The Source of the Negro Spirituals

Paul Robeson Tells of the Drama in the Old Testament That Has Given Birth to the Negro Songs.

By SULAMITH ISH-KISHOR.

By courtesy of “Jewish Tribune.”

It was at a concert given for the benefit of a certain Jewish reconstruction organisation that Paul Robeson received his formal introduction to the music-lovers of the Jewish race. A big, broad-shouldered man, as involuntarily pleasing as children are, the coloured baritone (who only a few years ago discovered that he had a voice, and thereupon turned from the lure of a career as a professional football player or a career as a lawyer), glided into the goodwill of the audience with extraordinary ease.

His success before this audience was not due entirely to his large, rich voice, or to his remarkable skill in using it. Part of his appeal was unintentionally made by the nature of the songs which he sang. These songs are called negro spirituals. Their text is largely based on the Old Testament. Their charm was therefore as universal, compelling as the Bible stories. Framed in melodies, sometimes amazingly beautiful, with Mr. Robeson’s lovely voice to express them, and having the added grace of the *naivete* of the coloured race, it was unlikely that a Jewish audience would fail to delight in them.

Paul Robeson, lawyer and Phi Beta Kappa man, was very willing to say what he thought was the explanation of the nature of these songs, and how much and in what respects the coloured race had drawn inspiration and comfort from the Old Testament. Trying to tuck his six foot three of self into an ordinary-size armchair at his apartment on upper Broadway, he picked up a large green-and-white book of music and held it on his knee as he talked.

“It’s a curious thing that the Bible has been the sole law for two contrasting races—its originators, men of fiery action and inspired thought, and the enslaved negroes, who were far too meek and mild and child-hearted. They were just the opposites of the ancient Hebrews; the Hebrews were so war-like, so resentful of domination. The captive negroes of America took that race as their model, in a way at least, by having such a complete and absorbing interest in their history, yet they somehow never moved a finger to free themselves!”

“But after all, the Jews, all through the Egyptian captivity, had their memories of former glory and freedom to inspire them with the hope of future freedom. It is much easier to pick oneself up from a fall, than to get up when one has always lain supine.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s so. The Bible was the only form of literature the captive negroes could get at, even those who could read. It was natural for their quick imaginations to find a pathetic similarity between their condition and that of the enslaved Hebrews; I believe that’s why the Bible made such a tremendous appeal to the negroes. They saw their own history reflected in it, and they saw their own vague hopes given a sort of false glow of possibility. They felt that their freedom also would depend on some miracle happening, so they had to have intense faith in what they read, or heard read, of the Old Testament. You’ll notice, by the way, that comparatively few of the negro spirituals are based on the New Testament. Except for ‘Were you there,’ which is really very good, and a few others, most of the inspired melodies have been given to the Old Testament themes.”

“Is it perhaps because there is so much more drama in the Old Testament?”

“Not only that—of course, almost the whole dramatic action in the New Testament begins and ends in the story of the life of Jesus—but also that the stories of the earlier part were closer to their own lives. What a vision of hope for them the story of Moses was! One of the most beautiful of the spirituals, “Go Down, Moses,” is based on that.

He hummed the words in that extraordinarily moving, noble voice of his:

“Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt’s
land,
Tell old Pharaoh, ‘Let My people go!
If not, I’ll smite your first-born dead.
Let My people go!’”

The dignity and slow grace of this melody can only be felt by those who have heard it sung with the feeling that Mr. Robeson puts into it.

“It was really their own plight that they were describing in words and music,” he went on. “And, by the way, it’s a curious thing that these songs were largely written *not* in the negro dialect, but in a language caught from the Bible itself. The negro preachers mostly got their language from the Bible, and not from the ignorant negroes around them. There’s the force and swing of the Bible in all they wrote. They made their songs in the same spirit as they read the Bible. And listen to this,” he said eagerly as a new thought struck him.

And he hummed, “Rock me, Rock me,” with its long, wailing refrain.

