

## Alabama as Egypt: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Religion of Slaves

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In his autobiographical essay "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," Martin Luther King, Jr., explains his intellectual evolution as the result chiefly of his stint as a graduate student at Crozer Theological Seminary and at Boston University, where he read Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Walter Rauschenbusch, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, the Boston Personalists, and other Western philosophers and theologians. As if to emphasize his doctoral studies, King throughout his discourse sprinkles quotations of and references to many icons of Western culture, including Plato, Aristotle, Shakespeare, John Donne, Matthew Arnold, Carlyle, Tennyson, Emerson, Thoreau, Tillich, and Niebuhr.

Attracted to "Pilgrimage" and to King's quotations, scholars customarily ascribe his ideas and persuasiveness to what Stephen Oates calls "theological erudition" obtained in his graduate schools.<sup>1</sup> Harvard Sitkoff notes that King's "training in systematic theology had left him with an appetite for transcendent ideas, for theoretical constructs."<sup>2</sup> A whole book by Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp traces the development of King's ideas and rhetoric to his course work at Crozer and Boston; another volume by John Ansbro provides an expanded but comparable examination. Smith and Zepp and Ansbro account for King's various positions by linking them one by one to the writings of Hegel, Marx, Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, the Boston Personalists, Thoreau, Gandhi, and other thinkers whose tomes King investigated as part of his formal academic training. Paying



scant attention to King's earlier environment in the black community, biographers and historians usually assume that white academia offered the future civil rights leader the intellectual climate that nurtured both his oratorical genius and his skill as a political strategist.<sup>3</sup>

This essay marches to the beat of a different drummer—an African-American drummer. The drumbeat is sounded by Eugene Genovese, Lawrence Levine, Molefi Asante, and Sterling Stuckey, who have greatly expanded our understanding of black life by challenging the common view that African-American culture and religion derive primarily from white America and ultimately from Europe. Building on the legacy of Melville Herskovits, these writers examine the African roots of black culture and later developments from those roots. Extending their general perspective to King, I claim that, while Crozer Seminary and Boston University did stimulate King's thought, black religion animated King's ideas and discourse much more than did his formal white schooling.

In a previous essay, "Composing Martin Luther King, Jr.," I opposed the standard interpretation of King's intellectual development, scrutinizing in detail each of the supposed Euro-American influences on King's intellectual maturation. This essay probes beyond that effort by exploring King's enormous, underlying debt to the black church. I maintain that the dominant theme of King's discourse and the typological epistemology undergirding it issue not from Hegelian dialectic or Niebuhrian social theory but from the world view of slaves. Assembling this argument requires an examination of slave theology and typology, theme and typology in the black pulpit, self-making in black folk sermons, King's relationship to the black church, and King's general theme and typology. I follow this analysis by investigating how all these elements shape two important addresses, King's sermon "Death of Evil on the Seashore" and his final speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop."

## Slave Theology and Typology

The theology of slaves featured both otherworldly and this-worldly salvation blended together to form what Eugene Genovese characterizes as "a pervasive theme of deliverance."<sup>4</sup> Frederick Douglass and others noted the double meaning of spirituals, which pointed both to heavenly redemption and to earthly freedom.<sup>5</sup>

One manifestation of the this-worldly side of slave religion was an intense and widespread identification with figures from the Hebrew Bible (or Christian Old Testament), especially the Hebrew people



