the public arena. It is understandable why this is the case: religion involves values, which are often deeply personal. Also, some bad actors, if given an inch, will take a mile in trying to proselytize others, which is an illegal action when undertaken in public schools in the United States. However, I believe these pitfalls should not prevent students the opportunity to study religious texts as literature. My old textbook confirmed this opinion, as well as the literature I have surveyed in writing this thesis.

In setting out to research religion as literature, I at first conceived of a study about the texts of the world's great, major religious traditions. However, I found this topic too broad. I then became more aware of the abundance of religious texts in American history, specifically African American history. I shifted my focus to this area, and delved into African American religion and its historical contexts. Finally, I honed in on the African American Spirituals—a somewhat specific but significant topic of African American religion—and their connection to biblical literature. In fact, speaking of race and religion, it is a common saying that racism is the original sin of America. As can be seen in the current events of today, systemic racism in America remains an ongoing social problem. Its origins are found in slavery, from which the Spirituals are a direct byproduct. With these factors and interests in mind, the question that emerged during my research process was: of the many African American Spirituals and of all the biblical literature that inspired the Spirituals, which texts from both corpuses may be studied in a high school language arts classroom?

This question has guided my research. To attempt an answer to this question, this paper begins with brief backgrounds on the African American Spirituals and the Bible. I then transition into a discussion of legal and educational reasons for teaching these topics. Next, I discuss common themes within both the Spirituals and the Bible, which, according to my first pass at analysis, are slavery, “chosenness,” and coded language. After I explore these themes, I

systematically choose texts that adhere to said themes. Finally, I provide an analysis of the themes, biblical texts, and Spirituals that I recommend to teach in high school language arts.

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Background on the African American Spirituals

The Spirituals, also called “slave songs,” “sorrow songs,” “Negro folk-songs,” and other various names, began as an oral tradition among African American slaves. Their origins can be traced to several factors: the influence of African song and dance; the gradual conversion of African Americans to Christianity, especially from around 1790-1830; and the evolving hybrid of European hymns mixed with African musical styles (Hummon, 2008). These songs, largely inspired by the Bible (Lawrence-McIntyre, 1987), “embody the faith and heritage of a people who have encountered the dehumanizing affects [sic] of slavery and racism. Enslaved for nearly 300 years, the creators of these songs sang about the suffering they endured” (Smith, 2006, p. 533).

Frederick Douglass (2003) famously remarked about the Spirituals in his 1845 memoir that he “sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do” (p. 26). W.E.B. Du Bois (2012), in his 1903 classic book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, analyzed the Spirituals amid the painful context in which they developed:

What are these songs, and what do they mean? I know little of music and can say nothing in technical phrase, but I know something of men, and knowing them, I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world.... They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways. (p. 215)

Du Bois also notes that though observers like Thomas Wentworth Higginson had written about these uniquely American songs, it was not until the Fisk Jubilee Singers, starting in 1871, performed them and toured in the United States and abroad that made the Spirituals famous.

It was not until around the post-Civil War period that efforts were made to compile and document the lyrics of the Spirituals (Hummon, 2008). Unlike the Bible, these songs have never been canonized into an official list, though some songs have become better known than others. Overall, the Library of Congress estimates that the Spirituals are about 6,000 in number (Newman, 1998).

Background on the Bible

Technically, the Bible is not one book but a collection of many books (Trawick, 1966), even though literary critics such as Northrop Frye contend that the Bible may be read as a unified whole (1982). Regardless, the various books of the Bible consist of many different genres and styles, including “stories of origins, heroic narratives, epics, parodies, tragedies, lyrics, epithalamions, encomiums, wisdom literature, proverbs, parables, pastorals, satires, prophecies, gospels, epistles, oratories, and apocalyptic visions” (Wachlin, 1997, p. 8).

Like the African American Spirituals, the books that comprise the Bible were developed and written over time, though the dates of composition for the biblical books range a greater timespan—about 1,000 years according to scholarly consensus (Trawick, 1966). Unlike the Spirituals, the Bible has been canonized into an official collection of books, though the list of biblical books differs slightly, depending on religion.

For example, adherents of Judaism and Protestantism traditionally observe the same canon, though the organization of the books is different, and some of the terminology is different as well (Bloom, 1990). Traditional Judaism adheres to the Tanakh, which is also called the Jewish Bible and the Hebrew Bible, and known as the Old Testament to Christians (Biale, 2015). For purposes of inclusivity, I will refer to it as the Hebrew Bible, since this term is generally acceptable to mainstream denominations of both Judaism and Christianity. Catholicism and other denominations also adhere to this canon but include seven additional books in it, as well as additional material in the Books of Daniel and Esther (Singer-Towns, 2002). However, the most relevant version of the Bible for this particular study is the Protestant one, which typically includes 39 books in its Hebrew Bible and 27 books in its New Testament (Ackerman & Warshaw, 1995).

Legal Context for Bible as Literature

The 1963 Supreme Court decision of *Abington v. Schempp* is a landmark case regarding Bible study in public schools. The ruling came about after families from Pennsylvania and Maryland objected to their local schools requiring students to recite daily Bible readings, ostensibly for devotional purposes rather than academic purposes (Mauro, 2016). As a result, the opinion of the high court emphatically affirmed the separation of Church and State, also known

as the Establishment Clause. The decision therefore deems it unconstitutional for public schools to teach religious texts for devotional or religious ends.

The majority opinion, however, affirms the value of teaching about religion in public schools for academic purposes, particularly in the subjects of literature and social studies. Justice Clark states:

[I]t might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment. (*School Dist. of Abington Township v. Schempp*, 1963)

Indeed, though the Bible is largely a religious text, it also encompasses and inspires a variety of other subjects besides religion: literature, history, geography, et cetera. The themes that will be explored later in this thesis, for example, relate to circumstances of particular cultures and time periods.

Moreover, Justice William Brennan Jr., while emphasizing the unconstitutional nature of teaching religion in public schools, also affirmed that religious texts may be used for secular purposes, clarifying that “not every involvement of religion in public life violates the Establishment Clause” and that “it would be impossible to teach meaningfully many subjects in the social sciences or the humanities without some mention of religion” (*School Dist. of Abington Township v. Schempp*, 1963). Justice Goldberg concurred and made an important distinction of “teaching *about* religion, as distinguished from the teaching *of* religion, in the public schools” (emphasis added).

For his part Justice Brennan went on say that it is up to the discretion of school districts to determine what is appropriate for study and what is not. This adheres to the longstanding U.S. practice of letting education policy mostly be kept to the state and local levels. Though historic legislation such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, signed into law by President Johnson in 1965, has increased the federal government’s role in public education, many educational policies are set by states and local school districts. For example, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), though developed by state-level stakeholders, essentially function as a federal guide. However, the Indiana Academic Standards (IAS) were of course developed at the

state level, and the way both the CCSS and IAS address religious texts is similar but with subtle differences in their emphases. The standards as they relate to literature and religion will be discussed later.

More recently, President Barack Obama (2006), himself a trained scholar in Constitutional law, noted that the secular aspect of *Abington v. Schempp* was not new, but is foundational in U.S. law: “Contrary to the claims of many...who rail against the separation of church and state, their argument is not with a handful of liberal sixties judges. It is with the drafters of the Bill of Rights” (pp. 216-217). Also, Obama, in accordance with the aforementioned judges, clarified that “Not every mention of God in public is a breach in the wall of separation; as the Supreme Court has properly recognized, context matters” (p. 221). He also affirmed the role religious activism has played in African American history, notably abolition and civil rights, and remarked that, though his own mother was not particularly religious, she instilled in him as a child an appreciation for the humanities. He recalled, “In her mind, a working knowledge of the world’s great religions was a necessary part of any well-rounded education” (p. 203).

Educational Context for Bible as Literature

As the legal opinions and precedents implied, an either/or dichotomy is not desirable in regard to texts of a religious nature in public schools. That is, it is unconstitutional to teach literature for religious purposes, but religious literature is not necessarily forbidden. English teacher and scholar Maridella Carter (2002), in defending the use of teaching religious texts as literature in public schools, stated, “Not surprisingly, I have found that the most difficult aspect of teaching the Bible as literature is that most of my students are so used to reading it as a holy text that they have trouble looking at it through a literary lens. However, I believe that dealing with this difficulty is well worth the effort it requires” (p. 38).

Carter listed reasons why religious texts may be taught as literature in public schools: understanding of religious allusions in the Western canon; insight into cultural themes, values, and attitudes; learning about universal themes; and the value of seeing texts interpreted in multiple ways. In regard to the last reason, the Bible has indeed been the source of many fierce debates in the United States, including the question of slavery. On this question, abolitionists had valid biblical arguments against slavery, but slaveholders and their allies also had biblically-

based arguments to support their views. I think it behooves students at the very least to be exposed to the fact that the Bible has been used and interpreted in a variety of ways in American literature, and, like the U.S. Constitution, can be understood as a dynamic text.

Carter (2002) also emphasized literary elements such as themes and archetypes in teaching biblical literature. For example, she said, “[T]he general values projected and themes developed in many classic texts of Western literature have their roots in the Bible” (p. 35). For archetypes she claimed, “Archetypal heroes and heroines such as the Mother (Eve), the Soul Mate/Holy Mother (Mary), the Wise Old Man (the prophets), the Trickster (Jacob), the questing hero (Moses and Jesus), and the sacrificial scapegoat-hero (Jesus) all appear in various biblical stories, reminding a reader of the Bible that its stories have their roots in the most essential aspects of the human psyche” (p. 36). Here, one cannot help but be reminded of the numerous instances of the Black authors of the Spirituals intuitively seeing biblical archetypes in many of their songs, whether it was Moses leading them out of slavery or Jacob’s ladder enabling them to climb the rungs of social advancement (Newman, 1998).

Marie Goughnour Wachlin (1997) is another notable scholar who conducted a yearlong study on public high school English teachers and their attitudes and practices regarding the Bible. Key findings from her quantitative and qualitative analyses were that 81 percent of high school English teachers said that it was important to teach some biblical literature; however, only 10 percent taught a course or unit on the Bible. Furthermore, according to Wachlin, high school textbooks’ content averages one fourth of one percent (.260%) from the Bible. Wachlin also found that the majority of teachers she surveyed did not know that it was constitutionally permissible to teach the Bible as literature in public schools. Data like these support educated guesses that literature of a religious nature—especially scriptural texts—are not widely taught in public schools due to various factors such as lack of training and knowledge.

Moreover, Wachlin (1998) defended the practice of teaching the Bible as literature in public schools. Her reasons echo Carter’s in some respects, such as the Bible’s massive influence on Western culture and biblical allusions in literature. Wachlin (1997) explained an additional reason: preparing students for post-secondary school. In her findings she claimed that a plurality of college instructors recommend biblical literature: “Though 55% of college English instructors personally recommended that secondary English majors take a Biblical literature course, only 38% [of secondary English majors] had done so” (p. 7). These data complement the

aforementioned study of secondary teachers' lack of awareness of the permissibility to teach the Bible, and greater efforts may be made to encourage biblical literacy. In my own experiences, I did not take a course in Bible as literature in my training for secondary English.

