

## Second Isaiah Lands in Washington, DC: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" as Biblical Narrative and Biblical Hermeneutic

*Even though Martin Luther King, Jr. constantly cited the Bible, no one has seriously examined his rhetoric as biblical hermeneutic. Here I argue that in "I Have a Dream," King explodes closed memories of the Exodus by reconceptualizing a hermeneutic of (Second) Isaiah as he interprets African-Americans' experience of oppression and exile in Babylon/America and their hope for a new Exodus. Drawing on African-American political rhetoric, King spotlights biblical writers' dialogue with each other and extends the arc of biblical narrative into the present. He also anticipates certain forms of liberation theology of the 1970s and beyond.*

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In our schools and universities, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" is taught much more frequently than any other speech.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, many English textbooks represent the entire history of oratory through this speech and no other. It is so popular that Michael Eric Dyson, a King scholar and prominent public intellectual, argued in 2002 that it deserves a moratorium for ten years. That moratorium, however, has not begun and will not begin, for public attention lavished on the speech will not abate either in our classrooms or on public observances during the King Holiday.

Yet despite the popularity of "I Have a Dream," it is still not understood well by students, teachers, or the public. A chief difficulty is that scholars and teachers rarely if ever treat "I Have a Dream" or any of King's other rhetoric as a biblical hermeneutic. This gross neglect prevails even though, between his ordination as a minister in 1946 and the delivery of "I Have a Dream" at the March on Washington in 1963, King constantly interpreted the Bible, mining its passages to create a foundation for each of literally hundreds of sermons. In addition, hundreds of his speeches, including the most memorable ones, explicate the Bible.

King's approach to the Bible was hardly casual; rather, he undertook an enormous amount of biblical study, which took three main forms. First, as a child and adolescent, he attended weekly Sunday School classes at Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta, where teachers provided instruction in the Bible, and long Sunday morning church services (followed by briefer Sunday night services) that featured Bible-based prayers and sermons by his father, Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., and by guest preachers. Further commenting on the Bible were the hymns the choir and congregation sang while his mother played the organ. During his years at Morehouse College, he continued to worship at Ebenezer Church on Sunday while also attending required weekly chapel services at the college and visiting other churches. Second, he examined the Bible more formally during his years at Crozer Theological Seminary where he studied with two distinguished biblical scholars. At Crozer and, later, in his PhD program at Boston University, he examined the work of theologians, some of whom attempted, in part, to systematize biblical thought. During his years in graduate school, he also scoured books of sermons by Phillips Brooks, Harry Emerson Fosdick, J. Wallace Hamilton, and other leading liberal Protestant preachers—all of whom investigated angles for interpreting scripture.<sup>2</sup> Third, King continued to ponder biblical texts throughout his career as a minister. Preparation for sermons invariably engages clergy in reconsidering the Bible and books about it, for ministers recognize that the process of understanding scripture is never complete.

Here I argue that King defines and enacts "I Have a Dream" as biblical narrative and biblical hermeneutic—a definition and an enactment that are basic to the meaning of the oration and that therefore demand our attention. This hermeneutic embraces, extends, and reconceptualizes the rich hermeneutic that biblical authors themselves, most notably Second Isaiah, provide for the Bible.

Of course, neither King nor anyone else offers an unmediated interpretation of the Bible. Rather, organized religious communities not only shape but also make possible the rhetorical contingencies and interpretive perspectives that are salient to all biblical exegesis.

"I Have a Dream" leans on and extends a vibrant tradition of African-American religious rhetoric and biblical hermeneutics. As James Cone explains, "A separate faith emerged among black Christians in the United States because they believed that the God of the Exodus, the prophets, and Jesus did not condone the mistreatment they received from whites" (*Martin* 122). Rejecting slaveholders' versions of scripture, enslaved folk preachers and songwriters engaged and reframed biblical texts about Hebrew bondage and escape—first from Egypt and later from Babylon. In "Go Down, Moses" and other spirituals about the Exodus, slaves depicted white Southern aristocrats as Pharaohs and themselves as Israelites. Slaves also construed Harriet Tubman, Abraham Lincoln, and/or the Union

army as Moses figures who were guiding an Exodus (Genovese; Levine). As Albert Raboteau explains: "Exodus functioned as an archetypal myth for the slaves," for whom the "sacred history of God's liberation of his people would be or was being reenacted in the American South" (32). A white chaplain in the Union Army regretfully noted: "There is no part of the Bible with which [slaves] are so familiar as the story of the deliverance of Israel. *Moses* is their ideal of all that is high, and noble, and perfect in man." The chaplain observed that slaves yearned for "a second Moses who would eventually lead *them* out of their prison-house of bondage" (qtd. in Raboteau 32–33). Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and other sterling African-American abolitionist and postbellum orators frequently paralleled American slaves to Hebrews in Egypt. Phillips Brooks and other white abolitionists occasionally did so as well. Following the Civil War, former slaves intent on moving to Kansas christened themselves "Exodusters." In the early part of the twentieth century, African Americans sometimes viewed the Great Migration to the North as another Exodus.

