

Stretching Out: Hymn Interpretation in the Black Church

Carlton David Johnson

*By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our harps.
For there our captors asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How could we sing the Lord’s song
in a foreign land?*

—Psalm 137:1–4

*We brought our gifts and mingled them
with yours: a gift of story and song—soft,
stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and
unmelodious land. Our song, our toil, our
cheer, and warning have been given to this
nation in blood-brotherhood. Actively we have
woven ourselves with the very warp and woof
of this nation—we fought their battles, shared
their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs,
and generation after generation have pleaded
with a headstrong, careless people to despise
not Justice, Mercy, and Truth.*

—W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

Imagine that as they lay in wait, the Babylonians ridiculed and even demeaned the unique sound of the soon-to-be captive Israelites. They depreciated all that made the Israelites fully human; to do so was how they were able to treat them so savagely.

Later, as the captives labored and longed for the beauty and freedom of their motherland, they remembered their native melodies and conjured them to comfort themselves and the kin among them under the blazing Babylonian sun.

It is highly unlikely that the Babylonians truly appreciated the original and sacred songs from the Israelites’ music canon. I imagine that the songs these slaveholders tauntingly requested were “Israelitized” Babylonian songs, hymns that these brilliant and beautiful people had rearranged applying their native melodies.

Perhaps both Babylonian and Euro-American slaveholders hoped by forcing the enslaved Israelites and Africans to sing often during daylight, and by listening in on their secret sacred gatherings, they could diminish the haunting they felt. These sorrow songs disrupted their slumber in the midnight hour. The need to dislodge the grip of these melodies was a desperate one. In *The Burden of Black Religion*, Curtis Evans shared one woman’s particular experience:

Although deeply offended by the worship practices of Blacks, she was surprised by her own reaction. She sensed an “invisible power” that seemed to hold her in its grasp as they were gathered in this church where they were nearly suffocating from the heat and wild excitement. “The excitement was working upon us and sent the blood surging in wild torrents to the brain, that reeled in darkened terror under the shock.” A few moments more, she related, even she would have “shrieked in unison with the crowd.”¹

Understanding is attainable. The tunnel that leads to the light is a dark one; those who would dare follow the voice of God must relinquish their stronghold on the assumption that the path they once travelled was the only one. To truly see people and receive

Carlton David Johnson is a minister of the Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and coordinator for Vital Congregations for the Presbyterian Mission Agency in Louisville, Kentucky.

their expressions, one must learn to listen attentively to stories that do not match their own. One must be willing to hear old songs with reborn ears. When those who are prepared for proclamation are ready, the liberating sound of freedom rings clearer than any church bell.

I recall the eleventh toll of a church bell on a particular freezing January morning nearly a decade ago. That day I would preach for the first time as a pulpit supply. It would be the first time I would preach to a non-African American congregation.

As I approached the church doorstep, I reflected over my journey. In addition to a successful career in music ministry, I had attained over two decades of corporate leadership. A series of nagging biblical questions led me to seminary, to ordination as a Baptist minister, and then to candidacy for ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This day would be like my first corporate internship, I thought. More deeply I imagined how the many elements of my journey would come together that morning.

I was born and formed in the Black church, in a Baptist congregation. At the age of five, I sang my first solo. By high school, I was a choir director. Over the next forty-five years, I would be a leader in music ministry around the country.

The musicality of the Black church had been a constant in my life. Even in the Presbyterian church where I served at the time, an all-Black congregation, preaching began and ended musically. By definition, a good sermon opened and closed with some form of musicality. If you were not a skilled “closer,” if you could not “whoop,” you would do well to know how to sing a good hymn. I pondered how I would close that day.

Nervously, I peered down at the order of worship to be sure that the sermon text and title I submitted were correct. To my surprise, one of my favorite hymns, “A Charge to Keep I Have,” leaped from the page. I texted friends in glee. My wife gripped my hand with equal giddiness.

