

Travelin' to the Promised Land:

Symbolism of the Jordan River in African Spiritual, English Hymn, and American Folksong Selections

Deep River

Deep River is an African spiritual borne out of great suffering. Its primary theme is deliverance – deliverance from bondage, from burdens, and from the toiling hardship of life on earth. First references to this song exist as early as 1876, when it was mentioned in *The Story of the Jubilee Singers: With Their Songs* by J.B.T. Marsh. The Fisk Jubilee Singers, an African-American a capella ensemble from Fisk University, specialized in performances of spirituals popular among slaves before the Civil War. While the Fisk Jubilee Singers would have performed a four-part arrangement of *Deep River*, people today are most familiar with Harry T. Burleigh's arrangement for solo voice and piano. Several arrangements have since been written, including those featured in the 1929 musical, *Showboat*, and the 1941 oratorio, *A Child of Our Time*.

Since *Deep River* is an anonymous work, the composer's intentions and circumstances must be inferred through textual analysis. The reference to the Jordan River found in *Deep River* can be linked to an Old Testament passage of Scripture which reads, "But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest (Deuteronomy 12:10, NIV) This song's allusions to the Jordan River may illustrate the desire of enslaved African-Americans to "cross over" into a promised land of freedom.

On Jordan's Stormy Banks (I am Bound for the Promised Land)

THE ORIGINAL VERSION OF THIS HYMN, UNDER THE PROMISED LAND, WAS WRITTEN BY Samuel Stennett, a nonconformist English Baptist minister. Many of his hymns were included in John Rippon's volume of the finest English hymns, *A Selection of Hymns from the Best Authors*, published in 1787. Eventually, this song made it to America and was first printed in *The Southern Harmony*, a shape-note songbook. When it was first published in England, it was

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Ultimately, this is a song of hope and anticipation. The lyrics have evangelistic undertones, especially as heard in the chorus, which asks, "Oh who will come and go with me? I am bound for the promised land." In *On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand*, the Jordan River symbolizes a time of joyful transition, when believers will take the final steps of their journey to the shores of the Promised Land – heaven's shores.

Poor Wayfaring Stranger

First records of this song are dated as early as 1784. Some consider *Poor Wayfaring Stranger* to be a spiritual, but it is likely an early American folksong with spiritual lyrics. While its origins are unknown, some have argued that African, Irish, or German influence can be seen in the text. Regardless of its early history, this song became a well-known American tune that was frequently sung at revival meetings. During the Civil War, the lyrics became known as the Libby Prison Hymn, due to their use by a dying, disabled soldier in Libby Prison (Richmond, VA). Numerous singers have produced covers of the song *Poor Wayfaring Stranger*, including Burl Ives and Johnny Cash.

This piece tells the story of a wayfarer who travels through this life laden with earthly cares and troubles, looking forward to meeting his Savior, parents, and loved ones in heaven. In this piece, the Jordan River seems to symbolize restoration and reunion. *Poor Wayfaring Stranger* is a sad song, written in a minor key, but it exemplifies the peace of knowing that the end of one's earthly journey will begin a sweet heavenly reunion.

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Performance Paradigm

A singer presenting these pieces should be aware of their eternity-focused subject matter. Each of the above pieces must be performed in a slightly different style, while keeping a heavenly perspective at the forefront. Indeed, these are pieces about heaven, and while heaven itself is a place of beauty and joy, the journey towards heaven presents many difficulties. Songs such as these give a raw and honest look at life, death, and the daily struggle to overcome. This life has many trials and tribulations, but for the Christian, life is culminated not in death, but in a joyful reunion with the Lord. These qualities are difficult to reproduce in musical form but should be evident through the performer's use of ornamentation, phrasing, and dynamics. This concept requires the singer to perform with sensitivity and emotional expression appropriate to the storyline present in each piece.