Despite the Emancipation Proclamation, African-American identification with the suffering Hebrews continued, extending into the 1950s and 1960s. Malcolm X, King's most important rival, hailed his revered mentor, Elijah Muhammad as "a modern Moses" and as "a modern Daniel" and "a modern David" (127, 129). When racists exploded a bomb at the home of Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, King's close colleague and leading agitator of the Birmingham movement, it demolished the room where Shuttlesworth was sitting but left him uninjured. Describing his survival as a miracle straight from Hebrew scripture, he announced, "Well, God just brought the Bible up to date. You don't have to go back to Daniel in the lion's den or the boys in the fiery furnace" (qtd. in Manis 109). In the mid 1950s, Rev. C. L. Franklin, a famous preacher who later allied himself with King, indicated that a Moses would eventually lead those who struggled against segregation.<sup>3</sup> So did an obscure but highly eloquent preacher in Alabama in 1960 (Walzer 3). During the early 1960s, Robert Moses, a civil rights agitator in Mississippi, was sometimes revered as a Moses figure, as was King. "Go Down, Moses" was popular among civil rights songleaders, including the indomitable Fannie Lou Hamer; songsheets for this spiritual were distributed at the March on Washington. Certain important activists—notably Ella Baker, Ruby Doris Robinson, and Robert Moses—disdained the top-down, patriarchal model of leadership implied in the longing for a single leader authorized by God, but they did not always succeed in dampening such a longing within the highly churched community of Southern blacks.<sup>4</sup>

One popular slave sermon, "Dry Bones in the Valley," addressed a text in *Ezekiel* that portrays the Hebrews captive in Babylon as skeletal remains in a

desolate valley whom God miraculously revives—a trope for God’s expected rescue of the Hebrews from captivity and exile in Babylon. “Dry Bones in the Valley” expanded this equation to include enslaved African Americans, who needed an equally miraculous revival. This sermon remained popular during the civil rights era; Franklin, for example, preached it in the mid 1950s.<sup>5</sup>

King himself sometimes fit contemporary actors into the coordinates of biblical narratives, especially the Exodus. After being convicted of violating an unjust law during the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1956, King reflected on his setback: “You don’t get to the Promised Land without going through the wilderness” (“Address” 200). He based his entire 1957 homily “The Birth of a New Nation” on *Exodus*, interpreting Egyptian slavery as a common, albeit temporary condition and observing that oppressed people will eventually revolt because they “cannot be satisfied with Egypt” (20). Analyzing the overthrow of British rule in Ghana, he extolled Kwame Nkrumah as an anticolonialist whose new nation was “breaking aloose from Egypt” until it “crossed the Red Sea” and would soon “confront its wilderness” (20, 28). King then described African Americans as “breaking aloose from an evil Egypt trying to move through the wilderness toward the promised land of cultural integration” (29). He also paralleled the travails of Egyptian bondage to the crucifixion of Christ and compared the arrival in the Promised Land to the glory of Easter. In 1956 he debuted “Death of Evil on the Seashore,” an analysis of the Exodus that he adapted from Phillips Brooks and included in his homiletic collection *Strength to Love* in 1963. In this sermon King likened the US Supreme Court in its landmark *Brown* decision of 1954 to Moses and equated Mahatma Gandhi and other anticolonialist leaders with Moses. The activist Septima Clark remarked, “As [King] 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” (qtd. in Morris 98).

Not only did a chaplain in the Union Army disdain blacks’ fascination with Moses and the Pharaoh, so did many other whites. For generations, experts on ancient Hebrew and Greek held forth in the cloistered chambers of liberal, largely white Protestant seminaries, privileging themselves alone as knowledgeable and informed interpreters of scripture and completely ignoring other sources of interpretation, including African-American sources. Liberation theologians in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s took inspiration from the civil rights movement—and sometimes from James Cone’s theological manifesto of 1969—and used prominent religious presses and forums as crowbars to pry the doors of these chambers and demand a hearing for their own emancipatory readings of the Bible, including the Exodus. In 1980 one prominent biblical scholar dismissed such readings with a wave of his hand.<sup>6</sup> In addition, ordinary white pastors and

laity generally bypassed African-American views of the Bible. Although white churchgoers quarried the Bible for guidance about personal behavior, they tended to codify First Testament narratives into a set of ancient, iconic stories trapped in amber that Sunday School teachers would present to each succeeding generation of admiring schoolchildren. Petrifying the classic Exodus/wilderness narratives constitutes an example of what Kenneth Burke deems “bureaucratized imagination” that forces readers to walk on a “cow-path ... in pious obedience to ... the authority of custom” (*Attitudes* 225–29). Ossifying the Exodus was (and is) such a common practice that in 2002 Avishai Margalit, an esteemed and otherwise thoughtful philosopher, considered such a process to be invariable and unassailable. He insists, “the Exodus memory ... is a *closed memory* of the event: the only line of memory leading to this event is the one authorized by the tradition of the community as its canonical line of memory” (60).

Such a closed memory is exactly what King challenges in “The Birth of a New Nation,” “Death of Evil on the Seashore,” and “I Have a Dream.” While noting Drew Hansen’s skillful analysis of a variety of biblical allusions and echoes in “I Have a Dream,” here I focus mainly on King’s two entirely obvious references—his quotations of *Amos* 5:24 and (*Second*) *Isaiah* 40:4–5.<sup>7</sup> Weaving these citations into his speech enables King to jettison any frozen understanding of the Mosaic legacy while constructing his own biblical hermeneutic.