In the church of my upbringing,
“A Charge to Keep I Have” is not just
any hymn, it is *the* hymn.

In the church of my upbringing, “A Charge to Keep I Have” is not just any hymn, it is *the* hymn. When led by a seasoned hymn leader, this hymn had (and still has) the unique ability to “dump the

house.” My father, the late Deacon David Johnson, had been such a hymn leader. Suddenly, my burdens were lifted. I felt the hand of my father and other ancestors on my shoulder.

I gathered a hymnal only to be formal. I knew this song in my heart. My father taught me how to call out the first line with power over forty years ago. Not a month went by before I would hear or lead this soul-stirring hymn. I know I was not scheduled to lead this hymn, but instinctively, I exhaled and filled my lungs to call out the first verse. The pianist played the introductory chords.

Wait . . . what???

The chords and rhythm were totally unfamiliar to the hymn as I knew it. In fact, hearing a piano or any instrument at all was unfamiliar to “A Charge to Keep I Have” as I knew it. It literally took my breath away. As the pianist continued to play, members of the congregation began to sing the tune from their hymnals. By the second verse, congregants were on their feet beaming with joy.

This was the same song that, for forty years, I had relied on for the strength to go on. This was the same lament that had brought tears for what had been lost in the fight for righteousness; wasn’t it? I peered up and down from my hymnal; the lyrics were the exact same. What had happened?

That day will stay with me forever. The congregation had sung “A Charge to Keep I Have” *as it was originally written and composed* by Charles Wesley and Lowell Mason over 260 years ago. It was the first time I ever heard it sung in this way.

It was different, but I liked it. I was not accustomed to hearing the original scores played along with the hymns nor the voices accompanying the original scores in that way. I was familiar with hymn books. Our congregation had them. Yet they acted primarily as binders for the hymn’s lyrics. Our musicians did not play the original scores, in most cases. It was definitely not a testimony to their capabilities. If anything, the limited number of hymns that were allowed instrumental accompaniment required committal to memory a unique canon of music that is not recorded anywhere.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois posited that Black music could not truly be notated or transcribed. The *soul* of the music cannot be measured or contained by the standard signs used to symbolize sounds. Its *essence*, a mixture of transcribed cultural memory, prevents it from being noted down accurately.

The lyrics themselves are like poetry. The meter of a hymn is the pattern of syllables and stresses. This is different from the meter of the music, signified by the time signature at the beginning of the staff. It is originally metered as 6.6.8.6, or “short metered.” Other meter forms include the long and common meters. Yet I’d grown up hearing “A Charge to Keep I Have” in the under-documented “old meter” form.

Old metering a hymn slows the cadence significantly, almost to that of a dirge. Through swells and emphases of particular words, the lament, the sincere pleas for help, the pain and truth of the present-day drama and the ancestral saga of the Black experience in America can be heard. Desperate cries live in and between each word. Jubilant celebrations live between each line. Hope emerges from each verse. In *The Spirituals and the Blues*, Dr. James H. Cone called these songs

the essence of black religion, that is, the experience of trying to be free in the midst of a powerful lot of tribulation. They are songs about black souls, stretching out into the outskirts of God’s eternity and affirming that divine reality which lets you know that you are a human being. White folk thought the slaves were contented, waiting for the next world. But in reality they were “stretching out” on God’s Word, affirming a new-found experience that could not be destroyed by the masters.²

The old meter version of these songs is uniquely soul stirring. When done well, the movement of the spirit is palpable. In *The Burden of Black Religion*, Gayraud S. Wilmore Jr. is quoted as describing soulfulness as a “rich artistic and emotional freedom that had its roots in the African heritage of communalism (though reformed and reshaped by the ghettos of America, he was careful to add).” This soul quality was “opposite to the style of life formed by the structured, unfeeling, scientific rationality of white Western civilization.”³

The old meter form originated after the Great Awakening of the early eighteenth century. Thereafter, enslaved African people were “allowed” to participate in worship services. It is noteworthy that the invitation to join in worship had nothing to do with the welfare of the enslaved. Slave owners were taught by the church to imagine these enslaved people as

“bodiless souls.”⁴ Though it was acceptable to treat them as chattel, it was a part of their Christian duty to make fit their souls for heaven.