Additional educational rationales given by Carter and Wachlin for teaching the Bible as literature are to broaden and sharpen students' minds. Carter (2002) states, "I believe we should help our students read religious texts such as the Bible, the Torah, and the Koran and that we should teach ways to reflect critically on these texts: many conflicts... could be averted if the peoples of the world read their own and each others' religious literature from an analytical and critical perspective" (p. 39). For her part Wachlin (1998) says, "Youthful English language users need a knowledge of the book [the Bible] that permeates Western culture, literature, and conversation" (p. 31). I agree with such sentiments. Gaining a greater understanding of the humanities, especially of religious literature, is a worthwhile and important endeavor. In the case of African American Spirituals combined with the Bible, these texts have left significant marks on the cultural, historical, and literary heritage of the United States.

Moreover, the nonpartisan Pew Research Center published data as recently as 2019 suggesting that young people were lacking in biblical literacy and religious knowledge in general. According to their study, people 18-29 years old answered only 6.3 out of 14 questions correctly on knowledge of the Bible, and 11.9 out of 32 questions correctly on religion in general. The number of correct questions in both of these categories improved with age, with the 30-49 age bracket doing better, 50-64 year-olds improving even more, and those 65 or older doing best, answering 8.9 out of 14 questions correctly on the Bible, and 16 out of 32 questions on religion in general.

As previously mentioned, Supreme Court justices found value in teaching the Bible, especially for its literary and historic qualities. Indeed, literature and history complement each other. One cannot imagine teaching the themes of greed or sanctimoniousness in *The Great Gatsby* or *The Scarlet Letter* without also providing historical contexts of the excesses of the Roaring 20s or the puritanism of seventeenth century New England. However, Charles Kniker (1985) points out that the "primary province of the Bible in the literature class is neither religion nor history. Rather, the focus should be on the Bible's literary qualities and on its relation to secular literature" (p. 18). He goes on to explain that such literary qualities of biblical passages include themes, issues, and ideas; as well as "how well form and content, manner and matter

reinforce each other”; and comparisons/contrasts of secular literatures that allude to the Bible, including the “why” and the “how” of the allusions (p. 19). Moreover, Kniker distinguishes among three different ways of teaching the Bible as literature in secondary schools: The Bible *as* literature, the Bible *in* literature, and the Bible *and* literature.

Kniker also offers some warnings. First, he cautions teachers against using biblical passages “to preach theology or morality” and also says “the teacher should avoid offending denominational sensibilities, as well as sensibilities of those whom the Bible is not a sacred document” (p. 18). He elaborates, saying: “[I]nsisting on the Bible’s literal infallibility or demeaning it as just myth—will offend some religious sensibilities. They also will violate the Supreme Court’s admonition to study the Bible objectively as part of a secular program of education in a pluralistic society” (p. 21).

In regard to these pitfalls of either possibly proselytizing students with religion or demeaning it, I think it is important for teachers to stay focused on their educational objectives, which I will discuss. Moreover, I believe this tricky issue may be better avoided if the Bible is not necessarily the main focus of learning, but is used in concert with other literatures. This is precisely a feature of this study. The Black Spirituals ground biblical literature in a relevant context for U.S. students, who may study the common themes of both corpuses. Thus these two genres of literature, when studied together, may produce a literary synergy that results neither in promoting religion nor demeaning it. Granted, given the subject matter, it will prove impossible to avoid material that does not at least sound religious. Moreover, it may also prove impossible to completely avoid offending fundamentalist beliefs. For example, a believer whose interpretation of the Bible is entirely literal is incompatible with interpretations that are non-literal. As already stated, public schools should not unnecessarily offend religious sensibilities, but they should not compromise their duty to educate. A parallel example of this is the freedom and the duty of science educators to teach about evolutionary theory, albeit without disdain for alternative views, such as various forms of creationism.

Educational Standards

The approaches one can take to reading the Bible as literature are myriad. Thankfully, academic standards can give cues on teaching religious works as literature. There are two main groups of standards that are applicable here: the Common Core State Standards, which began in

2010 through the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers; and the Indiana Academic Standards, which were approved by the Indiana State Board of Education in 2014 (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2020; Indiana Department of Education, 2020). Both the CCSS and the IAS pledge to equip K-12 students with the knowledge and skills for career and college readiness. Moreover, the CCSS were also started so that the several states could agree on what defines college and career readiness. However, adhering to CCSS’s standards is voluntary, and Indiana and eight other states have since opted to adopt their own standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2020). In reviewing both the CCSS and IAS, I found a total of four standards that are applicable to religious texts, which are charted in Figure 1. These two sets of standards mirror each other. That is, Indiana’s 9-10 standard, which falls under the subcategory of “Synthesis and Connection of Ideas,” which also falls under the broader category of “Reading: Literature,” is consistent with the CCSS’s 9-10 standard, which falls under the subcategory of “Integration of Knowledge and Ideas,” which also falls under “Reading Standards for Literature.” The same is true for the 11-12 standards as well, in terms of how the CCSS and IAS mirror each other, albeit with notable differences.

	Grade 9-10	Grades 11-12
Indiana Standards	Analyze and evaluate how works of literary or cultural significance (American, English, or world) draw on themes, patterns of events, or character types from myths, traditional stories, or religious works , including describing how the material is rendered new.	Analyze and evaluate works of literary or cultural significance in history (American, English, or world) and the way in which these works have used archetypes drawn from myths, traditional stories, or religious works , as well as how two or more of the works treat similar themes, conflicts, issues, or topics.
Common Core Standards	Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work (e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from Ovid or the Bible or how a later author draws on a play by Shakespeare).	Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

Figure 1: A Comparison of Common Core and Indiana Standards

Of course, standards are subject to change, and what the state and federal government deem important at one time may be regarded as less important in another time. However, all four of the above standards involve themes, which is indicative of its perennial importance in literature. Moreover, the standards indicate that religious works such as the Bible, and literature influenced by religious works, such as the African American Spirituals, are encouraged to be

studied together, which may serve multiple learning objectives such as comparison/contrast. If passages from the Bible are read on their own, an English teacher can find an endless amount of themes to choose from, depending on factors such as personal point of view—for example, themes deriving from teachers’ own religious or non-religious perspectives. The same may also be said of the African American Spirituals. However, when selected texts from both corpuses are studied together, the focus of the themes may become more targeted and specific.

What then may be common themes of the African American Spirituals and the Bible, especially English language arts instruction for grades 9-12 in public schools? I have read various literatures, both religious and secular, in an attempt to begin to answer this question. From a theological point of view, one could say that faith, hope, charity, or the problem of evil are viable themes. But since the aim here is secular in nature, I have found themes that are appropriate, important, and worthy of study. For the African American Spirituals and the Bible, the themes that emerged to me are slavery, “chosenness,” and coded language. These particular themes stood out in my research process of both the Spirituals and the Bible. For example, the theme of slavery was obvious in my research of the Spirituals, and thus, I honed in on literature that also described slavery-themes in the Bible. I employed a similar method for the other two themes. For example, in multiple sources, scholars discussed how African Americans saw themselves as a “chosen” people, and the same theme is apparent in biblical literature, especially in texts relating to the Book of Exodus, for example. Another prominent theme in literature about Spirituals is coded language. This theme is also found in certain books of the Bible, particularly the books of Daniel and Revelation.

CHAPTER 3. THREE COMMON THEMES

As previously mentioned, slavery, chosenness, and coded language are the common themes that emerged to me between and within the African American Spirituals and the Bible. In this chapter I discuss each of these three themes; then, in Chapter 4, I systematically choose texts from the Spirituals and Bible using these themes as a guide.

The Theme of Slavery

One of the great paradoxes of the enslavement of African Americans is how religion was used as both a tool of oppression and as a tool of liberation. This observation became apparent in my research as I read that slaveholders used a certain kind of interpretation of the Bible to oppress Black Americans. On the other hand, my research also indicated that Blacks and abolitionists interpreted the Bible in an opposite fashion, seeing divine justification for freedom and equality. The mere existence of the Spirituals themselves indicates that, despite Blacks' conditions, they were able to channel their trials and tribulations into their own original art form. In that case, the theme of slavery may be the most fundamental of all the themes in the Spirituals, since the Spirituals were born directly out of this oppressive system.

The slaves inherited biblical religion from their slave-masters, and were subjected not only to biblical content, but also to the way such content was interpreted to them. For example, former slave William Henry Robinson wrote that, "some white man would do the preaching, and his text would always be, 'Servants obey your masters [.]'" (as cited in Wright, 2006, p. 417). Another former slave, Harriet Gresham, recalled how African American preachers would exhort slaves to be "subservient in order to enter the Kingdom of God," and that such preachers were representing the interests of the slave-masters (Maffly-Kipp, 2005, as cited in Shepherd, 2019, p. 227). Such exhortations came directly from the New Testament. Verses such as "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ" from Ephesians 6:5, or "Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh" from 1 Peter 2:18, did not help to disturb the status quo of slavery in the United States (Shepherd, 2019). Looking through the New Testament myself, I was able to cross-reference all passages that

allude to such content. Overall, the number of passages in the New Testament that involve a message of slaves obeying masters total a number of six, including the aforementioned Ephesians 6:5 and 1 Peter 2:18. The other four passages are: 1 Corinthians 7:17-24, Colossians 3:22-25, 1 Timothy 6:1-2, and Titus 2:9-10 (World English Bible, 2016).

Moreover, it is evident, from the many direct mentions of slavery in the Hebrew Bible, that slavery was more or less taken for granted as an accepted cultural institution in the ancient world (The New American Bible, 2011). As a matter of fact, slavery as practiced under Judaic law was more of a temporary arrangement and did not have the same aggressively racist and oppressive character like American slavery had (Shepherd, 2019). This is evident in many of its books, especially in the Torah, also known as the Pentateuch, which includes the books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Racists and supporters of slavery found various passages to enforce their views, such as Genesis 9:20-27, a passage involving Noah cursing Ham, thereby decreeing that Ham's descendants be slaves to his brothers' descendants (O'Meally, 2003). Further, slaves were given a special catechism, with the intention being to keep African Americans in a state of docility. An excerpt from the catechism included material such as:

Q: What did God make you for?

A: To make a crop.

Q: What is the meaning of "Thou Shalt not commit adultery?"

A: To serve our Heavenly Father and our Earthly master, obey your overseer, and not steal anything. (Matthews, 1965, 87, as cited in Lawrence-McIntyre, 1987, pp. 383-384)

Shepherd (2019) noted a similar example, stating that a special abridged Bible was created for slaves, with certain passages being bowdlerized, such as the Israelites' liberation from slavery or Paul's letter to Philemon, as well as many other passages.

From his experience in his 1845 memoir, Frederick Douglass (2003) remembered witnessing a slave being whipped as the slave-owner recited a passage from Luke 12:47, which is a parable of Jesus taken out of context and cherry-picked by the slave-master to emphasize punishment for slaves. Douglass was clear about the hypocrisy of Christian slaveholders. He said that, "of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others. It was my unhappy lot not only to belong to a religious slaveholder, but to live in a community of such religionists," (pp. 72-73).