Many of those who heard “I Have a Dream” had read the Bible repeatedly and carefully. Biblically literate Jews and Christians comprised a large portion of King’s audience—the 250,000 who heard the speech in person, the several million who listened on radio and television, and the many additional millions who heard or studied it later. This audience included numerous priests, ministers, and rabbis, who had examined the Bible thoroughly during their childhood, adolescence, and years in seminary, and who continued to explore it while preparing weekly, Bible-based homilies. Other listeners were laity who regularly attended synagogues and churches, often for several hours per week throughout their entire lives, examining scripture in classes, and hearing countless sermons. Clergy and laity also consulted the Bible regularly in their homes. Biblical interpretation(s) certainly informed and helped shape their worldview(s).

Biblically literate listeners noticed King’s scriptural quotations for two reasons. First, the lines were familiar, and believers already treasured them. Second, King called attention to each by inserting it at a key point in “I Have a Dream.”

King concludes his “We are not satisfied” litany—an eloquent catalogue of racial inequities—by using the phrase “And we will not be satisfied until” to introduce his quotation of *Amos* 5:24: “And we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” *Amos* 5:24 does not merely supply simple, beautiful metaphors for the arrival of justice and

righteousness. For biblically literate protestors at the March on Washington—and all other devout Jews and Christians—each passage of scripture pulls a very long train of signifiers. For believers, any quotation from *Amos* entails not only the whole project of *Amos* but also the larger phenomenon of Hebrew prophecy. The faithful also consider each piece of scripture to entail a very grand enterprise indeed, namely God's purpose for human life as communicated in the complete text of the Bible. For Jews and Christians, no part of scripture stands alone.

King's reiteration of Amos's cry for justice resonates with the prophets' general emphasis on justice—a foundational principle of Israelite religion that was announced initially and forcefully in the Exodus narrative. When Amos severely rebukes those who exploit the poor, he repeatedly explains that the God who demands justice is the same God who freed the Hebrew slaves. In three distinct passages, Amos, speaking for God, declares, "I brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (2:10, 3:1–2, 9:7). This brief statement reminds readers of the highly memorable epic that dominates the Pentateuch and that I hazard to summarize as follows. Sympathetic to the enslaved Hebrews, God chooses Moses as the first and greatest prophet.<sup>8</sup> Moses demands that the cruel Pharaoh free the anguished Israelites, but Pharaoh refuses, even after Moses summons one frightful plague after another. Finally, God strikes dead the firstborn child in each Egyptian household while sparing the Israelites through the Passover. After Moses directs the Hebrews to the Red Sea, he lifts his rod and God separates the land from the parted waters, enabling the Israelites to walk across the dry seabed. Pharaoh's army follows, but gigantic waves crash upon the soldiers, drowning them. Acting through Moses, God seals a sacred covenant with the Hebrews and, later, grants Moses the Ten Commandments. Sustained by manna from God, the Israelites wander in the Sinai wilderness for forty years until they finally reach the Promised Land. Biblical writers repeatedly indicate that despite this immeasurably great triumph, succeeding generations of Hebrews often disobey the Lord, their transgressions prompting Amos and other prophets to condemn their waywardness, warn of impending catastrophe, and demand allegiance to God.

"I Have a Dream" harnesses *Amos* 5:24 to call for the same Mosaic justice that Amos demanded—a quotation that is hardly accidental, for King reiterated it quite frequently. By citing Amos as he does, King appeals to Amos's expression of God's concern for an entire people and thereby affirms the fundamental assumption of Judaism that religious experience is profoundly social and the related presupposition that material and spiritual conditions are intimately and indissolubly related. As King explained earlier (in phrases adapted from Fossdick), "any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion" (*Stride* 91).<sup>9</sup>

Very significantly, King never preached about the most famous of all Hebrew sovereigns—David and Solomon. According to the Bible, they levied taxes, created standing armies, and administered a small empire; Solomon also built a lavish temple, supervised a sizable, ruling bureaucracy, and assembled a large harem. As he extended David's legacy of social hierarchy and stability, Solomon, especially, embodied what Walter Brueggemann calls "royal consciousness" and "urban imperial consciousness" (*Prophetic* 21–38; "Trajectories" 313).<sup>10</sup>

Far from commemorating royalty, however, King, from among a very large cast of First Testament figures, characteristically quotes Amos and other fulminating outsiders who manifested what Langdon Gilkey calls an "antiaristocratic emphasis" as they, in Brueggemann's words, "replicated the constitutive word of Moses" and exhibited "the liberation consciousness of the Mosaic tradition."<sup>11</sup> Abraham Heschel, an eminent scholar and King ally, explains: "God is raging in the prophet's words," which express "breathless impatience with injustice" in a world that "reels in confusion" while manifesting blockheaded "indifference" that requires "ceaseless shattering" (xi, 4, 5, 9). Prophets reserve special scorn for the misconduct of rulers and priests, including that of King David himself. Especially attracted to (*First*) *Isaiah*, (*Second*) *Isaiah*, (*Third*) *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah*, *Amos*, and *Micah*, King repeatedly and exclusively embraced their prophetic ethics of Mosaic justice while eschewing both the royal sensibility of Davidic and Solomonic order and the less demanding ethics of charity articulated in *Proverbs*.

Not only is King's pattern of quoting prophets significant, so is his selection of verses. Not alone among biblical texts, the three major books and twelve minor books of prophecy feature many sulphurous denunciations and abundant images of utter doom. Proclaiming "[t]he end has come for my people Israel" (*Amos* 8:12), Amos elaborates what Donald Gowan terms a "death sentence" and "funeral lament" for the whole nation (30, 55). Gowan continues, "The theme of lamentation is prominent throughout the prophetic books"—a generalization that is obvious to any casual reader (55). Avoiding the acidic diatribes and plentiful oracles of desolation in *Amos*, *Isaiah*, and other prophetic texts, King here, following his customary practice, locates verses of comfort and redemption.