Remarkably, there were some who would not believe that even the soul of an African could make it to the same heaven as that of a white person. Therefore, churches built in the nineteenth century were built with balconies. These balconies not only kept the enslaved Africans as far away from whites as possible, they provided reconciliation of the best possible destiny for the enslaved—time in “Nigger Heaven” on Sundays with their owners.

From these segregated spaces, and in hush harbors and other secret worship services, the art of hymn lining was born. Enslaved Africans were not allowed to learn to read. The rumor alone of an enslaved African having learned to read could be cause for unfathomable torture and often death. Hence, an identified leader would commit the words of a hymn to memory. When gathered, the leader, or “exhorter,” would line out or chant the lyrics. Immediately after calling out a few words or a sentence of the hymn, the assembled congregation would sing the line responsively. The exhorter would then call out the next line. The cycle continued until the song’s completion.

The beauty in hymn lining is that particularly seasoned and/or talented exhorters may add personal notes and testimonial phrases to the called-out lines. Their emphasis on a word or phrase is shared in melody by the responding congregation. In this melisma, both the exhorter and the congregation take liberties each time and in each place the hymn is sung.

For example, I was trained to line out “A Charge to Keep I Have” so that when the fourth verse is called out, the first phrase is repeated at least three times, each time adding an increasing excess of “bluesy grit”:

*O may it all,
OOO may it all,
OOOOOOO may it all my powers engage
To DO my Master’s will!*

Though an outward repetition, this plea is the most earnest expression of “deep calling unto deep.” I have observed a distinct difference in how the Black congregations I worship with are impacted by this particular verse. Rather than gleefully responding to a bouncy cadence (as when sung in the traditional

W. E. B. Du Bois observed in *The Souls of Black Folk* that the hymns of the Black church were the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil.

short meter), the Black congregations bond in lament. Though tears well in the eyes of many, the righteous determination in their sway expresses a collective focus, their powers engaged, to complete their journey of life in spite of oppression that is equally determined to kill them. I have witnessed an expression of determination in this verse that is not of rote. It is sincere sharing of the depth of the struggle to survive.

Though the hymn writers' lyrics do not suggest it, in traditional Black congregations, after the final verses, the congregation hums or "moans" one or two lines of the tune. My uncles all took this time to remind the congregation that "the devil don't understand you when you moan." It was a reminder that in the darkest days of African American history, our foreparents would often blend messages of escape into the moaning, because it confused the "enemy."

W. E. B. Du Bois observed in *The Souls of Black Folk* that the hymns of the Black church were the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil. Plaintive rhythmic melodies, with touching minor cadences, were adapted, changed, and intensified by the tragic soul-life of the enslaved until, under the stress of law and whip, they became the one true expression of a people's sorrow, despair, and hope.

"Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah," found in both the *Presbyterian Hymnal* (281) and *Glory to God* (65), is likewise traditionally translated differently in the churches of my community. First and foremost, the earnest plea that is the first line of the song, for guidance through this barren land, connects us musically and spiritually to the Exodus story. In *The Talking Book*, Allen Dwight Callahan notes,

Possibly more than any other biblical narrative, Exodus was the biblical argument that God opposed the institution of slavery and that God would return a catastrophic judgement against America as was true for Egypt. In it, we find our own ongoing aspirations for liberation, freedom and equality.⁵

Whether errantly or purposefully, many exhorters change the word "pilgrim" to "children" when lining this hymn. Hence, the congregation responds in collective solicitation to God to do for us what was done for the children of Israel. The exhorter lines out the second verse, sweetly admitting, "I am weak, Lord, but Thou art mighty." Responsively, the church community confesses the need for the strength and protection of their heavenly and all-powerful parent against heartless landlords, bosses, and judges. In so doing, they conjure God's unconquerability for the journey ahead with the awareness that God will hide and hold them in the hollowed cradle of "thou powerful hand."