held captive in Egypt.<sup>6</sup> According to John Lovell, "nearly always, the slave chooses a revolutionary chapter from the Bible. Note that nearly all the Biblical personages the slave poet deals with were involved in upheaval and revolution (Moses, Daniel, David, the Hebrew children, Samson, Elijah, Gideon, Jesus, Paul)."<sup>7</sup> Identification with the Israelites is evident in many spirituals about Moses, the Pharaoh, the Red Sea, the wilderness, and/or the Promised Land. These songs include "My Army Cross Over," "O the Dying Lamb," "O It's Gonna Be a Mighty Day," "Wheel in a Wheel," "Didn't Ole Pharaoh Get Lost [in the Red Sea]," "I Am Bound for the Promised Land," "Leaning on the Lord," "Way Down in Egypt Land," "O Walk Together Children," "Turn Back Pharaoh's Army," "O Mary Don't You Weep," "Joshua Fit De Battle of Jericho," and "Go Down Moses."<sup>8</sup> Levine explains this identification as one that collapses history, replacing chronological time with a form of sacred time that allows biblical characters to become peers and contemporaries.<sup>9</sup> In Levine's words, "For the slaves, then, songs of God and the mythic heroes of their religion were not confined to a specific time or place, but were appropriate to almost every situation."<sup>10</sup>

How did typology inform the slaves' sense of sacred time? Typology essentially involves seeing Old Testament figures (e.g., Adam and Moses) as prototypes for New Testament figures (e.g., Jesus) or treating biblical characters as types that recur throughout history and that appear in the present as well. Typology patterns history according to knowable and repeatable forms of experience. It does not merely present a set of symbols, for believers view typological events as literally true. Nor does typology entail a set of analogies, for, unlike analogy, typology introduces and sustains an entire *weltanschauung*, fitting human experience into a system of interpretation both strong and flexible. While this system is theological, it is also epistemological, for it provides a means of self-recognition and social understanding: One understands one's self and others in a set of knowable and repetitive types of human experience as good and evil struggle in the recurring morality play of human existence.<sup>11</sup> Desmond Tutu provides an example of typological Christian thought: "Jesus is but the Greek form of Joshua who led the Israelites across the Jordan River into the Promised Land. . . . What was not fully realized in the Old Testament would find complete fulfillment in the New. Matthew sees Jesus as a second but greater Moses. . . . Luke, describing the transfiguration, tells us that the subject of the conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah had to do with the destiny He was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. And Luke uses the Greek *Exodus* to describe that event. It can't have been merely coincidental."<sup>12</sup>



Slave religion functioned typologically when, as Genovese explains, slaves united Moses and Jesus "into the image of a single deliverer."<sup>13</sup> This conflation occurred, for example, in the lyrics of a spiritual:

Jesus Christ, He died for me,  
Way down in Egypt Land  
Jesus Christ, He set me free,  
Way down in Egypt Land.<sup>14</sup>

In the experience of the ring shout, some slaves became, so to speak, their counterparts from the Bible.<sup>15</sup> Others saw Lincoln as Moses. In Asante's words, "the name Moses grew as important in Africans' minds as the person had been in Israel's eyes, and dominated the future of blacks as Moses had dominated the history of Jews."<sup>16</sup> The frequent and widespread nature of Moses/Pharaoh references in spirituals also testifies to an identification more profound and more sustaining than any offered by mere analogy, metaphor, or symbol. Expressing slaves' intense and persistent longing for freedom (from Moses/Pharaoh typology) provided hope in the form of a specific narrative equating blacks with an oppressed people whom God would eventually direct to the Promised Land.

## Theme and Typology in the Black Pulpit

In black churches the theme of deliverance persisted long after slavery, as did the importance of scriptural heroes. Rev. Gardner Taylor, distinguished black preacher and longtime friend of the King family, observes that the sermonizing he heard as a boy presented "an indistinguishable mixture" of heavenly and earthly liberation, personal and social redemption.<sup>17</sup> Studying the black folk pulpit in rural Georgia in the late 1940s, William Pipes noticed strong identification with biblical figures.<sup>18</sup>

Often these characters were those involved in the Exodus. Just as David Walker, the fiery, nineteenth-century political radical, and Rev. Richard Allen, the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, did not hesitate to identify slaves with the Chosen People chafing under the Egyptian yoke, black ministers in years subsequent to slavery continued to identify blacks typologically with the Israelites held captive by the Pharaoh. For example, five decades following the Emancipation Proclamation, Rev. L. J. Coppin used the Exodus to interpret the condition of American blacks: "Fifty years brings us to the border of the Promised Land. The