Later in the speech, instead of selecting original phrases for the climax of the "I have a dream" litany—the most memorable lines in his entire oratory—King reiterates (*Second*) *Isaiah* 40:4–5—a prophecy of hope that occurs roughly two hundred years after Amos and after the Babylonians had hauled the Hebrews into captivity and exile in 587 BCE. King uses the quotation to cap his "I have a dream" anaphoras of simple, yet wondrous images of harmony and happiness that will ensue once the inhumanity of racism disappears:

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted and every hill and mountain shall be laid low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

Because (*Second*) *Isaiah* 40:3–5 features a single, well-known, briefly and tightly worded quotation from a “voice,” Jews and Christians (including the author of *Luke*) customarily treat (*Second*) *Isaiah* 40:3–5 as a single passage of scripture. For that reason King’s quotation of (*Second*) *Isaiah* 40:4–5 strongly implies the preceding verse, (*Second*) *Isaiah* 40:3. Consider two popular translations of (*Second*) *Isaiah* 40:3–5 that were available to King:

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.

—King James Version

A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

—Revised Standard Version

Here King avoids the more accurate translation afforded by the Revised Standard Version and holds fairly closely to the wording of the King James Version, a richly poetic English Bible that was venerated for centuries.<sup>12</sup> But, as Bernhard Anderson and others note, for those familiar with either translation, (*Second*) *Isaiah* 40:3 refers to wilderness and desert and thereby strongly evokes the Exodus from Egypt across the Sinai desert/wilderness to the Promised Land—a story that, by the time of Second Isaiah, was already canonized in Israelite religion (181–84).<sup>13</sup> By referring to the desert/wilderness as he does, Second Isaiah equates the Hebrews’ known, glorious past—escaping bondage in Egypt, wandering in the desert/wilderness, and entering the Promised Land—and what he envisions will be their glorious future—escaping Babylonian captivity, cruising a smoothened highway in the desert/wilderness, and reentering the Promised Land.



Here, by citing Second Isaiah's vision of renovated innocence through a return to the homeland, King appeals to widely shared memories of a biblical text that defines religion through narratives about the journey of an entire people from slavery to freedom, from wilderness to the Promised Land, and from exile back to the homeland. King also summons Second Isaiah's reconceptualization of the original Exodus—a reconfiguration that includes four major processes, all of which inform King's biblical hermeneutic.

First, when Second Isaiah narrates Babylonian captivity as a prelude to another Exodus, he interprets the Exodus typologically, that is, as a recurring event. He thereby joins other writers of Hebrew and Christian scripture in reshaping and reenergizing earlier, sacred stories. These typologies never reflect timeless mythological cycles and are never routinized or systematized; instead, as Michael Fishbane explains, they “emphasize the homological ‘likeness’ of any two events” while paradoxically preserving the “concrete historicity” of each. Despite the formidable challenge of creating typological relations that in Fishbane's words “are never something simply given” but “are rather something which must always be exegetically established” (351), reimagining the Exodus is, as Anderson notes, one of Second Isaiah's “dominant themes” (181). Walther Eichrodt insists that Second Isaiah “gives full force” to this project, returning to it “again and again” (234). As Second Isaiah conceives this theme broadly, he also pursues it lexically. For example, (*Second*) *Isaiah* 48:10 asserts that Babylon creates a “furnace of affliction” for the Israelites—the same metaphor that *Deuteronomy* and *Jeremiah* use to evoke the Hebrews' suffering in Egypt.<sup>14</sup>

Second, like the authors and editors of the Pentateuch, Second Isaiah heaps importance on the Exodus by emplotting it according to what Michael Fishbane calls “foundational cosmic patterns from a prehistorical period” (356). Terence Fretheim suggests that the Exodus narrative presents a “theology of creation” (12–14, 159–69). Like *Exodus* and *Psalms*, (*Second*) *Isaiah* drapes the miracle at the Red Sea in what Anderson terms “the mythopoeic colors of creation” (185).<sup>15</sup> Alluding to a portion of the creation narrative that was later canonized as *Genesis* 1:9–10, (*Second*) *Isaiah* explains the separation of the land from the waters as a crucial moment both in the formation of the universe and in the crossing of the Red Sea.

Third, Second Isaiah ties his envisioned, typological reenactment of the Exodus not only to creation but also to salvation. Anderson notes that for Second Isaiah, “[God's] redemptive acts are acts of creation; and his creative acts are acts of history” (185). Prophets present history as teleological and in Eichrodt's words “closely” link typology with “eschatological hope” (234). Writing about biblical texts in general, Paul Ricoeur illuminates Second Isaiah's reworking of narratives from *Genesis* and *Exodus*: “The always-already-there of Creation” entails “the perpetual futurity of Redemption” (LaCocque and Ricoeur 67).

Fourth, as Anderson and Brueggeman (*Theology*) emphasize, Second Isaiah dramatically transforms the Exodus, a narrative that the Pentateuch indicates is specifically about the Hebrews, into an epic that encompasses all oppressed people. In Second Isaiah's text, not only will Israelites experience a new Exodus, but those who languish in "every valley," every oppressive situation, will also see (that is, experience) the new liberation.

