Russell S. Bartlett*

Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters: The Model of Hebrew Prophecy in the Ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream!" Martin Luther King Jr. leavened much of his oratory with this famous quotation from the prophet Amos (5:24). Easily King's favorite biblical verse from either testament, it recurs throughout his sermons, speeches, interviews, magazine articles, and books. He used it in his address at the Holt Street Baptist Church on December 5, 1955, the crucial first day of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He used it in his last public address on April 3, 1968, the night before he was assassinated in Memphis. King drew upon this quotation for its powerful life-affirming imagery, for its authoritative voice, for its grounding deep in our Judeo-Christian ethical tradition. The frequency with which King quoted this verse is arguably the major reason it is so familiar to us today.

Some observers dismiss the Amos quotation as little more than emotional filler for King's oratory, providing neither depth nor insight into his ultimate concerns.[1] King's choice, though, is significant in and of itself: not the words of Jesus on loving our enemies, not the letters of Paul on faith, hope, and charity, but the spoken oracle of a Hebrew prophet, adopting the voice of God in demanding from God's people a torrent of reinvigorating justice. It becomes

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* Russell S. Bartlett is Professor of Religion and Chaplain, Mount Hermon School, Northfield, MA.

[1] E.g, Joseph M. Thompson, *Martin Luther King, Jr. and Christian Witness: An Interpretation of King Based on a Theological Model of Prophetic Witness*, Ph. D. Dissertation, Fordham University, 1981, p. 118, note #5.

all the more significant as an inaugurating and recurring theme of King's public ministry. Moreover, King's many other quotations of, references to, and adoptions of the "thundering voice" of the Hebrew prophets (to the widest variety of audiences) belie any casual dismissal. In the hearts of the prophets, in their words, in their deeds, King found a model for his own ministry, his own integration of preaching, action, and conscientious witness—which he urged others, both clergy and laity, to adopt. In the prophets' responses to the great social crises of their days King heard voices resonating with his own response to the modern social ills of racism, materialism, and militarism.

A close examination of three of King's sermons and speeches will reveal an increasing and authentic urgency in his message during the last three years of his life, 1965-68—a time characterized by Kenneth Smith as "The Radicalization of Martin Luther King, Jr."[2]—when America experienced a profound social crisis, expressed in urban riots, antiwar demonstrations, and widespread erosion of confidence in our governing institutions. Such an examination will also reveal an increasing reliance on the Hebrew prophets for the content of their message, for the style of their delivery, and for their action-defined roles in Israelite society.[3]

More than King's writings for publication,[4] his spoken words evoke five major themes from Hebrew prophecy: a sense of

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[2]Cf. Kenneth Smith's 1989 article: "The Radicalization of Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Last Three Years," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 26:2, Spring 1989.

[3]Focusing on three of King's delivered but unpublished addresses will accomplish three other goals: first, it will refine and concentrate the scope of this inquiry; second, it will allow a deeper analysis of certain works that may serve as windows to his life and work, considered more comprehensively; and third, it will make a contribution to scholarship on his writings that have not been as widely available, nor as seriously examined as his published materials.

[4]The published writings are consistent with the prophetic model, but not as dramatically compelling as his delivered addresses. Many scholars stress the primacy of the preached (and largely unpublished) word in understanding King. Cf. (in bibliography) articles by James Cone, David Garrow, Richard Lischer, and Keith Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

direct calling by God to speak the word of God; an overriding concern for ethical obedience to God's righteous covenant as authentic religious devotion; a passion for social justice which expresses our ethical obedience; a conviction that God's active presence in the world does not preclude but in fact demands a human response; and finally, a mixture of comforting, hopeful words along with doomsaying judgments. These themes form a core prophetic message—by no means exhaustive—on which King relied for the content of his own prophetic message. Closely related to content, the prophetic forms of speech adopted by King amplified his message and allowed it to resonate. Finally, King's understanding of the social context of the prophets influenced his own role in American society—combining opposition to established powers with an enduring faith in the original principles of American democracy—which occasioned his incisive yet always constructive criticisms of current American society. Like the prophets, King criticized governing institutions in a radical but non-systemic way.[5] Considered together, these facets of the prophetic model enabled him to speak and act with an authority and an authenticity few other public figures have been able to muster before or since.

After Amos, King drew on Micah and Isaiah most frequently in his sermons and speeches.[6] Amos describes himself as a Judahite dresser of sycamore trees, called to prophesy against the northern kingdom; Micah as a country dweller decries the abuses of city and court life; and the first Isaiah, as a court/cult prophet, sees more clearly the saving purposes of God working through the

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[5]E.g., he never advocated the restructuring—violent or otherwise—of the constitutionally-mandated three branches of federal government.

[6]King makes many other prophetic references, especially to Jeremiah and Ezekiel, but these references are made less directly through King's use of slave spirituals.

Davidic monarchy.[7] These three exemplars demonstrate that the gift of prophecy is granted to many people of diverse backgrounds.

However, what is most striking about these prophets of the Golden Age (late 8th—late 6th century, BCE) is their common concern for proclaiming the word of God, for social justice, and for other core prophetic themes. They spoke for God the liberator of the Israelites from Egypt, God the giver of the covenant to Moses at Sinai. Events both external and internal to Israel were interpreted in light of God's active, interested presence. Confronting any and all perpetrators of religious idolatry, corruption, and social injustice, the prophets saw the connections between Israel's failure to honor the covenant traditions and her subsequent punishment. Rather than "predicting" the future, the prophets were merely discerning the signs of history within the context of understanding and proclaiming God's word, and subsequently judging a person's or a nation's obedience to that word.[8] The prophets denounced all forms of socio-economic exploitation as affronts to God, announcing God's anger in the form of harsh judgments, interspersed with expressions of hope: for Israel's reaffirmation of the covenant, and for God's mercy.

Despite their bold, challenging postures to evil kings and corrupt elites, the prophets were not revolutionaries. They were reformers; they did not criticize systemic forms of injustice. The prophets did not advocate a nonviolent ethic of social protest, neither did they promote a grassroots sort of community organizing for

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[7]The writing prophets we have inherited in the Hebrew canon were probably more confrontational and less beholden to established institutions than were the court/cult prophets. For example, Amos in his confrontation with Amaziah the priest makes a point of distinguishing himself from paid court prophets. Cf. Amos 7:14. Isaiah as an insider may have been an exception to this rule.