Canaan of our citizenship is just before us and is infested with enemies who deny our right to enter."<sup>19</sup> In 1926 Rev. J. M. Gates, a legend in the African-American folk pulpit, incorporated the lyrics of "Go Down Moses" into his recorded sermon "Moses in the Wilderness." Rev. C. L. Franklin, whom Tony Heilbut describes as "the most famous preacher in the gospel circuit," expounded the theme "Moses at the Red Sea."<sup>20</sup> During the 1940s and 1950s the highly visible, well-educated preacher and early civil rights activist Rev. William Holmes Borders delivered a number of sermons about the Israelites leaving Egypt.<sup>21</sup> Franklin's sermon "Dry Bones in the Valley" equates Hebrew slavery in Babylon with black slavery in America. Gates, prominent Baptist leader Rev. E. O. S. Cleveland, and other ministers also used "Dry Bones" to address the spiritual death and revival of the Israelites during their Babylonian captivity.

Sermonic repetition-with-variation on the typological theme of enslaved blacks/Hebrews never lost its usefulness for two reasons. First, the theme treated the condition of oppression blacks continued to experience under the system of segregation. How could preachers ignore the subject of slavery when blacks still suffered the semislavery of segregation? Second, the African-American religious community retained its sense of sacred time that acknowledged no boundaries of geography or chronology that could hamper the continued relevance of the biblical narratives of slavery and deliverance.

## Self-Making in the Black Folk Pulpit

Preachers like Gates, Franklin, and Cleveland activate sacred time not only by invoking typological narratives but also by circulating sermons and embedding lyrics.<sup>22</sup>

### *Circulating Sermons*

Forbidden by law from learning to read, slave preachers usually could not study the Bible and instead imbibed their faith from sermons and songs. Developing a profoundly oral pulpit tradition, these preachers at times reiterated each other's sermons—a practice that continued after the Civil War. One sermon enjoying widespread popularity was "Dry Bones in the Valley." Not only did Franklin, Gates, and Cleveland expound "Dry Bones," so also did numerous other homilists; at least five ministers recorded the ubiquitous sermon.<sup>23</sup> "Eagle Stirs Her Nest" ignited congregations at least as



early as 1868 before appealing to Cleveland, Gates, Franklin, and others.<sup>24</sup>

Consider what happens when a pastor launches into "Dry Bones" or "Eagle Stirs Her Nest." Who is delivering the Word? Obviously, the individual homilist. But the preacher's voice is also the voice of earlier speakers. The voice and the identity of the preacher converge with those of sanctified predecessors who have previously articulated these popular homilies. Preachers create a voice and a self by merging their identities with other representatives of a well-known, authoritative tradition.

### *Embedding Lyrics*

Anticipating the hymn of invitation that immediately follows the sermon, Franklin and many other Baptist ministers often incorporate the lyrics of spirituals and hymns into the last few sentences of their sermonizing. Cleveland frequently engages in this practice, capping one sermon with these words:

And with Jesus Our Leader, we shall Mount Up on Wings and Try the Air,  
and FLY-FLY-FLY-FLY-AWAY to Our Heavenly HOME. . . . Thank God I know  
How to Fly. Yes—I KNOW HOW TO FLY. . . .  
Some glad morning when this life is over, I'll fly away To a home on God's  
celestial shore, I'll fly away. . . ."<sup>25</sup>

The final two lines and several succeeding lines serve as the lyrics of the familiar hymn "I'll Fly Away." But consider Cleveland's earlier declaration, "I KNOW HOW TO FLY," a statement that anticipates the lyrics. Who is the "I" of this sentence? The "I" is the person in the pulpit, but the "I" is also the narrative voice of the hymn, for the preacher interlaces the words of the hymn and the sermon, extending the hymn through the sermon and the sermon through the hymn. Following the sermon, each churchgoer joins the preacher in singing the hymn and, in the process of doing so, becomes the "I" of the lyrics. In addition, the "I" is everyone alive or dead who has ever vocalized "I'll Fly Away." All these identities converge in the preacher's extraordinary process of self-making.