“Why, that refrain is like Jewish synagogue music!” I said.

“Yes, isn’t it?” he smiled. “Now, I wonder where they could have got that from? It’s a song of the negroes of New Orleans.”

“Perhaps they did get it from the synagogue,” I suggested. “There was quite a large Jewish community in New Orleans. Several of its members were noted Abolitionists. Maybe the negroes there heard them singing in the synagogues.”

“That sounds likely,” he admitted. “Anyway, the liberation theme struck so deep—the Moses story, the Daniel story, the Joseph story—well, not that one so much—the Joshua story. These stories were so colourful, and they felt so much similarity there to their own plight. It’s rather strange, after all, that the negroes didn’t catch some of that spirit of the old Patriarchs rather than accept, in action, the precepts of humility and sufferance taught in the New Testament. You know, Moses wasn’t really a meek man. But then, I suppose, that’s a case of racial difference. The Hebrews are a war-like people,” he laughed. “The coloured people do like peace better than most anything. I never was a kid that liked to fight, myself.”

For a flash I saw the bowed figure of a magnificent bronze prize-fighter, seated on a low chair, on the stage—the last scene of “Black Boy,” in which Mr. Robeson acted last year—and heard that disconsolate voice say, as if quoting himself, “Yas, ah do like singin’ better’n fightin’.”

“I wonder what they would have done, if they hadn’t had the Bible to read their own glorification into,” said Mr. Robeson. “It must have been quite a comfort. I don’t suppose most of them understood it at all; they grasped the ideas, in the main, and then had to put them into a simpler form, which is quite distinctive. Here’s what I mean.”

He gave me the big green-and-white-covered book of spirituals, and pointed out three songs; his large hand somehow reminded me of the long clean roots of a forest tree, with its long joints and rhythmic shape.

The songs he had indicated were, “Joshua Fit de Battle of Jericho,” and “Who’ll be a Witness for My Lord,” and “Little David.”

“Joshua fit de battle of Jericho, Jericho,
Jericho,
Joshua fit de battle of Jericho,
And de walls came tumbling down
That morning!
You can talk about your king of
Gideon,
You can talk about your man of Saul,
There’s none like good old Joshua
At de battle of Jericho!
Up to the walls of Jericho
He marched with spear in hand,
‘Go blow dem ram’s horns,’ Joshua
cried,
‘For de battle am in my hand!’ etc.”

“See how the negroes took the story, and to make it more vivid for themselves, reduced it to the simplest terms. Naturally, they didn’t improve it, but they took it to their hearts! Then there’s ‘Who’ll Be a Witness For My Lord,’ which recounts the high lights in the stories of Methuselah, Samson, and Daniel, and ‘Little David.’ The group who composed these songs were naturally artistic, and they were able to translate the grand epics of one people into naive terms for their own inspiration.”

Not all the negro folk-songs are spirituals. A large proportion of them are songs of their own experiences. One of the grandest of these is “Water-Boy,” a song of the negro chain-gangs. In these, too, the almost primitive rhythms and musical phrases of the spirituals are employed with great effect. But, for some reason, none of these folk-songs reach quite the same heights of dignity and beauty as does, for example, “Deep River” (where the voice of Robeson at the phrase, “Oh, don’t you want to go there, to that promised land, where all is peace,” seems to burst into hot bloom like the sudden sunlight on a hillside of tropic flowers), or “Stand Still, Jordan,” where Mr. Robeson carries the melodic line in one tense, molten flow of gold.

Of this remarkable singer a brilliant young woman editor of wide experience uttered one of the best criticisms, “This man is an aristocrat,” she said. “I would not have believed it possible that, so early as 1930 the negro race should produce so highly developed a character. I enjoy him more than X—(she mentioned a famous foreign artist)—because X embroiders and trims his art but Robeson is truly simple. X seems to consider his art a thing within himself, which he has developed, while Robeson is humble, like a priest, before the temple which he conceives his art to be.”