Douglass' experiences were supported by British philosopher Bertrand Russell (2015) who, in his classic 1927 essay "Why I Am Not a Christian," opined that "the Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world," (pp. 577-578). Russell included the bondage of African Americans as evidence for this conclusion, and said "...every step toward better treatment of the colored races, or every mitigation of slavery, every moral progress that there has been in the world, has been consistently opposed by the organized churches of the world," (p. 577).

As sharp as Russell's points were, his arguments were only half true and were an oversimplification. The other half of the story was that African Americans, despite the subjugation they experienced from the religion of their white oppressors, were able to make Christianity their own, thereby turning it into a tool of liberation. Their abolitionist allies and their infrastructure of churches and media also used religion to combat slaveholder-Christianity. Though the aforementioned slaves recalled how attempts were made to indoctrinate them into a contented life of bondage, they also mentioned how slaves secretly challenged such indoctrination. William Henry Robinson recalled in 1913 how slaves were conscious of the messages they heard in the slave-owner sanctioned sermons and would secretly conduct their own worship services. The Spiritual, "There's a Meeting Here Tonight," would even be used to alert other slaves about these secret congregations, using coded lyrics (as cited in Wright, 2006). Harriet Gresham likewise described how secret gatherings were held after the regular sermons, with her and her fellow slaves praying for better lives (Maffly-Kipp, 2005, as cited in Shepherd, 2019). Finally, in addition to William Ward's aforementioned quote about attempted indoctrination, he also said:

None of the slaves believed this [sermons about obedience to slave-masters], although they pretended to believe because of the presence of the white overseer. If this overseer was absent sometimes and the preacher varied in the text of his sermon, that is, if he preached exactly what he thought and felt, he was given a sound whipping. (Maffly-Kipp, 2005, as cited in Shepherd, 2019)

Moreover, whereas slave-owner culture maintained slavery through biblical argument, slaves and abolitionists challenged the system by also employing this method. President Abraham Lincoln was quite right when he famously remarked in his 1865 Second Inaugural Address about the warring North and South that "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other" (p. 107).

According to Dan Shepherd (2019), “the Abolitionist movement was, in a large part, an evangelical Christian movement” (p. 232), and he explained some nineteenth century arguments against slavery. For example, he mentioned an abolitionist named Angelina Emily Grimke and her argument:

She argues, starting with the creation narrative, that man was given dominion over other animals but not over other men. Later, she contends that the Bible includes numerous examples of individuals who chose obedience to God over obedience to flawed human laws. (Grimke, 2018, as cited in Shepherd, 2019, p. 232)

Shepherd also mentioned how certain biblical passages were censored from slaves, such as Exodus 21:16, Jeremiah 22:13, and Galatians 3:28 which could be interpreted to challenge slavery, as well as many passages in Exodus as a whole. In regard to Galatians 3:28, which essentially says that slaves and masters are equal in terms of dignity and worth, I found three additional verses that are very similar: Romans 10:12, 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, and Colossians 3:11 (World English Bible, 2016).

Moreover, Shepherd (2019) brought attention to the Apostle Paul’s letter to Philemon from the New Testament, saying, “Here, strikingly, Paul erases any sense of personal ownership and replaces it with familial relationship. Slavery’s founding principles, though not yet officially abolished, are eradicated by love” (p. 233).

Indeed, Shepherd’s explanation of the letter to Philemon may indicate part of Christianity’s appeal in ancient times. For example, one historian attempts to partially explain the popularity of the Jesus movement, saying:

Rome is a society which is 75 to 80 percent slaves. Slaves are not human: they can’t marry, they can be bought and sold; they can be whipped and raped. So, suddenly there’s this movement that’s saying you’re a person of dignity who’s created in the image of God, and that makes you worthwhile. So, that’s part of the power of this Christian movement. (Pagels, 2018)

One can imagine the downtrodden and poor members of the ancient Mediterranean world finding solace in New Testament passages such as the parable about the rich man and Lazarus from the Gospel of Luke or the narrative about the sheep and the goats from Matthew 25. A rather blunt translation of Luke 6:20-21, 24-25 emphasizes the point:

Then he [Jesus] would look squarely at his disciples and say:

Congratulations, you poor!

God's empire belongs to you.

Congratulations, you hungry!

You will have a feast.

Congratulations, you who weep now!

You will laugh.

Damn you rich!

You already have your consolation.

Damn you who are well-fed now!

You will know hunger.

Damn you who laugh now!

You will learn to weep and grieve. (Miller, 2010, p. 139)

Returning to nineteenth century America, the Hebrew Bible, as previously asserted, was a source of refutation against slavery. Historian Eddie Glaude asserted:

No other story in the Bible has quite captured the imagination of African Americans like that of Exodus. The story's account of bondage, the trials of the wilderness, and the final entrance into the promised land resonated with those who experienced the hardships of slavery and racial discrimination. Indeed, the story demonstrated God active in history and his willingness to intervene on behalf of his chosen people. (2000, p. 3)

Patricia U. Bonomi (2016) likewise asserted that "The Israelites' escape from Egypt in the Book of Exodus resonated with special force" among African Americans (p. 54). Further, Omo-Osagie (2007) commented on the impact of Exodus and parallel passages: "Their corporate faith in God, as seen in the songs they sang, gave them the assurance of one day being liberated just as the Israelites were liberated from the Egyptians" (p. 34).

Even in the middle of the nineteenth century, it was evident to observers that the themes of slavery and liberation existed in African American Spirituals, especially the parallels between the ancient Israelites' bondage and Black Americans' enslavement (Wright, 2006). A former

slave, William Wells Brown, remarked in 1867 that in the most famous Spiritual, “Go Down Moses,” slaves were well aware of its political implications and literary contents:

“the [N]egroes regard the condition of the Israelites in Egypt as typical of their own condition in slavery; and the allusions to Moses, Pharaoh, the Egyptian taskmasters, and the unhappy condition of the captive Israelites, were continuous; and any reference to the triumphant escape of the Israelites across the Red Sea, and the destruction of their pursuing masters, was certain to bring out a strong ‘Amen!’” (as cited in Wright, p. 2006, p. 416)

Themes of slavery and liberation in the Spirituals have been noted by several other commentators, such as literary critics Jack Miles (2018) and Northrop Frye (2002), as well as popular historian Jon Meacham (2019). Miles, quoting the Spiritual “Go Down Moses,” said, “the story that the biblical narrator tells [e.g., Exodus and parallel passages]...has remained with reason an archetypal legend of up-from-slavery liberation” (p. 169). Moreover, Meacham noted that Spirituals such as “Sold Off to Georgy” and “Song of the Coffle Gang” directly confronted the issue of slavery (p. 55). Also, many of the Spirituals that were formed in the nineteenth century were later used in the Civil Rights movement, such as “O, Freedom,” “My Mind Stayed on Freedom,” and “I Will Overcome,” (Newman, 1998) the latter of which is more commonly known as “We Shall Overcome.”

Moreover, Lawrence-McIntyre (1987) observed that “A basic concept that slavery contradicted and denied God’s will can be found in many spirituals” (p. 395-396) and said that the Spiritual, “Joshua Fit the Battle for Jericho,” a reference to the Book of Joshua from the Hebrew Bible, is a prime example of the weak and powerless overcoming the strong.

To this day, racism and racial unrest continue, and many African Americans find resilience and strength through religious expression. A major example of this is the moment in 2015 when President Barack Obama led a congregation in singing “Amazing Grace” several days after a white supremacist massacred nine African Americans in the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, in Charleston, South Carolina. This church was founded in the days of slavery and Spirituals. Then, like now, Black leaders and their communities rooted themselves in religious songs and found meaning amid struggle. In regard to the most classic Spiritual ever, “Go Down Moses,” Jon Meacham (2019) noted that Harriet Tubman sometimes sang this song, which was “drawn from the story of Exodus, the most familiar of images to a people for whom churches, religious gatherings, and spirituals were crucial” (p. 59).

The Theme of “Chosenness”

Next, I discovered in my research that chosenness is a frequent theme in both the Spirituals and the Bible. First, some of the literature I examined discussed this theme and how it was relevant to the African American slaves. Such literature also referred to chosenness in the Bible itself. In the Bible, being chosen by God is a pervasive motif, with the character of God not being remote and distant, but something that is relational to communities and individuals.

Lawrence Levine contended that “the most persistent single image in the slave songs is that of the chosen people” (as cited in Sanger, 1995, p. 187). Lawrence-McIntyre (1987) concurred, saying, “Enslavement relegated slaves to the status of nobodies. That negative form of existence contradicted God’s creation of a special people to be His children. Slaves viewed themselves as God’s children, the chosen people of their time, analogous to the Israelites of ancient Bible times” (p. 396). Kerran Sanger (1995) elaborated, saying, “slaves used their songs to define themselves as among God’s chosen, as is evident in the lyrics” (p. 186). Sanger listed, directly and indirectly, several Spirituals that relate to the theme of “chosenness,” which generally fall into categories involving: a special relationship with God/rewards from God, divine intervention, and identification with other biblical figures.

In a chosenness that involves a special relationship with God, the lyrics of the Spirituals often portray the slaves as friends, confidantes, spokespersons, and messengers/prophets of God. “Run to Jesus,” and “Ride on, King Jesus,” are two examples, which depict the slaves as dear friends to Jesus. With a chosenness of divine intervention, the Spirituals, according to Sanger (1995), contain “detailed descriptions of the ways God and other heavenly beings acted on the behalf of slaves to advance their definition of self as God’s chosen” (p. 187). “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “Old Ship of Zion” are examples. Finally, in a chosenness that involves identification with biblical heroes, “the slaves used...to identify with other beleaguered people,” and the songs are “symbolic representatives for the slaves and, significantly, all [the biblical characters] emerged from their trials unscathed” (p. 188). “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?” and “Joshua Fit the Battle for Jericho” are examples, which involve biblical characters undergoing trials and/or a war against an other. Scholar Timothy Beal (2010) linked the biblical Daniel to the African American experience:

The heroes in the book of Daniel are strangers in a strange land, trying to keep the faith and remain true to themselves within a society whose rules are as absurd as

they are unjust. Their stories have spoken powerfully to many others, including African Americans who have had to survive and thrive in the more recent lions' dens and fiery furnaces of slavery and racism. (pp.178-179)

The New American Bible (2011) validates the aspect of chosenness that African Americans must have intuitively tapped into when hearing passages read aloud to them from the Book of Daniel. It states that “for both prophet and apocalypticist there was one Lord of history, who would ultimately vindicate the chosen people” (p. 965). In my own study of the Spirituals, I found that chosenness essentially falls under two categories: identification with biblical peoples, places, and events; as well as a chosenness of war/good-versus-evil. More about this will be later discussed in my methodology.

From a biblical perspective, the theme of chosenness is especially prominent in passages like Exodus 18:1-24:18 in which the Israelites form a special covenant with God and are given special laws and commandments at Mount Sinai (Berlin & Brettler, 2014). Indeed, such a passage is a quintessential example of a kind of communal chosenness, which pervades the Torah and the rest of the Hebrew Bible, as well as the New Testament. In addition to chosenness on a communal level, the Bible also features chosenness on an individual level. For example, in Genesis 17:5 Abram is chosen by God and becomes Abraham, in Genesis 32:29 Jacob becomes Israel, in Matthew 16:18 Simon becomes Peter, in the Book of Acts, Saul becomes Paul, and so on. However, a name-change is not always required in biblical chosenness. For example, in the Books of Exodus, 1 Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos, the characters of Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos are called to a prophetic vocation without having their names changed.