Circulating sermons and embedding lyrics provide a means of self-making radically different from those offered by Euro-American print culture. Black folk preachers often do not create language from inside the self like a spider spinning a web by pulling material from its own body. Instead, they create an identity by subsuming them-



selves within the recognizable voices of a spiritual tradition. The procedures of self-making closely resemble the process of identifying with biblical figures: In both cases one discovers and defines a self according to a set of sanctioned, knowable, and recurring expressions of human personality. Both self-making and typology introduce sacred time by making the recognizable past (e.g., the Hebrews in captivity, a minister's sermon heard years before, a hymn sung by a parent or grandparent) immediately present. By activating sacred time, both self-making and typology provide a means for spiritual awareness and self-understanding and prevent history from deteriorating into a junkheap of cacophonous voices, unrelated experiences, and forgettable characters.

### **King's Relationship to the Black Pulpit**

When Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., moved to Atlanta, he apprenticed himself to Rev. A. D. Williams, who became his father-in-law. Williams whooped and moaned his folk sermons at Ebenezer Baptist Church. A political activist as well as a minister, Williams served as an NAACP fundraiser and agitated for the construction of the city's first black high school, which King, Jr., attended.<sup>26</sup> For his part the elder King, an able folk preacher, led a voting rights march in the 1930s and, in the words of his son, "this stern and courageous man . . . led the fight in Atlanta to equalize [black and white] teachers' salaries and has been instrumental in the elimination of Jim Crow elevators in the courthouse."<sup>27</sup>

Folk preachers Williams and the senior King attacked segregation from the Ebenezer pulpit, as did Borders from his pulpit one short block away. According to Borders, a young King often listened to his preaching in person and over an outdoor loudspeaker. King may also have heard the sermons of Gates, who pastored in Atlanta, and Franklin, who packed an Atlanta auditorium on several occasions and who once preached at Ebenezer Church. Furthermore, King could hardly have ignored Borders's highly successful social gospel ministry, his radio sermons, and his political visibility in the city.<sup>28</sup>

King scholars' claim that King learned the social gospel primarily by reading Rauschenbusch in seminary seems untenable when one considers the evangelical and political gospel expounded and practiced by the likes of Williams, the elder King, and Borders.<sup>29</sup> In reality, King's entire career expresses the liberatory theology of Ebenezer Church, the institution that nurtured him, and extends and intensifies the vision and commitment of his grandfather, father, and Borders. While King used his graduate studies to enlarge his self-



understanding and his awareness of white society, he retained the theology of his community even though most of the elite thinkers he studied at Crozer and Boston rarely even mentioned the evils of segregation and racial inequality.

King's calm-to-storm, call-and-response delivery—especially evident in his addresses to black audiences—also reflects his training in the folk pulpit. So does his ability to lift an audience to a state of ecstasy and pandemonium at the conclusion of a speech or sermon. So does his recirculation of his own and other preachers' sermons.<sup>30</sup> So does his use of hymns and spirituals at the conclusion of most of his sermons and many speeches, including the most important ones—"I Have a Dream," "I've Been to the Mountaintop," "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," "How Long?" and others.<sup>31</sup> In "I Have a Dream" he also enacts the self-making procedures of the folk pulpit by merging his voice with those of Amos, Isaiah, Jesus, Handel's *Messiah*, "America," and a spiritual.<sup>32</sup> Just as King scholars often effectively erase Williams and the elder King from any significant role in promoting King's intellectual development, and just as scholars almost entirely neglect Borders, they also overlook King's use of the themes, typology, and other resources for self-making provided by the black folk pulpit.<sup>33</sup>

## King's General Theme and Typology

The slaves' pervasive, unequivocal theme of deliverance became the pervasive, unequivocal theme of the civil rights movement and of King's speeches, sermons, essays, columns, books, and politics. The theme reveals itself clearly in the movement's and King's application of the traditional Moses/Pharaoh typology. For example, civil rights songleaders updated "Go Down Moses" by taking the lyrics of the spiritual—

Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land.  
Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go.