When lining the words "Bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more," it is normal for the exhorter to repeat the phrase "bread of heaven" several times. In the traditional singing of the hymn, this verse is a request for the Holy Spirit to descend. In the predominantly African American churches of my upbringing, the congregation connects with a real need for God to supply food and other resources.⁶

The Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin, recorded one of the more popular versions of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" (*Glory to God*, 465, *Presbyterian Hymnal*, 403). Franklin's is a soulful rendition of the traditional country-folk score. Her gospel choir is accompanied by piano. When sung in mainline white church congregations that I have visited, the delightful hymn may also be accompanied by a magnificent pipe organ.

As stated earlier, lined hymns follow a limited number of tunes and rhythms. Where the previously discussed hymns are sung to a similar beat, the cadence used for the lined hymn version of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" is that of the chant of a work crew. Often shackled, or at least restricted across hundreds of yards and sometimes miles, these crews used a rhythmic 4/4 foot stomp, or hammer swing, to keep their collective timing. When reproduced in African American worship services, work crew foot tapping is replicated as the hymn is sung without musical accompaniment.

Between foot stomps, I've watched faces. The relief that seems to wash over each face is beautiful. Among the lyrics of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" is one of the few times we will hear of disenfranchised people speaking of their "privilege." The song reassures us of one privilege of which we can be sure. We have barrier-free and *equal* access to take all of our burdens, all of our needs, to God in prayer.

A beloved church member came to me after a service several years ago, cheeks still wet with tears. She explained that her tears were of joy and relief that she felt in hearing the third verse of her favorite hymn, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." On the eve of her son's murder "trials," she heard she should never be discouraged, because we can take it to the Lord in prayer. For a millisecond, I wanted to correct what "trials" meant in the hymn's lyrics. Instead, I chose to join her in hope.

The swelling crescendo of the first half of each verse of the old metered version of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" is a literal walk to the throne of grace to receive well deserved rest, reparations, and restoration.

The swelling crescendo of the first half of each verse of the old metered version of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" is a literal walk to the throne of grace to receive well deserved rest, reparations, and restoration. The gentle decrescendo of the second half allows the fearful grandmother to carry good news back down to her wayward granddaughter. It supplies the grief-stricken husband with good news to carry home to his wife who lies dying due to a system that would deny her proper healthcare. The congregation at large descends to share the message of hope with a community blanketed by nihilism.

Occasionally, a song as originally scored simply does not "do enough" lyrically or musically. One such song is "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" (*Glory to God*, 825). Originally composed by formerly enslaved Wallis Willis, the song connects freedom across the Jordan River (some say the Ohio River) to Elijah's flight to heaven in 2 Kings 2:11.

The version of the hymn that was popularized by the Fisk Jubilee singers and other traveling

college choirs in the early twentieth century is not the way it was shared in the churches of my upbringing. Neither was it meant to be. These Black choirs chiefly sang for white audiences to raise money for their schools.

In traditional African American churches, the song was converted to "Low Down Chariot, Let Me Ride." The lyrics of the new song make a more impassioned plea for the lowering of God's transportation to heaven, to glory, to freedom. For the chorus, the single line, "Low down chariot (let me ride)" is repeated four times. With whatever liberty the song leader might take, the ensuing choruses include the singer's plea to see their mother or father again: "I want to see my mother (let me ride)." The final verse is always the ultimate request to be free at last, to be as one with the great liberator: "I want to see King Jesus (let me ride)."