By incorporating the passage from (*Second*) *Isaiah*, King summons not only a specific biblical writer but also the broader enterprise of biblical authors and editors to extend the Exodus beyond its original, particular manifestation. In describing the initial entrance to the Promised Land, *Joshua* and *Psalms* sketch the parting of the Jordan River, thereby explicating this new event as a typological reenactment of the earlier miracle at the Red Sea. Not to be outdone, (*First*) *Isaiah* outlines a Hebrew Exodus from Assyrian vassalage; *Micah*, *Hosea*, *Jeremiah*, and *Zephaniah* also invoke a later Hebrew Exodus. Like (*Second*) *Isaiah*, *Ezekiel* and *Ezra* identify the Israelites' return from Babylon to the Promised Land as another Exodus. (*First*) *Isaiah* and *Amos* join (*Second*) *Isaiah* in stretching the Exodus not only beyond the Hebrews' escape from Pharaoh but beyond the Hebrews altogether. *Amos* declares that both the Syrians and the Philistines experienced an Exodus. (*First*) *Isaiah* announces that even the Egyptians, the evil captors of the Hebrews, will undergo an Exodus.<sup>16</sup>

All these typological emplotments impose pattern and definition on what Kenneth Burke calls "the Scramble, the Wrangle of the Market Place, the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard" (*Rhetoric* 23), which might otherwise appear incomprehensible. Fishbane insists that biblical typologies serve "as the means whereby the deeper dimensions perceived to be latent in historical events are rendered manifest and explicit to the cultural imagination" (360). Using more overtly religious language, H. Richard Niebuhr suggests, "What is otherwise arbitrary and dumb fact becomes related, intelligible and eloquent fact through the revelatory event" (97).

In chapters 41, 42, 43, 48, 49, 51, 52, and 55, Second Isaiah continues his project of reconstructing the Exodus while propounding his dominant theme of (re)creation and (re)liberation. He strikingly and unmistakably presents the Exodus as a cosmic drama that continues to engulf human life, rejoicing that the Israelites in Babylon—and all exploited peoples—will recapitulate the Hebrews' earlier experience of escaping Egypt. While the details of each Exodus vary, the grand, underlying plot continues unimpeded. Far more extensively than any other writer of Hebrew scripture, Second Isaiah envisions that to live faithfully in any oppressive Babylon is to abide in Pharaoh's Egypt while awaiting a planetary and human (re)birth and (re)emancipation.

"I Have a Dream" reignites Second Isaiah's hermeneutic of the Exodus as (re)conception/(re)liberation. King's success in energizing of this hermeneutic is especially apparent when one considers that Second Isaiah's words illuminate assertions that King makes early in "I Have a Dream." After he begins by hailing the Emancipation Proclamation as a "great beacon light of hope," he quickly reverses directions, claiming that African Americans are still enslaved, "sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination." Then he announces that "the Negro ... finds himself an exile in his own land." He thus clearly identifies African Americans as living in captivity and exile (even if the US is, paradoxically, their "own land"). By reiterating Second Isaiah, he supplies a triple equation: Hebrews in Egypt equal Hebrews in Babylon equal African Americans in the US. King grounds his hope in the same God who eliminated Hebrew bondage in Egypt and Hebrew captivity and exile in Babylon, and who would, therefore, end the captivity/segregation/exile of African Americans.

Following First Isaiah, who denounced Hebrew apostasy and who fairly often prophesied wholesale catastrophe, Second Isaiah, viewing the subsequent cataclysm of captivity and exile in Babylon, offered sympathy and promise, not projections of additional, looming disaster. Framing African Americans as a similarly enslaved and exiled people in need of consolation, King follows the logic of Second Isaiah by inserting into "I Have a Dream" one of Amos's few prophecies of hope while avoiding Amos's far more numerous oracles of devastation.

In "I Have a Dream," which includes no lines that appear only in the Christian Bible, King uses his quotations from *Amos* and (*Second*) *Isaiah* to appeal to his Jewish listeners' Judaism. For them, the resurfacing of (*Second*) *Isaiah* 40:3–5 in the Christian scripture does not add meaning to that passage. For King's Christian listeners, however, the reappearance of Second Isaiah's words in no fewer than three gospel texts greatly underscores and expands their significance.

Offering compact versions of (*Second*) *Isaiah* 40:3–5 are *John* (1:22–23) and *Mark* (1:2–3). *John* reinterprets Second Isaiah's language as a direct reference to Jesus. Refusing to compress (*Second*) *Isaiah* 40:3–5, *Luke* (3:4–6) quotes the passage in its entirety, using the words, as *Mark* does, to announce the mission of John the Baptist, the precursor of Christ. Thus *Mark*, *John*, and *Luke* all employ (*Second*) *Isaiah* 40:3–5 typologically to herald the arrival of Christ. Further, their use of (*Second*) *Isaiah* is one means by which, in the words of Hans Walter Wolff, "the final word of God [that is, Christ] is indissolubly connected with the recognition of his historical connection with the Old Testament salvation history" (352). Whereas Second Isaiah asserts that an impending Exodus from Babylon will both repeat and surpass the original Exodus, the three gospel texts recontextualize the same words to announce that world restoration through Christ will both encompass and exceed world restoration envisioned by Second Isaiah.