—and adapting them typologically to fit their own circumstance:

Go down Kennedy, way down in Georgia land.  
Tell old [Sheriff] Pritchett to let my people go.<sup>34</sup>

King's lieutenant Wyatt Walker cites "Go Down Moses" and other spirituals as "the most suitable music" for the civil rights movement and regards "Go Down Moses" as offering "universal appeal



for all oppressed people."<sup>35</sup> Agreeing with Walker, the leaders who organized the famous March on Washington distributed song sheets for "Go Down Moses" and other spirituals that served as anthems of protest. Spiritual and gospel singer Mahalia Jackson performed at the March and later described the proceedings in typological language: "here was a nation of people marching together. It was like the vision of Moses that the children of Israel would march into Canaan."<sup>36</sup> Such civil rights preachers as Kenneth Buford and Ralph Abernathy also equated segregated blacks with the Hebrews and powerful white rulers with the Pharaoh.<sup>37</sup>

Like song leaders and other preachers, King adjusted slave theology and typology to his situation. He often labeled racist opponents as Pharaohs, and many people—including white journalists—called him a black Moses. Outstanding civil rights organizer Septima Clark noted King's ability to mine the story of the Hebrews' escape from Egypt: "As he talked about Moses, and leading the people out, and getting the people into the place where the Red Sea would cover them, he would just make you see them. You believed it."<sup>38</sup> Andrew Young also observed King's and other activists' abilities to reinvigorate the familiar Old Testament and folk pulpit imagery of dry bones and the Exodus when straightforward political appeals had failed.<sup>39</sup> King repeatedly invoked the Exodus as an archetypal human experience—a narrative that spiraled through history—and, in unmistakably typological language, intertwined blacks' fate with that of the Hebrews: "The Bible tells the thrilling story of how Moses stood in Pharaoh's court and cried, 'Let my people go.' This was an opening chapter in a continuing story. The present struggle in the United States is a later chapter in the same story."<sup>40</sup>

### **"Death of Evil on the Seashore"**

Delivered initially in 1956, "Death of Evil on the Seashore" is an early King sermon that the civil rights leader preached in several pulpits around the nation, including the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York City, one of the nation's two or three most important liberal, white Protestant churches. Not content to reiterate the sermon orally, he included it in his homiletic collection, *Strength to Love*; he did so because he understood the immense power of the Exodus theme and its broad appeal to generations of blacks who sang songs of the Exodus and heard sermons proclaiming its message of liberation.

"Death of Evil" is especially important because it serves as the fullest and most extensive explanation of the biblical basis for the



central theme of the civil rights movement—the escape from bondage to freedom. King's only sermon based entirely on the Exodus, "Death of Evil" provided him with an unparalleled opportunity to refute the complacency of white Christians who viewed dramatic social change as undesirable or impossible and objected to religious leadership of social movements. Intent on reducing Christianity to a personal fire insurance policy against the eternal flames of hell, southern whites could twist and constrict Jesus and—especially—Paul to suit their ends. The Exodus, however, militated against such a fundamentalist reduction because it undeniably involved massive, dramatic, social transformation as God placed his awesome power unequivocally on the side of an entire oppressed people, whom he led literally from slavery to freedom. More clearly than any other King pronouncement prior to his final speech, "Death of Evil" revitalizes the most noteworthy biblical precedent for radical social change and thus confounds fundamentalists' attempts to privatize religion. "Death of Evil" succeeds not simply because it reinterprets the Exodus but because it reawakens the slaves' theme of deliverance and their ability to telescope time and space. King begins his sermon by explicating the biblical Exodus, sketching the Hebrew march across the Red Sea and "the turbulence and momentum of the tidal waves" that drowned the mighty Egyptian forces.<sup>41</sup> Affirming the typological validity of the story, King remarks, "The truth of this text is revealed in the contemporary struggle between good in the form of freedom and justice and evil in the form of oppression and colonialism."<sup>42</sup> The Exodus reduplicates itself throughout the world, for, he declares, "In nearly every territory in Asia and Africa a courageous Moses pleaded passionately for the freedom of his people."<sup>43</sup> King organizes much of his sermon by way of a typological chain that extends the Moses/Pharaoh narrative into a variety of recent contexts. Relating how Gandhi and other Moses figures have rescued masses of Third World peoples "from the Egypt of colonialism," King explains that in the previous twenty-five years the number of independent countries in Africa had grown from three to thirty-two.<sup>44</sup>