[8]R.B.Y. Scott, *The Relevance of the Prophets*, (New York: Macmillan, 1968) p. 14. "The prophets were primarily preachers in the highest sense of that term, rather than teachers or prognosticators. The epigram which describes them as 'forth tellers rather than foretellers' makes a useful if not a completely accurate distinction."

resistance or change. The solution to all crises was not to sweep away an aging corrupt order, but to reaffirm something very old: God's covenant with Israel, and more generally speaking, our dependence on the living, present God. The prophets understood themselves to be heirs to and advocates of a rich, vital, and still viable tradition that began with the formative experiences of the Exodus and the Sinai covenant. For these reasons the prophets are aptly described as radical messengers with an essentially conservative message.[9]

The prophets did not come to King pure and unmediated. They were passed on to him—indeed, made compelling to him—via three major traditions, which are themselves intertwined and mutually affective: first, through the life and ministry of Jesus; second, through liberal Protestant (mostly white) theology and preaching; third, and most important, through African American church culture. Mediated or otherwise, the Hebrew prophets were directly available to King, not because he was a Baptist minister, not because he earned a Ph.D. in systematic theology. All he needed was a Bible.[10]

King's Sermons

In 1965, rather than departing radically from the past, King builds upon and intensifies his invocation of prophetic themes and

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[9]Scott, pp. 2, 14-17.

[10]Kelvin Calloway, in *Martin Luther King, Jr., Modern-Day Prophet: An Ethical Analysis of King's Preaching*. D. Min. Dissertation, School of Theology at Claremont, 1988, pp. 25-26, observes the presence of the biblical prophetic tradition in King's sermons, while also reminding us that King never took any course on the prophets while at Crozer Theological Seminary (1948-51). But he did study biblical Hebrew, and struggled with it. Cf. "Letter to Alberta Williams King [Oct. 1948]" in Clayborne Carson, Sr. ed., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., vol. I*, p. 161. At Boston University King took his advisor L. Harold DeWolf's course, "Religious Teachings of the Old Testament." Cf. King's transcript on display at the King Collection at Boston U. (hereafter referred to as KCBU).

models seen very early in his career.[11] First we will examine the 1955 "Holt Street Address" to observe this early usage, then consider two speeches from the later years: the 1965 "Address to the Synagogue Council," and the 1968 "Address to the Ministers' Leadership Training Conference."

Early Years: The Holt Street Address. David Garrow identifies this first address to the bus boycotters (December 5, 1955) as one of the crucial windows into King's work, demonstrating the profound influence of the southern Black church and the Bible on his life.[12] It illustrates King's invocation of the prophets at a critical moment in his ministry, the first of countless others. Its place as the first address of his career as a civil rights leader, as well as the spontaneity with which it was delivered, confer upon this speech a special prominence in the King canon.[13]

King begins by defining both the community present that night and the purpose of the meeting. He appeals to his audience as Americans who love democracy, "determined to apply our citizenship to the fullness of its means." People have gathered to correct the bus situation, both the immediate outrage of Rosa Parks'

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[11]Of the 100 sermons and speeches read and/or listened to for this study—spanning his entire public career—King invokes the prophets in many ways throughout his ministry, but much more frequently during the years 1965-68.

[12]Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Influences and Commentaries," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 40:4, 1986, p. 5. Garrow also notes the struggle in King scholarship to identify the major intellectual source and influence on his life. Recent King scholarship conducted by Lewis Baldwin, Kelvin Calloway, James Cone, David Garrow, Cornelius Gray, and Richard Lischer stresses this black church/Bible influence more than earlier studies of his life and thought. In this paper I have followed their compelling line of reasoning.

[13]In his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom* (pp. 58-64), King directly comments on the lack of preparation time. (Earlier in the day King, the 26 year-old pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, had been selected to lead the newly-formed Montgomery Improvement Association and to address the meeting that evening.) Note the prophetic theme of divine calling and divine inspiration—as passed on via Black preachers—that King uses to explain the address' success: "...I realized that this speech had evoked more response than any speech or sermon I had ever delivered, and yet it was virtually unprepared. I came to see for the first time what the older preachers meant then they said, 'Open your mouth and God will speak for you.'" (p. 63).

arrest and the long history of intimidation, humiliation, and oppression experienced by African Americans on Montgomery's buses. Using a familiar rhetorical technique—later epitomized in his "I Have a Dream" speech—King introduces these themes with a crescendo-building repetition of "We are here because..." Five times in his six opening sentences he uses this formula, along with four other identity-forging "we are's," culminating with "We are here because we are determined to get the [bus] situation corrected." This technique is a mainstay of African American homiletics, preparing and inviting the congregation to participate in the "call and response" phase of the sermon or address, where energy and identity are exchanged and amplified between pulpit and pew.[14]

Two other times in the address King uses such repetition, achieving ever greater responses from the audience. After detailing Parks' arrest and contrasting it with her upstanding character as responsible citizen and devoted Christian, King declares:

> There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. [Thunderous applause] There comes a time my friends when people get tired of being flung across the abyss of humiliation...[Keep talking!] There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July, and left standing amidst the piercing chill of an Alpine November. [Applause][15]

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[14]Richard Lischer, "The Word that Moves: The Preaching of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Theology Today*, 46:2, July 1989, pp. 172-176. Such repetition is present in classical Greek and Roman oratory as well. Cf. Joseph M. Thompson, pp. 66-68. (We cannot be sure, of course, what kind of response the Greeks and Romans made.) One may also note that such repetition is a mainstay of prophetic oracles and biblical poetry in general. Cf. "Characteristics of Hebrew Poetry" in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, pp. 1523-1529.

[15]Like many others in the King Center Archives, this speech is a transcription from a live recording, which also has the audience's response. Being able to listen to King's preaching is not just an added dimension of understanding, but a crucial part of true appreciation of the primacy of the spoken word. Cf. Lischer, pp. 171-172.

After stressing the need for nonviolence and identifying the audience as triply special because of its adherence to Christianity, its experience of oppression as African Americans, and its location in America with her glorious tradition of protest, King invokes the concept of ethical action in its political and divine/universal dimensions:

> And we are not wrong, we are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong, then the Supreme Court of this Nation is wrong. [Yes Sir! Applause] If we are wrong the Constitution of the United States is wrong. [Applause] If we are wrong God Almighty is wrong. [Cheers and applause] If we are wrong Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer and never came down to earth. [Applause] If we are wrong justice is a lie.