Like Second Isaiah, who recognizes yet catapults beyond the earlier, sacred revelation in *Exodus*, the authors of *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John* recognize yet catapult beyond the earlier, sacred revelation of Second Isaiah. In other words, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John* imitate (*Second*) *Isaiah* precisely when they supersede (*Second*) *Isaiah*. Even as these gospel texts instigate what Ricoeur calls their own “interpretive dynamism” and “network of intersignification” while creating a “horizon of meaning implicit in [traditional] narratives and symbols” (161, 236), the texts also emulate and extend what Fishbane calls the “dynamic interaction, dynamic interpenetration, and dynamic interdependence” that characterize Hebrew scripture (543). As John Barton and Fishbane emphasize, for biblical writers the realization of a miracle or oracle does not exhaust the miracle or the oracle, as one might think, but, rather, signals that it can be refilled yet again. Over and over. In Fishbane’s words, “the fact that a particular event is not rendered solely in its own terms, but is rather re-imagined in terms of another—a prototype—is not due to its paucity of religious significance but rather to its abundance” (360).

By quoting Second Isaiah’s typological passage about the Exodus that was retypologized in *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John*, King signals the ongoing dialogue among biblical writers—especially the authors of *Exodus*, (*Second*) *Isaiah*, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John*—and the continuing hermeneutical process involved in the formation of biblical texts. King’s reference to the adaptation of *Exodus* in (*Second*) *Isaiah* and the adaptation of (*Second*) *Isaiah* in *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John* indicates his argument that in the words of Brevard Childs, biblical texts are “stable in the sense of having an established structure and content and adaptable in addressing the community in each new generation” (50).

More specifically, King is yet again reconceptualizing biblical vision(s) of emancipation from Egypt, emancipation from Babylon, and (for Christian listeners) emancipation through Christ. To Jews and Christians, King is announcing that the end of segregation will signal African Americans’ Exodus from captivity and exile in Egypt/ Babylon/America. To Christians he is also declaring that the demise of racism must precede the arrival of the new order promised by Christ.

King is also refuting, in advance, Malcolm X’s critique of his use of the Exodus narrative. Urging separation from whites, Malcolm X lambasted King by arguing that whereas Moses led slaves away from Pharaoh, King urged people to integrate with Pharaoh (126–32). King’s recitation of (*Second*) *Isaiah* and *Luke* indicates that one should not understand the Exodus as necessarily involving the physical movement of a whole people from one nation to another. Like (*Second*) *Isaiah* and *Luke* (and unlike Malcolm X), King interprets the Exodus imaginatively, not literally.<sup>17</sup>

King’s and other protestors’ constant and ubiquitous use of the word *freedom* in practically every anthem, chant, sermon, and oration of their movement

can be seen as a reference to a goal shared by the Hebrews in Egypt, Hebrews in Babylon, and African Americans under segregation, a goal whose realization was guaranteed by God. These songs include "Oh Freedom," a spiritual that the civil rights movement revived and that Joan Baez sang at the March on Washington. These orations, of course, include "I Have a Dream," which mentions *freedom* eleven times in its conclusion and ends with a quotation from another spiritual

Free at last!

Free at last!

Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!

King's quotation of these lyrics clearly indicate God's role in the movement from slavery to freedom and bring to fruition King's earlier references to Exodus from Egypt/Babylon/America and (for Christian listeners) to fulfillment through Christ.

H. Richard Niebuhr maintains that social history inevitably underlies believers' approaches to biblical texts. In his words, "We are in [social] history as a fish is in water and what we mean by the revelation of God can be indicated only as we point through the medium which we live" (36). He adds, "A [biblical] history that was [prophesied] forward, as it were, must be read backward through our history if it is to be understood as revelation" (37). Given that communities of faith shape biblical interpretation and that no one can proceed in a neutral fashion, a question arises: Which interpretation of history and the present informs one's understanding of the Bible?

In "I Have a Dream," King implicitly responds to this question by proposing a double reading of the Bible that for many listeners (especially whites) is radically new. This interpretation directly confronts those who cling to a closed, fossilized memory of *Exodus* and believe they already abide in a "Christian nation." First, King contends that the African-American struggle against oppression provides an invaluable lens for viewing biblical narratives about oppression. He argues, in effect, that because African Americans live in captivity and exile, their experience is, in Niebuhr's terms, the "medium" from which one can comprehend the Hebrews' experience of slavery in Egypt and of captivity and exile in Babylon. King supports his claim by observing that after spending almost two centuries of listening to gaudy promises about "the inalienable rights" of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," African Americans still linger in "the dark and desolate valley of segregation"—a metaphor that for some could recall Ezekiel's image of the Hebrews reduced to desiccated bones in a Babylonian valley. The civil rights leader also observes that black Americans are isolated on an "island of poverty" amidst an "ocean" of economic success. Further, the nation is mired

in “quicksands of racial injustice.” His “We are not satisfied” litany catalogues an inventory of exploitation: Blacks are routinely disenfranchised; regularly excluded from motels, hotels, and prosperous neighborhoods; and restricted to impoverished neighborhoods. They are refused many other rights and blocked from the mainstream of American life. He maintains that as their reward for pursuing racial justice, activists suffer “great trials and tribulations” and are left “battered by the storms of persecution”—experiences that, the Bible explains, parallel the fate of the prophets, who frequently were persecuted.

Second, King argues that the Exodus/Babylonian narratives, in particular, supply an invaluable lens for viewing African-American experience, mainly because these sacred stories offer the basis for hope that centuries of slavery can and will end. He implicitly claims that the liberation promised in (*Second*) *Isaiah* leads him and his supporters to seek “to make justice a reality for” everyone by seriously altering the social status quo. Even agitators’ persecution has merit, for their “unearned suffering is redemptive,” just as the prophets’ unearned suffering proved redemptive. What form will justice take? Even Mississippi, with its horrific segregation, can become an “oasis.” Even Alabama, with its horrifying governor and other “vicious racists,” can spawn children who will happily clasp hands with children of another race. Indeed, the national cacophony created by segregation can transmute into “a beautiful symphony.” In this argument God ordains that Egypt and Babylon and segregation cannot hold people forever.