Like Richard Allen, L. J. Coppin, J. M. Gates, C. L. Franklin, William Holmes Borders, and a multitude of other African-American preachers before him, King interprets the struggle of the slaves as a reenactment of the experience of the Israelites constrained within the Egyptian version of the peculiar institution. As King recounts the American chapter of the biblical story, Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation brought the Negro "nearer to the Red Sea, but it did not guarantee his passage through parted waters."<sup>45</sup> Instead blacks suffered because "the pharaohs of the South" en-



gineered an "Egypt of segregation."<sup>46</sup> Echoing the language of "Go Down Moses," King observes that southern oppressors "refused to let the Negro people go."<sup>47</sup> Then the Supreme Court split the Red Sea with its landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, leaving the "forces of segregation" to face the fate of Egyptian soldiers left "gradually dying on the seashore."<sup>48</sup> Able to escape from Egypt, blacks through patient effort "shall reach the promised land."<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, any time God's people experience "the darkness of some oppressive Egypt," God can supply hope and redemption.<sup>50</sup>

In various places in the text King reinforces theological hope by reiterating a group of quotations from Shakespeare, Bryant, Carlyle, Lowell, Tennyson, Arnold, and Charles Beard. As I explain elsewhere, each of these quotations serves as a commonplace in liberal white homiletics, and each testifies to the ultimate triumph of good over evil.<sup>51</sup> One might ask: If good defeats evil and if God sent his ultimate revelation of himself two thousand years ago, why does evil return and even seem to prevail? The answer is that evil repeats itself typologically as, in King's words, "the death of one tyranny is followed by the emergence of another tyranny," which in turn dies on the seashore when the Egyptian narrative inevitably reasserts itself.<sup>52</sup>

### **"I've Been to the Mountaintop"**

On the night before his assassination, King delivered his final speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," to a meeting of striking garbage workers and their supporters in Memphis.<sup>53</sup> In "Mountaintop" he revives the Moses/Pharaoh typology more effectively than he had ever dared before. The incandescent brilliance of the address derives mainly from his wholehearted and highly imaginative reconception and adaptation of the slaves' theme and typology of liberation.

In "Death of Evil" King and the civil rights movement remained largely outside the typological narrative as Lincoln guided blacks/Hebrews toward the Red Sea and as the Supreme Court parted the waves with its epochal 1954 decision. By contrast, in "Mountaintop" King boldly inserts himself and the movement into the narrative and locates the new/old struggle of blacks/Hebrews in the expansive universe of the slaves—a universe that admits of no distinctions of space and time or of heavenly and earthly deliverance.

Calling Ralph Abernathy "the best friend that I have," King starts



his speech with the "I" of his everyday self—a plain, straightforward "I" who is a close friend of Abernathy.<sup>54</sup> But he immediately enlarges the "I" when God enables him to undertake a grand tour of history. Adapting the slaves' sense of sacred time that erases all barriers of chronology and geography, King slips into a time machine to witness the Exodus and observes other profound events in ancient Greece, ancient Rome, and Renaissance Europe. Extending his magical travels through time and space, he gazes at Martin Luther ("the man for whom I'm named") as Luther nails his theses on the church door at Wittenberg; he next spies Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation and listens as Franklin Roosevelt consoles a nation.<sup>55</sup> Several of these events—especially Luther's protest and Lincoln's declaration—were world-changing expressions of the broad, historical movement from oppression to freedom. These occurrences seem to serve as typological recapitulations of the Exodus.