Returning to the African American Spirituals and their historical contexts, the ideology of chosenness preceded African American religion. In fact, the American version of chosenness may have origins in Puritanism, and was embedded in the broader U.S. culture (Glaude, 2000). Glaude said, “With the [American] Revolution, the Puritan vision flowered into the myth of America. For the errand was rooted in biblical myth” (p. 75). Glaude expanded on the tribal aspects of chosenness ideology in the U.S.:

With the success of the Revolution Americans came to see their endeavor as providential and themselves as chosen. This sense of chosenness was a way of differentiating themselves from others and consolidating their own identities. At the heart of this effort lies the process of negation: garden versus wilderness, chosen people versus the nations of the earth, and white versus black. (p. 76)

It can be said, then, that the tribal nature of U.S. society at the time, with its racism and practices of slavery, set the conditions for the enslaved Blacks to form their own conception of chosenness. Glaude argued that chosenness “can easily lead to some form of chauvinism,” which can breed an attitude of, “We are the chosen ones and, thus, our actions—right or wrong—are sanctioned by God” (p.80). This view has also been enforced by colonialist readings of the Bible, such as the conquest of Canaan in the Book of Joshua and similar passages (Beal, 2010).

Though some may balk at the idea of a certain race or class of people being divinely chosen, be it the Israelites in the Bible or African Americans amid a system of slavery, for society’s underdogs chosenness may be a source of empowerment. In Glaude’s words, chosenness equipped African Americans with a power to “not merely to differentiate the group from a radical other but to account for evil in the world and the inevitable triumph of good,” as well as to possess “forms of propheticism that ground political aims in deeply moralistic conceptions of the world” (pp. 80-81). According to Glaude, the Book of Exodus, with its narrative of the enslaved Israelites who were chosen by God, was especially impactful on the African Americans, which gave them an interpretive framework for their own experience of enslavement. Moreover, Rabbi Rodney J. Mariner (2010), in his own reading of the Hebrew Bible, commented that the idea of being chosen by God did not mean being superior to others, but instead entailed a calling to serious and sacred responsibilities. Further, the ancient Israelites, as told in the biblical narratives, experienced ongoing systematic oppression: enslavement by the Egyptians, exile by the Assyrians and Babylonians, persecution by the Greeks, and, finally, subjugation by the Romans (Berlin & Brettler, 2014).

From an educational perspective, studying the theme of chosenness may prove valuable due to its implications of tribalism and nationalism, which are ongoing issues in today’s America and abroad. While such issues rightly carry negative connotations, they are also worth being studied in their positive dimensions as well. For the historical context of the Spirituals, these songs came about amid centuries of severe oppression and racism, and, per Article I of the U.S. Constitution, African Americans were regarded, along with Native Americans, as being only three-fifths of a human being (§ 2.3, changed by § 2 of amend. XIV), and therefore regarded as inferior to whites. This is why Sanger (1995) pointed out that the theme of being God’s chosen in the Spirituals “added evidence to their [slaves] argument that they were much more than barbaric, amoral heathens,” and that the slaves could communicate “heightened self-esteem” (p.

187) amid their degrading experiences. The lyrics “conveyed a sense of worth in God’s eyes, and in the slave’s eyes” and “only people with real value and worth could be the recipients of such aid and support from God” (p. 187). In short, the broad theme of being God’s chosen people filled the slaves with dignity amid subjection to an undignified existence.

The Theme of Coded Language

The third theme in my research, coded language, was synthesized like the two previous themes, in the sense that I found common patterns in literature about the Spirituals and the Bible. In the case of the Spirituals, many journal articles and books mention the employment of coded language, though there is disagreement about the extent that coded language was used in the Spirituals. In regard to the Bible, I decided to specifically investigate the genre of apocalypses, since this genre is well known for employing hidden meanings. Of all the three themes of slavery, chosenness, and coded language, the last theme perhaps required the most synthesis. That is, African Americans were conscious of their enslavement and therefore they naturally drew connections between their experiences and those of the ancient Israelites. The same may be true in regard to chosenness, even if Blacks did not label their divine favor in such a way. But it is improbable that African Americans, or anyone else at the time besides Bible scholars, knew that their coded songs had parallels to biblical books such as Daniel and Revelation. Nevertheless, this connection between the Spirituals and the Bible may still be applied and studied.

Coded language is found in biblical literature, especially from apocalypses such as the Book of Daniel from the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Revelation from the New Testament. Merriam-Webster defines the apocalyptic genre as:

one of the Jewish and Christian writings of 200 b.c. to a.d. 150 marked by pseudonymity, symbolic imagery, and the expectation of an imminent cosmic cataclysm in which God destroys the ruling powers of evil and raises the righteous to life in a messianic kingdom.

This definition is in accordance with Leland Ryken’s (1984) description of apocalyptic literature, in which he claimed that both apocalyptic and prophetic genres might often be categorized as so-called visionary literature. According to Ryken, salient features of visionary

literature include: highly imaginative and fantastical settings, reversals of fortune, supernatural characters, subversive messages, and heavy symbolism.

Moreover, apocalyptic literature often is loaded with coded language. David Mikics (2007) said, “The word *apocalypse*, from Greek, means an opening up or revealing” (p. 21). Indeed, an introduction to the Book of Revelation states that an aim of the book is for “unveiling the reality hidden in the future and the true meaning of what is coming, a meaning known only to God,” (Catholic Book Publishing Corp, 2016, p. 646). Religious meaning aside, this same text goes on to say:

[A]n apocalypse is a special kind of prophecy. It is a reclusive literature because it is addressed to initiates and uses a mysterious language; it seeks to escape the surveillance of oppressors and of censors. It is a protest of conscience against intolerable pressures, a claim to a different vision of society and the world, a call to resistance in the midst of torment. (p. 646)

Finally, the introduction pointed to other passages in the gospels and letters in the New Testament that contain apocalyptic qualities but especially points to the Hebrew Bible as having quintessential examples of apocalyptic literature: not only the Book of Daniel but the Book of Joel, Isaiah 24-27, Zechariah 9-11, and the language of Ezekiel. It was also stated that apocalyptic literature started becoming fashionable around the second century B.C.E., both to Jews and then eventually to Christians.

Commentaries of Jewish literature affirm the coded elements of apocalyptic literature and hint at the reasons for its popularity:

In Second Temple literature, revelation comes either in strange visions that require deciphering or as the deciphering of a second, coded meaning embedded in received Scriptures. This new ciphering and deciphering probably owed its start to the traumatic events of the 160s B.C.E, when the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes, for reasons still debated, banned the practice of Judaism in Judea and converted the Temple to the worship of Zeus Olympus. (Biale, 2015, p. 122)

This commentary went on to describe extracanonical apocalyptic texts as well, such as 1 Enoch, as well as literature from the Dead Sea Scrolls such as the War Scroll and Habakkuk Commentary. The Book of Daniel is especially noted for its apocalyptic qualities “with the kind of baroque symbolism typical of apocalyptic literature” (p. 137), which was used in part to mask language amid persecution. It was also noted that even though the text takes place in

the Persian period, which would be the 500s B.C.E., the allusions give evidence that the text was actually written in the second century B.C.E. when the Jewish people suffered persecution under Greek rule.

This evidence accords with Christian sources as well. For example, the New American Bible translation of the Book of Daniel states: “This work was composed during the bitter persecution carried on by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (167-164 B.C.) and was written to strengthen and comfort the Jewish people in their ordeal” (2011, p. 965). Another source states, “The visions are full of strange symbols meant to be understood by the Israelites but not the Greek rulers of the author’s time” (Singer-Towns, 2002, p. 1077).

Lawrence Cunningham (2015) commented on the major apocalyptic work of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation, saying, “Many apocalypses survive from roughly 200 B.C.E. to 150 C.E., but only one full-fledged example of this visionary genre has been incorporated into the New Testament: The Book of Revelation” (p. 78). He added that, “It reads in some ways as the work of a Jew writing from within the long tradition of Jewish apocalyptic writing” and affirms the symbolic and coded language of the genre, stating “Scholars believe that the Beast, called ‘Babylon’ in the text, is a symbol for the idolatrous and oppressive Roman Empire” (p. 159).

Such evidence is bolstered by notes in the New American Bible translation (2011), which explained part of the author’s intention in using coded language to avoid persecution from the Roman Empire:

The Book of Revelation cannot be adequately understood except against the historical background that occasioned its writing. Like Daniel and other apocalypses, it was composed as resistance literature to meet a crisis. The book itself suggests that the crisis was ruthless persecution of the early church by the Roman authorities; the harlot Babylon symbolizes pagan Rome, the city on seven hills. (p. 1402)

As previously mentioned, other parts of the Bible contain apocalyptic characteristics, such as chapters 24-27 in Isaiah and chapters 9-11 in Zechariah. However, the majority of these two books are not apocalypses, and even the chapters that do have apocalyptic traits are subject to debate in terms of genre. For example, in regards to Isaiah 24-27, the NAB (2011) stated that labeling these chapters as apocalypses “is imprecise as a designation” (p. 806).

The Book of Joel was also previously mentioned as having apocalyptic traits, though it is not certain the book is an apocalypse per se. Rather, scholars guess that Joel, written probably around 400—350 B.C.E., marks a transition period between prophetic and apocalyptic texts (Berlin & Brettler, 2014). Moreover, the apocalyptic genres did not exist with certainty until around 200 B.C.E. to 150 C.E. (Cunningham, 2015). Especially relevant to the purposes here is that Isaiah and Joel lack the distinguishing characteristics of coded, symbolic language amid persecution/oppression.

Indeed, evidence of the use of coded language amid an oppressive environment, as in the biblical apocalypses of Daniel and Revelation, is also found in the African American Spirituals. Using symbolic language in their music was practically a must for the slaves, since, as Sanger (1995) said, “Slaves who sang in explicit ways regarding their value as human beings and about escape from slavery would have lost their ability to communicate openly” (p. 189), implying the slaves would have faced punishment from their overseers. The music of the slaves was also an essential way for them to communicate with one another (Lawrence-McIntyre, 1987).

In his first autobiographical memoir published in 1845, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Frederick Douglass (2003) described the psychological terror slave-owners would instill in the slaves. This culture of fear made the slaves accustomed to not speaking negatively about their slave-masters and being on constant guard as to what they said or did. In Douglass’ second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, first published in 1855, Douglass wrote, “A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of ‘O Canaan, sweet Canaan,’ something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the *north*—and the north was our Canaan” (2005, p. 209). Douglass went on to say that a Spiritual like “Run to Jesus” also “had a double meaning” and that to some slaves the song was taken at face value in terms of its religious and spiritual meaning, but to Douglass and some of his comrades who plotted escape, “it simply meant, a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery” (p. 210).

Lawrence-McIntyre (1987) also referenced “Run to Jesus” as a song that employed coded language, remarking that the song used Jesus’ name to disguise the desire to escape to freedom (p. 391). Similar examples she listed are “Deep River,” “Bound to Go,” “Members Don’t Get Weary,” and “Go Down, Moses,” which also had a triple meaning for many slaves, since Harriet Tubman was viewed by many as a Moses archetype, that is, a “Black Moses” (p. 391).