Ending this last climax, King quotes Amos: "And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream. [Applause]"

Only two-thirds completed, the address already raises several prophetic themes. First is the demand for social justice, for fair treatment on the buses of Montgomery. Second is the sense that the African Americans of Montgomery must actively pursue justice, not merely wait for the millennium. Third, is an evocation of covenant obedience paralleling the prophets' evocations of the Sinai covenant. King asserts that those protesting will not be defying the Constitution, the inaugurating secular covenant of this nation which established principles of justice and conferred upon the American people a unique status and purpose: a chosen people with a special mission.

King, however, does more than raise prophetic themes in his message; he actually adopts the prophetic model of speech and action at the close of his address. In stressing the need for the salu-

tary, complementary effect of justice on love (implying that we often think of love as the only element of Christian faith) King reminds us that "justice is really love in calculation. Justice is love correcting that which would work against love." To reinforce this point, he adopts the voice of God in offering a judgment oracle:

> God [is not] just standing out saying, "Behold thee, I love you Negro." He's also the God that standeth before the nations and says: "Be still and know that I am God, [Applause] that if you don't obey me I'm gonna break the backbone of your power, and cast you out of the arms of your international and national relationships."[16]

The sense of direct calling by God, so essential to the prophetic model of ministry, is extended through King to the African American audience present. It is a call to Black Messianism that he reiterates at the end of his speech and to which he will return throughout his career.[17] In this masterful first public address he makes references to Jesus and Christianity, but chooses to quote a fiery Hebrew prophet, to adopt the voice of a stern prophetic oracle, and to evoke several quintessential prophetic themes, chief among them the need for us to pursue justice actively as a form of obedience to God.

After the bus boycott was successfully completed in 1956—

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[16]Cf. Psalm 46:10 and Isaiah 41. God standing before the assembled nations is a common theme in Hebrew prophecy brought up as early as Amos and as late as Zechariah. It is a common theme to both prophetic and apocalyptic literature. Note that in King's favorite verse Amos is actually assuming the voice of God (5:24). Note also that the exact community addressed by the judgment oracle is cleverly left ambiguous. Certainly African Americans need to obey God's call, but King in a classic prophetic stance of opposition is reminding those who are engaged in national and international relationships—i.e. the U.S. government—that they, too, stand before God's judgment and must likewise heed the call or suffer the consequences.

[17]Lewis Baldwin, "Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black Church, and the Black Messianic Vision," *The Journal of the I.T.C.*, 12:1,2, Fall 1984/Spring 1985, *passim*.

and he had acquired national and international fame—King was never without an opportunity to speak. The prophetic themes expounded in the Holt Street address were recalled in various sermons and speeches during these early years (i.e., pre-1963, before Birmingham and the March on Washington).[18] Though present in these early addresses, the prophetic references are not as frequent, nor as urgent as in the last three years.

The Later Years: 1965-1968. In contrast to his earlier triumphs, the last three years of King's life are noted for his setbacks and his increasing radicalization in his thinking, speaking, and acting. The peak of his positive acclaim had already passed towards the end of 1965—after Birmingham, the March on Washington, the receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize, and especially after the Selma voting rights march. He was expanding the area of his concern beyond racism, criticizing the government for its failure to address the intertwined evils of militarism and entrenched poverty which, along with racism, he was beginning to see as more deeply rooted in the psyche and structure of American society. Despite positive change regarding legalized racism,[19] his expanded agenda and demands for more systemic change encountered stiffer resistance from those in political power.[20] For his denunciation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, King experienced harsh criticism from other civil rights leaders who feared his outspokenness on such "peripheral" issues would damage their pursuit of racial justice here in America. At the

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[18]In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" King directly identifies with the prophets who leave their villages to confront injustice with the word of God; in "I Have a Dream" King alludes to famous passages from Amos, Isaiah, and Daniel in his long crescendo finale. Cf. also, a 1957 address to the Conference on Christian Faith and Human Relations, stressing the prophetic role of the church, and a 1959 address at the fourth anniversary of the M.I.A., in which King upholds the Jews as a people—like the African American community—able to overcome prejudice and other obstacles to produce such great figures as Handel, Einstein, *and the prophets*. [emphasis added]

[19]E.g., the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

[20] Most notably from Lyndon Johnson regarding Vietnam policy, and from Richard Daley, the mayor of Chicago, regarding open-housing protests in 1966.

same time younger Black Power advocates were challenging his leadership and nonviolent philosophy, most notably during and after the Selma march. All of this was happening amidst a wave of massive urban rioting that began in Watts, Los Angeles, in the summer of 1965 and spread to other major urban centers over the next three summers. Not surprisingly, those same scholars noting King's radicalization have also noted his weariness regarding the achievement of lasting peace and social justice.[21] This is also a time when King's invocation of the Hebrew prophets increases dramatically.[22]

Address to the Synagogue Council. In a December 1965 address, King delivered the most extended discussion of Hebrew prophecy in his career. The speech is a watershed in his thought, of comparable significance to the Holt Street address, for it speaks to the extremism of the times, profoundly invoking the Hebrew prophets as vital, relevant models for current action—a truly bold statement heard nowhere before in King's sermons or other writings.

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[21]Lischer, p. 181, and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, pp. 602-604 (Garrow calls it depression induced partly by criticism and personal failures; contrast this position with the Christian optimism throughout King's life stressed by Baldwin. *There is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Minneapolis:* Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 5-6, 339 and Spillers, pp. 96-99.