Scanning all these majestic sights, however, would not satisfy King the time traveler, for he "wouldn't stop there" but would instead ask God to lead him into the present, where he could witness an enormous political awakening across Africa and the United States and learn that "the cry [of the oppressed] is always the same—'We want to be free.'"<sup>56</sup> Although the American awakening occurs in an atmosphere of crisis and confusion, it deserves to be cataloged among the greatest, most earth-shaking events in all Western history.

King next appeals for nonviolent solidarity, remarking that "whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt," he "kept the slaves fighting among themselves."<sup>57</sup> To frustrate this strategy, King urges mutual support: "When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of the end of slavery. Now let us maintain unity."<sup>58</sup> Who is the "us" of this sentence? The "us" are Egyptian slaves; the "us" are also King's listeners, the Memphis garbage workers, who chafe against the fetters of an American pharaoh.

After analyzing the struggle in Memphis, the civil rights leader reviews the movement's shining moment in Birmingham when demonstrators courageously faced police dogs and fire hoses as Police Commissioner Bull Connor failed to realize that protestors possessed "a certain kind of fire that no water could put out"—a sanctified, holy fire largely responsible for an enormous landmark in American race relations—the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Clearly the achievement of the Birmingham campaign seems to replicate the successful struggles King had cited before—the Exodus, the Reformation, the emancipation of American slaves, and Africa's emergence from European colonialism—and to exemplify the contemporary struggle he also noted.



After relating the experience of Birmingham, King declares, "Now we've got to go on to Memphis just like that."<sup>59</sup> Preachers should support the endeavor, King maintains, because "Somehow the preacher must be an Amos and say 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.' Somehow the preacher must say with Jesus, 'the Lord . . . hath anointed me to deal with the problems of the poor.'"<sup>60</sup> Undergirding this assertion is the typological assumption that religious leaders can and should leapfrog chronological time. A contemporary preacher can then be an Amos and can accept Jesus' mission to the poor. In this religious system, the needs of the poor are paramount and are essentially identical in the ages of Amos, Jesus, and twentieth-century America.

King next warns ministers not to focus on otherworldliness. He cites familiar black pulpit imagery of "long white robes over yonder" and heavenly "streets flowing with milk and honey," insisting that pastors who evoke "the new Jerusalem" must also outline "the new Memphis, Tennessee."<sup>61</sup> Like the clergy Gardner Taylor heard as a child—some of whom almost certainly were former slaves—King here blurs heavenly and earthly salvation, for the "new Memphis" is the "new Jerusalem" set down squarely on earth. After calling for local boycotts, King analyzes the Good Samaritan and tells his audience to treat sanitation workers as the Good Samaritan treated the innocent victim beaten along the roadside.

Then King remembers an attempt on his life in which a woman stabbed him in the chest; because he would have died had he merely sneezed, King reports his happiness over not sneezing. Sneezing would have prevented him from savoring watershed events in the agitation for civil rights. Extending the time-machine tour of history he used to open "Mountaintop," he enumerates examples of the American political awakening that he had hailed earlier: the 1960 lunch-counter sit-ins, the Albany movement, the Birmingham demonstrations, the delivery of "I Have a Dream," the Selma marches, and the Memphis garbage strike.

Here King arranges the undeniably noteworthy events of the crusade for civil rights within the context of several of the most important events of all time, including the Exodus, the Reformation, and the Emancipation Proclamation. The "I" who avoided sneezing also zoomed through time, pausing to witness epochal moments in the quest for freedom. King asserts that the meaning of the current struggle is quite comparable, if not identical, to the meaning of the Hebrews' triumph over Pharaoh, Luther's efforts to reform a corrupt church, and Lincoln's freeing of the slaves. Like previous episodes of the civil rights movement, the drama of Memphis allows for a successful reproduction of the Exodus because



human identity remains stable in King's updated rendition of the inclusive, typological universe of the slaves, who invoked sacred time as they yearned for Moses to appear in the Egypt of Alabama and Mississippi.