Moreover, popular historian Jon Meacham (2019) said another term for coded language in the Spirituals is a term called “masking” and lists songs such as “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “A City Called Heaven” as being classic examples (p. 56).

For her part, Josephine Wright (2006) explained how coded language was also used in what she calls “alerting songs” and references “There’s a Meeting Here Tonight” as an example. She stated:

They [slaves] also improvised sacred songs or used favorite hymns as coded tools of communication to warn of lurking slave patrols, to signal impending escapes, or to announce clandestine religious meetings in praise cabins or in bush arbors far away from white authority. From this practice evolved a repertory of alerting songs that the slave community utilized for a variety of purposes. (p. 417)

For a modern reader who is unfamiliar with the African American Spirituals, there exist general guidelines for decoding them. According to Lawrence-McIntyre (1987), Satan can mean a slave-master, King Jesus can mean someone or something that helps slaves, the biblical city of Babylon can mean winter, hell may imply the South, Jordan may mean freedom, Israelites may mean Black slaves, Egyptians may mean slaveholders, Canaan is often meant to imply a land of freedom, heaven can mean the North and/or Canada, home may mean Africa, and the Red Sea may imply freedom or returning to Africa via the Atlantic Ocean.

Of course, the Spirituals were not simply reducible to coded meaning. They also had religious, spiritual, and theological significance for the slaves, as was previously mentioned by Fredrick Douglass. However, for the purposes of this study, the primary focus is on the temporal elements of the Spirituals, rather than the otherworldly aspects.

In addition to the guidelines listed above by Lawrence-McIntyre (1987), she also gave more clues that can assist a modern reader in decoding the Spirituals:

Every reference to crossing the Jordan means escape to the North; every Israelite battle means slaves’ struggle for freedom; every reference to Elijah’s chariot or the gospel train alludes to the Underground Railroad; and every trumpet blast for judgment day means emancipation. (p. 398)

Finally, it may be noted that though the historical differences between the aforementioned biblical books and the Spirituals are different, since the Books of Daniel and Revelation were written amid persecution of Jews by the Greeks and of Christians by the Romans, respectively;

some key similarities exist between both corpuses, namely: community and solidarity, and the intention to comfort amid uncertainty.

CHAPTER 4. METHODS (TEXT SELECTION)

Now that I have provided background and have illustrated parallels between the African American Spirituals and the Bible in regard to the three themes of slavery, chosenness, and coded language, I next describe my systematic process for identifying representative texts for these themes from both the Spirituals and the Bible and narrowing down the selections for my top recommendations. As previously mentioned, the question that is guiding my research is: Which texts from both corpuses may be studied in a high school language arts classroom? In order to answer this question, I have used two foundational texts in this study: *Go Down, Moses: Celebrating the African-American Spiritual*, by Richard Newman, which is a compilation of over 200 African American Spirituals; and *Biblical Literacy: The Essential Bible Stories Everyone Needs to Know*, by Timothy Beal, which contains 87 passages from the Bible that the author considers to be literarily and/or culturally significant. Both of these compilations feature commentaries explaining the importance behind each Spiritual and Bible passage. Many times, these commentaries proved helpful in knowing the themes, characters, and other important elements of the respective works.

In the first two steps of my methodology, I found and charted biblical allusions in the Spirituals. These steps allowed me to match Spirituals with respective biblical counterparts. In the third and fourth steps, I took this data and then identified the themes of both the Bible passages and the Spirituals. Any irrelevant Bible passages and Spirituals were eliminated. In the fifth step, I organized all of the data according to the themes of the Spirituals only—not the themes of the Bible—but, of course, the biblical counterparts were included with their respective Spirituals. Also, in this step, the theme of chosenness became subdivided into “chosenness-identity” and “chosenness-war.” Finally, in the sixth and last step, I organized all the Spirituals according to their biblical counterparts. I then analyzed the data and highlighted in red the passages that were most important, due to both qualitative and quantitative reasons.

Part 1

To begin, I read through both of these compilations, and created a chart to graph data. Since the many Spirituals are derived from the few biblical passages, it made sense to chart the Spirituals according to which biblical books they are derived. After familiarizing myself with *Biblical Literacy*, I read through the Spirituals in *Go Down, Moses*, searching for any references in them to the biblical passages as found in *Biblical Literacy*. Such references include: characters, places, and events. This process was sometimes straightforward and objective, but it was also sometimes ambiguous and subjective. For example, a Spiritual referring to the symbol of Jacob's Ladder leaves no doubt that a direct reference is being made to Genesis 28:10-22, which is about Jacob's dream of climbing a ladder to heaven. However, a Spiritual might employ the word "chariot," and it is not clear if a reference is being made to 2 Kings 2:1-14, which is the famous passage about a chariot of fire coming from the heavens to sweep away the prophet Elijah. In such cases, I did my best to use contexts and author commentaries to make educated guesses. If I was still unsure, I did not include the Spiritual. Figure 2 provides an example of this first step.

Biblical Book	Chapter/Verse	Name of Passage	Spirituals
Genesis	1:1-2:4	“Let There Be Light”	N/A
	4:1-16	“East of Eden”	N/A
	18:1-15	“Sarah Laughed”	“Tell It” (214)
	18:16-19:29	“Sodom and Gomorrah”	“Tell It” (214)
	22:1-19	“The Binding of Isaac”	“Tell It” (214)
	28:10-22	“Jacob’s Ladder”	Deep River (31) “I Am Not Afraid to Die” (44) “Jacob’s Ladder” (151) “Then My Little Soul’s Going to Shine” (160) “Walk Together, Children” (169)
	32:22-32	“Wrestling Jacob”	“I Got a New Name” (45) “The Angels Done Changed My Name” (128) “I Saw the Beam in My Sister’s Eye” (188) “Wrestle on, Jacob” (216) “Wrestling Jacob” (217)
	37:3-36	“Selling Little Brother”	N/A
	39:1-23	“In Potiphar’s House”	N/A

Figure 2: Using Go Down Moses with Biblical Literacy

Part 2

Biblical Literacy is a helpful book, but there were additional passages in the Bible that are referenced in the African American Spirituals. Therefore, I charted additional Spirituals and Bible passages. This step was the same as the first, but I searched through the Bible myself to match the Spirituals with applicable passages. Figure 3 contains an example.

Biblical Book	Chapter/Verse	Name of Passage	Spiritual
Revelation	4:1-11	“White Robes and Crowns”	“Going to Shout All Over God’s Heaven” (133) “I Ain’t Going to Grief My Lord No More” (140) “I Can’t Stay Away” (142) “When the Saints Come Marchin’ In” (171) “Go, Mary, and Toll the Bell” (180) “John Done Saw That Number” (197)
	5:1-14	“The Lamb”	“Tell It” (214)
	7:1-17	“Garments of White”	Nobody Knows Who I Am” (57) “Rolling in Jesus’ Arms” (62) “Down by the Riverside” (75) “Wish I Was in Heaven Sitting Down” (113) “Going to Shout All Over God’s Heaven” (133) “I Ain’t Going to Grief My Lord No More” (140) “I Can’t Stay Away” (142) “I Have Another Building” (143) “Go, Mary, and Toll the Bell” (180) “John Done Saw That Number” (197) “Tell It” (214) “I Am Free” (86)

Figure 3: Using *Go Down Moses* with Independent Inquiry

Part 3

In the third step, I organized biblical passages according to the themes in this study: slavery, chosenness, and/or coded language, and stated my reasons for doing so. Moreover, I decided if biblical passages were worth including or excluding. Reasons for exclusion included overly religious content, and obscure or inadequate content. These decisions required careful

judgment. For example, I excluded all of the passages from the Book of Proverbs, because the references found in this section were not substantive, with only a brief word or phrase mentioned in passing from a much larger passage. Another example is Exodus 9:1-11, which I excluded because this passage did not make sense out of its context and its references to the Book of Life are obscure at best. Moreover, some biblical passages do not contain any of the three themes, but I occasionally included them if they had other compelling qualities, such as literary strength. Figure 4 is an example of this process.

Category	Passages	Themes	Reason
Ezekiel Passages	Ezekiel 1:4-28	N/A	Complements other biblical narratives such as the theophany in Exodus 19 (Berlin & Brettler, 2014), and the fantastical language in the Book of Revelation. Moreover, matches well with the Spiritual, “Ezekiel Saw the Wheel.”
	Ezekiel 9:1-11	N/A	Does not stand well on its own and its references to the Book of Life are obscure at best.
	Ezekiel 37:1-14	Chosenness	A prophet sees bones coming together, a metaphor for a community of people.

Figure 4: Themes of the Biblical Passages

Part 4

The fourth step is similar to the previous one, but here I analyzed the Spirituals that had so far been collected, and categorized them according to the same three themes of slavery, chosenness, and/or coded language. I described reasons for my judgments and provided their corresponding Bible passages. Figure 5 provides an example.

Spiritual	Theme	Reason	Bible Passages
“I Ain’t Going to Grief My Lord No More”	Chosenness	References to making it to Heaven and having name written down in “David’s line.”	Genesis 2:4-25, Acts 16:16-40, Revelation 2:1-7, Revelation 4:1-11, Revelation 7:1-17, Revelation 22:1-21 (6)
“I Am Free”	Coded Language/ Chosenness	“Freedom” has double meaning (heaven and slavery). Also contains warlike imagery.	John 8:2-11, Revelation 7:1-17 (2)
“I Am Not Afraid to Die”	Chosenness	“I am bound for the Promised Land,” and clear division between good and evil.	Genesis 28:10-22, Revelation 6:1-17; 8:1-5 (2)

Figure 5: Themes of the Spirituals

Part 5

When the biblical passages and Spirituals were both categorized according to theme, it was apparent that the Spirituals should get preference over the Bible in terms of thematic organization. This is because the Bible was not always obvious in what its themes were. The Spirituals, on the other hand, were more overt and emphatic in their themes and could be categorized more easily.

Therefore, in my research of categorizing the themes of the Spirituals, I grouped them together according to their respective categories, that is, slavery, chosenness, and coded language. One unexpected twist in this research, though, was that a pattern emerged in the theme of chosenness. That is, chosenness fell into two subcategories: “Identity” and “War” as I call them. For “Identity,” the characters in a Spiritual more or less identify with a biblical character and their experiences. For “War,” a Spiritual emphasizes warlike imagery in its lyrics and/or portrays a holy and righteous war fought between good people and bad people. In this step, then, I categorized the Spirituals accordingly and thus four themes emerged as a result: coded

language, slavery, and chosenness became subdivided into “chosenness-identity” and “chosenness-war.”

Further, in this step, I continued to exclude both biblical and Spiritual passages that did not conform to certain standards, which were: insignificant references, irrelevance, incongruent content, et cetera. Incongruent content is when a biblical passage does not appropriately match its Spiritual and vice versa. For example, “I Ain’t Going to Grief My Lord No More” has a reference to the biblical motif of the Tree of Life, which is found in Genesis 2:4-25. However, Genesis 2:4-25 also contains a broader narrative about Adam and Eve, and the detail about the Tree of Life plays an insignificant role in this biblical passage, in comparison to the role it plays in the Spiritual. Finally, for the Spirituals and Bible passages I intended to keep, I put them in bold lettering. Figures 6, 7, 8, and 9 are examples of all the categorized themes, along with their Spiritual and biblical passages and notes.