One can understand King’s biblical hermeneutic in part as a response to the decision of religious authorities to close the canon of both Jewish and Christian Bibles roughly four hundred years after the lifetime of Jesus. By that time officials had long wrangled over various texts before choosing which ones to include in one or more of the canonical bibles authorized by various branches of Judeo-Christianity. The act of finalizing the canon created if not a contradiction then at least a deep and perplexing paradox. Even though the main purpose of the Bible is to communicate the message that God is alive, closing the canon appears to freeze God’s revelations in the past, a past that would eventually recede—and, by King’s lifetime, had receded—many hundreds of years. Closing the canon suggests that inasmuch as no recent revelations warrant the same status of scriptural representation achieved by earlier disclosures, the living God might have appeared in a more compelling and authoritative fashion in ancient times than He has lately.

But, one could counter, the Bible itself addresses this problem by defying Claude Levi-Strauss’s analysis of literary conclusions: “[M]ythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution” (819). The biblical text resists resolution because, unlike later authorities who closed the canon, the authors of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible dialogued

incessantly with their predecessors as they reimagined and reworked biblical narratives and biblical theology. To them, in Mikhail Bakhtin's words, "Even *past* meanings, that is, those born in dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all)," for "there will always be ... subsequent future development of the dialogue" (170). The Jewish Bible also resists resolution because the destiny of the Jewish people—a major focus of the text—is not yet settled. For its part the Christian Bible concludes with Revelation and its vision of the Second Coming and Last Judgment as the culmination of history. Because the Second Coming has not yet occurred, the Christian Bible clearly does not resolve itself either. Rather, it proclaims that only the *actual* Second Coming and Last Judgment can assuage its textual oppositions between ultimate goodness and unspeakable evil. Indeed, in Christian teaching, because the Second Coming has yet to arrive, the centuries between the closing of the biblical canon and the day you read this essay are all included within the arc of the biblical narrative.

One can further understand King's hermeneutic as a response to several centuries' worth of European and Euro-American philosophy and Christian theology, much of which he studied at Crozer Theological Seminary and in his PhD program at Boston University. This work heavily emphasizes philosophical and theological abstractions.

By readapting the Exodus narrative in "The Birth of a New Nation" and "Death of Evil on the Seashore" and by using "I Have a Dream" to refashion the imagery of *Exodus*, (*Second*) *Isaiah*, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John*, King implicitly asserts that—despite the closing of the biblical canon and despite European and Euroamerican theologians' enduring preference for generating abstract treatises—the struggle for social justice continues and, therefore, *biblical authors' ongoing, dialogic narrative and hermeneutic about social struggle can and must extend into the present moment*. Further, he implicitly affirms that like biblical writers, *contemporary preachers and theologians must recognize the primacy of narrative*. In addition, he implicitly maintains that the Exodus/Babylonian narratives are not primarily tales about the past. According to King's hermeneutic, the Exodus is only incidentally what happened thousands of years ago to someone named Moses. Indeed, King affirms that the Bible deliberates about the past *only* because such deliberation is necessary to fulfill its primary goal of analyzing the present and projecting a possible future. Through this deliberation, King implies, biblical authors claim that *although the world is badly skewed and sinful, the magnificent drama of the Exodus continues unabated, offering hope to all oppressed people*.

Albeit unnoticed by many biblical scholars, rhetorical critics, and historians of the civil rights movement, King's biblical hermeneutic strongly anticipated—and helped inspire—the liberation theologies and liberatory biblical hermeneutics

that began to appear shortly after his death, that dominated many liberal theological discussions during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and that continue to command attention. King's biblical hermeneutic also presages the possible emergence of a promising narrative theology and the attention to narration-as-persuasion that emerged in rhetorical criticism in the 1980s, especially in the work of Walter Fisher.<sup>18</sup>

College faculty can profitably encourage students to examine "I Have a Dream" as part of the nonviolent struggle of the 1950s and 1960s, as an African-American jeremiad, as a Burkean performance/text, and as the culmination of King's evolving oratorical motifs.<sup>19</sup> But, as Elizabeth Vander Lei and Bonnie Kyburz persuasively argue, many teachers embargo any discussion of religion in their classes—a tendency that seriously hampers their students' ability to plumb "I Have a Dream."

This situation can change. Faculty and students can learn how, instead of bypassing religion, King not only appealed to secular documents—the Declaration of Independence and the Emancipation Proclamation—in "I Have a Dream" but also engaged the Judeo-Christian faith of most of his audience. He developed a biblical narrative and biblical hermeneutic by inserting the civil rights movement into the Bible and, like Second Isaiah, by portraying the Exodus as an encompassing drama that transforms all exploitative political arrangements. Teachers and students can further discover how King shattered indifference and assaulted closed memory and bureaucratized imagination as he revitalized the dialogic relation among biblical authors to argue that bondage and exile can finally end when all people implement justice and, as a consequence, overcome their alienation and rehabilitate their joy.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>I thank *RR* reviewers Jacqueline Jones Royster and Mark Gellis. For their encouragement and criticism while I was drafting this essay, I thank Randel Helms, Drew Hansen, and Ralph Luker. I also pour a libation for Elizabeth Vander Lei, David Jolliffe, Beth Daniell, and others at a conference called *Inquiries into Rhetoric and Christianity* that was held at DePaul University in May 2005.

