Wade in the Water
“Tell all my friends that I’m comin’ too”

At face value, the famous spiritual, *Wade in the Water*, seems to encourage people to be baptised in order to find hope for the future. However, many historians now believe the song is actually a very clever code that gave advice to slaves from the American south on how to escape to Canada, where slavery was illegal.

Have a close look at the lyrics. What do you think?

Slaves who were caught trying to escape would be punished by death, as an example to other slaves. This meant that the song had to be disguised as a religious song to avoid suspicion.

The song suggests the safest way of getting to Canada: follow the river. This meant that slaves could easily navigate at night to avoid being caught.

The journey was long (usually taking a year) and uncomfortable, so the song offered moral support along the way.

Even though hiding an escaped slave was punishable by death, people throughout the United States agreed to take in escapees. This network was highly organised, and became known as the Underground Railroad.

It is thought the slaves were encouraged to literally wade in the water rather than just walking along the banks of the river. This would prevent them being sniffed out by the bloodhounds sent by slave-owners.

The song needed to offer hope to anyone who tried to escape. It suggests that God is on their side, but also that they can be ‘redeemed’ (saved) by following the instructions.

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