Spiritual	Bible Passage	Notes
Deep River	Genesis 28:10-22, Exodus 14:1-31; 15:20-21	Neither of the Bible passages contains coded language, and the references are negligible in the Spiritual.
Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel	Daniel 3:1-31, Daniel 6:1-24	All of these passages contain coded language: the Spiritual with its political message about justice for African Americans as well as escape from bondage, and the Daniel passages with their allusions to and encouragement amid the tyrannous reign of the Greek Antiochus IV in Jewish land.

Figure 6: Coded Language

Spiritual	Bible Passage	Notes
I Am Free	-John 8:2-11 -Revelation 7:1-17	The reference to Revelation is clear and consistent, but the reference to John 8 is minor. Also, there may be reference to Paul's escape from jail in the Book of Acts, but it is also a minor allusion.
I Am Not Afraid to Die	-Genesis 28:10-22 -Revelation 6:1-17; 8:1-5	The "Promised Land," in the Spiritual complements the chosen passages of Genesis and Revelation here. In Revelation, the adjectives that describe the horses are different than what is described in the Spirituals, but the overall message is similar.

Figure 7: Chosenness-War

Spiritual	Bible Passage	Notes
I Ain't Going to Grief My Lord No More	-Genesis 2:4-25 -Acts 16:16-40 -Revelation 2:1-7 -Revelation 7:1-17 -Revelation 22:1-21	The "Tree of Life" reference is found in Genesis 2 and Revelation 2, but in the former the reference is overshadowed by all the other details. In the latter, the passage does not read well when taken out of context. However, Revelation 22 references the "Tree of Life" three times and is a key motif in the passage. Also, Spiritual refers to Paul and Silas in jail, which is Acts 16, as well as the saints dressed in white in Revelation 7.
I Can't Stay Away	Revelation 7:1-17	Here, Revelation 7 is again matched with a Spiritual that contains descriptive language of heavenly rewards, especially the motif of white robes.

Figure 8: Chosenness-Identity

Spiritual	Notes
<p style="text-align: center;">-Go Down Moses</p> <p>- He Never Said a Mumbling Word</p> <p style="text-align: center;">- Holy Bible</p> <p style="text-align: center;">- I'm New-Born Again</p> <p style="text-align: center;">- I Want to Go Home</p> <p style="text-align: center;">- John Brown's Body</p> <p style="text-align: center;">-Many Thousand Gone</p> <p>-Master Going to Sell Us Tomorrow</p> <p style="text-align: center;">-My Mind Stayed on Freedom</p> <p style="text-align: center;">-O, Freedom</p> <p style="text-align: center;">-O, Mary, Don't You Weep</p> <p style="text-align: center;">-Rise and Shine</p> <p style="text-align: center;">-Slavery's Chain</p> <p style="text-align: center;">-This Old-Time Religion</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Genesis 9:1-29:</p> <p>As discussed in the literature review, Genesis 9:18-27 was used by enslavers to justify slavery. They claimed that since Noah cursed Ham's descendants to be slaves of Shem and Japheth's descendants, this justified the enslavement of African Americans, since the descendants of Ham were supposedly Black. For contextual reasons, I recommend including this whole chapter, which are verses 1-29.</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">Genesis 16:1-16:</p> <p>Genesis 16 presents a very interesting story, with a nuanced view of slavery. On one hand, it is clear that the slave, Hagar, is treated like a second-class citizen. On the other hand, Hagar is given divine favor.</p>

Figure 9: Slavery

Part 6

Finally, in the last step, I organized all of the recommended Spirituals according to their parallel Bible passages. I did not find it necessary to identify the themes of the biblical passages due to their broad level of interpretation, but identifying the themes of the Spirituals was essential. Figures 10 and 11 are the final recommended lists of Spirituals and their themes, as well as their respective biblical passages. The reason why the slavery passages are in a separate chart is because, as previously stated in the first step of this process, the Spirituals mostly correspond to the biblical passages from which they are derived. For example, a Spiritual that references Moses parting the Red Sea corresponds to Exodus 14, where this event happens. For the themes involving slavery, though, there are many passages involving slavery in the Bible, and it would be unnecessarily redundant to keep listing the exact same 14 Spirituals that involve slavery for all 11 of their corresponding Bible passages. Therefore, the theme of slavery deserves its own chart. In the recommended lists of passages below, I highlighted in red the passages I

thought were *especially* important, for qualitative and quantitative reasons, though *every* biblical passage and Spiritual in the lists below is recommended. An analysis of the most important texts will be discussed in the next chapter.

Bible Passage	Spiritual
Genesis 3:1-24	-Good Lord, Shall I Ever Be the One? (Coded) (1 Spiritual)
Genesis 22:1-19	-Tell It (Chosen, Identity) (1 Spiritual)
Genesis 28:10-22	-Jacob's Ladder (Coded) -Walk Together, Children (Coded) -I Am Not Afraid to Die (Chosen, War) -Then My Little Soul's Going to Shine (Chosen, War) -Jacob's Ladder (Chosen, Identity) -Walk Together, Children (Chosen, Identity) (6 Spirituals)
Genesis 32:22-32	-I Got a New Name (Chosen, Identity) -The Angels Done Changed My Name (Chosen, Identity) -Wrestle on, Jacob (Chosen, Identity) -Wrestling Jacob (Chosen, Identity) (4 Spirituals)
Exodus 1:8-2:22	-Go Down Moses (Chosen, War) -Go, Mary, and Toll the Bell (Chosen, Identity) (2 Spirituals)
Exodus 2:23-3:15	-Go Down Moses (Coded) -The Welcome Table (Coded) - Go Down Moses (Chosen, War) -Go, Mary, and Toll the Bell (Chosen, Identity) (4 Spirituals)
Exodus 4:1-17	-Go Down Moses (Coded) - Go Down Moses (Chosen, War) -Go, Mary, and Toll the Bell (Chosen, Identity) (3 Spirituals)

Figure 10: Recommended List of Biblical Texts and Spirituals with Coded/Chosen Themes

Figure 10 continued

<p>Exodus 7:1-24</p>	<p>-Go Down Moses (Coded) -Go Down Moses (Chosen, War) -Go, Mary, and Toll the Bell (Chosen, Identity)</p> <p>(3 Spirituals)</p>
<p>Exodus 11:1-12:42</p>	<p>-Go Down Moses (Coded) -Go Down Moses (Chosen, War) -Go, Mary, and Toll the Bell (Chosen, Identity)</p> <p>(3 Spirituals)</p>
<p>Exodus 14:1-31; 15:20-21</p>	<p>-Go Down Moses (Coded) -Go Down Moses (Chosen, War) -O, Mary, Don't You Weep (Chosen, War) -Go, Mary, and Toll the Bell (Chosen, Identity)</p> <p>(4 Spirituals)</p>
<p>Exodus 16:1-35</p>	<p>-Go Down Moses (Chosen, War) -If You Want to See Jesus (Chosen, War) -Go, Mary, and Toll the Bell (Chosen, Identity)</p> <p>(3 Spirituals)</p>
<p>Exodus 19:1-20:21</p>	<p>-Bound for Canaan Land (Chosen, War) -Go, Mary, and Toll the Bell (Chosen, Identity)</p> <p>(2 Spirituals)</p>
<p>Exodus 32:1-35; 34:1-9</p>	<p>-O Lord, Write My Name (Chosen, War) -The Book of Life (Chosen, War) -Go, Mary, and Toll the Bell (Chosen, Identity)</p> <p>(3 Spirituals)</p>
<p>Exodus 34:29-35</p>	<p>-Go, Mary, and Toll the Bell (Chosen, Identity)</p> <p>(1 Spiritual)</p>
<p>Leviticus 25:1-55</p>	<p>-Great Day (Chosen, War) -Michael, Row the Boat Ashore (Chosen, War) -Rise and Shine (Chosen, War)</p> <p>(3 Spirituals)</p>
<p>Joshua 2:1-24; 6:1-25</p>	<p>-Bound for Canaan Land (Chosen, War) - Go Down Moses (Chosen, War) -Great Day (Chosen, War) -I'm Going Where There Ain't No More Dying (Chosen, War) -Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho (Chosen, War)</p> <p>(5 Spirituals)</p>

Figure 10 continued

2 Kings 2:1-14	<p>-Run, Mary, Run (Coded) -Swing Low, Sweet Chariot (Coded) -Run, Mary, Run (Chosen, Identity)</p> <p>(3 Spirituals)</p>
2 Kings 5:1-27	<p>-Some of These Days (Coded) -Some of These Days (Chosen, Identity)</p> <p>(2 Spirituals)</p>
1 Samuel 17:1-58	<p>-Tell It (Chosen, Identity) (1 Spiritual)</p>
Song of Songs 1:2-2:7	<p>-He's the Lily of the Valley (Coded)</p> <p>(1 Spiritual)</p>
Isaiah 2:2-4 (or Micah 4:1-4)	<p>-Down by the Riverside (Chosen, War)</p> <p>(1 Spiritual)</p>
Isaiah 9:2-7	<p>-Down by the Riverside (Chosen, War)</p> <p>(1 Spiritual)</p>
Ezekiel 1:4-28	<p>-Ezekiel Saw the Wheel (Coded)</p> <p>(1 Spiritual)</p>
Ezekiel 37:1-14	<p>-Dry Bones (Chosen, Identity)</p> <p>(1 Spiritual)</p>
Daniel 3:1-31	<p>-Babylon's Falling (Coded) -Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel (Coded)</p> <p>(2 Spirituals)</p>
Daniel 6:1-24	<p>-Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel (Coded)</p> <p>(1 Spiritual)</p>
Matthew 4:1-11 (or Luke 4:1-13)	<p>-If You Want to See Jesus (Chosen, War)</p> <p>(1 Spiritual)</p>
Matthew 21:1-17 (or Mark 11:1-19, Luke 19:28-48, or John 12:12-15)	<p>-In the Army of the Lord (Chosen, War)</p> <p>(1 Spiritual)</p>
Matthew 26:31-27:66 (or Mark 14:27-15:47, Luke 22:31-23:56, John 18-19)	<p>-He Never Said a Mumbling Word (Chosen, Identity)</p> <p>(2 Spirituals)</p>