[22]Though not asserted in a prepared address, in the summer of 1965 King explicitly described his ministry as prophetic. In two separate television interviews—one of which appeared before a national audience—King answered questions about his anti-Vietnam stand and his alleged uniting of peace and civil rights issues by claiming that ministers have a prophetic function: "...my expressions on the war in Vietnam grow out of something much larger than my participation in the Civil Rights movement. I happen to be a minister of the Gospel and I take that ministry very seriously, and in that capacity I have not merely a priestly function but a prophetic function, and I must ever seek to bring the great principles and insights of our Judeo-Christian heritage to bear on the social evils of our day....as a minister of the Gospel and one greatly concerned about the need for peace in our world and the survival of mankind, I must continue to take a stand on this issue." Perhaps because he was being interviewed on television, in a non-religious context, King did not quote from the prophets directly. But the core themes of prophetic witness—of being called to speak out against social injustice, and to look into our ethical heritage for guiding principles—these are clearly articulated in the interviews, and to one of his widest possible audiences. "Interview on CBS-TV, *Face the Nation*," 29 August 1965. King said virtually the same thing earlier in a local Los Angeles newscast on July 10, 1965.

The speech reflects much of what he was experiencing at the time: the radicalization of his thought, the expanding focus of his conscientious witness, and the mounting wave of criticism for his stance on Vietnam. At this time of personal and public turmoil, he looked "into history for the courage to speak even in an unpopular cause. Looming as ethical giants are those most extraordinary men of history, the Hebrew prophets."

King focuses on war and peace issues,[23] specifically the escalating American involvement in Vietnam, and the "ugly repressive sentiment to silence peace-seekers" like himself. While warning us of the inexorable logic of war—including the possibility of nuclear holocaust—and of America's failure to pursue peace in good faith, he notes that "Free speech and the privilege of dissent and discussion are rights being shot down by bombers in Vietnam."[24]

After linking nuclear-era militarism with racism at home—"there is no point in fighting for integration of lunch counters if there can be no world in which to integrate"—King identifies himself as a minister of the gospel, "mandated by this calling...to seek peace among men and to do it even in the face of hysteria and scorn," to denounce moderates who see evil in the world yet say nothing, and to break silence "when a more terrible scourge afflicts the world." After creating an urgent mood, along with a sense of powerful, insidious evil, King the masterful preacher looks deep into our Judeo-Christian tradition for courageous forebears and finds the Hebrew prophets.

King discusses the prophets at the emotional, climactic core

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[23]The occasion is King's acceptance of the Synagogue Council of America's Judaism and World Peace Award.

[24]To defend his stance, King reminds us of the anti-war stances of certain national political leaders; he later recalls Abraham Lincoln, not for his Emancipation Proclamation, as King had done so many times before, but for his fearless denunciation of the Mexican War while a first-term congressman from Illinois.

of his address, later using some of the momentum-building repetition we have heard before.[25] Admiring their thundering voices of conscience, their articulate, passionate and fearless attacks on injustice and corruption—whether in kings or in their own unrepentant people—King declares that "today we particularly need the Hebrew prophets because they taught that to love God was to love justice: that each human being has an inescapable obligation to denounce evil where he sees it and to defy a ruler who commands him to break the covenant." Here we have King's understanding of Hebrew prophecy and its continuing vital relevance today. Just as importantly, we see his identification with the role of prophet: "Without physical protection, scornful of risks evoked by their unpopular messages, they went among the people with no shield other than truth." These words acquire a special poignancy when the man uttering them has been stabbed, beaten, arrested, and threatened with death or bodily harm innumerable times for his own fearless truth-telling.

King ascends the staircase of emotional pitch by repeating the incantatory phrases, "We need the Hebrew prophets today because..." or "The Hebrew prophets are needed today because..." Among the chief reasons given: their courage to speak the truth will inspire decent people to do likewise; they will show us that living silently with a lie is a gross affront to God; and "the thunder of [prophetic] voices is the only sound stronger than the blasts of bombs and the clamor of war hysteria." Again, we have a reiteration of three of the five core prophetic themes (the last two will appear shortly in the address). He describes himself as a minister of the gospel called to speak and act out the truth, which he equates with the word of God. Not only that, but he describes all human

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[25]But this is not a sermon to a familiar African American congregation—before whom he might comfortably employ those same homiletical techniques he used so well in Montgomery (and elsewhere). This unpublished speech has no indications of audience response, unlike the Holt St. address.

beings as under an "inescapable obligation" to speak and act similarly—"to love God [is] to love justice." One way of speaking truth, loving justice, and thereby loving God, is defying a ruler who commands us to break the covenant. In the context of this address that questions the legality and morality of our government's actions in Vietnam, King is symbolically identifying the U.S. Constitution with the Sinai covenant, Lyndon Johnson with the corrupt ruler, and the courageous opposers of such rulers with the prophets.[26] Furthermore, the passion for social justice is proposed as a sharp contrast to the entrenched racism here in the United States, and more specifically to the vicious conduct of our troops in this war.

The last two core themes—God's present persistent demand for human action in this world, and a combination of hope- and doom-filled utterances—are more clearly articulated in the later section of the momentum-building repetition. After quoting his three favorite prophets in one paragraph,[27] King identifies the Hebrew prophets as among us today, in the form of those ministers who preach the "prophets' message of truth and decency, brotherhood and peace...[these prophets] are living in our time to give hope to a tortured world that their promise of the Kingdom of God has not been lost to mankind." Again, he identifies the prophet with the minister, focusing on the central role preaching plays in both vocations. Despite the stern quotation from Isaiah, the physical presence of these ministers among us today is a sure, hopeful sign of God's active presence in our lives, calling us "to undergo a mental and spiritual re-evaluation, a change of focus which will...generate the readiness, indeed the eagerness, to enter into the new world which is now possible, 'the city which hath foundation, whose builder and maker is God.' "

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[26]It is plausible to suggest that King saw himself in the prophetic tradition of Nathan confronting David regarding Uriah, or Elijah confronting Ahab regarding Naboth.

[27]Amos ("Let justice roll..."), Micah ("they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks..." 4:3, also Isaiah 2:4) and Isaiah ("When ye make many prayers, I will not hear; Your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean..." 1:15-16).

Some observers may dismiss this speech as flattery aimed at a specific Jewish religious group in New York City. Yet, as we have seen, King looked to the Hebrew prophets as early as 1955, long before this 1965 speech. He had invoked the authority of prophetic witness as recently as the previous summer, before a national television audience. He would be looking to the prophets with increasing urgency afterwards, up to his death in 1968.[28]

Address to the Ministers' Leadership Training Conference. The last few months of King's life were consumed with a proposed Poor People's Campaign—his boldest, most radical form of nonviolent direct action—scheduled to culminate in Washington, DC, during the spring of 1968. His efforts on behalf of this campaign—to address systemic economic inequality—are reflected in his sermons and speeches throughout the period. He relies on the prophets to convey a sense of urgency by providing familiar passages of impending judgment (and inspiring hope).[29] They also provide the most effective models of thought, speech, and action for both the rank and file of this campaign and the clergy who make up the leadership, including King.