King ends "Mountaintop" by describing his pilot's extra safety precautions, referring to recent threats on his life, and reflecting on the possibility of assassination. The ominous tone of these statements builds upon the atmosphere of crisis he had evoked immediately following his journey in the time machine. He had exclaimed: "The world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. Confusion all around."<sup>62</sup> Now his recounting of the nearly fatal stabbing incident and recent death threats intensifies the atmosphere of crisis and the looming possibility—or likelihood—of tragedy. All the dark imagery that King summons in "Mountaintop" reflects and modifies the vision of impending doom and Satanic hellfire common in the revivals led by traditional Baptist preachers, including those held in his home church. Here King simply applies a political, this-worldly twist to a stock theme of evangelical and fundamentalist sermonizing.

But King is not content to situate the movement within the narrative of crisis and typology and to locate himself as a performer in the drama. Perhaps because of his sense of the near-inevitability of his assassination, he ignores the risk of showboating and concludes "Mountaintop" by dramatically installing himself at the head of the typological procession. For the first time in his career, he boldly and explicitly equates himself with Moses, whom God had led to the top of a mountain where he could gaze upon a Promised Land he could not enter: "I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything, I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"<sup>63</sup>

King's final sentence is the first line of "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Union soldiers sang the lyrics as they marched into the Civil War, and churchgoers have often sung them as well. To whom does the personal, possessive pronoun "mine" of "mine eyes" refer? "Mine eyes" are the eyes of the narrator of the hymn. "Mine eyes" are also the eyes of Moses, the prototype in the Old Testament, who sees the glory of the coming of Christ the Lord, the fulfillment of the type in the New Testament. Moreover, "mine eyes" are the eyes of all people who have sung the anthem before, including soldiers and churchgoers. Of course, "mine eyes" are also the eyes of King, the



speaker, the "I" of the speech—King the friend of Ralph Abernathy; King the interpreter of biblical typology who insists that the preacher "must be an Amos"; King the preacher who blurs this-worldly and otherworldly deliverance; King the activist who justifies his politics by aligning Memphis garbage workers with the recipient of compassion in Jesus' greatest parable; King the time traveler who observes the panorama of the Exodus, the Reformation, and the Emancipation Proclamation; King the sojourner who completes his historical odyssey by witnessing the sit-ins, the Birmingham crusade, the Selma protests, and the Memphis strike; and King the leader who repeatedly risks martyrdom. *All* these selves—the narrative voice of "Battle Hymn of the Republic," Moses, Union soldiers, earlier hymn-singing Christians, and King in his multiple, yet cohesive, identities—merge in King's extraordinary act of self-making.

Failing to adhere to a linear, European view of history, King involves himself and his audience in a single process of self-discovery and persuasion within a universe of sacred time that unites heaven and earth and fuses chronologically disparate characters and events. This process and this universe have little to do with the theories of the individual and history espoused by Rauschenbusch, Hegel, Marx, Niebuhr, the Boston Personalists, Tillich, Gandhi, and others whom King studied in graduate school. Instead, the typological theology and rhetorical process of self-definition manifested in "Death of Evil" and "Mountaintop" represent the consummate expression of the distinctive theology, epistemology, and rhetoric developed by slaves and sustained over many decades by humble, usually anonymous, and often illiterate African-American folk preachers.

Throughout his career and especially in "Mountaintop," King's oratory illuminates the American landscape because, like the slaves singing a certain spiritual, he essentially testifies that the road he and other blacks walked in Alabama and Georgia was the same "rough, rocky road what Moses done travel."<sup>64</sup>