Figure 10 continued

Luke 16:19-31	-Rock-a My Soul (Chosen, War) (1 Spiritual)
John 14:1-14	-Trouble Done Bore Me Down (Chosen, Identity) (1 Spiritual)
John 21:1-25	-Wrestle on, Jacob (Chosen, Identity) (1 Spiritual)
Acts 9:1-25 (or Acts 22:3-16, Acts 26:2-18)	-I Got a New Name (Chosen, Identity) -The Angels Done Changed My Name (Chosen, Identity) (2 Spirituals)
Acts 16:16-40	-I Ain't Going to Grief My Lord No More (Chosen, Identity) -You Got a Right (Chosen, Identity) (2 Spirituals)
Revelation 3:1-6	-O Lord, Write My Name (Chosen, War) -The Book of Life (Chosen, War) (2 Spirituals)
Revelation 4:1-11	-When the Saint's Come Marchin' In (Chosen, War) (1 Spiritual)
Revelation 6:1-17; 8:1-5	-Bound for Canaan Land (Coded) -Steal Away (Coded) -When I'm Dead (Coded) -I Am Not Afraid to Die (Chosen, War) -In That Great Getting-up Morning (Chosen, War) -My Lord, What a Mourning (Chosen, War) -Ride on King Jesus (Chosen, War) -Rolling in Jesus' Arms (Chosen, Identity) (8 Spirituals)
Revelation 7:1-17	-I Am Free (Coded) -I Have Another Building (Coded) -Going to Shout All Over God's Heaven (Chosen, War) -I Am Free (Chosen, War) -Nobody Knows Who I Am" (Chosen, War) -Go, Mary, and Toll the Bell (Chosen, Identity) -I Ain't Going to Grief My Lord No More (Chosen, Identity) -I Can't Stay Away (Chosen, Identity) -Rolling in Jesus' Arms (Chosen, Identity) (9 Spirituals)

Figure 10 continued

Revelation 10:1-11	In That Great Getting-up Morning (Chosen, War) (1 Spiritual)
Revelation 12:1-9; 13-18	-Free at Last (Chosen, War) -Tell It (Chosen, Identity) (2 Spirituals)
Revelation 13:1-18	-Free at Last (Chosen, War) -O Lord, Write My Name (Chosen, War) -The Book of Life (Chosen, War) (3 Spirituals)
Revelation 14:1-13	-John Done Saw That Number (Chosen, War) (1 Spiritual)
Revelation 17:1-18	-Babylon's Falling (Coded) -O Lord, Write My Name (Chosen, War) -The Book of Life (Chosen, War) (3 Spirituals)
Revelation 19:17- 20:15	-Free at Last (Chosen, War) -In the Army of the Lord (Chosen, War) -O Lord, Write My Name (Chosen, War) -Ride on King Jesus (Chosen, War) -The Book of Life (Chosen, War) (5 Spirituals)
Revelation 21:1-27	-Come and Go with Me (Coded) -I Have Another Building (Coded) -Just Like John (Chosen, War) -O Lord, Write My Name (Chosen, War) -The Book of Life (Chosen, War) (5 Spirituals)
Revelation 22:1-21	-I Ain't Going to Grief My Lord No More (Chosen, Identity) -You Got a Right (Chosen, Identity) (2 Spirituals)

Other Coded Language Spirituals: Death Is Going to Lay His Cold Icy Hands on Me, Deep River, Down by the Riverside, Fighting On, God's Going to Trouble the Water, Going to Set Down and Rest Awhile, I'm a Poor Wayfaring Stranger, I'm All Wore Out a-Toiling for the Lord, I Want to Go Home, Old Ship of Zion, Run to Jesus.

Other Chosen-Identity Spirituals: Old Ship of Zion and The Welcome Table.

Bible Passages	Spirituals
<p>-Genesis 9:1-29</p> <p>-Genesis 16:1-16</p> <p>-Exodus 1:8-2:22</p> <p>-Exodus 2:23-3:15</p> <p>-Exodus 7:1-24</p> <p>-Exodus 21:1-37</p> <p>-Leviticus 25:1-55</p> <p>-Luke 12:35-48</p> <p>-1 Corinthians 7:17-24/Ephesians 6:5-9/Colossians 3:22-25/1 Timothy 6:1-2/Titus 2:9-10/1 Peter 2:18-25</p> <p>-Galatians 3:28/Romans 10:12/1 Corinthians 12:12-26/Colossians 3:11</p> <p>-Philemon</p>	<p>Go Down Moses, He Never Said a Mumbling Word, Holy Bible, I'm New-Born Again, I Want to Go Home, John Brown's Body, Many Thousand Gone, Master Going to Sell Us Tomorrow, My Mind Stayed on Freedom, O, Freedom, O, Mary, Don't You Weep, Rise and Shine, Slavery's Chain, This Old-Time Religion</p>
(11 Bible passages total)	(14 Spirituals total)

Figure 11: Recommended List of Biblical Texts and Spirituals with Slavery Themes

CHAPTER 5. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Analysis and Recommendations

If I could recommend just two books from the Bible to teach with the African American Spirituals in a high school language arts classroom, they would be the Books of Exodus and Revelation. This is due to both quantitative and qualitative reasons. First, the Spirituals refer to Revelation the most of all the biblical books, and a total number of 12 different passages from Revelation correspond with the Spirituals. The Book of Exodus is also frequently alluded to in the Spirituals, and 11 passages from this book correspond to the songs. Moreover, Revelation and Exodus contain strong examples of the themes of chosenness, coded language, and slavery, along with their corresponding Spirituals. Finally, both of these books are whole and complete narratives, and, unlike the other biblical books in this study, may be read from beginning to end due to their strong and complementary connections to the themes, characters, and references in the Spirituals.

Exodus and its Spirituals

A main purpose of this research is not to study the Bible and the Spirituals in isolation, but to study these two corpuses in relation to one another. Therefore it is necessary to discuss Exodus and its corresponding Spirituals, and the common themes they share.

Firstly, the classic Spiritual “Go Down Moses” is recommended 14 times in this study. Thirteen of these recommendations occur in the Book of Exodus. Moreover, this song contains all of the three major themes. That is, it is recommended seven times as chosenness-war, five times as coded, and once as slavery. Another biblical book that contains this Spiritual is the Book of Joshua.

Next, the Spiritual “Go, Mary, and Toll the Bell” is recommended eleven times in the list, 10 of which are found in the Book of Exodus. The one other time this Spiritual is recommended is in the seventh chapter of Revelation. In all of its eleven appearances in the recommended list, this Spiritual is always a chosenness-identity theme.

Thirdly, both songs “O Lord, Write My Name” and “The Book of Life” appear once in Exodus as a chosenness-war theme. This pair is also found five times in the Book of Revelation,

with the same theme. And, finally, “Bound for Canaan Land” is found once in Exodus as chosenness-war. This same Spiritual and theme are also found in Joshua, and as a coded theme in Revelation.

Furthermore, as can be seen in Figure 11, Exodus also contains four passages within its book that can be read alongside the Spirituals that have slavery themes. As a result, Exodus, more than all of the other biblical books in the recommended list, contains the most slavery-related themes.

In conclusion, based on the preponderance and quality of the data, Exodus may mostly be read with chosenness and slavery themes, along with the aforementioned Spirituals that contain these themes. Additionally, Exodus itself does not contain coded themes, but it may read with “Go Down Moses,” which does contain a coded theme. Thankfully, as previously mentioned, this classic Spiritual also contains chosenness and slavery themes as well.

Revelation and its Spirituals

Moving on, I will discuss Revelation and its corresponding Spirituals, as well as the common themes they share. Overall, Revelation contains strong themes of chosenness and coded language. And, as previously mentioned, passages from Revelation appear twelve times in the recommended list, which is the most frequent of any biblical book.

In regard to chosenness, the book is largely about “the decisive struggle of Christ and his followers against Satan and his cohorts” (New American Bible, 2012, p. 1402), and I found that the book’s various passages may be read with 26 corresponding Spirituals through the lens of chosenness-war themes. Such Spirituals with these themes in this book are: “O Lord, Write My Name” and “The Book of Life,” which have five different parallels in Revelation; as well as “Free at Last,” which has three parallels in this book. Moreover, as a bonus, “Free at Last,” is referenced in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech, which is important for educators to keep in mind (Cunningham, 2015). Also, the Civil War-era poem and anthem, “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” references Revelation 19 (Miles, 2018) and itself contains a chosenness-war theme. Battle Hymn of the Republic is itself based on the Spiritual, “John Brown’s Body,” which is a recommended Spiritual that has a slavery theme.

Additionally, the Book of Revelation may also be taught through the lens of chosenness-identification themes, and the text has eight corresponding Spirituals with these themes. “I Ain’t

Going to Grief My Lord No More,” is an example, which has two parallels in Revelation, as well as “Tell It,” which has one parallel with this book. However, the theme of chosenness-war is more prevalent in Revelation, along with its 26 complementary Spirituals that share this theme; and, thus, this specific theme deserves special focus.

Moving on to the important theme of coded language, Revelation is worthy to be studied for this feature as well, along with its 8 parallel Spirituals to this book. The New American Bible (2011) states about the book that “symbolic descriptions are not to be taken as literal descriptions, nor is the symbolism meant to be pictured realistically” (p. 1402). In this regard, the rich symbolism and fantastical imagery of Revelation provide rich learning opportunities for high school language arts instruction. Furthermore, Revelation may be read with *any* of the coded Spirituals that are found in the recommended list, but it may especially be read with the ones that have parallels to Revelation, since they of course refer to passages directly from the book.

Moreover, as previously mentioned, the only other biblical book in this study that has strong coded themes is the Book of Daniel. Therefore, Daniel and its corresponding coded Spirituals—“Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel,” and “Babylon’s Falling,” may be studied with Revelation and its coded Spirituals. Further, “Babylon’s Falling,” corresponds with Revelation 17:1-18, and the mention of Babylon in the book is a coded reference to ancient pagan Rome. Indeed, whenever “Babylon” is invoked in the Bible, it usually carries negative connotations, implying wickedness or some related effect.

Finally, the Spiritual “Bound for Canaan Land,” is another coded language theme that is found in Revelation, which also has parallels with the Books of Joshua and Exodus, albeit with different themes. This is helpful to keep in mind in case teachers want to mix and match Spirituals and themes across different biblical books.

Other Recommended Biblical Books and Spirituals

In addition to the Books of Revelation and Exodus and their corresponding Spirituals and themes, I also recommend the following biblical passages, which have a preponderance of Spirituals: Genesis 28:10-22, Genesis 32:22-32, Acts 9:1-25, Joshua 2:1-24; 6:1-25, 2 Kings 2:1-14, and the Hebrew Bible and New Testament passages on slavery, which are both listed in Figure 11. The biblical “Slavery” passages contain the most Spirituals, with a total number of 14.

Genesis 28:10-22 is the classic passage involving the symbol of Jacob's Ladder, and it corresponds to 6 Spirituals, which have a variety of coded and chosen themes. Next, Genesis 32:22-32, which is the famous passage of Jacob wrestling with an angel, and Acts 9:1-25, which is the well-known story of Saul on the road to Damascus, make an interesting pair because they both, in my opinion, are par excellence of the theme of chosenness-identity. In both biblical passages, a character is renamed after being "chosen." In the Genesis story, Jacob is renamed as Israel, and, in the Acts account, Saul is renamed as Paul. These correspond beautifully to the African American Spirituals that also have chosenness-identity themes, especially involving the action of divine renaming. These Spirituals are "I Got a New Name" and "The Angels Done Changed My Name."

Next, Joshua 2:1-24; 6:1-25 is highly recommended because the book contains five parallels to the Spirituals, and two of them overlap with Exodus and Revelation passages. Moreover, the Book of Joshua and its corresponding Spirituals are excellent examples of chosenness-war. Finally, the biblical passage of 2 Kings 2:1-14, which is the classic story of the chariot of fire sweeping up the prophet Elijah in a whirlwind, only corresponds to three Spirituals, but the image of the chariot is a frequent motif in the Spirituals, which symbolizes escape from slavery.