<sup>2</sup>For an investigation of King's use of sources for his sermons, see Miller, *Voice*.

<sup>3</sup>For an analysis of this sermon, see Salvatore 148–52.

<sup>4</sup>For a study of Robinson, see Fleming. For an examination of Baker, see Ransby. For an exploration of Robert Moses, see Burner.

<sup>5</sup>For an analysis of this sermon, see Salvatore 158–64.

<sup>6</sup>See Barr, *Scope* 107. James Barr had earlier complained that churchgoers "doubted" the importance of the entire Hebrew scripture (*Old and New* 139). In 1979 another prominent scholar, Brevard Childs, growled that the First Testament should not be "ignored" or treated merely as "background material" for the Second Testament (671). Focusing on white churches, Barr and Childs utterly failed to notice that African Americans had, for over one hundred years, placed



enormous emphasis on the story of the Exodus and on other narratives of the Hebrew Bible. Among other contemporary scholars of the First Testament, Walter Brueggemann now welcomes interpretations from a wide variety of perspectives, including those from people who struggle against oppression (*Theology*). In an effort supported by Cone, Vincent Wimbush recently edited *African Americans and the Bible*, a collection of sixty-two scholarly essays that analyze and champion African-American interpretations of scripture. In two other recent books, Charles Marsh thoughtfully explores the civil rights movement in Mississippi and Alabama as a source of Christian theology and biblical hermeneutics.

<sup>7</sup>For King's use of biblical metaphors at a rally in Birmingham, see Miller, "City." *Isaiah* appears in the Bible as a single book. In the late eighteenth century, however, scholars began to argue that *Isaiah* 1–39 was written during the eighth century BCE, before the period of Hebrew captivity in Babylon, and that later portions of *Isaiah* were written roughly two hundred years later during the period of captivity and exile in Babylon that began in 587 BCE. Critics therefore began to distinguish between First Isaiah, the author of chapters 1–39, and Second Isaiah, the later author of subsequent chapters. In the 1920s, scholars began to decide that *Isaiah* 55–66 was written by someone after Second Isaiah and began to refer to the author(s) of those chapters as Third Isaiah. Although virtually all scholars now accept these divisions, distinguishing among the sections of *Isaiah* took centuries in part because biblical editors worked assiduously to connect the three segments of *Isaiah* thematically and (in some ways) lexically, combining the three texts into a single document that partly succeeded in fusing the texts produced by First Isaiah, Second Isaiah, and Third Isaiah. Because *Isaiah* is and is not a unified text, I use the phrase "(First) *Isaiah*" to designate *Isaiah* 1–39 and the phrase "(Second) *Isaiah*" indicate *Isaiah* 40–55.

<sup>8</sup>For Moses as the initial and most outstanding prophet, see *Numbers* 12: 6–8 and *Deuteronomy* 34:10. He also figures prominently in Christian scripture. See, for example, *Acts* 7:17–50 and *Hebrews* 11:23–30.

<sup>9</sup>See Fosdick 25, 38. See also King, *Testament* 37–38.

<sup>10</sup>James Sanders claims that the Babylonian exile prompted biblical editors to choose not to preserve Davidic-Solomonic statutes, which must have existed, and instead to follow the prophets in halting Mosaic law and the Mosaic covenant as the foundation for Hebrew religion. The views of Childs, Gowan, and Brueggemann are consistent with Sanders's argument.

<sup>11</sup>See Gilkey 113; Brueggemann, *Theology* 634–35; and Brueggemann, "Trajectories" 313.

<sup>12</sup>Although "voice in the wilderness" is now a familiar phrase in everyday conversation, the more accurate translation of the Hebrew does not speak of a "voice in the wilderness" but rather of the wilderness as the place for preparing "the way of the Lord."

<sup>13</sup>It is not clear whether Second Isaiah had available a written text of the Exodus or relied on an oral tradition. But, in either case, the story was already valorized.

<sup>14</sup>See *Deuteronomy* 4:20 and *Jeremiah* 11:4.

<sup>15</sup>See *Exodus* 14:21–26; *Psalms* 107:31–35; and (Second) *Isaiah* 51:9–10.

<sup>16</sup>See *Joshua* 3:5–7, 4:22–23; *Psalms* 107:31–35; (First) *Isaiah* 10:24–27, 11:11–16, 35:5–10; *Micah* 7:14–15; *Hosea* 2:14–23; *Jeremiah* 16:14, 23:7; *Zephaniah* 3:13–20; *Ezekiel* 5:22, 5:40; *Ezra* 1:4–6; *Amos* 9:7; and (First) *Isaiah* 19:19–25.

<sup>17</sup>Much of Malcolm X's critique of King is, however, quite cogent. See Miller, "'Plymouth.'" For a valuable general discussion of King and Malcolm X, see Cone, *Martin*.

<sup>18</sup>For narrative theology, see Hauerwas and Jones.

<sup>19</sup>For the political context for "I Have a Dream," see Garrow and Branch. (For a critique of the best-selling Branch, however, see Luker.) For "I Have a Dream" as a jeremiad, see Howard-Pitney, Vander Lei and Miller. For a Burkean analysis of the speech, see Bobbitt. For the evolution of its motifs, see Hansen.

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