More than any other speech of his career, King's "Address to the Ministers Leadership Training Conference" (February 23, 1968) forcefully presents Hebrew prophecy as an action-based model for present-day ministry. His discussion of the prophets and

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[28]For the television interview(s), cf. note 22, above. For especially relevant sermons on core prophetic themes during these later years, cf. from 1966: "Guidelines for a Constructive Church" and "Prodigal Son;" from 1967: "Why I am Opposed to the War in Vietnam" and "To Serve the Present Age;" and from 1968: "Address to the Mass Meeting [Birmingham]."

[29]To add to the sense of urgency, consider that in 1967—during the summer before the Poor People's Campaign—the most destructive riots to date erupted in Newark, Detroit, and many other cities. In Detroit alone, six days of rioting resulted in 43 deaths, over 1000 wounded, and thousands of arrests. That summer violence prompted President Johnson to create a National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. Cf. Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1980*, pp. 200-204.

their fusion of challenging speech with challenging action is on a par with his 1965 speech to the Synagogue Council, but with an added emotional pitch. This increased zeal is perhaps not surprising, considering the situation, a conference mobilizing support for the truly ambitious Poor People's Campaign, and the audience—mostly African American pastors and other committed activists with whom he could engage more comfortably in the emotional rhythms of African American preaching.[30]

King's title for his remarks, "To Minister to the Valley," uses a familiar prophetic image—epitomized in Isaiah 40—which he contrasts early on with the mountain imagery first seen in the Bible with Moses at Sinai. "...[This conference] has been a mountaintop experience. And there are those transfiguring moments in life when we do ascend the mountaintop where we are inspired, where we are lifted, and where we feel a sense of eternity." But there is a temptation, he warns, to stay on the mountaintop and forget the despair of those remaining in the valley. "And the valley calls us. We will be returning to valleys filled with men and women who know the ache and anguish of poverty."

He challenges these leaders of the church to minister to this valley made bleak and desolate by the evils of racism, militarism and, most especially for this campaign, economic exploitation. He challenges his audience to harness and direct the angry frustration of the poor and the youth in America by making the church relevant, i.e., prophetic, in its concern for social justice, and revolutionary in its ability to challenge the status quo.

> We can make the church recapture its authentic ring. We have the power to change America, and give a kind of new vitality to the religion of Jesus Christ. And we

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[30]Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, pp. 598-599. Garrow also mentions that King offered some very pointed, despondent opening remarks to the conference on 19 February: "A kind of genocide has been perpetrated against the black people,...Not physical genocide, but psychological and spiritual genocide,..." (*Ibid.*, p. 598)

> of new vitality to the religion of Jesus Christ. And we can get those young men and women...who've lost faith in the church to see that Jesus was a serious man precisely because he dealt with the tang of the human amid the glow of the divine, and that he was concerned about their problems. He was concerned about bread...[He was] the greatest revolutionary that history has ever known.

Not Karl Marx but Jesus is King's authentic revolutionary,[31] and to reinforce this point he recalls Jesus' quotation of Isaiah, "He was anointed to heal the broken-hearted...to deal with the problems of the poor," etc.

King brings up the theme of America's failure to obey its sacred covenantal obligations, once again linking the principles articulated in the Declaration of Independence with earlier understandings of basic human rights as God-given. And in this speech he forcefully questions the ability of Black America to celebrate the upcoming Bicentennial.[32] "What life have we known? Too often it's a life of unemployment, of under-employment, of misery and poverty. What liberty have we known? Too often it is merely the liberty to move from one slum to another."

The Poor People's Campaign will allow a creative, nonviolent expression of this misery and anger, with the ultimate goal of forcing the federal government to do something. "They [Congress and the President] aren't going to do a single thing until we act,

[31]Smith, p. 280.

[32]King's criticism of American society, though deep, did not cut so deep as Thurgood Marshall's comments on the Constitution's slavery compromises in his 1987 *Ebony* article, "The Real Meaning of the Constitution's Bicentennial." Consider this brief passage: "I do not believe that the meaning of the Constitution was forever "fixed" at Philadelphia. Nor do I find the wisdom, foresight, and sense of justice exhibited by the Framers particularly profound. To the contrary, the government they devised was defective from the start,..." (p. 64) He also points out the irony of the Declaration's truth that "all men are created equal" being written by a slaveowner in the midst of a slave-owning society.

until we act massively, until we create a nonviolent crisis in this nation." King then invokes the empowering imagery of Exodus by declaring that the opening of this campaign "would be the first wave. But you see, you don't deal with pharaoh's hardened heart with just one plague. You got to keep plaguing pharaoh. And we want waves and waves."

In this scheme President Johnson is cast in the role of Pharaoh, and as the leader of this challenging campaign, King implies a connection between himself and Moses.[33]

Interestingly, after the Exodus imagery, yet still in the heat of sermonizing for this protest campaign, King draws back from a more radical posture and qualifies his remarks.

> ...[W]e aren't going to close down the Pentagon...We aren't going there to close down Capitol Hill...But if they don't respond to us,...we can do a lot of other things to escalate it. We can get three or four trucks moving through the ghettoes of our nation, picking up uncollected garbage, and take it and pour it right down [on] Capitol Hill.

As the enlister of mass support, King is perhaps calming those who flinch at the extreme action of occupying offices, especially the military's headquarters. He also highlights the symbolic action of garbage dumping as an alternative to the more revolutionary (and potentially more violence-provoking) tactic of "closing down" the government. His position is consistent with the general position of the Hebrew prophets: they accused Israel's rulers of covenant infidelity and pronounced doom-filled judgment, presenting themselves in fearless witness to their understanding of God's call. They engaged in symbolic action to dramatize the urgency of

[33]The Moses-King link was one other observers had made on numerous occasions but which King himself was reluctant to make. Cf. Baldwin, *There is a Balm in Gilead*, pp. 246-249.

whatever crisis the nation was confronting (e.g., Jeremiah's yoke). But they did not themselves wield the sword that would kill an unjust king, nor did they lead popular uprisings (violent or otherwise) to replace the institution of kingship with another form of government.