Lastly, the biblical passages involving slavery and their corresponding Spirituals, which are all listed in Figure 11, may be the simplest and most straightforward themes in this study. Every single Spiritual may be said to have themes of slavery, since this was the historical context under which these songs were composed. For the purposes of this study, however, a Spiritual was considered to have a theme of slavery if a direct reference to the practice is evident in the lyrics. For example, lyrics that say, "Before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave," leave little room for doubt that slavery is being discussed in the Spiritual called "Holy Bible" (Newman, 1998, p.176). Moreover, the title alone of "Master Going to Sell Us Tomorrow" is clear that this song also has a slavery theme. Such Spirituals may be read with biblical passages that also have strong themes of slavery. As previously mentioned, slavery was a hot button issue in the nineteenth century, with Americans using the Bible to both abolish and defend the institution. The biblical passages selected in Figure 11 represent both sides of the argument. For example, Genesis 9:1-29 may be said to condone slavery, as was noted earlier, whereas many of the Exodus passages may be said to condemn it. Other passages such as Genesis 16:1-16 and

Leviticus 25:1-55 may appear to do both. Another interesting set of passages are the groupings of 1 Corinthians 7:17-24/Ephesians 6:5-9/Colossians 3:22-25/1 Timothy 6:1-2/Titus 2:9-10/1 Peter 2:18-25, which exhort slaves to obey their masters, in contrast to Galatians 3:28/Romans 10:12/1 Corinthians 12:12-26/Colossians 3:11, which may be interpreted to mean that slaves are equal in worth and dignity to free persons. All of these slavery-themes in the Bible may be read with the slavery-themes in the Spirituals, which illustrate the dehumanizing effects of slavery, such as family separation, torture, sadness, and oppression; and, somewhat paradoxically, also illustrate the healing aspects under such dehumanization, such as group solidarity, hope for freedom, and hope for a better and more just world.

Another one of the slavery-themed Spirituals is “John Brown’s Body.” As previously mentioned, this Spiritual was adapted into a Civil War anthem, “Battle Hymn of the Republic” (Cunningham, 2015). Even though Battle Hymn of the Republic is not a Spiritual, it is good for educators to keep this adaption in mind, as its content overlaps with Revelation 19, as well as themes involving chosenness-war and slavery.

Conclusion

The question that guided my research was: of the many African American Spirituals and of all the biblical literature that inspired the Spirituals, which texts from both corpuses may be studied in a high school language arts classroom? As previously noted, Indiana’s standards involve analyzing and evaluating how texts of American literary/cultural significance draw on themes from religious works. Similarly, the Common Core State Standards require that students analyze how an author draws on a classic work, such as the Bible, and uses it for their own purposes. Accordingly, African American Spirituals, which certainly qualify for literary/cultural significance, adapted the coded language as found in the Books of Daniel and Revelation, as well as the ideology of chosenness as found in the Books of Exodus, Revelation, Joshua, and others. Whether or not African Americans intentionally made conscious efforts to appropriate these biblical themes is not as important here as much as the fact that these similarities do exist and are thus worthy of analysis and evaluation.

Moreover, the CCSS also states that students should be able to demonstrate knowledge of nineteenth-century “foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes,” (2020). The Black Spirituals, with their various

African and European influences, are certainly original and “foundational” works of American literature and culture, as these raw songs, improvised and sung on plantations, have gone on to influence modern American music (Charlton, 2008), and, as a result, American, Western, and global consciousness as well. Thus, the theme of slavery, along with chosenness and coded language, may be studied in this uniquely American genre, along with an even more foundational Western text: the Bible.

It has now been a couple of years since I opened my old high school textbook and browsed through its pages, having been inspired by its approach to religion as literature. Since then, my appreciation for religious texts as literature has increased even more. Now more than ever I see that religious texts belong to every single one of us, no matter the extent of one’s religious or non-religious affiliation. Moreover, just as African Americans did not allow slaveholder interpretations to define *their* views of biblical texts, marginalized people in today’s world likewise do not have to have *their* views of the Bible colored by potentially narrow-minded interpretations. Indeed, I have become increasingly aware that there is often a thin line between politics, religion, and the literatures of each. This was the case for Exodus and the Jewish people, Revelation and the early Christians, and both of these books and other texts for the African Americans.

Most of all, it is my hope that students continue to be trained to think critically, perhaps especially in regard to texts of a religious nature. For these reasons and more, I plan to continue studying religion in some capacity, and to keep on climbing the rungs of Jacob’s Ladder to attain greater knowledge and understanding.

REFERENCES

- Ackerman, J. S., & Warshaw, T. S. (1995). *The Bible as/in literature* (J. Sweet, Ed.; Second Edition). ScottForesman.
- Beal, T. (2010). *Biblical Literacy: The Essential Bible Stories Everyone Needs to Know*. HarperOne.
- Berlin, A., & Brettler, M. Z. (Eds.). (2014). *The Jewish Study Bible: Second Edition* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Biale, D. (2015). *The Norton anthology of world religions: Judaism* (J. Miles, Ed.; 1st ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Bloom, H. (1991). *The book of J* (Reprint ed.). Vintage.
- Bonomi, P. U. (2016). "Swarms of Negroes Comeing about My Door": Black Christianity in Early Dutch and English North America. *Journal of American History*, 103(1), 54.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jaw007>
- Carter, M. (2002). The Bible: Still a classic worldwide bestseller. *The English Journal*, 91(5), 33–39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/821395>
- Catholic Book Publishing. (2016). *New Testament in the New Catholic Version: Saint Joseph Pocket Edition*. Catholic Book Publishing Co.
- Charlton, K. (2008). *Rock Music Styles*. McGraw-Hill Education.
- Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2020). *About the Standards: Development Process*. <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/development-process/>
- Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2020). *Standards in Your State*. <http://www.corestandards.org/standards-in-your-state/>
- Common Core Standards for English Language Arts. (2010). Reading Standards for Literature 6-12. Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/>
- Cunningham, L. S. (2015). *The Norton Anthology of World Religions: Christianity* (J. Miles, Ed.; 1st ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Douglass, F. (2005). *My Bondage and My Freedom* (B. H. Edwards, Ed.). Barnes & Noble Classics.

- Douglass, F. (2003). *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave* (R. G. O’Meally, Ed.). Barnes & Noble Classics.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (2012). *The souls of Black folk* (R. Kenan & C. T. Gilkes, Eds.; Reprint ed.). Signet.
- Frye, N. (2002). *The great code: The Bible and literature* (First ed.). Harcourt Books.
- Glaude, Jr., E. S. (2000). *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*. University of Chicago Press.
- Harcourt. (2003). *Elements of literature: Fourth course with readings in world literature, Indiana edition*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Hummon, D. M. (2008). Climbing Jacob’s Ladder: Reconstructing the ladder in African American Spirituals. *The Journal of American Culture*, 31(2), 165, 167, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734x.2008.00670.x>
- Indiana Academic Standards. (2014). 9-10.RL.4.2. Retrieved from <https://www.doe.in.gov/standards/englishlanguage-arts> Indiana Academic Standards.
- (2014). 11-12.RL.4.2. Retrieved from <https://www.doe.in.gov/standards/englishlanguage-arts>
- Indiana Department of Education. (2020). *Indiana Academic Standards*. <https://www.doe.in.gov/standards>
- Kniker, C. R. (1985). *Teaching about religion in the public schools*. Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.
- Lawrence-McIntyre, C. C. (1987). The double meanings of the Spirituals. *Journal of Black Studies*, 17(4), 382-385, 389, 391, 395-396, 398. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002193478701700401>
- Lincoln, A. (1991). *Great Speeches / Abraham Lincoln: with Historical Notes by John Grafton* (S. Appelbaum, Ed.). Dover Publications.
- Mariner, R. (2010). *The Torah* (Reprint ed.). Kuperard.
- Mauro, T. (2016). *The Supreme Court: Landmark Decisions*. Fall River Press.
- Meacham, J., & McGraw, T. (2019). *Songs of America: Patriotism, Protest, and the Music That Made a Nation*. Random House.
- Merriam-Webster (2019). Apocalypse. Retrieved on December 11, 2019 from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apocalypse>

- Mikics, D. (2007). *A New Handbook of Literary Terms*. Yale University Press.
- Miles, J. (2018). *God in the Qur'an*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Miller, R. J. (Ed.). (2010). *The Complete Gospels* (Fourth ed.). Polebridge Press.
- Newman, R. (1998). *Go Down, Moses: celebrating the African-American Spiritual* (Annotated edition). Clarkson Potter.
- Obama, B. (2006). *The audacity of hope: Thoughts on reclaiming the American dream*. Broadway Books.
- O'Meally, R. G. (Ed.). (2003). *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Barnes & Noble Classics.
- Omo-Osagie II, S. I. (2007). "Their Souls Made Them Whole": Negro Spirituals and Lessons in Healing and Atonement. *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 31(2), 34.
<https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-203660016/their-souls-made-them-whole-negro-spirituals-and>
- Pagels, E. (historian). (2018, March 11). The Rise of the Pope [TV-show]. Pope: The Most Powerful Man in History. USA: CNN.
- Pew Research Center. (2019). *What Americans Know About Religion*.
<https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/23/factors-linked-with-religious-knowledge/>
- Russell, B. (2015). *The Norton Anthology of World Religions: Christianity* (J. Miles & L.S. Cunningham, Eds.; 1st ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Ryken, L. (1984). *How to Read the Bible as Literature*. Zondervan.
- Sanger, K. L. (1995). Slave resistance and rhetorical self-definition: Spirituals as a strategy. *Western Journal of Communication*, 59(3), 185-189.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10570319509374516>
- School Dist. of Abington Township v. Schempp, 374 U.S. 203 (1963)
- Singer-Towns, B. (Ed.). (2002). *The Catholic youth Bible: New American Bible including the revised psalms and the revised New Testament*. Saint Mary's Press.
- Shepherd, D. (2019). Teaching about American slavery and its connections to Christianity and the Bible. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 14(2), 226-227, 230-233.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/ssrp-04-2019-0021>

- Smith, Y. Y. (2006). Christian education and the African-American Spirituals: recommended resources. *Religious Education, 101*(4), 533.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00344080600956822>
- New American Bible, Revised Edition.* (2011). Catholic Book Publishing Corp.
- Trawick, B. B. (1966). *The Bible as literature; Old Testament history and biography.* Barnes & Noble.
- U.S. Const. Article I, § 2.3 (changed by § 2 of amend. XIV.)
- Wachlin, M. G. (1997). The place of Bible literature in public high school English classes. *Research in the Teaching of English, 31*(1), 7-50 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40171263>
- Wachlin, M. G. (1998). The Bible: Why we need to teach it; how some do. *The English Journal, 87*(3), 32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/822380>
- World English Bible.* (2016). Bible Domain Publishing.
- Wright, J. (2006). Songs of Remembrance. *The Journal of African American History, 91*(4), 414-417. <https://doi.org/10.1086/jaahv91n4p413>