During the week preceding Easter, I met with three Presbyterian pastor colleagues; the four of us were raised in traditional African American congregations. In passing, I shared the research and writing I was doing and did a quick survey of their "top three" favorite hymns. Within seconds, we listed over twenty songs that were performed differently in those congregations, an anthology all its own. Though I resigned myself to not being able to cover all of our conversation in this one disquisition, there are just a few more songs that I would be remiss not to share. After all, everyone named them in their top three.

When sung in traditional African American worship services, the tempo of "Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed" (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, 78) is doubled. In addition, the chorus from "At the Cross, Where I First Saw the Light" is added, resulting in a much more celebratory tune.

"What a Fellowship, What a Joy Divine" (*Glory to God*, 837) also features a quicker tempo. What is most impressive is how the hymn is repurposed in all of our congregations for "fellowshipping in" new members. Traditionally, this fellowship time is celebrated during the passing of the peace or just before benediction. (We debated briefly about whose congregation held "laaaaastiiiiing aararrrrmmms" longest at the end of the song.)

"I Want Jesus to Walk with Me" (*Glory to God*, 775) is one of the most often rearranged hymns. Though this hymn seems to have originated with African Americans, the score in the hymnal is not how it is traditionally delivered. As fascinated as I

am by rhythmic variations, I must first make note of the changes in the lyrics when this hymn is sung in traditional Black churches. In addition to the request for Jesus to walk with me, we supplement a request for him to also “talk” with me. Following the biblical instruction for specificity in prayer, we continue with changes to the first phrase for *specifically when* we want Jesus to walk with us. “In my trouble, I want Jesus to walk with me” and “When I’m dying, I want Jesus to talk with me.”

These changes often reflect the contexts of the congregations who are singing the hymns. Beyond a consistent desire for the daily, peaceful presence of Jesus, “I Want Jesus to Walk with Me” was an earnest plea for protection during Civil Rights demonstrations and marches of the 1960s. This same request was sung by African Americans who were unjustly attacked while walking the streets of the Jim Crow South. And in other parts of the country. And still today.

Our country is experiencing a full-on ecology of grief. We are walking through the very valley of the shadow of death. We are opposed on one side by a wall of police brutality and injustice and on the other side by an unprecedented virus. The relentlessness of these pandemics will make the recovery of our economy and government even more difficult for our newly elected administration. In this time where connection with the highest power of all is being experienced in arenas beyond the pews of our Sunday morning gatherings, Lizz Wright renders a jazz version of “I Want Jesus to Walk with Me” that all can appreciate. With deeply soulful and almost sultry grooves, Wright gives us a new song of lament for our deeply troubled times.

I will close by declaring that “I’m So Glad That Trouble Don’t Last Always!” Those hope-filled

words titled my mother’s favorite hymn. I share most of the preceding notes with sweet recollections of my childhood, the songs of natal tradition, and the history of my people. There were many paragraphs I wrote, then closed my laptop and cried like a baby. But none of these great melodies were written to compare or suggest that either version is better than the other. Like the Scriptures themselves, song lyrics must be translated to minister to people according to their time and circumstance. My greatest dream is that someday, somehow, we will learn to appreciate each other and sing every song of every tradition at once in a cacophony that will please the ear and heart of the One who created us with variety in sounds, in gifts, and in beautiful human bodies.

Notes

1. Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 71.
2. James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 29–30.
3. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion*, 269.
4. Riggins R. Earl Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self and Community in the Slave Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 5.
5. Dwight Allen Callahan, *The Talking Book* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 83.
6. In 2016, Pew Research found that the average household income of the top three predominantly Black denominations ranks lowest among all surveyed. Over 70 percent of these mostly single parent households struggle for “bread” from day to day with a gross annual income of less than \$50,000. See David Masci, “Fact Tank: How Income Varies Among U.S. Religious Groups,” Pew Research Center, October 11, 2016, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/11/how-income-varies-among-u-s-religious-groups/.