Several other prophetic themes heard earlier in King sermons are again brought up: the sense of America as a chosen nation, with great potential and thus great expectations; the harsh judgment of God when those expectations are unfulfilled or willfully ignored ("Congress sees the problem [of poverty] every day. But they won't face it. And I hate to say it. But this Congress, if it does not come to itself, is going to hell");[34] the need for the church and its membership to be actively engaged in the struggle to bring the Kingdom of God to the present; and the presence of hope, seen in the belief that the protesters are obeying God's will.

But in asking these ministers to choose the path of open protest King offers as an inspirational model the Hebrew prophets, and the continuation of their prophetic spirit in the actions of Jesus and his early followers. The following crescendo from the speech is worth quoting at length because it contains all five of the core prophetic themes outlined above and a mixture of famous prophetic passages interspersed with present day problems, thus achieving a conflation of current historic time with transhistoric Biblical time.

> [W]e are not only priests, but we are prophets. When God speaks, who can but prophesy? We are prophets and if we are going to have a creative ministry, we must have a prophetic ministry. And I would urge you today...to go out and prophesy. Prophesy until slums and rat-infested

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[34]Note the phrasing "come to itself," suggesting redeemable qualities at the heart of this otherwise unresponsive Congress. Despite the harsh tone of the judgment, King has not given up entirely on America's government, nor on its ability to change through nonviolent pressure—not to the extent that Black Nationalists have given up.

ghettoes will be a thing of a dead past...Go out and prophesy, until the idle industries of Appalachia are revitalized and the wrinkled stomachs in Mississippi are filled....Go out and prophesy, until our state houses and our city halls will be filled with men who will do justly, who will love mercy, and will walk humbly with their God. Go out and prophesy, until even the lion and the lamb can lie down together, and every man will sit under his own vine and fig tree, and none shall be afraid. It won't always be easy ....But if we are followers of Jesus Christ, we know that Christianity is not a euphoria of unalloyed comfort and untroubled ease....It means taking up the cross....with all of its tension-packed agony and bearing that cross until it leaves the very marks of Jesus Christ on your body, and on your soul....[W]e're going back to a valley that's filled with despair ....And we have the job of transforming the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope.

This address is easily King's most profound evocation of the prophetic model of ministry, coming about six weeks before his death.[35]

The three sermons examined in depth for this survey best represent King's understanding and use of prophetic models for thinking, speaking, and acting. His increasing radicalization between 1965 and 1968 is reflected in his increasing reliance on the prophetic model during those years. Of the approximately 100 sermons examined for this essay, forty of them were taken from the

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[35]King employs the prophetic model with equal if not more intensity in his last address, "I've Been to the Mountaintop" (also known as "I See the Promised Land"). With this famous speech, quite easily available on tape, one can experience more fully King's emotional crescendos, and the audience's reflection and amplification of his energy.

years 1955-1964, the remaining sixty from 1965 onward.[36] Though prophetic themes could be discerned in all time periods, the reliance in the last three years on prophetic quotations and prophetic models for speaking and acting increase both quantitatively and qualitatively. Before speculating further on why King embraced prophetic models, we should consider briefly the three traditions which made the Hebrew prophets so appealing to King in the first place.

Three Traditions Mediating Hebrew Prophecy

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a minister of the gospel and believed in Jesus as the Messiah. He reminds his audiences time and again of his calling as a Baptist minister, making Jesus and the gospels the focus of his sermons. But it is important to note that he concentrated on the prophetic elements in Jesus' life, and furthermore Jesus himself was aware of the prophetic tradition with which he himself identified.

The inaugurating act of Jesus' public ministry was a symbolic identification with the spirit of Hebrew prophecy: baptism in the Jordan with the prophet-like John the Baptist.[37] King focused on Jesus' quotation of Isaiah regarding the preaching of the gospel to the poor, liberation of the oppressed, etc.[38] Jesus' teachings, healings, and confrontations with established powers are the subjects of King's sermons, i.e., those features consistent with the prophetic

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[36]The overwhelming majority of materials consulted for this paper is housed in the largest repository of King materials in the world: the Archives of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta. As an indicator of the weighting of later materials, consider their index of "Speeches, Sermons, Articles, Statements: 1954-1968." Of the 925 items listed, 491 come from the years before 1965, whereas 420 are dated 1965 or later. (14 items without dates are listed at the end of the index, thereby bringing the total to 925.)

[37]The retelling of this event in all four gospels certainly adds to its significance in Jesus' life. Moreover, Albert Nolan in *Jesus Before Christianity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976), emphasizes this event precisely as a self-conscious identification with the prophetic heritage. Cf. p.11, Ch. 2 *passim*

[38]Luke 4:17-19. Jesus' quotation is a combination of Isaiah 61:1,2 and 58:6.

themes of ethical obedience, social justice, and human efforts to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. The high christology of Jesus as the eternal *logos*, the final judge, is not nearly so important to him as the low christology of Jesus, the living human being, the teacher and comforter of the oppressed, the nonviolent opposer of injustice and embodiment of the ethic of love.

This human side of Jesus is the single most important feature of Christianity stressed by liberal Protestantism, resonating well with the prophetic emphasis on God's active presence in the human situation.[39] King found renewed meaning and purpose in organized religion as a result of his exposure to various strands of liberal Protestantism, especially its emphasis on reconciling scriptural revelation with modern science.[40]

The Social Gospel and Personalism are perhaps the strands of liberal Protestantism most pertinent to King's understanding of the prophets. Walter Rauschenbusch directly invokes the prophetic tradition of Amos, Isaiah, Micah, and Jesus, as a grounding for his theology of human endeavor to build the Kingdom of God on earth.[41] Personalism's conception of God as an active, personal

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[39]As King reminded us so often, "It's alright to talk about 'long white robes over yonder,' in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here." This quotation, representative of perhaps hundreds more in the King canon, is from his last public address, "I've Been to the Mountaintop" (also known as "I See the Promised Land"). Cf. *A Testament of Hope*, p. 280.

[40]The historical critical method of biblical inquiry emerged from this attempt to reconcile revelation and rationalism. In his "Autobiography of Religious Development," King describes himself as skeptical by nature, questioning in his early adolescence the bodily resurrection of Jesus, later in college feeling liberated from an uncritical fundamentalism, allowing him to embrace the more quintessentially liberal view of the Bible as possessing profound truths behind the myths. Although autobiographical statements are perhaps more authentic sources of knowledge about King, they, too, are not accepted uncritically. Keith Miller, for example, questions the accuracy of King's characterization of his father's religious views as "fundamentalist," and further questions the absence of any references to the African American church in another famous autobiographical piece, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence." Cf. *Voice of Deliverance*, Chs. 2 & 3, *passim*, and Cone's "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Black Theology and the Black Church," *The Drew Gateway*, Winter 1985, 56:2, pp. 2-3.

[41]Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Gospel for the Social Awakening: Selections from the Writings of Walter Rauschenbusch* (compiled by Benjamin E. Mays), (New York: Association Press, 1950), pp. 62-67.

deity—coupled with the dignity and worth of all human personality—resonated well with the Hebrew prophets' conception of God as an interested but stern and demanding father figure to his children.[42]

Recent King scholarship has also revealed the profound influence of the liberal homiletic tradition on his oratory, as epitomized by Harry Emerson Fosdick and Robert McCracken, popular pastors and radio preachers of New York's Riverside Church. King used a great deal of material from these ministers in his own sermons, including passages on social action, pacifism, nonviolence, and nonconformity.[43] This scholarship stresses the impact of the "lower" homiletic tradition on him more than the "higher" theological and philosophical traditions stressed by earlier King scholars and King himself. In both cases, a liberal outlook toward the Bible, toward religion in general, and toward current social problems predominates.

Clearly, however, the most important avenue for King's appropriation of the Hebrew prophets is the African American church, the community that nurtured him and his family for generations.[44] In assessing this community's role in making Hebrew prophecy amenable to King, we should consider two major aspects of African American church culture: its unique biblical interpretation and the powerful models of prophetic ministry it provided, seen especially in King's own family heritage.

[42]King was impressed enough by this school of theology to pursue doctoral work at Boston U. under its major thinkers, L. Harold DeWolf and Edgar S. Brightman. King credits Rauschenbusch, Brightman and DeWolf as major influences on his thinking in his "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," incorporated into *Stride Toward Freedom* as Ch. 6.

[43]Keith Miller, *Voice of Deliverance*, Ch. 3 & 4, *passim*, and pp. 200-201.

[44]Besides Miller—who stresses King's successful combination of the homiletic traditions of white liberalism *and the African American folk pulpit*—Lewis Baldwin focuses on King's African American, southern, folk cultural roots. Miller's focus on homiletics and Baldwin's emphasis on folk culture are complementary angles of approach to King scholarship. Earlier treatments of King—e.g., Smith and Zepp's—have accepted uncritically the bias toward theology and philosophy as practiced in the academy. King himself may have learned through his academic training to devalue the insights of folk pulpit wisdom or African American theology (the very concept of a theologizing unique to African Americans—or theologizing as an endeavor open to all—is at best embryonic in King's thinking).

The experience of enslavement, exile, oppression, and endurance that has characterized the African American's time on this continent has enabled the African American church community to see the story of the Israelites' liberation as fundamentally their own, second only to the Jews' identification with this story. The Exodus and Moses traditions are thus paradigmatic for all subsequent African American biblical interpretation.[45] The centrality of this liberating event to later interpreters, including the canonical prophets, cannot be overstated. "Deliverance from oppression was *the* event through which the later Israelite inevitably viewed his understanding of himself, God, and his people."[46] As the prophets looked back to the saving act of God in the Exodus and saw a paramount concern for deliverance from oppression, so later African American interpreters—especially Martin Luther King, Jr.—looked to the same story, and to those prophetic champions of "God's concern for a poor/oppressed people."[47]

This story of a liberating God concerned with human suffering has been transmitted most notably in the African American community by the central character of the charismatic, prophetic preacher.[48] King well understood this model of ministry and preaching, especially its prophetic dimensions. His father, grandfather, and great-grandfather participated in a tradition that had its roots in slave-era folk preachers who, denied any formal education, nonetheless preached an emotional experience of God's word, passing on the liberating stories of the Bible, leading resistance to the

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[45]This is a common thesis advanced by students of African American culture. For some recent examples of this kind of scholarship, cf. the articles in Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

[46]Thomas Hoyt, Jr., "The Biblical Tradition of the Poor and Martin Luther King, Jr." in *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, Reprint. (no date) p. 16.

[47]*Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

[48]Cf. Lewis Baldwin, *There is a Balm in Gilead*: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), Ch. 5.

enslaving culture, and providing hope to the slave community.[49]

King and his preaching ancestors were also significantly molded by the experience of higher education in the African American tradition at Morehouse College. He was nurtured during his Morehouse days by Benjamin Mays and George Kelsey, scholars who embodied a creative synthesis of African American folk wisdom and advanced liberal theological knowledge, as well as a tradition of scholarly and practical concern for racial and social justice.[50] In addition to the example set by his father, Mays, and Kelsey, King also experienced a powerful, charismatic, and learned model of preaching in Vernon Johns, his immediate predecessor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery.[51] What these representative personalities illustrate is the rich tradition of social activism and social protest emanating from the African American pulpit that King inherited as the son, grandson, and great-grandson of Baptist preachers. Coupled with the biblical paradigm of liberation from oppression as epitomized in the Exodus and Moses traditions, the African American church was especially receptive to the core prophetic themes we have seen King enliven and carry on in his own masterful sermonizing.

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[49]In his "Autobiography of Religious Development" King sees his father as a great motivating factor in his adoption of ministry as a profession (p. 13 ff). My information regarding slave-era folk preaching comes from a conversation with Dr. Major J. Jones, Chaplain at the Atlanta University Center Library, on 9 Jan. 1992 and from John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 61-76. Blassingame also discusses at length the profound influence of the spiritual as a form of instruction, hope, and group identity. King quoted widely from the spirituals, often ending his sermons with rhythmic passages from them. To the extent that spirituals also passed on the biblical heritage to the African American community, they, too, are sources for King's appropriation of the prophets.

[50]Lawrence E. Carter, Sr., Dean of the Martin Luther King, Jr. International Chapel at Morehouse, describes King as having walked by many prophetic figures before him while studying at this "prophetic incubator," which was founded by men who consciously chose "to identify with the oppressed and to affirm the personhood of blacks." Conversation with Dean Carter, 7 Jan. 1992.

[51]Miller in *Voice of Deliverance* succinctly describes Johns as a "Learned black preacher whose eccentric personality strongly resembled that of an Old Testament prophet." (p. 200).

Conclusion

The three traditions outlined above made Hebrew prophecy a relevant model for Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life and ministry, but they do not fully explain his stronger embrace of the model during the years 1965-68, which is the central thesis of this essay. Circumstances that he created through his own fearless truth-telling made him adopt more fully the prophetic model, and made the core prophetic themes truly resonate in his oratory.[52] Principally it was his denunciation of American involvement in Vietnam and his expansion of the Civil Rights movement to address economic issues throughout the entire country that drew greater criticism from previous allies in the struggle for racial justice. The successes of the Civil Rights movement in the South also produced a younger, more volatile generation of student leaders that criticized and isolated King. As he said so often in these later years, the Hebrew prophets were sources of strength that he sought to emulate—and encouraged others to emulate. The Hebrew prophets, the three traditions, and King's own life experiences together form the hermeneutical circle of recovery, itself a model of interpretation that does not point to any one locus as a paramount influence. His stronger identification with the spirit of Hebrew prophecy radicalized his thought and action, yet this radicalization made an increased reliance on Hebrew prophecy that much easier. Both observations are correct, neither one excludes or contradicts the other.

King's last years epitomized the fullest definition of "radicalization": not merely extreme political action (often associated with violent revolution), but also "getting at the roots." He certainly got at the roots of racism, materialism, and militarism in American society, and perhaps in the world. He saw that the roots of these modern social ills were truly deep and intertwined. In this

[52]Baldwin, *There is a Balm in Gilead*, pp. 326-330. Baldwin discusses at length the parallels between the social context of the classical prophets and America during the late King years.

sense he did move to a more radical criticism, and commensurately more radical (though not violent) action, as seen in the Poor People's Campaign and in the many antiwar rallies he joined.[53] But he also saw deep in the roots of American democracy, and more deeply in our Judeo-Christian ethical heritage—chiefly through the prophetic strands in both testaments—principles of justice (and love) on which to establish a more perfect union, as well as the Kingdom of God. Though he may have felt discouraged at times during these last years, he did not lose faith in the possibility of transfiguration through a revival of prophetic themes, nor did he lose faith in Jesus' nonviolent ethic of love. The prophets were of a similar mind with regard to the revival of covenantal obedience. When "radicalization" is understood in its fullest sense, there is perhaps less contradiction in juxtaposing the radical extremism of the prophets' and King's style with the essentially conservative, revivalist messages they were bearing.

Apart from his many gifts—of thinking, of speaking, of commitment, of compassion—what ultimately distinguishes King from other African American civil rights leaders of his time is his religiosity, specifically his whole-hearted adoption of the Judeo-Christian prophetic model of ministry. To those more politically and tactically conservative than King—Roy Wilkins of the NAACP and Whitney Young of the Urban League—King's prophetic, confrontational truth-telling about Vietnam was too radical, too extreme. To those more radical in their actions and their critiques of American society—Malcolm X of the Nation of Islam, or Stokely Carmichael and James Forman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—King's prophetic adherence

[53] To say that he was less radical than others because he did not advocate violence is to distort the meaning of "radical." Nonviolence is a far more radical approach to addressing social problems than is violence. Perhaps the measure of radical devotion to any particular cause should not be willingness to commit violence but rather, willingness to persevere, and to endure violence and not strike back.

to covenantal traditions of American democracy, as well as his identification with what Malcolm X described as an oppressor's religion, must have made these Black Power advocates squirm with impatience.[54] For King, Hebrew prophecy set the standard, reinforced by Jesus' ministry, liberal Protestantism, and African American church culture.

Many people have applied the prophet label to King, mostly after he was assassinated.[55] For anyone remotely acquainted with King and the prophetic tradition there is an intuitive association of the two. Benjamin Mays spoke to this intuition in his eulogy for King in April 1968:

> If Amos and Micah were prophets in the eighth century, B.C., Martin Luther King, Jr. was a prophet in the twentieth century. If Isaiah was called of God to prophesy in his day, Martin Luther was called of God to prophesy in his time...If a prophet is one who interprets in clear and intelligible language the will of God, Martin Luther King, Jr., fits that designation. If a prophet is one who does not seek popular causes to espouse, but rather the causes he thinks are right, Martin Luther qualified on that score.

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[54]This perception of King as the so-called moderate "Uncle Tom" is present in both the larger White and African American communities. Cf. David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), p. 625.

[55]One need only consider several sources to sample the truth of this assertion: Kelvin Calloway's unpublished D. Min. Dissertation, School of Theology at Claremont, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Modern-Day Prophet...*, or William Ramsay's *Four Modern Prophets: Rauschenbusch, King, Gutierrez, and Reuther* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), or Baldwin's "The Minister as Preacher, Pastor, and Prophet: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr." *American Baptist Quarterly*. The one exception to the prophetic bandwagon: Joseph M. Thompson's Ph. D. dissertation, *Martin Luther King, Jr. and Christian Witness: An Interpretation of King Based on a Theological Model of Prophetic Witness*, Fordam University, 1981.

King was clearly more prophetic than priestly or pastoral. He may have excelled in those latter functions, but without his adoption of the prophetic model we would scarcely now be remembering him with a national holiday. He was, first of all, more a preacher and activist than an academic, systematic theologian, or author of books. He shares this identity with the Hebrew prophets.

In moments of great stress we often say that true character is revealed. Certainly King was under stress constantly from the bus boycott until his death thirteen years later. The greater stress of his last three years—produced by his numerous awards as well as increased notoriety—surely produced a response as authentic as any other time in his life, a response different in some ways, but an authentic one. James Cone has written: "Where one turns when one's back is up against the wall and when everything seems hopeless will tell us far more about our theology than what is often printed in articles and books...when despair was about to destroy the possibility of making a new future for the poor, King turned to the faith contained in the tradition of the Black church."[56] In those latter, stressful days of King's life we also hear more of the Hebrew prophets.

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[56]James Cone, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Theology, and the Black Church," p. 4.